

***HERBERT
JENKINS***



***THE BINDLES
ON THE ROCKS***

Herbert Jenkins

The Bindles on the Rocks

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CHAPTER I - THE BINDLES ON THE ROCKS

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I

"They've cut the water off!"

Mrs. Bindle made the announcement as if she found in it a relief to her feelings.

Bindle received the news in silence, then, as if feeling that the tension of the situation required relieving, he remarked:

"Well, well, you can't 'ave everythink."

"And how am I going to cook?" she demanded.

"There ain't been much wantin' cookin' lately," he retorted: but there was no bitterness in his tone. It was rather a statement of fact.

Mrs. Bindle eyed him keenly. For weeks past she had noted the hard, drawn expression of his face.

The Government dole of a pound a week was little enough on which to live, particularly when a pound sterling possessed the purchasing power of some eight shillings before the War, a circumstance which Mrs. Bindle seemed never tired of emphasising.

"The gas'll go next," she announced, as if anxious to squeeze from the situation every drop of drama it contained.

"Well, there won't be anythink else to take after they get that," said Bindle, with a grin that was a ghost of its former self, "unless they takes me," he added.

"I suppose you've forgotten the house," was Mrs. Bindle's acid retort.

"Speakin' as man to woman, I 'ad," was the reply, as he drew from his pocket his beloved clay pipe, gazed at it for a moment, and then returned it once more to where of late it seemed exclusively to belong. It was five days since it had received what Bindle called "a feed," and then it had been due to a mate's hospitality.

"Well, well," he sighed, as he dropped into a chair, "as I was jest sayin', you can't 'ave everythink."

There were times when he found the struggle against depression almost too much for his philosophy.

"Got a job?"

Bindle had been anticipating the question ever since he entered; yet he winced. He never could hear that interrogation without wincing.

"Not yet, Lizzie," he said with forced cheerfulness; "but I'll get somethink soon."

Mrs. Bindle sniffed. To her it was a man's duty to get a job and keep, it, just as it was a woman's duty to see to the requirements of the house.

"'Ow am I going to cook without water?" she demanded, her diction becoming a little frayed under the stress of emotion.

"If they cut off the gas, we won't want to cook," he replied, striving to speak cheerfully. "We ain't got no coal."

"That's right, make a joke of it!" she cried. "That'll fill your stomach, won't it?"

"I ain't a-making a joke of it. I'm tryin' to make the best--"

"Yes, make the best of having no gas, no water, no coal, and no food. Pretty best you're likely to make of that."

Bindle was silent--he realised that the domestic barometer was falling.

"I've filled the jugs and pails," Mrs. Bindle announced presently, with the air of one who has scored off a natural enemy.

"There ain't no flies on you, Mrs. B.," and the grin with which he accompanied the remark was a tribute to Mrs. Bindle's astuteness. "I suppose we couldn't bottle some gas?" he suggested.

"Don't be a fool!" was the retort. "I saw the turncock," she added a moment later. There was a note of grimness in her voice.

"Wot did 'e say?" asked Bindle with interest. He was sorry to have missed Mrs. Bindle's encounter with the turncock. He knew her capacity for inspired invective when under the influence of great emotion.

"Oh! he was like all men," she cried scornfully. "Said he'd got his orders. I gave him a piece of my mind."

"Wot jer say to 'im?"

She sniffed disdainfully. She could not exactly remember what she had said; but the turncock remembered. It had spoiled his day. The delay due to Mrs. Bindle's eloquence had made it too late for him to get on the 1.30 at Alexandra Park, and his choice had subsequently won at a 100 to 8. He had not so much minded the reflections that Mrs. Bindle had cast upon him as a father, a husband, and a man; but he had hated missing the 1.30, in fact he hated missing the first race at any meeting. Somehow or other the conviction

had been borne in upon him that his destiny was indissolubly linked up with first races, a circumstance that had earned for him the sobriquet of "First-race Rogers."

"Well?" demanded Mrs. Bindle, as Bindle made no further effort towards conversation.

"Eh?" he queried.

In his imagination he had been filling his clay pipe from a box full of tobacco. He sighed a little dolefully.

"How am I to cook without water?" she demanded for the third time.

"You got all them pails full."

"There's only two, and one's the slop-pail."

Bindle scratched his head with the air of one who is carefully weighing a difficult problem. "But ain't the jugs full?" he queried.

"We've got two jugs and three cups. I filled the large flower-pot; but the cork came out of the bottom."

"An' wot about my rinse?"

"You can't have it," she snapped.

"Well, it don't look as if there's goin' to be soup for dinner to-morrow," he muttered.

"That's right! Go on, make a joke of it!" she retorted.

"But things ain't so bad but wot you can laugh at 'em, Lizzie." There was a note of almost pleading in his voice.

"Then you'd better fill your stomach with it and see how empty you'll feel," was the angry rejoinder.

Mrs. Bindle liked to get the full dialectical value out of tragedy and drama, and she resented Bindle's flippancy. With her there was a time and place for all things. She did

not realise that Bindle was applying the only balm he knew for a wounded spirit.

For weeks he had been out of work, and for weeks he had tramped London from early morning until late at night, without food, beer, or tobacco. He suffered considerable pain from what he called his "various" veins; but Joseph Bindle was a great-hearted little man, who realised to the full his domestic responsibilities.

Each night he returned home as he had left it that morning--one of the unemployed. He felt ashamed; yet never had he worked so hard as during those weeks of tramping the streets seeking employment.

He had presented himself as a candidate for every conceivable sort of job, on more than one occasion earning the scorn of the advertiser, who resented receiving applications for the post of traveller, or fish-fryer, from a journeyman pantehnicon-man.

In her heart Mrs. Bindle realised that Bindle was trying all he could to get a job; yet, destitute of tact, she did not seem to realise that in that one evening interrogation she drove the iron deep into his soul. Although he knew it to be inevitable, he never quite succeeded in steeling himself against the question when it actually did come.

On his return to No. 7 Fenton Street two evenings later, Bindle was met with the announcement that Mrs. Bindle had used the last of the water.

"I'll nip in next door and fetch some," he said, with forced cheerfulness.

"Don't you dare!"

He was startled by the angry intensity of her tone.

"Wot's up, you been scrappin'?"

"I won't be under an obligation to those women," she cried, her mouth shutting with a determined snap. "Besides, they don't know."

"Why, everybody in the street knows by now, and Mrs. Sawney and Mrs. Grimps--"

"Don't you dare to mention their names in my house."

"Then wot am I goin' to do when I wants a drink o' water?" he cried in an aggrieved tone.

"Go without!" was the angry response.

"There don't seem anythink else to do but turn up my toes," he grumbled. "'Ow you goin' to cook?"

"Not with their water," she announced with decision.

"I'll take a bucket round to 'Earty an' pinch some of 'is," said Bindle wearily.

"You do, and I'll throw it over you!" she cried. "Mark my words if I don't."

"But where the 'ell are we goin' to get water, Lizzie, if you won't 'ave it from nowhere?"

"I won't have Mr. Hearty know, and I won't borrow it from those women, so there," and there was that in Mrs. Bindle's tone which convinced Bindle it would be foolish to argue. Instead, he put a beer-bottle in either trouser pocket, and two more under his coat, and stole out into the night.

A quarter of an hour later he returned triumphant, the four beer-bottles full of water.

"Where did you get it?" demanded Mrs. Bindle suspiciously, her eyes almost devouring the precious bottles.

"Round at a garridge in the Fulham Road," he lied.

As a matter of fact, he had obtained the precious fluid from a hydrant used for the filling of water-carts, aided by a spanner, borrowed on the way.

Mrs. Bindle poured out a little water in a cup and drank it daintily, although she was very thirsty.

"Why didn't you wash the bottles? It tastes of beer!" she cried, walking over to the sink; but for once the material triumphed over the ethical, and Mrs. Bindle swallowed the beer-tainted water, although she made a motion suggestive of disgust.

II

Three days later the gas-man called at No. 7 Fenton Street, and was met by Mrs. Bindle, mop in hand.

He explained that he had been sent to disconnect the meter from the supply pipe. At that point Mrs. Bindle monopolised the conversation.

The man was silent and respectful, bowing under the flail of Mrs. Bindle's biting tongue. He was not unsympathetic. He had a wife of his own, albeit one less biting of speech, and he was sorry to have to cut off from any home the sole means it possessed of cooking food; still, it was a little galling, even to him, to be called "a Hun," "a breaker-up of homes," and "the Eighth Plague."

At first he had scarcely hoped to get off with an unbroken head; but even Mrs. Bindle had seen the justice of his protestations that it wasn't his fault, and if she refused to allow him to cut off the gas, others would come and do so by force. He had gone on to tell the story of one woman who had assaulted official of the company, with the result that

she had done fourteen days, owing to her inability to pay the fine.

And so the gas, like the water, was added to the list of things forbidden at No. 7 Fenton Street.

Piece by piece the smaller of the Bindles' possessions had already passed through the portals over which swung the three brass balls of penury.

As the weeks passed, the articles became larger, and the hour at which they were taken out later. Mrs. Bindle was proud. Not for the world would she have allowed the neighbours to know that she was pawning her home; but the neighbours not only knew it; they were in a position to supply a fairly accurate list of the articles which had been disposed of. Bindle had come to dread the return from these expeditions, with Mrs. Bindle's inevitable interrogation, "How much did you get?" It soon became apparent that between her views on the matter of valuation, and those of the pawnbroker, there was a great gulf fixed.

Her much-valued lustres, for instance, which she had valued at five pounds, realised three shillings and sixpence, and a case of wax fruit, about which she was a little doubtful, but had finally settled upon as worth ten pounds, had produced only two shillings.

Without hesitation she had condemned the pawnbroker as a thief; but, inspired by a sense of fairness to him, she always insisted on seeing the pawn-tickets, although she had no objection to Bindle retaining them once she had checked the amount of the accommodation.

"There's comin' a day," muttered Bindle to himself one evening as he plodded wearily homewards, "there's comin'

a day, J. B., when there won't be nothink left to pawn but Mrs. B., an' 'ow much you're a-goin' to get on 'er depends on Ole Isaac's views on women."

"Ole Isaac" was Bindle's name for Mr. Montagu Gordon, whose thickness of speech and arched nose confirmed his Scotch descent! One day, a week after the interruption of the gas supply, Bindle was walking, along the Fulham Road, when he was surprised to hear himself hailed from a motor-car. A moment later a neat little limousine drew up beside him, the door was burst open, and he saw Dr. Richard Little smiling at him.

"Hullo, J. B.! Where have you been all these years?"

"'Ullo, 'ullo!" cried Bindle joyfully, "and 'ow goes it, sir?"

"Come on, hop in," cried Dr. Little, and, a moment later, Bindle was whirled off in the direction of the doctor's flat in Sloane Gardens. Years before, when a student at St. Timothy's Hospital, known as "Tim's," Dr. Little had sought Bindle's assistance in organising the Temperance Fete rag. They had continued friends ever since, and it was through him that Bindle became known to the men of St. Timothy's Hospital, whom he always referred to as "the Assassins."

Seating Bindle in a comfortable chair in his surgery, Dr. Little stood looking down at him, professional speculation in his eye. Reaching forward, he lifted his left wrist and felt the pulse.

"What's the trouble, J. B.?" he asked, gazing at him keenly.

"When I comes to my doctor, it's for 'im to tell me, not for me to tell 'im," retorted Bindle with a grin.

"Well, I haven't many minutes to spare; but I've just got time to snatch a bite before I push off again."

He pressed his thumb on the bell-push.

"A good plateful of sandwiches, Smithson," he said, as a dainty and efficient-looking parlourmaid entered. "I've not time for luncheon, and I'm very hungry."

For a moment the girl hesitated; but, too well trained to manifest surprise, she retired. "Manage a sandwich with me?" he queried. "Then we can talk."

"Well, I ain't 'ungry," said Bindle, praying to be forgiven for the lie; "but I don't mind jest nibblin' orf the corner, if it's a very small one an' cut thin."

In his heart was a great thankfulness. Here was a prospect of food, which he could eat without wound to his pride.

Going to the sideboard, Dr. Little produced a claret-jug and some glasses. He had successfully diagnosed his patient's case. It was an ailment requiring good red, blood-making wine instead of whisky-and-soda.

"Well," he cried presently, "how's the happy home?"

"I got most of it in my pocket. I--" Bindle stopped suddenly, realising that he was giving the game away; but Dr. Little had seen a handful of pawn tickets, which Bindle had half drawn from his pocket. Bindle cursed himself for his ready tongue; but the humour of the situation had carried him away.

"I been out of a job," he explained; "but it's all right now," and he took another sandwich from the dish Dr. Little pushed across to him.

"In work again?"

"Oh! we'll soon be all right now," Bindle equivocated.

For a quarter of an hour they chatted, during which time Dr. Little managed to persuade Bindle to make a fairly hearty meal of sandwiches, taking one himself for every one that Bindle took, and discarding it when he was not observed.

"Well, so long, J. B.," he cried heartily, as he gripped his hand, and Bindle was shown out by the trim parlour-maid, a cigar between his lips and a great content in his heart.

"I wish I could 'ave pinched a few for Lizzie," he muttered, as he walked down the steps; "but it wouldn't 'ave been right like to 'im."

Meanwhile, Dr. Little was examining a pile of pawn-tickets on his consulting-room table. There had been a time when, as Yu Li Tel, the Chinese wizard, he had been famous at Tim's for his sleight-of-hand.

The examination completed, he went down upon his knees and proceeded to retrieve partially eaten sandwiches from under the table. These he threw into the fireplace. The next morning, the maid who attended to the surgery, decided that the master must have had a stroke, her father being subject to fits.

That night, as luck would have it, Mrs. Bindle was in some doubt as to the amount lent upon a copper saucepan that she had valued at 15s., and on which the pawnbroker had lent either 2s. 3d. or 3s. 3d. To settle the point to her satisfaction, she demanded the pawn-tickets of Bindle.

Without hesitation he thrust his hand into his coat pocket, then, by the look of consternation on his face, she realised that something was wrong.

"What's the matter?" she demanded. Bindle proceeded to go through his pockets with the hurried action of a bridegroom who has forgotten the ring.

"I 'ad 'em all in my pocket this mornin'," he mumbled.

"You've lost them," she announced; then she added inconsistently: "Go upstairs and look!"

Bindle spent the next half-hour in searching everything that was searchable, even down to the dustbin; but nowhere could he find a single pawn-ticket, and he had perforce to announce that the portion of their home which was in the possession of "Ole Isaac" was irretrievably lost to them, whereat Mrs. Bindle had sunk down at the kitchen-table and indulged in a fit of hysterics which was already twenty-four hours overdue. From careful observation Bindle had discovered that during the period of crisis Mrs. Bindle had hysterics twice a week.

"Well, well," he muttered. "It ain't no good either laughin' or cryin' about it. I'd never 'ave 'ad the money to get them sticks out. My Gawd! Them sandwiches, an' the wine, an' that cigar. I'll never forget 'em; yet it don't seem fair me 'avin' 'em without Lizzie."

The reduction of the Government dole from twenty to fifteen shillings a week had been a serious thing for the Bindles. The trade union to which Bindle belonged was practically bankrupt, and the seven shillings a week it paid was insufficient to meet the rent.

To feed two people upon a pound a week, with slight additions of a few shillings due to the transference to "Ole Isaac" of one or other of Mrs. Bindle's household gods, had required very careful and economical management. A

reduction of twenty-five per cent. had spelt tragedy, and in a very short time Bindle had economised two holes in the leather belt he had taken to. He foresaw a time when he would have "a waist like a bloomin' wasp."

No longer could he "cut and come again" at his favourite dishes, for they, too, had been included in the general catastrophe, Mrs. Bindle being obliged to select such foods as were cheap and sustaining.

Bindle had learnt to hate the name of haricots, lentils and split peas, stewed with bones a week old and white from constant immersion. Even of these culinary reiterations there was insufficient, and the spirit of self-sacrifice inspired Bindle to lie, and Mrs. Bindle to compromise with the truth.

"How can I eat when I don't know where the next meal's coming from?" she would snap illogically, when urged to "ave another go at that there bone an' bean dish," as Bindle had named the large yellow pie-dish in which their meals were now always served.

"I ain't 'ungry, not workin'," he would remark, when ordered to pass up his plate, his very stomach seeming to protest at the lie which denied it the occupation to which it was accustomed.

By common consent both Bindle and Mrs. Bindle kept from the Heartys all knowledge of the straits to which they were reduced. Even had they communicated to him the facts of the case, it is doubtful if Mr. Hearty would have been of any real assistance. None knew better than he the value of money, and in all probability his aid would have taken the form of a stock-soiled pineapple, or a cokernut

which had lost most of its value, owing to being cracked and destitute of milk.

Mr. Hearty's dictum was "Let not thy right hand know what thy left hand doeth," and he found no difficulty in observing the rule, as neither compromised itself with lavish or injudicious charity. He never gave to beggars in the street because they "only spent it on drink," and he was not the man irrevocably to plunge into the fiery furnace of perpetual damnation the soul of a fellow-creature. There were times when Mr. Hearty would talk gravely, almost grimly, of the dangers of promiscuous giving, and it was always when he had refused largess to some importuning piece of human flotsam. The only way to extract charity from Alfred Hearty was to take him by the throat, for, much as he valued his money, he valued his life more.

And so the Bindles passed from one hungry day to another.

"I'm worried about--" Mrs. Hearty broke off, beating her breast with her clenched fist.

Mr. Hearty looked up from the day-book, in which he was making entries. He was accustomed to Mrs. Hearty's serial form of conversation.

"I'm worried about Lizzie and Joe," said Mrs. Hearty, when she had recovered somewhat.

"Lizzie and Joe," repeated Mr. Hearty, in a patient, woolly voice. Mr. Hearty was always patient.

"Joe's been out of work for--for--oh, my breath!" gasped Mrs. Hearty. It had become a habit with her to break off when a word short of the completion of the sentence, in

order to expend more than the necessary oxygen required to complete it.

"Eight weeks," concluded Mrs. Hearty.

"Eight weeks," repeated Mr. Hearty vaguely, his thoughts having returned to the day-book. "Eight weeks what?"

"Work!" exploded Mrs. Hearty, who once more began to beat her breast.

"Who has got eight weeks' work?" enquired Mr. Hearty.

Mrs. Hearty shook her head violently, and made motions with her hands; but it was several seconds before she could gasp the words, "Hasn't had it."

When she had gained more control over her powers of breathing, she proceeded to explain in wheezy jerks that she was greatly concerned as to what was happening at No. 7 Fenton Street.

Mr. Hearty regarded her with the air of a man who would like to change the subject. "Can't you do somethin' for Joe, Alf?" she enquired presently.

"Do something?" interrogated Mr. Hearty. "I am--I am rather pressed for ready money at the moment, Martha," he added, as a precaution.

"Try and get 'im a job then," she suggested. "I will make enquiries," said Mr. Hearty, as he returned to the pages of the day-book. Mrs. Hearty had no illusions about the man she had married. On the few occasions when Mr. Hearty indulged in charity, it was always in connection with a subscription list, where he felt that to some extent he obtained value for money in the form of prestige among the faithful of the Alton Road Chapel.

There was no bond of sympathy between him and his brother-in-law; in fact, there was no bond of sympathy between Alfred Hearty and anybody, as from youth he had always been self-centred, his whole attention being concentrated on the art of getting on. He had married as a preliminary to starting in business on his own account. He foresaw absences from his shop, and he distrusted his fellows. A wife could be left in charge of the till, and her keep would be less than the salary he would have to pay an assistant. Apart from that, she would cook, wash and mend.

He found his attention wandering from his work. He realised in a vague sort of way that Martha was not a woman to desert her own kith and kin, and he found himself wondering how he could help the Bindles and, at the same time, help himself.

Finally he decided that if he were to discharge his carman, Smith, to whom he paid two pounds fifteen shillings a week, and offer Bindle the job for thirty-five shillings a week, he would be exercising an economy of a pound a week and, at the same time, prove himself to be a practical Christian.

As he worked, the idea grew upon him, and he decided to give it careful consideration. With Mr. Hearty, to think things over had become almost a religion. Fools might rush in; but not Alfred Hearty. He had to see his way clear to every step in his career.

Brilliance had no attraction for him. He was a plodder, and he hated risks.

Late in the afternoon of the following day, Mr. Hearty had come to the conclusion that he must help the Bindles in the

hour of their need--that was how he had come to regard it. That evening, after tea, he announced to Mrs. Hearty that he was going round to Fenton Street to see what could be done for the Bindles. It was Mrs. Bindle who answered the door to him. From the kitchen, Bindle heard the woolly tones of his brother-in-law, and he wondered what had brought them so unaccustomed a visitor. For some time he listened to the murmur of the voices in the parlour. Presently Mrs. Bindle entered the kitchen.

"Mr. Hearty wants to see you, Bindle," she announced. There was an unwonted light in her eye.

"Wot's 'e want?" muttered Bindle.

"He has something to say to you," was the retort. "You'd better go at once."

"Ah, well," said Bindle. "I suppose 'e wants to tell me one of those long stories of 'is."

"Now, mind what you say to him!" admonished Mrs. Bindle. "You ought to be very grateful."

"I ought to be wot?" queried Bindle, pausing half-way to the door.

"You ought to be extremely grateful."

"Grateful to 'Earty," persisted Bindle. "Anyone wot was grateful to 'Earty would be a livin' lie."

"There you go!" hissed Mrs. Bindle angrily. "As soon as anyone tries to help you, you want to insult them."

Deciding that it was politic to allow Mrs. Bindle the last word, Bindle entered the parlour, to find Mr. Hearty seated on the edge of a chair.

"'Ullo, 'Earty!" cried Bindle. "'Ow's Martha?"

"Good evening, Joseph," said Mr. Hearty, who was always punctilious in the way of speaking. "Martha is about the same, thank you. I--I called to--to--" He paused uncertainly.

"Mr. Hearty's going to let you drive his van," explained Mrs. Bindle, who had followed him into the room. "I think it is very kind of you, Mr. Hearty," she added.

"Drive your van, 'Earty? I ain't much in the drivin' line," he added. "Still, if somebody leads the 'orse, I might be able to get through."

"Mr. Hearty will give you thirty-five shillings a week," continued Mrs. Bindle, "and--and--" She paused.

"Wot's 'appened to ole Smith?"

"He--he will be leaving." Mr. Hearty looked uncomfortable.

"You 'oofin' 'im out?" enquired Bindle, curiously. "Wot's 'e been up to, pinchin' the spuds?"

"He has--he has--" began Mr. Hearty. Then he paused.

"Mr. Hearty is discharging him to make room for you, Bindle, and you ought to be very grateful."

"'As 'e been up to anythink, 'Earty?" enquired Bindle.

"No," replied Mr. Hearty. "He has always done very well; but I thought--"

"You're payin' 'im two pounds fifteen shillin' a week, ain't you?"

"Yes, that is what he gets."

"An' now you're goin' to give 'im the boot, an' give me 'is job, an' save a pound a week."

"I felt that--Martha said you were out of work, and I--"

"'Earty," said Bindle, shaking his head from side to side, "you got the 'eart of a blackleg. Lizzie says I ain't got a soul;

but if I 'ad I wouldn't sell it for a quid a week. An' I ain't a-goin' to take poor ole Smith's job, 'im with a wife an' three kids. No doubt you means well; but, my Gawd, you've got a funny way of showin' it," and with that Bindle turned, brushed past Mrs. Bindle and re-entered the kitchen.

"There's goin' to be a 'ell of a row to-night for this 'ere," he muttered, as he sat down and awaited the return of Mrs. Bindle. "Mrs. B. ain't altogether a joy w'en you got a belly full," he muttered. "W'en you ain't--well, well, we can't 'ave everythink."

When Mrs. Bindle re-entered the kitchen, having closed the street-door behind Mr. Hearty, Bindle realised that he had not been unduly pessimistic in his anticipation. Before she had closed the door behind her, the storm burst.

"And now what have you got to say for yourself?" she demanded. "Insulting Mr. Hearty when he came to offer to help you."

"'Earty don't care a blow about me," was Bindle's retort. "'E's out for savin' money."

"He was willing to give you work, and you refused it, and, not content with that, you must insult him at the same time. Mr. Hearty will find it very difficult to forgive you."

"Well, that's one comfort," retorted Bindle. "Any'ow, I'm never goin' to forgive 'im for wanting to make me a blackleg."

"It's those wicked trade-union ideas that you've got in your head," replied Mrs. Bindle. "I'd trade-union them if I got hold of them. Ruining homes like this. And now," she announced, with the air of one playing a last card, "you either accept Mr. Hearty's offer, or out you go from this

house to-night. I've had enough of you and your lazy, good-for-nothing ways!" she cried, her voice increasing in shrillness.

"You don't want to work," she continued. "That's what's the matter with you. You're like the precious trade unions; but I'll show you, as I showed them. Now, you can make up your mind. Either you go and drive Mr. Hearty's van, or out you go!"

"But I can't take poor ole Smith's job, an' 'im with a wife an' kids."

"That's no business of yours!" retorted Mrs. Bindle. "If you have bread-and-butter put in your mouth, it's for you to eat it. No wonder you haven't got work if that's how you try to get it. I shall be ashamed to see Mr. Hearty after this."

"So shall I," was Bindle's dry retort. "Any man wot is a man would be ashamed to meet a cove wot could do the dirty like that."

"So you aren't going to accept the job?" demanded Mrs. Bindle.

"No, I bloomin' well ain't!" cried Bindle, with decision.

"Then out you go!" and Mrs. Bindle darted into the scullery, returning a moment later with the mop. "I mean it!" she shrilled. "Either you promise to start work for Mr. Hearty on Monday week, or you can find somebody else to look after you. Now then, make up your mind!"

To assist Bindle in making up his mind, she made a lunge at him with the business end of the mop. Bindle dodged, and put the kitchen table between them.

For several minutes they dodged about the kitchen. With the aid of chairs and doubling round the table, Bindle strove

to keep Mrs. Bindle at such a distance from him as to render her weapon useless.

At length, realising that they could not spend the whole evening in jumping round like young lambs, he presently made a dart for the door, snatched up his cap as he passed, and made a successful get-away.

"You let me see your face back here again, and I'll throttle you!" rang Mrs. Bindle's valediction in his ears, as she banged the street-door behind him.

"Well, I'm blowed!" muttered Bindle, as he paused beneath a lamp-post half-way down Fenton Street. "I suppose this is wot they call the 'ome life of England."

III

"I likes a bit o' bread-an'-cheese an' a glass--an' a cup o' tea," amended Mr. Bindle, as, with moistened forefinger, he proceeded to gather up such crumbs as still lay upon his plate, later transferring them to his mouth. He had remembered in time that beer had ceased to figure in the menu at No. 7 Fenton Street.

He emptied his cup, striving to disguise his distaste for tea without milk or sugar.

Mrs. Bindle sat staring straight in front of her. Since Bindle had announced the night before that there would be no further payment from the union, she had realised that things were nearing a crisis.

Fifteen shillings a week with the rent to pay would leave nothing for food, and if the rent were not paid they would be turned out. Never in the history of her married life had she been threatened by such a disaster. In the earlier days of the trouble she had not hesitated to reproach Bindle with his

inability to obtain work; but as the weeks had passed, and he grew paler and thinner in the face, she manifested a sportsmanship that caused him to marvel. The "Got a job?" with which he was greeted each evening lost that note of hardness and reproach which had characterised it earlier. In its place was a wistful note of enquiry. From eight o'clock that morning until well after six Bindle had tramped about, foodless and tobaccoless. He had given up the Labour Exchange as hopeless, contenting himself with the necessary reporting each day in order to obtain the dole. He would then make his way to the Fulham Library, where, in common with hundreds of others, he strove to catch a glimpse of the advertisement columns of the daily papers.

Since his return that evening he had striven to be conversational and cheerful. He was striving to postpone the discussion of their finances, which he knew was inevitable.

"There's fivepence-halfpenny in the drawer," announced Mrs. Bindle, with the air of one who is determined to face the crisis. It was her custom, when not engaged in shopping, to keep her purse in the right-hand dresser drawer.

For once in his life Bindle had no retort.

"There's nothing in the house for breakfast," she continued, "and that's all the bread we've got." Her eyes indicated about a quarter of a tin loaf that lay on the table.

"It don't look 'ealthy, do it?" he murmured bravely.

In times of great emotional stress, Mrs. Bindle would delve deep into the past, returning triumphantly with some further evidence of Bindle's obliquity.

"I won't accept charity!" cried Mrs. Bindle shrilly. "If you bring any of your parish relief people here, I'll mark them, see if I don't."

"All right, Lizzie," said Bindle pacifically. "I ain't said anythink about applyin' for parish relief."

"But you're thinking of it," was the retort. "I know you!"

"Oh, my Gawd!" murmured Bindle. "'Oo the 'ell put that into 'er 'ead."

"You're always trying to drag me down," continued Mrs. Bindle. "Ever since I married you, and now you want to shame me before the neighbours. It's always the same--you and your common ways. Look how you behave at table, picking your teeth with a bus-ticket. I might be your slave for all the respect you show me."

"But I ain't tryin' to drag you down, an' it ain't a bus-ticket, it's a bit of a matchbox, Lizzie," he protested. "I ain't said anythink---"

"No, you haven't said anything; but I know you. I was warned what to expect when you were late at the church."

"Late at the church," repeated Bindle, with a puzzled air.

"Yes; when we were married. You couldn't even be there in time, leaving me to look like a fool while you--" She broke off hysterically. "But I was there in time," protested Bindle. "You was early." And then Bindle committed a tactical error by adding: "Women always is early."

"You beast! I know what you mean," she cried tempestuously, the last vestiges of self-control slipping from her. "You want--you look what you've brought me to. Perhaps you'll tell me how I'm going to feed you, instead of making stupid remarks," she snapped.

He said nothing. With the aid of a pipe he felt that he might possibly be equal to the situation; but without it he was a broken reed. His imagination refused to function.

"Well?"

"There don't seem much to say, Lizzie," and there was a humility in his tone which touched even Mrs. Bindle. In it was something of shame that he had failed to supply their modest domestic needs.

"I shall buy bread with all the money left," she announced, her housewifely instincts asserting themselves even in the hour of tragedy. "Stale bread," she added as an afterthought.

"Well, it won't exactly run to eggs and bacon," he agreed, with forced cheerfulness.

"That's right," she cried angrily, "treat it all as a joke! Perhaps it'll fill your stomach. You won't be happy till the brokers are--

"My Gawd!"

It was not Mrs. Bindle's remark that drew from Bindle the exclamation; but a sudden pounding on the front door.

Both started to their feet and stood staring at the kitchen door which led into the narrow passage.

Again a tremendous rat-tat-tat filled the kitchen with sound.

"Well, aren't you going to open the door?" she cried at length, being the first to recover from her astonishment.

"Shall I let 'em in?" he whispered hoarsely.

"Let who in?"

"The bums," and for once Mrs. Bindle forgot to rebuke him for slang.

"The rent's paid to the end of the month," she said, and Bindle walked reluctantly to the door, fear in his eyes and speculation in his heart.

A moment later Mrs. Bindle's eyes widened. Down the passage boomed the refrain, sung in many keys:

"For he's a jolly good fellow,
For he's a jolly good fellow,
For he's a jolly good fellow,
And so say all of us."

Her left hand seemed instinctively to raise itself to her heart, while her right clutched the edge of the table. The moment was pregnant with drama, and Mrs. Bindle, for the first time in her life, wondered if she were going to faint. A moment later the kitchen door was burst open, and half a dozen young men poured in, shouting at the top of their voices; while the rear was brought up by Bindle, who protested that he had got something in his eye and proceeded to rub, not one, but both eyes with the back of his hand.

Mrs. Bindle noticed that two of the men carried between them a large hamper, which they placed in the centre of the room.

Suddenly one of them, who appeared to be a sort of master of the ceremonies, blew a shrill blast upon a whistle, producing instantaneous silence. He thereupon mounted a chair.

"Mrs. Bindle," he cried gravely, "we, the men of Tim's, have come to supper. Minions, do your duty," he cried, addressing the others.

Instantly the table was cleared and the dirty crockery piled in the sink. In a dazed sort of way, Mrs. Bindle watched

these young men opening drawers, collecting knives and forks and laying the table for eight, while one proceeded to wash up the dirty dishes, producing the water from a large earthenware jar they had brought with them.

The hamper was opened, and proved a veritable cornucopia.

Through a mist of water caused by the fly which had got into his eye, Bindle saw taken from that basket things he was able to identify, such as sandwiches and pastries; and things that were new to him, including galantine of chicken, chicken in aspic, and other dainties.

Several times Mrs. Bindle seemed to swallow with difficulty. Suddenly she turned and literally ran from the room, a moment later followed by Bindle.

When the two returned, they found the table laid, and even Mrs. Bindle, a severe critic in such matters, could find no fault with it. There was not enough cutlery to go round, and the plate shortage was overcome by using saucers. From the bedroom window above, Bindle had seen a large open car at the door. He had also seen the majority of his neighbours at either door or window. Some had come out into the street in order to miss nothing of the sight of "a private motor-car" at the door of one of their neighbours' houses.

"Altesse! the banquet is served," announced a little man with large round spectacles and sandy hair, as he bowed gravely before the man with the silver whistle.

Walking up to Mrs. Bindle, the master of the ceremonies gravely offered her his arm. In spite of herself, she took it, and was led to the head of the table.

Bindle, still blinking, was placed at the foot, and the others seated themselves three on either side.

"Now!" cried the leader, rising and addressing his companions, "you have our permission indulge your disgusting appetites."

Amidst cheers, they proceeded to help themselves, not forgetting the Bindles.

At first Mrs. Bindle hesitated; but the galantine of chicken was good, and it was weeks since she had eaten a satisfying meal. As for Bindle, he ate as a man eats but once or twice in a lifetime. The food was good, and the beer was better; but the company was best of all.

For once Mrs. Bindle forgot her table manners. She no longer toyed with her knife and fork, but used them with the zest of one who is hungry.

It was long before Bindle pushed his plate from him. "It's no good," he sighed, in response to urgings to try a wing of chicken. "I can't. I 'ope nothink swells," he added a moment later, a note of anxiety in his voice. "If it does, then I'll bust."

The meal completed, the leader once more rose, bowed, and, without a word of adieu, the whole party tramped from the room, leaving the remains of the feast behind, and in those remains Bindle saw at least a dozen good meals for them both.

"Stop them!"

Mrs. Bindle's exclamation galvanised Bindle to action. He dashed across the kitchen and along the passage, arriving just in time to see the tail-light of the car as it turned the corner.

"Well, I'm blowed!"