

## An Early Chapter

By H. Gilbert

ARTHUR NEIL, "top-boy" in Scardell Road Board School, had one characteristic which none of his fellows could understand: he was always more willing to "make it up" than to fight. When Billy Leake, the squint-eyed fighter of the school, once called him a fool in the heat of chagrin while at play, Arthur, who hotly repelled all slights, had gone up and struck him lightly on the shoulder—the invariable challenge to fight. The school bell had sounded just then, and the elder boys went in warm with the expectation of a battle between two champions of different achievements. When school was over, however, and the two lads with their own set had retired to a quiet piece of ground, it was rumoured that Arthur had offered to accept an apology! The descending disgust was averted by the appearance of Billy, who threw off his coat, tucked up his sleeves, and stood ready—short, firmly built, frowning, his fists working, his jaw clenched and his fierce eyes unmistakably certain. But no one said Arthur was afraid; he stood up and got punished well, for he could not fight "for nuts"; and his onsets, though futile against the other's coolness and science, were reckless. After this, for some time, Billy and Arthur were great chums, were seldom apart in scrapes and took a great share together in the street fights with other schools.

It

It was Arthur Neil who organised secret societies among the bigger boys, composed cypher alphabets for the laborious communications between the members of these mysterious brotherhoods in neighbouring desks; and kept the accounts of the weekly journal fund for the purchase and reading of Red Lion Court literature. He had been Grand Master of the short-lived Order of the Knights of Albion; and the dubbing by him of a squire in one of the school corridors, with the adjuncts of green tunic, "cap of maintenance," dagger and real rapier—"a right Toledo blade"—was an unforgettable though furtive ceremony. When he picked out Murray's *Prairie Bird* for a prize, and after reading it lent it round to his friends, their enthusiasm fashioned moccasins and leggings (ornamented with worsted scalplocks) out of American cloth, made bows and arrows from umbrella ribs, tomahawks from blade bones and wood, and scalping knives from abstracted table cutlery, ripped up mattresses for war-plumes, and secreted all leather within reach. Arthur, with the advantages of a cap made of badly dressed rabbit skin, the green tunic (which, though slashed and puffed, could be made to serve many turns), belt, totem—a disk of bone hung by a leather boot-lace round his neck and having "a war eagle" scratched upon it—powder-horn, wooden gun and cross bow, was made chief of a band of half a dozen warriors, skulking in the dusky prairies and scarlet-runner forests of a back garden, until the mother of one of them—*Terror of Palefaces*—called him in to go to bed.

It was Arthur also who had suggested basket-lids for shields and "tolly-whacks" (rope knotted and twined in graduated thickness) for weapons, in the fights with other schools. Even the invention of this "stunning" mode of warfare had been marred by his weakness. The Scardell Road School was in a newly-opened suburb, and the boys, being mostly villa residents, had always despised

despised the neighbouring Delta Road school, it being second grade and situate near the gasworks. It was not known what this particular row was about—somebody had hit one of the Delta Road Boys or jeered at them in passing, or something or other—anyway, the gas cads at length sent some big fellows and taunted the Scardell boys as they came out at mid-day. When the elders had attempted to avenge this, they had been beaten back by a hail of flints, taken from a heap by the road that was being made up. The Scardell boys had retired, hurt in mind and body, lusting for revenge and a flint heap. But Arthur, even then, when his fellows wished for nothing but the bodies of those boys half a street off, jeering in the security of their position, wanted to know what they had been fighting about? He had even advised a parley, and though some of the council were disposed to brand him a coward for his talk, he, notwithstanding the impatience and disgust of the others, went marching down the middle of the road holding up a white handkerchief. The Delta boys had seemed puzzled at first, and then one had thrown a stone and had been imitated by his fellows. The Scardell boys saw their disowned embassy stop and rub his leg and then turn, put his handkerchief away and limp back, accompanied by hopping flints. They told him "it served him cussed well right. What else could he expect from those gas cads?" Arthur said little, but came back from dinner thoughtful, and it was not long before every elder boy had fashioned a "tolly," and bought, begged, or stolen a basket lid, and fitted it with handles. Then when these had been smuggled to school, the Delta boys had been waylaid and wiped out, wealed and wailing.

There were many tender relations between the elder boys and girls of Scardell Road school; which reciprocity was encouraged by the head-master. Most of the scholars dropped in and out of love with the greatest ease. One week Bob Sullivan would be the sweetheart

sweetheart of Nelly Tulford, who next week would enamour Billy Leake and flout Bob, who would recriminate contemptuously. But jilted boys seldom fought their more favoured fellows : they went and cut out some other friend, who consoled himself elsewhere.

Arthur Neil was the most sensitive to unsuccess or indifference, the most fastidious in choice and the most constant in attachment. His sweetheart, Winnie Alfrey, had been in turn the beloved of three of his best friends. She had indeed wounded the last of them by her confessed admiration for Arthur, who, though she was reckoned for the time being by favoured boys to be the prettiest girl in the school, had hitherto kept himself in studied coldness before the charms that were setting his friends in rivalry or chagrined depreciation.

His friend Alf Lawers had met Arthur one day on their way to school, and in the course of conversation said with momentary moodiness, "I'm going to chuck up Winnie Alfrey. You can have her if you like."

Arthur secretly glowed. "Why, what's the matter?" he asked. "What have you fallen out over?"

"She wants you. I ain't good enough for her."

"Stow it, Alf, don't talk such rot!" said the other, thrilling.

"It's the truth! All the girls are gone on you since you won that prize for reciting. Didn't you say the other day that that fat girl, Emily Goodchild, had sent you a note? Well, that's why!"

Arthur became thoughtful: he was desired, and with the self-esteem and impulse to wound that were characteristic of his semi-feminine nature was moved to play with the circumstance.

"You tell her from me she's had too many chaps already. I'm nearly sick of girls."

Alf subsequently told his friend that he and Winnie had had a volcanic separation. He had told her that if she wanted Arthur, Arthur didn't want her, on which she had angrily retorted that she didn't care for Arthur Neil, then that she didn't believe he had said it; and, on Alf persisting, had gone off almost crying, saying she believed it was a falsehood. Arthur regretted his friend's distorting and stubborn straightforwardness.

"You'd better tell her yourself, Art," said Alf.

"No," said the other, assuming indifference, "I shan't take any notice of her."

"Well, I shan't speak to her again," said Alf. "That new girl, Kate Dunmore, is a pretty girl. I shall go after her. She laughed at me this morning."

It fell out, however, that Winnie was taken ill and was away from school for a month. During her absence her brother Harry became a great friend of Arthur's, though he had hitherto been disliked by the latter as being spiteful and unfair. When Winnie returned to school, Arthur with some of his chums met her one day with a friend, and her appearance as she passed and looked at him—so pale, pretty, and yet proud—overcame him. Within a week many of the little boys, at safe distances, were calling after them as Arthur escorted her home from school, her satchel slung upon his back with his own.

This had happened quite a year ago, and still they were lovers. He even went out with her in the evenings and on Sundays, and was often at tea with her family.

The girl found that Arthur was not like her former sweethearts. In matters of endearment he was more shy than she was and had to be most coyly excited, or he would become cold and proud. This was very different from, say, Will Kemp's headiness. She had only to dare him and he would chase her half a mile and when

he

he had caught her there would be a delightful struggle for kisses. If she had ever dared Arthur in the same open way, she felt he would have left her. But there were compensations. Sometimes, he would be quite irresistible, exceeding in his dominance any other sweetheart, and then her coyness was intensified and deliciously rewarded. Those long spring and summer evenings spent in the chestnut avenue in the field behind her house, slowly walking in the twilight, when he would be so daring, so masterful and sweet! Then, again, he seemed to be so different in an indefinable way from other boys. He was not roughly impatient, or boisterously mocking. She hugged to herself the words passed by her mother one day when he was mentioned in the family—"he was a little gentleman!" She wondered she had not thought of this—of course he was. He wore his clothes better, spoke with more refinement and used different words. Besides, was he not the best scholar in the school?

One day Alf Lawers on his way home with Arthur from morning school said he had had another quarrel with Kate Dunmore. These two had been sweethearts (with intervals of mutual unfaithfulness for spite) since Alf had given up Winnie.

"She's so beastly proud. She says she's going on the stage at Liverpool soon with her mother."

Arthur's sympathy had been blunted by frequent exercise on behalf of his friend.

"When's she going to leave school, then?" he asked.

"Goodness knows! I don't believe half she says. She's been saying she's going to leave ever since she came."

"Aren't you going to try and make it up?"

Alf was moody for a moment, and made a wry face. "I don't know. Don't see any use."

"She's

"She's a jolly nice girl. I should if I were you."

Arthur felt a dislike to seeing his friend contemplate throwing away the pleasure he himself possessed.

"You wouldn't like to see Bob Sullivan with her, or Will Kemp, would you?"

Alf hesitated, looking at his boots as he walked.

"Oh, all right," he said. "I tell you what. Will you see her and say I'm sorry I offended her and if she'll make it up I'll be at the end lamp-post to-night in Menival Road? She knows the place."

"All right, but what did you offend her about?"

"Oh," said Alf laughing, "she said her mother was Queen of the Fairies last Christmas in a pantomime, and I said she must have been a jolly heavy fairy then. You know, her mother is *rather stout*."

"Girls don't like that, you know," said Arthur, gravely.

"It's the truth, anyway. It would have to be a moonbeam like a plank to hold her up." He laughed. "Anyhow, you catch her if you can after school and tell her I'm sorry and all that. You know how to put it."

Kate was the daughter of an actress at present "resting." She was pretty, plump, and bewitchingly frank. Arthur managed to meet her after school, though uneasy as to the result of giving Winnie the slip. All his pleading, however, was in vain. She didn't like Alf, and besides, she was to leave in a month or so for Liverpool, where she was going to act with her mother.

"He says he's very sorry he offended you," said Arthur.

"He says!" repeated Kate, in great disdain. "I'd smack his face, the cheeky thing! How would he like me to make game of *his mother*?"

"It certainly wasn't kind of him, but Alf always will get a laugh somehow."

"I'll make him laugh the other side of his face."

"He always laughs both sides," said Arthur, slyly.

Kate looked at him with puzzled eyes for a moment. Then with some impatience, said, "Why, you're as cheeky as he is. You'd better go and find Winnie Alfrey or she'll be jealous."

"Not she," said Arthur.

"Dear me, has she got such confidence in you? Isn't she afraid of me?"

The lad chilled at once. "She doesn't think anything at all about you."

"Oh, very well. I'm sure I don't want to rob her. You'd better go and find her and tell her what I've said."

Arthur was hurt by this implication, and kept walking by her, she with her head up, looking intently at the hedge on the other side of the road.

"Don't be silly, Kate," he said at length, pleadingly.

"Miss Dunmore, please."

"Well, then, Miss Dunmore. I don't see why you turn off so. You quarrel with every one."

"It's a story! I don't make a row with anybody if they'll let me alone."

They were nearing her home in a quiet little street of villas.

"Well then, you won't meet Alf?"

"No, I won't, so you can tell him from me. Boys are such sillies."

She looked mischievously into his eyes.

"I wouldn't have another sweetheart for anything," she continued, "they're no good, and they are so awfully conceited."

They stopped in front of the house in the shade of a small maple tree.

"You're jolly rough on us," said Arthur laughing. "But if  
you

you girls weren't so nice we shouldn't be so conceited. It's your fault." He thrilled at his own daring before the provoking look.

"How do you mean, nice?" she asked, with little wrinkles round her eyes and lips.

"Well—jolly and—and pretty."

"Oh," she said, with a little laughing cry, her face flushing. "What sauciness! to dare to say that to any one!"

"Well, it's the truth!" said the lad, bolder in the sight of her pleasure.

She laughed, prettily confused, looking at him for a moment and then dropping her eyes, her face all warm.

"I think we'd better say good-bye," she said. "I shall never forget this."

She held out her hand, and retained his.

"Tell Alf I really can't meet him to-night. But I'll think about it. After all when we go away, I shan't see him ever again perhaps. You will tell him, won't you?" she asked, softly, with a curious, dilated look.

"Certainly," replied the boy.

She drew him by the hand quickly and kissed him on the lips. He started back, glancing about, and looked at her coldly, then seeing her defiant, shamed face he half laughed.

"Whatever are you doing, Kate?" he asked.

"That was for Alf," she said.

"But I can't give it to Alf!"

She laughed merrily as she closed the wooden gate. She stood leaning over it, and looked at him with bright eyes.

"It was for you then."

His eyes chilled as he thought of the appearance of unfaithfulness to Winnie if he did not in some way discard the caress.

"I wish you hadn't done that," he said.

"Oh,

"Oh, are you frightened?" she asked mockingly. Her eyes dilated again. "Then give it me back." She broke into gentle merriment as his face stiffened.

"I think you are most deceitful," he said. "You had no right, you shouldn't have done it. I shall never forgive you."

"Oh, very well, go and tell every one a girl kissed you and you didn't like it!" Her tone changed to scorn. "If you tell any one, I'll have to leave the school at once. You would be a coward!" Her voice faltered.

"I would never do that. I should never think of such a thing." He spoke with great heat.

"Very well, then, don't be silly. What have you got to be upset about? Good-bye."

She went up the path and rang the bell, and continued standing with her head bent and her back to him. He hesitated for some moments, and then as the door was opened went away slowly.

Alf heard no more from Kate in spite of the hope the message implied. She was about to pass him one day in the street with a contemptuous look, but he stopped her, saying,

"Aren't you going to speak to me again, Kate?"

"Speak to you?" she said disdainfully, "No, go away. What do you mean stopping me like this?" She tried to shake off his hold.

He was astounded at this complete change.

"Why, you said you'd think about it," he blurted angrily, loosing his hold on her arm.

"Pooh!" she ejaculated, slipping away.

He stood for some moments gloomily watching her, but she did not turn her head.

For ten days after this Alf was a fervid misogynist. His humour flickered up for a moment, he said that they might spiflicate him

if

if he was ever done any more by an Irish girl. Later he generalised his chagrin, saying, "All girls are cads." He and Arthur nearly fell out, for he began making contemptuous reflections on girls and the boys who debased themselves. He went about almost estranged, with a gloomy look on his face, which he was always forgetting to keep there ; going for long walks among the maimed fields and lanes near by, either by himself or with some school-mate not amatively degenerate. He began to long for the life of the trapper, lonely, void of all sentimental "rot," sternly self-contained, despising the admiration and yearning which he himself excited—a superior Dr. Carver, with long black hair, a broad sombrero, a stern and melancholy countenance, and a beautiful buckskin suit. He therefore began to get in training. He discarded braces, and wore a belt, broke the habit of regular meals, and in the dinner hour would wander off into the meadows, learning "wood-lore," following trails, remarking and laboriously explaining the meaning of a broken twig or bent. He would stealthily creep along, following birds flitting in and out of the hedge-rows, keenly observant meanwhile of every movement in the herbage and the dead leaves about him. Sometimes he got the cramp when some particularly promising noise attracted him, and he would stop in a constrained position waiting for developments that never came, except in the shape of a small beetle or a worm rustling under the leaves. If anybody passed, he would whistle and try to appear as if he were doing nothing in particular. When his stomach craved he gloomily took in another hole of his belt. Sometimes he ate the young tops of the thorn. He would return to afternoon school, stern, silent, and hungry, in figure like a wasp.

As his mother did not trouble herself much about his absence from the dinner-table, and nobody else seemed to know or care what

what he was doing, he soon descended again to braces, good dinners, games and love-making.

A few evenings after the affair with Kate, Arthur met Winnie in the field at the back of her house. She looked at him coldly, and retreated before his proffered caress.

"You're a deceitful thing, Arthur Neil," she said. "Go to that girl Dunmore and kiss her, not me. I wonder you can look me in the face."

"I didn't——" Arthur began hotly, and stopped. "What do you mean!" he asked.

"Oh, you know what I mean, very well. You kissed Kate Dunmore. She says you did. I want nothing more to do with you."

Winnie was coldly self-contained, but her appearance—so prettily proud, her lips curling, and her grey eyes piercing—excited the lad.

"It isn't true, Winnie, really, dear."

"But she says you did, and you told her she was pretty—and—and such stuff as that! I'm ashamed of you. You'd better go to her, for I won't speak to you again."

The lad was silent; he did not know what to do. He felt that Kate's apparent falsehood released him, but he revolted from the exposure of her, the breaking of his implied promise, and the prospect of pleading to a girl who condemned him without hearing him.

"I tell you it isn't true," he said, soberly. "Can't you believe me?"

Winnie hesitated before his seriousness. She dropped her eyes, and then raised them. She looked so pretty with her dignity, that it was in the lad's mind to rush upon her and kiss away her doubt, but his piqued loyalty held him back.

"Will

"Will you say you didn't kiss her—and say those things?" she said.

"I didn't kiss her."

She noticed his reservation, looked at him sharply, and flung away with "I don't believe you. You did say it!" She stopped a few feet off.

"Very well, I did say she was pretty—and—and so she is!"

She gave him a quick glance of scorn.

"Then you may go and tell her so again. I hate you." She spoke with composure, and turning, walked away quickly. Arthur did not hesitate, and went out of the field with head up, whistling.

On subsequent evenings, coming from school while Arthur was waiting to catch Kate for her explanation of things, Winnie passed him with cold eyes, that looked through him, her lips curled; though her brother Harry had confided to Arthur that she had "cried her eyes out" on that fateful evening, and had been cross ever since.

It seemed evident that Kate was keeping out of the way, and it was not for a week that he met her, when it happened that, having been sent, in his capacity as monitor, to a neighbouring school, he was returning just as the girls were coming out, and came face to face with Kate, in the van of chattering pupils. She was confused, and tried to push past him, her shocked companions bidding him, with much laughter, giggles, and reproach, to leave her alone. He succeeded in drawing her apart, however, and felt she was not unwilling, when free of her friends.

"I say, Kate," he began, with gentle reproof, "why did you tell Winnie that?"

She kept her head bent, her cheek suffused.

"I'm very sorry, Arthur, really. I didn't think she'd go off in  
such

such a passion, but—but we were talking about you and Alf, and she made me cross, and I said it before I knew what I was saying. Don't you think she'd make it up if I told her the truth?"

"I wouldn't be friends again," said the lad, decisively. "She's been very nasty about it, and wouldn't believe what I said."

"You didn't say——" The girl stopped, and averted her face.

"No; I didn't tell her anything about that. If she hadn't been in such a temper I might, and, really, Kate, it would have served you right."

A moment's silence. "It was rather—it was mean of me, wasn't it?" She turned up her flushing face and pleading eyes for a moment. "I didn't deserve your not telling her, I'm sure, and I'm truly sorry."

Arthur caught his breath. "There's no need for that, Kate." A few thrilling seconds passed.

"Well, I must get back to school," he said at length, with an effort. "I'm afraid we've been walking out of your way."

"Not at all," she replied as they stopped.

He stood, trying to catch her eyes, but she evaded his look.

"Well, then, Kate, good-bye," he said, seizing both her hands. She turned her limpid eyes upon his with a daring smile. Her full, red lips moved slightly, but she did not speak. Her frankness thrilled him, and he kissed her, vaguely feeling as if powerless to restrain himself. She laughed softly, and a deeper warmth swept into her face.

"Was that the one I gave you the other day?"

"No, no," he said, laughing and flushing.

She watched his face, her eyes travelling to the curly dark hair over the forehead that the blue cricket cap never imprisoned.

"That was for you," he added.

"I thought

"I thought you said you'd never forgive me?" she said, her eyes bright with merriment.

"That was different. It's all r'ight now. I told Winnie herself what I said to you, and that quite turned her. But, you see, she wanted me to say you weren't—jolly, you know."

"Did you really say that, Arthur?" Her eyes shone. "Well, there!"

She laughed a little hysterically.

"We must keep this quiet, Kate. It would be too bad to hurt her any more, though she has made herself silly."

"Oh, all right," said the girl, hesitating. "Can you come out to-night? I'm going to play tennis in the meadows."

They arranged a meeting-place, kissed again, and parted, turning every few steps to kiss their hands, until a bend in the road hid them from each other.

The furtive love-making of the next month was the most delightful either had ever enjoyed. Arthur was chary of publicity, since he felt his conduct might be thought disloyal to Alf, though the latter was now enamoured of the fat girl, Emily Goodchild, who joked and punned worse than he. Arthur also shrank from causing annoyance to Winnie, but he feared she would soon know the swift defection that must convince her of his falseness. Kate's secret, under the usual strict injunctions, spread among her own set, and elsewhere; but Winnie kept a proud reserve that sometimes moved her rival to pity and shy overtures of peace, which, for the time, were chilled to constraint as stubborn, by Winnie's uncompromising repulsion.

On the eve of Kate's departure, she, with Arthur and his closest friend, spent the last few hours together. The girl was one moment in excited talk about her dress, and the expected pleasures of her new life; but next moment, checking herself, would

would express regret in eyes, tones, and words, saying that she would send him her address, and they would write to each other. In the darkness, the friend, at a distance, witnessed their separation. He saw them talk awhile, kiss, and part sedately ; but they looked back, stopped, and then rushed together again, with arms about each other. A few moments' close embrace, the sound of many caresses, and she darted away quickly. Arthur lingeringly rejoined his companion, and they went away, silent.