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Opening extract from

The Box of Delights

Written by and illustrated by

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Published by

Egmont

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The Box of Delights first published in Great Britain 1935
This edition published 2008
by Egmont UK Limited
239 Kensington High Street
London W8 6SA

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ISBN 978 1 4052 3253 1

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the
British Library

Typeset by Avon DataSet Ltd, Bidford on Avon, Warwickshire
Printed and bound in Great Britain by the CPI Group

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To My Wife

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Chapter I

As Kay was coming home for the Christmas holidays, after his first term at school, the train stopped at Musborough Station. An old man, ringing a hand-bell, went along the platform, crying 'Musborough Junction . . . Change for Tatchester and Newminster.'

Kay knew that he had to change trains there, with a wait of forty minutes. He climbed down on to the platform in the bitter cold and stamped his feet to try to get warmth into them. The old man, ringing the hand-bell, cried, 'All for Condicote and Tatchester . . . All for Yockwardine and Newminster go to Number Five Platform by the subway.'

As the passengers set off towards the subway-entrance, Kay put his fingers into his pocket for his ticket: it was not there. 'Did I drop it in the carriage?' he wondered. He went back to the carriage. 'Stand back, master, please,' a porter said. 'We're going to shift the train.'

'Please, I think I've dropped my ticket in the carriage.'

'Oh . . . one minute, then,' the porter said, opening the door. 'Which seat were you sitting at, master?'

'Here,' Kay said. He looked under the seat and in what he called 'the crink' between the back and the seat: there was no ticket there.

'I don't seem to see it,' the porter said. 'Had you it when they punched tickets at Blunafon?'

'Yes.'

'Well, you'd better explain at the subway. We've got to shunt this train.'

The train presently moved away; Kay went to the bench where he had left his bag; he began to rummage through all his pockets. He felt that the ticket-collector who was watching him at the subway gate was beginning to think him a suspicious character.

An Irish terrier came up to Kay, sniffed at him and wagged the stump of his tail. 'Good boy,' Kay said. 'Nice old boy, then,' and rumpled his head for him, which made the dog bounce about with delight. Still, he could not find the ticket.

Two men, who had been standing near the subway-entrance watching the people go out, moved up to the bench and sat down upon it. Kay had noticed them, for he had been told that detectives often stand near ticket-collectors, watching for escaping murderers. He had thought, 'Probably those are two men from the Yard, after somebody.' Now he thought, 'Supposing they arrest me, for not having a ticket?'

'Well,' one of the men said, 'he's diddled us. He's simply not on the train. Here's the description sent: "Travelling first class. In appearance like a French cavalry colonel, with waxed moustaches, very smart and upright, height five feet eight, age about forty to forty-five." He's hopped off the train where it slowed down somewhere; depend upon it.'

'We'd better telephone at once that he wasn't on the train.'

'Asses that we are,' the other cried suddenly. 'Oh silly chumps and fatheads . . . Of course . . . he got under a seat in a first class carriage and he's been shunted out and away. Quick, quick . . . we may get him yet in the shunting yard . . .'

'Of course, that's it,' the other said. 'Lively, then.'

At once, the two men ran off, past the subway-entrance and away along the platform in the direction in which the train had gone.

Now that the men were running, it seemed to Kay that some dogs, which he had not before noticed, were running with them. 'They are Alsatian dogs,' he thought, 'but they seem thicker in the shoulder than most Alsatians . . .

'Why, of course,' he exclaimed. 'They are Police Dogs, and they are going to be put on the scent. Oh I do wish I knew what the criminal had done.'

As he watched, one of the men paused in his run to signal with his hand to a man on Number Five Platform, who signalled back with a real pair of handcuffs and then ran out of the station.

'I say,' Kay said to himself, 'I've never been so near to detectives before. Oh I do wish I could find this ticket.'

The Irish terrier was at his feet again, begging to have his head rumpled, which Kay did for him. Then he noticed that the owner of the dog was standing near him.

He was a little old man in a worn grey overcoat. He had travelled there in the end coach of Kay's train. Since leaving the train he had been at the platform end securing a big case in a cover of green baize. This he now carried in his hand.

'Ah, young Master,' the old man said, 'I see that my Barney Dog has made friends with you at first sight. That's the time that likings are made. And you are looking for your ticket, which, lo, is on the platform, dropped at your feet.'

'Why, so it is,' Kay said, picking it up. 'So it is. Thank you ever so much.'

'You must have slipped it out as you rumpaged,' the man said.

Kay noticed that the man had very bright eyes, alert as a bird's or squirrel's.

'We must be moving along, young Master,' he said, 'or

they'll be wondering if we've got no tickets.'

'Could I give you a hand, please, to help you carry your case?' Kay asked. He noticed that it was an awkward load for a little old man.

'No, I thank you, Master,' the old man said. 'But if you would be so kind as to steady her when I swing her; then I could get her to my back, which is where she rides a-triumph. Only I do date from pagan times and age makes joints to creak. Or doesn't it?'

'I should think it does,' Kay said.

'Now, I'm going to swing,' the old man said, 'and keep it, you, young Master, from rolling me over, if you will be so gracious.' He swung his bundle up to his shoulder; and, indeed, if Kay had not been there to steady it, the load might have pulled him over; he had a frail little old withered body, 'like the ghost of ninepence,' as he said.

Kay walked with him through the subway to Number Five Platform, and there helped him to set down his bundle at a seat. After this, he went into the refreshment room and bought some biscuits for Barney, for which the old man was grateful. After this, as there was still half an hour to wait before the Condicote train came in, he tried to get to the shunting yard, to find out if the detectives had caught the criminal and what it was that the criminal had done.

He was not allowed inside the shunting yard. The

young porter who headed him off at the gates told him that no one was allowed in. Kay asked if the detectives had found the criminal under one of the seats. 'What, just now?' the porter asked. 'Yes; they got him. He was under one of the seats dressing up as a Duchess. In another minute, he'd have finished, so that not even the Prime Minister would have told the difference.'

'What had he done?' Kay asked.

'Done?' the porter said. 'Er, he was a bad one. He had a row with his father-in-law, and he got a big sharp knife and cut the poor old man up, put him through the mincer and sold him to the dog's-meat man. The dog's-meat man wouldn't have noticed it, only one of the buttons stuck in a dog's throat and the lady who owned the dog complained, and then it all came out, and it's thought it isn't the first man he put through the mincer, it's a habit that's been growing on him for years.'

'What will be done to him?' Kay asked.

'He'll get the rope,' the porter said. 'Madame Tussaud's are offering any money already for the mincer he did the deed with.'

'I say,' Kay said, 'couldn't you let me peep in and just see him where he is, with the detectives?'

'Oh, they've gone, gone a long while,' the porter said. 'They'd a special car and went off at once to London with an armed guard.'

Kay was thrilled with the story, but as he walked back to the platform he wondered whether the porter had been telling the truth. He bought a newspaper but could find nothing at all about any such crime. While he was searching through the newspaper, the train came in. He got into a carriage and was soon on his way home.

When he had been taken to school in September he had gone by car. He was now returning home through a country quite new to him by a railway line over which he had never before travelled. The train passed out of the meadows into a hilly land beautiful with woodlands and glens. In spite of the bitter cold Kay was much interested in this new country. Some of the hills had old camps on them. On the headlands there were old castles; in the glens there were churches which looked like forts. He took from his bag a cycling map of the countryside. By this he picked out the hills, castles and churches as the train went past them. Soon all the land to the left of the railway was a range of low wooded hills of the most strange shapes. He read the name on the map – Chester Hills. 'What a wonderful place,' he said to himself. 'I do wish that I could come here to explore.'

While he was looking through the window at these hills he heard a scratching at the door leading into the train's corridor and glancing in that direction he saw that the Irish terrier, Barney, was standing on his hind legs

looking at him through the glass. He went to him, opened the door and patted him, and after a minute the dog went scuttering off down the train. 'I suppose,' he said to himself, 'that the old man is in the train somewhere. I'd forgotten all about him in thinking about the murderer.' The train drew up at a station.

'Hope-under-Chesters,' he read. 'Then that little river is the Yock. And that is Chesters camp. It must be a Roman camp, from the name. And that is Hope Cross. There must have been a battle there, for it's marked with crossed swords. And the map shows a lake only a couple of miles away.'

He stared at the hills. It was a grim winter morning, threatening a gale. Something in the light, with its hard sinister clearness, gave mystery and dread to those hills. 'They look just the sort of hills,' Kay said to himself, 'where you might come upon a Dark Tower, and blow a horn at the gate for something to happen.'

The train was about to start; the whistle had blown and the station-master had waved his flag, when there came cries from the ticket-office, of 'Hold-on. Wait half a minute.' Two men rushed across the platform and scrambled into Kay's carriage just as the train moved off.

The men took the further corner-seats; they panted a little, and looked at Kay. Both were in the black clothes of

theological students. 'They didn't give us much time,' one of them said.

'The news has only just come through,' the other said. Both were youngish men (about twenty-three, Kay thought). Somehow, he didn't like the men, nor their voices. They made in some foreign tongue one or two remarks, which Kay judged to be about himself. After this, as the train went on, they spoke to him. One of them, who was a pale, eager-looking man, with foxy hair, said, 'Going home for the holidays, ha-ha, what?' and when Kay said, 'Yes, please, sir,' the other said, 'And very seasonable weather, too: we are to have snow, it seems. And no doubt you enjoy snowballing, and tobogganing and making snowmen?'

Kay said that he did: he began to like this other man, who had a round, rosy, chubby face, with fair hair; and yet there was something about him . . . Kay couldn't quite put it into words . . . he had a kind of a . . . sort of a . . . It was more in his eyes than in anything else.

'And are you going far, may I ask?' the chubby man asked.

'I'm going to Condicote,' Kay said.

'Ah, indeed . . . Condicote Junction,' the chubby man said . . . 'And I wonder if, in the Christmas holidays, you will ever do card-tricks?'

'If you please, sir, I do not know any.'

'But you are of a studious turn, I see, ha-ha, what? With your maps and food-for-the-mind,' the foxy-faced man said. 'I wonder if I might try to teach you a simple trick, since we are to be fellow-travellers.'

Kay said that it would be very kind, but that he was afraid that he would be stupid at it.

'I see that you will be very clever at it,' the foxy man said. 'Don't you think, Tristan, that he has the face of one certain to be clever at card-tricks; what?'

'The very face,' the other said.

'Just the facial angle and the Borromean Index,' the foxy one went on. 'Now let me see if I have my cards. I usually carry cards, because I am much alone, and find the games of Patience a great mental solace. Ah yes, I have my old companions.'

He produced a little packet of green-backed cards in a dull red leather case.

'Let nothing tempt you into playing cards with strangers in a train or ship or anywhere,' the chubby man said.

'I am inclined to agree with you, Lancelot,' the foxy man said, 'but there will be no harm in showing him one of the tricks by which sharpers deceive the unwary. Let me show you the commonest trick. It is often known as "spotting-the-lady".'

He dealt out three cards, one of which was the Queen

of Clubs, the other two low hearts. 'See there,' he said. 'Mark them well. I twist them and shift them and lo, now, which is the Lady?'

'That one,' Kay said.

'So it is; so it is,' the man said. 'What it is to have young eyes, Gawaine, is it not?'

'It was not his young eyes, but your clumsy dealing,' the other said.

'Ha,' the foxy-faced man said, 'I lack practice, I see. I must give myself some incentive. I will back my skill. Now, then; prepare: if you beat me this time, you shall have sixpence, for, indeed, I must be put upon my mettle.

'Watch now the whirling cards,
They shift, they lift, they dive.
Twiddle. Twiddle. Twiddle.
Pussycat and fiddlestrings.

'Can you tell the Lady, this time?'

'Yes,' Kay said. 'Here she is.'

'And here is your sixpence,' the man said. 'And yet I thought I was discreet. But you have an eye like a lynx. Now may I try once again? You are too young, you are too sharp; there is no getting round you. Now, no denial: if I beat you this time you shall give me half-a-crown for the Poor Box or next Sunday's collection.'

Kay was about to protest, for he had promised never to bet, nor to play at cards for money; but the chubby-faced man said, 'Of course . . . that would be simply sportsman's honour.'

'Agreed, agreed, what,' the foxy-faced man said, as he twiddled the cards. 'Hark to Merlin: "Again the fatal sister spins her web. Mark well her hand, the hand of Destiny; so shoots the weft across the serried warp; and back the sword beats and the shear descends." Now, which is the Lady?'

'This one,' Kay said. 'I saw her from underneath as the cards went down.'

He was quite certain that he had seen the Queen, but when he lifted the card, it was not the Queen, it was the three of Hearts.

'Now how did that happen, what?' the foxy-faced man said. 'That will be just half-a-crown, please; for the collection in aid of the Decayed Cellarers, poor fellows. A debt of honour, you know.'

Kay felt very unhappy, but pulled out his purse and paid the half-crown. It may have been suspicion or error, yet it seemed to him that both men seemed very inquisitive, craning over, as it were, to see what money was in his purse.

'So you carry your money in a purse,' the chubby-faced man said. 'It is always a wise precaution; so much

better than having it loose, when it will get pulled out with the handkerchief or what not.'

The foxy-faced man spread his cards. 'Now, Sir Lancelot,' he said, 'that is two to you and one to me. Won't you give me my chance to get equal?'

Kay thought that he was already past being equal and a good deal ahead. He was sorely perplexed as to what to say. At this moment, however, the train began to slacken for a station.

'Ha, we stop here, what?' the foxy-faced man said. 'Sir Dagonet, a word with you.' He tapped his left ear and went out into the corridor; the chubby-faced man followed him. The train was at a little junction, Yarnton for Yockombe Regis; two or three people left the train and others got in.

'I won't play cards any more,' Kay decided. 'Nothing shall induce me . . .'

When the train started, the two men returned. Kay was again studying his map. He was afraid that the men would suggest more cards, but they had returned deep in thought. They talked to each other in low voices in a tongue which Kay thought must be Italian.

He glanced at them sideways from time to time. There was something in the way of their bending their heads together which seemed very sinister. Kay wondered that he had ever thought either of them nice. They were

talking about somebody. They seemed to be looking out for somebody. Whenever the train stopped at one of the little stations: Gabbett's Cross, Lower Turrington, Stoke Dever and Radsoe, the men went out into the corridor, and seemed (as Kay decided) to watch all people leaving the train. They had friends (accomplices Kay called them) in the train, for once (at Radsoe), as Kay was looking out for the landmarks of home, he saw the foxy-faced man, who had got out on to the platform, signalling to a man in a forward carriage.

'These men are up to no good,' Kay thought. 'They're after somebody. Very likely it's some farmer, coming home from the beast-market with a lot of money, whom they are going to rob. I do hope they won't talk to me again.'

He settled again to his map as they returned to the carriage. 'Still feeding the mind, what?' the foxy man said.

'Yes, please,' Kay said.

'And can you tell me what country we are now coming to?'

'Yes,' Kay said. 'If you will look there, you will see Condicote Church . . . Then, that wooded hill is King Arthur's Court: it's a Roman Camp . . . Up there, is Broadbarrow, where there used to be a gibbet.'

'Indeed,' the man said. 'Well, well. Then this next station will be Condicote, I take it?'

'Yes,' Kay said.

'You hear that, Palamedes?' he said to his companion. 'Sir Lancelot says that Condicote is next stop, where the hawks get out to wait for the chicken . . . if the chicken is still on the wing.'

'Not so loud, not so loud,' the chubby-faced man said, with a look of alarm. 'Good heaven, what was that?'

Some slight noise made them all look towards the corridor. It was only the Irish terrier of the old man, 'Barney Dog', standing on his hind legs to look in to the compartment. With a scratching of claws upon the paint, the dog dropped from his post and slid away. Yet Kay felt somehow uneasy, for the dog had looked at him so strangely.

'A dog, I think,' the chubby man said, with a warning glance at his friend. 'One of the friends of man, as they are called. And do you keep dogs at Seekings, Mr Harker?'

Kay jumped, for how did the man know his name and home? 'How did you know about me, sir?' he asked.

'Magic, no doubt,' the man said. 'But there is a proverb:

"More know Tom Fool
Than Tom Fool knows."

'Not that I want you to think that I think you a fool; by no means.'

'By no means, what?' the foxy-faced man said, as he put up his cards in their case. 'He is no fool, but a hawk with the eyes of a gimlet, our young friend from Seekings House. And this is Condicote Station?'

'It is,' Kay said, still marvelling that the men should know him. The train stopped.

There was always a press of people on Condicote platform at the coming-in of that train: there was on this day. Kay was bumped and thrust by people getting in and out. There in the press was Caroline Louisa come to meet him; then, among other familiar faces, the old bus man, Jim, came forward to help him with his bags. 'Why, Master Kay, how you have growed, to be sure. Learning seems to suit 'ee.'

He crossed the line with the crowd. As he gave up his ticket at the exit gate he was bumped and thrust among the company. When he had won through the press and was safely in the car, he found that he had been robbed.

'I say,' he said, 'there must have been pickpockets in the crowd. They've got my purse and my dollar watch.'

'When had you them last?'

'A few minutes before we reached the station.'

'Did you feel any hand at your pockets?'

'No, of course not. I was pushed and shoved in the crowd, of course.'

'Did you notice any suspicious person near you?'

'No . . . Hullo. Here's my ticket . . .'

'But you gave it up just now.'

'So I did,' he said. 'Well. That's a queer thing. I couldn't find my ticket at Musborough: and an old man who was there said "there lo, it's on the platform"; and there it was, right at my feet. I must have picked up some other chap's ticket, perhaps it was the old man's own ticket. Why, there is the old man, that old fellow with the green baize case and the Irish terrier.'

'What is he?' Caroline Louisa asked. 'A Punch and Judy man?'

'I don't know,' Kay said. 'I'll ask him. And I'll ask if I had his ticket. And may I offer him a lift? He's rather a poor old chap to be lugging those loads about.'

'Ask him, if you like,' she said.

Kay asked him, had he given him his own ticket at Musborough.

'No, I thank you,' the old man said. 'I had my own ticket, thank you, and have now given it over.'

'Will you please tell me,' Kay said, 'if you are a Punch and Judy man?'

'I am, so to speak, a showman,' the old man said, 'and my Barney Dog is, as it were, my Toby Dog, when chance does call.'

'I was to ask you, would you like a lift down into the town, as it is rather a step, and it is so cold.'

'No, I thank you, my young Master,' the old man said. 'But if you would once more steady my show, why, then I should not stumble.'

Kay helped him a little, so that the case did not overbalance him as he swung it to his shoulders.

'And I thank you, my young Master,' he said. 'Time was when we had power, like the Sun, and could swing the Earth and the Moon, and now our old wheels are all running down and we are coming to a second childhood.

'Still, they say,' he went on, 'that it begins again, in the course of time. But the secrets of my show, they aren't to be had by these common ones, now, are they?'

Kay did not know what to say to this.

'Hearts, diamonds, spades, clubs, it goes,' the old man said. 'And then all the way back again.'

The old man paused an instant and looked about him. By this time, all those who had met or who had travelled by the train were gone from the station yard, while the porters and ticket man had gone back to shelter.

'And now, Master Harker, of Seekings,' the old man said, 'now that the Wolves are Running, as you will have seen, perhaps you would do something to stop their Bite? Or wouldn't you?'

'I don't know what you mean,' Kay said, 'but is there anything I can do for you?'

'Master Harker,' he said, 'there is something that no

other soul can do for me but you alone. As you go down towards Seekings, if you would stop at Bob's shop, as it were to buy muffins now . . . Near the door you will see a woman plaided from the cold, wearing a ring of a very strange shape, Master Harker, being like my ring here, of the longways cross in gold and garnets. And she has very bright eyes, Master Harker, as bright as mine, which is what few have. If you will step into Bob's shop to buy muffins now, saying nothing, not even to your good friend, and say to this Lady "The Wolves are Running," then she will know and Others will know; and none will get bit.'

'I'll do that, of course,' Kay said. 'But how did you know my name?'

'When Wolves Run it betides to know, Master Harker,' he said. 'And I do bless you.

'But Time and Tide and Buttered Eggs wait for no man,' he added. He swung away at once, bent under his pack, followed by his Dog Barney. He had that odd stagger or waddle in his knees that Kay had so often noticed in old countrymen.

'How on earth does he know my name?' Kay thought. 'And how does he know Bob's shop? I've certainly never seen him before today . . .' He went back to the car.

'I'm sorry to have been so long,' he said. 'He's a queer old man. I should think he has been something very different once . . .'

'About your being robbed,' Caroline Louisa said. 'Who was with you in the train?'

'Two men, but I don't think they would have robbed me. They were two sort of curates. They got in at Hope-under-Chesters and got out here. The funny thing was that they knew my name and that I came from Seekings.'

'They could have read that from your luggage labels,' she said. 'If your curates got in at Hope-under-Chesters they may have been members of the Missionaries College there.'

'I say,' Kay said, 'are there any muffins?'

'No,' she said, 'teacakes, but no muffins.'

'Would you mind frightfully, if we stopped at Bob's and got some muffins? Only you'll have to lend me some tin, for my purse is gone. I haven't a tosser to my kick.'

'Now Kay, you mustn't use slang in the holidays.'

'That's nothing to some I know.'

At this moment, the car passed the old man. Kay waved to him and the old man waved back.

'By the way,' Kay said, 'are there Buttered Eggs for lunch?'

'Yes, specially for you. We must get on to them.'

'You know,' Kay said, 'there's something very queer about that old man. He knew that there would be Buttered Eggs. He said "Time, Tide and Buttered Eggs wait for no man."'