

## CONCEALED ART

If a fellow has lots of money and lots of time and lots of curiosity about other fellows' business, it is astonishing, don't you know, what a lot of strange affairs he can get mixed up in. Now, I have money and curiosity and all the time there is. My name's Pepper--Reggie Pepper. My uncle was the colliery-owner chappie, and he left me the dickens of a pile. And ever since the lawyer slipped the stuff into my hand, whispering "It's yours!" life seems to have been one thing after another.

For instance, the dashed rummy case of dear old Archie. I first ran into old Archie when he was studying in Paris, and when he came back to London he looked me up, and we celebrated. He always liked me because I didn't mind listening to his theories of Art. For Archie, you must know, was an artist. Not an ordinary artist either, but one of those fellows you read about who are several years ahead of the times, and paint the sort of thing that people will be educated up to by about 1999 or thereabouts.

Well, one day as I was sitting in the club watching the traffic coming up one way and going down the other, and thinking nothing in particular, in blew the old boy. He was looking rather worried.

"Reggie, I want your advice."

"You shall have it," I said. "State your point, old top."

"It's like this--I'm engaged to be married."

"My dear old scout, a million con----"

"Yes, I know. Thanks very much, and all that, but listen."

"What's the trouble? Don't you like her?"

A kind of rapt expression came over his face.

"Like her! Why, she's the only----"

He gibbered for a spell. When he had calmed down, I said, "Well then, what's your trouble?"

"Reggie," he said, "do you think a man is bound to tell his wife all about his past life?"

"Oh, well," I said, "of course, I suppose she's prepared to find that a man has--er--sowed his wild oats, don't you know, and all that sort of thing, and----"

He seemed quite irritated.

"Don't be a chump. It's nothing like that. Listen. When I came back to London and started to try and make a living by painting, I found that people simply wouldn't buy the sort of work I did at any price. Do you know, Reggie, I've been at it three years now, and I haven't sold a single picture."

I whooped in a sort of amazed way, but I should have been far more startled if he'd told me he had sold a picture. I've seen his pictures, and they are like nothing on earth. So far as I can make out what he says, they aren't supposed to be. There's one in particular, called "The Coming of Summer," which I sometimes dream about when I've been hitting it up a shade too vigorously. It's all dots and splashes, with a great eye staring out of the middle of the mess. It looks as if summer, just as it was on the way, had stubbed its toe on a bomb. He tells me it's his masterpiece, and that he will never do anything like it again. I should like to have that in writing.

"Well, artists eat, just the same as other people," he went on, "and personally I like mine often and well cooked. Besides which, my sojourn in Paris gave me a rather nice taste in light wines. The consequence was that I came to the conclusion, after I had been back a few months, that something had to be done. Reggie, do you by any remote chance read a paper called Funny Slices?"

"Every week."

He gazed at me with a kind of wistful admiration.

"I envy you, Reggie. Fancy being able to make a statement like that openly and without fear. Then I take it you know the Doughnut family?"

"I should say I did."

His voice sank almost to a whisper, and he looked over his shoulder nervously.

"Reggie, I do them."

"You what?"

"I do them--draw them--paint them. I am the creator of the Doughnut family."

I stared at him, absolutely astounded. I was simply dumb. It was the biggest surprise of my life. Why, dash it, the Doughnut family was the best thing in its line in London. There is Pa Doughnut, Ma Doughnut, Aunt Bella, Cousin Joe, and Mabel, the daughter, and they have all sorts of slapstick adventures. Pa, Ma and Aunt Bella are pure gargoyles; Cousin Joe is a little more nearly semi-human, and Mabel is a perfect darling. I had often wondered who did them, for they were unsigned, and I had often thought what a deuced brainy fellow the chap

must be. And all the time it was old Archie. I stammered as I tried to congratulate him.

He winced.

"Don't gargle, Reggie, there's a good fellow," he said. "My nerves are all on edge. Well, as I say, I do the Doughnuts. It was that or starvation. I got the idea one night when I had a toothache, and next day I took some specimens round to an editor. He rolled in his chair, and told me to start in and go on till further notice. Since then I have done them without a break. Well, there's the position. I must go on drawing these infernal things, or I shall be penniless. The question is, am I to tell her?"

"Tell her? Of course you must tell her."

"Ah, but you don't know her, Reggie. Have you ever heard of Eunice Nugent?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"As she doesn't sprint up and down the joyway at the Hippodrome, I didn't suppose you would."

I thought this rather uncalled-for, seeing that, as a matter of fact, I scarcely know a dozen of the Hippodrome chorus, but I made allowances

for his state of mind.

"She's a poetess," he went on, "and her work has appeared in lots of good magazines. My idea is that she would be utterly horrified if she knew, and could never be quite the same to me again. But I want you to meet her and judge for yourself. It's just possible that I am taking too morbid a view of the matter, and I want an unprejudiced outside opinion. Come and lunch with us at the Piccadilly tomorrow, will you?"

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He was absolutely right. One glance at Miss Nugent told me that the poor old boy had got the correct idea. I hardly know how to describe the impression she made on me. On the way to the Pic, Archie had told me that what first attracted him to her was the fact that she was so utterly unlike Mabel Doughnut; but that had not prepared me for what she really was. She was kind of intense, if you know what I mean--kind of spiritual. She was perfectly pleasant, and drew me out about golf and all that sort of thing; but all the time I felt that she considered me an earthy worm whose loftier soul-essence had been carelessly left out of his composition at birth. She made me wish that I had never seen a musical comedy or danced on a supper table on New Year's Eve. And if that was the impression she made on me, you can understand why poor old Archie jibbed at the idea of bringing her Funny Slices, and pointing at the Doughnuts and saying, "Me--I did it!" The notion was absolutely out of the question. The shot wasn't on the board. I told

Archie so directly we were alone.

"Old top," I said, "you must keep it dark."

"I'm afraid so. But I hate the thought of deceiving her."

"You must get used to that now you're going to be a married man," I said.

"The trouble is, how am I going to account for the fact that I can do myself pretty well?"

"Why, tell her you have private means, of course. What's your money invested in?"

"Practically all of it in B. and O. P. Rails. It is a devilish good thing. A pal of mine put me onto it."

"Tell her that you have a pile of money in B. and O. P., then. She'll take it for granted it's a legacy. A spiritual girl like Miss Nugent isn't likely to inquire further."

"Reggie, I believe you're right. It cuts both ways, that spiritual gag. I'll do it."

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They were married quietly. I held the towel for Archie, and a spectacled girl with a mouth like a rat-trap, who was something to do with the Woman's Movement, saw fair play for Eunice. And then they went off to Scotland for their honeymoon. I wondered how the Doughnuts were going to get on in old Archie's absence, but it seemed that he had buckled down to it and turned out three months' supply in advance. He told me that long practice had enabled him to Doughnut almost without conscious effort. When he came back to London he would give an hour a week to them and do them on his head. Pretty soft! It seemed to me that the marriage was going to be a success.

One gets out of touch with people when they marry. I am not much on the social-call game, and for nearly six months I don't suppose I saw Archie more than twice or three times. When I did, he appeared sound in wind and limb, and reported that married life was all to the velvet, and that he regarded bachelors like myself as so many excrescences on the social system. He compared me, if I remember rightly, to a wart, and advocated drastic treatment.

It was perhaps seven months after he had told Eunice that he endowed her with all his worldly goods--she not suspecting what the parcel contained--that he came to me unexpectedly one afternoon with a face so long and sick-looking that my finger was on the button and I was ordering brandy and soda before he had time to speak.



"Reggie," he said, "an awful thing has happened. Have you seen the paper today?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Did you read the Stock Exchange news? Did you see that some lunatic has been jumping around with a club and hammering the stuffing out of B. and O. P.? This afternoon they are worth practically nothing."

"By jove! And all your money was in it. What rotten luck!" Then I spotted the silver lining. "But, after all, it doesn't matter so very much. What I mean is, bang go your little savings and all that sort of thing; but, after all, you're making quite a good income, so why worry?"

"I might have known you would miss the point," he said. "Can't you understand the situation? This morning at breakfast Eunice got hold of the paper first. 'Archie,' she said, 'didn't you tell me all your money was in B. and O. P.?' 'Yes,' I said. 'Why?' 'Then we're ruined.' Now do you see? If I had had time to think, I could have said that I had another chunk in something else, but I had committed myself, I have either got to tell her about those infernal Doughnuts, or else conceal the fact that I had money coming in."

"Great Scot! What on earth are you going to do?"

"I can't think. We can struggle along in a sort of way, for it appears that she has small private means of her own. The idea at present is that we shall live on them. We're selling the car, and trying to get out of the rest of our lease up at the flat, and then we're going to look about for a cheaper place, probably down Chelsea way, so as to be near my studio. What was that stuff I've been drinking? Ring for another of the same, there's a good fellow. In fact, I think you had better keep your finger permanently on the bell. I shall want all they've got."

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The spectacle of a fellow human being up to his neck in the consommé is painful, of course, but there's certainly what the advertisements at the top of magazine stories call a "tense human interest" about it, and I'm bound to say that I saw as much as possible of poor old Archie from now on. His sad case fascinated me. It was rather thrilling to see him wrestling with New Zealand mutton-hash and draught beer down at his Chelsea flat, with all the suppressed anguish of a man who has let himself get accustomed to delicate food and vintage wines, and think that a word from him could send him whizzing back to the old life again whenever he wished. But at what a cost, as they say in the novels. That was the catch. He might hate this new order of things, but his lips were sealed.

I personally came in for a good deal of quiet esteem for the way in

which I stuck to him in his adversity. I don't think Eunice had thought much of me before, but now she seemed to feel that I had formed a corner in golden hearts. I took advantage of this to try and pave the way for a confession on poor old Archie's part.

"I wonder, Archie, old top," I said one evening after we had dined on mutton-hash and were sitting round trying to forget it, "I wonder you don't try another line in painting. I've heard that some of these fellows who draw for the comic papers----"

Mrs. Archie nipped me in the bud.

"How can you suggest such a thing, Mr. Pepper? A man with Archie's genius! I know the public is not educated up to his work, but it is only a question of time. Archie suffers, like all pioneers, from being ahead of his generation. But, thank Heaven, he need not sully his genius by stooping----"

"No, no," I said. "Sorry. I only suggested it."

After that I gave more time than ever to trying to think of a solution. Sometimes I would lie awake at night, and my manner towards Wilberforce, my man, became so distraught that it almost caused a rift. He asked me one morning which suit I would wear that day, and, by Jove, I said, "Oh, any of them. I don't mind." There was a most frightful silence, and I woke up to find him looking at me with such a dashed

wounded expression in his eyes that I had to tip him a couple of quid to bring him round again.

Well, you can't go on straining your brain like that forever without something breaking loose, and one night, just after I had gone to bed, I got it. Yes, by gad, absolutely got it. And I was so excited that I hopped out from under the blankets there and then, and rang up old Archie on the phone.

"Archie, old scout," I said, "can the misses hear what I'm saying? Well then, don't say anything to give the show away. Keep on saying, 'Yes? Halloa?' so that you can tell her it was someone on the wrong wire. I've got it, my boy. All you've got to do to solve the whole problem is to tell her you've sold one of your pictures. Make the price as big as you like. Come and lunch with me tomorrow at the club, and we'll settle the details."

There was a pause, and then Archie's voice said, "Halloa, halloa?" It might have been a bit disappointing, only there was a tremble in it which made me understand how happy I had made the old boy. I went back to bed and slept like a king.

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Next day we lunched together, and fixed the thing up. I have never seen anyone so supremely braced. We examined the scheme from every angle and

there wasn't a flaw in it. The only difficulty was to hit on a plausible purchaser. Archie suggested me, but I couldn't see it. I said it would sound fishy. Eventually I had a brain wave, and suggested J. Bellingwood Brackett, the American millionaire. He lives in London, and you see his name in the papers everyday as having bought some painting or statue or something, so why shouldn't he buy Archie's "Coming of Summer?" And Archie said, "Exactly--why shouldn't he? And if he had had any sense in his fat head, he would have done it long ago, dash him!" Which shows you that dear old Archie was bracing up, for I've heard him use much the same language in happier days about a referee.

He went off, crammed to the eyebrows with good food and happiness, to tell Mrs. Archie that all was well, and that the old home was saved, and that Canterbury mutton might now be definitely considered as off the bill of fare.

He told me on the phone that night that he had made the price two thousand pounds, because he needed the money, and what was two thousand to a man who had been fleecing the widow and the orphan for forty odd years without a break? I thought the price was a bit high, but I agreed that J. Bellingwood could afford it. And happiness, you might say, reigned supreme.

I don't know when I've had such a nasty jar as I got when Wilberforce brought me the paper in bed, and I languidly opened it and this jumped out and bit at me:

BELLINGWOOD BRACKETT DISCOVERS

ENGLISH GENIUS

-----

PAYS STUPENDOUS PRICE FOR YOUNG ARTIST'S PICTURE

-----

HITHERTO UNKNOWN FUTURIST RECEIVED £2,000

Underneath there was a column, some of it about Archie, the rest about the picture; and scattered over the page were two photographs of old Archie, looking more like Pa Doughnut than anything human, and a smudged reproduction of "The Coming of Summer"; and, believe me, frightful as the original of that weird exhibit looked, the reproduction had it licked to a whisper. It was one of the ghastliest things I have ever seen.

Well, after the first shock I recovered a bit. After all, it was fame for dear old Archie. As soon as I had had lunch I went down to the flat to congratulate him.

He was sitting there with Mrs. Archie. He was looking a bit dazed, but she was simmering with joy. She welcomed me as the faithful friend.

"Isn't it perfectly splendid, Mr. Pepper, to think that Archie's genius has at last been recognized? How quiet he kept it. I had no idea that Mr. Brackett was even interested in his work. I wonder how he heard of

it?"

"Oh, these things get about," I said. "You can't keep a good man down."

"Think of two thousand pounds for one picture--and the first he has ever sold!"

"What beats me," I said, "is how the papers got hold of it."

"Oh, I sent it to the papers," said Mrs. Archie, in an offhand way.

"I wonder who did the writing up," I said.

"They would do that in the office, wouldn't they?" said Mrs. Archie.

"I suppose they would," I said. "They are wonders at that sort of thing."

I couldn't help wishing that Archie would enter into the spirit of the thing a little more and perk up, instead of sitting there looking like a codfish. The thing seemed to have stunned the poor chappie.

"After this, Archie," I said, "all you have to do is to sit in your studio, while the police see that the waiting line of millionaires doesn't straggle over the pavement. They'll fight----"

"What's that?" said Archie, starting as if someone had dug a red-hot needle into his calf.

It was only a ring at the bell, followed by a voice asking if Mr. Ferguson was at home.

"Probably an interviewer," said Mrs. Archie. "I suppose we shall get no peace for a long time to come."

The door opened, and the cook came in with a card. "Renshaw Liggett," said Mrs. Archie "I don't know him. Do you, Archie? It must be an interviewer. Ask him to come in, Julia."

And in he came.

My knowledge of chappies in general, after a fairly wide experience, is that some chappies seem to kind of convey an atmosphere of unpleasantness the moment you come into contact with them. Renshaw Liggett gave me this feeling directly he came in; and when he fixed me with a sinister glance and said, "Mr. Ferguson?" I felt inclined to say "Not guilty." I backed a step or two and jerked my head towards Archie, and Renshaw turned the searchlight off me and switched it onto him.

"You are Mr. Archibald Ferguson, the artist?"

Archie nodded pallidly, and Renshaw nodded, as much as to say that you



couldn't deceive him. He produced a sheet of paper. It was the middle page of the Mail.

"You authorized the publication of this?"

Archie nodded again.

"I represent Mr. Brackett. The publication of this most impudent fiction has caused Mr. Brackett extreme annoyance, and, as it might also lead to other and more serious consequences, I must insist that a full denial be published without a moment's delay."

"What do you mean?" cried Mrs. Archie. "Are you mad?"

She had been standing, listening to the conversation in a sort of trance. Now she jumped into the fight with a vim that turned Renshaw's attention to her in a second.

"No, madam, I am not mad. Nor, despite the interested assertions of certain parties whom I need not specify by name, is Mr. Brackett. It may be news to you, Mrs. Ferguson, that an action is even now pending in New York, whereby certain parties are attempting to show that my client, Mr. Brackett, is non compos and should be legally restrained from exercising control over his property. Their case is extremely weak, for even if we admit their contention that our client did, on the eighteenth of June last, attempt to walk up Fifth Avenue in his

pyjamas, we shall be able to show that his action was the result of an election bet. But as the parties to whom I have alluded will undoubtedly snatch at every straw in their efforts to prove that Mr. Brackett is mentally infirm, the prejudicial effect of this publication cannot be over-estimated. Unless Mr. Brackett can clear himself of the stigma of having given two thousand pounds for this extraordinary production of an absolutely unknown artist, the strength of his case must be seriously shaken. I may add that my client's lavish patronage of Art is already one of the main planks in the platform of the parties already referred to. They adduce his extremely generous expenditure in this direction as evidence that he is incapable of a proper handling of his money. I need scarcely point out with what sinister pleasure, therefore, they must have contemplated--this."

And he looked at "The Coming of Summer" as if it were a black beetle.

I must say, much as I disliked the blighter, I couldn't help feeling that he had right on his side. It hadn't occurred to me in quite that light before, but, considering it calmly now, I could see that a man who would disgorge two thousand of the best for Archie's Futurist masterpiece might very well step straight into the nut factory, and no questions asked.

Mrs. Archie came right back at him, as game as you please.

"I am sorry for Mr. Brackett's domestic troubles, but my husband can

prove without difficulty that he did buy the picture. Can't you, dear?"

Archie, extremely white about the gills, looked at the ceiling and at the floor and at me and Renshaw Liggett.

"No," he said finally. "I can't. Because he didn't."

"Exactly," said Renshaw, "and I must ask you to publish that statement in tomorrow's papers without fail." He rose, and made for the door. "My client has no objection to young artists advertising themselves, realizing that this is an age of strenuous competition, but he firmly refuses to permit them to do it at his expense. Good afternoon."

And he legged it, leaving behind him one of the most chunky silences I have ever been mixed up in. For the life of me, I couldn't see who was to make the next remark. I was jolly certain that it wasn't going to be me.

Eventually Mrs. Archie opened the proceedings.

"What does it mean?"

Archie turned to me with a sort of frozen calm.

"Reggie, would you mind stepping into the kitchen and asking Julia for this week's Funny Slices? I know she has it."

He was right. She unearthed it from a cupboard. I trotted back with it to the sitting room. Archie took the paper from me, and held it out to his wife, Doughnuts uppermost.

"Look!" he said.

She looked.

"I do them. I have done them every week for three years. No, don't speak yet. Listen. This is where all my money came from, all the money I lost when B. and O. P. Rails went smash. And this is where the money came from to buy 'The Coming of Summer.' It wasn't Brackett who bought it; it was myself."

Mrs. Archie was devouring the Doughnuts with wide-open eyes. I caught a glimpse of them myself, and only just managed not to laugh, for it was the set of pictures where Pa Doughnut tries to fix the electric light, one of the very finest things dear old Archie had ever done.

"I don't understand," she said.

"I draw these things. I have sold my soul."

"Archie!"

He winced, but stuck to it bravely.

"Yes, I knew how you would feel about it, and that was why I didn't dare to tell you, and why we fixed up this story about old Brackett. I couldn't bear to live on you any longer, and to see you roughing it here, when we might be having all the money we wanted."

Suddenly, like a boiler exploding, she began to laugh.

"They're the funniest things I ever saw in my life," she gurgled. "Mr. Pepper, do look! He's trying to cut the electric wire with the scissors, and everything blazes up. And you've been hiding this from me all that time!"

Archie goggled dumbly. She dived at a table, and picked up a magazine, pointing to one of the advertisement pages.

"Read!" she cried. "Read it aloud."

And in a shaking voice Archie read:

You think you are perfectly well, don't you? You wake up in the morning and spring out of bed and say to yourself that you have never been better in your life. You're wrong! Unless you are avoiding coffee as you would avoid the man who always tells you the smart things his little boy said yesterday, and drinking

## SAFETY FIRST MOLASSINE

for breakfast, you cannot be

Perfectly Well.

It is a physical impossibility. Coffee contains an appreciable quantity of the deadly drug caffeine, and therefore----

"I wrote that," she said. "And I wrote the advertisement of the Spiller Baby Food on page ninety-four, and the one about the Preeminent Breakfast Sausage on page eighty-six. Oh, Archie, dear, the torments I have been through, fearing that you would some day find me out and despise me. I couldn't help it. I had no private means, and I didn't make enough out of my poetry to keep me in hats. I learned to write advertisements four years ago at a correspondence school, and I've been doing them ever since. And now I don't mind your knowing, now that you have told me this perfectly splendid news. Archie!"

She rushed into his arms like someone charging in for a bowl of soup at a railway station buffet. And I drifted out. It seemed to me that this was a scene in which I was not on. I sidled to the door, and slid forth. They didn't notice me. My experience is that nobody ever does--much.