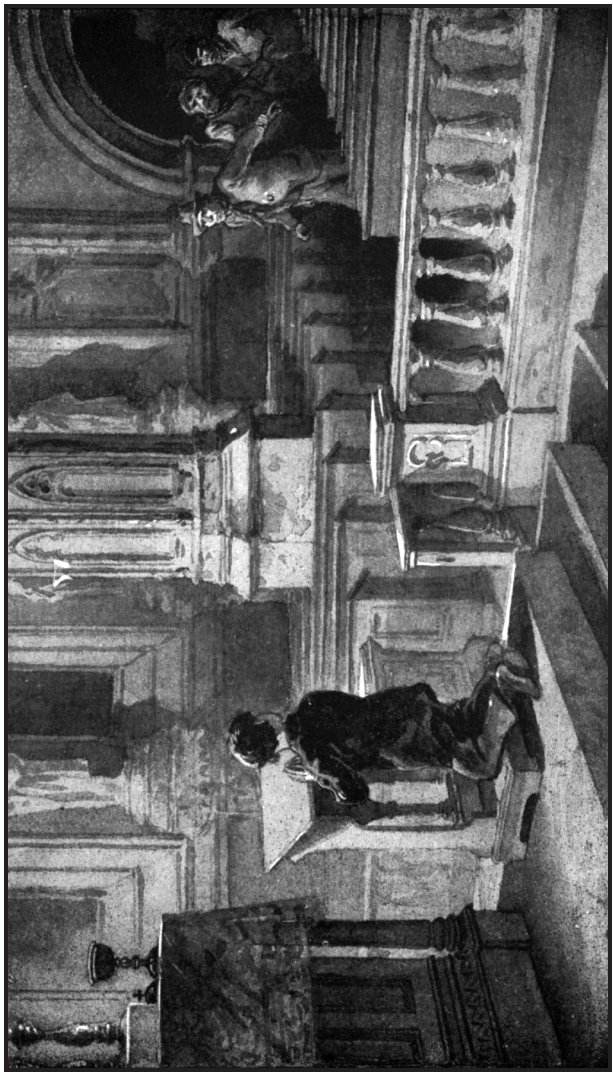


Claude Lightfoot

**OR HOW THE PROBLEM
WAS SOLVED**



"My God!" cried the atheist, jumping back and falling against Jordan. "What's that?"

Claude Lightfoot

OR HOW THE PROBLEM
WAS SOLVED

By

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HARRY DEE, ETC.

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“It’s so hard to imagine almost any small boy changing into a man, but in most you can see a faint streak of seriousness. But Claude strikes me as being the concentrated essence of small boy, and I can’t even begin to imagine how or when he’ll change.”

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Claude Lightfoot

**OR HOW THE PROBLEM
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Chapter I

IN WHICH CLAUDE PUZZLES FRANK ELMWOOD

“**T**HAT newcomer’s a queer boy,” observed John Winter.

“He’s lively as a kitten,” said Rob Collins. “I’ve been keeping an eye on him ever since the beginning of recess, and I don’t think there’s a square foot of ground in the college yard he hasn’t passed over. He’s tripped up five or six fellows already and just managed to get off being kicked at least twice. I think,” added Rob solemnly, and bringing into use the latest knowledge he had gleaned from a passing fit of attention in Chemistry class, “I really do think that he’s one of the Mercury Compounds.”

Whereupon Frank Elmwood, the third of the group, rang a “chestnut bell,” in answer to which Rob indignantly disclaimed any attempt at joking.

“Look,” exclaimed John, breaking in upon the playful dispute of these two bosom friends, “your Compound of Mercury is going to get into trouble, I’m afraid; he’s fooling around Worden!”

“Worden will kick him, sure,” prophesied Rob.

“Yes, and hard, too, the overgrown bully,” commented Frank, with a certain amount of bitterness in his voice and a frown upon his pale, energetic face.

The three speakers were leaning at ease against the storm door which opens upon the playground of Milwaukee College [that is, Academy]. It was ten o'clock recess, and the yard was everywhere alive with moving human figures. Like birds of swift passage, baseballs were flying through the air in all directions, and, on the run, of course, the multitudinous legs of small boys were moving from point to point. During recess the younger students seldom condescend to walk but, yielding to their natural and healthy inclinations, spend that quarter of an hour in a state of what is for the most part breathless animation. But among all these flying figures, the newcomer was eminently conspicuous. He seemed to move upon springs which, in their perfection, just fell short of wings.

On the way to Worden, he startled Charlie Pierson, the quietest lad in the college, by leaping clean over his shoulders. Charlie had been standing engrossed in watching a

game, his head bent forward, his hands clasped behind his back and, fortunately for the nonce, his legs spread so as to afford him a good purchase for the shock, when, without warning, the young madcap came flying over his head.

“Confound your cheek!” cried Charlie, the lazy, benevolent smile on his face almost disappearing; “if I catch you, I’ll pound your muscle till it’s sore!” And as he spoke, he took after the dancing madcap.

“Whoop! Hi! Hi! Catch me,” sang out Rob’s Chemical Compound, as with his head craned so as to keep his pursuer in sight, he broke into a swift run, followed heavily and clumsily by Charlie, who was not given to hard exercise.

Now it so happened that Dan Dockery, a lively lad and intimate friend of Charlie, had been intently watching the proceedings of the young vaulter. Taking advantage of the fleeing boy’s position of head, Dan planted himself, without being observed, in the path of the runner. As he had desired, a collision followed. Dan staggered back a few steps, while the lively youth bounded to one side like a rubber ball, rolled over and over, rose with a spring and a bound and, before Charlie could catch him, sprang away and dashed

head first into the stomach of no less a person than the bully Worden.

For the moment, Worden lost all power of speech, but retained sufficient presence of mind to grasp his unwitting assailant in a vise-like grip.

Thus caught in the toils, the newcomer set about a process of wriggling and squirming which it is difficult to imagine and impossible to set down. Legs and arms writhed and bent, while the whole body twisted and turned in every conceivable posture, till the eye became dazed and blurred in following the swift changes. But Worden, still choking and gasping, held on grimly. The small boy who butted *him* in the stomach was not likely to forget the incident to the last day of his life.

“You wretched little rowdy!” he began, recovering his breath and endeavoring to put his captive into a position where he could best be kicked, “I’ll teach you a lesson.”

By way of reply, the small boy effected a miraculous wriggle which brought him through Worden’s legs and rendered the intended operation of kicking, for the time being, impracticable. But Worden still preserved his hold and at once made a strenuous effort to bring the wriggler back into position.

At this point Pierson and Dockery, who despised Worden, as bullies are wont to be despised by the small boy, came to the rescue.

They sang in unison,

Worden, Worden
Went a-birdin'
On a summer's day:
Worden, Worden, went a-birdin'
And the birds they flew away.

And then by way of chorus, a dozen youngsters in the vicinity chimed in with—

Worden, Worden went a-birdin'
And didn't *he* run away.

This was too much for the hero of these doggerels: releasing his intended victim, he started off in chase of his serenaders.

The cause of all this disturbance now made directly for the trio, who were still leaning against the storm door.

"What a stout pair of legs he's got!" exclaimed Collins. "And he moves with such ease. I never saw a little chap in knee breeches yet that looked so strong and so graceful."

"Yes," assented Elmwood. "And at the same time, he has such a sunny face: it's a healthy face too. It's not too chubby, and his complexion is really fine."

"And look at the smile he wears," continued John Winter. "It's what I would call sympathetic."

"Ahem!" grunted Rob.

"I mean," said John coloring, "that it makes you feel jolly and gay to look at it. You can see from the straight way he holds himself and from his build that he's a mighty strong little chap. He looks *sunny*—that's the word. His hair is really sunny. He's really a pretty boy."

"Pshaw!" growled Frank, "sunniness may be the right word, but prettiness certainly isn't. Almost any little boy, who's dressed well and who's not thoroughly bad, looks pretty. But this little chap is interesting."

"Hallo, Specksy!" cried the object of these remarks, who had been staring at his critics for full half a minute.

Rob and John joined in a laugh at Frank's expense. Though only seventeen, Frank wore spectacles.

"Hallo, Sublimate of Mercury!"

"You're another, and twice anything you call me!" came the quick answer. "I say, I like this school immensely. There's a yard to it where a fellow's got room enough to move around in."

"What school did you go to before you

came here?" Frank inquired.

"Sixteenth District till a few days ago."

"What happened then?"

"I got expelled." As he made his answer, he favored Frank with a series of winks. He had blue eyes, not over-large, but with a snap and sparkle about them which added much to the sunshininess of his appearance.

"Stop your winking and tell us why you were expelled," pursued Frank.

The artless youth had been hopping about impatiently during this dialogue, and, as Frank put him the last question, he flew at John Winter, seized John's hat and, without further ado, took to his heels.

With an ejaculation expressive partly of amusement, partly of annoyance, John took after him. He was the youngest and smallest of the trio—indeed, though a member of the class of Poetry, he still went about in knickerbockers—but in running he was second to none of his class fellows. After a sharp pursuit, he captured the snatcher of hats and brought him back wriggling to Frank and Rob.

"Now," puffed John, retaining his firm grasp on our young friend's wrist, "tell us about your being expelled."

"I was expelled for nothing—there!" with

a wriggle. "Let me go, will you?" More wriggles. "Let me go, I say!" Still more wriggles. "Ow-w-w-w! Stop squeezing!"

And in a seeming paroxysm of pain, the wriggler fell into a complete state of collapse and hung limp, a dead weight from John's hand, while lines and spasms of pain chased about his most expressive face.

Softened by pity, John let go. In a flash, the limpness was gone, and the brightest, happiest, sunniest boy, his hair shot with gold and dancing to its owner's motions, was hopping and skipping before the three poets, his right thumb raised to his pretty little nose and four fingers wriggling like the fingers of an excited Italian in the heart of the Italian game of Mora.

"Yah! yah!—fooled you, didn't I? Oh, didn't I take him in, Specksy?"

"Tell us how you got expelled," said Rob, "and I'll give you some chocolate caramels."

There was a cessation of hop and skip.

"How many?"

"Five or six."

"Will you give me one to start on?"

Rob handed him a caramel.

"Now," continued the sunny one, as he put the candy in his mouth, "how'll I know that you'll give me the rest?"

"Well I suppose you can trust me."

"No, you don't. I know your brother Walter, and he says you're no good. You just pass those caramels over to Specksy; I like Specksy." And the frank young gentleman glanced at Elmwood with open admiration.

"All right, Johnny," said Rob, as he executed the condition.

"You needn't call me Johnny," continued the newcomer, sidling toward Frank and making a sudden but unsuccessful grab at the candy in his hand. "My name is Claude—Claude Lightfoot, and don't you forget it, Specksy."

In answer to this appeal, Frank gave him a caramel.

"We're not particular about your name," put in John Winter, anxious to quote

What's in a name? That which we call
a rose . . .

"Just what I was going to say," interrupted Elmwood, with a mischievous twinkle in his eye. "Go on, Claude, and tell us about your expulsion."

"It was all on account of a billy goat and a lightning rod."

"Ah!" said Rob. "Did the billy goat strike the lightning rod?"

Before replying, Claude extorted a third caramel from Frank.

“No, it didn’t. Last Wednesday a fellow stumped me to bring my billy goat to school. General Jackson (that was his name) behaved like a gentleman as long as we were outside the school building. I tied him up in the yard; but just as soon as I started to go into school, General Jackson began to get frisky; and then the fellow that stumped me loosed him, and he came bumping in after me—”

“Who? The fellow that stumped you?”

“No, the General. I wanted to run him out; but a lot of fellows stood at the door and shooed at him. Then General Jackson got mad and went just a-tearing down that hall and sent a lot of girls a-squealing, and one or two of them sprawling; and I came charging after. Some of those girls said that I was setting him on. I caught the General after he had scared the wits out of two of the women teachers—one of ’em had her hand on her breast and it was heaving like anything, and the other was standing on a chair with her skirts gathered about her, the way they all do when they see a mouse. The principal came down on me then—”

“Where did he come down on you?”

“On my hands—both of them, and said

that next time I cut up, he'd expel me for being something or other—uncursable, I think he said."

"Incorrigible, you mean, Claude," suggested Winter.

"That's it. I only heard the word once, and I was too excited to notice how he said it. So I went home and made up my mind not to take any more risks. But the next day, a fellow stumped me just before class to climb up the lightning rod to the third story and offered me a big apple if I'd do it. I forgot to think, and caught hold of that lightning rod and began to climb it hand over hand—."

"Where did you learn to climb?" Frank inquired.

"I didn't learn at all, Specksy: it just came natural, I reckon. So I got up almost as high as the second story when one of those lady teachers saw me from a third story window. And maybe she didn't yell! Then a couple of other teachers, of course they were ladies, who heard her singing out, put their heads out, and they just howled, and I tell you I began to work my way down as fast as I knew how; but it was no use. Before I got to the ground, the principal was standing at the door and making eyes at me through his specks. When I got on my feet, he asked me

whether I could find my way home. He was awful funny with me—”

“Sarcastic, you mean,” said Rob.

“Maybe I do—anyhow it was a funny way of being funny. He told me never to show my face in that school again; and that fellow wouldn’t give me the apple, either. He wouldn’t even give me half. So I went home feeling bad about it all—”

“Especially about the apple,” suggested Frank.

“That’s so, Specksy; it was mean. I told Ma and Kate all about it. You see I wanted them to fix it all right with Pa, who’s awful fond of the public schools.”

“Did he go to the public schools himself?”

“No; he was born in Canada and didn’t come here till he was twenty.”

“Well, Claude,” said Frank, “it’s about time for you to come to a Catholic school anyhow.”

“Sure. It suits me all over,” answered Claude, who was now making repeated endeavors to touch the back of his neck with the sole of his right foot. “Ma’s been wanting me to go ever since I left Miss Wilton’s private school two months ago. She and my sister Kate are anxious for me to get ready for my First Communion. Pa was vexed and

wanted to put me to work. When Ma and Kate won him over, then the President of this College didn't seem to care about taking a boy that had been expelled. Then I got a letter from Miss Wilton, and Kate had a long talk with the President, and now I'm here on trial. Pa says he hopes they'll expel me from this College too. But Pa is so careful about me; you see he wants me to be an American."

"Why," put in John, "were you born in New Zealand?"

"Aw, now, aren't you funny? I was born here just as much as you were, and twice as much too. Pa thinks that if a boy wants to be an American he's got to go to an American school."

"What's the matter with this college?" queried Rob.

"I don't know what's—" Here Claude sprang upon Elmwood's back and was within a little of bringing that dignified young gentleman to the ground. As Claude's evident intention was merely to demonstrate the warmth of his friendship, Frank contented himself with reaching back after Claude and setting the young bundle of nerves upon his feet again.

"If you don't behave yourself, sir," he said

with a suppressed smile, "I'll put you over my knee."

Claude was about to make some derisive comment upon this remark when suddenly his face changed, and he darted away like a minnow when it catches sight of a pike. Worden, in this instance, was the pike. He came rushing past the three poets with an expression of anticipatory triumph when Frank Elmwood caught him by the arm. Quick as thought young Winter, who was something of a wag and a tease, seized Worden's right hand and shook it warmly.

"How are you, Worden? Glad to see you!" cried John, with a malicious grin.

"And I say, Worden, old boy, you're losing your dignity," added Frank. "What's your hurry, anyhow?"

Worden, fully Frank's equal in size and weight, was meantime endeavoring to break away from the strong, nervous grasp upon his arm, and of two minds as to swearing at these grinning captors.

"Look here, Elmwood, let go. Drop my hand, Winter. Let go, I say. Let go. Conf—you fellows are making a fool of me."

"They might just as well try to make a square circle," put in Rob, as with a bow and a smile he advanced to welcome ami-

able Mr. Worden, who for a wonder kept his temper, lest something worse should happen to him.

“Is the Mercury arrangement out of reach yet?” asked Frank of Rob.

“Sure! He’s at the far end of the yard, trying to see how high he can kick.”

“All right: you can go, Worden, and next time you get after a small boy, you heroic fraud, we hope you’ll have worse luck than you had now.”

Worden looked bowie knives at Frank, puffed his lower lip into a baby pout, stuck his thumbs in his vest and walked away with a sorry attempt at dignity. He made no further offer that day to wreak vengeance on Claude; for, although he was not a boy of fine discernment, there was something in the tone of Frank’s voice which he recognized as a note of warning.

As Worden walked away, Frank’s face settled into an expression of study. He took off his glasses and, while eyeing them with his severest look, rubbed them vigorously.

“A penny for your thoughts, Frank,” ventured Rob.

“I’m thinking of that sunny scalawag who is now kicking his legs about as though there never had been a yesterday, and it never

occurred to him that there'd be a tomorrow. He's bound to have hard times, just as sure as he lives to grow up. At present he has about as much sense of responsibility as a kitten. Now, I'm wondering how he'll develop. It's so hard to imagine almost any small boy changing into a man, but in most you can see a faint streak of seriousness. But Claude strikes me as being the concentrated essence of small boy, and I can't even begin to imagine how or when he'll change."

"Oh, I guess it'll come about in the ordinary way," said John Winter. "We were all small boys once—you needn't grin at me because I'm in knickerbockers. I can write verses and essays—and yet three years ago, I used to wonder how boys in Poetry class could do those things."

"I think you've given the true solution," said Rob. "We change with years: and Claude will take his medicine just as we did and change in the usual way."

"I don't believe it: I can't imagine it," said Frank.

And Frank was right. Claude's change was not to be the work of time. The difficulties of that change, its seeming impossibility and its sudden accomplishment form the subject matter of this narrative.