

WILLIAM WYMARK JACOBS

DIALSTONE LANE, PART 1

William Wymark Jacobs

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CHAPTER I

Mr. Edward Tredgold sat in the private office of Tredgold and Son, land and estate agents, gazing through the prim wire blinds at the peaceful High Street of Binchester. Tredgold senior, who believed in work for the young, had left early. Tredgold junior, glad at an opportunity of sharing his father's views, had passed most of the work on to a clerk who had arrived in the world exactly three weeks after himself.

"Binchester gets duller and duller," said Mr. Tredgold to himself, wearily. "Two skittish octogenarians, one gloomy baby, one gloomier nursemaid, and three dogs in the last five minutes. If it wasn't for the dogs—Halloa!"

He put down his pen and, rising, looked over the top of the blind at a girl who was glancing from side to side of the road as though in search of an address.

"A visitor," continued Mr. Tredgold, critically. "Girls like that only visit Binchester, and then take the first train back, never to return."

The girl turned at that moment and, encountering the forehead and eyes, gazed at them until they sank slowly behind the protection of the blind.

"She's coming here," said Mr. Tredgold, watching through the wire. "Wants to see our timetable, I expect."

He sat down at the table again, and taking up his pen took some papers from a pigeon-hole and eyed them with severe thoughtfulness.

"A lady to see you, sir," said a clerk, opening the door.

Mr. Tredgold rose and placed a chair.

"I have called for the key of the cottage in Dialstone Lane," said the girl, still standing. "My uncle, Captain Bowers, has not arrived yet, and I am told that you are the landlord."

Mr. Tredgold bowed. "The next train is due at six," he observed, with a glance at the timetable hanging on the wall; "I expect he'll come by that. He was here on Monday seeing the last of the furniture in. Are you Miss Drewitt?"

"Yes," said the girl. "If you'll kindly give me the key, I can go in and wait for him."

Mr. Tredgold took it from a drawer. "If you will allow me, I will go down with you," he said, slowly; "the lock is rather awkward for anybody who doesn't understand it."

The girl murmured something about not troubling him.

"It's no trouble," said Mr. Tredgold, taking up his hat. "It is our duty to do all we can for the comfort of our tenants. That lock—"

He held the door open and followed her into the street, pointing out various objects of interest as they went along.

"I'm afraid you'll find Binchester very quiet," he remarked.

"I like quiet," said his companion.

Mr. Tredgold glanced at her shrewdly, and, pausing only at the jubilee horse-trough to point out beauties which might easily escape any but a trained observation, walked on in silence until they reached their destination.

Except in the matter of window-blinds, Dialstone Lane had not changed for generations, and Mr. Tredgold noted with pleasure the interest of his companion as she gazed at the crumbling roofs, the red-brick doorsteps, and the tiny lattice windows of the cottages. At the last house, a cottage larger

than the rest, one side of which bordered the old churchyard, Mr. Tredgold paused and, inserting his key in the lock, turned it with thoughtless ease.

"The lock seems all right; I need not have bothered you," said Miss Drewitt, regarding him gravely.

"Ah, it seems easy," said Mr. Tredgold, shaking his head, "but it wants knack."

The girl closed the door smartly, and, turning the key, opened it again without any difficulty. To satisfy herself—on more points than one—she repeated the performance.

"You've got the knack," said Mr. Tredgold, meeting her gaze with great calmness. "It's extraordinary what a lot of character there is in locks; they let some people open them without any trouble, while others may fumble at them till they're tired."

The girl pushed the door open and stood just inside the room.

"Thank you," she said, and gave him a little bow of dismissal.

A vein of obstinacy in Mr. Tredgold's disposition, which its owner mistook for firmness, asserted itself. It was plain that the girl had estimated his services at their true value and was quite willing to apprise him of the fact. He tried the lock again, and with more bitterness than the occasion seemed to warrant said that somebody had been oiling it.

"I promised Captain Bowers to come in this afternoon and see that a few odd things had been done," he added. "May I come in now?"

The girl withdrew into the room, and, seating herself in a large arm-chair by the fireplace, watched his inspection of door-knobs and window-fastenings with an air of grave amusement, which he found somewhat trying.

"Captain Bowers had the walls panelled and these lockers made to make the room look as much like a ship's cabin as possible," he said, pausing in his labours. "He was quite pleased to find the staircase opening out of the room—he calls it the companion-ladder. And he calls the kitchen the pantry, which led to a lot of confusion with the workmen. Did he tell you of the crow's-nest in the garden?"

"No," said the girl.

"It's a fine piece of work," said Mr. Tredgold.

He opened the door leading into the kitchen and stepped out into the garden. Miss Drewitt, after a moment's hesitation, followed, and after one delighted glance at the trim old garden gazed curiously at a mast with a barrel fixed near the top, which stood at the end.

"There's a fine view from up there," said Mr. Tredgold. "With the captain's glass one can see the sea distinctly. I spent nearly all last Friday afternoon up there, keeping an eye on things. Do you like the garden? Do you think these old creepers ought to be torn down from the house?"

"Certainly not," said Miss Drewitt, with emphasis.

"Just what I said," remarked Mr. Tredgold.

"Captain Bowers wanted to have them pulled down, but I dissuaded him. I advised him to consult you first."

"I don't suppose he really intended to," said the girl.

"He did," said the other, grimly; "said they were untidy. How do you like the way the house is furnished?"

The girl gazed at him for a few moments before replying. "I like it very much," she said, coldly.

"That's right," said Mr. Tredgold, with an air of relief. "You see, I advised the captain what to buy. I went with him to Tollminster and helped him choose. Your room gave me the most anxiety, I think."

"My room?" said the girl, starting.

"It's a dream in the best shades of pink and green," said Mr. Tredgold, modestly. "Pink on the walls, and carpets and hangings green; three or four bits of old furniture—the captain objected, but I stood firm; and for pictures I had two or three little things out of an art journal framed."

"Is furnishing part of your business?" inquired the girl, eyeing him in bewilderment.

"Business?" said the other. "Oh, no. I did it for amusement. I chose and the captain paid. It was a delightful experience. The sordid question of price was waived; for once expense was nothing to me. I wish you'd just step up to your room and see how you like it. It's the one over the kitchen."

Miss Drewitt hesitated, and then curiosity, combined with a cheerful idea of probably being able to disapprove of the lauded decorations, took her indoors and upstairs. In a few minutes she came down again.

"I suppose it's all right," she said, ungraciously, "but I don't understand why you should have selected it."

"I had to," said Mr. Tredgold, confidentially. "I happened to go to Tollminster the same day as the captain and went into a shop with him. If you could only see the things he wanted to buy, you would understand."

The girl was silent.

"The paper the captain selected for your room," continued Mr. Tredgold, severely, "was decorated with branches of an unknown flowering shrub, on the top twig of which a humming-bird sat eating a dragonfly. A rough calculation showed me that every time you opened your eyes in the morning you would see fifty-seven humming-birds—all made in the same pattern—eating fifty-seven ditto dragon-flies. The captain said it was cheerful."

"I have no doubt that my uncle's selection would have satisfied me," said Miss Drewitt, coldly.

"The curtains he fancied were red, with small yellow tigers crouching all over them," pursued Mr. Tredgold. "The captain seemed fond of animals."

"I think that you were rather—venturesome," said the girl. "Suppose that I had not liked the things you selected?"

Mr. Tredgold deliberated. "I felt sure that you would like them," he said, at last. "It was a hard struggle not to keep some of the things for myself. I've had my eye on those two Chippendale chairs for years. They belonged to an old woman in Mint Street, but she always refused to part with them. I shouldn't have got them, only one of them let her down the other day."

"Let her down?" repeated Miss Drewitt, sharply. "Do you mean one of the chairs in my bedroom?"

Mr. Tredgold nodded. "Gave her rather a nasty fall," he said. "I struck while the iron was hot, and went and made her an offer while she was still laid up from the effects of it. It's the one standing against the wall; the other's all right, with proper care."

Miss Drewitt, after a somewhat long interval, thanked him.

"You must have been very useful to my uncle," she said, slowly. "I feel sure that he would never have bought chairs like those of his own accord."

"He has been at sea all his life," said Mr. Tredgold, in extenuation. "You haven't seen him for a long time, have you?"

"Ten years," was the reply.

"He is delightful company," said Mr. Tredgold. "His life has been one long series of adventures in every quarter of the globe. His stock of yarns is like the widow's cruse. And here he comes," he added, as a dilapidated fly drew up at the house and an elderly man, with a red, weatherbeaten face, partly hidden in a cloud of grey beard, stepped out and stood in the doorway, regarding the girl with something almost akin to embarrassment.

"It's not—not Prudence?" he said at length, holding out his hand and staring at her.

"Yes, uncle," said the girl.

They shook hands, and Captain Bowers, reaching up for a cage containing a parrot, which had been noisily entreating the cabman for a kiss all the way from the station, handed that flustered person his fare and entered the house again.

"Glad to see you, my lad," he said, shaking hands with Mr. Tredgold and glancing covertly at his niece. "I hope you haven't been waiting long," he added, turning to the latter.

"No," said Miss Drewitt, regarding him with a puzzled air.

"I missed the train," said the captain. "We must try and manage better next time. I0-I hope you'll be comfortable."

"Thank you," said the girl.

"You—you are very like your poor mother," said the captain.

"I hope so," said Prudence.

She stole up to the captain and, after a moment's hesitation, kissed his cheek. The next moment she was caught up and crushed in the arms of a powerful and affectionate bear.

"Blest if I hardly knew how to take you at first," said the captain, his red face shining with gratification. "Little girls are one thing, but when they grow up into"—he held her away and looked at her proudly—"into handsome and dignified-looking young women, a man doesn't quite know where he is." He took her in his arms again and, kissing her forehead, winked delightedly in the direction of Mr. Tredgold, who was affecting to look out of the window.

"My man'll be in soon," he said, releasing the girl, "and then we'll see about some tea. He met me at the station and I sent him straight off for things to eat."

"Your man?" said Miss Drewitt.

"Yes; I thought a man would be easier to manage than a girl," said the captain, knowingly. "You can be freer with 'em in the matter of language, and then there's no followers or anything of that kind. I got him to sign articles ship-shape and proper. Mr. Tredgold recommended him."

"No, no," said that gentleman, hastily.

"I asked you before he signed on with me," said the captain, pointing a stumpy forefinger at him. "I made a point of it, and you told me that you had never heard anything against him."

"I don't call that a recommendation," said Mr. Tredgold.

"It's good enough in these days," retorted the captain, gloomily. "A man that has got a character like that is hard to find."

"He might be artful and keep his faults to himself," suggested Tredgold.

"So long as he does that, it's all right," said Captain Bowers. "I can't find fault if there's no faults to find fault with. The best steward I ever had, I found out afterwards, had escaped from gaol. He never wanted to go ashore, and when the ship was in port almost lived in his pantry."

"I never heard of Tasker having been in gaol," said Mr. Tredgold. "Anyhow, I'm certain that he never broke out of one; he's far too stupid."

As he paid this tribute the young man referred to entered laden with parcels, and, gazing awkwardly at the company, passed through the room on tiptoe and began to busy himself in the pantry. Mr. Tredgold, refusing the captain's invitation to stay for a cup of tea, took his departure.

"Very nice youngster that," said the captain, looking after him. "A little bit light-hearted in his ways, perhaps, but none the worse for that."

He sat down and looked round at his possessions. "The first real home I've had for nearly fifty years," he said, with great content. "I hope you'll be as happy here as I intend to be. It sha'n't be my fault if you're not."

Mr. Tredgold walked home deep in thought, and by the time he had arrived there had come to the conclusion that if Miss Drewitt favoured her mother, that lady must have been singularly unlike Captain Bowers in features.

CHAPTER II

In less than a week Captain Bowers had settled down comfortably in his new command. A set of rules and regulations by which Mr. Joseph Tasker was to order his life was framed and hung in the pantry. He studied it with care, and, anxious that there should be no possible chance of a misunderstanding, questioned the spelling in three instances. The captain's explanation that he had spelt those words in the American style was an untruthful reflection upon a great and friendly nation.

Dialstone Lane was at first disposed to look askance at Mr. Tasker. Old-fashioned matrons clustered round to watch him cleaning the doorstep, and, surprised at its whiteness, withdrew discomfited. Rumour had it that he liked work, and scandal said that he had wept because he was not allowed to do the washing.

The captain attributed this satisfactory condition of affairs to the rules and regulations, though a slight indiscretion on the part of Mr. Tasker, necessitating the unframing of the document to add to the latter, caused him a little annoyance.

The first intimation he had of it was a loud knocking at the front door as he sat dozing one afternoon in his easy-chair. In response to his startled cry of "Come in!" the door opened and a small man, in a state of considerable agitation, burst into the room and confronted him.

"My name is Chalk," he said, breathlessly.

"A friend of Mr. Tredgold's?" said the captain. "I've heard of you, sir."

The visitor paid no heed.

"My wife wishes to know whether she has got to dress in the dark every afternoon for the rest of her life," he said, in fierce but trembling tones.

"Got to dress in the dark?" repeated the astonished captain.

"With the blind down," explained the other.

Captain Bowers looked him up and down. He saw a man of about fifty nervously fingering the little bits of fluffy red whisker which grew at the sides of his face, and trying to still the agitation of his tremulous mouth.

"How would you like it yourself?" demanded the visitor, whose manner was gradually becoming milder and milder. "How would you like a telescope a yard long pointing—"

He broke off abruptly as the captain, with a smothered oath, dashed out of his chair into the garden and stood shaking his fist at the crow's-nest at the bottom.

"Joseph!" he bawled.

"Yes, sir," said Mr. Tasker, removing the telescope described by Mr. Chalk from his eye, and leaning over.

"What are you doing with that spy-glass?" demanded his master, beckoning to the visitor, who had drawn near. "How dare you stare in at people's windows?"

"I wasn't, sir," replied Mr. Tasker, in an injured voice. "I wouldn't think o' such a thing—I couldn't, not if I tried."

"You'd got it pointed straight at my bedroom window," cried Mr. Chalk, as he accompanied the captain down the garden. "And it ain't the first time."

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