

A COLOSSAL IDEA

AN ORIGINAL FARCE

BY

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DRAMATIS PERSONÆ

Mr. Wellington Yellowboy

Jack Battersby

Mrs. Yellowboy

Mrs. Badger

Anna Maria

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SCENE: – *A pleasant sitting-room in a Margate Lodging House, nicely furnished. Doors C. and R. Bow window L. Tables R. and C. Sofa L. On L. Table are three soda-water bottles. Light subdued as from blinds drawn down.*

As the curtain rises MRS. YELLOWBOY and ANNA MARIA are discovered, the former seated at work, the latter dusting chimney ornaments, etc.

ANNA. Mr. Yellowboy do seem uncommon bad to-day 'm.

MRS. YELLOWBOY. Poor dear little fellow, indeed he does. Ah! Anna Maria you can form but little idea of what real brain work is. It eats and eats and eats away the most powerful intellect and utterly undermines the constitution of the most robust.

ANNA. Oh 'm it's hawful; and as I says to my Frederick, says I, "Frederick," I says, "carrying coals chock full of nubly ones from a cart to a coal hole and 'eaving of them nubly ones down is work," says I, and so it is, but it isn't to be mentioned in the same breath with the sittin' up o' nights writing and composing the Naucyclopeddier Britannikies, no more it isn't 'm!

MRS. YELLOWBOY. It's a different sort of thing, Anna Maria, altogether. Oh! There is something truly grand, truly noble, in the idea of perishing over so gigantic a work. If I could reconcile myself to the idea of selecting a final exit for my beloved Yellowboy I do believe that death from sheer exhaustion brought about by intense application to his forthcoming work, the hundred and twenty third edition of the "Encyclopaedia Britannica" would be the one which of all other ends I would select for him.

ANNA. Oh! 'm. But if Mr. Yellowboy was to die!

MRS. YELLOWBOY. Anna Maria!

ANNA. If Mr. Yellowboy was to die.

MRS. YELLOWBOY. (*impressively*) If anything were to happen to Mr. Yellowboy you mean.

ANNA. Well 'm. If anything was to happen to Mr. Yellowboy I'm sure you'd never get over it.

MRS. YELLOWBOY. No, Anna Maria. I don't think I ever should, yet night after night and week after week I allow the dear little man to sit up until four or five o'clock in the morning, slaving in his little study at his enormous undertaking. He can never begin to write until about ten when I retire to rest and then he locks himself in and from ten at night to three or four every morning, it's nothing but fag, fag, fag, work, work, work, at those noble volumes until his pen drops from his hands and when at last he *does* contrive to drag his exhausted body from his beloved books he is in such a state of physical prostration that he is really unable to walk upright; and then he rolls about the room in so extraordinary a manner and says such ridiculous things that anybody who didn't know him well would think he was tipsy. I'm sure the other lodgers must think so –

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ANNA. Yes 'm. Specially when they hear him singing, "For I'm bound to go the whole hog or none," at four o'clock in the morning, beating time on the floor with his patent book jack.

MRS. YELLOWBOY. Knowing as I know, as you know, Anna Maria, that his occasionally eccentric behaviour is brought about solely by his incessant brain-work, I care very little for the ribald opinions of the second floor.

ANNA. Yes 'm. And as I says to my Frederick – I says – "Frederick," says I – when he's awful bad with beer – "you 'aven't got no call for to go and to get yourself in this discreditable condition for yours is not head work," says I, "nor never will be, though muscle it do require and muscle it have got." But says Frederick to me, he says, "Anna Maria," says he, "if the balancing of a couple of hunderweight on the back of my skull ain't 'ed work (he do leave out his aitches awful he do), why I should like to know what is and there's where it is and that's all about it."

MRS. YELLOWBOY. Fortunately as Mr. Yellowboy is a professed teetotaller his friends would never think of attributing these distressing symptoms to intoxication. He drinks literally nothing.

ANNA. 'Cept soda-water, mum. He's had three bottles this morning.

MRS. YELLOWBOY. Soda-water is not forbidden by the terms of his pledge. (*Giving ANNA MARIA a braided jacket.*) Just run upstairs with my new Rifleman jacket and put it into my private cupboard and mind you lock the door and bring me the key, as I should be very sorry to let Mr. Yellowboy know that I'd been so extravagant as to treat myself to another jacket and out of the house-keeping money too, but it did look so lovely in Bailey & Potter's shop window in Oxford Street that I really couldn't resist the temptation.

ANNA. Well 'm (*taking the jacket and admiring it*) it is a beauty and lovely is what it do look and no mistake - looks as if it had broke out in braid all over, don't it 'm? I'm quite sure Master would never be angry if he only saw it. (*aside*) Eccentricity of Genius is it. Well I dare say it is only it looks to me a good deal more like drunk and incapable. (*Exit ANNA MARIA.*)

MRS. YELLOWBOY. Oh, dear! I'm afraid it's very wrong of me to have a secret from my dear Yellowboy. I declare I'll tell him all about it this very morning. Ah! I hear him moving in his room; he's getting up. I'll run and get "Lady Audley's Secret" and read to him, he will like a little light reading after his colossal labours. I won't be a minute. (*Exit MRS. YELLOWBOY.*)

Enter MR. YELLOWBOY. He looks very pale and seedy and his head is bound up with a white handkerchief.

Mr. Y (*rubbing his eyes*) Oh! What an awful headache. Oh that seductive little shepherdess and that still more seductive pink champagne! Oh that deceptive debardeur in the green velvets! what-in-the-world-do-you-call-'ems? and that confounded volunteer, the music, the dancing, the supper, the chandeliers, the tough fowls, the dust, the heat, the ices and waiters are revolving about in my unfortunate head like the spokes of a gigantic catherine wheel; Oh that debardeur! After paying the exceedingly exorbitant price of my own admission within the gate of the Tivoli Gardens, the deceptive debardeur, discovering at the last moment that she had left her purse at home, turned to me – attracted no doubt by my imposing appearance as Richard Coeur de Lion, in a complete suit of chain armour – two pound ten – and

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implored me to pay for her ticket, I am not ashamed to own I yielded to her entreaties and, tucking her under my arm, we strolled into the gardens together. Scarcely had I passed ten minutes in her society when, catching a glimpse of a malignant and turbaned Rifleman, all moustachios, cock's feathers, and braid – with whom it appeared she was already acquainted, she slipped from under my arm and joined him, and then both trotted away ready to burst with laughter. However shortly after I was consoled by an introduction to my bewitching little Watteau Shepherdess, all chintz and crooks and curls and ribbons, with a little hat about as big as a five-shilling piece on her head. Well, in the society of my little Watteau Shepherdess I soon forgot my deceptive debardeur and spent a most delightful evening, my wife labouring under the mistaken idea that I was busy in my study with my colossal work, the hundred and twenty-third edition of the "Encyclopaedia Britannica." That hypothetical work has afforded me about four nights out every week for the last twelve months. Oh! it's a colossal idea! The only thing I fear is that she will some day or other want to see the MS. of my work. That will be awkward and I don't quite see my way out of that. I'm disposed to think that my study will catch fire and if such a calamity should happen I'll bear the blow like a Newton.

Enter MRS. YELLOWBOY.

MRS. YELLOWBOY. Oh, my dearest Wellington, I'm so glad to see you sitting up, and how is its own little heddicums?

YELLOWBOY. Its heddicums is better, a little better, my dear, though not quite the thing yet.

MRS. YELLOWBOY. Ah, my dear Wellington, – what a heroic Martyr you are to the noble cause to which you have devoted yourself Have you made much progress in your gigantic work?

YELLOWBOY. Pretty well, my dear, I've got to letter S.

MRS. YELLOWBOY. Yes dear, and what articles did you occupy yourself with last night?

YELLOWBOY. Why – a – Shepherdess, sherry, sandwiches, salad, soda-water – soft nothings and Sir Roger de Coverley.

Enter ANNA MARIA with note.

ANNA (*aside*) He's left out Champagne. (*aloud*) Please 'm, here's a note for you and there's a party waiting for an answer.

MRS. YELLOWBOY. For me. (*Taking note.*) Ah! from Mrs. Balderby. (*Reads to herself.*) "My dearest Amelia, will you come and spend an hour or two with me this morning. I saw you on the beach the other morning walking with such a duck of a Rifleman – how shocking this sounds doesn't it? - and I want you to drive over to Ramsgate with me as I intend to pick up just such another, there are plenty of them about. Of course, Mr. Yellowboy knows nothing. Ever your devoted. Sarah Ann." Well, they say imitation is the sincerest flattery, and if I go I ought to feel highly gratified at Sarah Ann Balderby's behaviour for she imitates me in everything, but how she can imagine that what suits me must necessarily suit her, who is as figureless as a broomstick, I can't understand.

YELLOWBOY. Who writes, my dear?

MRS. YELLOWBOY. Oh, it's only Sarah Ann. She wants me to call on her.

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YELLOWBOY. Let me see the note darling.

MRS. YELLOWBOY. I'll read it to you. (*reads*) "My dearest Amelia, will you come and spend an hour or two this morning. I saw you on the beach the other day walking with – hem! – your devoted – Sarah Ann."

YELLOWBOY. Come, Amelia, don't talk confounded nonsense, let me see that letter.

MRS. YELLOWBOY. Wellington Yellowboy, you are making yourself contemptibly ridiculous.

YELLOWBOY. Ma'am, give me that note. (*MRS. Y. pockets it.*) Mrs. Yellowboy, I am not to be trifled with. When I said give me that note I did not mean put it away in your right-hand pocket.

MRS. YELLOWBOY. (*Takes out handkerchief and drops note.*) Cruel, Mr. Yellowboy, and before the servant too.

ANNA. Oh, don't mind me 'm. As I says to Frederick, I says Frederick, says I –

YELLOWBOY. Go about your business.

ANNA. No, I didn't say that – I says –

MRS. YELLOWBOY. She's waiting for an answer to Mrs. Balderby's note. (*To ANNA*) Say I'll come in ten minutes. (*Exit ANNA.*) Mr. Yellowboy, I had intended to spend the morning with you, but as you make yourself so preposterously ridiculous I shall spend it with Mrs. Balderby. (*Exit.*)

YELLOWBOY. Oh, very good, ma'am -very good. So it was from Mrs. Balderby was it? Oh, I've no doubt it was, never mind – I'll have my revenge, I'll work at the Encyclopaedia all day as well as all night - for the future. *I'll* be deceptive – *I'll* be dissipated, I'll be da – (*Sees note.*) Hullo! what's this? Why it's the Balderby correspondence, by all that's fortunate - now Mrs. Y. - now for a disclosure. (*Takes note and is about to open it but hesitates.*) Stop, Wellington Yellowboy - what are you about to do? Reflect, Wellington, on the step you are going to take. If you read this accursed piece of paper it may have the effect of embittering for ever the future of yourself and your beautiful Amelia. Ponder, Yellowboy. Unread, you are boundlessly happy - read, you may be made utterly miserable – will you act the part of the noble and generous husband, the trusting gentleman, the unsuspecting man of honour, who believes his wife to be as innocent as himself, who would look upon the act of prying into the letters of his Amelia with scorn unutterable, will you play this worthy part? No you will not! (*Opens and reads.*) What's this? "I saw you walking on the beach this morning with such a duck of a Rifleman." Ha, ha, so, so, Mrs. Yellowboy, the secret's out at last. You walk on beaches with ducks of Riflemen do you? And in the morning too when your poor - poor Wellington is safe in bed endeavouring but in vain, to snatch a few minutes repose from the overwhelming labours of the night before – this explains everything – her hesitation – her confused look – "with such a duck of a Rifleman," "how shocking that sounds!" Well, I quite agree with you, Mrs. Balderby, candidly, I think it does. It verges remotely on the extreme limits of indiscretion, not to say indelicacy, Mrs. Balderby. "I want you to go to Ramsgate with me as I intend to pick up just such another." Oh, you do, do you, Mrs. Balderby? Very good. You're a widow, Balderby, and may, of course, have as many ducks of Riflemen dangling after your aged heels as you can "pick up" as you call it. I've nothing to do with that, that's the Rifleman's look out – I pity them poor devils whoever they are, but that's neither here nor there. But stop, Wellington, you are hasty, read the note once more, carefully this time and see if you can't place another interpretation on

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those mysterious words – stretch a point, Yellowboy, and if there is room for doubt let the prisoner have the benefit of it. Now, let's see, "I saw you on the beach the other morning walking with such a duck of a Rifleman." Oh, I see it all, she means me, of course she does. Ha, ha! Why, Yellowboy, I do believe you were getting jealous, just a little jealous. Of course she means me – I'm a Rifleman. I'm a Piccadilly Popgun. I did walk with Amelia the other morning on the beach. It was Monday morning and I went to bed early on Sunday night. "How shocking that sounds!" Oh, dear me, oh, dear me, not if the context is considered, you are too fastidious, Balderby. You are too particular – "drive over to Ramsgate with me as I intend to pick up just such another." Eh? Oh, ah! Of course, ha, ha! Old Balderby has seen me walking with my wife and she wants to pick up just such another. Come, she's a cool hand – Balderby, I wish you may get it – "There are plenty of them about." The devil there are. I flatter myself there ain't a pair of Wellingtons in Margate. "Of course, Mr. Yellowboy knows nothing." The deuce he doesn't. Oh, it's no good, I can't deceive myself any longer, but I'll find out the infernal villain. I'll dog him and by Jove, I'll shoot him - no I won't, I'll have him shot - or stay, a more fearful vengeance still – a blood-curdling vengeance. Old Balderby wants a Rifleman and she shall have him -Ha, ha, ha! (*Exit frantically.*)

Enter JACK BATTERSBY. He is dressed in a wonderfully exaggerated Volunteer Uniform, all braid and feathers, and wears a heavy false moustache, he carries a carpet bag.

BATTERSBY. Ha, ha! This is a rum start, by Jupiter. Here am I, Jack Battersby, Commercial Traveller in Hardware - not to say Bagman to the first-rate house of Pogson & Blithers, Birmingham, and within half a dozen yards of my pretty sister whom I haven't set eyes upon for years - when I state that I'm a Commercial Traveller, it must be distinctly understood that I'm a Commercial Traveller of a refined and glorified description. It's my sacrilegious duty to visit the idolatrous islands of the Indian and other oceans and then collect orders for goods and goddesses as supplied hot and hot by the aforesaid Pogson & Blithers. Three long years have I been beating about the Indian and Pacific and here I am again only too glad to set foot on civilized soil once more - poor little Amelia, she's married now I hear, married old Yellowboy, retired Grocer and Alderman, late of Cheapside, and now of Clapham, Surrey. Wonder what sort of chap he is, never saw him, 'spose I shall soon though. How she will stare! She'll never know me in this "get up." Rather a sweet thing in uniforms this, and rather a sensation it created at the Tivoli Ball last night. I was so struck with it that I've worn it ever since; what a ball that that was! Hang me if I can get that pretty debardeur out of my head; how she danced and how she pranced! I flatter myself we showed them all the way. And the poor little devil of a Richard Cœur de Lion who had the benefit of paying for her ticket and enjoyed her society for about five minutes by way of compensation - she told me all about it afterwards. But where's Amelia? Won't she jump when she sees me. She'll never know me behind this moustache – oh – someone comes, it's my sister, now to astonish her.

Enter MRS. YELLOWBOY in bonnet and shawl.

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- MRS. YELLOWBOY. Now for Mrs. Balderby. I wonder where my ridiculous little husband is all this time - I sincerely trust his jealous little head is bursting with pain. (*Sees BATTERSBY.*) Oh, dear, who are you - what do you want?
- BATTERSBY. (*tragically*) Blood! Blood! Blood! (*MRS. YELLOWBOY is horrified.*) Ha! Ha! Ha! Don't you know me?
- MRS. YELLOWBOY. No, who are you?
- BATTERSBY. (*With exaggerated action.*) I am the eldest son of the late Frederick the Great. But I am not proud, no. Shake hands - minions say I am mad, mad! Ha, ha! Do I look mad?
- MRS. YELLOWBOY. Certainly not. (*Very terrified.*)
- BATTERSBY. Then why lock me up in a neighbouring asylum. Why flog me with whips? Why put me on low diet? Isn't it preposterous?
- MRS. YELLOWBOY. Nothing could be more unreasonable. May I ask the object of this visit?
- BATTERSBY. I have already told you I have escaped from the asylum because do all I can, they will not give me blood - I want blood and blood I must have. (*Changing his manner.*) Ha! Ha! Ha! Why don't you know me, Milly, don't you know your brother Jack Battersby?
- MRS. YELLOWBOY. Jack? Why I declare it is. (*Embracing him.*) Why, Jack, my dear Jack, how you frightened me, but I'm so glad to see you. Where have you been all this time? Where are you going to and how long are you going to stay with us?
- BATTERSBY. Well, I've been to Feejee and I'm going to Birmingham and I'm quite well, and I'm off to-morrow.
- MRS. YELLOWBOY. But this dress, Jack, what does it mean? Is this the usual costume of a hardware traveller in the Fiji Islands?
- BATTERSBY. Not exactly, no, the national uniform consists principally of a neat tattoo. Fact is I was at the Fancy Ball last night and borrowed this from Wilkinson, our London Correspondent. I have my mufti in this bag, but I rather liked the style of thing so I thought I'd come in it and surprise you.
- MRS. YELLOWBOY. And you have surprised me, but there, go along into Yellowboy's dressing-room and change your clothes and then come with me to call on Mrs. Balderby: you remember Mrs. Balderby?
- BATTERSBY. Oh, yes, I know old Balderby, but about Yellowboy, you haven't told me a word about him; what's he like?
- MRS. YELLOWBOY. Well, he isn't handsome you know, but he is very good and oh, so clever. What do you think he's engaged on now? Why in editing the hundred and twenty-third edition of the "Encyclopaedia Britannica." Isn't it a gigantic idea?
- BATTERSBY. But I thought he was a Grocer.
- MRS. YELLOWBOY. Once - now he's a distinguished Author.

Enter MR. YELLOWBOY - he listens.

There go away and don't be long, there's a dear boy. Yellowboy will be back in a minute and he'll be wanting me to stop with him and I want so much to be alone with you, we haven't seen each other for such a while, it seems an age since we met and we've so much to talk about, family matters and all that,

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there, go along. (*Kisses him.*) You must come and live very near us and see us very often. What a beautiful moustachio! (*Pulling it.*)

BATTERSBY. Take care, Milly, don't do that, it's not real.

MRS. YELLOWBOY. Not real? What a pity. You must grow one just like it and I'll run and speak to the cook and be back before you are ready.

Exit MRS. YELLOWBOY. MR. YELLOWBOY *comes down in a towering rage – he seizes* BATTERSBY *by the throat.*

YELLOWBOY. Ha! Ruffian! Hound! Cadger! (*BATTERSBY shakes him off violently.*) I mean, Sir, that I trust you will pardon me if I venture to say that, h'm! ha! That is a remarkably neat uniform, sir.

BATTERSBY. I'm very glad you like it. (*aside*) Where have I seen this little lunatic? I know his face. Oh, it's the preposterous little Richard Cœur de Lion, – whose debardeur I took away from him last night.

YELLOWBOY. (*aside*) Let me dissemble. (*aloud*) Dear Sir, the day is devilish fine.

BATTERSBY. (*aside*) He must have followed me here to get an explanation. (*aloud*) It is, sir, devilish, devilish – May I ask your business in this house?

YELLOWBOY. In this house. Ha! Ha! He wants to know my business in this house. Gad, this is too cool. Do you know, sir, that you've been alienating the affections of my only wife?

BATTERSBY. (*aside*) His wife? The debardeur – his wife? (*aloud*) Well, sir, if you are fool enough to take your wife to such a disreputable place, you must take the consequences.

YELLOWBOY. Disreputable place, sir! How dare you accuse me of taking my wife to a disreputable place, sir!

BATTERSBY. Why, of course it is, you know that.

YELLOWBOY. Sir, this is trifling. I want your blood!

BATTERSBY. So do I and it's not worth halving. Why what a sanguinary little pepper-pot it is!

YELLOWBOY. Do you apply the expression pepper-pot to me, sir?

BATTERSBY. (*going*) I have a lady waiting for me whom I would not disappoint for worlds.

YELLOWBOY. My wife! (*aloud*) But you shan't go! (*Seizes him.*)

BATTERSBY. Get out! (*Exit Battersby.*)

YELLOWBOY. Am I awake or is it a dream, a hideous dream? Am I to stand by and see my wife coolly embraced, no, not if I know it; and what did he mean by saying that I should not take my wife to disreputable places? Can it be that Mrs. Badger's establishment is not as correct in its character as her references induced me to imagine? That is a question that shall very soon be set to rest. (*rings*) This come of living in apartments, it serves me right. It's just a punishment for my cursed economy.

Enter MRS BADGER L.

MRS. BADGER. Did you ring, sir?

YELLOWBOY. Yes, ma'am, I did – pray sit down. (*They sit.*) (*aside*) This is a rather delicate affair and I must bring all my tact to bear upon it. (*aloud*) I believe Mrs. Badger, that you have kept a lodging establishment for many years.

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MRS. BADGER. Not for many years, ho no! Suckemstances have not always obligated me for to let sea-side lodgings, far from that sir. It's only since the departure of Badger that I've been so reduced.

YELLOWBOY. The departure of Badger. Oh, then he has gone?

MRS. BADGER. Oh, yes, sir, three years since.

YELLOWBOY. Good gracious, you astonish me. And when do you expect him back?

MRS. BADGER. Lor', sir! Not at all I hope. I'm a widow, sir!

YELLOWBOY. Oh, ah! I see, just so and an uncommonly nice widow you are too.

MRS. BADGER. Sir!

YELLOWBOY. Well, this is irrelevant – Mrs. Badger, a ruffian has just been here who has – you will scarcely believe it – ventured to asperse the respectability of your establishment.

MRS. BADGER. Sir!

YELLOWBOY. Yes, it's dreadful isn't it. I caught him kissing my wife – who of course resisted violently – and when I expostulated mildly he told me that I was a fool to bring my wife to such a disreputable place as this. I mustn't be surprised at anything that happened to her. He implied, in short, that your establishment was no better than it ought to be.

MRS. BADGER. Hoitz! Hoitz! My goodness gracious me! How dare you presume to insinuate that my establishment is no better than it ought to be?

YELLOWBOY. Well, but *is* it?

MRS. BADGER. Is it? Of course it is – a great deal better than it ought to be! Upon my word, sir! You're a pretty fellow to come here and take away the character of a hard-working respectable widow. Oh, if Badger were alive, you dursn't do it. But Badger is dead, and well you know it!

YELLOWBOY. (*aside*) Happy Badger!

MRS. BADGER. But out of this house you packs this very day. Not a minute after four o'clock do you remain in it – you barrel of bad figs! No better than it ought to be! (*Exit in a great rage.*)

YELLOWBOY. Here's a pretty state of things! My wife about to elope – myself involved in a duel with a feathered warrior of exaggerated dimensions, and both of us turned neck and crop out of our house because I was fool enough to believe the insidious idiot's mis-statement. But I'll fight him – I will! But who's to take the message? I don't know a soul in Margate. (*BATTERSBY heard whistling outside.*) Who's that? (*BATTERSBY passes the door in plain clothes and without a moustache.*) It must be the second floor – he shall take it. (*calling*) Hi! Sir! You! Here!

Enter BATTERSBY – YELLOWBOY does not know him.

BATTERSBY. Eh? What is it *now*?

YELLOWBOY. Sir, have you a heart?

BATTERSBY. Why, of course I have, the circulation could not be carried on without one.

YELLOWBOY. No, of course not anatomically speaking. That is so, of course, but in addition to its normal functions, is yours the heart that can feel for another?

BATTERSBY. Why, what is the little lunatic driving at now?

YELLOWBOY. Sir! I am a total stranger here. A ruffian is about to elope with my wife. A Rifleman, sir, an enormous Rifleman, half a dozen inches taller than

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yourself. Blood must be spilt, sir, I must fight him. You must take the challenge for, understand me sir, you must act as my friend on this occasion only.

BATTERSBY. (*aside*) Ha, ha! He don't know me, I see it all now. I never knew a man asked to call himself out before. (*aloud*) Oh, yes – I'll take it.

YELLOWBOY. Pardon me if I venture to remind you of the grave nature of the commission.

BATTERSBY. Oh, it's all right. I'll be as serious as you like. Where is it? I'll take it.

YELLOWBOY. I'll write it in my dressing-room and be back in a minute.

(*Exit* YELLOWBOY.)

BATTERSBY. Well, this is about the queerest start I ever remember to have experienced. Here's a lunatic who takes his wife to a fancy ball as a debardeur and then, not only calls me out for dancing with her, but asks me to be at the same time his enemy and his friend.

Enter MRS. YELLOWBOY.

MRS. YELLOWBOY. Here I am, I hope I haven't kept you waiting. How altered you are without that ferocious moustache!

BATTERSBY. Ha, ha! By-the bye I've had an adventure. I've been challenged since I saw you.

MRS. YELLOWBOY. Challenged? Nonsense!

BATTERSBY. Nonsense is it? But it's a fact, nevertheless. Yes, a little lunatic has challenged me because I flirted at the Ball last night with a green velvet debardeur who he swears was his wife.

MRS. YELLOWBOY. Why, nobody has been here but Yellowboy.

BATTERSBY. Yellowboy?

MRS. YELLOWBOY. Yes, my husband.

BATTERSBY. Small man, check suit, short red hair, tuft under his chin, bounceable way – rather mad?

MRS. YELLOWBOY. Yes, that's he – Wellington Yellowboy.

BATTERSBY. But you were not the little debardeur?

MRS. YELLOWBOY. Little debardeur? No, of course not. What in the world are you talking about?

BATTERSBY. Nor yet the shepherdess?

MRS. YELLOWBOY. No, of course not. What do you mean?

BATTERSBY. Oh, then it wasn't his wife that I insulted, he said it was somebody's wife. I thought he said his own.

MRS. YELLOWBOY. What? My Wellington at the Ball last night with a green velvet debardeur who was somebody else's wife! It can't be!

BATTERSBY. (*aside*) Poor little devil.

MRS. YELLOWBOY. For he was sitting in his study till four this morning working at his gigantic task; the on hundred and twenty-third edition of the "Encyclopaedia Britannica"

BATTERSBY. Oh! the little villain.

MRS. YELLOWBOY. But why has he challenged you?

BATTERSBY. Because I eclipsed him in the affections of a green velvet debardeur at the Ball last night.

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MRS. YELLOWBOY. Oh, John, John, what do I hear! (*cries*) Then my Wellington wasn't writing on his Colossal Idea until four this morning, and his preposterous behaviour wasn't the result of devoted attention to the articles "shepherdess", "sherry", "soda-water", "soft nothings" and "Sir Roger de Coverley".

BATTERSBY. I wouldn't be sure about that either.

MRS. YELLOWBOY. Oh, I'm a miserable woman. (*weeps*)

BATTERSBY. (*consoling her*) Never mind, Milly, I'll cure him.

Enter MR. YELLOWBOY.

YELLOWBOY. My very dear sir. Here is the fearful document. Why! What the deuce? At it again Amelia, and with the second floor who is going to take my challenge. Why sir, you're as bad as the Rifleman.

MRS. YELLOWBOY. Mr. Yellowboy, don't be absurd.

YELLOWBOY. Amelia, may I enquire how many more people in Margate enjoy the privilege of squeezing you round the waist, besides the Rifleman, the second floor, and myself?

MRS. YELLOWBOY. Really I am at a loss to understand you, sir.

YELLOWBOY. Oh, are you? Then I'll make myself plain. (*Exit.*)

MRS. YELLOWBOY. Where has he gone, I wonder?

BATTERSBY. To Hanwell, I hope.

Enter YELLOWBOY with a pair of braided trousers.

YELLOWBOY. There, ma'am, that's what I mean. I found these pantomime breeches in my dressing-room, ma'am, in my dressing room!

MRS. YELLOWBOY. Oh, how absurd of you to order such clothes! I for one will never walk out with you in them.

YELLOWBOY. Mine, ma'am? Don't talk damned absurd nonsense. They belong either to that ridiculously tagged and braided Volunteer whom I saw kissing you, or to yourself, Mrs. Yellowboy. As for the Volunteer, I'm going to shoot him, and my very dear friend, the second floor, is going to call him out, ain't you sir?

BATTERSBY. To be sure I am, with all the pleasure in life.

YELLOWBOY. (*shaking hands with BATTERSBY*) Thank you, my dear sir, you are a fine gentleman, and as such sympathize with a deceived and trusting husband. But I forgot, what were you hugging my wife for just now? Hang it all, explain yourself, sir?

MRS. YELLOWBOY. Do nothing of the kind, Jack. If Mr. Yellowboy is so mean spirited as to suspect me of impropriety, it is only fit that he should be punished for his injustice by remaining a little longer in suspense.

BATTERSBY, unobserved, takes the braided trousers and exit.

YELLOWBOY. Mrs. Yellowboy, once for all I insist upon knowing all about the infernal Volunteer whom I caught you kissing and hugging in this room twenty minutes ago, and also the immoral second floor whom I also caught you kissing and hugging not ten minutes ago.

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MRS. YELLOWBOY. Sir, I have already told you that I shall not condescend to enter into any particulars.

YELLOWBOY. Oh, Amelia, have I deserved this? When night after night – and night after night I’ve been innocently engaged, you know how.

MRS. YELLOWBOY. Alas I do, too well.

YELLOWBOY. And to think, Amelia, that you should have been base enough to take advantage of my studious habits to cultivate an intrigue with that detestable warrior and that unholy second floor.

MRS. YELLOWBOY. Mr. Yellowboy, as I have had quite enough of this Rhodomontade, I shall go out.

YELLOWBOY. Very good, ma’am, in the meantime I will annihilate the Rifleman, and when I’ve killed him I’ll get him to call out the second floor.

MRS. YELLOWBOY. You will, of course, act as you think proper, but here comes one of your victims; pray be merciful!

Enter BATTERSBY dressed as a Rifleman.

YELLOWBOY. (*flying at his throat*) Here he is! Now I’ve got you, say your prayers before you die!

BATTERSBY. Get out. (*Shakes him off.*)

YELLOWBOY. I demand satisfaction, sir. You have insulted this lady, sir – this lady.

BATTERSBY. But this lady isn’t the green velvet debardeur or the little Watteau shepherdess.

YELLOWBOY. (*putting his hand over BATTERSBY’S mouth*) Hold you tongue, that’s my wife – don’t say a word about the debardeur and shepherdess and I’ll forgive you all.

MRS. YELLOWBOY. What is all this about? Debardeurs and shepherdesses?

BATTERSBY. Why this little villain wants to call me out because he says I flirted with his wife at the Fancy Ball last night.

YELLOWBOY. No, no, no. She wasn’t my wife – I mean, how dare you insinuate that I was at the Fancy Ball last night?

MRS. YELLOWBOY. Oh, it’s impossible. Mr. Yellowboy was busy last night with the following articles – “shepherdess”, “sherry”, “sandwiches”, “salad”, “soda-water” – “soft nothings” – and “Sir Richard de Coverley”.

BATTERSBY. Oh, no, I’m quite sure he was there as Richard Cœur de Lion.

YELLOWBOY. (*vacantly*) Who *was* Richard Cœur de Lion?

BATTERSBY. (*producing a helmet*) A gentleman who wore a four-and-nine of this description – I found it in your dressing-room – sweet thing in hats, isn’t it?

MRS. YELLOWBOY. Well, Mr. Yellowboy, a pretty figure you must have looked in that thing.¹ (*Puts it on his head.*)

YELLOWBOY. Nothing of the kind, ma’am. I’ve been recommended to wear it for the toothache. But one thing at a time, Mrs. Yellowboy – read that note ma’am –
(*Endeavours to take off helmet, but does not succeed.*)

MRS. YELLOWBOY. Well, and what of it?

YELLOWBOY. She asks what of it? What of it, ma’am? What of the duck of a Rifleman with whom you were seen on the beach this morning? And I think I

¹ Townley Searle’s edition of 1932 gives this line as a continuation of Battersby’s speech. It has been given to Mrs. Yellowboy purely on the evidence of its context.

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am justified in assuming that that young man in the tomfool dress is the citizen in question.

MRS. YELLOWBOY. That! Why that is my brother Jack.

YELLOWBOY. That! That, Jack Battersby – Lor' why Jack, who'd have thought of seeing you? Why didn't you tell me you were Jack Battersby before, it would have saved you all?

BATTERSBY. But you didn't ask me.

YELLOWBOY. But, I say, how's business, eh? Pretty brisk, eh? Goddesses looking up I hope, that's all right. But now that everything is comfortably cleared up why let us be happy together. Hold hard though, it isn't all comfortably cleared up, it's very far from being comfortably cleared up. I don't see my way through this letter yet. If Jack Battersby isn't the duck of a Rifleman, perhaps you will be good enough to tell me who is. Where is he, madam?

MRS. YELLOWBOY. In the adjoining room.

YELLOWBOY. Then produce him instantly. (*Exit MRS. YELLOWBOY.*) Here, Amelia, hold hard. I've got his trousers here somewhere; you can't bring him in without them you know.

Re-enter MRS. YELLOWBOY.

MRS. YELLOWBOY. Thank you, Mr. Yellowboy, but he never wears them. (*Goes off and returns with jacket.*) Allow mw to introduce you to the object of your jealousy, my last new Rifleman's jacket, but please don't shoot him as he cost four pounds ten.

YELLOWBOY. Phew! I'm afraid I look very like an ass. But stop a bit, ma'am, where is the affectionate second floor?

BATTERSBY. (*taking off his moustache*) Here he is.

YELLOWBOY. (*flying at him*) Ah, you infernal scoundrel, perhaps you will explain how – but – hullo – I forgot you Jack Battersby still, ain't you? – why of course you are.

BATTERSBY. Well, upon my word, you've done your best in the course of the last half-hour to make me think I'm somebody else.

YELLOWBOY. Well, all's square at last and as I said before, let us be happy together.

MRS. YELLOWBOY. Not so fast, Mr Yellowboy – now I want to know a little more about the green velvet debardeur and the Watteau shepherdess.

YELLOWBOY. Well, Amelia – I'll confess all. The fact is that the Gigantic Idea upon which I have been engaged nightly for the last year requires that I should visit – much against my will – all sorts of places in order to acquire a knowledge of men and things – *Bal Marques* in particular. But I'll tell you what I'll do if you'll forgive me: I'll give up my gigantic idea and send the "Encyclopaedia Britannica" to the Butterman and be a devoted husband ever afterwards.