

In The Library - The Lady of the Barge and Others, Part 6.

W.W. Jacobs

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THE LADY OF THE BARGE

AND OTHER STORIES

By W. W. Jacobs

IN THE LIBRARY

The fire had burnt low in the library, for the night was wet and warm. It was now little more than a grey shell, and looked desolate. Trayton Burleigh, still hot, rose from his armchair, and turning out one of the gas-jets, took a cigar from a box on a side-table and resumed his seat again.

The apartment, which was on the third floor at the back of the house, was a combination of library, study, and smoke-room, and was the daily despair of the old housekeeper who, with the assistance of one servant, managed the house. It was a bachelor establishment, and had been left to

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Trayton Burleigh and James Fletcher by a distant connection of both men some ten years before.

Trayton Burleigh sat back in his chair watching the smoke of his cigar through half-closed eyes. Occasionally he opened them a little wider and glanced round the comfortable, well-furnished room, or stared with a cold gleam of hatred at Fletcher as he sat sucking stolidly at his brier pipe. It was a comfortable room and a valuable house, half of which belonged to Trayton Burleigh; and yet he was to leave it in the morning and become a rogue and a wanderer over the face of the earth. James Fletcher had said so. James Fletcher, with the pipe still between his teeth and speaking from one corner of his mouth only, had pronounced his sentence.

"It hasn't occurred to you, I suppose," said Burleigh, speaking suddenly, "that I might refuse your terms."

"No," said Fletcher, simply.

Burleigh took a great mouthful of smoke and let it roll slowly out.

"I am to go out and leave you in possession?" he continued. "You will stay here sole proprietor of the house; you will stay at the office sole owner and representative of the firm? You are a good hand at a deal, James Fletcher."

"I am an honest man," said Fletcher, "and to raise sufficient money to make your defalcations good will not by any means leave me the gainer, as you very well know."

"There is no necessity to borrow," began Burleigh, eagerly. "We can pay the interest easily, and in course of time make the principal good without a soul being the wiser."

"That you suggested before," said Fletcher, "and my answer is the same. I will be no man's confederate in dishonesty; I will raise every penny at all costs, and save the name of the firm--and yours with it--but I will never have you darken the office again, or sit in this house after to-night."

"You won't," cried Burleigh, starting up in a frenzy of rage.

"I won't," said Fletcher. "You can choose the alternative: disgrace and penal servitude. Don't stand over me; you won't frighten me, I can assure you. Sit down."

"You have arranged so many things in your kindness," said Burleigh, slowly, resuming his seat again, "have you arranged how I am to live?"

"You have two strong hands, and health," replied Fletcher. "I will give you the two hundred pounds I mentioned, and after that you must look out for yourself. You can take it now."

He took a leather case from his breast pocket, and drew out a roll of notes. Burleigh, watching him calmly, stretched out his hand and took them from the table. Then he gave way to a sudden access of rage, and crumpling them in his hand, threw them into a corner of the room. Fletcher smoked on.

"Mrs. Marl is out?" said Burleigh, suddenly.

Fletcher nodded.

"She will be away the night," he said, slowly; "and Jane too; they have gone together somewhere, but they will be back at half-past eight in the morning."

"You are going to let me have one more breakfast in the old place, then," said Burleigh. "Half-past eight, half-past----"

He rose from his chair again. This time Fletcher took his pipe from his mouth and watched him closely. Burleigh stooped, and picking up the notes, placed them in his pocket.

"If I am to be turned adrift, it shall not be to leave you here," he said, in a thick voice.

He crossed over and shut the door; as he turned back Fletcher rose from his chair and stood confronting him. Burleigh put his hand to the wall, and drawing a small Japanese sword from its sheath of carved ivory, stepped slowly toward him.

"I give you one chance, Fletcher," he said, grimly. "You are a man of your word. Hush this up and let things be as they were before, and you are safe."

"Put that down," said Fletcher, sharply.

"By ---, I mean what I say!" cried the other.

"I mean what I said!" answered Fletcher.

He looked round at the last moment for a weapon, then he turned suddenly at a sharp sudden pain, and saw Burleigh's clenched fist nearly touching his breast-bone. The hand came away from his breast again, and something with it. It went a long way off. Trayton Burleigh suddenly went to a great distance and the room darkened. It got quite dark, and Fletcher, with an attempt to raise his hands, let them fall to his side instead, and fell in a heap to the floor.

He was so still that Burleigh could hardly realize that it was all over, and stood stupidly waiting for him to rise again. Then he took out his handkerchief as though to wipe the sword, and thinking better of it, put it back into his pocket again, and threw the weapon on to the floor.

The body of Fletcher lay where it had fallen, the white face turned up to the gas. In life he had been a commonplace-looking man, not to say vulgar; now Burleigh, with a feeling of nausea, drew back toward the door, until the body was hidden by the table, and relieved from the sight, he could think more clearly. He looked down carefully and examined his clothes and his boots. Then he crossed the room again, and with his face averted, turned out the gas. Something seemed to stir in the darkness, and with a faint cry he blundered toward the door before he had realized that it was the clock. It struck twelve.

[Illustration: BURLEIGH, WITH A FEELING OF NAUSEA, DREW BACK TOWARD THE DOOR.]

He stood at the head of the stairs trying to recover himself; trying to

think. The gas on the landing below, the stairs and the furniture, all looked so prosaic and familiar that he could not realize what had occurred. He walked slowly down and turned the light out. The darkness of the upper part of the house was now almost appalling, and in a sudden panic he ran down stairs into the lighted hall, and snatching a hat from the stand, went to the door and walked down to the gate.

Except for one window the neighbouring houses were in darkness, and the lamps shone tip a silent street. There was a little rain in the air, and the muddy road was full of pebbles. He stood at the gate trying to screw up his courage to enter the house again. Then he noticed a figure coming slowly up the road and keeping close to the palings.

The full realization of what he had done broke in upon him when he found himself turning to fly from the approach of the constable. The wet cape glistening in the lamplight, the slow, heavy step, made him tremble. Suppose the thing upstairs was not quite dead and should cry out? Suppose the constable should think it strange for him to be standing there and follow him in? He assumed a careless attitude, which did not feel careless, and as the man passed bade him good-night, and made a remark as to the weather.

Ere the sound of the other's footsteps had gone quite out of hearing, he turned and entered the house again before the sense of companionship should have quite departed. The first flight of stairs was lighted by the gas in the hall, and he went up slowly. Then he struck a match and went up steadily, past the library door, and with firm fingers turned on the gas in his bedroom and lit it. He opened the window a little way, and sitting down on his bed, tried to think.

He had got eight hours. Eight hours and two hundred pounds in small notes. He opened his safe and took out all the loose cash it contained, and walking about the room, gathered up and placed in his pockets such articles of jewellery as he possessed.

The first horror had now to some extent passed, and was succeeded by the fear of death.

With this fear on him he sat down again and tried to think out the first moves in that game of skill of which his life was the stake. He had often read of people of hasty temper, evading the police for a time, and eventually falling into their hands for lack of the most elementary common sense. He had heard it said that they always made some stupid blunder, left behind them some damning clue. He took his revolver from a drawer and saw that it was loaded. If the worst came to the worst, he would die quickly.

Eight hours' start; two hundred odd pounds. He would take lodgings at first in some populous district, and let the hair on his face grow. When the hue-and-cry had ceased, he would go abroad and start life again. He would go out of a night and post letters to himself, or better still, postcards, which his landlady would read. Postcards from cheery friends, from a sister, from a brother. During the day he would stay in and write, as became a man who described himself as a journalist.

Or suppose he went to the sea? Who would look for him in flannels, bathing and boating with ordinary happy mortals? He sat and pondered. One might mean life, and the other death. Which?

His face burned as he thought of the responsibility of the choice. So many people went to the sea at that time of year that he would surely pass unnoticed. But at the sea one might meet acquaintances. He got up and nervously paced the room again. It was not so simple, now that it meant so much, as he had thought.

The sharp little clock on the mantel-piece rang out "one," followed immediately by the deeper note of that in the library. He thought of the clock, it seemed the only live thing in that room, and shuddered. He wondered whether the thing lying by the far side of the table heard it. He wondered---

He started and held his breath with fear. Somewhere down stairs a board creaked loudly, then another. He went to the door, and opening it a little way, but without looking out, listened. The house was so still that he could hear the ticking of the old clock in the kitchen below. He opened the door a little wider and peeped out. As he did so there was a sudden sharp outcry on the stairs, and he drew back into the room and stood trembling before he had quite realized that the noise had been made by the cat. The cry was unmistakable; but what had disturbed it?

There was silence again, and he drew near the door once more. He became certain that something was moving stealthily on the stairs. He heard the boards creak again, and once the rails of the balustrade rattled. The silence and suspense were frightful. Suppose that the something which had been Fletcher waited for him in the darkness outside?

He fought his fears down, and opening the door, determined to see what was beyond. The light from his room streamed out on to the landing, and he peered about fearfully. Was it fancy, or did the door of Fletcher's room opposite close as he looked? Was it fancy, or did the handle of the door really turn?

In perfect silence, and watching the door as he moved, to see that nothing came out and followed him, he proceeded slowly down the dark stairs. Then his jaw fell, and he turned sick and faint again. The library door, which he distinctly remembered closing, and which, moreover, he had seen was closed when he went up stairs to his room, now stood open some four or five inches. He fancied that there was a rustling inside, but his brain refused to be certain. Then plainly and unmistakably he heard a chair pushed against the wall.

He crept to the door, hoping to pass it before the thing inside became aware of his presence. Something crept stealthily about the room. With a sudden impulse he caught the handle of the door, and, closing it violently, turned the key in the lock, and ran madly down the stairs.

A fearful cry sounded from the room, and a heavy hand beat upon the panels of the door. The house rang with the blows, but above them sounded the loud hoarse cries of human fear. Burleigh, half-way down to the hall, stopped with his hand on the balustrade and listened. The beating ceased, and a man's voice cried out loudly for God's sake to let him out.

At once Burleigh saw what had happened and what it might mean for him. He had left the hall door open after his visit to the front, and some wandering bird of the night had entered the house. No need for him to go now. No need to hide either from the hangman's rope or the felon's cell. The fool above had saved him. He turned and ran up stairs again just as

the prisoner in his furious efforts to escape wrenched the handle from the door.

"Who's there?" he cried, loudly.

"Let me out!" cried a frantic voice. "For God's sake, open the door! There's something here."

"Stay where you are!" shouted Burleigh, sternly. "Stay where you are! If you come out, I'll shoot you like a dog!"

The only response was a smashing blow on the lock of the door. Burleigh raised his pistol, and aiming at the height of a man's chest, fired through the panel.

The report and the crashing of the wood made one noise, succeeded by an unearthly stillness, then the noise of a window hastily opened. Burleigh fled hastily down the stairs, and flinging wide the hall door, shouted loudly for assistance.

It happened that a sergeant and the constable on the beat had just met in the road. They came toward the house at a run. Burleigh, with incoherent explanations, ran up stairs before them, and halted outside the library door. The prisoner was still inside, still trying to demolish the lock of the sturdy oaken door. Burleigh tried to turn the key, but the lock was too damaged to admit of its moving. The sergeant drew back, and, shoulder foremost, hurled himself at the door and burst it open.

He stumbled into the room, followed by the constable, and two shafts of light from the lanterns at their belts danced round the room. A man lurking behind the door made a dash for it, and the next instant the three men were locked together.

Burleigh, standing in the doorway, looked on coldly, reserving himself for the scene which was to follow. Except for the stumbling of the men and the sharp catch of the prisoner's breath, there was no noise. A helmet fell off and bounced and rolled along the floor. The men fell; there was a sobbing snarl and a sharp click. A tall figure rose from the floor; the other, on his knees, still held the man down. The standing figure felt in his pocket, and, striking a match, lit the gas.

The light fell on the flushed face and fair beard of the sergeant. He was bare-headed, and his hair dishevelled. Burleigh entered the room and gazed eagerly at the half-insensible man on the floor—a short, thick-set fellow with a white, dirty face and a black moustache. His lip was cut and bled down his neck. Burleigh glanced furtively at the table. The cloth had come off in the struggle, and was now in the place where he had left Fletcher.

"Hot work, sir," said the sergeant, with a smile. "It's fortunate we were handy."

The prisoner raised a heavy head and looked up with unmistakable terror in his eyes.

"All right, sir," he said, trembling, as the constable increased the pressure of his knee. "I 'ain't been in the house ten minutes altogether. By ---, I've not."

The sergeant regarded him curiously.

"It don't signify," he said, slowly; "ten minutes or ten seconds won't make any difference."

The man shook and began to whimper.

"It was 'ere when I come," he said, eagerly; "take that down, sir. I've only just come, and it was 'ere when I come. I tried to get away then, but I was locked in."

"What was?" demanded the sergeant.

"That," he said, desperately.

The sergeant, following the direction of the terror-stricken black eyes, stooped by the table. Then, with a sharp exclamation, he dragged away the cloth. Burleigh, with a sharp cry of horror, reeled back against the wall.

"All right, sir," said the sergeant, catching him; "all right. Turn your head away."

He pushed him into a chair, and crossing the room, poured out a glass of whiskey and brought it to him. The glass rattled against his teeth, but he drank it greedily, and then groaned faintly. The sergeant waited patiently. There was no hurry.

"Who is it, sir?" he asked at length.

"My friend--Fletcher," said Burleigh, with an effort. "We lived together." He turned to the prisoner.

"You damned villain!"

"He was dead when I come in the room, gentlemen," said the prisoner, strenuously. "He was on the floor dead, and when I see 'im, I tried to get out. S' 'elp me he was. You heard me call out, sir. I shouldn't ha' called out if I'd killed him."

"All right," said the sergeant, gruffly; "you'd better hold your tongue, you know."

"You keep quiet," urged the constable.

The sergeant knelt down and raised the dead man's head.

"I 'ad nothing to do with it," repeated the man on the floor. "I 'ad nothing to do with it. I never thought of such a thing. I've only been in the place ten minutes; put that down, sir."

The sergeant groped with his left hand, and picking up the Japanese sword, held it at him.

"I've never seen it before," said the prisoner, struggling.

"It used to hang on the wall," said Burleigh. "He must have snatched it down. It was on the wall when I left Fletcher a little while ago."

"How long?" inquired the sergeant.

"Perhaps an hour, perhaps half an hour," was the reply. "I went to my bedroom."

The man on the floor twisted his head and regarded him narrowly.

"You done it!" he cried, fiercely. "You done it, and you want me to swing for it."

"That 'll do," said the indignant constable.

The sergeant let his burden gently to the floor again.

"You hold your tongue, you devil!" he said, menacingly.

He crossed to the table and poured a little spirit into a glass and took it in his hand. Then he put it down again and crossed to Burleigh.

"Feeling better, sir?" he asked.

The other nodded faintly.

"You won't want this thing any more," said the sergeant.

He pointed to the pistol which the other still held, and taking it from him gently, put it into his pocket.

"You've hurt your wrist, sir," he said, anxiously.

Burleigh raised one hand sharply, and then the other.

"This one, I think," said the sergeant. "I saw it just now."

He took the other's wrists in his hand, and suddenly holding them in the grip of a vice, whipped out something from his pocket--something hard and cold, which snapped suddenly on Burleigh's wrists, and held them fast.

"That's right," said the sergeant; "keep quiet."

The constable turned round in amaze; Burleigh sprang toward him furiously.

"Take these things off!" he choked. "Have you gone mad? Take them off!"

"All in good time," said the sergeant.

"Take them off!" cried Burleigh again.

For answer the sergeant took him in a powerful grip, and staring steadily at his white face and gleaming eyes, forced him to the other end of the room and pushed him into a chair.

"Collins," he said, sharply.

"Sir?" said the astonished subordinate.

"Run to the doctor at the corner hard as you can run!" said the other.
"This man is not dead!"

As the man left the room the sergeant took up the glass of spirits he had poured out, and kneeling down by Fletcher again, raised his head and tried to pour a little down his throat. Burleigh, sitting in his corner, watched like one in a trance. He saw the constable return with the breathless surgeon, saw the three men bending over Fletcher, and then saw the eyes of the dying man open and the lips of the dying man move. He was conscious that the sergeant made some notes in a pocket-book, and that all three men eyed him closely. The sergeant stepped toward him and placed his hand on his shoulder, and obedient to the touch, he arose and went with him out into the night.

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