

Fine Feathers Ship's Company, Part 1.

W.W. Jacobs

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Produced by David Widger

SHIP'S COMPANY

By W.W. Jacobs

[Illustration: "Can I 'ave it took off while I eat my bloater, mother?"]

FINE FEATHERS

Mr. Jobson awoke with a Sundayish feeling, probably due to the fact that it was Bank Holiday. He had been aware, in a dim fashion, of the rising of Mrs. Jobson some time before, and in a semi-conscious condition had taken over a large slice of unoccupied territory. He stretched himself and yawned, and then, by an effort of will, threw off the clothes and springing out of bed reached for his trousers.

He was an orderly man, and had hung them every night for over twenty

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years on the brass knob on his side of the bed. He had hung them there the night before, and now they had absconded with a pair of red braces just entering their teens. Instead, on a chair at the foot of the bed was a collection of garments that made him shudder. With trembling fingers he turned over a black tailcoat, a white waistcoat, and a pair of light check trousers. A white shirt, a collar, and tie kept them company, and, greatest outrage of all, a tall silk hat stood on its own band-box beside the chair. Mr. Jobson, fingering his bristly chin, stood regarding the collection with a wan smile.

"So that's their little game, is it?" he muttered. "Want to make a toff of me. Where's my clothes got to, I wonder?"

A hasty search satisfied him that they were not in the room, and, pausing only to drape himself in the counterpane, he made his way into the next. He passed on to the others, and then, with a growing sense of alarm, stole softly downstairs and making his way to the shop continued the search. With the shutters up the place was almost in darkness, and in spite of his utmost care apples and potatoes rolled on to the floor and travelled across it in a succession of bumps. Then a sudden turn brought the scales clattering down.

"Good gracious, Alf!" said a voice. "Whatever are you a-doing of?"

Mr. Jobson turned and eyed his wife, who was standing at the door.

"I'm looking for my clothes, mother," he replied, briefly.

"Clothes!" said Mrs. Jobson, with an obvious attempt at unconcerned speech. "Clothes! Why, they're on the chair."

"I mean clothes fit for a Christian to wear--fit for a greengrocer to wear," said Mr. Jobson, raising his voice.

"It was a little surprise for you, dear," said his wife. "Me and Bert and Gladys and Dorothy 'ave all been saving up for it for ever so long."

"It's very kind of you all," said Mr. Jobson, feebly--"very, but--"

"They've all been doing without things themselves to do it," interjected his wife. "As for Gladys, I'm sure nobody knows what she's given up."

"Well, if nobody knows, it don't matter," said Mr. Jobson. "As I was saying, it's very kind of you all, but I can't wear 'em. Where's my others?"

Mrs. Jobson hesitated.

"Where's my others?" repeated her husband.

"They're being took care of," replied his wife, with spirit. "Aunt Emma's minding 'em for you--and you know what she is. H'sh! Alf! Alf! I'm surprised at you!"

Mr. Jobson coughed. "It's the collar, mother," he said at last. "I ain't wore a collar for over twenty years; not since we was walking out together. And then I didn't like it."

"More shame for you," said his wife. "I'm sure there's no other

respectable tradesman goes about with a handkerchief knotted round his neck."

"P'raps their skins ain't as tender as what mine is," urged Mr. Jobson; "and besides, fancy me in a top-'at! Why, I shall be the laughing-stock of the place."

"Nonsense!" said his wife. "It's only the lower classes what would laugh, and nobody minds what they think."

Mr. Jobson sighed. "Well, I shall 'ave to go back to bed again, then," he said, ruefully. "So long, mother. Hope you have a pleasant time at the Palace."

He took a reef in the counterpane and with a fair amount of dignity, considering his appearance, stalked upstairs again and stood gloomily considering affairs in his bedroom. Ever since Gladys and Dorothy had been big enough to be objects of interest to the young men of the neighbourhood the clothes nuisance had been rampant. He peeped through the window-blind at the bright sunshine outside, and then looked back at the tumbled bed. A murmur of voices downstairs apprised him that the conspirators were awaiting the result.

He dressed at last and stood like a lamb--a redfaced, bull-necked lamb--while Mrs. Jobson fastened his collar for him.

"Bert wanted to get a taller one," she remarked, "but I said this would do to begin with."

"Wanted it to come over my mouth, I s'pose," said the unfortunate Mr. Jobson. "Well, 'ave it your own way. Don't mind about me. What with the trousers and the collar, I couldn't pick up a sovereign if I saw one in front of me."

"If you see one I'll pick it up for you," said his wife, taking up the hat and moving towards the door. "Come along!"

Mr. Jobson, with his arms standing out stiffly from his sides and his head painfully erect, followed her downstairs, and a sudden hush as he entered the kitchen testified to the effect produced by his appearance. It was followed by a hum of admiration that sent the blood flying to his head.

"Why he couldn't have done it before I don't know," said the dutiful Gladys. "Why, there ain't a man in the street looks a quarter as smart."

"Fits him like a glove!" said Dorothy, walking round him.

"Just the right length," said Bert, scrutinizing the coat.

"And he stands as straight as a soldier," said Gladys, clasping her hands gleefully.

"Collar," said Mr. Jobson, briefly. "Can I 'ave it took off while I eat my bloater, mother?"

"Don't be silly, Alf," said his wife. "Gladys, pour your father out a nice, strong, Pot cup o' tea, and don't forget that the train starts at ha' past ten."

"It'll start all right when it sees me," observed Mr. Jobson, squinting down at his trousers.

Mother and children, delighted with the success of their scheme, laughed applause, and Mr. Jobson somewhat gratified at the success of his retort, sat down and attacked his breakfast. A short clay pipe, smoked as a digestive, was impounded by the watchful Mrs. Jobson the moment he had finished it.

"He'd smoke it along the street if I didn't," she declared.

"And why not?" demanded her husband--always do."

"Not in a top-'at," said Mrs. Jobson, shaking her head at him.

"Or a tail-coat," said Dorothy.

"One would spoil the other," said Gladys.

"I wish something would spoil the hat," said Mr. Jobson, wistfully.
"It's no good; I must smoke, mother."

Mrs. Jobson smiled, and, going to the cupboard, produced, with a smile of triumph, an envelope containing seven dangerous-looking cigars. Mr. Jobson whistled, and taking one up examined it carefully.

"What do they call 'em, mother?" he inquired. "The 'Cut and Try Again Smokes'?"

Mrs. Jobson smiled vaguely. "Me and the girls are going upstairs to get ready now," she said. "Keep your eye on him, Bert!"

Father and son grinned at each other, and, to pass the time, took a cigar apiece. They had just finished them when a swish and rustle of skirts sounded from the stairs, and Mrs. Jobson and the girls, beautifully attired, entered the room and stood buttoning their gloves. A strong smell of scent fought with the aroma of the cigars.

"You get round me like, so as to hide me a bit," entreated Mr. Jobson, as they quitted the house. "I don't mind so much when we get out of our street."

Mrs. Jobson laughed his fears to scorn.

"Well, cross the road, then," said Mr. Jobson, urgently. "There's Bill Foley standing at his door."

His wife sniffed. "Let him stand," she said, haughtily.

Mr. Foley failed to avail himself of the permission. He regarded Mr. Jobson with dilated eyeballs, and, as the party approached, sank slowly into a sitting position on his doorstep, and as the door opened behind him rolled slowly over onto his back and presented an enormous pair of hobnailed soles to the gaze of an interested world.

"I told you 'ow it would be," said the blushing Mr. Jobson. "You know what Bill's like as well as I do."

His wife tossed her head and they all quickened their pace. The voice of the ingenious Mr. Foley calling piteously for his mother pursued them to the end of the road.

"I knew what it 'ud be," said Mr. Jobson, wiping his hot face. "Bill will never let me 'ear the end of this."

"Nonsense!" said his wife, bridling. "Do you mean to tell me you've got to ask Bill Foley 'ow you're to dress? He'll soon get tired of it; and, besides, it's just as well to let him see who you are. There's not many tradesmen as would lower themselves by mixing with a plasterer."

Mr. Jobson scratched his ear, but wisely refrained from speech. Once clear of his own district mental agitation subsided, but bodily discomfort increased at every step. The hat and the collar bothered him most, but every article of attire contributed its share. His uneasiness was so manifest that Mrs. Jobson, after a little womanly sympathy, suggested that, besides Sundays, it might be as well to wear them occasionally of an evening in order to get used to them.

"What, 'ave I got to wear them every Sunday?" demanded the unfortunate, blankly; "why, I thought they was only for Bank Holidays."

Mrs. Jobson told him not to be silly.

"Straight, I did," said her husband, earnestly. "You've no idea 'ow I'm suffering; I've got a headache, I'm arf choked, and there's a feeling about my waist as though I'm being cuddled by somebody I don't like."

Mrs. Jobson said it would soon wear off and, seated in the train that bore them to the Crystal Palace, put the hat on the rack. Her husband's attempt to leave it in the train was easily frustrated and his explanation that he had forgotten all about it received in silence. It was evident that he would require watching, and under the clear gaze of his children he seldom had a button undone for more than three minutes at a time.

The day was hot and he perspired profusely. His collar lost its starch--a thing to be grateful for--and for the greater part of the day he wore his tie under the left ear. By the time they had arrived home again he was in a state of open mutiny.

"Never again," he said, loudly, as he tore the collar off and hung his coat on a chair.

There was a chorus of lamentation; but he remained firm. Dorothy began to sniff ominously, and Gladys spoke longingly of the fathers possessed by other girls. It was not until Mrs. Jobson sat eyeing her supper, instead of eating it, that he began to temporize. He gave way bit by bit, garment by garment. When he gave way at last on the great hat question, his wife took up her knife and fork.

His workaday clothes appeared in his bedroom next morning, but the others still remained in the clutches of Aunt Emma. The suit provided was of considerable antiquity, and at closing time, Mr. Jobson, after some hesitation, donned his new clothes and with a sheepish glance at his wife went out; Mrs. Jobson nodded delight at her daughters.

"He's coming round," she whispered. "He liked that ticket-collector

calling him 'sir' yesterday. I noticed it. He's put on everything but the topper. Don't say nothing about it; take it as a matter of course."

It became evident as the days wore on that she was right... Bit by bit she obtained the other clothes--with some difficulty--from Aunt Emma, but her husband still wore his best on Sundays and sometimes of an evening; and twice, on going into the bedroom suddenly, she had caught him surveying himself at different angles in the glass.

And, moreover, he had spoken with some heat--for such a good-tempered man--on the shortcomings of Dorothy's laundry work.

"We'd better put your collars out," said his wife.

"And the shirts," said Mr. Jobson. "Nothing looks worse than a bad got-up cuff."

"You're getting quite dressy," said his wife, with a laugh.

Mr. Jobson eyed her seriously.

"No, mother, no," he replied. "All I've done is to find out that you're right, as you always 'ave been. A man in my persition has got no right to dress as if he kept a stall on the kerb. It ain't fair to the gals, or to young Bert. I don't want 'em to be ashamed of their father."

"They wouldn't be that," said Mrs. Jobson.

"I'm trying to improve," said her husband. "O' course, it's no use dressing up and behaving wrong, and yesterday I bought a book what tells you all about behaviour."

"Well done!" said the delighted Mrs. Jobson.

Mr. Jobson was glad to find that her opinion on his purchase was shared by the rest of the family. Encouraged by their approval, he told them of the benefit he was deriving from it; and at tea-time that day, after a little hesitation, ventured to affirm that it was a book that might do them all good.

"Hear, hear!" said Gladys.

"For one thing," said Mr. Jobson, slowly, "I didn't know before that it was wrong to blow your tea; and as for drinking it out of a saucer, the book says it's a thing that is only done by the lower orders."

"If you're in a hurry?" demanded Mr. Bert Jobson, pausing with his saucer half way to his mouth.

"If you're in anything," responded his father. "A gentleman would rather go without his tea than drink it out of a saucer. That's the sort o' thing Bill Foley would do."

Mr. Bert Jobson drained his saucer thoughtfully.

"Picking your teeth with your finger is wrong, too," said Mr. Jobson, taking a breath. "Food should be removed in a--a--un-undemonstrative fashion with the tip of the tongue."

"I wasn't," said Gladys.

"A knife," pursued her father--"a knife should never in any circumstances be allowed near the mouth."

"You've made mother cut herself," said Gladys, sharply; "that's what you've done."

"I thought it was my fork," said Mrs. Jobson. "I was so busy listening I wasn't thinking what I was doing. Silly of me."

"We shall all do better in time," said Mr. Jobson. "But what I want to know is, what about the gravy? You can't eat it with a fork, and it don't say nothing about a spoon. Oh, and what about our cold tubs, mother?"

"Cold tubs?" repeated his wife, staring at him. "What cold tubs?"

"The cold tubs me and Bert ought to 'ave," said Mr. Jobson. "It says in the book that an Englishman would just as soon think of going without his breakfus' as his cold tub; and you know how fond I am of my breakfus'."

"And what about me and the gals?" said the amazed Mrs. Jobson.

"Don't you worry about me, ma," said Gladys, hastily.

"The book don't say nothing about gals; it says Englishmen," said Mr. Jobson.

"But we ain't got a bathroom," said his son.

"It don't signify," said Mr. Jobson. "A washtub'll do. Me and Bert'll 'ave a washtub each brought up overnight; and it'll be exercise for the gals bringing the water up of a morning to us."

"Well, I don't know, I'm sure," said the bewildered Mrs. Jobson.

"Anyway, you and Bert'll 'ave to carry the tubs up and down. Messy, I call it.

"It's got to be done, mother," said Mr. Jobson cheerfully. "It's only the lower orders what don't 'ave their cold tub reg'lar. The book says so."

He trundled the tub upstairs the same night and, after his wife had gone downstairs next morning, opened the door and took in the can and pail that stood outside. He poured the contents into the tub, and, after eyeing it thoughtfully for some time, agitated the surface with his right foot. He dipped and dried that much enduring member some ten times, and after regarding the damp condition of the towels with great satisfaction, dressed himself and went downstairs.

"I'm all of a glow," he said, seating himself at the table. "I believe I could eat a elephant. I feel as fresh as a daisy; don't you, Bert?"

Mr. Jobson, junior, who had just come in from the shop, remarked, shortly, that he felt more like a blooming snowdrop.

"And somebody slopped a lot of water over the stairs carrying it up," said Mrs. Jobson. "I don't believe as everybody has cold baths of a

morning. It don't seem wholesome to me."

Mr. Jobson took a book from his pocket, and opening it at a certain page, handed it over to her.

"If I'm going to do the thing at all I must do it properly," he said, gravely. "I don't suppose Bill Foley ever 'ad a cold tub in his life; he don't know no better. Gladys!"

"Halloa!" said that young lady, with a start.

"Are you--are you eating that kipper with your fingers?"

Gladys turned and eyed her mother appealingly.

"Page-page one hundred and something, I think it is," said her father, with his mouth full. "'Manners at the Dinner Table.' It's near the end of the book, I know."

"If I never do no worse than that I shan't come to no harm," said his daughter.

Mr. Jobson shook his head at her, and after eating his breakfast with great care, wiped his mouth on his handkerchief and went into the shop.

"I suppose it's all right," said Mrs. Jobson, looking after him, "but he's taking it very serious--very."

"He washed his hands five times yesterday morning," said Dorothy, who had just come in from the shop to her breakfast; "and kept customers waiting while he did it, too."

"It's the cold-tub business I can't get over," said her mother. "I'm sure it's more trouble to empty them than what it is to fill them. There's quite enough work in the 'ouse as it is."

"Too much," said Bert, with unwonted consideration.

"I wish he'd leave me alone," said Gladys. "My food don't do me no good when he's watching every mouthful I eat."

Of murmurings such as these Mr. Jobson heard nothing, and in view of the great improvement in his dress and manners, a strong resolution was passed to avoid the faintest appearance of discontent. Even when, satisfied with his own appearance, he set to work to improve that of Mrs. Jobson, that admirable woman made no complaint. Hitherto the brightness of her attire and the size of her hats had been held to atone for her lack of figure and the roomy comfort of her boots, but Mr. Jobson, infected with new ideas, refused to listen to such sophistry. He went shopping with Dorothy; and the Sunday after, when Mrs. Jobson went for an airing with him, she walked in boots with heels two inches high and toes that ended in a point. A waist that had disappeared some years before was recaptured and placed in durance vile; and a hat which called for a new style of hair-dressing completed the effect.

"You look splendid, ma!" said Gladys, as she watched their departure. "Splendid!"

"I don't feel splendid," sighed Mrs. Jobson to her husband. "These 'ere

boots feel red-'ot."

"Your usual size," said Mr. Jobson, looking across the road.

"And the clothes seem just a teeny-weeny bit tight, p'r'aps," continued his wife.

Mr. Jobson regarded her critically. "P'r'aps they might have been let out a quarter of an inch," he said, thoughtfully. "They're the best fit you've 'ad for a long time, mother. I only 'ope the gals'll 'ave such good figgers."

His wife smiled faintly, but, with little breath for conversation, walked on for some time in silence. A growing redness of face testified to her distress.

"I--I feel awful," she said at last, pressing her hand to her side. "Awful."

"You'll soon get used to it," said Mr. Jobson, gently. "Look at me! I felt like you do at first, and now I wouldn't go back to old clothes--and comfort--for anything. You'll get to love them boots.

"If I could only take 'em off I should love 'em better," said his wife, panting; "and I can't breathe properly--I can't breathe."

"You look ripping, mother," said her husband, simply.

His wife essayed another smile, but failed. She set her lips together and plodded on, Mr. Jobson chatting cheerily and taking no notice of the fact that she kept lurching against him. Two miles from home she stopped and eyed him fixedly.

"If I don't get these boots off, Alf, I shall be a 'elpless cripple for the rest of my days," she murmured. "My ankle's gone over three times."

"But you can't take 'em off here," said Mr. Jobson, hastily. "Think 'ow it would look."

"I must 'ave a cab or something," said his wife, hysterically. "If I don't get 'em off soon I shall scream."

She leaned against the iron palings of a house for support, while Mr. Jobson, standing on the kerb, looked up and down the road for a cab. A four-wheeler appeared just in time to prevent the scandal--of Mrs. Jobson removing her boots in the street.

"Thank goodness," she gasped, as she climbed in. "Never mind about untying 'em, Alf; cut the laces and get 'em off quick."

They drove home with the boots standing side by side on the seat in front of them. Mr. Jobson got out first and knocked at the door, and as soon as it opened Mrs. Jobson pattered across the intervening space with the boots dangling from her hand. She had nearly reached the door when Mr. Foley, who had a diabolical habit of always being on hand when he was least wanted, appeared suddenly from the offside of the cab.

"Been paddlin'?" he inquired.

Mrs. Jobson, safe in her doorway, drew herself up and, holding the boots behind her, surveyed him with a stare of high-bred disdain.

"Been paddlin'?" he inquired

"I see you going down the road in 'em," said the unabashed Mr. Foley, "and I says to myself, I says, 'Pride'll bear a pinch, but she's going too far. If she thinks that she can squeegee those little tootsywootsies of 'ers into them boo--'"

The door slammed violently and left him exchanging grins with Mr. Jobson.

"How's the 'at?" he inquired.

Mr. Jobson winked. "Bet you a level 'arf-dollar I ain't wearing it next Sunday," he said, in a hoarse whisper.

Mr. Foley edged away.

"Not good enough," he said, shaking his head. "I've had a good many bets with you first and last, Alf, but I can't remember as I ever won one yet. So long."

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