

Cupboard Love - The Lady of the Barge and Others, Part 5.

W.W. Jacobs

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THE LADY OF THE BARGE
AND OTHER STORIES

By W. W. Jacobs

CUPBOARD LOVE

In the comfortable living-room at Negget's farm, half parlour and half kitchen, three people sat at tea in the waning light of a November afternoon. Conversation, which had been brisk, had languished somewhat, owing to Mrs. Negget glancing at frequent intervals toward the door, behind which she was convinced the servant was listening, and checking the finest periods and the most startling suggestions with a warning _'ssh!_

"Go on, uncle," she said, after one of these interruptions.

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"I forget where I was," said Mr. Martin Bodfish, shortly.

"Under our bed," Mr. Negget reminded him.

"Yes, watching," said Mrs. Negget, eagerly.

It was an odd place for an ex-policeman, especially as a small legacy added to his pension had considerably improved his social position, but Mr. Bodfish had himself suggested it in the professional hope that the person who had taken Mrs. Negget's gold brooch might try for further loot. He had, indeed, suggested baiting the dressing-table with the farmer's watch, an idea which Mr. Negget had promptly vetoed.

"I can't help thinking that Mrs. Pottle knows something about it," said Mrs. Negget, with an indignant glance at her husband.

"Mrs. Pottle," said the farmer, rising slowly and taking a seat on the oak settle built in the fireplace, "has been away from the village for near a fortnit."

"I didn't say she took it," snapped his wife. "I said I believe she knows something about it, and so I do. She's a horrid woman. Look at the way she encouraged her girl Looey to run after that young traveller from Smithson's. The whole fact of the matter is, it isn't your brooch, so you don't care."

"I said--" began Mr. Negget.

"I know what you said," retorted his wife, sharply, "and I wish you'd be quiet and not interrupt uncle. Here's my uncle been in the police twenty-five years, and you won't let him put a word in edgeways."

"My way o' looking at it," said the ex-policeman, slowly, "is different to that o' the law; my idea is, an' always has been, that everybody is guilty until they've proved their innocence."

"It's a wonderful thing to me," said Mr. Negget in a low voice to his pipe, "as they should come to a house with a retired policeman living in it. Looks to me like somebody that ain't got much respect for the police."

The ex-policeman got up from the table, and taking a seat on the settle opposite the speaker, slowly filled a long clay and took a spill from the fireplace. His pipe lit, he turned to his niece, and slowly bade her go over the account of her loss once more.

"I missed it this morning," said Mrs. Negget, rapidly, "at ten minutes past twelve o'clock by the clock, and half-past five by my watch which wants looking to. I'd just put the batch of bread into the oven, and gone upstairs and opened the box that stands on my drawers to get a lozenge, and I missed the brooch."

"Do you keep it in that box?" asked the ex-policeman, slowly.

"Always," replied his niece. "I at once came down stairs and told Emma that the brooch had been stolen. I said that I named no names, and didn't wish to think bad of anybody, and that if I found the brooch back in the box when I went up stairs again, I should forgive whoever took it."

"And what did Emma say?" inquired Mr. Bodfish.

"Emma said a lot o' things," replied Mrs. Negget, angrily. "I'm sure by the lot she had to say you'd ha' thought she was the missis and me the servant. I gave her a month's notice at once, and she went straight up stairs and sat on her box and cried."

"Sat on her box?" repeated the ex-constable, impressively. "Oh!"

"That's what I thought," said his niece, "but it wasn't, because I got her off at last and searched it through and through. I never saw anything like her clothes in all my life. There was hardly a button or a tape on; and as for her stockings--"

"She don't get much time," said Mr. Negget, slowly.

"That's right; I thought you'd speak up for her," cried his wife, shrilly.

"Look here--" began Mr. Negget, laying his pipe on the seat by his side and rising slowly.

"Keep to the case in hand," said the ex-constable, waving him back to his seat again. "Now, Lizzie."

"I searched her box through and through," said his niece, "but it wasn't there; then I came down again and had a rare good cry all to myself."

"That's the best way for you to have it," remarked Mr. Negget, feelingly.

Mrs. Negget's uncle instinctively motioned his niece to silence, and holding his chin in his hand, scowled frightfully in the intensity of thought.

"See a cloo?" inquired Mr. Negget, affably.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself, George," said his wife, angrily; "speaking to uncle when he's looking like that."

Mr. Bodfish said nothing; it is doubtful whether he even heard these remarks; but he drew a huge notebook from his pocket, and after vainly trying to point his pencil by suction, took a knife from the table and hastily sharpened it.

"Was the brooch there last night?" he inquired.

"It were," said Mr. Negget, promptly. "Lizzie made me get up just as the owd clock were striking twelve to get her a lozenge."

"It seems pretty certain that the brooch went since then," mused Mr. Bodfish.

"It would seem like it to a plain man," said Mr. Negget, guardedly.

"I should like to see the box," said Mr. Bodfish.

Mrs. Negget went up and fetched it and stood eyeing him eagerly as he

raised the lid and inspected the contents. It contained only a few lozenges and some bone studs. Mr. Negget helped himself to a lozenge, and going back to his seat, breathed peppermint.

"Properly speaking, that ought not to have been touched," said the ex-constable, regarding him with some severity.

"Eh!" said the startled farmer, putting his finger to his lips.

"Never mind," said the other, shaking his head. "It's too late now."

"He doesn't care a bit," said Mrs. Negget, somewhat sadly. "He used to keep buttons in that box with the lozenges until one night he gave me one by mistake. Yes, you may laugh--I'm glad you can laugh."

Mr. Negget, feeling that his mirth was certainly ill-timed, shook for some time in a noble effort to control himself, and despairing at length, went into the back place to recover. Sounds of blows indicative of Emma slapping him on the back did not add to Mrs. Negget's serenity.

"The point is," said the ex-constable, "could anybody have come into your room while you was asleep and taken it?"

"No," said Mrs. Negget, decisively. "I'm a very poor sleeper, and I'd have woken at once, but if a flock of elephants was to come in the room they wouldn't wake George. He'd sleep through anything."

"Except her feeling under my pillar for her handkerchief," corroborated Mr. Negget, returning to the sitting-room.

Mr. Bodfish waved them to silence, and again gave way to deep thought. Three times he took up his pencil, and laying it down again, sat and drummed on the table with his fingers. Then he arose, and with bent head walked slowly round and round the room until he stumbled over a stool.

"Nobody came to the house this morning, I suppose?" he said at length, resuming his seat.

"Only Mrs. Driver," said his niece.

"What time did she come?" inquired Mr. Bodfish.

"Here! look here!" interposed Mr. Negget. "I've known Mrs. Driver thirty year a'most."

"What time did she come?" repeated the ex-constable, pitilessly.

His niece shook her head. "It might have been eleven, and again it might have been earlier," she replied. "I was out when she came."

"Out!" almost shouted the other.

Mrs. Negget nodded.

"She was sitting in here when I came back."

Her uncle looked up and glanced at the door behind which a small staircase led to the room above.

"What was to prevent Mrs. Driver going up there while you were away?" he demanded.

"I shouldn't like to think that of Mrs. Driver," said his niece, shaking her head; "but then in these days one never knows what might happen. Never. I've given up thinking about it. However, when I came back, Mrs. Driver was here, sitting in that very chair you are sitting in now."

Mr. Bodfish pursed up his lips and made another note. Then he took a spill from the fireplace, and lighting a candle, went slowly and carefully up the stairs. He found nothing on them but two caked rims of mud, and being too busy to notice Mr. Negget's frantic signalling, called his niece's attention to them.

"What do you think of that?" he demanded, triumphantly.

"Somebody's been up there," said his niece. "It isn't Emma, because she hasn't been outside the house all day; and it can't be George, because he promised me faithful he'd never go up there in his dirty boots."

Mr. Negget coughed, and approaching the stairs, gazed with the eye of a stranger at the relics as Mr. Bodfish hotly rebuked a suggestion of his niece's to sweep them up.

"Seems to me," said the conscience-stricken Mr. Negget, feebly, "as they're rather large for a woman."

"Mud cakes," said Mr. Bodfish, with his most professional manner; "a small boot would pick up a lot this weather."

"So it would," said Mr. Negget, and with brazen effrontery not only met his wife's eye without quailing, but actually glanced down at her boots.

Mr. Bodfish came back to his chair and ruminated. Then he looked up and spoke.

"It was missed this morning at ten minutes past twelve," he said, slowly; "it was there last night. At eleven o'clock you came in and found Mrs. Driver sitting in that chair."

"No, the one you're in," interrupted his niece.

"It don't signify," said her uncle. "Nobody else has been near the place, and Emma's box has been searched."

"Thoroughly searched," testified Mrs. Negget.

"Now the point is, what did Mrs. Driver come for this morning?" resumed the ex-constable. "Did she come--"

He broke off and eyed with dignified surprise a fine piece of wireless telegraphy between husband and wife. It appeared that Mr. Negget sent off a humorous message with his left eye, the right being for some reason closed, to which Mrs. Negget replied with a series of frowns and staccato shakes of the head, which her husband found easily translatable. Under the austere stare of Mr. Bodfish their faces at once regained their wonted calm, and the ex-constable in a somewhat offended manner resumed his inquiries.

"Mrs. Driver has been here a good bit lately," he remarked, slowly.

Mr. Negget's eyes watered, and his mouth worked piteously.

"If you can't behave yourself, George--began began his wife, fiercely.

"What is the matter?" demanded Mr. Bodfish. "I'm not aware that I've said anything to be laughed at."

"No more you have, uncle," retorted his niece; "only George is such a stupid. He's got an idea in his silly head that Mrs. Driver--But it's all nonsense, of course."

"I've merely got a bit of an idea that it's a wedding-ring, not a brooch, Mrs. Driver is after," said the farmer to the perplexed constable.

Mr. Bodfish looked from one to the other. "But you always keep yours on, Lizzie, don't you?" he asked.

"Yes, of course," replied his niece, hurriedly; "but George has always got such strange ideas. Don't take no notice of him."

Her uncle sat back in his chair, his face still wrinkled perplexedly; then the wrinkles vanished suddenly, chased away by a huge glow, and he rose wrathfully and towered over the match-making Mr. Negget. "How dare you?" he gasped.

Mr. Negget made no reply, but in a cowardly fashion jerked his thumb toward his wife.

"Oh! George! How can you say so?" said the latter.

"I should never ha' thought of it by myself," said the farmer; "but I think they'd make a very nice couple, and I'm sure Mrs. Driver thinks so."

The ex-constable sat down in wrathful confusion, and taking up his notebook again, watched over the top of it the silent charges and countercharges of his niece and her husband.

"If I put my finger on the culprit," he asked at length, turning to his niece, "what do you wish done to her?"

Mrs. Negget regarded him with an expression which contained all the Christian virtues rolled into one.

"Nothing," she said, softly. "I only want my brooch back."

The ex-constable shook his head at this leniency.

"Well, do as you please," he said, slowly. "In the first place, I want you to ask Mrs. Driver here to tea to-morrow--oh, I don't mind Negget's ridiculous ideas--pity he hasn't got something better to think of; if she's guilty, I'll soon find it out. I'll play with her like a cat with a mouse. I'll make her convict herself."

"Look here!" said Mr. Negget, with sudden vigour. "I won't have it. I won't have no woman asked here to tea to be got at like that. There's only my friends comes here to tea, and if any friend stole anything o'

mine, I'd be one o' the first to hush it up."

"If they were all like you, George," said his wife, angrily, "where would the law be?"

"Or the police?" demanded Mr. Bodfish, staring at him.

"I won't have it!" repeated the farmer, loudly. "I'm the law here, and I'm the police here. That little tiny bit o' dirt was off my boots, I dare say. I don't care if it was."

"Very good," said Mr. Bodfish, turning to his indignant niece; "if he likes to look at it that way, there's nothing more to be said. I only wanted to get your brooch back for you, that's all; but if he's against it--"

"I'm against your asking Mrs. Driver here to my house to be got at," said the farmer.

"O' course if you can find out who took the brooch, and get it back again anyway, that's another matter."

Mr. Bodfish leaned over the table toward his niece.

"If I get an opportunity, I'll search her cottage," he said, in a low voice. "Strictly speaking, it ain't quite a legal thing to do, o course, but many o' the finest pieces of detective work have been done by breaking the law. If she's a kleptomaniac, it's very likely lying about somewhere in the house."

He eyed Mr. Negget closely, as though half expecting another outburst, but none being forthcoming, sat back in his chair again and smoked in silence, while Mrs. Negget, with a carpet-brush which almost spoke, swept the pieces of dried mud from the stairs.

Mr. Negget was the last to go to bed that night, and finishing his pipe over the dying fire, sat for some time in deep thought. He had from the first raised objections to the presence of Mr. Bodfish at the farm, but family affection, coupled with an idea of testamentary benefits, had so wrought with his wife that he had allowed her to have her own way. Now he half fancied that he saw a chance of getting rid of him. If he could only enable the widow to catch him searching her house, it was highly probable that the ex-constable would find the village somewhat too hot to hold him. He gave his right leg a congratulatory slap as he thought of it, and knocking the ashes from his pipe, went slowly up to bed.

He was so amiable next morning that Mr. Bodfish, who was trying to explain to Mrs. Negget the difference between theft and kleptomania, spoke before him freely. The ex-constable defined kleptomania as a sort of amiable weakness found chiefly among the upper circles, and cited the case of a lady of title whose love of diamonds, combined with great hospitality, was a source of much embarrassment to her guests.

For the whole of that day Mr. Bodfish hung about in the neighbourhood of the widow's cottage, but in vain, and it would be hard to say whether he or Mr. Negget, who had been discreetly shadowing him, felt the disappointment most. On the day following, however, the ex-constable from a distant hedge saw a friend of the widow's enter the cottage, and a little later both ladies emerged and walked up the road.

He watched them turn the corner, and then, with a cautious glance round, which failed, however, to discover Mr. Negget, the ex-constable strolled casually in the direction of the cottage, and approaching it from the rear, turned the handle of the door and slipped in.

He searched the parlour hastily, and then, after a glance from the window, ventured up stairs. And he was in the thick of his self-imposed task when his graceless nephew by marriage, who had met Mrs. Driver and referred pathetically to a raging thirst which he had hoped to have quenched with some of her home-brewed, brought the ladies hastily back again.

"I'll go round the back way," said the wily Negget as they approached the cottage. "I just want to have a look at that pig of yours."

He reached the back door at the same time as Mr. Bodfish, and placing his legs apart, held it firmly against the frantic efforts of the exconstable. The struggle ceased suddenly, and the door opened easily just as Mrs. Driver and her friend appeared in the front room, and the farmer, with a keen glance at the door of the larder which had just closed, took a chair while his hostess drew a glass of beer from the barrel in the kitchen.

Mr. Negget drank gratefully and praised the brew. From beer the conversation turned naturally to the police, and from the police to the listening Mr. Bodfish, who was economizing space by sitting on the bread-pan, and trembling with agitation.

"He's a lonely man," said Negget, shaking his head and glancing from the corner of his eye at the door of the larder. In his wildest dreams he had not imagined so choice a position, and he resolved to give full play to an idea which suddenly occurred to him.

"I dare say," said Mrs. Driver, carelessly, conscious that her friend was watching her.

"And the heart of a little child," said Negget; "you wouldn't believe how simple he is."

Mrs. Clowes said that it did him credit, but, speaking for herself, she hadn't noticed it.

"He was talking about you night before last," said Negget, turning to his hostess; "not that that's anything fresh. He always is talking about you nowadays."

The widow coughed confusedly and told him not to be foolish.

"Ask my wife," said the farmer, impressively; "they were talking about you for hours. He's a very shy man is my wife's uncle, but you should see his face change when your name's mentioned."

As a matter of fact, Mr. Bodfish's face was at that very moment taking on a deeper shade of crimson.

"Everything you do seems to interest him," continued the farmer, disregarding Mrs. Driver's manifest distress; "he was asking Lizzie about your calling on Monday; how long you stayed, and where you sat; and after she'd told him, I'm blest if he didn't go and sit in the same chair!"

This romantic setting to a perfectly casual action on the part of Mr. Bodfish affected the widow visibly, but its effect on the ex-constable nearly upset the bread-pan.

"But here," continued Mr. Negget, with another glance at the larder, "he might go on like that for years. He's a wunnerful shy man--big, and gentle, and shy. He wanted Lizzie to ask you to tea yesterday."

"Now, Mr. Negget," said the blushing widow. "Do be quiet."

"Fact," replied the farmer; "solemn fact, I assure you. And he asked her whether you were fond of jewellery."

"I met him twice in the road near here yesterday," said Mrs. Clowes, suddenly. "Perhaps he was waiting for you to come out."

"I dare say," replied the farmer. "I shouldn't wonder but what he's hanging about somewhere near now, unable to tear himself away."

Mr. Bodfish wrung his hands, and his thoughts reverted instinctively to instances in his memory in which charges of murder had been altered by the direction of a sensible judge to manslaughter. He held his breath for the next words.

Mr. Negget drank a little more ale and looked at Mrs. Driver.

[Illustration: MRS. DRIVER FELL RACK BEFORE THE EMERGING FORM OF MR. BODFISH]

"I wonder whether you've got a morsel of bread and cheese?" he said, slowly. "I've come over that hungry--"

The widow and Mr. Bodfish rose simultaneously. It required not the brain of a trained detective to know that the cheese was in the larder. The unconscious Mrs. Driver opened the door, and then with a wild scream fell back before the emerging form of Mr. Bodfish into the arms of Mrs. Clowes. The glass of Mr. Negget smashed on the floor, and the farmer himself, with every appearance of astonishment, stared at the apparition open-mouthed.

"Mr.--Bodfish!" he said at length, slowly.

Mr. Bodfish, incapable of speech, glared at him ferociously.

"Leave him alone," said Mrs. Clowes, who was ministering to her friend. "Can't you see the man's upset at frightening her? She's coming round, Mr. Bodfish; don't be alarmed."

"Very good," said the farmer, who found his injured relative's gaze somewhat trying. "I'll go, and leave him to explain to Mrs. Driver why he was hidden in her larder. It don't seem a proper thing to me."

"Why, you silly man," said Mrs. Clowes, gleefully, as she paused at the door, "that don't want any explanation. Now, Mr. Bodfish, we're giving you your chance. Mind you make the most of it, and don't be too shy."

She walked excitedly up the road with the farmer, and bidding him good-bye at the corner, went off hastily to spread the news. Mr. Negget

walked home soberly, and hardly staying long enough to listen to his wife's account of the finding of the brooch between the chest of drawers and the wall, went off to spend the evening with a friend, and ended by making a night of it.

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