

Fairy Gold

Ship's Company, Part 4.

W.W. Jacobs

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Title: Fairy Gold
Ship's Company, Part 4.

Author: W.W. Jacobs

Release Date: January 1, 2004 [EBook #10564]

Language: English

Character set encoding: ASCII

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Produced by David Widger

SHIP'S COMPANY

By W.W. Jacobs

[Illustration: Mr. Chase, with his friend in his powerful grasp, was doing his best, as he expressed it, to shake the life out of him]

FAIRY GOLD

"Come and have a pint and talk it over," said Mr. Augustus Teak. "I've got reasons in my 'ead that you don't dream of, Alf."

Mr. Chase grunted and stole a side-glance at the small figure of his companion. "All brains, you are, Gussie," he remarked. "That's why it is you're so well off."

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"Come and have a pint," repeated the other, and with surprising ease pushed his bulky friend into the bar of the "Ship and Anchor." Mr. Chase, mellowed by a long draught, placed his mug on the counter and eyeing him kindly, said--

"I've been in my lodgings thirteen years."

"I know," said Mr. Teak; "but I've got a partikler reason for wanting you. Our lodger, Mr. Dunn, left last week, and I only thought of you yesterday. I mentioned you to my missis, and she was quite pleased. You see, she knows I've known you for over twenty years, and she wants to make sure of only 'aving honest people in the 'ouse. She has got a reason for it."

He closed one eye and nodded with great significance at his friend.

"Oh!" said Mr. Chase, waiting.

"She's a rich woman," said Mr. Teak, pulling the other's ear down to his mouth. "She--"

"When you've done tickling me with your whiskers," said Mr. Chase, withdrawing his head and rubbing his ear vigorously, "I shall be glad."

Mr. Teak apologized. "A rich woman," he repeated. "She's been stinting me for twenty-nine years and saving the money--my money!--money that I 'ave earned with the sweat of my brow. She 'as got over three 'undred pounds!"

"Ow much?" demanded Mr. Chase.

"Three 'undred pounds and more," repeated the other; "and if she had 'ad the sense to put it in a bank it would ha' been over four 'undred by this time. Instead o' that she keeps it hid in the 'Ouse."

"Where?" inquired the greatly interested Mr. Chase.

Mr. Teak shook his head. "That's just what I want to find out," he answered. "She don't know I know it; and she mustn't know, either. That's important."

"How did you find out about it, then?" inquired his friend.

"My wife's sister's husband, Bert Adams, told me. His wife told 'im in strict confidence; and I might 'ave gone to my grave without knowing about it, only she smacked his face for 'im the other night."

"If it's in the house you ought to be able to find it easy enough," said Mr. Chase.

"Yes, it's all very well to talk," retorted Mr. Teak. "My missis never leaves the 'ouse unless I'm with her, except when I'm at work; and if she thought I knew of it she'd take and put it in some bank or somewhere unbeknown to me, and I should be farther off it than ever."

"Haven't you got no idea?" said Mr. Chase.

"Not the leastest bit," said the other. "I never thought for a moment

she was saving money. She's always asking me for more, for one thing; but, then women alway do. And look 'ow bad it is for her--saving money like that on the sly. She might grow into a miser, pore thing. For 'er own sake I ought to get hold of it, if it's only to save her from 'erself."

Mr. Chase's face reflected the gravity of his own.

"You're the only man I can trust," continued Mr. Teak, "and I thought if you came as lodger you might be able to find out where it is hid, and get hold of it for me."

"Me steal it, d'ye mean?" demanded the gaping Mr. Chase. "And suppose she got me locked up for it? I should look pretty, shouldn't I?"

"No; you find out where it is hid," said the other; "that's all you need do. I'll find someway of getting hold of it then."

"But if you can't find it, how should I be able to?" inquired Mr. Chase.

"'Cos you'll 'ave opportunities," said the other. "I take her out some time when you're supposed to be out late; you come 'ome, let yourself in with your key, and spot the hiding-place. I get the cash, and give you ten-golden-sovereigns--all to your little self. It only occurred to me after Bert told me about it, that I ain't been in the house alone for years."

He ordered some more beer, and, drawing Mr. Chase to a bench, sat down to a long and steady argument. It shook his faith in human nature to find that his friend estimated the affair as a twenty-pound job, but he was in no position to bargain. They came out smoking twopenny cigars whose strength was remarkable for their age, and before they parted Mr. Chase was pledged to the hilt to do all that he could to save Mrs. Teak from the vice of avarice.

It was a more difficult undertaking than he had supposed. The house, small and compact, seemed to offer few opportunities for the concealment of large sums of money, and after a fortnight's residence he came to the conclusion that the treasure must have been hidden in the garden. The unalloyed pleasure, however, with which Mrs. Teak regarded the efforts of her husband to put under cultivation land that had lain fallow for twenty years convinced both men that they were on a wrong scent. Mr. Teak, who did the digging, was the first to realize it, but his friend, pointing out the suspicions that might be engendered by a sudden cessation of labour, induced him to persevere.

"And try and look as if you liked it," he said, severely. "Why, from the window even the back view of you looks disagreeable."

"I'm fair sick of it," declared Mr. Teak. "Anybody might ha' known she wouldn't have buried it in the garden. She must 'ave been saving for pretty near thirty years, week by week, and she couldn't keep coming out here to hide it. 'Tain't likely."

Mr. Chase pondered. "Let her know, casual like, that I sha'n't be 'ome till late on Saturday," he said, slowly. "Then you come 'ome in the afternoon and take her out. As soon as you're gone I'll pop in and have a thorough good hunt round. Is she fond of animals?"

"I b'lieve so," said the other, staring. "Why?"

"Take 'er to the Zoo," said Mr. Chase, impressively. "Take two-penn'orth o' nuts with you for the monkeys, and some stale buns for--for--for animals as likes 'em. Give 'er a ride on the elephant and a ride on the camel."

"Anything else?" inquired Mr. Teak disagreeably. "Any more ways you can think of for me to spend my money?"

"You do as I tell you," said his friend. "I've got an idea now where it is. If I'm able to show you where to put your finger on three 'undred pounds when you come 'ome it'll be the cheapest outing you have ever 'ad. Won't it?"

Mr. Teak made no reply, but, after spending the evening in deliberation, issued the invitation at the supper-table. His wife's eyes sparkled at first; then the light slowly faded from them and her face fell.

"I can't go," she said, at last. "I've got nothing to go in."

"Rubbish!" said her husband, starting uneasily.

"It's a fact," said Mrs. Teak. "I should like to go, too--it's years since I was at the Zoo. I might make my jacket do; it's my hat I'm thinking about."

Mr. Chase, meeting Mr. Teak's eye, winked an obvious suggestion.

"So, thanking you all the same," continued Mrs. Teak, with amiable cheerfulness, "I'll stay at 'ome."

"Ow-'ow much are they?" growled her husband, scowling at Mr. Chase.

"All prices," replied his wife.

"Yes, I know," said Mr. Teak, in a grating voice. "You go in to buy a hat at one and eleven-pence; you get talked over and flattered by a man like a barber's block, and you come out with a four-and-six penny one. The only real difference in hats is the price, but women can never see it."

Mrs. Teak smiled faintly, and again expressed her willingness to stay at home. They could spend the afternoon working in the garden, she said. Her husband, with another indignant glance at the right eye of Mr. Chase, which was still enacting the part of a camera-shutter, said that she could have a hat, but asked her to remember when buying it that nothing suited her so well as a plain one.

The remainder of the week passed away slowly; and Mr. Teak, despite his utmost efforts, was unable to glean any information from Mr. Chase as to that gentleman's ideas concerning the hiding-place. At every suggestion Mr. Chase's smile only got broader and more indulgent.

"You leave it to me," he said. "You leave it to me, and when you come home from a happy outing I 'ope to be able to cross your little hand with three 'undred golden quids."

"But why not tell me?" urged Mr. Teak.

"Cos I want to surprise you," was the reply. "But mind, whatever you do, don't let your wife run away with the idea that I've been mixed up in it at all. Now, if you worry me any more I shall ask you to make it thirty pounds for me instead of twenty."

The two friends parted at the corner of the road on Saturday afternoon, and Mr. Teak, conscious of his friend's impatience, sought to hurry his wife by occasionally calling the wrong time up the stairs. She came down at last, smiling, in a plain hat with three roses, two bows, and a feather.

"I've had the feather for years," she remarked. "This is the fourth hat it has been on--but, then, I've taken care of it."

Mr. Teak grunted, and, opening the door, ushered her into the street. A sense of adventure, and the hope of a profitable afternoon made his spirits rise. He paid a compliment to the hat, and then, to the surprise of both, followed it up with another--a very little one--to his wife.

They took a tram at the end of the street, and for the sake of the air mounted to the top. Mrs. Teak leaned back in her seat with placid enjoyment, and for the first ten minutes amused herself with the life in the streets. Then she turned suddenly to her husband and declared that she had felt a spot of rain.

"Magination," he said, shortly.

Something cold touched him lightly on the eyelid, a tiny pattering sounded from the seats, and then swish, down came the rain. With an angry exclamation he sprang up and followed his wife below.

"Just our luck," she said, mournfully. "Best thing we can do is to stay in the car and go back with it."

"Nonsense!" said her husband, in a startled voice; "it'll be over in a minute."

Events proved the contrary. By the time the car reached the terminus it was coming down heavily. Mrs. Teak settled herself squarely in her seat, and patches of blue sky, visible only to the eye of faith and her husband, failed to move her. Even his reckless reference to a cab failed.

"It's no good," she said, tartly. "We can't go about the grounds in a cab, and I'm not going to slop about in the wet to please anybody. We must go another time. It's hard luck, but there's worse things in life."

Mr. Teak, wondering as to the operations of Mr. Chase, agreed dumbly. He stopped the car at the corner of their road, and, holding his head down against the rain, sprinted towards home. Mrs. Teak, anxious for her hat, passed him.

"What on earth's the matter?" she inquired, fumbling in her pocket for the key as her husband executed a clumsy but noisy breakdown on the front step.

"Chill," replied Mr. Teak. "I've got wet."

He resumed his lumberings and, the door being opened, gave vent to his relief at being home again in the dry, in a voice that made the windows rattle. Then with anxious eyes he watched his wife pass upstairs.

"Wonder what excuse old Alf'll make for being in?" he thought.

He stood with one foot on the bottom stair, listening acutely. He heard a door open above, and then a wild, ear-splitting shriek rang through the house. Instinctively he dashed upstairs and, following his wife into their bedroom, stood by her side gaping stupidly at a pair of legs standing on the hearthstone. As he watched they came backwards into the room, the upper part of a body materialized from the chimney, and turning round revealed the soot-stained face of Mr. Alfred Chase. Another wild shriek from Mrs. Teak greeted its appearance.

"Hul-lo!" exclaimed Mr. Teak, groping for the right thing to say.
"Hul-lo! What--what are you doing, Alf?"

Mr. Chase blew the soot from his lips. "I--I--I come 'ome unexpected," he stammered.

"But--what are--you doing?" panted Mrs. Teak, in a rising voice.

"I--I was passing your door," said Mr. Chase, "passing your door--to go to my room to--to 'ave a bit of a rinse, when--"

"Yes," said Mrs. Teak.

Mr. Chase gave Mr. Teak a glance the pathos of which even the soot could not conceal. "When I--I heard a pore little bird struggling in your chimbley," he continued, with a sigh of relief. "Being fond of animals, I took the liberty of comin' into your room and saving its life."

Mr. Teak drew a breath, which he endeavoured in vain to render noiseless.

"It got its pore little foot caught in the brickwork," continued the veracious Mr. Chase, tenderly. "I released it, and it flowed--I mean flew--up the chimbley."

With the shamefaced air of a man detected in the performance of a noble action, he passed out of the room. Husband and wife eyed each other.

"That's Alf--that's Alf all over," said Mr. Teak, with enthusiasm. "He's been like it from a child. He's the sort of man that 'ud dive off Waterloo Bridge to save the life of a drowning sparrow."

"He's made an awful mess," said his wife, frowning; "it'll take me the rest of the day to clean up. There's soot everywhere. The rug is quite spoilt."

She took off her hat and jacket and prepared for the fray. Down below Messrs. Teak and Chase, comparing notes, sought, with much warmth, to put the blame on the right shoulders.

"Well, it ain't there," said Mr. Chase, finally. "I've made sure of that. That's something towards it. I shan't 'ave to look there again, thank goodness."

Mr. Teak sniffed. "Got any more ideas?" he queried.

"I have," said the other sternly. "There's plenty of places to search yet. I've only just begun. Get her out as much as you can and I'll 'ave my hands on it afore you can say--"

"Soot?" suggested Mr. Teak, sourly.

"Any more of your nasty snacks and I chuck it up altogether," said Mr. Chase, heatedly. "If I wasn't hard up I'd drop it now."

He went up to his room in dudgeon, and for the next few days Mr. Teak saw but little of him. To lure Mrs. Teak out was almost as difficult as to persuade a snail to leave its shell, but he succeeded on two or three occasions, and each time she added something to her wardrobe.

The assistant fortune-hunter had been in residence just a month when Mr. Teak, returning home one afternoon, stood in the small passage listening to a suppressed wailing noise proceeding from upstairs. It was so creepy that half-way up he hesitated, and, in a stern but trembling voice, demanded to know what his wife meant by it. A louder wail than before was the only reply, and, summoning up his courage, he pushed open the door of the bedroom and peeped in. His gaze fell on Mrs. Teak, who was sitting on the hearth-rug, rocking to and fro in front of a dismantled fire-place.

"What--what's the matter?" he said, hastily.

Mrs. Teak raised her voice to a pitch that set his teeth on edge. "My money!" she wailed. "It's all gone! All gone!"

"Money?" repeated Mr. Teak, hardly able to contain himself. "What money?"

"All--all my savings!" moaned his wife. "Savings!" said the delighted Mr. Teak. "What savings?"

"Money I have been putting by for our old age," said his wife. "Three hundred and twenty-two pounds. All gone!"

In a fit of sudden generosity Mr. Teak decided then and there that Mr. Chase should have the odd twenty-two pounds.

"You're dreaming!" he said, sternly.

"I wish I was," said his wife, wiping her eyes. "Three hundred and twenty-two pounds in empty mustard-tins. Every ha'penny's gone!"

Mr. Teak's eye fell on the stove. He stepped forward and examined it. The back was out, and Mrs. Teak, calling his attention to a tunnel at the side, implored him to put his arm in and satisfy himself that it was empty.

"But where could you get all that money from?" he demanded, after a prolonged groping.

"Sa--sa--saved it," sobbed his wife, "for our old age."

"Our old age?" repeated Mr. Teak, in lofty tones. "And suppose I had died first? Or suppose you had died sudden? This is what comes of

deceitfulness and keeping things from your husband. Now somebody has stole it."

Mrs. Teak bent her head and sobbed again. "I--I had just been out for --for an hour," she gasped. "When I came back I fou--fou--found the washhouse window smashed, and--"

Sobs choked her utterance. Mr. Teak, lost in admiration of Mr. Chase's cleverness, stood regarding her in silence.

"What--what about the police?" said his wife at last.

"Police!" repeated Mr. Teak, with extraordinary vehemence. "Police! Certainly not. D'ye think I'm going to let it be known all round that I'm the husband of a miser? I'd sooner lose ten times the money."

He stalked solemnly out of the room and downstairs, and, safe in the parlour, gave vent to his feelings in a wild but silent hornpipe. He cannoned against the table at last, and, subsiding into an easy-chair, crammed his handkerchief to his mouth and gave way to suppressed mirth.

In his excitement he forgot all about tea, and the bereaved Mrs. Teak made no attempt to come downstairs to prepare it. With his eye on the clock he waited with what patience he might for the arrival of Mr. Chase. The usual hour for his return came and went. Another hour passed; and another. A horrible idea that Mr. Chase had been robbed gave way to one more horrible still. He paced the room in dismay, until at nine o'clock his wife came down, and in a languid fashion began to set the supper-table.

"Alf's very late," said Mr. Teak, thickly.

"Is he?" said his wife, dully.

"Very late," said Mr. Teak. "I can't think--Ah, there he is!"

He took a deep breath and clenched his hands together. By the time Mr. Chase came into the room he was able to greet him with a stealthy wink. Mr. Chase, with a humorous twist of his mouth, winked back.

"We've 'ad a upset," said Mr. Teak, in warning tones.

"Eh?" said the other, as Mrs. Teak threw her apron over her head and sank into a chair. "What about?"

In bated accents, interrupted at times by broken murmurs from his wife, Mr. Teak informed him of the robbery. Mr. Chase, leaning against the doorpost, listened with open mouth and distended eyeballs. Occasional interjections of pity and surprise attested his interest. The tale finished, the gentlemen exchanged a significant wink and sighed in unison.

"And now," said Mr. Teak an hour later, after his wife had retired, "where is it?"

"Ah, that's the question," said Mr. Chase, roguishly. "I wonder where it can be?"

"I--I hope it's in a safe place," said Mr. Teak, anxiously. "Where 'ave

you put it?"

"Me?" said Mr. Chase. "Who are you getting at? I ain't put it anywhere. You know that."

"Don't play the giddy goat," said the other, testily. "Where've you hid it? Is it safe?"

Mr. Chase leaned back in his chair and, shaking his head at him, smiled approvingly. "You're a little wonder, that's what you are, Gussie," he remarked. "No wonder your pore wife is took in so easy."

Mr. Teak sprang up in a fury. "Don't play the fool," he said hoarsely. "Where's the money? I want it. Now, where've you put it?"

"Go on," said Mr. Chase, with a chuckle. "Go on. Don't mind me. You ought to be on the stage, Gussie, that's where you ought to be."

"I'm not joking," said Mr. Teak, in a trembling voice, "and I don't want you to joke with me. If you think you are going off with my money, you're mistook. If you don't tell me in two minutes where it is, I shall give you in charge for theft."

"Oh" said Mr. Chase. He took a deep breath. "Oh, really!" he said. "I wouldn't 'ave thought it of you, Gussie. I wouldn't 'ave thought you'd have played it so low down. I'm surprised at you."

"You thought wrong, then," said the other.

"Trying to do me out o' my twenty pounds, that's what you are," said Mr. Chase, knitting his brows. "But it won't do, my boy. I wasn't born yesterday. Hand it over, afore I lose my temper. Twenty pounds I want of you, and I don't leave this room till I get it."

Speechless with fury, Mr. Teak struck at him. The next moment the supper-table was overturned with a crash, and Mr. Chase, with his friend in his powerful grasp, was doing his best, as he expressed it, to shake the life out of him. A faint scream sounded from above, steps pattered on the stairs, and Mrs. Teak, with a red shawl round her shoulders, burst 'hurriedly into the room. Mr. Chase released Mr. Teak, opened his mouth to speak, and then, thinking better of it, dashed into the passage, took his hat from the peg, and, slamming the front door with extraordinary violence, departed.

He sent round for his clothes next day, but he did not see Mr. Teak until a month afterwards. His fists clenched and his mouth hardened, but Mr. Teak, with a pathetic smile, held out his hand, and Mr. Chase, after a moment's hesitation, took it. Mr. Teak, still holding his friend's hand, piloted him to a neighbouring hostelry.

"It was my mistake, Alf," he said, shaking his head, "but it wasn't my fault. It's a mistake anybody might ha' made."

"Have you found out who took it?" inquired Mr. Chase, regarding him suspiciously.

Mr. Teak gulped and nodded. "I met Bert Adams yesterday," he said, slowly. "It took three pints afore he told me, but I got it out of 'im at last. My missis took it herself."

Mr. Chase put his mug down with a bang. "What?" he gasped.

"The day after she found you with your head up the chimbley," added Mr. Teak, mournfully. "She's shoved it away in some bank now, and I shall never see a ha'penny of it. If you was a married man, Alf, you'd understand it better. You wouldn't be surprised at anything."

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