

Jenkins Herbert George

Adventures of Bindle



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Содержание

CHAPTER I	6
CHAPTER II	14
CHAPTER III	23
CHAPTER IV	28
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	34

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THE CHILDREN OF THE DEAD END

There are Fairies in the city,
There are Fairies on the down,
When Wee Hughie comes from Ireland
To visit London Town.

There is sunshine in the dungeon,
There is starlight in the grave,
If June will but remember
The things that April gave.

CHAPTER I

THE COMING OF THE LODGER

Bang! Even Bindle was startled by the emphasis with which Mrs. Bindle placed upon the supper-table a large pie-dish containing a savoury-smelling stew.

"Anythink wrong?" he enquired solicitously, gazing at Mrs. Bindle over the top of the evening paper.

"Wrong!" she cried. "Is there anything right?"

"Well, there's beer, an' Beatty, an' the boys wot's fightin'," began Bindle suggestively.

"Don't talk to me!" Mrs. Bindle banged a plate of stew in front of Bindle, to which he applied himself earnestly.

For some minutes the only sound was that occasioned by Bindle's enjoyment of his supper, as he proceeded to read the newspaper propped up in front of him.

"You're nice company, aren't you?" cried Mrs. Bindle, making a dive with the spoon at a potato, which she transferred to her plate. "I might be on a desert island for all the company you are."

Bindle gazed at Mrs. Bindle over the small bone from which he was detaching the last vestiges of nutriment by means of his teeth. He replaced the bone on the edge of his plate in silence.

"You think of nothing but your stomach," Mrs. Bindle continued angrily. "Look at you now!"

"Well, now, ain't you funny!" remarked Bindle, as he replaced his glass upon the table. "If I'm chatty, you say, 'Old your tongue!' If I ain't chatty, you ask why I ain't a-makin' love to you."

After a moment's silence he continued meditatively: "I kept rabbits, silkworms, an' a special kind o' performin' flea, an' I seemed to get to understand 'em all; but women – well, you may search me!" and he pushed his plate from him as a sign of repletion.

Mrs. Bindle rose from the table. Bindle watched her curiously; it was never wise to enquire what course was to follow.

"I answered an advertisement to-day," she announced, as she banged an apple-pie on the table.

With difficulty Bindle withdrew his interest from the pie to Mrs. Bindle's statement.

"You don't say so," he remarked pleasantly.

"And about time, I should think, with food going up as it is," she continued, as she hacked out a large V-shaped piece of pie-crust which she transferred to a plate, and proceeded to dab apple beside it.

Bindle regarded her uncomprehendingly.

"In *The Gospel Sentinel*." She vouchsafed the information grudgingly and, rising, she fetched a paper from the dresser and threw it down in front of Bindle, indicating a particular part of the page with a vicious stab of her fore-finger.

Bindle picked up the paper. The spot indicated was the column headed "Wanted." He read:

"Christian Home wanted by a single gentleman, chapel-goer, temperance, quiet, musical, home-comforts, good-cooking, moderate terms. References given and required. Apply Lonely, c/o *The Gospel Sentinel*."

Bindle looked up from the paper at Mrs. Bindle.

"Well?" she challenged.

He turned once more to the paper and re-read the advertisement with great deliberation, forgetful of his fast-cooling plate.

"Well," remarked Bindle judicially, "this is a Christian 'ome right enough, plenty of soap an' water, with an 'ymn or two thrown in so as you won't notice the smell. Cookin's good likewise, an' as for 'ome-comforts, if we ain't got 'em, who 'as? There's sweepin' an' scrubbin' an' mats everywhere,

mustn't smoke in the parlour unless you 'appen to be the chimney, and of course there's you, the biggest 'ome-comfort of all. Yes! Mrs. B.," he concluded, shaking his head with gloomy conviction, "we got enough 'ome comforts to start a colony, I'm always trippin' over 'em."

"Eat your pie," snapped Mrs. Bindle, "perhaps it'll stop your mouth."

Bindle applied himself to the apple-pie with obvious relish, glancing from time to time at *The Gospel Sentinel*.

"Well?" demanded Mrs. Bindle once more.

"I was jest wonderin'," said Bindle.

"What about?"

"I was jest wonderin'," continued Bindle, "why we want a lodger, us like two love-birds a-singin' an' a-cooin' all day long."

"What about the housekeeping?" demanded Mrs. Bindle aggressively.

"The 'ousekeepin'?" enquired Bindle innocently.

"Yes, the housekeeping," repeated Mrs. Bindle with rising wrath, as if Bindle were directly responsible, "the housekeeping, I said, and food going up like – like – "

"'Ell," suggested Bindle helpfully.

"How am I to make both ends meet?" she demanded.

"I suppose they must meet?" he enquired tentatively.

"Don't be a fool, Bindle!" was the response.

"I ain't goin' to be a fool with that there lodger 'angin' about," retorted Bindle. "If 'e starts a-playin' about wi' my 'Ome Comfort, 'e'll find 'is jaw closed for alterations. I'm a desperate feller where my 'eart's concerned. There was poor 'ole 'Orace only the other day. Jest back from the front 'e was."

Bindle paused and shook his head mournfully.

"Horace who?" demanded Mrs. Bindle.

"'Orace Gaze," replied Bindle. "Nice cove too, 'e is."

"'Ullo! 'Orace,' I calls out, when I see 'im jest a-comin' from the station with all 'is kit."

"'Cheerio,' says 'e."

"'The missis'll be glad to see you,' I says."

"'She don't know I'm 'ere yet,' 'e says."

"'Didn't you send 'er a telegram?' I asks."

"'Telegram!' says 'e, 'not 'arf."

"'Why not?"

"'Lord! ain't you a mug, Joe!' says 'e; 'you don't catch me a-trustin' women, I got my own way, I 'ave,' says 'e, mysterious like."

"'What is it?' I asks 'im."

"'Well, I goes 'ome,' says 'e, "er thinkin' me at the front, rattles my key in the front door, then I nips round to the back, an' catches the blighter every time!"

"I won't listen to your disgusting stories," said Mrs. Bindle angrily.

"Disgustin'?" said Bindle incredulously.

"You've a lewd mind, Bindle."

"Well, well!" remarked Bindle, "it's somethink to 'ave a mind at all, it's about the only thing they don't tax as war profits."

"You'll have to be careful when the lodger comes." There was a note of grim warning in Mrs. Bindle's voice.

"Lodgers ain't to be trusted," said Bindle oracularly. "If you expects 'em to pinch your money-box, orf they goes with your missis; an' if you're 'opin' it'll be your missis, blowed if they don't pouch the canary. No!" he concluded with conviction, "lodgers ain't to be depended on."

"That's right, go on; but you're not hurting me," snapped Mrs. Bindle, rising to clear away. "You always oppose me, perhaps you'll tell me how I'm to feed you on your wages." She stood, her hands on her hips, looking down upon Bindle with challenge in her eye.

"My wages! why, I'm gettin' – "

"Never mind what you're getting," interrupted Mrs. Bindle. "You eat all you get and more, and you know it. Look at the price of food, and me waiting in queues half the day to get it for you. You're not worth it," she concluded with conviction.

"I ain't, Mrs. B.," replied Bindle good-humouredly, "I ain't worth 'alf the love wot women 'ave 'ad for me."

Mrs. Bindle sniffed. "You always was fond of your food," she continued, as if reluctant to let slip a topic so incontrovertible.

"I was, Mrs. B.," agreed Bindle; "an' wot is more I probably always shall be as long as you go on cookin' it. Wot I shall do when you go orf with the lodger, I don't know," and Bindle wagged his head from side to side in utter despondency.

Mrs. Bindle made an unprovoked attack upon the kitchen fire.

"Well," said Bindle after a pause, "if it's rations or a lodger, I suppose it's got to be a lodger," and he drew a deep sigh of resignation. He turned once more to *The Gospel Sentinel*. "Musical, too, ain't 'e," he continued. "I wonder wot 'e plays, the jews' 'arp or a drum? Seems a rare sport 'e does, chapel-goer, temperance, quiet, musical, fond of 'ome-comforts, good cookin'; an' don't want to pay much; regular blood I should call 'im."

"He's coming to-night to see the place," Mrs. Bindle announced, "and don't you go and make me feel ashamed. You'd better keep out of the room."

"Ow could you!" cried Bindle reproachfully, as he proceeded to light his pipe. "Me – "

"Don't do that!" snapped Mrs. Bindle.

Bindle regarded her over the flaming match with eyebrows raised interrogatingly.

"Perhaps he doesn't smoke," she explained.

"But I ain't goin' to give up tobacco," said Bindle with decision. "'Oly Angels! me with a wife an a lodger an' no pipe!"

He looked about him as if in search of sympathy. Then turning to Mrs. Bindle, he demanded:

"You mean to say I got to give up smokin' for a lodger!" Indignation had smoothed out the wrinkles round his eyes and stilled the twitchings at the corners of his mouth.

"It doesn't matter after he's here," Mrs. Bindle responded sagely.

Slowly the set-expression vanished from Bindle's face; the wrinkles and twitches returned, and he breathed a sigh of elaborate relief.

"Mrs. B.," he said admiringly, "you 'aven't lived for nineteen years with your awful wedded 'usband, lovin', 'onourin' an' obeyin' 'im – I don't think – without learnin' a thing or two." He winked knowingly.

"Yes," he continued, apparently addressing a fly upon the ceiling, "we'll catch our lodger first an' smoke 'im afterwards, all of which is good business. Funny 'ow religion never seems to make you too simple to – "

Bindle was interrupted by a knocking at the outer-door. Mrs. Bindle performed a series of movements with amazing celerity. She removed and folded her kitchen-apron, placing it swiftly in the dresser-drawer, gave a hasty glance in the looking-glass over the mantelpiece to assure herself that all was well with her personal appearance and, finally, slipped into the parlour to light the gas. She was out again in a second and, as she passed into the passage leading to the outer-door, she threw back at Bindle the one word "Remember," pregnant with as much meaning as that uttered two and a half centuries before in Whitehall.

"Nippy on 'er feet is Mrs. B.," muttered Bindle admiringly, as he listened intently to the murmur of voices and the sound of footsteps in the passage. Presently the parlour-door closed and then – silence.

Bindle fidgeted about the kitchen. He was curious as to what was taking place in the parlour and, above all, what manner of man the prospective lodger would turn out to be. He picked up the evening paper, endeavouring to read what the Austrian Prime Minister thought of the prospects of peace, what Berlin thought of the Austrian Prime Minister, what the Kaiser thought of the Almighty, and what the Almighty was permitted to think of the Kaiser. But international politics and the War had lost their interest. Bindle was conscious that he was on the eve of a crisis in his home life.

"Ow the injiarubber ostridge can a cove read when 'e ain't smokin'?" he muttered discontentedly as he paused to listen. He had detected a movement in the parlour.

Yes; the door had been opened. There was again the murmur of voices, steps along the passage and, finally, the sound of the outer-door closing. A moment later Mrs. Bindle entered.

Bindle looked up expectantly; but remembering that curiosity was the last thing calculated to open Mrs. Bindle's set lips, he became engrossed in his paper.

Mrs. Bindle seated herself opposite to him and, smoothing her skirt, "folded 'er 'ands on 'er supper," as Bindle had once expressed it.

"He's coming Monday," she proclaimed with the air of one announcing an event of grave national importance.

"Does 'e smoke?" enquired Bindle anxiously.

"He does not," replied Mrs. Bindle with undisguised satisfaction; "but," she added, as if claiming for some hero the virtue of self-abnegation, "he doesn't object to it – in moderation," she added significantly.

"Well, that's somethink," admitted Bindle as he proceeded to light his long-neglected pipe. "There was pore 'ole Alf Gorley wot beer made sick; but 'e used to like to see other coves with a skinful."

"Don't be disgusting, Bindle," snapped Mrs. Bindle, piqued that his apparent lack of interest in the lodger gave her no opportunity of imparting the information she was bursting to divulge.

"Wot's disgustin'?" demanded Bindle.

"Him, watching men making beasts of themselves," retorted Mrs. Bindle.

"Them makin' beasts o' themselves!" Bindle exclaimed. "If you'd ever seen Alf after 'alf a pint o' beer, you wouldn't 'ave said it was them wot was makin' beasts o' –"

"Mr. Hearty will like him," interrupted Mrs. Bindle, unable longer to keep off the subject of the lodger. Mr. Hearty had married Mrs. Bindle's sister, and had become a prosperous greengrocer.

"'Earty like Alf! 'Old me, 'Orace!" cried Bindle.

"I meant Mr. Gupperduck," said Mrs. Bindle with dignity.

"Mr. Wot-a-duck!" Bindle cried, his interest too evident for concealment.

"Mr. Josiah Gupperduck," repeated Mrs. Bindle with unction. "That is his name."

Bindle whistled, a long low sound of joy and wonder. "Well, I'm damned!" he exclaimed.

"Don't you swear before me, Joseph Bindle," cried Mrs. Bindle angrily; "for I won't stand it."

"Gupperduck!" repeated Bindle with obvious enjoyment. "Sounds like a patent mackintosh."

"Oh! you may laugh," said Mrs. Bindle, drawing her lips, "you may laugh; but he'll be company for me. He plays too." She could no longer restrain her desire to tell all she knew about Mr. Gupperduck.

"Is it the jew's 'arp, or the drum wot 'e plays?" enquired Bindle presently.

"It's neither," replied Mrs. Bindle, "it's the accordion."

Bindle groaned. Mentally he visualised Mr. Hearty's hymn-singing Sunday evenings, plus Mr. Gupperduck and his accordion.

"Well, well!" he remarked philosophically, "I suppose we're none of us perfect."

"He's a very good man, an' he's goin' to join our chapel," announced Mrs. Bindle with satisfaction.

Bindle groaned again. "'Earty, an' Mrs. B., an' Ole Buttercup," he muttered. "Joe Bindle, you'll be on the saved-bench before you know where you are"; and rising he went out, much to the disappointment of Mrs. Bindle, who was prepared to talk "lodger" until bed-time.

To Bindle the lodger was something between a convention and an institution. He was a being around whom a vast tradition had accumulated. In conjunction with the mother-in-law he was, "on the halls," the source from which all humour flowed. His red nose, umbrella and bloater were ageless.

He was a sower of discord in other men's houses, waxing fat on the produce of a stranger's labour. He would as cheerfully go off with his landlord's wife for ever, as with the unfortunate man's shirt or trousers for a few hours, thus losing him a day's work.

Nemesis seemed powerless to dog the footsteps of the lodger, retribution was incapable of tracking him down. He was voracious of appetite, prolific of explanation, eternally on the brink of affluence, for ever in the slough of debt.

He was a prince of parasites, a master of optimism, a model of obtuseness, he could achieve more, and at less cost to himself, than a Gypsy. He was as ancient as the hills, as genial as the sunshine, as cheerful as an expectant relative at the death-bedside of wealth. He was unthinkable, unforgettable, unejectable, living on all men for all time.

Nations rose and declined, kings came and went, emperors soared and fell; but the lodger stayed on.

Bindle looked forward to the coming of Mr. Gupperduck with keen interest. Since the evening of his call, Mrs. Bindle had become uncommunicative.

"Wot's 'e do?" Bindle had enquired.

"He's engaged upon the Lord's work," she had replied, and proved unamenable to all further interrogation.

On the Monday Bindle was home from work early, only to be informed that Mr. Gupperduck would not arrive until eight o'clock.

"Now you just be careful what you say, Bindle," Mrs. Bindle had admonished him as she busied herself with innumerable saucepans upon the stove.

"Don't you be nervous, Mrs. B.," he reassured her, sniffing the savoury air with keen anticipation, "there ain't nothink wrong with my conversation once I gets goin'. Wot about drink?" he demanded as he unhooked from the dresser the blue and white jug with the crimson butterfly just beneath the spout.

"He's temperance," replied Mrs. Bindle with unction.

"Well, I 'ope 'e looks it," was Bindle's comment as he went out.

When time permitted, Bindle's method of fetching the supper-beer was what he described as "'alf inside and 'alf in the jug," which meant that he spent half an hour in pleasant converse with congenial spirits at The Yellow Ostrich.

When he returned to Fenton Street, Mr. Gupperduck had arrived. Depositing the jug upon the table with deliberation, Bindle turned to welcome the guest.

"Pleased to see you, Mr. Gutter – " He paused, the name had momentarily escaped him.

"Gupperduck, Mr. Josiah Gupperduck," volunteered the lodger.

"It ain't easy, is it?" said Bindle cheerfully. "Must 'ave caused you a rare lot o' trouble, a name like that."

Mr. Gupperduck eyed him disapprovingly. He was a small, thin man, with a humourless cast of face, large round spectacles, three distinct wisps of overworked hair that failed to conceal his baldness, a short brown beard that seemed to stand out straight from his chin, and a red nose. His upper lip was bare, save for a three days' growth of bristles.

"Looks like a owl wot's been on the drink," was Bindle's mental comment. "You can read 'is 'ole 'istory in the end of 'is nose."

"Been a pleasant day," remarked Bindle conversationally, quite forgetful that it had rained continuously since early morning.

"Pleasant!" interrogated Mr. Gupperduck.

Bindle suddenly remembered. "For the ducks, I mean," he said; then with inspiration added, "not for Gupperducks."

"Bindle!" admonished Mrs. Bindle. "You forget yourself."

"Oh, don't mind me, Mr. G.," said Bindle; "there ain't no real 'arm in me."

Bindle proceeded to put "an 'ead on the beer." This he did by pouring it into the glass from a distance of fully a yard and with astonishing accuracy. Catching Mr. Gupperduck's eye, he winked.

"Can't get an 'ead like that on lemonade," he remarked cheerfully.

The atmosphere was constrained. Mr. Gupperduck was tired and hungry, Bindle was hungry without being tired, and Mrs. Bindle was grimly prepared for the worst.

"Well, 'ere's long legs to the baby!" cried Bindle, raising his glass and drinking thirstily.

Mrs. Bindle cast a swift glance at Mr. Gupperduck, who gazed at Bindle wonderingly over the top of the spoon he was raising to his mouth.

The meal continued in silence. Bindle was hypnotised by Mr. Gupperduck's ears. They stood out from each side of his head like sign-boards, as if determined that nothing should escape them.

After a time Mr. Gupperduck began to show signs that the first ardour of his appetite had been appeased.

"If it ain't a rude question, mister," began Bindle, "might I ask wot's your job?"

"I'm in the service of the Lord," replied Mr. Gupperduck in a harsh tone.

"Trade union wages?" queried Bindle with assumed innocence.

"Bindle!" admonished Mrs. Bindle, "behave yourself."

"I am a sower of the seed," said Mr. Gupperduck pompously and with evident self-satisfaction.

"Well, personally myself," said Bindle, "I ain't much belief in them allotments. You spend all your time in diggin', gettin' yourself in an 'ell of a mess, an' then somebody comes along an' pinches your bloomin' vegetables."

"I refer to the spiritual seed," said Mr. Gupperduck. "I preach the word of God, the peace that passeth all understanding."

Bindle groaned inwardly, and silence fell once more over the board.

"Mrs. Bindle," said Mr. Gupperduck at length, "you have given me a most excellent supper."

Mrs. Bindle's lips became slightly visible.

"The Lord shall feed his flock," remarked Mr. Gupperduck apropos of nothing in particular, "and –"

"'E keeps a few little pickin's for 'Is Gupperducks," flashed Bindle.

"Bindle!" Mrs. Bindle glanced across at Mr. Gupperduck. The two then entered into a conversation upon the ways of the Lord, about which they both seemed to possess vast stores of the most intimate information. From their conversation Bindle gathered that Mr. Gupperduck was a lecturer in the parks, mission-halls and the like, being connected with the Society for the Suppression of Atheism.

"And what are the tenets of your spiritual faith, Mr. Bindle?" Mr. Gupperduck suddenly turned and addressed himself to Bindle.

"Wot's my wot?" enquired Bindle with corrugated forehead.

"He's a blasphemer, Mr. Gupperduck, I'm sorry to say," volunteered Mrs. Bindle.

Mr. Gupperduck regarded Bindle as if Mrs. Bindle had said he was the "Missing Link."

"Mr. Bindle," he said earnestly, "have you ever thought of the other world?"

"Thought of the other world!" Bindle exclaimed. "If you lived with Mrs. B., you wouldn't 'ave much time for thinkin' of anythink else. She's as dotty about 'eaven as an 'en over a 'shop-egg,' an' as for 'Earty, that's my brother-in-law, well, 'Earty gets my goat when 'e starts about 'eaven an' angels."

"I fear you speak lightly of serious things, Mr. Bindle," said Mr. Gupperduck harshly. "Think of when the trumpet shall sound incorruptible and – !"

"Think o' when the all-clear bugle sounds in Fulham," responded Bindle.

Mr. Gupperduck looked at Mrs. Bindle in horror.

"I'm a special, you know," explained Bindle. "I got to be on the listen for that bugle after the air-raids. My! don't they jest nip back into their little beds again, feelin' 'ow brave they've all been."

Mr. Gupperduck seemed to come to the conclusion that Bindle was hopeless. For the next half-hour he devoted himself to conversing with Mrs. Bindle about "the message" he was engaged in delivering.

"You plays, don't you?" enquired Bindle, as Mr. Gupperduck rose.

"I am very fond of my accordion," replied Mr. Gupperduck.

"I suppose you couldn't give us a tune?" ventured Bindle.

"Not to-night, Mr. Bindle," said Mr. Gupperduck. "I have a lot to do to-morrow." Then, as if suddenly remembering his pose, he added, "There is the Lord's work to be done on the morrow, and His servant hath need of rest."

Bindle stared. Mrs. Bindle regarded her lodger with admiration tinged with awe. When Mr. Gupperduck could not call to mind an appropriate passage from the Scriptures, he invented one.

"I'm sorry," remarked Bindle, as Mr. Gupperduck moved towards the door. "I wanted you to play a thing I picked up at The Granville the other night. It was a rare good song, 'If You Squeeze Me Tighter, Jimmie, I Shall Scream.' I can whistle it if – " but Mr. Gupperduck was gone.

Then the storm burst.

"You're a disgrace to any respectable 'ome, Joseph Bindle, that you are," Mrs. Bindle broke out as soon as Mr. Gupperduck's bedroom door was heard to close.

"Me?" enquired Bindle in obvious surprise.

"What must he think of us?" demanded Mrs. Bindle. "You with your lewd and blasphemous talk."

"Wot 'ave I done now?" enquired Bindle in an injured tone.

"Talkin' about babies' legs, and – and – oh! you make me ashamed, you do." Mrs. Bindle proceeded to bang away the supper things.

"Steady on," admonished Bindle, "or you'll 'ave the Duck out o' bed."

"What must 'e think of me with such an 'usband?" Mrs. Bindle's aitches were dropping from her under the stress of her pent-up feelings.

"Well! speakin' for myself," said Bindle, relighting his pipe, which had gone out, "he most likely thinks you're an uncommon lucky woman. You see, Lizzie," Bindle continued evenly, "you're fickle, that's wot's the matter with you."

Mrs. Bindle paused in the act of pouring water over the piled-up dishes in the sink.

"As soon as you sees another cove wot takes your fancy, you sort o' loses your taste for your own 'usband."

Bindle seated himself at the table and spread out the evening paper.

"First it's 'Earty, then it's Gupperduck. Now I ask you, Mrs. B., wot would you think if I was to say we must 'ave a woman lodger? Now I ask you!"

"That's quite different," cried Mrs. Bindle angrily. "Mr. Gupperduck is – "

"A sort o' prayer-'og in trousers, judgin' from 'is talk," interrupted Bindle. "Me an' 'im ain't goin' to fall out, though you did give 'im a extra dose o' gravy; at the same time we ain't goin' to fall in love with each other. If 'e pays 'is rent an' behaves quiet like, then I 'aven't nothink to say, for wot's an 'ome without a lodger; but it's got to be 'ands orf my missis, see!"

"Bindle, you're a dirty-minded beast," retorted Mrs. Bindle, snapping her jaws viciously.

"That may, or may not be," replied Bindle as he walked towards the door on his way to bed; "but if you an' 'im start givin' each other the glad-eye, then I'm 'urt in my private feelin's, an' when I'm 'urt in my private feelin's, I'm 'ot stuff," and he winked gravely at the text on the kitchen wall containing some home truths for the transgressor.

CHAPTER II

A DOWNING STREET SENSATION

"Me ride eight miles on an 'orse!" exclaimed Bindle, looking up at the foreman in surprise. "An' who's a-comin' to 'old me on?"

Bindle stood in the yard of Messrs. Empsom & Daley, cartage contractors, regarding a pair of burly cart-horses, ready-harnessed, with the traces thrown over their backs.

The foreman explained in the idiom adopted by foreman that "orders is orders."

"You can ride on top, run beside, or 'ang on be'ind; but you got to be at Merton at twelve o'clock," he said. "We jest 'ad a telephone message that a van's stranded this side o' Merton, 'orses broken down, an' you an' Tippitt 'ave got to take these 'ere and deliver the goods. Then take the van where you're told, an' bring back them ruddy 'orses 'ere, an' don't you forget it."

Bindle scratched his head through the blue and white cricket cap he habitually wore. Horses had suddenly assumed for him a new significance. With elaborate intentness he examined the particular animal that had been assigned to him.

"Wot part d'you sit on, ole son?" he enquired of Tippitt, a pale, weedy youth, with a thin dark moustache that curled into the corners of his mouth. Tippitt's main characteristic was that he always had a cigarette either stuck to his lip or behind his ear. Sometimes both.

"On 'is tail," replied Tippitt laconically, his cigarette wagging up and down as he spoke.

"Sit on 'is wot?" cried Bindle, walking round to the stern of his animal and examining the tail with great attention. "Sit on 'is wot?"

"On 'is tail," repeated Tippitt without manifesting any interest in the conversation. "Right back on 'is 'aunches," he added by way of explanation; "more comfortable."

"Oh!" said Bindle, relieved, "I see. Pity you can't say wot you mean, Tippy, ain't it? Personally, meself, I'd sooner sit well up, so as I could put me arms round 'is neck. Hi! Spotty!" he called to an unprepossessing stable-hand. "Bring a ladder."

"A wot?" enquired Spotty dully.

"A ladder," explained Bindle. "I got to mount this 'ere Derby winner."

Spotty strolled leisurely across the yard towards Bindle, and for a moment stood regarding the horse in a detached sort of way.

"I'll give you a leg up, mate," he said accommodatingly.

Bindle looked at the horse suspiciously and, seeing there were no indications of vice, at the same time realising that there was nothing else to be done, he acquiesced.

"Steady on, ole sport," he counselled Spotty. "Don't you chuck me clean over the other side."

With a dexterous heave, Spotty landed him well upon the animal's back. Bindle calmly proceeded to throw one leg over, sitting astride.

"Not that way," said Tippitt, "both legs on the near side."

"You can ride your nag wot way you like, Tippy," said Bindle; "but as for me, I likes to 'ave a leg each side. 'Ow the 'ell am I goin' to 'old on if I sit like a bloomin' lady. My Gawd!" he exclaimed, passing his hand along the backbone of the animal, "if I don't 'ave a cushion I shall wear through in two ticks. 'Ere, Spotty, give us a cloth o' some sort, then you can back me as a two-to-one chance."

Tippitt, more accustomed than Bindle to such adventures, vaulted lightly upon his animal, and led the way out of the yard. For some distance they proceeded at an ambling walk, which Bindle found in no way inconvenient. Just as they had entered the Fulham Road, where it branches off from the Brompton Road, an urchin gave Bindle's horse a flick on the flank with a stick, sending it into a ponderous trot, amidst the jangle and clatter of harness. Bindle clutched wildly at the collar.

"'Ere, stop 'im, somebody! 'Old 'im!" he yelled. "I touched the wrong button. Whoa, steady, whoa, ole iron!" he shouted. Then turning his head to one side he called out: "Tippy, Tippy, where the 'ell is the brake? For Gawd's sake stop 'im before 'e shakes me into a jelly!"

Tippitt's animal jangled up beside that on which Bindle was mounted, and both once more fell back into the ponderous lope at which they had started. With great caution Bindle raised himself into an upright position.

"I wonder wot made 'im do a thing like that," he said reproachfully. "Bruised me all over 'e 'as. I shan't be able to sit down for a month. 'Ere, stop 'im, Tippy. I'm gettin' orf."

Tippitt stretched out his hand and brought both horses to a standstill. Bindle slipped ungracefully over his animal's tail.

"You can 'ave 'im, Tippy, ole sport, I'm goin' to walk," he announced. "When I get tired o' walking, I'll get on a bus. I'll meet you at Wimbledon Common;" and Tippitt, his cigarette hanging loosely from a still looser lower lip, reached over, caught the animal's bridle and, without comment, continued on his way westward.

"Well, live 'an learn," mumbled Bindle to himself. "I don't care wot a jockey gets; but 'e earns it, every penny. Fancy an 'orse bein' as 'ard as that. Catch you up presently, Tippy," he cried. "Mind you don't fall orf," and Bindle turned into The Drag and Hounds "for somethink to take the bruises out," as he expressed it to himself.

"Catch me a-ridin' of an 'orse again without an air-cushion," he muttered as he came out of the public-bar wiping his mouth. He hailed a west-bound bus, and, climbing on the top and lighting his pipe, proceeded to enjoy the morning sunshine.

When Tippitt reached the extreme end of Wimbledon Common, Bindle rose from the grass by the roadside, where he had been leisurely smoking and enjoying the warmth.

"'Ad quite a pleasant little snooze, Tippy," he yawned, as he stretched his arms behind his head. "Wonder who first thought o' ridin' on an 'orse's back," he yawned. "As for me, I'd jest as soon ride on an 'and-saw."

They jogged along in the direction of Merton, Bindle walking beside the horses, Tippitt silent and apathetic, his cigarette still attached to his lower lip.

"You ain't wot I should call a chatty cove, Tippy," remarked Bindle conversationally; "but then," he added, "that 'as its points. If you don't open your mouth, no woman can't say you ever asked 'er to marry you, can she?"

"Married, mate!" Tippitt vouchsafed the information without expression or interest.

Bindle stood still and looked at him.

Tippitt unconcernedly continued on his way.

"Well, I'm damned!" remarked Bindle, as he continued after the horses. "Well, I'm damned! They'd get you if you was deaf an' dumb an' blind. Pore ole Tippy! no wonder 'e looks like that."

Just outside Merton they came upon a stranded pantechnicon. Drawn up in front of it was a motor-car containing two ladies.

"This the little lot?" enquired Bindle as they pulled up beside the vehicle, which bore the name of John Smith & Company, Merton.

"Are you from Empson & Daleys?" enquired the elder of the two ladies, a sallow-faced, angular woman with pince-nez.

"That's us, mum," responded Bindle.

"I suppose those are the horses," remarked the same lady, indicating the animals with an inclination of her head.

"You ain't got much to learn in the way o' guessing, mum," was Bindle's cheery response.

The lady eyed him disapprovingly. Her companion at the wheel smiled. She was younger. Bindle winked at her; but she froze instantly.

"The horses that were in this van were taken ill," said the lady.

"Wot, both together, mum!" exclaimed Bindle.

"Yes," replied the lady, looking at him sharply.

"Must 'ave been twins or conchies,"¹ was Bindle's explanation of the phenomenon. "If one o' Ginger's twins 'as the measles, sure as eggs the other'll get 'em the next day. That's wot makes Ginger so ratty."

Bindle walked up to the van and examined it, as if to assure himself that it was in no way defective.

"An' where are we to take it, mum?" he enquired.

"To Mr. Llewellyn John, Number 110, Downing Street," was the reply.

Bindle whistled. "'E ain't movin', is 'e, mum?"

"The van contains a presentation of carved-oak dining-room furniture," she added.

"An' very nice too," was Bindle's comment.

"Outside Downing Street," she continued, "you will be met by a lady who will give you the key that opens the doors of the van."

"Adn't we better take the key now, mum?" Bindle enquired.

"You'll do as you're told, please," was the uncompromising rejoinder.

"Right-o! mum," remarked Bindle cheerily. "Now then, Tippy, let's get these 'ere 'orses in. Which end d'you begin on?"

Tippitt and Bindle silently busied themselves in harnessing the horses to the pantehnicon.

"Now you won't make any mistake," said the lady when everything was completed. "Number 110, Downing Street, Mr. Llewellyn John."

"There ain't goin' to be no mistakes, mum, you may put your 'and on your 'eart," Bindle assured her.

"Cawfee money, mum?" enquired Tippitt. "It's 'ot." Tippitt never wasted words.

"Tippy, Tippy! I'm surprised at you!" Bindle turned upon his colleague reproachfully. "Only twice 'ave you spoke to-day, an' the second time's to beg. I'm sorry, mum," he said, turning to the lady. "It ain't 'is fault. It's jest 'abit."

The lady hesitated for a moment, then taking her purse from her bag, handed Bindle a two-shilling piece.

Tippitt eyed it greedily.

With a final admonition not to forget, the lady drove off.

Bindle looked at the coin, spat on it, and put it in his pocket.

"Funny thing 'ow a woman'll give a couple o' bob, where a man'll make it 'alf a dollar," he remarked.

"Wot about me?" enquired Tippitt.

"Wot about you, Tippy?" repeated Bindle. "Well, least said soonest mended. You can't 'elp it."

"But I asked 'er," persisted Tippitt.

"Ah! Tippy," remarked Bindle, "it ain't 'im wot asks; but 'im wot gets. 'Owever, you shall 'ave a stone-inger at the next stoppin' place. Your ole pal ain't goin' back on you, Tippy."

Without a word, Tippitt climbed up into the driver's seat, whilst Bindle clambered on to the tail-board, where he proceeded to fill his pipe with the air of a man for whom time has no meaning.

"Good job they ain't all like me," he muttered. "I likes a day in the country, now *and* then; but always! Not me." He struck a match, lighted his pipe and, with a sigh of contentment, composed himself to bucolic meditation.

One of the advantages of the moving-profession in Bindle's eyes was that it gave him hours of leisured ease, whilst the goods were in transit. "You can slack it like a Cuthbert," he would say. "All you 'as to do is to sit on the tail of a van an' watch the world go by —*some* life that."

¹ Conscientious objectors to military service.

Bindle was awakened from his contemplation of the hedges and the white road that ribboned out before his eyes by a man coming out of a gate. At the sight of the pantechicon he grinned and, with a jerk of his thumb, indicated the van as if it were the greatest joke in the world.

Bindle grinned back, although not quite understanding the cause of the man's amusement.

"Ot little lot that, mate," remarked the man, stepping off the kerb and walking beside the tailboard.

Bindle looked at him, puzzled at the remark.

"Wot exactly might you be meanin', ole son?" he enquired.

"Oh! come orf of it," said the man. "I won't tell your missis. Like a razzle myself sometimes," and he laughed, obviously amused at this joke.

Bindle slipped off the tail-board and joined the man, who had returned to the pavement.

"You evidently seen a joke wot's caught me on the blind side," he remarked casually.

"A joke," remarked the man; "a whole van-load of jokes, if you was to ask me."

"Well, p'raps you're right," remarked Bindle philosophically, "but if there's as many as all that, I should 'ave thought there'd 'ave been enough for two; but as I say, p'raps you're right. These ain't the times for givin' anythink away, although," he added meditatively, "I 'adn't 'eard of their 'avin' rationed jokes as well as meat and sugar. We shall be 'avin' joke-queues soon," he added. "You seem to be a sort of joke-'og, you do." Bindle turned and regarded his companion with interest.

"You mean to say you don't know wot's inside that there van?" enquired the man incredulously.

"Carved-oak dinin'-room furniture, I been told," replied Bindle indifferently.

The man laughed loudly. Then turned to Bindle. "You mean to say you don't know that van's full o' gals?" he demanded.

"Full o' wot?" exclaimed Bindle, coming to a dead stop. His astonishment was too obvious to leave doubt in the man's mind as to its genuineness.

"Gals an' women," he replied. "Saw 'em gettin' in down the road, out of motors. Dressed in white they was, with coloured sashes over their shoulders. Suffragettes, I should say. They didn't see me though," he added.

Bindle gave vent to a low, prolonged whistle as he resumed his walk.

"Old me, 'Orace!" he cried happily. "Wot 'ud Mrs. B. say if she knew." Suddenly he paused again, and slapped his knee.

"Well, I'm damned!" he cried. "A raid, of course."

The man looked anxiously up at the blue of the sky.

"It's all right," said Bindle reassuringly. "My mistake; it was a bird."

A few minutes later the man turned off from the main road.

"Hi! Tippy," Bindle hailed, "don't you forget that stone-ger at the next dairy."

A muttered reply came from Tippitt. Five minutes later he drew up outside a public-house on the outskirts of Wimbledon. Bindle took the opportunity of climbing up on the top of the van, where he gained the information he required. Every inch of the roof was perforated!

"Air-'oles," he muttered with keen satisfaction; "air-'oles, as I'm a miserable sinner," and he clambered down and entered the public-bar, where he convinced Tippitt that his mate could be trusted with money.

When Bindle had drained to the last drop his second pewter, his mind was made up.

"Number 110, Downing Street," he muttered. "White dresses an' coloured sashes. That's it. Well, Joe Bindle, you can't save the bloomin' British Empire from destruction; but you can save the Prime Minister from 'avin' 'is afternoon nap spoilt, leastwise you can try.

"I'm a-goin' for a little stroll, Tippy," he remarked, as he walked towards the door. "Back in ten minutes. If you gets lonely, order another pint an' put it down to me."

"Right-o! mate," replied Tippitt.

Bindle walked along Wimbledon High Street and turned into an oil-shop.

"D'you keep lamp black?" he enquired of the young woman behind the counter.

"Yes," she replied. "How much do you want, we sell it in packets?"

"Let's 'ave a look at a packet," said Bindle.

When he had examined it, he ordered two more.

"Startin' a minstrel troupe," he confided to the young woman.

"But you want burnt cork," she said practically; "lamp black's greasy. You'll never get it off."

"That's jest why I want it," remarked Bindle with a grin.

The young woman looked at him curiously and, when he had purchased a pea-puffer as well, she decided that he was a harmless lunatic; but took the precaution of testing the half-crown he tendered by ringing it on the counter.

"Shouldn't be surprised if we was to 'ave an 'eavy shower of rain in a few minutes," remarked Bindle loudly a few minutes later, as he rejoined Tippitt, who was engaged in watering the horses.

Tippitt looked at Bindle, his cigarette wagging. Then turning his eyes up to the cloudless sky in surprise, he finally reached the same conclusion as the young woman at the oil-shop.

"Now up you get, Tippy," admonished Bindle, "an' there's another drink for you at The Green Lion." Bindle knew his London.

As the pantechnicon rumbled heavily along by the side of Wimbledon Common, Bindle whistled softly to himself the refrain of "The End of a Happy Day."

Whilst Tippitt was enjoying his fourth pint that morning at The Green Lion, Bindle borrowed a large watering-can, which was handed up to him on the roof of the pantechnicon by a surprised barman. Bindle emptied the contents of one of the packets of lamp-black into the can, and started to stir it vigorously with a piece of twig he had picked up from the side of the Common. When the water had reluctantly absorbed the lamp-black to Bindle's entire satisfaction, he called out loudly:

"I knew we was goin' to 'ave a shower," and he proceeded to water the top of the pantechnicon. "Now I must put this 'ere tarpaulin over, or else the water'll get through them 'oles," he said.

He clearly heard suppressed exclamations as the water penetrated inside the van. Having emptied the can, he proceeded to drag the tarpaulin over the roof, leaving uncovered only a small portion in the centre.

The barman of The Green Lion had been watching Bindle with open-mouthed astonishment.

"What the 'ell are you up to, mate?" he whispered.

Bindle put his forefinger of the right hand to the side of his nose and winked mysteriously. Then going inside The Green Lion he, in a way that did not outrage the regulations that there should be no "treating," had Tippitt's tankard refilled, and called for another for himself.

"If you watch the papers," Bindle remarked to the barman, "I shouldn't be surprised if you was to see wot I was a-doin' on the top of that there van," and again he winked.

The barman looked from Bindle to Tippitt, then touching his forehead with a fugitive first finger, and glancing in the direction of Bindle, made it clear that another was prepared to support the diagnosis of the young woman at the oil-shop.

Bindle completed the journey on the top of the van, industriously occupied in puffing lamp-black through the holes in the roof. His method was to dip the end of the pea-puffer into the packet, then insert it in one of the holes and give a sharp puff. This he did half a dozen times in quick succession. Then he would pause for a few minutes to allow the lamp-black to settle. He argued that if he puffed it all in at once, it would in all probability choke the occupants.

By the time they turned from the King's Road into Ebury Street, Bindle's task was accomplished – the lamp-black was exhausted.

"Victoria Station," he called out loudly to Tippitt. "Shan't be long now, mate. Another shower a-comin', better cover up these bloomin' 'oles," and he drew the tarpaulin over the rest of the roof. "Let 'em stoo a bit now," he muttered to himself. "That'll make 'em 'ot."

He had been conscious of suppressed coughing and sneezing from within, which he detected by placing his ear near the holes in the roof.

Opposite the Houses of Parliament, a lady came up to Bindle and handed him a key. "This is the key of the pantechnicon," she said loudly. "You are not to undo it until you reach Number 110, Downing Street. Do you understand?"

"Right-o!" remarked Bindle, "I got it."

"Now don't forget!" said the lady, and she disappeared swiftly in the direction of Victoria Street.

"No, I ain't goin' to forget," murmured Bindle to himself, "an' I shouldn't be surprised if there was others wot ain't goin' to forget either."

He watched the lady who had given him the key well out of sight, then slipping off the tail-board of the van he walked swiftly along Whitehall.

A few yards south of Downing Street, an inspector of police was meditatively contemplating the flow of traffic north and south.

Bindle went up to him. "Pretend that I'm askin' the way, sir. I'm most likely bein' watched. I got a van wot's supposed to contain carved-oak furniture for Mr. Llewellyn John, 110, Downing Street. I think it's full o' suffragettes goin' to raid 'im. You get your men round there, the van'll be up in two ticks. Now point as if you was showing me Downing Street."

The inspector was a man of quick decision and, looking keenly at Bindle, decided that he was to be trusted.

"Right!" he said, then extending an official arm, pointed out Downing Street to Bindle. "Don't hurry," he added.

"Right-o!" said Bindle. "Joseph Bindle's my name. I'm a special, Fulham district."

The inspector nodded, and Bindle turned back to the van. A moment later the inspector strolled leisurely through the archway leading to the Foreign Office.

"That's Downing Street on the left," shouted Bindle to Tippitt as he came up, much to Tippitt's surprise. He was at a loss to account for many things that Bindle had done and said that day.

As they turned into Downing Street, Bindle was a little disappointed at finding only two constables; but he was relieved a moment later by the sight of the inspector to whom he had spoken, hurrying through the archway, leading from the Foreign Office.

"Where are you going to?" called out the inspector to Tippitt, taking no notice of Bindle.

Tippitt jerked his thumb in the direction of Bindle, who came forward at that moment.

"Number 110, Downing Street, sir," responded Bindle. "Some furniture for Mr. Llewellyn John."

"Right!" said the inspector loudly; "but you'll have to wait a few minutes until that motor-car has gone."

Bindle winked as a sign of his acceptance of the mythical motor-car and, drawing the key of the pantechnicon from his pocket, showed it to the inspector, who, by closing his eyes and slightly bending his head, indicated that he understood.

Tippitt had decided that everybody was mad this morning. The police inspector's reference to a motor-car outside Number 110, whereas his eyes told him that there was nothing there but roadway and dust, had seriously undermined his respect for the Metropolitan Police Force. However, it was not his business. He was there to drive the horses, who in turn drew a van to a given spot; there his responsibility ended.

After a wait of nearly ten minutes, the inspector re-appeared. "It's all clear now," he remarked. "Draw up."

As the pantechnicon pulled up in front of Number 110, Bindle glanced up at the house and saw Mr. Llewellyn John looking out of one of the first-floor windows. He had evidently been apprised of what was taking place.

Bindle noticed that the doors of Number 110 and 111 were both ajar. He was, however, a little puzzled at the absence of police. The two uniformed constables had been reinforced by three others, and there were two obviously plain-clothes men loitering about.

"Now then, Tippy, get ready to lend me a 'and with this 'ere furniture," called out Bindle as he proceeded to insert the key in the padlock that fastened the doors of the van.

Tippitt, who had climbed down, was standing close to the tail-board facing the doors.

With a quick movement Bindle released the padlock from the hasp and, lifting the bar, stepped aside with an agility that was astonishing.

"Votes for Women! Votes for Women!! Votes for Women!!!"

Suddenly the placid quiet of Downing Street was shattered. The doors of the pantechnicon were burst open and thrown back upon their hinges, where they shivered as if trembling with fear. From the interior of the van poured such a stream of humanity as Downing Street had never before seen.

Following Bindle's lead the inspector had taken the precaution of stepping aside; but Tippitt, unconscious that the van contained anything more aggressive than carved-oak furniture, was in the direct line of exit. At the moment the doors flew open he was in the act of removing his coat and, with his arms entangled in its sleeves, sat down with a suddenness that caused his teeth to rattle and his cigarette to fall from his lower lip.

Synchronising with the opening of the doors of the pantechnicon was a short, sharp blast of a police whistle. The effect was magical. Men seemed to pour into Downing Street from everywhere: from the archway leading to the Foreign Office, up the steps from Green Park, from Whitehall and out of Numbers 110 and 111. Plain-clothes and uniformed police seemed to spring up from everywhere; but no one took any notice of the fall of Tippitt. All eyes were fixed upon the human avalanche that was pouring from the inside of the pantechnicon. For once in its existence the Metropolitan Police Force was rendered helpless with astonishment. Women they had expected, women they were prepared for; but the extraordinary flood of femininity that cascaded out of the van absolutely staggered them.

There were short women and tall women, stout women and thin women, young women and – well, women not so young. The one thing they had in common was lamp-black. It was smeared upon their faces, streaked upon their garments; it had circled their eyes, marked the lines of their mouths, had collected round their nostrils. The heat inside the pantechnicon had produced the necessary moisture upon the fair faces and with this the lamp-black had formed an unholy alliance. Hats were awry, hair was dishevelled, frocks were limp and bedraggled.

The cries of "Votes for Women" that had heralded the triumphant outburst from the van froze upon their lips as the demonstrators caught sight of one another. Each gazed at the others in mute astonishment, whilst Tippitt, from his seat in the middle of the roadway, stared, wondering in a stupid way whether what he saw was the heat, or the five pints of ale he had consumed at Bindle's expense during the morning.

The inspector looked at Bindle curiously, and Bindle looked at the inspector with self-satisfaction, whilst the constables discovered that their unhappy anticipation of a rough and tumble with women, a thing they disliked, had been turned into a most delectable comedy.

At the first-floor window Mr. Llewellyn John watched the scene with keen enjoyment.

For a full minute the women stood gazing from one to the other in a dazed fashion. Finally one with stouter heart than the rest shouted "Votes for Women! This is a woman's war!"

But there was no answering cry from the ranks. Slowly it dawned upon each and every woman that in all probability she was looking just as ridiculous as those she saw about her. One girl produced a small looking-glass from a hand-bag. She gave one glance into it, and incontinently went into hysterics, flopping down where she stood.

The public, conscious that great events were happening in Downing Street, poured into the narrow thoroughfare, and the laughter denied the official police by virtue of discipline was heard on every hand.

"Christy Minstrels, ain't they?" enquired one youth of another with ponderous humour.

It was at the moment that one of them had raised a despairing cry of "Votes for Women," and had received no support.

"Votes for Women!" remarked one man shrewdly. "Soap for Women! is what they want."

"Fancy comin' out like that, even in wartime," commented another.

"Ow'd they get like that?" enquired a third.

"Oh, you never know them suffragettes," remarked a fourth sagely; "they're always out for doing something different from what's been done before."

"Well, they done it this time," commented a little man with grey whiskers. "Enough to make Gawd 'Imself ashamed of us, them women is. Bah!" and he spat contemptuously.

The inspector felt that the time for action had arrived. Walking up to the unhappy group of twenty, he remarked in his most official tone:

"You cannot stand about here, you must be moving on."

"Moving on; but where?" They looked into each other's eyes mutely. Suddenly an idea seemed to strike them and they turned instinctively to re-enter the van; but Bindle had anticipated this manœuvre, and had carefully closed, barred and padlocked the doors.

The inspector nodded approval. He had formed a very high opinion of Bindle's powers, although greatly puzzled by the whole business. At a signal from their superior, a number of uniformed constables formed up behind the forlorn band of females, several of whom were in tears.

"Move along there, please," they chorused, dexterously splitting up the group into smaller groups, and, finally, into ones and twos. Thus they were herded towards Whitehall.

"Will you call some cabs, please," said she who was obviously the leader. The inspector shook his head, whereat the woman smacked the face of the nearest constable, obviously with the intention of being arrested. Again the inspector shook his head. He had made up his mind that there should be no arrests that day. Nemesis had taken a hand in the game, and the inspector recognized in her one who is more powerful than the Metropolitan Police Force.

Slowly amidst the jeers of the crowd the twenty women were shepherded into Whitehall.

"Oh, please get me a taxi," appealed a little blonde woman with a hard mouth and what looked like a dark black moustache. "I cannot go about like this."

Suddenly one of their number was taken with shrieking hysterics. She sat down suddenly, giving vent to shriek after shriek, and beating a tattoo with the heels of her shoes upon the roadway; but no one took any notice of her and soon she rose and followed the others.

In Whitehall frantic appeals were made to drivers of taxicabs and conductorettes of omnibuses. None would accept such fares.

"It 'ud take a month to clean my bloomin' cab after you'd been in it," shouted one man derisively. "What jer want to get yourself in such a dirty mess for?"

"Go 'ome and wash the baby," shouted another.

Nowhere did the Black and White Raiders find sympathy or assistance. Two of the leaders of the Suffragette Movement, who happened to be passing down Whitehall, were attracted by the crowd. On learning what had happened, and seeing the plight of the demonstrators, they continued on their way.

"This is war-time," one of them remarked to the other, "and they're disobeying the rules of the Association." With this they were left to their fate.

Some made for the Tube, others for the District Railway, whilst two sought out a tea-shop and demanded washing facilities; but were refused. The railway-stations were their one source of hope. For the next three hours passengers travelling to Wimbledon were astonished to see entering

the train forlorn and dishevelled women, whose faces were rendered hideous by smears of black, and whose white frocks, limp and crumpled, looked as if they had been used to clean machinery.

"A pleasant little afternoon's treat for you, sir," remarked Bindle to the inspector, when the last of the raiders had disappeared. "Mr. John seemed to enjoy it." Bindle indicated the first-floor window of Number 110, with a jerk of his thumb.

"Was that your doing?" enquired the inspector.

"Well," replied Bindle, "it was an' it wasn't," and he explained how it had all come about.

"And what am I goin' to do with this 'ere van?" he queried.

"Better run it round to 'the Yard,' then you can take home the horses," replied the inspector.

"Right-o!" said Bindle.

"By the way," added the inspector, "I'm coming round myself. I should like you to see Chief-Inspector Gunny."

Bindle nodded cheerily. "'Ullo, Tippy!" he cried, "knocked you down, didn't they?"

Tippitt grinned, he had thoroughly enjoyed the entertainment and bore no malice.

"That's why you got the watering-can, mate?" he remarked.

Bindle surveyed him with mock admiration.

"Now ain't you clever," he remarked. "Fancy you a-seein' that. There ain't no spots on you, Tippy," whereat Tippitt grinned again modestly.

That afternoon Bindle was introduced to the Famous Chief-Inspector Gunny of Scotland Yard, who, for years previously, had been the head of the department dealing with the suffragist demonstrations. He was a genial, large-hearted man, who had earned the respect, almost the liking of those whose official enemy he was. When he heard Bindle's story, he roared with laughter, and insisted that Bindle should himself tell about the Black and White Raiders to the Deputy-Commissioner and the Chief Constable. It was nearly four o'clock when Bindle left Scotland Yard, smoking a big cigar with which the Deputy-Commissioner had presented him.

Chief-Inspector Gunny's last words had been, "Well, Bindle, you've done us a great service. If at any time I can help you, let me know."

"Now I wonder wot 'e meant by that," murmured Bindle to himself. "Does it mean that I can 'ave a little flutter at bigamy, or that I can break 'Earty's bloomin' 'ead and not get pinched for it. Still," he remarked cheerfully, "it's been an 'appy day, a very 'appy day," and he turned in at The Feathers and ordered "somethink to wet this 'ere cigar."

CHAPTER III THE AIR-RAID

I

"There wasn't no 'ome life in England until the Kayser started a-droppin' bombs in people's back-yards," remarked Bindle oracularly. "Funny thing," he continued, "'ow everybody seemed to find out 'ow fond they was of settin' at 'ome because they was afraid o' goin' out."

Mr. Hearty looked at Mr. Gupperduck and Mr. Gupperduck looked at Mrs. Bindle. They required time in which to assimilate so profound an utterance.

Mr. Gupperduck had firmly established himself in the good graces of Mr. Hearty and the leaders of the Alton Road Chapel. He was a constant visitor at the Heartys', especially at meal times, and at the chapel he prayed with great fervour, beating all records as far as endurance was concerned.

"I don't agree with you," remarked Mr. Gupperduck at length, "I do not agree with you. The Scriptures say, 'Every man to his family.'"

Mr. Hearty looked gratefully at his guest. It was pleasant to find Bindle controverted.

"You know, Alf, you never been so much at 'ome," wheezed Mrs. Hearty, hitting her chest remorselessly. "You never go out on moonlight nights."

"You trust 'im," said Bindle. "'Earty an' the moon ain't never out together."

"We are told to take cover," said Mr. Hearty with dignity.

"An' wot about us pore fellers wot 'as to be out in it all?" demanded Bindle, looking down at his special constable's uniform.

"You should commend yourself to God," said Mr. Gupperduck piously. "He that putteth his trust in Him shall not be afraid."

"Ain't you afraid then when there's a raid on?" demanded Bindle.

"I have no fear of earthly things," replied Mr. Gupperduck, lifting his eyes to the ceiling.

"E's all Gupperduck an' camelflage, ain't 'e, Millikins?" whispered Bindle to his niece. Then aloud he said: "Well, Mrs. B. ain't like you! She's afraid like all the rest of us. I don't believe much in coves wot say they ain't afraid. You ask the boys back from France. You don't 'ear them a-sayin' they ain't afraid. They knows too much for that."

"There is One above who watches over us all, Joseph," said Mr. Hearty, emboldened to unaccustomed temerity by the presence of Mr. Gupperduck.

"Mr. Bindle," said Mr. Gupperduck, "our lives and our happiness are in God's hands, wherefore should we feel afraid?"

"Well, well!" remarked Bindle, with resignation, "you an' 'Earty beat me when it comes to pluck. When I'm out with all them guns a-goin', an' bombs a-droppin' about, I'd sooner be somewhere else, an' I ain't a-goin' to say different. P'raps it's because I'm an 'eathen."

"The hour of repentance should not be deferred," said Mr. Gupperduck. "It is not too late even now."

"It's no good," said Bindle decisively. "I should never be able to feel as brave as wot you are when there's a raid on."

"Oh ye of little faith!" murmured Mr. Gupperduck mournfully.

"Think of Daniel in the lions' den," said Mrs. Bindle. "And Jonah in the – er – interior of the whale," added Mr. Hearty with great delicacy.

"No," remarked Bindle, shaking his head with conviction, "I wasn't made for lions, or whales. I suppose I'm a bit of a coward."

"I don't feel brave when there's a raid, Uncle Joe," said Millie Hearty loyally. She had been a silent listener. "And mother isn't either, are you, mums?" she turned to Mrs. Hearty.

"It's my breath," responded Mrs. Hearty, patting her ample bosom. "It gets me here."

"That's because you don't go to chapel, Martha," said Bindle. "If you was to turn up there three times on Sundays you'd be as brave as wot Mr. Gupperduck is. Ain't that so?" he enquired, turning to Mr. Gupperduck.

"You're always sneering at the chapel," broke in Mrs. Bindle, without giving the lodger time to reply. "It doesn't do us any harm, whatever you may think."

"That's jest where you're wrong, Mrs. B.," remarked Bindle, settling himself down for a controversy. "I ain't got nothink to say against the chapel, if they'd only let you set quiet; but it's such an up an' down sort o' life. When you ain't kneelin' down a-askin' to be saved from wot you know you deserves, or kept from doin' wot you're nuts on doin', you're a-standin' up asingin' 'ymns about all sorts of uncomfortable things wot you says you 'opes to find in 'eaven."

"You have a jaundiced view of religion, Mr. Bindle," said Mr. Gupperduck ponderously. "A jaundiced view," he repeated, pleased with the phrase.

"Ave I really?" enquired Bindle anxiously. "I 'ope it ain't catchin'. No," he continued meditatively, "I wasn't meant for chapels. I seem to be able to think best about 'eaven when I'm settin' smokin' after supper, with Mrs. B. a-bangin' at the stove to remind me that I ain't there yet."

"Wot does me," he continued, "is that I never yet see any of your chapel coves 'appier for all your singin' an' prayin'. Why is it? Look at you three now! If you was goin' to be plucked and trussed to-morrow, you couldn't look more fidgety."

Instinctively each of the three looked at the other two. Mr. Gupperduck shook his head hopelessly.

"You don't understand, Joseph," murmured Mr. Hearty with mournful resignation.

"I can understand Ruddy Bill gettin' drunk," Bindle continued, "because 'e do look 'appy when 'e's got a skin-full; but I can't understand you a-wantin' to pray, 'Earty, I can't really. I only once see a lot o' religious people 'appy, an' that was when they got drunk by mistake. Lord, didn't they teach me an' ole 'Uggles things! 'E blushes like a gal when I mentions it. 'Uggles 'as a nice mind, 'e 'as."

"Well, I must be goin', 'Earty, in case them 'Uns come over to-night. You ought to be a special, 'Earty, there's some rare fine gals on Putney 'Ill."

"Do you think there'll be an air-raid to-night?" asked Mr. Gupperduck with something more than casual interest in his voice.

"May be," said Bindle casually, "may be not. Funny things, air-raids, they've changed a rare lot o' things," he remarked meditatively. "Once we used to want the moon to come out, sort o' made us think of gals and settin' on stiles. Mrs. B. was a rare one for moons and stiles, wasn't you, Lizzie?"

"Don't be disgusting, Bindle." There was anger in Mrs. Bindle's voice.

"Now," continued Bindle imperturbably, "no cove don't want to go out an' set on a stile a-'oldin' of a gal's 'and: not 'im. When 'is job's done, 'e starts orf for 'ome like giddy-o, an' you don't see 'is nose again till the next mornin'."

Bindle paused to wink at Mr. Hearty.

"If there's any gal now," he continued, "wot wants 'er 'and 'eld on moonlight nights, she'll 'ave to 'old it 'erself, or wait till peace comes."

"If you would only believe, Mr. Bindle," said Mr. Gupperduck earnestly, making a final effort at Bindle's salvation. "'If thou canst believe, all things are possible.' Ah!"

Mr. Gupperduck started into an upright position with eyes dilated as a loud report was heard.

"What was that?" he cried.

"That," remarked Bindle drily, as he rose and picked up his peaked cap, "is the signal for you an' 'Earty to put your trust in Gawd. In other words," he added, "it's a gun, 'im wot Fulham calls 'The Barker.'"

Bindle looked from Mr. Hearty, leaden-hued with fright, to Mr. Gupperduck, whose teeth were chattering, on to Mrs. Bindle, who was white to the lips.

"Well, I must be orf," he said, adjusting his cap upon his head at a rakish angle. "If I don't come back, Mrs. B., you'll be a widow, an' widows are wonderful things. Cheer-o! all."

Bindle turned and left the room, his niece Millie following him out into the passage.

"Uncle Joe," she said, clutching hold of his coat sleeve, "you will be careful, won't you?" Then with a little catch in her voice, she added, "You know you are the only Uncle Joe I've got."

And Bindle went out into the night where the guns thundered and the shrapnel burst in sinister white stabs in the sky, whilst over all brooded the Great Queen of the heavens, bathing in her white peace the red war of pigmies.

II

Two hours later Bindle's ring at the Heartys' bell was answered by Millie.

"Oh, Uncle Joe!" she cried joyfully, "I'm so glad you're back safe. Hasn't it been dreadful?" Her lower lip quivered a little.

"You ain't been frightened, Millikins, 'ave you?" enquired Bindle solicitously.

"A soldier's wife isn't afraid, Uncle Joe," she replied bravely. Millie's sweetheart, Charlie Dixon, was at the front.

"My! ain't we gettin' a woman, Millikins," cried Bindle, putting his arm affectionately round her shoulders and kissing her cheek loudly. "Everybody all right?" he enquired.

"Yes, I think so, Uncle Joe, but," she squeezed his arm, "I'm so glad you're back. I've been thinking of you all the time. Every time there was a big bang I – I wondered –"

"Well, well!" interrupted Bindle, "we ain't goin' to be down-'earted, are we? It's over now, you'll 'ear the 'All Clear' in a few minutes."

Bindle walked into the Heartys' parlour, where Mrs. Hearty was seated on the sofa half asleep.

"Ullo, Martha!" he cried.

"Ah! Joe," she said, "I'm glad you're back. I'm afraid there's been a lot of –" Her breath failed her, and she broke off into a wheeze.

Bindle looked about him curiously.

"Ullo! wot's 'appened to them three little cherubs?" he enquired.

Mrs. Hearty began to shake and wheeze with laughter, and Millie stood looking at Bindle.

"Wot's 'appened, Millikins?" he enquired. "Done a bunk, 'ave they?"

"They're – they're in the potato-cellar, Uncle Joe," said Millie without the ghost of a smile. Somehow it seemed to her almost like a reflection on her own courage that her father and aunt should have thought only of their personal safety.

Bindle slapped his leg with keen enjoyment. "Well, I'm blowed!" he cried, "if that ain't rich. Three people wot was talkin' about puttin' their trust in Gawd a-goin' into that little funk-'ole. Well, I'm blowed!"

"Don't laugh, Uncle Joe," began Millie, "I – I –" She broke off, unable to express what was in her mind.

"Don't you worry, Millikins," he replied as he moved towards the door. "I'd better go and tell 'em that it's all right."

Mr. Hearty's potato-cellar was reached through a trap-door flush with the floor of the shop.

With the aid of an electric torch, Bindle looked about him. His eyes fell on a large pair of scales, on which were weights up to 7 lbs. This gave him an idea. Carefully placing a box beside

the trap-door, he lifted the scales and weights in his arms and, with great caution, mounted on to the top of the box. Suddenly he let the scales and weights fall with a tremendous crash, full in the centre of the trap-door, at the same time giving vent to a shout. Millie came running in from the parlour.

"Oh! Uncle Joe, what has happened?" she cried. "Are you hurt?"

"It's all right, Millikins, knocked over these 'ere scales I did. Ain't I clumsy? 'Ush!"

Moans and cries could be distinctly heard from below.

"'Ere, 'elp me gather 'em up, Millikins. I 'ope I 'aven't broken the scales."

Having replaced the scales and weights on the counter, Bindle proceeded to pull up the trap-door.

"All clear!" he shouted cheerily.

There was no response, only a moaning from the extreme corner of the cellar.

"'Ere, come along, 'Earty. Wot d'you two mean by takin' my missis down into a cellar like that?"

"Is it gone?" quavered a voice that Bindle assumed must be that of Mr. Gupperduck.

"Is wot gone?" he enquired.

"The bomb," whispered the voice.

"Oh, come up, Gupperduck," said Bindle. "Don't play the giddy goat in the potato-cellar. Wot about you puttin' your trust in Gawd?"

There was a sound of movement below. A few moments later Mr. Gupperduck's face appeared within the radius of light. He had lost his spectacles and his upper set of false teeth. His hair was awry and his face distorted with fear. He climbed laboriously up the steps leading to the shop. He was followed by Mr. Hearty, literally yellow with terror.

"Wot 'ave you done with my missis?" demanded Bindle.

"She – she – she's down there," stuttered Mr. Gupperduck.

"Then you two jolly well go down and fetch 'er up, or I'll kick you down," cried Bindle angrily. "Nice sort of sports you are, leavin' a woman alone in an 'ole like that, after takin' er down there."

Mr. Hearty and Mr. Gupperduck looked at Bindle and then at each other. Slowly they turned and descended the ladder again. For some minutes they could be heard moving about below, then Mr. Hearty appeared with Mrs. Bindle's limp form clasped round the waist, whilst Mr. Gupperduck pushed from behind.

For one moment a grin flitted across Bindle's features, then, seeing Mrs. Bindle's pathetic plight, his manner changed.

"'Ere, Millikins, get some water," he cried. "Your Aunt Lizzie's fainted."

Between them they half-carried, half-dragged Mrs. Bindle into the parlour, where she was laid upon the sofa, vacated by Mrs. Hearty. Her hands were chafed, water dabbed upon her forehead, and a piece of brown paper burned under her nose by Mrs. Hearty.

She had not lost consciousness; but stared about her in a vague, half-dazed fashion.

Mr. Hearty and Mr. Gupperduck, who had retrieved his false teeth, seemed thoroughly ashamed of themselves. It was Mr. Hearty who suggested that Mrs. Bindle should spend the night with them, as she was not in a fit condition to go home.

As he spoke, the "All Clear" signal rang out joyfully upon the stillness without, two long-drawn-out notes that told of another twenty-four hours of safety. Mr. Gupperduck straightened himself, Mr. Hearty seemed to revive, and from Mrs. Bindle's eyes fled the expression of fear.

"Well, I must be orf," said Bindle. "Look after my missis, 'Earty. You comin' along, Mr. G.?" he enquired of Mr. Gupperduck, as, followed by Millie, he left the room.

"It was sweet of you not to laugh at them, Uncle Joe," said Millie, as they stood at the door waiting for Mr. Gupperduck.

"Nobody didn't ought to mind sayin' they're afraid, Millikins," said Bindle, looking at the serious face before him; "but I don't like a cove wot says 'e's brave, an' then turns out to 'ave

about as much 'eart as a shillin' rabbit. Come along, Mr. G. Good night, Millikins, my dear. Are we down-'earted? No!" and Bindle went out into the night, followed by a meek and chastened Mr. Gupperduck.

CHAPTER IV

THE DUPLICATION OF MR. HEARTY

I

"You've never been a real husband to me," burst out Mrs. Bindle stormily.

Bindle did not even raise his eyes from his favourite dish of stewed-steak-and-onions.

"Cold mutton," he had once remarked to his friend, Ginger, "means peace, because I don't like it – the mutton, I mean; but stewed-steak-and-onions means an 'ell of a row. Mrs. B. ain't able to see me enjoyin' myself but wot she thinks I'm bein' rude to Gawd."

Bindle continued his meal in silent expectation.

"Look at you!" continued Mrs. Bindle. "Look at you now!"

Bindle still declined to be drawn into a discussion.

"Look at Mr. Hearty." Mrs. Bindle uttered her challenge with the air of one who plays the ace of trumps.

With great deliberation Bindle wiped the last remaining vestige of gravy from his plate with a piece of bread, which he placed in his mouth. With a sigh he leaned back in his chair.

"Personally, myself," he remarked calmly, "I'd rather not."

"Rather not what?" snapped Mrs. Bindle.

"Look at 'Earty," was the response.

"You might look at worse men than him," flashed Mrs. Bindle with rising wrath.

"I might," replied Bindle, "and then again I might not."

"Look how he's got on!" challenged Mrs. Bindle.

After a few moments of silence Bindle remarked more to himself than to Mrs. Bindle:

"Gawd made me, an' Gawd made 'Earty; but in one of us 'E made a bloomer. If I'm right, 'Earty's wrong; if 'Earty's right, I'm wrong. If they 'ave me in 'eaven, they won't want 'Earty; an' if 'Earty gets in, well, they won't look at me."

Mrs. Bindle proceeded to gather up the plates.

"Thank you for that stoo," said Bindle as he tilted back his chair contentedly.

"You should thank God, not me," was the ungracious retort.

For a moment Bindle appeared to ponder the remark. "Some'ow," he said at length, "I don't think I should like to thank Gawd for stewed-steak-an'-onions," and he drew his pipe from his pocket and began to charge it.

"Don't start smoking," snapped Mrs. Bindle, rising from the chair and going over to the stove.

Bindle looked up with interested enquiry on his features.

"There's an apple-pudding," continued Mrs. Bindle.

Bindle pocketed his pipe with a happy expression on his features. "Lizzie," he said, "'ow could you treat me like this?"

"What's the matter now?" demanded Mrs. Bindle.

"An apple-puddin' a-waitin' to be eaten, an' you lettin' me waste time a-talkin' about 'Earty's looks. It ain't kind of you, Lizzie, it ain't really."

Mrs. Bindle's sole response was a series of bangs, as she proceeded to turn out the apple-pudding.

Bindle ate and ate generously. When he had finished he pushed the plate from him and once more produced his pipe from his pocket.

"Mrs. B.," he said, "you may be a Christian; but you're a damn fine cook."

"Don't use such language to me," was the response, uttered a little less ungraciously than her previous remarks.

"It's all right, Mrs. B., don't you worry, they ain't a-goin' to charge that there 'damn' up against you. You're too nervous about the devil, you are," Bindle struck a match and sucked at his pipe.

"He's going to open another shop," said Mrs. Bindle.

"Who, the devil?" enquired Bindle in surprise.

"It's going to be in Putney High Street," continued Mrs. Bindle, ignoring Bindle's remark.

Bindle looked up at her with genuine puzzlement on his features.

"Putney 'Igh Street used to be a pretty 'ot place at night before the war," he remarked; "it ain't exactly cool now; but I never thought o' the devil openin' a shop there."

"I said Mr. Hearty," retorted Mrs. Bindle angrily.

"Oh! 'Earty," said Bindle contemptuously. "'Earty'd open anythink except 'is 'eart, or a barrel of apples 'e's sellin', knowin' them to be rotten. Wot's 'e want to open another shop for? 'E's got two already, ain't 'e?"

"Why haven't you got on?" stormed Mrs. Bindle inconsequently. "Why haven't you got three shops?"

"Well!" continued Bindle, "I might 'ave done so, but wot should I sell in 'em?"

"You never got on, you lorst every job you ever got. You'd 'ave lorst me long ago if – "

"No," remarked Bindle with solemn conviction as he rose and took his cap from behind the door. "You ain't the sort o' woman wot's lorst, Mrs. B., you're one o' them wot's found, like the little lamb that Ole Woe-and-Whiskers talked about when I went to chapel with you that night. S'long."

The news about Mr. Hearty's third venture in the greengrocery trade occupied Bindle's mind to the exclusion of all else as he walked in the direction of Chelsea to call upon Dr. Richard Little, whom he had met in connection with the Temperance Fête fiasco at Barton Bridge. He winked at only three girls and passed two remarks to carmen, and one to a bus-conductor, who was holding on rather unnecessarily to the arm of a pretty girl.

He found Dick Little at home and with him his brother Tom, and "Guggers," now a captain in the Gordons.

"Hullo! Here's J.B., gug-gug-good," cried Guggers, hurling his fourteen stone towards the diminutive visitor.

"Blessed if it ain't ole Spit-and-Speak in petticoats," cried Bindle. "I'm glad to see you, sir, that I am," and he shook Guggers warmly by the hand.

Guggers, as he was known at Oxford on account of his inability to pronounce a "G" without a preliminary "gug-gug," had taken a prominent part in the Oxford rag, when Bindle posed as the millionaire uncle of an unpopular undergraduate.

Bindle had christened him Spit-and-Speak owing to Gugger's habit of salivating his words.

When the men were seated, and Bindle was puffing furiously at a big cigar, he explained the cause of his visit.

"I ain't 'appy, sir," he said to Dick Little, "and although the 'ymn says 'ere we suffer grief an' woe,' it don't say we got to suffer grief an' woe an' 'Earty, altogether."

"What's up, J.B.?" enquired Dick Little.

"Well, if the truth's got to be told, sir, I got 'Earty in the throat."

"Got what?" enquired Tom Little, grinning.

"'Earty, my brother-in-law, 'Earty. I 'ad 'im thrust down my throat to-night with stewed-steak-and-onions an' apple-puddin'. The stewed-steak and the puddin' slipped down all right; but 'Earty stuck."

"What's he been up to now?" enquired Dick Little.

"'E's goin' to open another shop in Putney 'Igh Street, that's number three. 'Earty with two shops give me 'ell; but with three shops it'll be 'ell and blazes."

"Gug-gug-gave you hell?" interrogated Guggers.

"Mrs. B.," explained Bindle laconically. Then after a pause he added, "No matter wot's wrong at 'ome, if the pipes burst through frost, or the butcher's late with the meat, or if it's a sixpenny milkman instead of a fivepenny milkman, Mrs. B. always seems to think it's through me not being like 'Earty, as if any man 'ud be like 'Earty wot could be like somethink else, even if it was a conchie. No," continued Bindle, "somethink's got to be done. That's why I come round this evenin'."

"Can't we gug-gug-get up a rag?" enquired Guggers. "If I gug-gug-go back to France without a rag we shall never beat the Huns."

For a few minutes the four men continued to smoke, Dick Little meditatively, Bindle furiously. It was Bindle who broke the silence.

"You may think I got a down on 'Earty, sir?" he said, addressing Dick Little. "Well, p'rap's I 'ave: but 'Eaven's sometimes a little late in punishin' people, an' I ain't above lendin' an 'and. 'Earty's afraid o' me because 'e's afraid of wot I may say, knowin' wot I know."

With this enigmatical utterance, Bindle buried his face in the tankard that was always kept for him at Dick Little's flat.

"We might of course celebrate the occasion," murmured Dick Little meditatively.

"Gug-gug-great Scott!" cried Guggers. "We will! Gug-gug-good old Dick!" He brought a heavy hand down on Dick Little's shoulder blade. "Out with it!"

For the next hour the four men conferred together, and by the time Bindle found it necessary to return to his "little grey 'ome in the west," the success of Mr. Hearty's third shop was assured, that is its advertisement was assured.

"It'll cost an 'ell of a lot of money," said Bindle doubtfully as he rose to go.

"Gug-gug-get out!" cried Guggers, whose income was an affair of five figures. "For a rag like that I'd gug-gug-give my – my –"

"Not your trousers, sir," interrupted Bindle, gazing down at Guggers' brawny knees; "remember you gone into short clothes. Wouldn't do for me to go about like that," he added, "me with my various veins."

And Bindle left Dick Little's flat, rich in the knowledge he possessed of coming events.

II

"Any'ow," remarked Bindle as he stood in front of the looking-glass over the kitchen mantelpiece, adjusting his special constable's cap at a suitable angle. "Any'ow, 'Earty's got a fine day."

Mrs. Bindle sniffed and banged a vegetable-dish on the dresser. She appeared to possess an almost uncanny judgment as to how much banging a utensil would stand without breaking.

"Now," continued Bindle philosophically, "it's a fine day, the sun's shinin', people comin' out, wantin' to buy vegetables; yet I'll bet my whistle to 'is whole stock that 'Earty ain't 'appy."

"We're not here to be happy," snapped Mrs. Bindle.

"It ain't always easy to see why some of us is 'ere at all," remarked Bindle, as he gave his cap a further twist over to the right in an endeavour to get a real Sir David Beatty touch to his appearance.

"We're here to do the Lord's work," said Mrs. Bindle sententiously

"But d'you mean to tell me that Gawd made 'Earty specially to sell vegetables, 'im with a face like that?" questioned Bindle.

Mrs. Bindle's reply was in bangs. Sometimes Bindle's literalness was disconcerting.

"Did Gawd make me to move furniture?" he persisted. "No, Mrs. B.," he continued. "It's more than likely that Gawd jest puts us down 'ere an' lets us sort ourselves out, 'Im up there a-watchin' to see 'ow we does it."

"You're a child of Moloch, Joseph Bindle," said Mrs. Bindle.

"A child o' what-lock?" enquired Bindle "Who's 'e?"

"Oh! go along with you, don't bother me. I'm busy," cried Mrs. Bindle. "I promised Mr. Hearty I'd be round at two o'clock."

"Now ain't that jest like a woman," complained Bindle to a fly-catcher hanging from the gas-bracket. "Ain't that jest like a woman. If you're too busy to tell me why I'm a child of ole What-a-Clock, why ain't you too busy to tell me that I am a child of ole What-a-Clock?" and with this profound enquiry Bindle slipped out, assuring Mrs. Bindle that he would see her some time during the afternoon as he was to be on duty in Putney High Street, "to see that no one don't pinch 'Earty's veges."

Ten minutes later Bindle stood in front of Mr. Hearty's new shop, aided in his scrutiny by two women and three boys.

"There ain't no denying the fact," murmured Bindle to himself, "that 'Earty do do the thing in style. If only 'is 'eart wasn't wot it is, an' if 'is face was wot it might be, 'e'd make a damn fine brother-in-law."

At that moment Mr. Hearty appeared at the door of the shop, bowing out a lady-customer, obviously someone of importance to judge by the obsequious manner in which he rubbed his hands and bent his head.

"Cheer-o! 'Earty!" cried Bindle.

Mr. Hearty started and looked round. The three errand boys and the two women looked round also and fixed their gaze on Bindle. Mr. Hearty devoted himself more assiduously to his customer, pretending not to have heard.

"I'll run in about six, 'Earty, and 'ave a look round," continued Bindle. "I'm on dooty till then. I'll see they don't pinch your stock," and he walked slowly down the High Street in the direction of the bridge, followed by the grins and gazes of the errand boys.

Mr. Hearty's new shop was, without doubt, the best of the three. A study in green paint and brass-work, it was capable of holding its own with the best shops in the West End. In the window was a magnificent array of fruits. Outside were the vegetables. Everything was ticketed in plain figures, figures that were the envy and despair of other Putney greengrocers.

It was Mr. Hearty's hour.

As Bindle promenaded the High Street, his manner was one of expectancy. Twice he looked at his watch and, when walking in the direction of Putney Hill, he would turn and cast backward glances along the High Street. During his second perambulation he encountered Mrs. Bindle hurrying in the direction of Mr. Hearty's new shop. He accorded her a salute that would have warmed the heart of a Chief Commissioner of the Police.

Meanwhile Mr. Hearty was gazing lovingly at the curved double brass-rail that adorned his window, looking like a harvest festival decoration. Mr. Hearty believed in appearances. He would buy persimmons, li-chis, bread-fruit, and custard-apples, not because he thought he could sell them; but because they gave tone to his shop. Those who had not heard of persimmons and li-chis were impressed because Mr. Hearty was telling them something they did not know; those who had heard of, possibly eaten, them were equally impressed, because he was reminding them of Regent Street and Piccadilly. As Bindle phrased it, Mr. Hearty was "a damn good greengrocer."

Mr. Hearty was interrupted in his contemplation of the fruity splendour of his genius by the entry of a customer, at least something had come between him and the light of the sun.

He turned, started violently and stared. Then he blinked his eyes and stared again. A man had entered wearing a silk-faced frock-coat of dubious fit and doubtful age, a turn-down collar, a white tie and trousers that concertinaed over large ill-shaped boots. On his head was a black felt hat, semi-clerical in type, insured against any sudden vagary of the wind by a hat-guard.

Mr. Hearty gazed at the man, his eyes dilated in astonishment. He stared at the stranger's sunken, sallow cheeks, at his heavy moustache, at his mutton-chop whiskers. The man was his double: features, expression, clothes; all were the same.

"Ullo! 'Earty! Put me down for a cokernut an' an onion."

Bindle, who had entered at that moment, dug the stranger in the ribs from behind. He turned round upon his assailant, then Bindle saw Mr. Hearty standing in the shadow. He looked from him to the stranger and back again with grave intentness. Both men regarded Bindle.

"Good afternoon, Joseph," said Mr. Hearty at length in his toneless voice, that always seemed to come from somewhere in the woolly distance.

"Good afternoon, Joseph," said the stranger in a voice that was a very clever imitation of that of Mr. Hearty.

Bindle fumbled in the breast-pocket of his tunic and produced a box of matches. Going up to Mr. Hearty he struck a match. Mr. Hearty started back as if doubtful of his intentions. Bindle proceeded to examine Mr. Hearty's features by the flickering light of the match, then turning to the stranger, he went through the same performance with him. Finally pushing his cap back he scratched his head in perplexity.

"Well, I'm damned!" he ejaculated. "Two 'Earty's."

"I want a cauliflower, please." It was the stranger who spoke.

Bindle once more proceeded to regard the stranger critically.

"I s'pose you're what they call an alibi," he remarked.

The stranger had no time to reply, as at that moment another man entered. In garb and appearance he was a replica of the first. Mr. Hearty looked as a man might who, without previous experience of alcohol, has just drunk a whole bottle of whisky.

Bindle whistled, grinned, then he smacked his leg vigorously.

"My cauliflower, please," said the first man.

"Good afternoon, Joseph," said the new arrival. The voice was not so good an imitation.

At that moment Smith, Mr. Hearty's right-hand man, thrust his head through the flap in the floor of the shop that gave access to the potato-cellar. He caught sight of the trinity of masters. He gave one frightened glance, ducked his head, and let the flap down with a bang just as a third "Mr. Hearty" entered. He was followed almost immediately by a fourth and fifth. Each greeted Bindle with a "Good-afternoon, Joseph."

Just as the sixth Mr. Hearty entered, Smith pushed up the flap again, this time a few inches only, and with dilated eyes looked out. The sight of seven "masters," as he afterwards confessed to Billy Nips, the errand boy, "shook 'im up crool." Keeping his eyes fixed warily upon the group of men, each demanding a cauliflower, Smith slowly drew himself up and out, letting the cellar-flap down with a bang as he slipped to the back of the shop away from the group. Was he drunk, or only dreaming?

"I woke up with one brother-in-law, an' now I got seven," cried Bindle as he walked over and opened the glass-door, with white lace curtains tied back with blue ribbon, at the back of the shop.

"Martha," he shouted, "Martha, you're wanted!"

An indistinct sound was heard and a minute later Mrs. Hearty appeared, enormously fat and wheezing painfully.

"That you, Joe?" she panted as she struck her ample bosom with clenched hand. "My breath! it's that bad to-day." For a moment she stood blinking in the sunlight.

"See 'em, Martha?" ejaculated Bindle, pointing to Mr. Hearty and the "alibis." "Seven of 'em. You're a bigamist, sure as eggs, Martha, an' Millie ain't never goin' to be an orphan."

As she became accustomed to the glare of the sunlight, Mrs. Hearty looked in a dazed way at the group of "husbands," all gazing in her direction. Then she suddenly began to shake and wheeze.

It took very little to make Mrs. Hearty laugh, sometimes nothing at all. Now she sat down suddenly on a sack of potatoes and heaved and shook with silent laughter.

Suddenly Mr. Hearty became galvanised into action.

"How – how dare you!" he fumed. "Get out of my shop, confound you!"

"'Earty, 'Earty!" protested Bindle, "fancy you a-usin' language like that. I'm surprised at you."

Mr. Hearty looked about him like a caged animal, then suddenly he turned to Bindle.

"Joseph," he cried, "I give these men in charge."

The men regarded Mr. Hearty with melancholy unconcern.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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