

Ship's Company, The Entire Collection

W.W. Jacobs

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SHIP'S COMPANY

By W.W. Jacobs

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[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 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'r'aps 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."

FRIENDS IN NEED

R. Joseph Gibbs finished his half-pint in the private bar of the Red Lion with the slowness of a man unable to see where the next was coming from, and, placing the mug on the counter, filled his pipe from a small paper of tobacco and shook his head slowly at his companions.

"First I've 'ad since ten o'clock this morning," he said, in a hard voice.

"Cheer up," said Mr. George Brown.

"It can't go on for ever," said Bob Kidd, encouragingly.

"All I ask for--is work," said Mr. Gibbs, impressively. "Not slavery, mind yer, but work."

"It's rather difficult to distinguish," said Mr. Brown.

"Specially for some people," added Mr. Kidd.

"Go on," said Mr. Gibbs, gloomily. "Go on. Stand a man 'arf a pint, and then go and hurt 'is feelings. Twice yesterday I wondered to myself what it would feel like to make a hole in the water."

"Lots o' chaps do do it," said Mr. Brown, musingly.

"And leave their wives and families to starve," said Mr. Gibbs, icily.

"Very often the wife is better off," said his friend. "It's one mouth less for her to feed. Besides, she gen'rally gets something. When pore old Bill went they 'ad a Friendly Lead at the 'King's Head' and got his missis pretty nearly seventeen pounds."

"And I believe we'd get more than that for your old woman," said Mr. Kidd. "There's no kids, and she could keep 'erself easy. Not that I want to encourage you to make away with yourself."

Mr. Gibbs scowled and, tilting his mug, peered gloomily into the interior.

"Joe won't make no 'ole in the water," said Mr. Brown, wagging his head. "If it was beer, now--"

Mr. Gibbs turned and, drawing himself up to five feet three, surveyed the speaker with an offensive stare.

"I don't see why he need make a 'ole in anything," said Mr. Kidd, slowly. "It 'ud do just as well if we said he 'ad. Then we could pass the hat round and share it."

"Divide it into three halves and each 'ave one," said Mr. Brown, nodding; "but 'ow is it to be done?"

"Ave some more beer and think it over," said Mr. Kidd, pale with excitement. "Three pints, please."

He and Mr. Brown took up their pints, and nodded at each other. Mr. Gibbs, toying idly with the handle of his, eyed them carefully. "Mind, I'm not promising anything," he said, slowly. "Understand, I ain't a-committing of myself by drinking this 'ere pint."

"You leave it to me, Joe," said Mr. Kidd.

Mr. Gibbs left it to him after a discussion in which pints played a persuasive part; with the result that Mr. Brown, sitting in the same bar the next evening with two or three friends, was rudely disturbed by the cyclonic entrance of Mr. Kidd, who, dripping with water, sank on a bench and breathed heavily.

"What's up? What's the matter?" demanded several voices.

"It's Joe--poor Joe Gibbs," said Mr. Kidd. "I was on Smith's wharf shifting that lighter to the next berth, and, o' course Joe must come aboard to help. He was shoving her off with 'is foot when--"

He broke off and shuddered and, accepting a mug of beer, pending the arrival of some brandy that a sympathizer had ordered, drank it slowly.

"It all 'appened in a flash," he said, looking round. "By the time I 'ad run round to his end he was just going down for the third time. I hung over the side and grabbed at 'im, and his collar and tie came off in my hand. Nearly went in, I did."

He held out the collar and tie; and approving notice was taken of the fact that he was soaking wet from the top of his head to the middle button of his waistcoat.

"Pore chap!" said the landlord, leaning over the bar. "He was in 'ere only 'arf an hour ago, standing in this very bar."

"Well, he's 'ad his last drop o' beer," said a carman in a chastened voice.

"That's more than anybody can say," said the landlord, sharply. "I never heard anything against the man; he's led a good life so far as I know, and 'ow can we tell that he won't 'ave beer?"

He made Mr. Kidd a present of another small glass of brandy.

"He didn't leave any family, did he?" he inquired, as he passed it over.

"Only a wife," said Mr. Kidd; "and who's to tell that pore soul I don't know. She fair doated on 'im. 'Ow she's to live I don't know. I shall do what I can for 'er."

"Same 'ere," said Mr. Brown, in a deep voice.

"Something ought to be done for 'er," said the carman, as he went out.

"First thing is to tell the police," said the landlord. "They ought to know; then p'r'aps one of them'll tell her. It's what they're paid for."

"It's so awfully sudden. I don't know where I am 'ardly," said Mr. Kidd. "I don't believe she's got a penny-piece in the 'ouse. Pore Joe 'ad a lot o' pals. I wonder whether we could'nt get up something for her."

"Go round and tell the police first," said the landlord, pursing up his lips thoughtfully. "We can talk about that later on."

Mr. Kidd thanked him warmly and withdrew, accompanied by Mr. Brown. Twenty minutes later they left the station, considerably relieved at the matter-of-fact way in which the police had received the tidings, and, hurrying across London Bridge, made their way towards a small figure supporting its back against a post in the Borough market.

"Well?" said Mr. Gibbs, snappishly, as he turned at the sound of their footsteps.

"It'll be all right, Joe," said Mr. Kidd. "We've sowed the seed."

"Sowed the wot?" demanded the other.

Mr. Kidd explained.

"Ho!" said Mr. Gibbs. "An' while your precious seed is a-coming up, wot am I to do? Wot about my comfortable 'ome? Wot about my bed and grub?"

His two friends looked at each other uneasily. In the excitement of the arrangements they had for gotten these things, and a long and sometimes painful experience of Mr. Gibbs showed them only too plainly where they were drifting.

"You'll 'ave to get a bed this side o' the river somewhere," said Mr. Brown, slowly. "Coffee-shop or something; and a smart, active man wot keeps his eyes open can always pick up a little money."

Mr. Gibbs laughed.

"And mind," said Mr. Kidd, furiously, in reply to the laugh, "anything we lend you is to be paid back out of your half when you get it. And, wot's more, you don't get a ha'penny till you've come into a barber's shop and 'ad them whiskers off. We don't want no accidents."

Mr. Gibbs, with his back against the post, fought for his whiskers for nearly half an hour, and at the end of that time was led into a barber's, and in a state of sullen indignation proffered his request for a "clean" shave. He gazed at the bare-faced creature that confronted him in the glass after the operation in open-eyed consternation, and Messrs. Kidd and Brown's politeness easily gave way before their astonishment.

"Well, I may as well have a 'air-cut while I'm here," said Mr. Gibbs, after a lengthy survey.

"And a shampoo, sir?" said the assistant.

"Just as you like," said Mr. Gibbs, turning a deaf ear to the frenzied expostulations of his financial backers. "Wot is it?"

[Illustration: Mr. Gibbs, with his back against the post, fought for nearly half an hour]

He sat in amazed discomfort during the operation, and emerging with his friends remarked that he felt half a stone lighter. The information was received in stony silence, and, having spent some time in the selection, they found a quiet public-house, and in a retired corner formed themselves into a Committee of Ways and Means.

"That'll do for you to go on with," said Mr. Kidd, after he and Mr. Brown had each made a contribution; "and, mind, it's coming off of your share."

Mr. Gibbs nodded. "And any evening you want to see me you'll find me in here," he remarked. "Beer's ripping. Now you'd better go and see my old woman."

The two friends departed, and, to their great relief, found a little knot of people outside the abode of Mrs. Gibbs. It was clear that the news had been already broken, and, pushing their way upstairs, they found the widow with a damp handkerchief in her hand surrounded by attentive

friends. In feeble accents she thanked Mr. Kidd for his noble attempts at rescue.

"He ain't dry yet," said Mr. Brown.

"I done wot I could," said Mr. Kidd, simply. "Pore Joe! Nobody could ha' had a better pal. Nobody!"

"Always ready to lend a helping 'and to them as was in trouble, he was," said Mr. Brown, looking round.

"Ear, 'ear!" said a voice.

"And we'll lend 'im a helping 'and," said Mr. Kidd, energetically. "We can't do 'im no good, pore chap, but we can try and do something for 'er as is left behind."

He moved slowly to the door, accompanied by Mr. Brown, and catching the eye of one or two of the men beckoned them to follow. Under his able guidance a small but gradually increasing crowd made its way to the "Red Lion." For the next three or four days the friends worked unceasingly. Cards stating that a Friendly Lead would be held at the "Red Lion," for the benefit of the widow of the late Mr. Joseph Gibbs, were distributed broadcast; and anecdotes portraying a singularly rare and beautiful character obtained an even wider circulation. Too late Wapping realized the benevolent disposition and the kindly but unobtrusive nature that had departed from it for ever.

Mr. Gibbs, from his retreat across the water, fully shared his friends' enthusiasm, but an insane desire--engendered by vanity--to be present at the function was a source of considerable trouble and annoyance to them. When he offered to black his face and take part in the entertainment as a nigger minstrel, Mr. Kidd had to be led outside and kept there until such time as he could converse in English pure and undefiled.

"Getting above 'imself, that's wot it is," said Mr. Brown, as they wended their way home. "He's having too much money out of us to spend; but it won't be for long now."

"He's having a lord's life of it, while we're slaving ourselves to death," grumbled Mr. Kidd. "I never see 'im looking so fat and well. By rights he oughtn't to 'ave the same share as wot we're going to 'ave; he ain't doing none of the work."

His ill-humour lasted until the night of the "Lead," which, largely owing to the presence of a sporting fishmonger who had done well at the races that day, and some of his friends, realized a sum far beyond the expectations of the hard-working promoters. The fishmonger led off by placing a five-pound note in the plate, and the packed audience breathed so hard that the plate-holder's responsibility began to weigh upon his spirits. In all, a financial tribute of thirty-seven pounds three and fourpence was paid to the memory of the late Mr. Gibbs.

"Over twelve quid apiece," said the delighted Mr. Kidd as he bade his co-worker good night. "Sounds too good to be true."

The next day passed all too slowly, but work was over at last, and Mr. Kidd led the way over London Bridge a yard or two ahead of the more phlegmatic Mr. Brown. Mr. Gibbs was in his old corner at the

"Wheelwright's Arms," and, instead of going into ecstasies over the sum realized, hinted darkly that it would have been larger if he had been allowed to have had a hand in it.

"It'll 'ardly pay me for my trouble," he said, shaking his head. "It's very dull over 'ere all alone by myself. By the time you two have 'ad your share, besides taking wot I owe you, there'll be 'ardly anything left."

"I'll talk to you another time," said Mr. Kidd, regarding him fixedly. "Wot you've got to do now is to come acrost the river with us."

"What for?" demanded Mr. Gibbs.

"We're going to break the joyful news to your old woman that you're alive afore she starts spending money wot isn't hers," said Mr. Kidd. "And we want you to be close by in case she don't believe us.

"Well, do it gentle, mind," said the fond husband. "We don't want 'er screaming, or anything o' that sort. I know 'er better than wot you do, and my advice to you is to go easy."

He walked along by the side of them, and, after some demur, consented, as a further disguise, to put on a pair of spectacles, for which Mr. Kidd's wife's mother had been hunting high and low since eight o'clock that morning.

"You doddle about 'ere for ten minutes," said Mr. Kidd, as they reached the Monument, "and then foller on. When you pass a lamp-post 'old your handkerchief up to your face. And wait for us at the corner of your road till we come for you."

He went off at a brisk pace with Mr. Brown, a pace moderated to one of almost funeral solemnity as they approached the residence of Mrs. Gibbs. To their relief she was alone, and after the usual amenities thanked them warmly for all they had done for her.

"I'd do more than that for pore Joe," said Mr. Brown.

"They--they 'aven't found 'im yet?" said the widow.

Mr. Kidd shook his head. "My idea is they won't find 'im," he said, slowly.

"Went down on the ebb tide," explained Mr. Brown; and spoilt Mr. Kidd's opening.

"Wherever he is 'e's better off," said Mrs. Gibbs.

"No more trouble about being out o' work; no more worry; no more pain. We've all got to go some day.

"Yes," began Mr. Kidd; "but--

"I'm sure I don't wish 'im back," said Mrs. Gibbs; "that would be sinful."

"But 'ow if he wanted to come back?" said Mr. Kidd, playing for an opening.

"And 'elp you spend that money," said Mr. Brown, ignoring the scowls of his friend.

Mrs. Gibbs looked bewildered. "Spend the money?" she began.

"Suppose," said Mr. Kidd, "suppose he wasn't drowned after all? Only last night I dreamt he was alive."

"So did I," said Mr. Brown.

"He was smiling at me," said Mr. Kidd, in a tender voice. "'Bob,' he ses, 'go and tell my pore missis that I'm alive,' he ses; 'break it to 'er gentle.'"

"It's the very words he said to me in my dream," said Mr. Brown. "Bit strange, ain't it?"

"Very," said Mrs. Gibbs.

"I suppose," said Mr. Kidd, after a pause, "I suppose you haven't been dreaming about 'im?"

"No; I'm a teetotaller," said the widow.

The two gentlemen exchanged glances, and Mr. Kidd, ever of an impulsive nature, resolved to bring matters to a head.

"Wot would you do if Joe was to come in 'ere at this door?" he asked.

"Scream the house down," said the widow, promptly.

"Scream--scream the 'ouse down?" said the distressed Mr. Kidd.

Mrs. Gibbs nodded. "I should go screaming, raving mad," she said, with conviction.

"But--but not if 'e was alive!" said Mr. Kidd.

"I don't know what you're driving at," said Mrs. Gibbs. "Why don't you speak out plain? Poor Joe is drowned, you know that; you saw it all, and yet you come talking to me about dreams and things."

Mr. Kidd bent over her and put his hand affectionately on her shoulder. "He escaped," he said, in a thrilling whisper. "He's alive and well."

"WHAT?" said Mrs. Gibbs, starting back.

"True as I stand 'ere," said Mr. Kidd; "ain't it, George?"

"Truer," said Mr. Brown, loyally.

Mrs. Gibbs leaned back, gasping. "Alive!" she said. "But 'ow? 'Ow can he be?"

"Don't make such a noise," said Mr. Kidd, earnestly. "Mind, if anybody else gets to 'ear of it you'll 'ave to give that money back."

"I'd give more than that to get 'im back," said Mrs. Gibbs, wildly. "I

believe you're deceiving me."

"True as I stand 'ere," asseverated the other. "He's only a minute or two off, and if it wasn't for you screaming I'd go out and fetch 'im in."

"I won't scream," said Mrs. Gibbs, "not if I know it's flesh and blood. Oh, where is he? Why don't you bring 'im in? Let me go to 'im."

"All right," said Mr. Kidd, with a satisfied smile at Mr. Brown; "all in good time. I'll go and fetch 'im now; but, mind, if you scream you'll spoil everything."

He bustled cheerfully out of the room and downstairs, and Mrs. Gibbs, motioning Mr. Brown to silence, stood by the door with parted lips, waiting. Three or four minutes elapsed.

"'Ere they come," said Mr. Brown, as footsteps sounded on the stairs. "Now, no screaming, mind!"

Mrs. Gibbs drew back, and, to the gratification of all concerned, did not utter a sound as Mr. Kidd, followed by her husband, entered the room. She stood looking expectantly towards the doorway.

"Where is he?" she gasped.

"Eh?" said Mr. Kidd, in a startled voice. "Why here. Don't you know 'im?"

"It's me, Susan," said Mr. Gibbs, in a low voice.

"Oh, I might 'ave known it was a joke," cried Mrs. Gibbs, in a faint voice, as she tottered to a chair. "Oh, 'ow cruel of you to tell me my pore Joe was alive! Oh, 'ow could you?"

"Lor' lumme," said the incensed Mr. Kidd, pushing Mr. Gibbs forward. "Here he is. Same as you saw 'im last, except for 'is whiskers. Don't make that sobbing noise; people'll be coming in."

"Oh! Oh! Oh! Take 'im away," cried Mrs. Gibbs. "Go and play your tricks with somebody else's broken 'art."

"But it's your husband," said Mr. Brown.

"Take 'im away," wailed Mrs. Gibbs.

Mr. Kidd, grinding his teeth, tried to think. "'Ave you got any marks on your body, Joe?" he inquired.

"I ain't got a mark on me," said Mr. Gibbs with a satisfied air, "or a blemish. My skin is as whi--"

"That's enough about your skin," interrupted Mr. Kidd, rudely.

"If you ain't all of you gone before I count ten," said Mrs. Gibbs, in a suppressed voice, "I'll scream. 'Ow dare you come into a respectable woman's place and talk about your skins? Are you going? One! Two! Three! Four! Five!"

Her voice rose with each numeral; and Mr. Gibbs himself led the way

downstairs, and, followed by his friends, slipped nimbly round the corner.

"It's a wonder she didn't rouse the whole 'ouse," he said, wiping his brow on his sleeve; "and where should we ha' been then? I thought at the time it was a mistake you making me 'ave my whiskers off, but I let you know best. She's never seen me without 'em. I 'ad a remarkable strong growth when I was quite a boy. While other boys was--"

"Shut-up!" vociferated Mr. Kidd.

"Sha'n't!" said Mr. Gibbs, defiantly. "I've 'ad enough of being away from my comfortable little 'ome and my wife; and I'm going to let 'em start growing agin this very night. She'll never reckernize me without 'em, that's certain."

"He's right, Bob," said Mr. Brown, with conviction.

"D'ye mean to tell me we've got to wait till 'is blasted whiskers grow?" cried Mr. Kidd, almost dancing with fury. "And go on keeping 'im in idleness till they do?"

"You'll get it all back out o' my share," said Mr. Gibbs, with dignity. "But you can please yourself. If you like to call it quits now, I don't mind."

Mr. Brown took his seething friend aside, and conferred with him in low but earnest tones. Mr. Gibbs, with an indifferent air, stood by whistling softly.

"Ow long will they take to grow?" inquired Mr. Kidd, turning to him with a growl.

Mr. Gibbs shrugged his shoulders. "Can't say," he replied; "but I should think two or three weeks would be enough for 'er to reckernize me by. If she don't, we must wait another week or so, that's all."

"Well, there won't be much o' your share left, mind that," said Mr. Kidd, glowering at him.

"I can't help it," said Mr. Gibbs. "You needn't keep reminding me of it."

They walked the rest of the way in silence; and for the next fortnight Mr. Gibbs's friends paid nightly visits to note the change in his appearance, and grumble at its slowness.

"We'll try and pull it off to-morrow night," said Mr. Kidd, at the end of that period. "I'm fair sick o' lending you money."

Mr. Gibbs shook his head and spoke sagely about not spoiling the ship for a ha'porth o' tar; but Mr. Kidd was obdurate.

"There's enough for 'er to reckernize you by," he said, sternly, "and we don't want other people to. Meet us at the Monument at eight o'clock to-morrow night, and we'll get it over."

"Give your orders," said Mr. Gibbs, in a nasty voice.

"Keep your 'at well over your eyes," commanded Mr. Kidd, sternly. "Put them spectacles on wot I lent you, and it wouldn't be a bad idea if you tied your face up in a piece o' red flannel."

"I know wot I'm going to do without you telling me," said Mr. Gibbs, nodding. "I'll bet you pots round that you don't either of you reckonize me tomorrow night."

The bet was taken at once, and from eight o'clock until ten minutes to nine the following night Messrs. Kidd and Brown did their best to win it. Then did Mr. Kidd, turning to Mr. Brown in perplexity, inquire with many redundant words what it all meant.

[Illustration: "Gone!" exclaimed both gentlemen. "Where?"]

"He must 'ave gone on by 'imself," said Mr. Brown. "We'd better go and see."

In a state of some disorder they hurried back to Wapping, and, mounting the stairs to Mrs. Gibbs's room, found the door fast. To their fervent and repeated knocking there was no answer.

"Ah, you won't make her 'ear," said a woman, thrusting an untidy head over the balusters on the next landing. "She's gone."

"Gone!" exclaimed both gentlemen. "Where?"

"Canada," said the woman. "She went off this morning."

Mr. Kidd leaned up against the wall for support; Mr. Brown stood open-mouthed and voiceless.

"It was a surprise to me," said the woman, "but she told me this morning she's been getting ready on the quiet for the last fortnight. Good spirits she was in, too; laughing like anything."

"Laughing!" repeated Mr. Kidd, in a terrible voice.

The woman nodded. "And when I spoke about it and reminded 'er that she 'ad only just lost 'er pore husband, I thought she would ha' burst," she said, severely. "She sat down on that stair and laughed till the tears ran down 'er face like water."

Mr. Brown turned a bewildered face upon his partner. "Laughing!" he said, slowly. "Wot 'ad she got to laugh at?"

"Two born-fools," replied Mr. Kidd.

GOOD INTENTIONS

"Jealousy; that's wot it is," said the night-watchman, trying to sneer-- "pure jealousy." He had left his broom for a hurried half-pint at the "Bull's Head"--left it leaning in a negligent attitude against the

warehouse-wall; now, lashed to the top of the crane at the jetty end, it pointed its soiled bristles towards the evening sky and defied capture.

"And I know who it is, and why 'e's done it," he continued. "Fust and last, I don't suppose I was talking to the gal for more than ten minutes, and 'arf of that was about the weather.

"I don't suppose anybody 'as suffered more from jealousy than wot I 'ave: Other people's jealousy, I mean. Ever since I was married the missis has been setting traps for me, and asking people to keep an eye on me. I blacked one of the eyes once--like a fool--and the chap it belonged to made up a tale about me that I ain't lived down yet.

"Years ago, when I was out with the missis one evening, I saved a gal's life for her. She slipped as she was getting off a bus, and I caught 'er just in time. Fine strapping gal she was, and afore I could get my balance we 'ad danced round and round 'arfway acrost the road with our arms round each other's necks, and my missis watching us from the pavement. When we were safe, she said the gal 'adn't slipped at all; and, as soon as the gal 'ad got 'er breath, I'm blest if she didn't say so too.

"You can't argufy with jealous people, and you can't shame 'em. When I told my missis once that I should never dream of being jealous of her, instead of up and thanking me for it, she spoilt the best frying-pan we ever had. When the widder-woman next-door but two and me 'ad rheumatics at the same time, she went and asked the doctor whether it was catching.

"The worse trouble o' that kind I ever got into was all through trying to do somebody else a kindness. I went out o' my way to do it; I wasted the whole evening for the sake of other people, and got into such trouble over it that even now it gives me the cold shivers to think of.

"Cap'n Tarbell was the man I tried to do a good turn to; a man what used to be master of a ketch called the Lizzie and Annie, trading between 'ere and Shoremouth. 'Artful Jack' he used to be called, and if ever a man deserved the name, he did. A widder-man of about fifty, and as silly as a boy of fifteen. He 'ad been talking of getting married agin for over ten years, and, thinking it was only talk, I didn't give 'im any good advice. Then he told me one night that 'e was keeping company with a woman named Lamb, who lived at a place near Shoremouth. When I asked 'im what she looked like, he said that she had a good 'art, and, knowing wot that meant, I wasn't at all surprised when he told me some time arter that 'e had been a silly fool.

""Well, if she's got a good 'art,' I ses, 'p'r'aps she'll let you go.'

""Talk sense,' he ses. 'It ain't good enough for that. Why, she worships the ground I tread on. She thinks there is nobody like me in the whole wide world.'

""Let's 'ope she'll think so arter you're married,' I ses, trying to cheer him up.

""I'm not going to get married,' he ses. 'Leastways, not to 'er. But 'ow to get out of it without breaking her 'art and being had up for breach o' promise I can't think. And if the other one got to 'ear of it, I should lose her too.'

"'Other one?' I ses, 'wot other one?'

"Cap'n Tarbell shook his 'ead and smiled like a silly gal.

"'She fell in love with me on top of a bus in the Mile End Road,' he ses. 'Love at fust sight it was. She's a widder lady with a nice little 'ouse at Bow, and plenty to live on-her 'usband having been a builder. I don't know what to do. You see, if I married both of 'em it's sure to be found out sooner or later.'

"'You'll be found out as it is,' I ses, 'if you ain't careful. I'm surprised at you.'

"'Yes,' he ses, getting up and walking backwards and forwards; 'especially as Mrs. Plimmer is always talking about coming down to see the ship. One thing is, the crew won't give me away; they've been with me too long for that. P'r'aps you could give me a little advice, Bill.'

"I did. I talked to that man for an hour and a'arf, and when I 'ad finished he said he didn't want that kind of advice at all. Wot 'e wanted was for me to tell 'im 'ow to get rid of Miss Lamb and marry Mrs. Plimmer without anybody being offended or having their feelings hurt.

"Mrs. Plimmer came down to the ship the very next evening. Fine-looking woman she was, and, wot with 'er watch and chain and di'mond rings and brooches and such-like, I should think she must 'ave 'ad five or six pounds' worth of jewell'ry on 'er. She gave me a very pleasant smile, and I gave 'er one back, and we stood chatting there like old friends till at last she tore 'erself away and went on board the ship.

"She came off by and by hanging on Cap'n Tarbell's arm. The cap'n was dressed up in 'is Sunday clothes, with one of the cleanest collars on I 'ave ever seen in my life, and smoking a cigar that smelt like an escape of gas. He came back alone at ha'past eleven that night, and 'e told me that if it wasn't for the other one down Shoremouth way he should be the 'appiest man on earth.

"'Mrs. Plimmer's only got one fault,' he ses, shaking his 'cad, 'and that's jealousy. If she got to know of Laura Lamb, it would be all U.P. It makes me go cold all over when I think of it. The only thing is to get married as quick as I can; then she can't help 'erself.'

"'It wouldn't prevent the other one making a fuss, though,' I ses.

"'No,' he ses, very thoughtfully, 'it wouldn't. I shall 'ave to do something there, but wot, I don't know.'

"He climbed on board like a man with a load on his mind, and arter a look at the sky went below and forgot both 'is troubles in sleep.

"Mrs. Plimmer came down to the wharf every time the ship was up, arter that. Sometimes she'd spend the evening aboard, and sometimes they'd go off and spend it somewhere else. She 'ad a fancy for the cabin, I think, and the cap'n told me that she 'ad said when they were married she was going to sail with 'im sometimes.

"'But it ain't for six months yet,' he ses, 'and a lot o' things might 'appen to the other one in that time, with luck.'

"It was just about a month arter that that 'e came to me one evening trembling all over. I 'ad just come on dooty, and afore I could ask 'im wot was the matter he 'ad got me in the 'Bull's Head' and stood me three 'arf-pints, one arter the other.

"'I'm ruined,' he ses in a 'usky whisper; 'I'm done for. Why was wimmen made? Wot good are they? Fancy 'ow bright and 'appy we should all be without 'em.'

"'I started to p'int out one or two things to 'im that he seemed to 'ave forgot, but 'e wouldn't listen. He was so excited that he didn't seem to know wot 'e was doing, and arter he 'ad got three more 'arf-pints waiting for me, all in a row on the counter, I 'ad to ask 'im whether he thought I was there to do conjuring tricks, or wot?'

"'There was a letter waiting for me in the office,' he ses. 'From Miss Lamb--she's in London. She's coming to pay me a surprise visit this evening--I know who'll get the surprise. Mrs. Plimmer's coming too.'

"I gave 'im one of my 'arf-pints and made 'im drink it. He chucked the pot on the floor when he 'ad done, in a desprit sort o' way, and 'im and the landlord 'ad a little breeze then that did 'im more good than wot the beer 'ad. When we came outside 'e seemed more contented with 'imself, but he shook his 'ead and got miserable as soon as we got to the wharf agin.

"'S'pose they both come along at the same time,' he ses. 'Wot's to be done?'

"I shut the gate with a bang and fastened the wicket. Then I turned to 'im with a smile.

"'I'm watchman 'ere,' I ses, 'and I lets in who I thinks I will. This ain't a public 'ighway,' I ses; 'it's a wharf.'

"'Bill,' he ses, 'you're a genius.'

"'If Miss Lamb comes 'ere asking arter you,' I ses, 'I shall say you've gone out for the evening.'

"'Wot about her letter?' he ses.

"'You didn't 'ave it,' I ses, winking at 'im.

"'And suppose she waits about outside for me, and Mrs. Plimmer wants me to take 'er out?' he ses, shivering. 'She's a fearful obstinate woman; and she'd wait a week for me.'

"He kept peeping up the road while we talked it over, and then we both see Mrs. Plimmer coming along. He backed on to the wharf and pulled out 'is purse.

"'Bill,' he ses, gabbling as fast as 'e could gabble, 'here's five or six shillings. If the other one comes and won't go away tell 'er I've gone to the Pagoda Music-'all and you'll take 'er to me, keep 'er out all the evening some'ow, if you can, if she comes back too soon keep 'er in the office.'

"'And wot about leaving the wharf and my dooty?' I ses, staring.

"'I'll put Joe on to keep watch for you,' he ses, pressing the money in my 'and. 'I rely on you, Bill, and I'll never forget you. You won't lose by it, trust me.'

"He nipped off and tumbled aboard the ship afore I could say a word. I just stood there staring arter 'im and feeling the money, and afore I could make up my mind Mrs. Plimmer came up.

"I thought I should never ha' got rid of 'er. She stood there chatting and smiling, and seemed to forget all about the cap'n, and every moment I was afraid that the other one might come up. At last she went off, looking behind 'er, to the ship, and then I went outside and put my back up agin the gate and waited.

"I 'ad hardly been there ten minutes afore the other one came along. I saw 'er stop and speak to a policeman, and then she came straight over to me.

"'I want to see Cap'n Tarbell,' she ses.

"'Cap'n Tarbell?' I ses, very slow; 'Cap'n Tarbell 'as gone off for the evening.'

"'Gone off!' she ses, staring. 'But he can't 'ave. Are you sure?'

"'Sartain,' I ses. Then I 'ad a bright idea. 'And there's a letter come for 'im,' I ses.

"'Oh, dear!' she ses. 'And I thought it would be in plenty of time. Well, I must go on the ship and wait for 'im, I suppose.'

"If I 'ad only let 'er go I should ha' saved myself a lot o' trouble, and the man wot deserved it would ha' got it. Instead o' that I told 'er about the music-'all, and arter carrying on like a silly gal o' seventeen and saying she couldn't think of it, she gave way and said she'd go with me to find 'im. I was all right so far as clothes went as it happened. Mrs. Plimmer said once that I got more and more dressy every time she saw me, and my missis 'ad said the same thing only in a different way. I just took a peep through the wicket and saw that Joe 'ad taken up my dooty, and then we set off.

"I said I wasn't quite sure which one he'd gone to, but we'd try the Pagoda Music-'all fust, and we went there on a bus from Aldgate. It was the fust evening out I 'ad 'ad for years, and I should 'ave enjoyed it if it 'adn't been for Miss Lamb. Wotever Cap'n Tarbell could ha' seen in 'er, I can't think.

"She was quiet, and stupid, and bad-tempered. When the bus-conductor came round for the fares she 'adn't got any change; and when we got to the hall she did such eggsterrordinary things trying to find 'er pocket that I tried to look as if she didn't belong to me. When she left off she smiled and said she was farther off than ever, and arter three or four wot was standing there 'ad begged 'er to have another try, I 'ad to pay for the two.

"The 'ouse was pretty full when we got in, but she didn't take no notice of that. Her idea was that she could walk about all over the place looking for Cap'n Tarbell, and it took three men in buttons and a

policeman to persuade 'er different. We were pushed into a couple o' seats at last, and then she started finding fault with me.

""Where is Cap'n Tarbell?' she ses. 'Why don't you find him?'

""I'll go and look for 'im in the bar presently,' I ses. 'He's sure to be there, arter a turn or two.'

"I managed to keep 'er quiet for 'arf an hour--with the 'elp of the people wot sat near us--and then I 'ad to go. I 'ad a glass o' beer to pass the time away, and, while I was drinking it, who should come up but the cook and one of the hands from the _Lizzie and Annie_.

""We saw you,' ses the cook, winking; 'didn't we Bob?'

""Yes,' ses Bob, shaking his silly 'ead; 'but it wasn't no surprise to me. I've 'ad my eye on 'im for a long time past.'

""I thought 'e was married,' ses the cook.

""So he is,' ses Bob, 'and to the best wife in London. I know where she lives. Mine's a bottle o' Bass,' he ses, turning to me.

""So's mine,' ses the cook.

"I paid for two bottles for 'em, and arter that they said that they'd 'ave a whisky and soda apiece just to show as there was no ill-feeling.

""It's very good,' ses Bob, sipping his, 'but it wants a sixpenny cigar to go with it. It's been the dream o' my life to smoke a sixpenny cigar.'

""So it 'as mine,' ses the cook, 'but I don't suppose I ever shall.'

"They both coughed arter that, and like a goodnatured fool I stood 'em a sixpenny cigar apiece, and I 'ad just turned to go back to my seat when up come two more hands from the Lizzie and Annie.

""Halloa, watchman!' ses one of 'em. 'Why, I thought you was a-taking care of the wharf.'

""He's got something better than the wharf to take care of,' ses Bob, grinning.

""I know; we see 'im,' ses the other chap. 'We've been watching 'is goings-on for the last 'arf-hour; better than a play it was.'

"I stopped their mouths with a glass o' bitter each, and went back to my seat while they was drinking it. I told Miss Lamb in whispers that 'e wasn't there, but I'd 'ave another look for him by and by. If she'd ha' whispered back it would ha' been all right, but she wouldn't, and, arter a most unpleasant scene, she walked out with her 'ead in the air follered by me with two men in buttons and a policeman.

"O' course, nothing would do but she must go back to the wharf and wait for Cap'n Tarbell, and all the way there I was wondering wot would 'appen if she went on board and found 'im there with Mrs. Plimmer. However, when we got there I persuaded 'er to go into the office while I went aboard to see if I could find out where he was, and three minutes

arterwards he was standing with me behind the galley, trembling all over and patting me on the back.

"'Keep 'er in the office a little longer,' he ses, in a whisper. 'The other's going soon. Keep 'er there as long as you can.'

"'And suppose she sees you and Mrs. Plimmer passing the window?' I ses.

"'That'll be all right; I'm going to take 'er to the stairs in the ship's boat,' he ses. 'It's more romantic.'

"He gave me a little punch in the ribs, playfullike, and, arter telling me I was worth my weight in gold-dust, went back to the cabin agin.

"I told Miss Lamb that the cabin was locked up, but that Cap'n Tarbell was expected back in about 'arf-an-hour's time. Then I found 'er an old newspaper and a comfortable chair and sat down to wait. I couldn't go on the wharf for fear she'd want to come with me, and I sat there as patient as I could, till a little clicking noise made us both start up and look at each other.

"'Wot's that?' she ses, listening.

"'It sounded,' I ses 'it sounded like somebody locking the door.'

"I went to the door to try it just as somebody dashed past the window with their 'ead down. It was locked fast, and arter I had 'ad a try at it and Miss Lamb had 'ad a try at it, we stood and looked at each other in surprise.

"'Somebody's playing a joke on us,' I ses.

"'Joke!' ses Miss Lamb. 'Open that door at once. If you don't open it I'll call for the police.'

"She looked at the windows, but the iron bars wot was strong enough to keep the vans outside was strong enough to keep 'er in, and then she gave way to such a fit o' temper that I couldn't do nothing with 'er.

"'Cap'n Tarbell can't be long now,' I ses, as soon as I could get a word in. 'We shall get out as soon as e comes.'

"She flung 'erself down in the chair agin with 'er back to me, and for nearly three-quarters of an hour we sat there without a word. Then, to our joy, we 'eard footsteps turn in at the gate. Quick footsteps they was. Somebody turned the handle of the door, and then a face looked in at the window that made me nearly jump out of my boots in surprise. A face that was as white as chalk with temper, and a bonnet cocked over one eye with walking fast. She shook 'er fist at me, and then she shook it at Miss Lamb.

"'Who's that?' ses Miss Lamb.

"'My missis,' I ses, in a loud voice. 'Thank goodness she's come.'

"'Open the door!' ses my missis, with a screech.

"'OPEN THE DOOR!'

"'I can't,' I ses. 'Somebody's locked it. This is Cap'n Tarbell's young lady.'

"'I'll Cap'n Tarbell 'er when I get in!' ses my wife. 'You too. I'll music-'all you! I'll learn you to go gallivanting about! Open the door!'

"She walked up and down the alley-way in front of the window waiting for me just like a lion walking up and down its cage waiting for its dinner, and I made up my mind then and there that I should 'ave to make a clean breast of it and let Cap'n Tarbell get out of it the best way he could. I wasn't going to suffer for him.

"'Ow long my missis walked up and down there I don't know. It seemed ages to me; but at last I 'eard footsteps and voices, and Bob and the cook and the other two chaps wot we 'ad met at the music'all came along and stood grinning in at the window.

"'Somebody's locked us in,' I ses. 'Go and fetch Cap'n Tarbell.'

"'Cap'n Tarbell?' ses the cook. 'You don't want to see 'im. Why, he's the last man in the world you ought to want to see! You don't know 'ow jealous he is.'

"'You go and fetch 'im, I ses. "'Ow dare you talk like that afore my wife!'

"'I dursen't take the responserbility,' ses the cook. 'It might mean bloodshed.'

"'You go and fetch 'im,' ses my missis. 'Never mind about the bloodshed. I don't. Open the door!'

"She started banging on the door agin, and arter talking among themselves for a time they moved off to the ship. They came back in three or four minutes, and the cook 'eld up something in front of the window.

"'The boy 'ad got it,' he ses. 'Now shall I open the door and let your missis in, or would you rather stay where you are in peace and quietness?'

"I saw my missis jump at the key, and Bob and the others, laughing fit to split their sides, 'olding her back. Then I heard a shout, and the next moment Cap'n Tarbell came up and asked 'em wot the trouble was about.

"They all started talking at once, and then the cap'n, arter one look in at the window, threw up his 'ands and staggered back as if 'e couldn't believe his eyesight. He stood dazed-like for a second or two, and then 'e took the key out of the cook's 'and, opened the door, and walked in. The four men was close be'ind 'im, and, do all she could, my missis couldn't get in front of 'em.

"'Watchman!' he ses, in a stuck-up voice, 'wot does this mean? Laura Lamb! wot 'ave you got to say for yourself? Where 'ave you been all the evening?'

"'She's been to a music-'all with Bill,' ses the cook. 'We saw 'em.'

"'WOT?' ses the cap'n, falling back again. 'It can't be!'

"'It was them,' ses my wife. 'A little boy brought me a note telling me. You let me go; it's my husband, and I want to talk to 'im.'

"'It's all right,' I ses, waving my 'and at Miss Lamb, wot was going to speak, and smiling at my missis, wot was trying to get at me.

"'We went to look for you,' ses Miss Lamb, very quick. 'He said you were at the music-'all, and as you 'adn't got my letter I thought it was very likely.'

"'But I did get your letter,' ses the cap'n.

"'He said you didn't,' ses Miss Lamb.

"'Look 'ere,' I ses. 'Why don't you keep quiet and let me explain? I can explain everything.'

"'I'm glad o' that, for your sake, my man,' ses the cap'n, looking at me very hard. 'I 'ope you will be able to explain 'ow it was you came to leave the wharf for three hours.'

"I saw it all then. If I split about Mrs. Plimmer, he'd split to the guv'nor about my leaving my dooty, and I should get the sack. I thought I should ha' choked, and, judging by the way they banged me on the back, Bob and the cook thought so too. They 'elped me to a chair when I got better, and I sat there 'elpless while the cap'n went on talking.

"'I'm no mischief-maker,' he ses; 'and, besides, p'r'aps he's been punished enough. And as far as I'm concerned he can take this lady to a music-'all every night of the week if 'e likes. I've done with her.'

"There was an eggsterrordinary noise from where my missis was standing; like the gurgling water makes sometimes running down the kitchen sink at 'ome, only worse. Then they all started talking together, and 'arf-a-dozen times or more Miss Lamb called me to back 'er up in wot she was saying, but I only shook my 'ead, and at last, arter tossing her 'ead at Cap'n Tarbell and telling 'im she wouldn't 'ave 'im if he'd got fifty million a year, the five of 'em 'eld my missis while she went off.

"They gave 'er ten minutes' start, and then Cap'n Tarbell, arter looking at me and shaking his 'ead, said he was afraid they must be going.

"'And I 'ope this night'll be a lesson to you,' he ses. 'Don't neglect your dooty again. I shall keep my eye on you, and if you be'ave yourself I sha'n't say anything. Why, for all you know or could ha' done the wharf might ha' been burnt to the ground while you was away!'

"He nodded to his crew, and they all walked out laughing and left me alone--with the missis."

[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."

"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."

[Illustration: "As I was a-saying, kindness to animals is all very well"]

WATCH-DOGS

"It's a'most the only enjyment I've got left," said the oldest inhabitant, taking a long, slow draught of beer, "that and a pipe o' baccy. Neither of 'em wants chewing, and that's a great thing when you ain't got anything worth speaking about left to chew with."

He put his mug on the table and, ignoring the stillness of the summer air, sheltered the flame of a match between his cupped hands and conveyed it with infinite care to the bowl of his pipe. A dull but crafty old eye squinting down the stem assured itself that the tobacco was well alight before the match was thrown away.

"As I was a-saying, kindness to animals is all very well," he said to the wayfarer who sat opposite him in the shade of the "Cauliflower" elms; "but kindness to your feller-creeturs is more. The pint wot you give me is gone, but I'm just as thankful to you as if it wasn't."

He half closed his eyes and, gazing on to the fields beyond, fell into a reverie so deep that he failed to observe the landlord come for his mug and return with it filled. A little start attested his surprise, and, to his great annoyance, upset a couple of tablespoonfuls of the precious liquid.

"Some people waste all their kindness on dumb animals," he remarked, after the landlord had withdrawn from his offended vision, "but I was never a believer in it. I mind some time ago when a gen'lemen from Lunnon wot 'ad more money than sense offered a prize for kindness to animals. I was the only one that didn't try for to win it.

"Mr. Bunnett 'is name was, and 'e come down and took Farmer Hall's 'ouse for the summer. Over sixty 'e was, and old enough to know better. He

used to put saucers of milk all round the 'ouse for cats to drink, and, by the time pore Farmer Hall got back, every cat for three miles round 'ad got in the habit of coming round to the back-door and asking for milk as if it was their right. Farmer Hall poisoned a saucer o' milk at last, and then 'ad to pay five shillings for a thin black cat with a mangy tail and one eye that Bob Pretty said belonged to 'is children. Farmer Hall said he'd go to jail afore he'd pay, at fust, but arter five men 'ad spoke the truth and said they 'ad see Bob's youngsters tying a empty mustard-tin to its tail on'y the day afore, he gave way.

"Tha was Bob Pretty all over, that was; the biggest raskel Claybury 'as ever had; and it wasn't the fust bit o' money 'e made out o' Mr. Bunnett coming to the place.

"It all come through Mr. Bunnett's love for animals. I never see a man so fond of animals as 'e was, and if he had 'ad 'is way Claybury would 'ave been overrun by 'em by this time. The day arter 'e got to the farm he couldn't eat 'is breakfuss because of a pig that was being killed in the yard, and it was no good pointing out to 'im that the pig was on'y making a fuss about it because it was its nature so to do. He lived on wegetables and such like, and the way 'e carried on one day over 'arf a biled caterpillar 'e found in his cabbage wouldn't be believed. He wouldn't eat another mossel, but sat hunting 'igh and low for the other 'arf.

"He 'adn't been in Claybury more than a week afore he said 'ow surprised 'e was to see 'ow pore dumb animals was treated. He made a little speech about it one evening up at the schoolroom, and, arter he 'ad finished, he up and offered to give a prize of a gold watch that used to belong to 'is dear sister wot loved animals, to the one wot was the kindest to 'em afore he left the place.

"If he'd ha' known Claybury men better 'e wouldn't ha' done it. The very next morning Bill Chambers took 'is baby's milk for the cat, and smacked 'is wife's 'ead for talking arter he'd told 'er to stop. Henery Walker got into trouble for leaning over Charlie Stubbs's fence and feeding his chickens for 'im, and Sam Jones's wife had to run off 'ome to 'er mother 'arf-dressed because she had 'appened to overlay a sick rabbit wot Sam 'ad taken to bed with 'im to keep warm.

"People used to stop animals in the road and try and do 'em a kindness--especially when Mr. Bunnett was passing--and Peter Gubbins walked past 'is house one day with ole Mrs. Broad's cat in 'is arms. A bad-tempered old cat it was, and, wot with Peter kissing the top of its 'ead and calling of it Tiddleums, it nearly went out of its mind.

"The fust time Mr. Bunnett see Bob Pretty was about a week arter he'd offered that gold watch. Bob was stooping down very careful over something in the hedge, and Mr. Bunnett, going up quiet-like behind 'im, see 'im messing about with a pore old toad he 'ad found, with a smashed leg.

""Wots the matter with it?" ses Mr. Bunnett.

"Bob didn't seem to hear 'im. He was a-kneeling on the ground with 'is 'ead on one side looking at the toad; and by and by he pulled out 'is pocket'an'kercher and put the toad in it, as if it was made of egg-shells, and walked away.

"'Wot's the matter with it?' ses Mr. Bunnett, a'most trotting to keep up with 'im.

"'Got it's leg 'urt in some way, pore thing,' ses Bob. 'I want to get it 'ome as soon as I can and wash it and put it on a piece o' damp moss. But I'm afraid it's not long for this world.'

"Mr. Bunnett said it did 'im credit, and walked home alongside of 'im talking. He was surprised to find that Bob hadn't 'eard anything of the gold watch 'e was offering, but Bob said he was a busy, 'ard-working man and didn't 'ave no time to go to hear speeches or listen to tittle-tattle.

"'When I've done my day's work,' he ses, 'I can always find a job in the garden, and arter that I go in and 'elp my missis put the children to bed. She ain't strong, pore thing, and it's better than wasting time and money up at the "Cauliflower.'"

"He 'ad a lot o' talk with Mr. Bunnett for the next day or two, and when 'e went round with the toad on the third day as lively and well as possible the old gen'leman said it was a miracle. And so it would ha' been if it had been the same toad.

"He took a great fancy to Bob Pretty, and somehow or other they was always dropping acrost each other. He met Bob with 'is dog one day--a large, ugly brute, but a'most as clever as wot Bob was 'imself. It stood there with its tongue 'anging out and looking at Bob uneasy-like out of the corner of its eye as Bob stood a-patting of it and calling it pet names.

"' Wunnerful affectionate old dog, ain't you, Joseph?' ses Bob.

"'He's got a kind eye,' ses Mr. Bunnett.

"'He's like another child to me, ain't you, my pretty?' ses Bob, smiling at 'im and feeling in 'is pocket. 'Here you are, old chap.'

"He threw down a biskit so sudden that Joseph, thinking it was a stone, went off like a streak o' lightning with 'is tail between 'is legs and yelping his 'ardest. Most men would ha' looked a bit foolish, but Bob Pretty didn't turn a hair.

"'Ain't it wunnerful the sense they've got,' he ses to Mr. Bunnett, wot was still staring arter the dog.

"'Sense?' ses the old gen'leman.

"'Yes,' ses Bob smiling. 'His food ain't been agreeing with 'im lately and he's starving hisself for a bit to get round agin, and 'e knew that 'e couldn't trust hisself alongside o' this biskit. Wot a pity men ain't like that with beer. I wish as 'ow Bill Chambers and Henery Walker and a few more 'ad been 'ere just now.'

"Mr. Bunnett agreed with 'im, and said wot a pity it was everybody 'adn't got Bob Pretty's commonsense and good feeling.

"'It ain't that,' ses Bob, shaking his 'ead at him; 'it ain't to my credit. I dessay if Sam Jones and Peter Gubbins, and Charlie Stubbs and Dicky Weed 'ad been brought up the same as I was they'd 'ave been a lot

better than wot I am.'

"He bid Mr. Bunnett good-bye becous 'e said he'd got to get back to 'is work, and Mr. Bunnett had 'ardly got 'ome afore Henery Walker turned up full of anxiousness to ask his advice about five little baby kittens wot 'is old cat had found in the wash-place: the night afore.

"Drownd them little innercent things, same as most would do, I can't,' he ses, shaking his 'ead; 'but wot to do with 'em I don't know.'

"Couldn't you find 'omes for 'em?' ses Mr. Bunnett.

"Henery Walker shook his 'ead agin. "Tain't no use thinking o' that,' he ses. 'There's more cats than 'omes about 'ere'. Why, Bill Chambers drowneded six o'ny last week right afore the eyes of my pore little boy. Upset 'im dreadful it did.'

"Mr. Bunnett walked up and down the room thinking. 'We must try and find 'omes for 'em when they are old enough,' he says at last; 'I'll go round myself and see wot I can do for you.'

"Henery Walker thanked 'im and went off 'ome doing a bit o' thinking; and well he 'ad reason to. Everybody wanted one o' them kittens. Peter Gubbins offered for to take two, and Mr. Bunnett told Henery Walker next day that 'e could ha' found 'omes for 'em ten times over.

"You've no idea wot fine, kind-'arted people they are in this village when their 'arts are touched,' he ses, smiling at Henery. 'You ought to 'ave seen Mr. Jones's smile when I asked 'im to take one. It did me good to see it. And I spoke to Mr. Chambers about drowning 'is kittens, and he told me 'e hadn't slept a wink ever since. And he offered to take your old cat to make up for it, if you was tired of keeping it.

"It was very 'ard on Henery Walker, I must say that. Other people was getting the credit of bringing up 'is kittens, and more than that, they used to ask Mr. Bunnett into their places to see 'ow the little dears was a-getting on.

"Kindness to animals caused more unpleasantness in Claybury than anything 'ad ever done afore. There was hardly a man as 'ud speak civil to each other, and the wimmen was a'most as bad. Cats and dogs and such-like began to act as if the place belonged to 'em, and seven people stopped Mr. Bunnett one day to tell 'im that Joe Parsons 'ad been putting down rat-poison and killed five little baby rats and their mother.

"It was some time afore anybody knew that Bob Pretty 'ad got 'is eye on that gold watch, and when they did they could 'ardly believe it. They give Bob credit for too much sense to waste time over wot they knew 'e couldn't get, but arter they 'ad heard one or two things they got alarmed, and pretty near the whole village went up to see Mr. Bunnett and tell 'im about Bob's true character. Mr. Bunnett couldn't believe 'em at fast, but arter they 'ad told 'im of Bob's poaching and the artful ways and tricks he 'ad of getting money as didn't belong to 'im 'e began to think different. He spoke to parson about 'im, and arter that 'e said he never wanted for to see Bob Pretty's face again.

"There was a fine to-do about it up at this 'ere Cauliflower public-'ouse that night, and the quietest man 'o the whole lot was Bob Pretty. He sat still all the time drinking 'is beer and smiling at 'em and giving 'em

good advice 'ow to get that gold watch.

"'It's no good to me,' he ses, shaking his 'ead. 'I'm a pore labourin' man, and I know my place.'

"'Ow you could ever 'ave thought you 'ad a chance, Bob, I don't know,' ses Henery Walker.

"'Ow's the toad, Bob?'" ses Bill Chambers; and then they all laughed.

"'Laugh away, mates,' ses Bob; 'I know you don't mean it. The on'y thing I'm sorry for is you can't all 'ave the gold watch, and I'm sure you've worked 'ard enough for it; keeping Henery Walker's kittens for 'im, and hanging round Mr. Bunnett's.'

"'We've all got a better chance than wot you 'ave, Bob,' ses little Dicky Weed the tailor.

"The quietest man o' the whole lot was Bob Pretty"

"'Ah, that's your iggernerance, Dicky,' ses Bob. 'Come to think it over quiet like, I'm afraid I shall win it arter all. Cos why? Cos I deserves it.'

"They all laughed agin, and Bill Chambers laughed so 'arty that 'e juggled Peter Gubbins's arm and upset 'is beer.

"'Laugh away,' ses Bob, pretending to get savage. 'Them that laughs best laughs last, mind. I'll 'ave that watch now, just to spite you all.'

"'Ow are you going to get it, Bob?'" ses Sam Jones, jeering.

"'Never you mind, mate,' ses Bob, stamping 'is foot; 'I'm going to win it fair. I'm going to 'ave it for kindness to pore dumb animals.'

"'Ear! 'ear!' ses Dicky Weed, winking at the others. 'Will you 'ave a bet on it, Bob?'"

"'No,' ses Bob Pretty; 'I don't want to win no man's money. I like to earn my money in the sweat o' my brow.'

"'But you won't win it, Bob,' ses Dicky, grinning. 'Look 'ere! I'll lay you a level bob you don't get it.'

"Bob shook his 'ead, and started talking to Bill Chambers about something else.

"'I'll bet you two bob to one, Bob,' ses Dicky. 'Well, three to one, then.'

"Bob sat up and looked at'im for a long time, considering, and at last he ses, 'All right,' he ses, 'if Smith the landlord will mind the money I will.'

"He 'anded over his shilling,' but very slow-like, and Dicky Weed 'anded over 'is money. Arter that Bob sat looking disagreeable like, especially when. Dicky said wot 'e was goin' to do with the money, and by an by Sam Jones dared 'im to 'ave the same bet with 'im in sixpences.

"Bob Pretty 'ad a pint more beer to think it over, and arter Bill Chambers 'ad stood 'im another, he said 'e would. He seemed a bit dazed like, and by the time he went 'ome he 'ad made bets with thirteen of 'em. Being Saturday night they 'ad all got money on 'em, and, as for Bob, he always 'ad some. Smith took care of the money and wrote it all up on a slate.

"Why don't you 'ave a bit on, Mr. Smith?' ses Dicky.

"Oh, I dunno,' ses Smith, wiping down the bar with a wet cloth.

"It's the chance of a lifetime,' ses Dicky.

"Looks like it,' ses Smith, coughing.

"But 'e can't win,' ses Sam Jones, looking a bit upset. 'Why, Mr. Bunnett said 'e ought to be locked up.'

"He's been led away,' ses Bob Pretty, shaking his 'ead. 'He's a kind-'arted old gen'leman when 'e's left alone, and he'll soon see wot a mistake 'e's made about me. I'll show 'im. But I wish it was something more useful than a gold watch.'

"You ain't got it yet,' ses Bill Chambers.

"No, mate,' ses Bob.

"And you stand to lose a sight o' money,' ses Sam Jones. 'If you like, Bob Pretty, you can 'ave your bet back with me.'

"Never mind, Sam,' ses Bob; 'I won't take no advantage of you. If I lose you'll 'ave sixpence to buy a rabbit-hutch with. Good-night, mates all.'

"He rumped Bill Chambers's 'air for 'im as he passed--a thing Bill never can a-bear--and gave Henery Walker, wot was drinking beer, a smack on the back wot nearly ruined 'im for life.

[Illustration: "Some of 'em went and told Mr. Bunnett some more things about Bob next day"]

"Some of 'em went and told Mr. Bunnett some more things about Bob next day, but they might as well ha' saved their breath. The old gen'leman said be knew all about 'im and he never wanted to 'ear his name mentioned agin. Arter which they began for to 'ave a more cheerful way of looking at things; and Sam Jones said 'e was going to 'ave a hole bored through 'is sixpence and wear it round 'is neck to aggravate Bob Pretty with.

"For the next three or four weeks Bob Pretty seemed to keep very quiet, and we all began to think as 'ow he 'ad made a mistake for once. Everybody else was trying their 'ardest for the watch, and all Bob done was to make a laugh of 'em and to say he believed it was on'y made of brass arter all. Then one arternoon, just a few days afore Mr. Bunnett's time was up at the farm, Bob took 'is dog out for a walk, and arter watching the farm for some time met the old gen'leman by accident up at Coe's plantation.

"'Good arternoon, sir,' he ses, smiling at 'im. 'Wot wunnerful fine weather we're a-having for the time o' year. I've just brought Joseph out for a bit of a walk. He ain't been wot I might call hisself for the last day or two, and I thought a little fresh air might do 'im good.'

"Mr. Bunnett just looked at him, and then 'e passed 'im by without a word.

"'I wanted to ask your advice about 'im,' ses Bob, turning round and follering of 'im. 'He's a delikit animal, and sometimes I wonder whether I 'aven't been a-pampering of 'im too much.'

"'Go away,' ses Mr. Bunnett; 'I've'eard all about you. Go away at once.'

"'Heard all about me?' ses Bob Pretty, looking puzzled. 'Well, you can't 'ave heard no 'arm, that's one comfort.'

"'I've been told your true character,' ses the old gen'leman, very firm. 'And I'm ashamed that I should have let myself be deceived by you. I hope you'll try and do better while there is still time.'

"'If anybody 'as got anything to say agin my character,' says Bob, 'I wish as they'd say it to my face. I'm a pore, hard-working man, and my character's all I've got.'

"'You're poorer than you thought you was then,' says Mr. Bunnett. 'I wish you good arternoon.'

"'Good arternoon, sir,' ses Bob, very humble. 'I'm afraid some on 'em 'ave been telling lies about me, and I didn't think I'd got a enemy in the world. Come on, Joseph. Come on, old pal. We ain't wanted here.'

"He shook 'is 'ead with sorrow, and made a little sucking noise between 'is teeth, and afore you could wink, his dog 'ad laid hold of the old gen'leman's leg and kep' quiet waiting orders.

"'Help!' screams Mr. Bunnett. 'Call, 'im off! Call 'im off!'

"Bob said arterwards that 'e was foolish enough to lose 'is presence o' mind for a moment, and instead o' doing anything he stood there gaping with 'is mouth open.

"'Call 'im off!' screams Mr. Bunnett, trying to push the dog away. 'Why don't you call him off?'

"'Don't move,' ses Bob Pretty in a frightened voice. 'Don't move, wotever you do.'

"'Call him off! Take 'im away!' ses Mr. Bunnett.

"'Why, Joseph! Joseph! Wotever are you a-thinking of?' ses Bob, shaking 'is 'ead at the dog. 'I'm surprised at you! Don't you know Mr. Bunnett wot is so fond of animals?'

"'If you don't call 'im off, ses Mr. Bunnett, trembling all over, 'I'll have you locked up.'

"'I am a-calling 'im off,' ses Bob, looking very puzzled. 'Didn't you 'ear me? It's you making that noise that excites 'im, I think. P'r'aps

if you keep quiet he'll leave go. Come off, Joseph, old boy, there's a good doggie. That ain't a bone.'

"It's no good talking to 'im like that,' ses Mr. Bunnett, keeping quiet but trembling worse than ever. 'Make him let go.'

"I don't want to 'urt his feelings,' ses Bob; 'they've got their feelings the same as wot we 'ave. Besides, p'r'aps it ain't 'is fault--p'r'aps he's gone mad.'

"HELP!' ses the old gen'leman, in a voice that might ha' been heard a mile away. 'HELP!'

"Why don't you keep quiet?' ses Bob. 'You're on'y frightening the pore animal and making things worse. Joseph, leave go and I'll see whether there's a biskit in my pocket. Why don't you leave go?'

"Pull him off. Hit 'im,' ses Mr. Bunnett, shouting.

"Wot?' ses Bob Pretty, with a start. 'Hit a poor, dumb animal wot don't know no better! Why, you'd never forgive me, sir, and I should lose the gold watch besides.'

"No, you won't,' ses Mr. Bunnett, speaking very fast. 'You'll 'ave as much chance of it as ever you had. Hit 'im! Quick!'

"It 'ud break my 'art,' ses Bob. 'He'd never forgive me; but if you'll take the resposibility, and then go straight 'ome and give me the gold watch now for kindness to animals, I will.'

"He shook his 'ead with sorrow and made that sucking noise agin.'

"All right, you shall 'ave it,' ses Mr. Bunnett, shouting. 'You shall 'ave it.'

"For kindness to animals?' ses Bob. 'Honour bright?'

"Yes,' ses Mr. Bunnett.

[Illustration:"Bob Pretty lifted 'is foot and caught Joseph one behind that surprised 'im."]

"Bob Pretty lifted 'is foot and caught Joseph one behind that surprised 'im. Then he 'elped Mr. Bunnett look at 'is leg, and arter pointing out that the skin wasn't hardly broken, and saying that Joseph 'ad got the best mouth of any dog in Claybury, 'e walked 'ome with the old gen'leman and got the watch. He said Mr. Bunnett made a little speech when 'e gave it to 'im wot he couldn't remember, and wot he wouldn't repeat if 'e could.

"He came up to this 'ere Cauliflower public-'ouse the same night for the money 'e had won, and Bill Chambers made another speech, but, as Smith the landlord put' in outside for it, it didn't do Bob Pretty the good it ought to ha' done."

THE BEQUEST

R. Robert Clarkson sat by his fire, smoking thoughtfully. His lifelong neighbour and successful rival in love had passed away a few days before, and Mr. Clarkson, fresh from the obsequies, sat musing on the fragility of man and the inconvenience that sometimes attended his departure.

His meditations were disturbed by a low knocking on the front door, which opened on to the street. In response to his invitation it opened slowly, and a small middle-aged man of doleful aspect entered softly and closed it behind him.

"Evening, Bob," he said, in stricken accents. "I thought I'd just step round to see how you was bearing up. Fancy pore old Phipps! Why, I'd a'most as soon it had been me. A'most."

Mr. Clarkson nodded.

"Here to-day and gone to-morrow," continued Mr. Smithson, taking a seat. "Well, well! So you'll have her at last-pore thing."

"That was his wish," said Mr. Clarkson, in a dull voice.

"And very generous of him too," said Mr. Smithson. "Everybody is saying so. Certainly he couldn't take her away with him. How long is it since you was both of you courting her?"

"Thirty years come June," replied the other.

"Shows what waiting does, and patience," commented Mr. Smithson. "If you'd been like some chaps and gone abroad, where would you have been now? Where would have been the reward of your faithful heart?"

Mr. Clarkson, whose pipe had gone out, took a coal from the fire and lit it again.

"I can't understand him dying at his age," he said, darkly. "He ought to have lived to ninety if he'd been taken care of."

"Well, he's gone, pore chap," said his friend. "What a blessing it must ha' been to him in his last moments to think that he had made provision for his wife."

"Provision!" exclaimed Mr. Clarkson. "Why he's left her nothing but the furniture and fifty pounds insurance money--nothing in the world."

Mr. Smithson fidgeted. "I mean you," he said, staring.

"Oh!" said the other. "Oh, yes--yes, of course."

"And he doesn't want you to eat your heart out in waiting," said Mr. Smithson. "'Never mind about me,' he said to her; 'you go and make Bob happy.' Wonderful pretty girl she used to be, didn't she?" Mr. Clarkson assented.

"And I've no doubt she looks the same to you as ever she did," pursued the sentimental Mr. Smithson. "That's the extraordinary part of it."

Mr. Clarkson turned and eyed him; removed the pipe from his mouth, and, after hesitating a moment, replaced it with a jerk.

"She says she'd rather be faithful to his memory," continued the persevering Mr. Smithson, "but his wishes are her law. She said so to my missis only yesterday."

"Still, she ought to be considered," said Mr. Clarkson, shaking his head. "I think that somebody ought to put it to her. She has got her feelings, poor thing, and, if she would rather not marry again, she oughtn't to be compelled to."

"Just what my missis did say to her," said the other; "but she didn't pay much attention. She said it was Henry's wish and she didn't care what happened to her now he's gone. Besides, if you come to think of it, what else is she to do? Don't you worry, Bob; you won't lose her again."

Mr. Clarkson, staring at the fire, mused darkly. For thirty years he had played the congenial part of the disappointed admirer but faithful friend. He had intended to play it for at least fifty or sixty. He wished that he had had the strength of mind to refuse the bequest when the late Mr. Phipps first mentioned it, or taken a firmer line over the congratulations of his friends. As it was, Little Molton quite understood that after thirty years' waiting the faithful heart was to be rewarded at last. Public opinion seemed to be that the late Mr. Phipps had behaved with extraordinary generosity.

"It's rather late in life for me to begin," said Mr. Clarkson at last.

"Better late than never," said the cheerful Mr. Smithson.

"And something seems to tell me that I ain't long for this world," continued Mr. Clarkson, eyeing him with some disfavour.

"Stuff and nonsense," said Mr. Smithson. "You'll lose all them ideas as soon as you're married. You'll have somebody to look after you and help you spend your money."

Mr. Clarkson emitted a dismal groan, and clapping his hand over his mouth strove to make it pass muster as a yawn. It was evident that the malicious Mr. Smithson was deriving considerable pleasure from his discomfiture--the pleasure natural to the father of seven over the troubles of a comfortable bachelor. Mr. Clarkson, anxious to share his troubles with somebody, came to a sudden and malicious determination to share them with Mr. Smithson.

"I don't want anybody to help me spend my money," he said, slowly. "First and last I've saved a tidy bit. I've got this house, those three cottages in Turner's Lane, and pretty near six hundred pounds in the bank."

Mr. Smithson's eyes glistened.

"I had thought--it had occurred to me," said Mr. Clarkson, trying to keep as near the truth as possible, "to leave my property to a friend o' mine --a hard-working man with a large family. However, it's no use talking about that now. It's too late."

"Who--who was it?" inquired his friend, trying to keep his voice steady.

Mr. Clarkson shook his head. "It's no good talking about that now, George," he said, eyeing him with sly enjoyment. "I shall have to leave everything to my wife now. After all, perhaps it does more harm than good to leave money to people."

"Rubbish!" said Mr. Smithson, sharply. "Who was it?"

"You, George," said Mr. Clarkson, softly.

"Me?" said the other, with a gasp. "Me?" He jumped up from his chair, and, seizing the other's hand, shook it fervently.

"I oughtn't to have told you, George," said Mr. Clarkson, with great satisfaction. "It'll only make you miserable. It's just one o' the might ha' beens."

Mr. Smithson, with his back to the fire and his hands twisted behind him, stood with his eyes fixed in thought.

"It's rather cool of Phipps," he said, after a long silence; "rather cool, I think, to go out of the world and just leave his wife to you to look after. Some men wouldn't stand it. You're too easy-going, Bob, that's what's the matter with you."

Mr. Clarkson sighed.

"And get took advantage of," added his friend.

"It's all very well to talk," said Mr. Clarkson, "but what can I do? I ought to have spoke up at the time. It's too late now."

"If I was you," said his friend very earnestly, "and didn't want to marry her, I should tell her so. Say what you like it ain't fair to her you know. It ain't fair to the pore woman. She'd never forgive you if she found it out."

"Everybody's taking it for granted," said the other.

"Let everybody look after their own business," said Mr. Smithson, tartly. "Now, look here, Bob; suppose I get you out of this business, how am I to be sure you'll leave your property to me?--not that I want it. Suppose you altered your will?"

"If you get me out of it, every penny I leave will go to you," said Mr. Clarkson, fervently. "I haven't got any relations, and it don't matter in the slightest to me who has it after I'm gone."

"As true as you stand there?" demanded the other, eyeing him fixedly.

"As true as I stand here," said Mr. Clarkson, smiting his chest, and shook hands again.

Long after his visitor had gone he sat gazing in a brooding fashion at the fire. As a single man his wants were few, and he could live on his savings; as the husband of Mrs. Phipps he would be compelled to resume the work he thought he had dropped for good three years before. Moreover, Mrs. Phipps possessed a strength of character that had many

times caused him to congratulate himself upon her choice of a husband.

Slowly but surely his fetters were made secure. Two days later the widow departed to spend six weeks with a sister; but any joy that he might have felt over the circumstance was marred by the fact that he had to carry her bags down to the railway station and see her off. The key of her house was left with him, with strict injunctions to go in and water her geraniums every day, while two canaries and a bullfinch had to be removed to his own house in order that they might have constant attention and company.

"She's doing it on purpose," said Mr. Smithson, fiercely; "she's binding you hand and foot."

Mr. Clarkson assented gloomily. "I'm trusting to you, George," he remarked.

"How'd it be to forget to water the geraniums and let the birds die because they missed her so much?" suggested Mr. Smithson, after prolonged thought.

Mr. Clarkson shivered.

"It would be a hint," said his friend.

Mr. Clarkson took some letters from the mantelpiece and held them up. "She writes about them every day," he said, briefly, "and I have to answer them."

"She--she don't refer to your getting married, I suppose?" said his friend, anxiously.

Mr. Clarkson said "No. But her sister does," he added. "I've had two letters from her."

Mr. Smithson got up and paced restlessly up and down the room. "That's women all over," he said, bitterly. "They never ask for things straight out; but they always get 'em in roundabout ways. She can't do it herself, so she gets her sister to do it."

Mr. Clarkson groaned. "And her sister is hinting that she can't leave the house where she spent so many happy years," he said, "and says what a pleasant surprise it would be for Mrs. Phipps if she was to come home and find it done up."

"That means you've got to live there when you're married," said his friend, solemnly.

Mr. Clarkson glanced round his comfortable room and groaned again. "She asked me to get an estimate from Digson," he said, dully. "She knows as well as I do her sister hasn't got any money. I wrote to say that it had better be left till she comes home, as I might not know what was wanted."

Mr. Smithson nodded approval.

"And Mrs. Phipps wrote herself and thanked me for being so considerate," continued his friend, grimly, "and says that when she comes back we must go over the house together and see what wants doing."

Mr. Smithson got up and walked round the room again.

"You never promised to marry her?" he said, stopping suddenly.

"No," said the other. "It's all been arranged for me. I never said a word. I couldn't tell Phipps I wouldn't have her with them all standing round, and him thinking he was doing me the greatest favour in the world."

"Well, she can't name the day unless you ask her," said the other. "All you've got to do is to keep quiet and not commit yourself. Be as cool as you can, and, just before she comes home, you go off to London on business and stay there as long as possible."

Mr. Clarkson carried out his instructions to the letter, and Mrs. Phipps, returning home at the end of her visit, learned that he had left for London three days before, leaving the geraniums and birds to the care of Mr. Smithson. From the hands of that unjust steward she received two empty bird-cages, together with a detailed account of the manner in which the occupants had effected their escape, and a bullfinch that seemed to be suffering from torpid liver. The condition of the geraniums was ascribed to worms in the pots, frost, and premature decay.

"They go like it sometimes," said Mr. Smithson, "and when they do nothing will save 'em."

Mrs. Phipps thanked him. "It's very kind of you to take so much trouble," she said, quietly; "some people would have lost the cages too while they were about it."

"I did my best," said Mr. Smithson, in a surly voice.

"I know you did," said Mrs. Phipps, thoughtfully, "and I am sure I am much obliged to you. If there is anything of yours I can look after at any time I shall be only too pleased. When did you say Mr. Clarkson was coming back?"

"He don't know," said Mr. Smithson, promptly. "He might be away a month; and then, again, he might be away six. It all depends. You know what business is."

"It's very thoughtful of him," said Mrs. Phipps. "Very."

"Thoughtful!" repeated Mr. Smithson.

"He has gone away for a time out of consideration for me," said the widow. "As things are, it is a little bit awkward for us to meet much at present."

"I don't think he's gone away for that at all," said the other, bluntly.

Mrs. Phipps shook her head. "Ah, you don't know him as well as I do," she said, fondly. "He has gone away on my account, I feel sure."

Mr. Smithson screwed his lips together and remained silent.

"When he feels that it is right and proper for him to come back," pursued Mrs. Phipps, turning her eyes upwards, "he will come. He has left his comfortable home just for my sake, and I shall not forget it."

Mr. Smithson coughed—a short, dry cough, meant to convey incredulity.

"I shall not do anything to this house till he comes back," said Mrs. Phipps. "I expect he would like to have a voice in it. He always used to admire it and say how comfortable it was. Well, well, we never know what is before us."

Mr. Smithson repeated the substance of the interview to Mr. Clarkson by letter, and in the lengthy correspondence that followed kept him posted as to the movements of Mrs. Phipps. By dint of warnings and entreaties he kept the bridegroom-elect in London for three months. By that time Little Molton was beginning to talk.

"They're beginning to see how the land lays," said Mr. Smithson, on the evening of his friend's return, "and if you keep quiet and do as I tell you she'll begin to see it too. As I said before, she can't name the day till you ask her."

Mr. Clarkson agreed, and the following morning, when he called upon Mrs. Phipps at her request, his manner was so distant that she attributed it to ill-health following business worries and the atmosphere of London. In the front parlour Mr. Digson, a small builder and contractor, was busy whitewashing.

"I thought we might as well get on with that," said Mrs. Phipps; "there is only one way of doing whitewashing, and the room has got to be done. To-morrow Mr. Digson will bring up some papers, and, if you'll come round, you can help me choose."

Mr. Clarkson hesitated. "Why not choose 'em yourself?" he said at last.

"Just what I told her," said Mr. Digson, stroking his black beard. "What'll please you will be sure to please him, I says; and if it don't it ought to."

Mr. Clarkson started. "Perhaps you could help her choose," he said, sharply.

Mr. Digson came down from his perch. "Just what I said," he replied. "If Mrs. Phipps will let me advise her, I'll make this house so she won't know it before I've done with it."

"Mr. Digson has been very kind," said Mrs. Phipps, reproachfully.

"Not at all, ma'am," said the builder, softly. "Anything I can do to make you happy or comfortable will be a pleasure to me."

Mr. Clarkson started again, and an odd idea sent his blood dancing. Digson was a widower; Mrs. Phipps was a widow. Could anything be more suitable or desirable?

"Better let him choose," he said. "After all, he ought to be a good judge."

Mrs. Phipps, after a faint protest, gave way, and Mr. Digson, smiling broadly, mounted his perch again.

Mr. Clarkson's first idea was to consult Mr. Smithson; then he resolved

to wait upon events. The idea was fantastic to begin with, but, if things did take such a satisfactory turn, he could not help reflecting that it would not be due to any efforts on the part of Mr. Smithson, and he would no longer be under any testamentary obligations to that enterprising gentleman.

By the end of a week he was jubilant. A child could have told Mr. Digson's intentions--and Mrs. Phipps was anything but a child. Mr. Clarkson admitted cheerfully that Mr. Digson was a younger and better-looking man than himself--a more suitable match in every way. And, so far as he could judge, Mrs. Phipps seemed to think so. At any rate, she had ceased to make the faintest allusion to any tie between them. He left her one day painting a door, while the attentive Digson guided the brush, and walked homewards smiling.

"Morning!" said a voice behind him.

"Morning, Bignell," said Mr. Clarkson.

"When--when is it to be?" inquired his friend, walking beside him.

Mr. Clarkson frowned. "When is what to be?" he demanded, disagreeably.

Mr. Bignell lowered his voice. "You'll lose her if you ain't careful," he said. "Mark my words. Can't you see Digson's little game?"

Mr. Clarkson shrugged his shoulders.

"He's after her money," said the other, with a cautious glance around.

"Money?" said the other, with an astonished laugh. "Why, she hasn't got any."

[Illustration: "She'll be riding in her carriage and pair in six months"]

"Oh, all right," said Mr. Bignell. "You know best of course. I was just giving you the tip, but if you know better--why, there's nothing more to be said. She'll be riding in her carriage and pair in six months, anyhow; the richest woman in Little Molton."

Mr. Clarkson stopped short and eyed him in perplexity.

"Digson got a bit sprung one night and told me," said Mr. Bignell. "She don't know it herself yet--uncle on her mother's side in America. She might know at any moment."

"But--but how did Digson know?" inquired the astonished Mr. Clarkson.

"He wouldn't tell me," was the reply. "But it's good enough for him. What do you think he's after? Her? And mind, don't let on to a soul that I told you."

He walked on, leaving Mr. Clarkson standing in a dazed condition in the centre of the foot-path. Recovering himself by an effort, he walked slowly away, and, after prowling about for some time in an aimless fashion, made his way back to Mrs. Phipps's house.

He emerged an hour later an engaged man, with the date of the wedding fixed. With jaunty steps he walked round and put up the banns, and then, with the air of a man who has completed a successful stroke of business, walked homewards.

Little Molton is a small town and news travels fast, but it did not travel faster than Mr. Smithson as soon as he had heard it. He burst into Mr. Clarkson's room like the proverbial hurricane, and, gasping for breath, leaned against the table and pointed at him an incriminating finger.

"You you've been running," said Mr. Clarkson, uneasily.

"What--what--what do you--mean by it?" gasped Mr. Smithson. "After all my trouble. After our--bargain."

"I altered my mind," said Mr. Clarkson, with dignity.

"Pah!" said the other.

"Just in time," said Mr. Clarkson, speaking rapidly. "Another day and I believe I should ha' been too late. It took me pretty near an hour to talk her over. Said I'd been neglecting her, and all that sort of thing; said that she was beginning to think I didn't want her. As hard a job as ever I had in my life."

"But you didn't want her," said the amazed Mr. Smithson. "You told me so."

"You misunderstood me," said Mr. Clarkson, coughing. "You jump at conclusions."

Mr. Smithson sat staring at him. "I heard," he said at last, with an effort... "I heard that Digson was paying her attentions."

Mr. Clarkson spoke without thought. "Ha, he was only after her money," he said, severely. "Good heavens! What's the matter?"

Mr. Smithson, who had sprung to his feet, made no reply, but stood for some time incapable of speech.

"What--is--the--matter?" repeated Mr. Clarkson. "Ain't you well?"

Mr. Smithson swayed a little, and sank slowly back into his chair again.

"Room's too hot," said his astonished host.

Mr. Smithson, staring straight before him, nodded.

"As I was saying," resumed Mr. Clarkson, in the low tones of confidence, "Digson was after her money. Of course her money don't make any difference to me, although, perhaps, I may be able to do something for friends like you. It's from an uncle in America on her mother's--"

Mr. Smithson made a strange moaning noise, and, snatching his hat from the table, clapped it on his head and made for the door. Mr. Clarkson flung his arms around him and dragged him back by main force.

"What are you carrying on like that for?" he demanded. "What do you mean

by it?"

"Fancy!" returned Mr. Smithson, with intense bitterness. "I thought Digson was the biggest fool in the place, and I find I've made a mistake. So have you. Good-night."

He opened the door and dashed out. Mr. Clarkson, with a strange sinking at his heart, watched him up the road.

THE GUARDIAN ANGEL

[Illustration: "The lodger was standing at the foot o' Ginger's bed, going through 'is pockets."]

The night-watchman shook his head. "I never met any of these phil--philantherpists, as you call 'em," he said, decidedly. "If I 'ad they wouldn't 'ave got away from me in a hurry, I can tell you. I don't say I don't believe in 'em; I only say I never met any of 'em. If people do you a kindness it's generally because they want to get something out of you; same as a man once--a perfick stranger--wot stood me eight 'arf-pints becos I reminded 'im of his dead brother, and then borrowed five bob off of me.

"O' course, there must be some kind-'arted people in the world--all men who get married must 'ave a soft spot somewhere, if it's only in the 'ead--but they don't often give things away. Kind-'artedness is often only another name for artfulness, same as Sam Small's kindness to Ginger Dick and Peter Russet.

"It started with a row. They was just back from a v'y'ge and 'ad taken a nice room together in Wapping, and for the fust day or two, wot with 'aving plenty o' money to spend and nothing to do, they was like three brothers. Then, in a little, old-fashioned public-'ouse down Poplar way, one night they fell out over a little joke Ginger played on Sam.

"It was the fust drink that evening, and Sam 'ad just ordered a pot o' beer and three glasses, when Ginger winked at the landlord and offered to bet Sam a level 'arf-dollar that 'e wouldn't drink off that pot o' beer without taking breath. The landlord held the money, and old Sam, with a 'appy smile on 'is face, 'ad just taken up the mug, when he noticed the odd way in which they was all watching him. Twice he took the mug up and put it down agin without starting and asked 'em wot the little game was, but they on'y laughed. He took it up the third time and started, and he 'ad just got about 'arf-way through when Ginger turns to the landlord and ses--

""Did you catch it in the mouse-trap,' he ses, 'or did it die of poison?'

"Pore Sam started as though he 'ad been shot, and, arter getting rid of the beer in 'is mouth, stood there 'olding the mug away from 'im and making such 'orrible faces that they was a'most frightened.

""Wot's the matter with him? I've never seen 'im carry on like that over a drop of beer before,' ses Ginger, staring.

"He usually likes it,' ses Peter Russet.

"Not with a dead mouse in it,' ses Sam, trembling with passion.

"Mouse?' ses Ginger, innercent-like. 'Mouse? Why, I didn't say it was in your beer, Sam. Wotever put that into your 'ead?'

"And made you lose your bet,' ses Peter.

"Then old Sam see 'ow he'd been done, and the way he carried on when the landlord gave Ginger the 'arf-dollar, and said it was won fair and honest, was a disgrace. He 'opped about that bar 'arf crazy, until at last the landlord and 'is brother, and a couple o' soldiers, and a helpless cripple wot wos selling matches, put 'im outside and told 'im to stop there.

"He stopped there till Ginger and Peter came out, and then, drawing 'imself up in a proud way, he told 'em their characters and wot he thought about 'em. And he said 'e never wanted to see wot they called their faces agin as long as he lived.

"I've done with you,' he ses, 'both of you, for ever.'

"All right,' ses Ginger moving off. 'Ta-ta for the present. Let's 'ope he'll come 'ome in a better temper, Peter.'

"Ome?' ses Sam, with a nasty laugh, "'ome? D'ye think I'm coming back to breathe the same air as you, Ginger? D'ye think I want to be suffocated?'

"He held his 'ead up very 'igh, and, arter looking at them as if they was dirt, he turned round and walked off with his nose in the air to spend the evening by 'imself.

"His temper kept him up for a time, but arter a while he 'ad to own up to 'imself that it was very dull, and the later it got the more he thought of 'is nice warm bed. The more 'e thought of it the nicer and warmer it seemed, and, arter a struggle between his pride and a few 'arf-pints, he got 'is good temper back agin and went off 'ome smiling.

"The room was dark when 'e got there, and, arter standing listening a moment to Ginger and Peter snoring, he took off 'is coat and sat down on 'is bed to take 'is boots off. He only sat down for a flash, and then he bent down and hit his 'ead an awful smack against another 'ead wot 'ad just started up to see wot it was sitting on its legs.

"He thought it was Peter or Ginger in the wrong bed at fust, but afore he could make it out Ginger 'ad got out of 'is own bed and lit the candle. Then 'e saw it was a stranger in 'is bed, and without saying a word he laid 'old of him by the 'air and began dragging him out.

"Here, stop that!' ses Ginger catching hold of 'im. 'Lend a hand 'ere, Peter.'

"Peter lent a hand and screwed it into the back o' Sam's neck till he made 'im leave go, and then the stranger, a nasty-looking little chap with a yellow face and a little dark moustache, told Sam wot he'd like to do to him.

"'Who are you?' ses Sam, 'and wot are you a-doing of in my bed?'

"'It's our lodger,' ses Ginger.

"'Your wot?' ses Sam, 'ardly able to believe his ears.

"'Our lodger,' ses Peter Russet. 'We've let 'im the bed you said you didn't want for sixpence a night. Now you take yourself off.'

"Old Sam couldn't speak for a minute; there was no words that he knew bad enough, but at last he licks 'is lips and he ses, 'I've paid for that bed up to Saturday, and I'm going to have it.'

"He rushed at the lodger, but Peter and Ginger got hold of 'im agin and put 'im down on the floor and sat on 'im till he promised to be'ave himself. They let 'im get up at last, and then, arter calling themselves names for their kind-'artedness, they said if he was very good he might sleep on the floor.

"Sam looked at 'em for a moment, and then, without a word, he took off 'is boots and put on 'is coat and went up in a corner to be out of the draught, but, wot with the cold and 'is temper, and the hardness of the floor, it was a long time afore 'e could get to sleep. He dropped off at last, and it seemed to 'im that he 'ad only just closed 'is eyes when it was daylight. He opened one eye and was just going to open the other when he saw something as made 'im screw 'em both up sharp and peep through 'is eyelashes. The lodger was standing at the foot o' Ginger's bed, going through 'is pockets, and then, arter waiting a moment and 'aving a look round, he went through Peter Russet's. Sam lay still mouse while the lodger tip-toed out o' the room with 'is boots in his 'and, and then, springing up, follered him downstairs.

"He caught 'im up just as he 'ad undone the front door, and, catching hold of 'im by the back o' the neck, shook 'im till 'e was tired. Then he let go of 'im and, holding his fist under 'is nose, told 'im to hand over the money, and look sharp about it.

"'Ye--ye--yes, sir,' ses the lodger, who was 'arf choked.

"Sam held out his 'and, and the lodger, arter saying it was only a little bit o' fun on 'is part, and telling 'im wot a fancy he 'ad taken to 'im from the fust, put Ginger's watch and chain into his 'ands and eighteen pounds four shillings and sevenpence. Sam put it into his pocket, and, arter going through the lodger's pockets to make sure he 'adn't forgot anything, opened the door and flung 'im into the street. He stopped on the landing to put the money in a belt he was wearing under 'is clothes, and then 'e went back on tip-toe to 'is corner and went to sleep with one eye open and the 'appiest smile that had been on his face for years.

"He shut both eyes when he 'eard Ginger wake up, and he slept like a child through the 'orrible noise that Peter and Ginger see fit to make when they started to put their clothes on. He got tired of it afore they did, and, arter opening 'is eyes slowly and yawning, he asked Ginger wot he meant by it.

"'You'll wake your lodger up if you ain't careful, making that noise,' he ses. 'Wot's the matter?'

"Sam,' ses Ginger, in a very different voice to wot he 'ad used the night before, 'Sam, old pal, he's taken all our money and bolted.'

"Wot?' ses Sam, sitting up on the floor and blinking, 'Nonsense!'

"Robbed me and Peter,' ses Ginger, in a trembling voice; 'taken every penny we've got, and my watch and chain.'

"You're dreaming,' ses Sam.

"I wish I was,' ses Ginger.

"But surely, Ginger,' ses Sam, standing up, 'surely you didn't take a lodger without a character?'

"He seemed such a nice chap,' ses Peter. 'We was only saying wot a much nicer chap he was than--than----'

"Go on, Peter,' ses Sam, very perlite.

"Than he might ha' been,' ses Ginger, very quick.

"Well, I've 'ad a wonderful escape,' ses Sam. 'If it hadn't ha' been for sleeping in my clothes I suppose he'd ha' 'ad my money as well.'

"He felt in 'is pockets anxious-like, then he smiled, and stood there letting 'is money fall through 'is fingers into his pocket over and over agin.

"Pore chap,' he ses; 'pore chap; p'r'aps he'd got a starving wife and family. Who knows? It ain't for us to judge 'im, Ginger.'

"He stood a little while longer chinking 'is money, and when he took off his coat to wash Ginger Dick poured the water out for im and Peter Russet picked up the soap, which 'ad fallen on the floor. Then they started pitying themselves, looking very 'ard at the back of old Sam while they did it.

"I s'pose we've got to starve, Peter,' ses Ginger, in, a sad voice.

"Looks like it,' ses Peter, dressing hissself very slowly.

"There's nobody'll mourn for me, that's one comfort,' ses Ginger.

"Or me,' ses Peter.

"P'r'aps Sam'll miss us a bit,' ses Ginger, grinding 'is teeth as old Sam went on washing as if he was deaf. 'He'ss the only real pal we ever 'ad.'

"Wot are you talking about?' ses Sam, turning round with the soap in his eyes, and feeling for the towel. 'Wot d'ye want to starve for? Why don't you get a ship?'

"I thought we was all going to sign on in the Cheaspeake agin, Sam,' ses Ginger, very mild.

"She won't be ready for sea for pretty near three weeks,' ses Sam. 'You know that.'

"'P'r'aps Sam would lend us a trifle to go on with, Ginger,' ses Peter Russet. 'Just enough to keep body and soul together, so as we can hold out and 'ave the pleasure of sailing with 'im agin.'

"'P'r'aps he wouldn't,' ses Sam, afore Ginger could open his mouth. 'I've just got about enough to last myself; I 'aven't got any to lend. Sailormen wot turns on their best friends and makes them sleep on the cold 'ard floor while their new pal is in his bed don't get money lent to 'em. My neck is so stiff it creaks every time I move it, and I've got the rheumatics in my legs something cruel.'

"He began to 'um a song, and putting on 'is cap went out to get some brekfuss. He went to a little eating-'ouse near by, where they was in the 'abit of going, and 'ad just started on a plate of eggs and bacon when Ginger Dick and Peter came into the place with a pocket-'ankercher of 'is wot they 'ad found in the fender.

"'We thought you might want it, Sam,' ses Peter.

"'So we brought it along,' ses Ginger. 'I 'ope you're enjoying of your brekfuss, Sam.'

"Sam took the 'ankercher and thanked 'em very perlite, and arter standing there for a minute or two as if they wanted to say something they couldn't remember, they sheered off. When Sam left the place 'arf-an-hour afterwards they was still hanging about, and as Sam passed Ginger asked 'im if he was going for a walk.

"'Walk?' ses Sam. 'Cert'nly not. I'm going to bed; I didn't 'ave a good night's rest like you and your lodger.'

"He went back 'ome, and arter taking off 'is coat and boots got into bed and slept like a top till one o'clock, when he woke up to find Ginger shaking 'im by the shoulders.

"'Wot's the matter?' he ses. 'Wot are you up to?'

"'It's dinner-time,' ses Ginger. 'I thought p'r'aps you'd like to know, in case you missed it.'

"'You leave me alone,' ses Sam, cuddling into the clothes agin. 'I don't want no dinner. You go and look arter your own dinners.'

"He stayed in bed for another 'arf-hour, listening to Peter and Ginger telling each other in loud whispers 'ow hungry they was, and then he got up and put 'is things on and went to the door.

"'I'm going to get a bit o' dinner,' he ses. 'And mind, I've got my pocket 'ankercher.'

"He went out and 'ad a steak and onions and a pint o' beer, but, although he kept looking up sudden from 'is plate, he didn't see Peter or Ginger. It spoilt 'is dinner a bit, but arter he got outside 'e saw them standing at the corner, and, pretending not to see them, he went off for a walk down the Mile End Road.

[Illustration: "'We thought you might want it, Sam,' ses Peter"]

"He walked as far as Bow with them follering 'im, and then he jumped on a bus and rode back as far as Whitechapel. There was no sign of 'em when he got off, and, feeling a bit lonesome, he stood about looking in shop-windows until 'e see them coming along as hard as they could come.

"'Why, halloa!' he ses. 'Where did you spring from?'

"'We--we--we've been--for a bit of a walk,' ses Ginger Dick, puffing and blowing like a grampus.

"'To-keep down the 'unger,' ses Peter Russet.

"Old Sam looked at 'em very stern for a moment, then he beckoned 'em to foller 'im, and, stopping at a little public-'ouse, he went in and ordered a pint o' bitter.

"'And give them two pore fellers a crust o' bread and cheese and 'arf-a-pint of four ale each,' he ses to the barmaid.

"Ginger and Peter looked at each other, but they was so hungry they didn't say a word; they just stood waiting.

"'Put that inside you my pore fellers,' ses Sam, with a oily smile. 'I can't bear to see people suffering for want o' food,' he ses to the barmaid, as he chucked down a sovereign on the counter.

"The barmaid, a very nice gal with black 'air and her fingers covered all over with rings, said that it did 'im credit, and they stood there talking about tramps and beggars and such-like till Peter and Ginger nearly choked. He stood there watching 'em and smoking a threepenny cigar, and when they 'ad finished he told the barmaid to give 'em a sausage-roll each, and went off.

"Peter and Ginger snatched up their sausage-rolls and follered 'im, and at last Ginger swallowed his pride and walked up to 'im and asked 'im to lend them some money.

"'You'll get it back agin,' he ses. 'You know that well enough.'

"'Cert'nly not,' ses Sam; 'and I'm surprised at you asking. Why, a child could rob you. It's 'ard enough as it is for a pore man like me to 'ave to keep a couple o' hulking sailormen, but I'm not going to give you money to chuck away on lodgers. No more sleeping on the floor for me! Now I don't want none o' your langwidge, and I don't want you follering me like a couple o' cats arter a meat-barrer. I shall be 'aving a cup o' tea at Brown's coffee-shop by and by, and if you're there at five sharp I'll see wot I can do for you. Wot did you call me?'

"Ginger told 'im three times, and then Peter Russet dragged 'im away. They turned up outside Brown's at a quarter to five, and at ten past six Sam Small strolled up smoking a cigar, and, arter telling them that he 'ad forgot all about 'em, took 'em inside and paid for their teas. He told Mr. Brown 'e was paying for 'em, and 'e told the gal wot served 'em 'e was paying for 'em, and it was all pore Ginger could do to stop 'imself from throwing his plate in 'is face.

"Sam went off by 'imself, and arter walking about all the evening without a ha'penny in their pockets, Ginger Dick and Peter went off 'ome to bed and went to sleep till twelve o'clock, when Sam came in and woke 'em up

to tell 'em about a music-'all he 'ad been to, and 'ow many pints he had 'ad. He sat up in bed till past one o'clock talking about 'imself, and twice Peter Russet woke Ginger up to listen and got punched for 'is trouble.

"They both said they'd get a ship next morning, and then old Sam turned round and wouldn't 'ear of it. The airs he gave 'imself was awful. He said he'd tell 'em when they was to get a ship, and if they went and did things without asking 'im he'd let 'em starve.

"He kept 'em with 'im all that day for fear of losing 'em and having to give 'em their money when 'e met 'em agin instead of spending it on 'em and getting praised for it. They 'ad their dinner with 'im at Brown's, and nothing they could do pleased him. He spoke to Peter Russet out loud about making a noise while he was eating, and directly arterwards he told Ginger to use his pocket 'ankercher. Pore Ginger sat there looking at 'im and swelling and swelling until he nearly bust, and Sam told 'im if he couldn't keep 'is temper when people was trying to do 'im a kindness he'd better go and get somebody else to keep him.

"He took 'em to a music-'all that night, but he spoilt it all for 'em by taking 'em into the little public-'ouse in Whitechapel Road fust and standing 'em a drink. He told the barmaid 'e was keeping 'em till they could find a job, and arter she 'ad told him he was too soft-'arted and would only be took advantage of, she brought another barmaid up to look at 'em and ask 'em wot they could do, and why they didn't do it.

"Sam served 'em like that for over a week, and he 'ad so much praise from Mr. Brown and other people that it nearly turned his 'ead. For once in his life he 'ad it pretty near all 'is own way. Twice Ginger Dick slipped off and tried to get a ship and came back sulky and hungry, and once Peter Russet sprained his thumb trying to get a job at the docks.

"They gave it up then and keft to Sam like a couple o' shadders, only giving 'im back-answers when they felt as if something 'ud give way inside if they didn't. For the fust time in their lives they began to count the days till their boat was ready for sea. Then something happened.

"They was all coming 'ome late one night along the Minories, when Ginger Dick gave a shout and, suddenly bolting up a little street arter a man that 'ad turned up there, fust of all sent 'im flying with a heavy punch of 'is fist, and then knelt on 'im.

"Now then Ginger,' ses Sam bustling up with Peter Russet, 'wot's all this? Wot yer doing?'

"It's the thief,' ses Ginger. 'It's our lodger. You keep still!' he ses shaking the man. 'D'ye hear?'

"Peter gave a shout of joy, and stood by to help.

"Nonsense!' ses old Sam, turning pale. 'You've been drinking, Ginger. This comes of standing you 'arf-pints.'

"It's him right enough,' ses Ginger. 'I'd know 'is ugly face anywhere.'

"You come off 'ome at once,' ses Sam, very sharp, but his voice trembling. 'At once. D'ye hear me?'

"Fetch a policeman, Peter,' ses Ginger.

"Let the pore feller go, I tell you,' ses Sam, stamping his foot. "Ow would you like to be locked up? 'Ow would you like to be torn away from your wife and little ones? 'Ow would you--'

"Fetch a policeman, Peter,' ses Ginger agin. 'D'ye hear?'

"Don't do that, guv'nor,' ses the lodger. 'You got your money back. Wot's the good o' putting me away?'

"Got our wot back?' ses Ginger, shaking 'im agin. 'Don't you try and be funny with me, else I'll tear you into little pieces.'

"But he took it back,' ses the man, trying to sit up and pointing at Sam. 'He follered me downstairs and took it all away from me. Your ticker as well.'

"Wot?' ses Ginger and Peter both together.

"Strue as I'm 'ere,' ses the lodger. 'You turn 'is pockets out and see. Look out! He's going off!'

"Ginger turned his 'ead just in time to see old Sam nipping round the corner. He pulled the lodger up like a flash, and, telling Peter to take hold of the other side of him, they set off arter Sam.

"Little-joke-o' mine-Ginger,' ses Sam, when they caught 'im. 'I was going to tell you about it to-night. It ain't often I get the chance of a joke agin you Ginger; you're too sharp for a old man like me.'

"Ginger Dick didn't say anything. He kept 'old o' Sam's arm with one hand and the lodger's neck with the other, and marched 'em off to his lodgings.

"He shut the door when 'e got in, and arter Peter 'ad lit the candle they took hold o' Sam and went through 'im, and arter trying to find pockets where he 'adn't got any, they took off 'is belt and found Ginger's watch, seventeen pounds five shillings, and a few coppers.

"We 'ad over nine quid each, me and Peter,' ses Ginger. 'Where's the rest?'

"It's all I've got left,' ses Sam; 'every ha'penny.'

"He 'ad to undress and even take 'is boots off afore they'd believe 'im, and then Ginger took 'is watch and he ses to Peter, 'Lemme see; 'arf of seventeen pounds is eight pounds ten; 'arf of five shillings is 'arf-a-crown; and 'arf of fourpence is twopence.'

"What about me Ginger old pal?' ses Sam, in a kind voice. 'We must divide it into threes.'

"Threes?' ses Ginger, staring at'im. 'Whaffor?'

"Cos part of it's mine,' ses Sam, struggling 'ard to be perlite. 'I've paid for everything for the last ten days, ain't I?'

"'Yes,' ses Ginger. 'You 'ave, and I thank you for it.'

"'So do I,' ses Peter Russet. 'Hearty I do.'

"'It was your kind-'artedness,' ses Ginger, grinning like mad. 'You gave it to us, and we wouldn't dream of giving it to you back.'

"'Nothin' o' the kind,' ses Sam, choking.

"'Oh, yes you did,' ses Ginger, 'and you didn't forget to tell people neither. You told everybody. Now it's our turn.'

"He opened the door and kicked the lodger out. Leastways, he would 'ave kicked 'im, but the chap was too quick for 'im. And then 'e came back, and, putting his arm round Peter's waist, danced a waltz round the room with 'im, while pore old Sam got on to his bed to be out of the way. They danced for nearly 'arf-an-hour, and then they undressed and sat on Peter's bed and talked. They talked in whispers at fust, but at last Sam 'eard Peter say:--

"'Threepence for 'is brekfuss; sevenpence for 'is dinner; threepence for 'is tea; penny for beer and a penny for bacca. 'Ow much is that, Ginger?'

"'One bob,' ses Ginger.

"Peter counted up to 'imself. 'I make it more than that, old pal,' he ses, when he 'ad finished.

"'Do you?' ses Ginger, getting up. 'Well, he won't; not if he counts it twenty times over he won't. Good-night, Peter. 'Appy dreams.'"

DUAL CONTROL

"Never say 'die,' Bert," said Mr. Culpepper, kindly; "I like you, and so do most other people who know what's good for 'em; and if Florrie don't like you she can keep single till she does."

Mr. Albert Sharp thanked him.

"Come in more oftener," said Mr. Culpepper. "If she don't know a steady young man when she sees him, it's her mistake."

"Nobody could be steadier than what I am," sighed Mr. Sharp.

Mr. Culpepper nodded. "The worst of it is, girls don't like steady young men," he said, rumpling his thin grey hair; "that's the silly part of it."

"But you was always steady, and Mrs. Culpepper married you," said the young man.

Mr. Culpepper nodded again. "She thought I was, and that came to the same thing," he said, composedly. "And it ain't for me to say, but she had an idea that I was very good-looking in them days. I had chestnutty hair. She burnt a piece of it only the other day she'd kept for thirty

years."

[Illustration: A very faint squeeze in return decided him]

"Burnt it? What for?" inquired Mr. Sharp.

"Words," said the other, lowering his voice. "When I want one thing nowadays she generally wants another; and the things she wants ain't the things I want."

Mr. Sharp shook his head and sighed again.

"You ain't talkative enough for Florrie, you know," said Mr. Culpepper, regarding him.

"I can talk all right as a rule," retorted Mr. Sharp. "You ought to hear me at the debating society; but you can't talk to a girl who doesn't talk back."

"You're far too humble," continued the other. "You should cheek her a bit now and then. Let 'er see you've got some spirit. Chaff 'er."

"That's no good," said the young man, restlessly. "I've tried it. Only the other day I called her 'a saucy little kipper,' and the way she went on, anybody would have thought I'd insulted her. Can't see a joke, I s'pose. Where is she now?"

"Upstairs," was the reply.

"That's because I'm here," said Mr. Sharp. "If it had been Jack Butler she'd have been down fast enough."

"It couldn't be him," said Mr. Culpepper, "because I won't have 'im in the house. I've told him so; I've told her so, and I've told 'er aunt so. And if she marries without my leave afore she's thirty she loses the seven hundred pounds 'er father left her. You've got plenty of time--ten years."

Mr. Sharp, sitting with his hands between his knees, gazed despondently at the floor. "There's a lot o' girls would jump at me," he remarked. "I've only got to hold up my little finger and they'd jump."

"That's because they've got sense," said Mr. Culpepper. "They've got the sense to prefer steadiness and humdrumness to good looks and dash. A young fellow like you earning thirty-two-and-six a week can do without good looks, and if I've told Florrie so once I have told her fifty times."

"Looks are a matter of taste," said Mr. Sharp, morosely. "Some of them girls I was speaking about just now--"

"Yes, yes," said Mr. Culpepper, hastily. "Now, look here; you go on a different tack. Take a glass of ale like a man or a couple o' glasses; smoke a cigarette or a pipe. Be like other young men. Cut a dash, and don't be a namby-pamby. After you're married you can be as miserable as you like."

Mr. Sharp, after a somewhat lengthy interval, thanked him.

"It's my birthday next Wednesday," continued Mr. Culpepper, regarding him benevolently; "come round about seven, and I'll ask you to stay to supper. That'll give you a chance. Anybody's allowed to step a bit over the mark on birthdays, and you might take a glass or two and make a speech, and be so happy and bright that they'd hardly know you. If you want an excuse for calling, you could bring me a box of cigars for my birthday."

"Or come in to wish you 'Many Happy Returns of the Day,'" said the thrifty Mr. Sharp.

"And don't forget to get above yourself," said Mr. Culpepper, regarding him sternly; "in a gentlemanly way, of course. Have as many glasses as you like--there's no stint about me."

"If it ever comes off," said Mr. Sharp, rising--"if I get her through you, you shan't have reason to repent it. I'll look after that."

Mr. Culpepper, whose feelings were a trifle ruffled, said that he would "look after it too." He had a faint idea that, even from his own point of view, he might have made a better selection for his niece's hand.

Mr. Sharp smoked his first cigarette the following morning, and, encouraged by the entire absence of any after-effects, purchased a pipe, which was taken up by a policeman the same evening for obstructing the public footpath in company with a metal tobacco-box three parts full.

In the matter of ale he found less difficulty. Certainly the taste was unpleasant, but, treated as medicine and gulped down quickly, it was endurable. After a day or two he even began to be critical, and on Monday evening went so far as to complain of its flatness to the wide-eyed landlord of the "Royal George."

"Too much cellar-work," he said, as he finished his glass and made for the door.

"Too much! 'Ere, come 'ere," said the landlord, thickly. "I want to speak to you."

The expert shook his head, and, passing out into the street, changed colour as he saw Miss Garland approaching. In a blundering fashion he clutched at his hat and stammered out a "Good evening."

Miss Garland returned the greeting and, instead of passing on, stopped and, with a friendly smile, held out her hand. Mr. Sharp shook it convulsively.

"You are just the man I want to see," she exclaimed. "Aunt and I have been talking about you all the afternoon."

Mr. Sharp said "Really!"

"But I don't want uncle to see us," pursued Miss Garland, in the low tones of confidence. "Which way shall we go?"

Mr. Sharp's brain reeled. All ways were alike to him in such company. He walked beside her like a man in a dream.

"We want to give him a lesson," said the girl, presently. "A lesson that

he will remember."

"Him?" said the young man.

"Uncle," explained the girl. "It's a shocking thing, a wicked thing, to try and upset a steady young man like you. Aunt is quite put out about it, and I feel the same as she does."

"But," gasped the astonished Mr. Sharp, "how did you?"

"Aunt heard him," said Miss Garland. "She was just going into the room when she caught a word or two, and she stayed outside and listened. You don't know what a lot she thinks of you."

Mr. Sharp's eyes opened wider than ever. "I thought she didn't like me," he said, slowly.

"Good gracious!" said Miss Garland. "Whatever could have put such an idea as that into your head? Of course, aunt isn't always going to let uncle see that she agrees with him. Still, as if anybody could help--" she murmured to herself.

"Eh?" said the young man, in a trembling voice.

"Nothing."

Miss Garland walked along with averted face; Mr. Sharp, his pulses bounding, trod on air beside her.

"I thought," he said, at last "I thought that Jack Butler was a favourite of hers?"

"Jack Butler!" said the girl, in tones of scornful surprise. "The idea! How blind men are; you're all alike, I think. You can't see two inches in front of you. She's as pleased as possible that you are coming on Wednesday; and so am--"

Mr. Sharp caught his breath. "Yes?" he murmured.

"Let's go down here," said Miss Garland quickly; "down by the river. And I'll tell you what we want you to do."

She placed her hand lightly on his arm, and Mr. Sharp, with a tremulous smile, obeyed. The smile faded gradually as he listened, and an expression of anxious astonishment took its place. He shook his head as she proceeded, and twice ventured a faint suggestion that she was only speaking in jest. Convinced at last, against his will, he walked on in silent consternation.

"But," he said at last, as Miss Garland paused for breath, "your uncle would never forgive me. He'd never let me come near the house again."

"Aunt will see to that," said the girl, confidently. "But, of course, if you don't wish to please me--"

She turned away, and Mr. Sharp, plucking up spirit, ventured to take her hand and squeeze it. A faint, a very faint, squeeze in return decided him.

"It will come all right afterwards," said Miss Garland, "especially with the hold it will give aunt over him."

"I hope so," said the young man. "If not, I shall be far--farther off than ever."

Miss Garland blushed and, turning her head, gazed steadily at the river.

"Trust me," she said at last. "Me and auntie."

Mr. Sharp said that so long as he pleased her nothing else mattered, and, in the seventh heaven of delight, paced slowly along the towpath by her side.

"And you mustn't mind what auntie and I say to you," said the girl, continuing her instructions. "We must keep up appearances, you know; and if we seem to be angry, you must remember we are only pretending."

Mr. Sharp, with a tender smile, said that he understood perfectly.

"And now I had better go," said Florrie, returning the smile. "Uncle might see us together, or somebody else might see us and tell him. Good-bye."

She shook hands and went off, stopping three times to turn and wave her hand. In a state of bewildered delight Mr. Sharp continued his stroll, rehearsing, as he went, the somewhat complicated and voluminous instructions she had given him.

By Wednesday evening he was part-perfect, and, in a state of mind divided between nervousness and exaltation, set out for Mr. Culpepper's. He found that gentleman, dressed in his best, sitting in an easy-chair with his hands folded over a fancy waistcoat of startling design, and, placing a small box of small cigars on his knees, wished him the usual "Happy Returns." The entrance of the ladies, who seemed as though they had just come off the ice, interrupted Mr. Culpepper's thanks.

"Getting spoiled, that's what I am," he remarked, playfully. "See this waistcoat? My old Aunt Elizabeth sent it this morning."

He leaned back in his chair and glanced down in warm approval. "The missis gave me a pipe, and Florrie gave me half a pound of tobacco. And I bought a bottle of port wine myself, for all of us."

He pointed to a bottle that stood on the supper-table, and, the ladies retiring to the kitchen to bring in the supper, rose and placed chairs. A piece of roast beef was placed before him, and, motioning Mr. Sharp to a seat opposite Florrie, he began to carve.

"Just a nice comfortable party," he said, genially, as he finished. "Help yourself to the ale, Bert."

Mr. Sharp, ignoring the surprise on the faces of the ladies, complied, and passed the bottle to Mr. Culpepper. They drank to each other, and again a flicker of surprise appeared on the faces of Mrs. Culpepper and her niece. Mr. Culpepper, noticing it, shook his head waggishly at Mr. Sharp.

"He drinks it as if he likes it," he remarked.

"I do," asserted Mr. Sharp, and, raising his glass, emptied it, and resumed the attack on his plate. Mr. Culpepper unscrewed the top of another bottle, and the reckless Mr. Sharp, after helping himself, made a short and feeling speech, in which he wished Mr. Culpepper long life and happiness. "If you ain't happy with Mrs. Culpepper," he concluded, gallantly, "you ought to be."

Mr. Culpepper nodded and went on eating in silence until, the keen edge of his appetite having been taken off, he put down his knife and fork and waxed sentimental.

"Been married over thirty years," he said, slowly, with a glance at his wife, "and never regretted it."

"Who hasn't?" inquired Mr. Sharp.

"Why, me," returned the surprised Mr. Culpepper.

Mr. Sharp, who had just raised his glass, put it down again and smiled. It was a faint smile, but it seemed to affect his host unfavourably.

"What are you smiling at?" he demanded.

"Thoughts," said Mr. Sharp, exchanging a covert glance with Florrie. "Something you told me the other day."

Mr. Culpepper looked bewildered. "I'll give you a penny for them thoughts," he said, with an air of jocosity.

Mr. Sharp shook his head. "Money couldn't buy 'em," he said, with owlish solemnity, "espec--especially after the good supper you're giving me."

"Bert," said Mr. Culpepper, uneasily, as his wife sat somewhat erect "Bert, it's my birthday, and I don't grudge nothing to nobody; but go easy with the beer. You ain't used to it, you know."

"What's the matter with the beer?" inquired Mr. Sharp. "It tastes all right--what there is of it."

"It ain't the beer; it's you," explained Mr. Culpepper.

Mr. Sharp stared at him. "Have I said anything I oughtn't to?" he inquired.

Mr. Culpepper shook his head, and, taking up a fork and spoon, began to serve a plum-pudding that Miss Garland had just placed on the table.

"What was it you said I was to be sure and not tell Mrs. Culpepper?" inquired Mr. Sharp, dreamily. "I haven't said that, have I?"

"No!" snapped the harassed Mr. Culpepper, laying down the fork and spoon and regarding him ferociously. "I mean, there wasn't anything. I mean, I didn't say so. You're raving."

"If I did say it, I'm sorry," persisted Mr. Sharp. "I can't say fairer than that, can I?"

"You're all right," said Mr. Culpepper, trying, but in vain, to exchange

a waggish glance with his wife.

"I didn't say it?" inquired Mr. Sharp.

"No," said Mr. Culpepper, still smiling in a wooden fashion.

"I mean the other thing?" said Mr. Sharp, in a thrilling whisper.

"Look here," exclaimed the overwrought Mr. Culpepper; "why not eat your pudding, and leave off talking nonsense? Nobody's listening to you."

"Speak for yourself," said his wife, tartly. "I like to hear Mr. Sharp talk. What was it he told you not to tell me?"

Mr. Sharp eyed her mistily. "I--I can't tell you," he said, slowly.

"Why not?" asked Mrs. Culpepper, coaxingly.

"Because it--it would make your hair stand on end," said the industrious Mr. Sharp.

"Nonsense," said Mrs. Culpepper, sharply.

"He said it would," said Mr. Sharp, indicating his host with his spoon, "and he ought--to know-- Who's that kicking me under the table?"

Mr. Culpepper, shivering with wrath and dread, struggled for speech. "You'd better get home, Bert," he said at last. "You're not yourself. There's nobody kicking you under the table. You don't know what you are saying. You've been dreaming things. I never said anything of the kind."

"Memory's gone," said Mr. Sharp, shaking his head at him. "Clean gone. Don't you remember--"

"NO!" roared Mr. Culpepper.

Mr. Sharp sat blinking at him, but his misgivings vanished before the glances of admiring devotion which Miss Garland was sending in his direction. He construed them rightly not only as a reward, but as an incentive to further efforts. In the midst of an impressive silence Mrs. Culpepper collected the plates and, producing a dish of fruit from the sideboard, placed it upon the table.

"Help yourself, Mr. Sharp," she said, pushing the bottle of port towards him.

Mr. Sharp complied, having first, after several refusals, put a little into the ladies' glasses, and a lot on the tablecloth near Mr. Culpepper. Then, after a satisfying sip or two, he rose with a bland smile and announced his intention of making a speech.

"But you've made one," said his host, in tones of fierce expostulation.

"That--that was las' night," said Mr. Sharp. "This is to-night--your birthday."

"Well, we don't want any more," said Mr. Culpepper.

Mr. Sharp hesitated. "It's only his fun," he said, looking round and raising his glass. "He's afraid I'm going to praise him up--praise him up. Here's to my old friend, Mr. Culpepper: one of the best. We all have our--faults, and he has his--has his. Where was I?"

"Sit down," growled Mr. Culpepper.

"Talking about my husband's faults," said his wife.

"So I was," said Mr. Sharp, putting his hand to his brow. "Don't be alarm'," he continued, turning to his host; "nothing to be alarm' about. I'm not going to talk about 'em. Not so silly as that, I hope. I don't want spoil your life."

"Sit down," repeated Mr. Culpepper.

"You're very anxious he should sit down," said his wife, sharply.

"No, I'm not," said Mr. Culpepper; "only he's talking nonsense."

Mr. Sharp, still on his legs, took another sip of port and, avoiding the eye of Mr. Culpepper, which was showing signs of incipient inflammation, looked for encouragement to Miss Garland.

"He's a man we all look up to and respect," he continued. "If he does go off to London every now and then on business, that's his lookout. My idea is he always ought to take Mrs. Culpepper with him.

"He'd have pleasure of her company and, same time, he'd be money in pocket by it. And why shouldn't she go to music-halls sometimes? Why shouldn't she--"

"You get off home," said the purple Mr. Culpepper, rising and hammering the table with his fist. "Get off home; and if you so much as show your face inside this 'ouse again there'll be trouble. Go on. Out you go!"

"Home?" repeated Mr. Sharp, sitting down suddenly. "Won't go home till morning."

"Oh, we'll soon see about that," said Mr. Culpepper, taking him by the shoulders. "Come on, now."

Mr. Sharp subsided lumpishly into his chair, and Mr. Culpepper, despite his utmost efforts, failed to move him. The two ladies exchanged a glance, and then, with their heads in the air, sailed out of the room, the younger pausing at the door to bestow a mirthful glance upon Mr. Sharp ere she disappeared.

"Come--out," said Mr. Culpepper, panting.

"You trying to tickle me?" inquired Mr. Sharp.

"You get off home," said the other. "You've been doing nothing but make mischief ever since you came in. What put such things into your silly head I don't know. I shall never hear the end of 'em as long as I live."

"Silly head?" repeated Mr. Sharp, with an alarming change of manner. "Say it again."

Mr. Culpepper repeated it with gusto.

"Very good," said Mr. Sharp. He seized him suddenly and, pushing him backwards into his easy chair, stood over him with such hideous contortions of visage that Mr. Culpepper was horrified. "Now you sit there and keep quite still," he said, with smouldering ferocity. "Where did you put carving-knife? Eh? Where's carving-knife?"

"No, no, Bert," said Mr. Culpepper, clutching at his sleeve. "I--I was only joking. You--you ain't quite yourself, Bert."

"What?" demanded the other, rolling his eyes, and clenching his fists.

"I--I mean you've improved," said Mr. Culpepper, hurriedly. "Wonderful, you have."

Mr. Sharp's countenance cleared a little. "Let's make a night of it," he said. "Don't move, whatever you do."

[Illustration: He felt the large and clumsy hand of Mr. Butler take him by the collar]

He closed the door and, putting the wine and a couple of glasses on the mantelpiece, took a chair by Mr. Culpepper and prepared to spend the evening. His instructions were too specific to be disregarded, and three times he placed his arm about the waist of the frenzied Mr. Culpepper and took him for a lumbering dance up and down the room. In the intervals between dances he regaled him with interminable extracts from speeches made at the debating society and recitations learned at school. Suggestions relating to bed, thrown out by Mr. Culpepper from time to time, were repelled with scorn. And twice, in deference to Mr. Sharp's desires, he had to join in the chorus of a song.

Ten o'clock passed, and the hands of the clock crawled round to eleven. The hour struck, and, as though in answer, the door opened and the agreeable face of Florrie Garland appeared. Behind her, to the intense surprise of both gentlemen, loomed the stalwart figure of Mr. Jack Butler.

"I thought he might be useful, uncle," said Miss Garland, coming into the room. "Auntie wouldn't let me come down before."

Mr. Sharp rose in a dazed fashion and saw Mr. Culpepper grasp Mr. Butler by the hand. More dazed still, he felt the large and clumsy hand of Mr. Butler take him by the collar and propel him with some violence along the small passage, while another hand, which he dimly recognized as belonging to Mr. Culpepper, was inserted in the small of his back. Then the front door opened and he was thrust out into the night. The door closed, and a low feminine laugh sounded from a window above.

[Illustration: 'I tell you, I am as innercent as a new-born babe'.]

SKILLED ASSISTANCE

The night-watchman, who had left his seat on the jetty to answer the gate-bell, came back with disgust written on a countenance only too well designed to express it.

"If she's been up 'ere once in the last week to, know whether the _Silvia_ is up she's been four or five times," he growled. "He's forty-seven if he's a day; 'is left leg is shorter than 'is right, and he talks with a stutter. When she's with 'im you'd think as butter wouldn't melt in 'er mouth; but the way she talked to me just now you'd think I was paid a-purpose to wait on her. I asked 'er at last wot she thought I was here for, and she said she didn't know, and nobody else neither. And afore she went off she told the potman from the 'Albion,' wot was listening, that I was known all over Wapping as the Sleeping Beauty.

"She ain't the fust I've 'ad words with, not by a lot. They're all the same; they all start in a nice, kind, soapy sort o' way, and, as soon as they don't get wot they want, fly into a temper and ask me who, I think I am. I told one woman once not to be silly, and I shall never forget it as long as I live-never. For all I know, she's wearing a bit o' my 'air in a locket to this day, and very likely boasting that I gave it to her.

"Talking of her reminds me of another woman. There was a Cap'n Pinner, used to trade between 'ere and Hull on a schooner named the Snipe. Nice little craft she was, and 'e was a very nice feller. Many and many's the pint we've 'ad together, turn and turn-about, and the on'y time we ever 'ad a cross word was when somebody hid his clay pipe in my beer and 'e was foolish enough to think I'd done it.

"He 'ad a nice little cottage, 'e told me about, near Hull, and 'is wife's father, a man of pretty near seventy, lived with 'em. Well-off the old man was, and, as she was his only daughter, they looked to 'ave all his money when he'd gorn. Their only fear was that 'e might marry agin, and, judging from wot 'e used to tell me about the old man, I thought it more than likely.

"If it wasn't for my missis he'd ha' been married over and over agin,' he ses one day. 'He's like a child playing with gunpowder.'

"Ow would it be to let 'im burn hisself a bit?' I ses.

"If you was to see some o' the gunpowder he wants to play with, you wouldn't talk like that,' ses the cap'n. 'You'd know better. The on'y thing is to keep 'em apart, and my pore missis is wore to a shadder a-doing of it.'

"It was just about a month arter that that he brought the old man up to London with 'im. They 'ad some stuff to put out at Smith's Wharf, t'other side of the river, afore they came to us, and though they was on'y there four or five days, it was long enough for that old man to get into trouble.

"The skipper told me about it ten minutes arter they was made snug in the inner berth 'ere. He walked up and down like a man with a raging toothache, and arter follering 'im up and down the wharf till I was tired out, I discovered that 'is father-in-law 'ad got 'imself mixed up with a widder-woman ninety years old and weighing twenty stun. Arter he 'ad cooled down a bit, and I 'ad given 'im a few little pats on the shoulder, 'e made it forty-eight years old and fourteen stun.

"'He's getting ready to go and meet her now,' he ses, 'and wot my missis'll say to me, I don't know.'

"His father-in-law came up on deck as 'e spoke, and began to brush 'imself all over with a clothesbrush. Nice-looking little man 'e was, with blue eyes, and a little white beard, cut to a point, and dressed up in a serge suit with brass buttons, and a white yachting cap. His real name was Mr. Finch, but the skipper called 'im Uncle Dick, and he took such a fancy to me that in five minutes I was calling 'im Uncle Dick too.

"'Time I was moving,' he ses, by and by. 'I've got an app'intment.'

"'Oh! who with?' ses the skipper, pretending not to know.

"'Friend o' mine, in the army,' ses the old man, with a wink at me. 'So long.'

"He went off as spry as a boy, and as soon as he'd gorn the skipper started walking back'ards and for'ards agin, and raving.

"'Let's 'ope as he's on'y amusing 'imself,' I ses.

"'Wait till you see 'er,' ses the skipper; 'then you won't talk foolishness.'

"As it 'appened she came back with Uncle Dick that evening, to see 'im safe, and I see at once wot sort of a woman it was. She 'adn't been on the wharf five minutes afore you'd ha' thought it belonged to 'er, and when she went and sat on the schooner it seemed to be about 'arf its size. She called the skipper Tom, and sat there as cool as you please holding Uncle Dick's 'and, and patting it.

"I took the skipper round to the 'Bull's Head' arter she 'ad gorn, and I wouldn't let 'im say a word until he had 'ad two pints. He felt better then, and some o' the words 'e used surprised me.

"'Wot's to be done?' he ses at last. 'You see 'ow it is, Bill.'

"'Can't you get 'im away?' I ses. 'Who is she, and wot's 'er name?'

"'Her name,' ses the skipper, 'her name is Jane Maria Elizabeth Muffit, and she lives over at Rotherhithe.'

"'She's very likely married already,' I ses.

"'Her 'usband died ten years ago,' ses the skipper; 'passed away in 'is sleep. Overlaid, I should say.'

"He sat there smoking, and I sat there thinking. Twice 'e spoke to me, and I held my 'and up and said 'H'sh.' Then I turned to 'im all of a sudden and pinched his arm so hard he nearly dropped 'is beer.

"'Is Uncle Dick a nervous man?' I ses.

"'Nervous is no name for it,' he ses, staring.

"'Very good, then,' I ses. 'I'll send 'er husband to frighten 'im.'

"The skipper looked at me very strange. 'Yes,' he ses. 'Yes. Yes.'

"'Frighten 'im out of 'is boots, and make him give 'er up,' I ses. 'Or better still, get 'im to run away and go into hiding for a time. That 'ud be best, in case 'e found out.'

"'Found out wot?' ses the skipper.

"'Found out it wasn't 'er husband,' I ses.

"'Bill,' ses the skipper, very earnest, 'this is the fust beer I've 'ad to-day, and I wish I could say the same for you.'

"I didn't take 'im at fast, but when I did I gave a laugh that brought in two more customers to see wot was the matter. Then I took 'im by the arm--arter a little trouble--and, taking 'im back to the wharf, explained my meaning to 'im.

"'I know the very man,' I ses. 'He comes into a public-'ouse down my way sometimes. Artful 'Arry, he's called, and, for 'arf-a-quid, say, he'd frighten Uncle Dick 'arf to death. He's big and ugly, and picks up a living by selling meerschaum pipes he's found to small men wot don't want 'em. Wonderful gift o' the gab he's got.'

"'We went acrost to the 'Albion' to talk it over. There's several bars there, and the landlady always keeps cotton-wool in 'er ears, not 'aving been brought up to the public line. The skipper told me all 'e knew about Mrs. Muffit, and we arranged that Artful 'Arry should come down at seven o'clock next night, if so be as I could find 'im in time.

"I got up early the next arternoon, and as it 'appened, he came into the 'Duke of Edinburgh' five minutes arter I got there. Nasty temper 'e was in, too. He'd just found a meerschaum pipe, as usual, and the very fust man 'e tried to sell it to said that it was the one 'e lost last Christmas, and gave 'im a punch in the jaw for it.

"'He's a thief, that's wot he is,' ses 'Arry; 'and I 'ate thieves. 'Ow's a honest tradesman to make a living when there's people like that about?'

"I stood 'im 'arf a pint, and though it hurt 'im awful to drink it, he said 'ed 'ave another just to see if he could bear the pain. Arter he had 'ad three 'e began for to take a more cheerful view o' life, and told me about a chap that spent three weeks in the London 'Orsepittle for calling 'im a liar.

"'Treat me fair,' he ses, 'and I'll treat other people fair. I never broke my word without a good reason for it, and that's more than everybody can say. If I told you the praise I've 'ad from some people you wouldn't believe it.'

"I let 'im go on till he 'ad talked 'imself into a good temper, and then I told 'im of the little job I 'ad got for 'im. He listened quiet till I 'ad finished, and then he shook 'is 'ead.

"'It ain't in my line,' he ses.

"'There's 'arf a quid 'anging to it,' I ses.

"'Arry shook his 'ead agin. 'Tain't enough, mate,' he ses. 'If you was to make it a quid I won't say as I mightn't think of it.'

"I 'ad told the skipper that it might cost 'im a quid, so I knew 'ow far I could go; and at last, arter 'Arry 'ad got as far as the door three times, I gave way.

"And I'll 'ave it now,' he ses, 'to prevent mistakes.'

"No, 'Arry,' I ses, very firm. 'Besides, it ain't my money, you see.'

"You mean to say you don't trust me,' 'e ses, firing up.

"I'd trust you with untold gold,' I ses, 'but not with a real quid; you're too fond of a joke, 'Arry.'

"We 'ad another long argyment about it, and I had to tell 'im plain at last that when I wanted to smell 'is fist, I'd say so.

"You turn up at the wharf at five minutes to seven,' I ses, 'and I'll give you ten bob of it; arter you've done your business I'll give you the other. Come along quiet, and you'll see me waiting at the gate for you.'

"He gave way arter a time, and, fust going 'ome for a cup o' tea, I went on to the wharf to tell the skipper 'ow things stood.

"It couldn't 'ave 'appened better,' he ses. 'Uncle Dick is sure to be aboard at that time, 'cos 'e's going acrost the water at eight o'clock to pay 'er a visit. And all the hands'll be away. I've made sure of that.'

"He gave me the money for Artful 'Arry in two 'arf-suverins, and then we went over to the 'Albion' for a quiet glass and a pipe, and to wait for seven o'clock.

"I left 'im there at ten minutes to, and at five minutes to, punctual to the minute, I see 'Arry coming along swinging a thick stick with a knob on the end of it.

"Where's the 'arf thick-un?' he ses, looking round to see that the coast was clear.

"I gave it to 'im, and arter biting it in three places and saying it was a bit short in weight he dropped it in 'is weskit-pocket and said 'e was ready.

"I left 'im there for a minute while I went and 'ad a look round. The deck of the Snipe was empty, but I could 'ear Uncle Dick down in the cabin singing; and, arter listening for a few seconds to make sure that it was singing, I went back and beckoned to 'Arry.

"He's down in the cabin,' I ses, pointing. 'Don't overdo it, 'Arry, and at the same time don't underdo it, as you might say.'

"I know just wot you want,' ses 'Arry, 'and if you'd got the 'art of a man in you, you'd make it two quids.'

"He climbed on board and stood listening for a moment at the companion, and then 'e went down, while I went off outside the gate, so as to be out of earshot in case Uncle Dick called for me. I knew that I should 'ear all about wot went on arterwards--and I did.

"Artful 'Arry went down the companion-ladder very quiet, and then stood at the foot of it looking at Uncle Dick. He looked 'im up and down and all over, and then 'e gave a fierce, loud cough.

"'Good-evening,' he ses.

"'Good-evening,' ses Uncle Dick, staring at 'im. 'Did you want to see anybody?'

"'I did,' ses 'Arry. 'I do. And when I see 'im I'm going to put my arms round 'im and twist 'is neck; then I'm going to break every bone in 'is body, and arter that I'm going to shy 'im overboard to pison the fishes with.'

"'Dear me!' ses Uncle Dick, shifting away as far as 'e could.

"'I ain't 'ad a wink o' sleep for two nights,' ses 'Arry--'not ever since I 'eard of it. When I think of all I've done for that woman--working for 'er, and such-like-my blood boils. When I think of her passing 'erself off as a widder--my widder--and going out with another man, I don't know wot to do with myself.'

"Uncle Dick started and turned pale. Fust 'e seemed as if 'e was going to speak, and then 'e thought better of it. He sat staring at 'Arry as if 'e couldn't believe his eyes.

"'Wot would you do with a man like that?' ses 'Arry. 'I ask you, as man to man, wot would you do to 'im?'

"'P'r'aps-p'r'aps 'e didn't know,' ses Uncle Dick, stammering.

"'Didn't know!' ses 'Arry. 'Don't care, you mean. We've got a nice little 'ome, and, just because I've 'ad to leave it and lay low for a bit for knifing a man, she takes advantage of it. And it ain't the fust time, neither. Wot's the matter?'

"'Touch-touch of ague; I get it sometimes,' ses Uncle Dick.

"'I want to see this man Finch,' ses 'Arry, shaking 'is knobby stick. 'Muffit, my name is, and I want to tell 'im so.'

"Uncle Dick nearly shook 'imself on to the floor.

"'I--I'll go and see if 'e's in the fo'c'sle,' he ses at last.

"'He ain't there, 'cos I've looked,' ses 'Arry, 'arf shutting 'is eyes and looking at 'im hard. 'Wot might your name be?'

"'My name's Finch,' ses Uncle Dick, putting out his 'ands to keep him off; 'but I thought she was a widder. She told me her 'usband died ten years ago; she's deceived me as well as you. I wouldn't ha' dreamt of taking any notice of 'er if I'd known. Truth, I wouldn't. I should'nt ha' dreamt of such a thing.'

"Artful 'Arry played with 'is stick a little, and stood looking at 'im with a horrible look on 'is face.

"'Ow am I to know you're speaking the truth?' he ses, very slow. 'Eh? 'Ow can you prove it?'

"If it was the last word I was to speak I'd say the same,' ses Uncle Dick. 'I tell you, I am as innercent as a new-born babe.'

"If that's true,' ses 'Arry, 'she's deceived both of us. Now, if I let you go will you go straight off and bring her 'ere to me?'

"I will,' ses Uncle Dick, jumping up.

"Arf a mo,' ses 'Arry, holding up 'is stick very quick. 'One thing is, if you don't come back, I'll 'ave you another day. I can't make up my mind wot to do. I can't think--I ain't tasted food for two days. If I 'ad any money in my pocket I'd 'ave a bite while you're gone.'

"Why not get something?' ses Uncle Dick, putting his 'and in his pocket, in a great 'urry to please him, and pulling out some silver.

"Arry said 'e would, and then he stood on one side to let 'im pass, and even put the knobby stick under 'im to help 'im up the companion-ladder.

"Uncle Dick passed me two minutes arterwards without a word, and set off down the road as fast as 'is little legs 'ud carry 'im. I watched 'im out o' sight, and then I went on board the schooner to see how 'Arry 'ad got on.

"Arry,' I ses, when he 'ad finished, 'you're a masterpiece!'

"I know I am,' he ses. 'Wot about that other 'arf-quid?'

"Here it is,' I ses, giving it to 'im. 'Fair masterpiece, that's wot you are. They may well call you Artful. Shake 'ands.'

"I patted 'im on the shoulder arter we 'ad shook 'ands, and we stood there smiling at each other and paying each other compliments.

"Fancy 'em sitting 'ere and waiting for you to come back from that bite,' I ses.

"I ought to 'ave 'ad more off of him,' ses 'Arry. "Owever, it can't be helped. I think I'll 'ave a lay down for a bit; I'm tired.'

"Better be off,' I ses, shaking my 'ead. 'Time passes, and they might come back afore you think.'

"Well, wot of it?' ses 'Arry.

"Wot of it?' I ses. 'Why, it'ud spoil everything. It 'ud be blue ruin.'

"Are you sure?' ses 'Arry'.

"Sartin,' I ses.

"Well, make it five quid, and I'll go, then,' he ses, sitting down agin.

"I couldn't believe my ears at fust, but when I could I drew myself up and told 'im wot I thought of 'im; and he sat there and laughed at me.

"Why, you called me a masterpiece just now,' he ses. 'I shouldn't be

much of a masterpiece if I let a chance like this slip. Why, I shouldn't be able to look myself in the face. Where's the skipper?'

""Sitting in the "Albion",' I ses, 'arf choking.

""Go and tell 'im it's five quid,' ses 'Arry. 'I don't mean five more, on'y four. Some people would ha' made it five, but I like to deal square and honest.'

"I run over for the skipper in a state of mind that don't bear thinking of, and he came back with me, 'arf crazy. When we got to the cabin we found the door was locked, and, arter the skipper 'ad told Artful wot he'd do to 'im if he didn't open it, he 'ad to go on deck and talk to 'im through the skylight.

""If you ain't off of my ship in two twos,' he ses, 'I'll fetch a policeman.'

""You go and fetch four pounds,' ses 'Arry; 'that's wot I'm waiting for, not a policeman. Didn't the watchman tell you?'

""The bargain was for one pound,' ses the skipper, 'ardly able to speak.

""Well, you tell that to the policeman,' ses Artful 'Arry.

"It was no use, he'd got us every way; and at last the skipper turns out 'is pockets, and he ses, 'Look 'ere,' he ses, 'I've got seventeen and tenpence ha' penny. Will you go if I give you that?'

""Ow much has the watchman got?' ses 'Arry. 'His lodger lost 'is purse the other day.'

"I'd got two and ninepence, as it 'appened, and then there was more trouble because the skipper wouldn't give 'im the money till he 'ad gone, and 'e wouldn't go till he 'ad got it. The skipper gave way at last, and as soon as he 'ad got it 'Arry ses, 'Now 'op off and borry the rest, and look slippy about it.'

"I put one hand over the skipper's mouth fust, and then, finding that was no good, I put the other. It was no good wasting bad langwidge on 'Arry.

"I pacified the skipper at last, and arter 'Arry 'ad swore true 'e'd go when 'e'd got the money, the skipper rushed round to try and raise it. It's a difficult job at the best o' times, and I sat there on the skylight shivering and wondering whether the skipper or Mrs. Muffit would turn up fust.

"Hours seemed to pass away, and then I see the wicket in the gate open, and the skipper come through. He jumped on deck without a word, and then, going over to the skylight, 'anded down the money to 'Arry.

""Right-o,' ses 'Arry. 'It on'y shows you wot you can do by trying.'

"He unlocked the door and came up on deck, looking at us very careful, and playing with 'is stick.

""You've got your money,' ses the skipper; 'now go as quick as you can.'

""Arry smiled and nodded at him. Then he stepped on to the wharf and was

just moving to the gate, with us follering, when the wicket opened and in came Mrs. Muffit and Uncle Dick.

"'There he is,' ses Uncle Dick. 'That's the man!'

"Mrs. Muffit walked up to 'im, and my 'art a'most stopped beating. Her face was the colour of beetroot with temper, and you could 'ave heard her breath fifty yards away.

"'Ho!' she says, planting 'erself in front of Artful 'Arry, 'so you're the man that ses you're my 'usband, are you?'

"'That's all right,' ses 'Arry, 'it's all a mistake.'

"'MISTAKE?' ses Mrs. Muffit.

"'Mistake o' Bill's,' ses 'Arry, pointing to me. 'I told 'im I thought 'e was wrong, but 'e would 'ave it. I've got a bad memory, so I left it to 'im.'

"'Ho!' ses Mrs. Muffit, taking a deep breath. 'Ho! I thought as much. Wot 'ave you got to say for yourself--eh?'

"She turned on me like a wild cat, with her 'ands in front of her. I've been scratched once in my life, and I wasn't going to be agin, so, fixing my eyes on 'er, I just stepped back a bit, ready for 'er. So long as I kept my eye fixed on 'ers she couldn't do anything. I knew that. Unfortunately I stepped back just a inch too far, and next moment I went over back'ards in twelve foot of water.

"Arter all, p'r'aps it was the best thing that could have 'appened to me; it stopped her talking. It ain't the fust time I've 'ad a wet jacket; but as for the skipper, and pore Uncle Dick--wot married her--they've been in hot water ever since."

FOR BETTER OR WORSE

Mr. George Wotton, gently pushing the swing doors of the public bar of the "King's Head" an inch apart, applied an eye to the aperture, in the hope of discovering a moneyed friend. His gaze fell on the only man in the bar a greybeard of sixty whose weather-beaten face and rough clothing spoke of the sea. With a faint sigh he widened the opening and passed through.

"Mornin', Ben," he said, with an attempt at cheerfulness.

"Have a drop with me," said the other, heartily. "Got any money about you?"

Mr. Wotton shook his head and his face fell, clearing somewhat as the other handed him his mug. "Drink it all up, George," he said.

His friend complied. A more tactful man might have taken longer over the job, but Mr. Benjamin Davis, who appeared to be labouring under some strong excitement, took no notice.

"I've had a shock, George," he said, regarding the other steadily. "I've heard news of my old woman."

"Didn't know you 'ad one," said Mr. Wotton calmly. "Wot's she done?"

"She left me," said Mr. Davis, solemnly--"she left me thirty-five years ago. I went off to sea one fine morning, and that was the last I ever see of er."

"Why, did she bolt?" inquired Mr. Wotton, with mild interest.

"No," said his friend, "but I did. We'd been married three years--three long years--and I had 'ad enough of it. Awful temper she had. The last words I ever heard 'er say was: 'Take that!'"

Mr. Wotton took up the mug and, after satisfying himself as to the absence of contents, put it down again and yawned.

"I shouldn't worry about it if I was you," he remarked. "She's hardly likely to find you now. And if she does she won't get much."

Mr. Davis gave vent to a contemptuous laugh. "Get much!" he repeated. "It's her what's got it. I met a old shipmate of mine this morning what I 'adn't seen for ten years, and he told me he run acrost 'er only a month ago. After she left me--"

"But you said you left her!" exclaimed his listening friend.

"Same thing," said Mr. Davis, impatiently. "After she left me to work myself to death at sea, running here and there at the orders of a pack o'lazy scuts aft, she went into service and stayed in one place for fifteen years. Then 'er missis died and left her all 'er money. For twenty years, while I've been working myself to skin and bone, she's been living in comfort and idleness."

"'Ard lines," said Mr. Wotton, shaking his head. "It don't bear thinking of."

"Why didn't she advertise for me?" said Mr. Davis, raising his voice. "That's what I want to know. Advertisements is cheap enough; why didn't she advertise? I should 'ave come at once if she'd said anything about money."

Mr. Wotton shook his head again. "P'r'aps she didn't want you," he said, slowly.

"What's that got to do with it?" demanded the other. "It was 'er dooty. She'd got money, and I ought to have 'ad my 'arf of it. Nothing can make up for that wasted twenty years--nothing."

"P'r'aps she'll take you back," said Mr. Wotton.

"Take me back?" repeated Mr. Davis. "O' course she'll take me back. She'll have to. There's a law in the land, ain't there? What I'm

thinking of is: Can I get back my share what I ought to have 'ad for the last twenty years?"

"Get 'er to take you back first," counselled his friend. "Thirty-five years is along time, and p'r'aps she has lost 'er love for you. Was you good-looking in those days?"

"Yes," snapped Mr. Davis; "I ain't altered much--. 'Sides, what about her?"

"That ain't the question," said the other. "She's got a home and money. It don't matter about looks; and, wot's more, she ain't bound to keep you. If you take my advice, you won't dream of letting her know you run away from her. Say you was cast away at sea, and when you came back years afterwards you couldn't find her."

Mr. Davis pondered for some time in sulky silence.

"P'r'aps it would be as well," he said at last; "but I sha'n't stand no nonsense, mind."

"If you like I'll come with you," said Mr. Wotton. "I ain't got nothing to do. I could tell 'er I was cast away with you if you liked. Anything to help a pal."

Mr. Davis took two inches of soiled clay pipe from his pocket and puffed thoughtfully.

"You can come," he said at last. "If you'd only got a copper or two we could ride; it's down Clapham way."

Mr. Wotton smiled feebly, and after going carefully through his pockets shook his head and followed his friend outside.

"I wonder whether she'll be pleased?" he remarked, as they walked slowly along. "She might be--women are funny creatures--so faithful. I knew one whose husband used to knock 'er about dreadful, and after he died she was so true to his memory she wouldn't marry again."

Mr. Davis grunted, and, with a longing eye at the omnibuses passing over London Bridge, asked a policeman the distance to Clapham.

"Never mind," said Mr. Wotton, as his friend uttered an exclamation. "You'll have money in your pocket soon."

Mr. Davis's face brightened. "And a watch and chain too," he said.

"And smoke your cigar of a Sunday," said Mr. Wotton, "and have a easy-chair and a glass for a friend."

Mr. Davis almost smiled, and then, suddenly remembering his wasted twenty years, shook his head grimly over the friendship that attached itself to easy-chairs and glasses of ale, and said that there was plenty of it about. More friendship than glasses of ale and easy-chairs, perhaps.

At Clapham, they inquired the way of a small boy, and, after following the road indicated, retraced their steps, cheered by a faint but bloodthirsty hope of meeting him again.

A friendly baker put them on the right track at last, both gentlemen eyeing the road with a mixture of concern and delight. It was a road of trim semi-detached villas, each with a well-kept front garden and neatly-curtained windows. At the gate of a house with the word "Blairgowrie" inscribed in huge gilt letters on the fanlight Mr. Davis paused for a moment uneasily, and then, walking up the path, followed by Mr. Wotton, knocked at the door.

He retired a step in disorder before the apparition of a maid in cap and apron. A sharp "Not to-day!" sounded in his ears and the door closed again. He faced his friend gasping.

"I should give her the sack first thing," said Mr. Wotton.

Mr. Davis knocked again, and again. The maid reappeared, and after surveying them through the glass opened the door a little way and parleyed.

"I want to see your missis," said Mr. Davis, fiercely.

"What for?" demanded the girl.

"You tell 'er," said Mr. Davis, inserting his foot just in time, "you tell 'er that there's two gentlemen here what have brought 'er news of her husband, and look sharp about it."

"They was cast away with 'im," said Mr. Wotton.

"On a desert island," said Mr. Davis. He pushed his way in, followed by his friend, and a head that had been leaning over the banisters was suddenly withdrawn. For a moment he stood irresolute in the tiny passage, and then, with a husband's boldness, he entered the front room and threw himself into an easy-chair. Mr. Wotton, after a scared glance around the well-furnished room, seated himself on the extreme edge of the most uncomfortable chair he could find and coughed nervously.

[Illustration: "You tell 'er that there's two gentlemen here what have brought 'er news of her husband"]

"Better not be too sudden with her," he whispered. "You don't want her to faint, or anything of that sort. Don't let 'er know who you are at first; let her find it out for herself."

Mr. Davis, who was also suffering from the stiff grandeur of his surroundings, nodded.

"P'r'aps you'd better start, in case she reckernizes my voice," he said, slowly. "Pitch it in strong about me and 'ow I was always wondering what had 'appened to her."

"You're in luck, that's wot you are," said his friend, enviously. "I've only seen furniture like thiss in shop windows before. H'sh! Here she comes."

He started, and both men tried to look at their ease as a stiff rustling sounded from the stairs. Then the door opened and a tall, stoutly-built old lady with white hair swept into the room and stood regarding them.

Mr. Davis, unprepared for the changes wrought by thirty-five years,

stared at her aghast. The black silk dress, the gold watch-chain, and huge cameo brooch did not help to reassure him.

"Good-good afternoon, ma'am," said Mr. Wotton, in a thin voice.

The old lady returned the greeting, and, crossing to a chair and seating herself in a very upright fashion, regarded him calmly.

"We--we called to see you about a dear old pal--friend, I mean," continued Mr. Wotton; "one o' the best. The best."

"Yes?" said the old lady.

"He's been missing," said Mr. Wotton, watching closely for any symptoms of fainting, "for thir-ty-five years. Thir-ty-five years ago-very much against his wish-he left 'is young and handsome wife to go for a sea v'y'ge, and was shipwrecked and cast away on a desert island."

"Yes?" said the old lady again.

"I was cast away with 'im," said Mr. Wotton. "Both of us was cast away with him."

He indicated Mr. Davis with his hand, and the old lady, after a glance at that gentleman, turned to Mr. Wotton again.

"We was on that island for longer than I like to think of," continued Mr. Wotton, who had a wholesome dread of dates. "But we was rescued at last, and ever since then he has been hunting high and low for his wife."

"It's very interesting," murmured the old lady; "but what has it got to do with me?"

Mr. Wotton gasped, and cast a helpless glance at his friend.

"You ain't heard his name yet," he said, impressively. "Wot would you say if I said it was--Ben Davis?"

"I should say it wasn't true," said the old lady, promptly.

"Not--true?" said Mr. Wotton, catching his breath painfully. "Wish I may die----"

"About the desert island," continued the old lady, calmly. "The story that I heard was that he went off like a cur and left his young wife to do the best she could for herself. I suppose he's heard since that she has come in for a bit of money."

"Money!" repeated Mr. Wotton, in a voice that he fondly hoped expressed artless surprise. "Money!"

"Money," said the old lady; "and I suppose he sent you two gentlemen round to see how the land lay."

She was looking full at Mr. Davis as she spoke, and both men began to take a somewhat sombre view of the situation.

"You didn't know him, else you wouldn't talk like that," said Mr. Wotton. "I don't suppose you'd know 'im if you was to see him now."

"I don't suppose I should," said the other.

"P'raps you'd reckonize his voice?" said Mr. Davis, breaking silence at last.

Mr. Wotton held his breath, but the old lady merely shook her head thoughtfully. "It was a disagreeable voice when his wife used to hear it," she said at last. "Always fault-finding, when it wasn't swearing."

Mr. Wotton glanced at his friend, and, raising his eyebrows slightly, gave up his task. "Might ha' been faults on both sides," said Mr. Davis, gruffly. "You weren't all that you should ha' been, you know."

"Me!" said his hostess, raising her voice.

[Illustration: "Don't you know me, Mary?"]

"Yes, you," said Mr. Davis, rising. "Don't you know me, Mary? Why, I knew you the moment you come into the room."

He moved towards her awkwardly, but she rose in her turn and drew back.

"If you touch me I'll scream," she said, firmly. "How dare you. Why, I've never seen you before in my life."

"It's Ben Davis, ma'am; it's 'im, right enough," said Mr. Wotton, meekly.

"Hold your tongue," said the old lady.

"Look at me!" commanded Mr. Davis, sternly. "Look at me straight in the eye."

"Don't talk nonsense," said the other, sharply. "Look you in the eye, indeed! I don't want to look in your eye. What would people think?"

"Let 'em think wot they like," said Mr. Davis, recklessly. "This is a nice home-coming after being away thirty-five years."

"Most of it on a desert island," put in Mr. Wotton, pathetically.

"And now I've come back," resumed Mr. Davis; "come back to stop."

He hung his cap on a vase on the mantelpiece that reeled under the shock, and, dropping into his chair again, crossed his legs and eyed her sternly. Her gaze was riveted on his dilapidated boots. She looked up and spoke mildly.

"You're not my husband," she said. "You've made a mistake--I think you had better go."

"Ho!" said Mr. Davis, with a hard laugh. "Indeed! And 'ow do you know I'm not?"

"For the best of reasons," was the reply. "Besides, how can you prove that you are? Thirty-five years is a long time."

"Specially on a desert island," said Mr. Wotton, rapidly. "You'd be surprised 'ow slow the time passes. I was there with 'im, and I can lay

my hand on my 'art and assure you that that is your husband."

"Nonsense!" said the old lady, vigorously. "Rubbish!"

"I can prove it," said Mr. Davis, fixing her with a glittering eye. "Do you remember the serpent I 'ad tattooed on my leg for a garter?"

"If you don't go at once," said the old lady, hastily, "I'll send for the police."

"You used to admire it," said Mr. Davis, reproachfully. "I remember once----"

"If you say another word," said the other, in a fierce voice, "I'll send straight off for the police. You and your serpents! I'll tell my husband of you, that's what I'll do."

"Your WHAT?" roared Mr. Davis, springing to his feet.

"My husband. He won't stand any of your nonsense, I can tell you. You'd better go before he comes in."

"O-oh," said Mr. Davis, taking a long breath. "Oh, so you been and got married again, 'ave you? That's your love for your husband as was cast away while trying to earn a living for you. That's why you don't want me, is it? We'll see. I'll wait for him."

"You don't know what you're talking about," said the other, with great dignity. "I've only been married once."

Mr. Davis passed the back of his hand across his eyes in a dazed fashion and stared at her.

"Is--is somebody passing himself off as me?" he demanded. "'Cos if he is I'll 'ave you both up for bigamy."

"Certainly not."

"But--but--"

Mr. Davis turned and looked blankly at his friend. Mr. Wotton met his gaze with dilated eyes.

"You say you recognize me as your wife?" said the old lady.

"Certainly," said Mr. Davis, hotly.

"It's very curious," said the other--"very. But are you sure? Look again."

Mr. Davis thrust his face close to hers and stared hard. She bore his scrutiny without flinching.

"I'm positive certain," said Mr. Davis, taking a breath.

"That's very curious," said the old lady; "but, then, I suppose we are a bit alike. You see, Mrs. Davis being away, I'm looking after her house for a bit. My name happens to be Smith."

Mr. Davis uttered a sharp exclamation, and, falling back a step, stared at her open-mouthed.

"We all make mistakes," urged Mr. Wotton, after a long silence, "and Ben's sight ain't wot it used to be. He strained it looking out for a sail when we was on that desert----"

"When--when'll she be back?" inquired Mr. Davis, finding his voice at last.

The old lady affected to look puzzled. "But I thought you were certain that I was your wife?" she said, smoothly.

"My mistake," said Mr. Davis, ruefully. "Thirty-five years is a long time and people change a bit; I have myself. For one thing, I must say I didn't expect to find 'er so stout."

"Stout!" repeated the other, quickly.

"Not that I mean you're too stout," said Mr. Davis, hurriedly--"for people that like stoutness, that is. My wife used to 'ave a very good figger."

Mr. Wotton nodded. "He used to rave about it on that des----"

"When will she be back?" inquired Mr. Davis, interrupting him.

Mrs. Smith shook her head. "I can't say," she replied, moving towards the door. "When she's off holidaying, I never know when she'll return. Shall I tell her you called?"

"Tell her I---certainly," said Mr. Davis, with great vehemence. "I'll come in a week's time and see if she's back."

"She might be away for months," said the old lady, moving slowly to the passage and opening the street door. "Good-afternoon."

She closed the door behind them and stood watching them through the glass as they passed disconsolately into the street. Then she went back into the parlour, and standing before the mantelpiece, looked long and earnestly into the mirror.

Mr. Davis returned a week later--alone, and, pausing at the gate, glanced in dismay at a bill in the window announcing that the house was to be sold. He walked up the path still looking at it, and being admitted by the trim servant was shown into the parlour, and stood in a dispirited fashion before Mrs. Smith.

"Not back yet?" he inquired, gruffly.

The old lady shook her head.

"What--what--is that bill for?" demanded Mr. Davis, jerking his thumb towards it.

"She is thinking of selling the house," said Mrs. Smith. "I let her know you had been, and that is, the result. She won't comeback. You won't see her again."

"Where is she?" inquired Mr. Davis, frowning.

Mrs. Smith shook her head again. "And it would be no use my telling you," she said. "What she has got is her own, and the law won't let you touch a penny of it without her consent. You must have treated her badly; why did you leave her?"

"Why?" repeated Mr. Davis. "Why? Why, because she hit me over the 'ead with a broom-handle."

Mrs. Smith tossed her head.

"Fancy you remembering that for thirty-five years!" she said.

"Fancy forgetting it!" retorted Mr. Davis.

"I suppose she had a hot temper," said the old lady.

"Ot temper?" said the other. "Yes." He leaned forward, and holding his chilled hands over the fire stood for some time deep in thought.

"I don't know what it is," he said at last, "but there's a something about you that reminds me of her. It ain't your voice, 'cos she had a very nice voice--when she wasn't in a temper--and it ain't your face, because--"

"Yes?" said Mrs. Smith, sharply. "Because it don't remind me of her."

"And yet the other day you said you recognized me at once," said the old lady.

"I thought I did," said Mr. Davis. "One thing is, I was expecting to see her, I s'pose."

There was a long silence.

"Well, I won't keep you," said Mrs. Smith at last, "and it's no good for you to keep coming here to see her. She will never come here again. I don't want to hurt your feelings, but you don't look over and above respectable. Your coat is torn, your trousers are patched in a dozen places, and your boots are half off your feet--I don't know what the servant must think."

"I--I only came to look for my wife," said Mr. Davis, in a startled voice. "I won't come again."

"That's right," said the old lady. "That'll please her, I know. And if she should happen to ask what sort of a living you are making, what shall I tell her?"

"Tell her what you said about my clothes, ma'am," said Mr. Davis, with his hand on the door-knob. "She'll understand then. She's known wot it is to be poor herself. She'd got a bad temper, but she'd have cut her tongue out afore she'd 'ave thrown a poor devil's rags in his face. Good-afternoon."

"Good-afternoon, Ben," said the old woman, in a changed voice.

Mr. Davis, half-way through the door, started as though he had been shot,

and, facing about, stood eyeing her in dumb bewilderment.

"If I take you back again," repeated his wife, "are you going to behave yourself?"

"It isn't the same voice and it isn't the same face," said the old woman; "but if I'd only got a broomhandle handy----"

Mr. Davis made an odd noise in his throat.

"If you hadn't been so down on your luck," said his wife, blinking her eyes rapidly, "I'd have let you go. If you hadn't looked 'so miserable I could have stood it. If I take you back, are you going to behave yourself?"

Mr. Davis stood gaping at her.

"If I take you back again," repeated his wife, speaking very slowly, "are you going to behave yourself?"

"Yes," said Mr. Davis, finding his voice at last. "Yes, if you are."

THE OLD MAN OF THE SEA

"What I want you to do," said Mr. George Wright, as he leaned towards the old sailor, "is to be an uncle to me."

"Aye, aye," said the mystified Mr. Kemp, pausing with a mug of beer midway to his lips.

"A rich uncle," continued the young man, lowering his voice to prevent any keen ears in the next bar from acquiring useless knowledge. "An uncle from New Zealand, who is going to leave me all 'is money."

"Where's it coming from?" demanded Mr. Kemp, with a little excitement.

"It ain't coming," was the reply. "You've only got to say you've got it. Fact of the matter is, I've got my eye on a young lady; there's another chap after 'er too, and if she thought I'd got a rich uncle it might make all the difference. She knows I 'ad an uncle that went to New Zealand and was never heard of since. That's what made me think of it."

Mr. Kemp drank his beer in thoughtful silence. "How can I be a rich uncle without any brass?" he inquired at length.

"I should 'ave to lend you some--a little," said Mr. Wright.

[Illustration: "What I want you to do," said Mr. George Wright, "is to be an uncle to me."]

The old man pondered. "I've had money lent me before," he said, candidly, "but I can't call to mind ever paying it back. I always meant to, but that's as far as it got."

"It don't matter," said the other. "It'll only be for a little while, and then you'll 'ave a letter calling you back to New Zealand. See? And you'll go back, promising to come home in a year's time, after you've wound up your business, and leave us all your money. See?"

Mr. Kemp scratched the back of his neck. "But she's sure to find it out in time," he objected.

"P'r'aps," said Mr. Wright. "And p'r'aps not. There'll be plenty of time for me to get married before she does, and you could write back and say you had got married yourself, or given your money to a hospital."

He ordered some more beer for Mr. Kemp, and in a low voice gave him as much of the family history as he considered necessary.

"I've only known you for about ten days," he concluded, "but I'd sooner trust you than people I've known for years."

"I took a fancy to you the moment I set eyes on you," rejoined Mr. Kemp. "You're the living image of a young fellow that lent me five pounds once, and was drowned afore my eyes the week after. He 'ad a bit of a squint, and I s'pose that's how he came to fall overboard."

He emptied his mug, and then, accompanied by Mr. Wright, fetched his sea-chest from the boarding-house where he was staying, and took it to the young man's lodgings. Fortunately for the latter's pocket the chest contained a good best suit and boots, and the only expenses incurred were for a large, soft felt hat and a gilded watch and chain. Dressed in his best, with a bulging pocket-book in his breast-pocket, he set out with Mr. Wright on the following evening to make his first call.

Mr. Wright, who was also in his best clothes, led the way to a small tobacconist's in a side street off the Mile End Road, and, raising his hat with some ceremony, shook hands with a good-looking young woman who stood behind the counter: Mr. Kemp, adopting an air of scornful dignity intended to indicate the possession of great wealth, waited.

"This is my uncle," said Mr. Wright, speaking rapidly, "from New Zealand, the one I spoke to you about. He turned up last night, and you might have knocked me down with a feather. The last person in the world I expected to see."

Mr. Kemp, in a good rolling voice, said, "Good evening, miss; I hope you are well," and, subsiding into a chair, asked for a cigar. His surprise when he found that the best cigar they stocked only cost sixpence almost assumed the dimensions of a grievance.

"It'll do to go on with," he said, smelling it suspiciously. "Have you got change for a fifty-pound note?"

Miss Bradshaw, concealing her surprise by an effort, said that she would see, and was scanning the contents of a drawer, when Mr. Kemp in some haste discovered a few odd sovereigns in his waistcoat-pocket. Five minutes later he was sitting in the little room behind the shop, holding forth to an admiring audience.

"So far as I know," he said, in reply to a question of Mrs. Bradshaw's, "George is the only relation I've got. Him and me are quite alone, and I

can tell you I was glad to find him."

Mrs. Bradshaw sighed. "It's a pity you are so far apart," she said.

"It's not for long," said Mr. Kemp. "I'm just going back for about a year to wind up things out there, and then I'm coming back to leave my old bones over here. George has very kindly offered to let me live with him."

"He won't suffer for it, I'll be bound," said Mrs. Bradshaw, archly.

"So far as money goes he won't," said the old man. "Not that that would make any difference to George."

"It would be the same to me if you hadn't got a farthing," said Mr. Wright, promptly.

[Illustration: "It'll do to go on with," he said]

Mr. Kemp, somewhat affected, shook hands with him, and leaning back in the most comfortable chair in the room, described his life and struggles in New Zealand. Hard work, teetotalism, and the simple life combined appeared to be responsible for a fortune which he affected to be too old to enjoy. Misunderstandings of a painful nature were avoided by a timely admission that under medical advice he was now taking a fair amount of stimulant.

[Illustration: "'Ow much did you say you'd got in the bank?"]

"Mind," he said, as he walked home with the elated George, "it's your game, not mine, and it's sure to come a bit expensive. I can't be a rich uncle without spending a bit. 'Ow much did you say you'd got in the bank?"

"We must be as careful as we can," said Mr. Wright, hastily. "One thing is they can't leave the shop to go out much. It's a very good little business, and it ought to be all right for me and Bella one of these days, eh?"

Mr. Kemp, prompted by a nudge in the ribs, assented. "It's wonderful how they took it all in about me," he said; "but I feel certain in my own mind that I ought to chuck some money about."

"Tell 'em of the money you have chucked about," said Mr. Wright. "It'll do just as well, and come a good deal cheaper. And you had better go round alone to-morrow evening. It'll look better. Just go in for another one of their sixpenny cigars."

Mr. Kemp obeyed, and the following evening, after sitting a little while chatting in the shop, was invited into the parlour, where, mindful of Mr. Wright's instructions, he held his listeners enthralled by tales of past expenditure. A tip of fifty pounds to his bedroom steward coming over was characterized by Mrs. Bradshaw as extravagant.

"Seems to be going all right," said Mr. Wright, as the old man made his report; "but be careful; don't go overdoing it."

Mr. Kemp nodded. "I can turn 'em round my little finger," he said. "You'll have Bella all to yourself to-morrow evening."

Mr. Wright flushed. "How did you manage that?" he inquired. "It's the first time she has ever been out with me alone."

"She ain't coming out," said Mr. Kemp. "She's going to stay at home and mind the shop; it's the mother what's coming out. Going to spend the evening with me!"

Mr. Wright frowned. "What did you do that for?" he demanded, hotly.

"I didn't do it," said Mr. Kemp, equably; "they done it. The old lady says that, just for once in her life, she wants to see how it feels to spend money like water."

"_Money like water!_" repeated the horrified Mr. Wright. "Money like-- I'll 'money' her--I'll----"

"It don't matter to me," said Mr. Kemp. "I can have a headache or a chill, or something of that sort, if you like. I don't want to go. It's no pleasure to me."

"What will it cost?" demanded Mr. Wright, pacing up and down the room.

The rich uncle made a calculation. "She wants to go to a place called the Empire," he said, slowly, "and have something for supper, and there'd be cabs and things. I dessay it would cost a couple o' pounds, and it might be more. But I'd just as soon ave' a chill--just."

Mr. Wright groaned, and after talking of Mrs. Bradshaw as though she were already his mother-in-law, produced the money. His instructions as to economy lasted almost up to the moment when he stood with Bella outside the shop on the following evening and watched the couple go off.

"It's wonderful how well they get on together," said Bella, as they re-entered the shop and passed into the parlour. "I've never seen mother take to anybody so quick as she has to him."

"I hope you like him, too," said Mr. Wright.

"He's a dear," said Bella. "Fancy having all that money. I wonder what it feels like?"

"I suppose I shall know some day," said the young man, slowly; "but it won't be much good to me unless----"

"Unless?" said Bella, after a pause.

"Unless it gives me what I want," replied the other. "I'd sooner be a poor man and married to the girl I love, than a millionaire."

Miss Bradshaw stole an uneasy glance at his somewhat sallow features, and became thoughtful.

"It's no good having diamonds and motor-cars and that sort of thing unless you have somebody to share them with," pursued Mr. Wright.

Miss Bradshaw's eyes sparkled, and at that moment the shop-bell tinkled and a lively whistle sounded. She rose and went into the shop, and Mr. Wright settled back in his chair and scowled darkly as he saw the

intruder.

"Good evening," said the latter. "I want a sixpenny smoke for twopence, please. How are we this evening? Sitting up and taking nourishment?"

Miss Bradshaw told him to behave himself.

"Always do," said the young man. "That's why I can never get anybody to play with. I had such an awful dream about you last night that I couldn't rest till I saw you. Awful it was."

"What was it?" inquired Miss Bradshaw.

"Dreamt you were married," said Mr. Hills, smiling at her.

Miss Bradshaw tossed her head. "Who to, pray?" she inquired.

"Me," said Mr. Hills, simply. "I woke up in a cold perspiration. Halloo! is that Georgie in there? How are you, George? Better?"

"I'm all right," said Mr. Wright, with dignity, as the other hooked the door open with his stick and nodded at him.

"Well, why don't you look it?" demanded the lively Mr. Hills. "Have you got your feet wet, or what?"

"Oh, be quiet," said Miss Bradshaw, smiling at him.

"Right-o," said Mr. Hills, dropping into a chair by the counter and caressing his moustache. "But you wouldn't speak to me like that if you knew what a terrible day I've had."

"What have you been doing?" asked the girl.

"Working," said the other, with a huge sigh. "Where's the millionaire? I came round on purpose to have a look at him."

"Him and mother have gone to the Empire?" said Miss Bradshaw.

Mr. Hills gave three long, penetrating whistles, and then, placing his cigar with great care on the counter, hid his face in a huge handkerchief. Miss Bradshaw, glanced from him to the frowning Mr. Wright, and then, entering the parlour, closed the door with a bang. Mr. Hills took the hint, and with a somewhat thoughtful grin departed.

He came in next evening for another cigar, and heard all that there was to hear about the Empire. Mrs. Bradshaw would have treated him but coldly, but the innocent Mr. Kemp, charmed by his manner, paid him great attention.

"He's just like what I was at his age," he said. "Lively."

"I'm not a patch on you," said Mr. Hills, edging his way by slow degrees into the parlour. "I don't take young ladies to the Empire. Were you telling me you came over here to get married, or did I dream it?"

"Ark at him," said the blushing Mr. Kemp, as Mrs. Bradshaw shook her head at the offender and told him to behave himself.

"He's a man any woman might be happy with," said Mr. Hills. "He never knows how much there is in his trousers-pocket. Fancy sewing on buttons for a man like that. Gold-mining ain't in it."

Mrs. Bradshaw shook her head at him again, and Mr. Hills, after apologizing to her for revealing her innermost thoughts before the most guileless of men, began to question Mr. Kemp as to the prospects of a bright and energetic young man, with a distaste for work, in New Zealand. The audience listened with keen attention to the replies, the only disturbing factor being a cough of Mr. Wright's, which became more and more troublesome as the evening wore on. By the time uncle and nephew rose to depart the latter was so hoarse that he could scarcely speak.

"Why didn't you tell 'em you had got a letter calling you home, as I told you?" he vociferated, as soon as they were clear of the shop.

"I--I forgot it," said the old man.

"Forgot it!" repeated the incensed Mr. Wright.

"What did you think I was coughing like that for--fun?"

"I forgot it," said the old man, doggedly. "Besides, if you take my advice, you'd better let me stay a little longer to make sure of things."

Mr. Wright laughed disagreeably. "I dare say," he said; "but I am managing this affair, not you. Now, you go round to-morrow afternoon and tell them you're off. D'ye hear? D'ye think I'm made of money? And what do you mean by making such a fuss of that fool, Charlie Hills? You know he is after Bella."

He walked the rest of the way home in indignant silence, and, after giving minute instructions to Mr. Kemp next morning at breakfast, went off to work in a more cheerful frame of mind. Mr. Kemp was out when he returned, and after making his toilet he followed him to Mrs. Bradshaw's.

To his annoyance, he found Mr. Hills there again; and, moreover, it soon became clear to him that Mr. Kemp had said nothing about his approaching departure. Coughs and scowls passed unheeded, and at last in a hesitating voice, he broached the subject himself. There was a general chorus of lamentation.

"I hadn't got the heart to tell you," said Mr. Kemp. "I don't know when I've been so happy."

"But you haven't got to go back immediate," said Mrs. Bradshaw.

"To-morrow," said Mr. Wright, before the old man could reply. "Business."

"Must you go," said Mrs. Bradshaw.

Mr. Kemp smiled feebly. "I suppose I ought to," he replied, in a hesitating voice.

"Take my tip and give yourself a bit of a holiday before you go back," urged Mr. Hills.

"Just for a few days," pleaded Bella.

"To please us," said Mrs. Bradshaw. "Think 'ow George'll miss you."

"Lay hold of him and don't let him go," said Mr. Hills.

He took Mr. Kemp round the waist, and the laughing Bella and her mother each secured an arm. An appeal to Mr. Wright to secure his legs passed unheeded.

"We don't let you go till you promise," said Mrs. Bradshaw.

Mr. Kemp smiled and shook his head. "Promise?" said Bella.

"Well, well," said Mr. Kemp; "p'r'aps--"

"He must go back," shouted the alarmed Mr. Wright.

"Let him speak for himself," exclaimed Bella, indignantly.

"Just another week then," said Mr. Kemp. "It's no good having money if I can't please myself."

"A week!" shouted Mr. Wright, almost beside himself with rage and dismay. "A week! Another week! Why, you told me----"

"Oh, don't listen to him," said Mrs. Bradshaw. "Croaker! It's his own business, ain't it? And he knows best, don't he? What's it got to do with you?"

She patted Mr. Kemp's hand; Mr. Kemp patted back, and with his disengaged hand helped himself to a glass of beer--the fourth--and beamed in a friendly fashion upon the company.

"George!" he said, suddenly.

"Yes," said Mr. Wright, in a harsh voice.

"Did you think to bring my pocket-book along with you?"

"No," said Mr. Wright, sharply; "I didn't."

"Tt-tt," said the old man, with a gesture of annoyance. "Well, lend me a couple of pounds, then, or else run back and fetch my pocket-book," he added, with a sly grin.

Mr. Wright's face worked with impotent fury. "What--what--do you--want it for?" he gasped.

Mrs. Bradshaw's "Well! Well!" seemed to sum up the general feeling; Mr. Kemp, shaking his head, eyed him with gentle reproach.

"Me and Mrs. Bradshaw are going to give another evening out," he said, quietly. "I've only got a few more days, and I must make hay while the sun shines."

To Mr. Wright the room seemed to revolve slowly on its axis, but, regaining his self-possession by a supreme effort, he took out his purse and produced the amount. Mrs. Bradshaw, after a few feminine protestations, went upstairs to put her bonnet on.

"And you can go and fetch a hansom-cab, George, while she's a-doing of it," said Mr. Kemp. "Pick out a good 'orse--spotted-grey, if you can."

Mr. Wright arose and, departing with a suddenness that was almost startling, exploded harmlessly in front of the barber's, next door but one. Then with lagging steps he went in search of the shabbiest cab and oldest horse he could find.

"Thankee, my boy," said Mr. Kemp, bluffly, as he helped Mrs. Bradshaw in and stood with his foot on the step. "By the way, you had better go back and lock my pocket-book up. I left it on the washstand, and there's best part of a thousand pounds in it. You can take fifty for yourself to buy smokes with."

There was a murmur of admiration, and Mr. Wright, with a frantic attempt to keep up appearances, tried to thank him, but in vain. Long after the cab had rolled away he stood on the pavement trying to think out a position which was rapidly becoming unendurable. Still keeping up appearances, he had to pretend to go home to look after the pocket-book, leaving the jubilant Mr. Hills to improve the shining hour with Miss Bradshaw.

Mr. Kemp, returning home at midnight--in a cab--found the young man waiting up for him, and, taking a seat on the edge of the table, listened unmoved to a word-picture of himself which seemed interminable. He was only moved to speech when Mr. Wright described him as a white-whiskered jezebel who was a disgrace to his sex, and then merely in the interests of natural science.

"Don't you worry," he said, as the other paused from exhaustion. "It won't be for long now."

"Long?" said Mr. Wright, panting. "First thing to-morrow morning you have a telegram calling you back--a telegram that must be minded. D'ye see?"

"No, I don't," said Mr. Kemp, plainly. "I'm not going back, never no more--never! I'm going to stop here and court Mrs. Bradshaw."

Mr. Wright fought for breath. "You--you can't!" he gasped.

"I'm going to have a try," said the old man. "I'm sick of going to sea, and it'll be a nice comfortable home for my old age. You marry Bella, and I'll marry her mother. Happy family!"

Mr. Wright, trembling with rage, sat down to recover, and, regaining his composure after a time, pointed out almost calmly the various difficulties in the way.

"I've thought it all out," said Mr. Kemp, nodding. "She mustn't know I'm not rich till after we're married; then I 'ave a letter from New Zealand saying I've lost all my money. It's just as easy to have that letter as the one you spoke of."

"And I'm to find you money to play the rich uncle with till you're married, I suppose," said Mr. Wright, in a grating voice, "and then lose Bella when Mrs. Bradshaw finds you've lost your money?"

Mr. Kemp scratched his ear. "That's your lookout," he said, at last.

"Now, look here," said Mr. Wright, with great determination. "Either you go and tell them that you've been telegraphed for--cabled is the proper word--or I tell them the truth."

"That'll settle you then," said Mr. Kemp.

"No more than the other would," retorted the young man, "and it'll come cheaper. One thing I'll take my oath of, and that is I won't give you another farthing; but if you do as I tell you I'll give you a quid for luck. Now, think it over."

Mr. Kemp thought it over, and after a vain attempt to raise the promised reward to five pounds, finally compounded for two, and went off to bed after a few stormy words on selfishness and ingratitude. He declined to speak to his host at breakfast next morning, and accompanied him in the evening with the air of a martyr going to the stake. He listened in stony silence to the young man's instructions, and only spoke when the latter refused to pay the two pounds in advance.

The news, communicated in halting accents by Mr. Kemp, was received with flattering dismay. Mrs. Bradshaw refused to believe her ears, and it was only after the information had been repeated and confirmed by Mr. Wright that she understood.

"I must go," said Mr. Kemp. "I've spent over eleven pounds cabling to-day; but it's all no good."

"But you're coming back?" said Mr. Hills.

"O' course I am," was the reply. "George is the only relation I've got, and I've got to look after him, I suppose. After all, blood is thicker than water."

"Hear, hear!" said Mrs. Bradshaw, piously.

"And there's you and Bella," continued Mr. Kemp; "two of the best that ever breathed."

The ladies looked down.

"And Charlie Hills; I don't know--I don't know _when_ I've took such a fancy to anybody as I have to 'im. If I was a young gal--a single young gal--he's--the other half," he said, slowly, as he paused--"just the one I should fancy. He's a good-'arted, good-looking----"

"Draw it mild," interrupted the blushing Mr. Hills as Mr. Wright bestowed a ferocious glance upon the speaker.

"Clever, lively young fellow," concluded Mr. Kemp. "George!"

"Yes," said Mr. Wright.

"I'm going now. I've got to catch the train for Southampton, but I don't want you to come with me. I prefer to be alone. You stay here and cheer them up. Oh, and before I forget it, lend me a couple o' pounds out o' that fifty I gave you last night. I've given all my small change away."

He looked up and met Mr. Wright's eye; the latter, too affected to speak, took out the money and passed it over.

"We never know what may happen to us," said the old man, solemnly, as he rose and buttoned his coat. "I'm an old man and I like to have things ship-shape. I've spent nearly the whole day with my lawyer, and if anything 'appens to my old carcass it won't make any difference. I have left half my money to George; half of all I have is to be his."

In the midst of an awed silence he went round and shook hands.

"The other half," with his hand on the door--"the other half and my best gold watch and chain I have left to my dear young pal, Charlie Hills. Good-bye, Georgie!"

"MANNERS MAKYTH MAN"

The night-watchman appeared to be out of sorts. His movements were even slower than usual, and, when he sat, the soap-box seemed to be unable to give satisfaction. His face bore an expression of deep melancholy, but a smouldering gleam in his eye betokened feelings deeply moved.

"Play-acting I don't hold with," he burst out, with sudden ferocity. "Never did. I don't say I ain't been to a theayter once or twice in my life, but I always come away with the idea that anybody could act if they liked to try. It's a kid's game, a silly kid's game, dressing up and pretending to be somebody else."

He cut off a piece of tobacco and, stowing it in his left cheek, sat chewing, with his lack-lustre eyes fixed on the wharves across the river. The offensive antics of a lighterman in mid-stream, who nearly fell overboard in his efforts to attract his attention, he ignored.

"I might ha' known it, too," he said, after a long silence. "If I'd only stopped to think, instead o' being in such a hurry to do good to others, I should ha' been all right, and the pack o' monkey-faced swabs on the _Lizzie and Annie_ wot calls themselves sailor-men would 'ave had to 'ave got something else to laugh about. They've told it in every pub for 'arf a mile round, and last night, when I went into the Town of Margate to get a drink, three chaps climbed over the partition to 'ave a look at me.

"It all began with young Ted Sawyer, the mate o' the _Lizzie and Annie_. He calls himself a mate, but if it wasn't for 'aving the skipper for a brother-in-law 'e'd be called something else, very quick. Two or three times we've 'ad words over one thing and another, and the last time I called 'im something that I can see now was a mistake. It was one o' these 'ere clever things that a man don't forget, let alone a lop-sided monkey like 'im.

"That was when they was up time afore last, and when they made fast 'ere last week I could see as he 'adn't forgotten it. For one thing he pretended not to see me, and, arter I 'ad told him wot I'd do to him if 'e ran into me agin, he said 'e thought I was a sack o' potatoes taking a airing on a pair of legs wot somebody 'ad throwed away. Nasty tongue 'e's got; not clever, but nasty.

"Arter that I took no notice of 'im, and, o' course, that annoyed 'im more than anything. All I could do I done, and 'e was ringing the gate-bell that night from five minutes to twelve till ha'-past afore I heard it. Many a night-watchman gets a name for going to sleep when 'e's only getting a bit of 'is own back.

"We stood there talking for over 'arf-an-hour arter I 'ad let'im in. Leastways, he did. And whenever I see as he was getting tired I just said, 'H'sh!' and 'e'd start agin as fresh as ever. He tumbled to it at last, and went aboard shaking 'is little fist at me and telling me wot he'd do to me if it wasn't for the lor.

"I kept by the gate as soon as I came on dooty next evening, just to give 'im a little smile as 'e went out. There is nothing more aggravating than a smile when it is properly done; but there was no signs o' my lord, and, arter practising it on a carman by mistake, I 'ad to go inside for a bit and wait till he 'ad gorn.

"The coast was clear by the time I went back, and I 'ad just stepped outside with my back up agin the gate-post to 'ave a pipe, when I see a boy coming along with a bag. Good-looking lad of about fifteen 'e was, nicely dressed in a serge suit, and he no sooner gets up to me than 'e puts down the bag and looks up at me with a timid sort o' little smile.

"Good evening, cap'n,' he ses.

"He wasn't the fust that has made that mistake; older people than 'im have done it.

"Good evening, my lad,' I ses.

"I s'pose,' he ses, in a trembling voice, 'I suppose you ain't looking out for a cabin-boy, sir?'

"Cabin-boy?' I ses. 'No, I ain't.'

"I've run away from 'ome to go to sea,' he ses, and I'm afraid of being pursued. Can I come inside?'

"Afore I could say 'No' he 'ad come, bag and all; and afore I could say anything else he 'ad nipped into the office and stood there with his 'and on his chest panting.

"I know I can trust you,' he ses; 'I can see it by your face.'

"Wot 'ave you run away from 'ome for?' I ses. 'Have they been ill-treating of you?'

"Ill-treating me?' he ses, with a laugh. 'Not much. Why, I expect my father is running about all over the place offering rewards for me. He wouldn't lose me for a thousand pounds.'

"I pricked up my ears at that; I don't deny it. Anybody would. Besides, I knew it would be doing him a kindness to hand 'im back to 'is father. And then I did a bit o' thinking to see 'ow it was to be done.

"Sit down,' I ses, putting three or four ledgers on the floor behind one of the desks. 'Sit down, and let's talk it over.'

"We talked away for ever so long, but, do all I would, I couldn't persuade 'im. His 'ead was stuffed full of coral islands and smugglers and pirates and foreign ports. He said 'e wanted to see the world, and flying-fish.

"'I love the blue billers,' he ses; 'the heaving blue billers is wot I want.'

"I tried to explain to 'im who would be doing the heaving, but 'e wouldn't listen to me. He sat on them ledgers like a little wooden image, looking up at me and shaking his 'ead, and when I told 'im of storms and shipwrecks he just smacked 'is lips and his blue eyes shone with joy. Arter a time I saw it was no good trying to persuade 'im, and I pretended to give way.

"'I think I can get you a ship with a friend o' mine,' I ses; 'but, mind, I've got to relieve your pore father's mind--I must let 'im know wot's become of you.'

"'Not before I've sailed,' he ses, very quick.

"'Certingly not,' I ses. 'But you must give me 'is name and address, and, arter the Blue Shark--that's the name of your ship--is clear of the land, I'll send 'im a letter with no name to it, saying where you ave gorn.'

"He didn't seem to like it at fust, and said 'e would write 'imself, but arter I 'ad pointed out that 'e might forget and that I was responsible, 'e gave way and told me that 'is father was named Mr. Watson, and he kept a big draper's shop in the Commercial Road.

"We talked a bit arter that, just to stop 'is suspicions, and then I told 'im to stay where 'e was on the floor, out of sight of the window, while I went to see my friend the captain.

"I stood outside for a moment trying to make up my mind wot to do. O'course, I 'ad no business, strictly speaking, to leave the wharf, but, on the other 'and, there was a father's 'art to relieve. I edged along bit by bit while I was thinking, and then, arter looking back once or twice to make sure that the boy wasn't watching me, I set off for the Commercial Road as hard as I could go.

"I'm not so young as I was. It was a warm evening, and I 'adn't got even a bus fare on me. I 'ad to walk all the way, and, by the time I got there, I was 'arf melted. It was a tidy-sized shop, with three or four nice-looking gals behind the counter, and things like babies' high chairs for the customers to sit onlong in the leg and ridikerlously small in the seat. I went up to one of the gals and told Per I wanted to see Mr. Watson.

"'On private business,' I ses. 'Very important.'

"She looked at me for a moment, and then she went away and fetched a tall, bald-headed man with grey side-whiskers and a large nose.

"'Wot d'you want?' he ses, coming up to me.

I want a word with you in private,' I ses.

"This is private enough for me,' he ses. 'Say wot you 'ave to say, and be quick about it.'

"I drawed myself up a bit and looked at him. 'P'r'aps you ain't missed 'im yet,' I ses.

"Missed 'im?' he ses, with a growl. 'Missed who?'

"Your-son. Your blue-eyed son,' I ses, looking 'im straight in the eye.

"Look here!' he ses, spluttering. 'You be off. 'Ow dare you come here with your games? Wot d'ye mean by it?'

"I mean,' I ses, getting a bit out o' temper, 'that your boy has run away to go to sea, and I've come to take you to 'im.'

"He seemed so upset that I thought 'e was going to 'ave a fit at fust, and it seemed only natural, too. Then I see that the best-looking girl and another was having a fit, although trying 'ard not to.

"If you don't get out o' my shop,' he ses at last, 'I'll 'ave you locked up.'

"Very good!' I ses, in a quiet way. 'Very good; but, mark my words, if he's drowned you'll never forgive yourself as long as you live for letting your temper get the better of you--you'll never know a good night's rest agin. Besides, wot about 'is mother?'

"One o' them silly gals went off agin just like a damp firework, and Mr. Watson, arter nearly choking 'imself with temper, shoved me out o' the way and marched out o' the shop. I didn't know wot to make of 'im at fust, and then one o' the gals told me that 'e was a bachelor and 'adn't got no son, and that somebody 'ad been taking advantage of what she called my inncence to pull my leg.

"You toddle off 'ome,' she ses, 'before Mr. Watson comes back.'

"It's a shame to let 'im come out alone,' ses one o' the other gals. 'Where do you live, gran'pa?'

"I see then that I 'ad been done, and I was just walking out o' the shop, pretending to be deaf, when Mr. Watson come back with a silly young policeman wot asked me wot I meant by it. He told me to get off 'ome quick, and actually put his 'and on my shoulder, but it 'ud take more than a thing like that to push me, and, arter trying his 'ardest, he could only rock me a bit.

"I went at last because I wanted to see that boy agin, and the young policeman follered me quite a long way, shaking his silly 'ead at me and telling me to be careful.

"I got a ride part o' the way from Commercial Road to Aldgate by getting on the wrong bus, but it wasn't much good, and I was quite tired by the time I got back to the wharf. I waited outside for a minute or two to get my wind back agin, and then I went in-boiling.

"You might ha' knocked me down with a feather, as the saying is, and I just stood inside the office speechless. The boy 'ad disappeared and

sitting on the floor where I 'ad left 'im was a very nice-looking gal of about eighteen, with short 'air, and a white blouse.

""Good evening, sir,' she ses, jumping up and giving me a pretty little frightened look. 'I'm so sorry that my brother has been deceiving you. He's a bad, wicked, ungrateful boy. The idea of telling you that Mr. Watson was 'is father! Have you been there? I do 'ope you're not tired.'

""Where is he?' I ses.

""He's gorn,' she ses, shaking her 'ead. 'I begged and prayed of 'im to stop, but 'e wouldn't. He said 'e thought you might be offended with 'im. "Give my love to old Roley-Poley, and tell him I don't trust 'im," he ses.'

"She stood there looking so scared that I didn't know wot to say. By and by she took out 'er little pocket-'ankercher and began to cry--

""Oh, get 'im back,' she ses. 'Don't let it be said I follered 'im 'ere all the way for nothing. Have another try. For my sake!'

""Ow can I get 'im back when I don't know where he's gorn?' I ses.

""He-he's gorn to 'is godfather,' she ses, dabbing her eyes. 'I promised 'im not to tell anybody; but I don't know wot to do for the best.'

""Well, p'r'aps his godfather will 'old on to 'im,' I ses.

""He won't tell 'im anything about going to sea,' she ses, shaking 'er little head. 'He's just gorn to try and bo--bo-borrow some money to go away with.'

"She bust out sobbing, and it was all I could do to get the godfather's address out of 'er. When I think of the trouble I took to get it I come over quite faint. At last she told me, between 'er sobs, that 'is name was Mr. Kiddem, and that he lived at 27, Bridge Street.

""He's one o' the kindest-'arted and most generous men that ever lived,' she ses; 'that's why my brother Harry 'as gone to 'im. And you needn't mind taking anything 'e likes to give you; he's rolling in money.'

"I took it a bit easier going to Bridge Street, but the evening seemed 'otter than ever, and by the time I got to the 'ouse I was pretty near done up. A nice, tidy-looking woman opened the door, but she was a' most stone deaf, and I 'ad to shout the name pretty near a dozen times afore she 'eard it.

""He don't live 'ere,' she ses.

""As he moved?' I ses. 'Or wot?'

"She shook her 'cad, and, arter telling me to wait, went in and fetched her 'usband.

""Never 'eard of him,' he ses, 'and we've been 'ere seventeen years. Are you sure it was twenty-seven?'

""Sartain,' I ses.

"Well, he don't live 'ere,' he ses. 'Why not try thirty-seven and forty-seven?'

"I tried'em: thirty-seven was empty, and a pasty-faced chap at forty-seven nearly made 'imself ill over the name of 'Kiddem.' It 'adn't struck me before, but it's a hard matter to deceive me, and all in a flash it come over me that I 'ad been done agin, and that the gal was as bad as 'er brother.

"I was so done up I could 'ardly crawl back, and my 'ead was all in a maze. Three or four times I stopped and tried to think, but couldn't, but at last I got back and dragged myself into the office.

"As I 'arf expected, it was empty. There was no sign of either the gal or the boy; and I dropped into a chair and tried to think wot it all meant. Then, 'appening to look out of the winder, I see somebody running up and down the jetty.

"I couldn't see plain owing to the things in the way, but as soon as I got outside and saw who it was I nearly dropped. It was the boy, and he was running up and down wringing his 'ands and crying like a wild thing, and, instead o' running away as soon as 'e saw me, he rushed right up to me and threw 'is grubby little paws round my neck.

"Save her!' 'e ses. 'Save 'er! Help! Help!'

"Look 'ere,' I ses, shoving 'im off.

"She fell overboard,' he ses, dancing about. 'Oh, my pore sister! Quick! Quick! I can't swim!'

"He ran to the side and pointed at the water, which was just about at 'arf-tide. Then 'e caught 'old of me agin.

"Make 'aste,' he ses, giving me a shove behind. 'Jump in. Wot are you waiting for?'

"I stood there for a moment 'arf dazed, looking down at the water. Then I pulled down a life-belt from the wall 'ere and threw it in, and, arter another moment's thought, ran back to the _Lizzie and Annie,_ wot was in the inside berth, and gave them a hail. I've always 'ad a good voice, and in a flash the skipper and Ted Sawyer came tumbling up out of the cabin and the 'ands out of the fo'c'sle.

"Gal overboard!' I ses, shouting.

"The skipper just asked where, and then 'im and the mate and a couple of 'ands tumbled into their boat and pulled under the jetty for all they was worth. Me and the boy ran back and stood with the others, watching.

"Point out the exact spot,' ses the skipper.

"The boy pointed, and the skipper stood up in the boat and felt round with a boat-hook. Twice 'e said he thought 'e touched something, but it turned out as 'e was mistaken. His face got longer and longer and 'e shook his 'ead, and said he was afraid it was no good.

"Don't stand cryin' 'ere,' he ses to the boy, kindly. 'Jem, run round

for the Thames police, and get them and the drags. Take the boy with you. It'll occupy 'is mind.'

"He 'ad another go with the boat-hook arter they 'ad gone; then 'e gave it up, and sat in the boat waiting.

"'This'll be a bad job for you, watchman,' he ses, shaking his 'ead. 'Where was you when it 'appened?'

"'He's been missing all the evening,' ses the cook, wot was standing beside me. 'If he'd been doing 'is dooty, the pore gal wouldn't 'ave been drowned. Wot was she doing on the wharf?'

"'Skylarkin', I s'pose,' ses the mate. 'It's a wonder there ain't more drowned. Wot can you expect when the watchman is sitting in a pub all the evening?'

"The cook said I ought to be 'ung, and a young ordinary seaman wot was standing beside 'im said he would sooner I was boiled. I believe they 'ad words about it, but I was feeling too upset to take much notice.

"'Looking miserable won't bring 'er back to life agin,' ses the skipper, looking up at me and shaking his 'ead. 'You'd better go down to my cabin and get yourself a drop o' whisky; there's a bottle on the table. You'll want all your wits about you when the police come. And wotever you do don't say nothing to criminate yourself.'

"'We'll do the criminating for 'im all right,' ses the cook.

"'If I was the pore gal I'd haunt 'im,' ses the ordinary seaman; 'every night of 'is life I'd stand afore 'im dripping with water and moaning.'

"'P'r'aps she will,' ses the cook; 'let's 'ope so, at any rate.'

"I didn't answer 'em; I was too dead-beat. Besides which, I've got a 'orror of ghosts, and the idea of being on the wharf alone of a night arter such a thing was a'most too much for me. I went on board the Lizzie and Annie, and down in the cabin I found a bottle o' whisky, as the skipper 'ad said. I sat down on the locker and 'ad a glass, and then I sat worrying and wondering wot was to be the end of it all.

"The whisky warmed me up a bit, and I 'ad just taken up the bottle to 'elp myself agin when I 'eard a faint sort o' sound in the skipper's state-room. I put the bottle down and listened, but everything seemed deathly still. I took it up agin, and 'ad just poured out a drop o' whisky when I distinctly 'eard a hissing noise and then a little moan.

"For a moment I sat turned to stone. Then I put the bottle down quiet, and 'ad just got up to go when the door of the state-room opened, and I saw the drowned gal, with 'er little face and hair all wet and dripping, standing before me.

"Ted Sawyer 'as been telling everybody that I came up the companion-way like a fog-horn that 'ad lost its ma; I wonder how he'd 'ave come up if he'd 'ad the evening I had 'ad?'

"They were all on the jetty as I got there and tumbled into the skipper's arms, and all asking at once wot was the matter. When I got my breath back a bit and told 'em, they laughed. All except the cook, and 'e said

it was only wot I might expect. Then, like a man in a dream, I see the gal come out of the companion and walk slowly to the side.

"'Look!' I ses. 'Look. There she is!'

"'You're dreaming,' ses the skipper, 'there's nothing there.'

"They all said the same, even when the gal stepped on to the side and climbed on to the wharf. She came along towards me with 'er arms held close to 'er sides, and making the most 'orrible faces at me, and it took five of'em all their time to 'old me. The wharf and everything seemed to me to spin round and round. Then she came straight up to me and patted me on the cheek.

"'Pore old gentleman,' she ses. 'Wot a shame it is, Ted! It's too bad.'

"They let go o' me then, and stamped up and down the jetty laughing fit to kill themselves. If they 'ad only known wot a exhibition they was making of themselves, and 'ow I pitied them, they wouldn't ha' done it. And by and by Ted wiped his eyes and put his arm round the gal's waist and ses--

"'This is my intended, Miss Florrie Price,' he ses. 'Ain't she a little wonder? Wot d'ye think of 'er?'

"'I'll keep my own opinion,' I ses. 'I ain't got nothing to say against gals, but if I only lay my hands on that young brother of 'ers'

"They went off agin then, worse than ever; and at last the cook came and put 'is skinny arm round my neck and started spluttering in my ear. I shoved 'im off hard, because I see it all then; and I should ha' seen it afore only I didn't 'ave time to think. I don't bear no malice, and all I can say is that I don't wish 'er any harder punishment than to be married to Ted Sawyer."

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