

Jenkins Herbert George

**Mrs. Bindle: Some Incidents
from the Domestic Life
of the Bindles**



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Hebert Jenkins

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CHAPTER I MRS. BINDLE'S LOCK-OUT

I

"Well! What's the matter now? Lorst your job?"

With one hand resting upon the edge of the pail beside which she was kneeling, Mrs. Bindle looked up, challenge in her eyes. Bindle's unexpected appearance while she was washing the kitchen oilcloth filled her with foreboding.

"There's a strike on at the yard," he replied in a tone which, in spite of his endeavour to render it casual, sounded like a confession of guilt. He knew Mrs. Bindle; he knew also her views on strikes.

"A what?" she cried, rising to her feet and wiping her hands upon the coarse canvas apron that covered the skirt carefully festooned about her hips. "A what?"

"A strike," repeated Bindle. "They give Walter 'Odson the sack, so we all come out."

"Oh! you have, have you?" she cried, her thin lips disappearing ominously. "And when are you going back, I'd like to know?" She regarded him with an eye that he knew meant war.

"Can't say," he replied, as he proceeded to fill his pipe from a tin tobacco-box. "Depends on the Union," he added.

"The Union!" she cried with rising wrath. "I wish I had them here. I'd give them Union, throwing men out of work, with food the price it is. What's going to 'appen to us? Can you tell me that?" she demanded, her diction becoming a little frayed at the edges, owing to the intensity of her feelings.

Bindle remained silent. He realised that he was faced by a crisis.

"Nice thing you coming 'ome at eleven o'clock in the morning calmly saying you've struck," she continued angrily. "You're a lazy, good-for-nothing set of loafers, the whole lot of you, that's what you are. When you're tired of work and want a 'oliday you strike, and spend your time in public-'ouses, betting and drinking and swearing, and us women slaving morning, noon and night to keep you. Suppose I was to strike, what then?"

She undid her canvas apron, and with short, jerky movements proceeded to fold and place it in the dresser-drawer. She then let down the festoons into which her skirt had been gathered about her inconspicuous hips.

Mrs. Bindle was a sharp, hatchet-faced woman, with eyes too closely set together to satisfy an artist.

The narrowness of her head was emphasised by the way in which her thin, sandy hair was drawn behind each ear and screwed tightly into a knot at the back.

Her lips were thin and slightly marked, and when she was annoyed they had a tendency to disappear altogether.

"How are we going to live?" she demanded. "Answer me that! You and your strikes!"

Bindle struck a match and became absorbed in lighting his pipe.

"What are you going to do for food?" She was not to be denied.

"We're a-goin' to get strike pay," he countered, seizing the opening.

"Strike pay!" she cried scornfully. "A fat lot of good that'll do. A pound a week, I suppose, and you eating like a – like a –" she paused for a satisfactory simile. "Eating me out of 'ouse and 'ome," she amended. "'Strike pay!' I'd give 'em strike pay if I had my way."

"It'll 'elp," suggested Bindle.

"Help! Yes, it'll help you to find out how hungry you can get," she retorted grimly. "I'd like to have that man Smillie here, I'd give him a bit of my mind."

"But 'e ain't done it," protested Bindle, a sense of fair play prompting him to defend the absent leader. "'E's a miner. We don't belong to 'is Union."

"They're all tarred with the same brush," cried Mrs. Bindle, "a good-for-nothing, lazy lot. They turn you round their little fingers, and then laugh at you up their sleeves. I know them," she added darkly.

Bindle edged towards the door. He had not been in favour of the strike; now it was even less popular with him.

"I suppose you're going round to your low public-house, to drink and smoke and tell each other how clever you've been," she continued. "Then you'll come back expecting to find your dinner ready to put in your mouth."

Mrs. Bindle's words were prophetic. Bindle *was* going round to The Yellow Ostrich to meet his mates, and discuss the latest strike-news.

"You wouldn't 'ave me a blackleg, Lizzie, would you?" he asked.

"Don't talk to me about such things," she retorted. "I'm a hardworking woman, I am, inchin' and pinchin' to keep the home respectable, while you and your low companions refuse to work. I wish I had them all here, I'd give them strikes." Her voice shook with suppressed passion.

Realising that the fates were against him, Bindle beat a gloomy retreat, and turned his steps in the direction of The Yellow Ostrich.

At one o'clock he returned to Fenton Street, a little doubtful; but very hungry.

He closed the gate quietly, Mrs. Bindle hated the banging of gates. Suddenly he caught sight of a piece of white paper pinned to the front door. A moment later he was reading the dumbfounding announcement:

"I have struck too.

"E. Bindle."

The words, which were written on the back of a coal-merchant's advertisement, seemed to dance before his eyes.

He was conscious that at the front window on either side a face was watching him intently. In Fenton Street drama was the common property of all.

With a puzzled expression in his eyes, Bindle stood staring at the piece of paper and its ominous message, his right hand scratching his head through the blue and white cricket cap he habitually wore.

"Well, I'm blowed," he muttered, as Mrs. Grimps, who lived at No. 5, came to her door and stood regarding him not unsympathetically.

At the sight of her neighbour, Mrs. Sawney, who occupied No. 9, also appeared, her hands rolled up in her apron and her arms steaming. She had been engaged in the scullery when "'Arriet," who had been set to watch events, rushed in from the front room with the news that Mr. Bindle was coming.

"Serves you right, it does," said Mrs. Sawney. "You men," she added, as if to remove from her words any suggestion that they were intended as personal. Bindle was very popular with his neighbours.

"Strikes you does, when you ain't feeling like work," chorused Mrs. Grimps, "I know you."

Bindle looked from one to the other. For once he felt there was nothing to say.

"Then there's the kids," said a slatternly-looking woman with a hard mouth and dusty hair, who had just drifted up from two doors away. "A lot you cares. It's us wot 'as to suffer."

There was a murmur from the other women, who had been reinforced by two neighbours from the opposite side of the street.

"She 'as my sympathy," said Mrs. Sawney, "although I can't say I likes 'er as a friend."

During these remarks, Bindle had been searching for his latch-key, which he now drew forth and inserted in the lock; but, although the latch responded, the door did not give. It was bolted on the inside.

"Well, I'm blowed!" he muttered again, too surprised at this new phase of the situation to be more than dimly conscious of the remarks of those about him.

"My sister's man struck three months ago," said one of the new arrivals, "and 'er expectin' 'er fifth. Crool I calls it. They ought to 'ave 'em themselves is wot I say. That'ud learn 'em to strike."

A murmur of approval broke from the others at this enigmatical utterance.

"It's all very well for them," cried Mrs. Sawney; "but it's us wot 'as to suffer, us and the pore kids, bless 'em. 'Arriet, you let me catch you swingin' on that gate again, my beauty, and I'll skin you."

The last remark was directed at the little girl, who had seized the moment of her mother's pre-occupation to indulge herself in an illicit joy.

Without a word, Bindle turned and walked down the flagged path to the gate, and along Fenton Street in the direction of The Yellow Ostrich, leaving behind him a group of interested women, who would find in his tragedy material for a week's gossip.

His customary cheeriness had forsaken him. He realised that he was faced by a domestic crisis that frankly puzzled him – and he was hungry.

As he pushed open the hospitable swing-door of The Yellow Ostrich, he was greeted by a new and even more bewildering phase of the situation.

"'Ere, Bindle," cried an angry voice, "wot the blinkin' 'ell's your missis up to?"

"You may search me," was Bindle's lugubrious reply, as he moved across to the bar and ordered a pint of beer, some bread, and "a bit o' the cheese wot works the lift."

"You was agin us chaps striking," continued the speaker who had greeted Bindle on his entrance, a man with a criminal forehead, a loose mouth, and a dirty neck-cloth.

"Wot's your complaint, mate?" enquired Bindle indifferently, as he lifted his pewter from the counter, and took a pull that half emptied it of its contents.

"Wot's your ruddy missis been up to?" demanded the man aggressively.

"Look 'ere, 'Enery, ole sport," said Bindle quietly, as he wiped his lips with the back of his hand, "you ain't pretty, an' you ain't good; but try an' keep yer mouth clean when you speaks of Mrs. B. See?"

A murmur of approval rose from the other men, with whom Bindle was popular and Henry Gilkes was not.

"Wot's she mean a-goin' round to my missis an' gettin' 'er to bolt me out?"

"Bolt you out!" cried Bindle, with a puzzled expression. "Wotjer talkin' about?"

"When I goes 'ome to dinner," was the angry retort, "there's a ticket on the blinkin' door sayin' my missis 'as struck. I'll strike 'er!" he added malevolently. "The lady next door tells me that it's your missis wot done it."

For a moment Bindle gazed at his fellow-sufferer, then he smacked his thigh with the air of a man who has just seen a great joke, which for some time has evaded him.

"'Enery," he grinned, "she's done it to me too."

"Done wot?" enquired Henry, who, as a Father of the Chapel, felt he was a man of some importance.

"Locked me out, back *and* front," explained Bindle, enjoying his mate's bewilderment. "Wot about the solidarity of labour now, ole sport?" he enquired.

Henry Gilkes had one topic of conversation – "the solidarity of labour." Those who worked with him found it wearisome listening to his views on the bloated capitalist, and how he was to be overcome. They preferred discussing their own betting ventures, and the prospects of the Chelsea and Fulham football teams.

"Done it to you!" repeated Gilkes dully. "Wot she done?"

"I jest nipped round to get a bit o' dinner," explained Bindle, "and there was both doors bolted, an' a note a-sayin' that Mrs. B. 'ad struck. Personally, myself, I calls it a lock-out," he added with a grin.

Several of his hearers began to manifest signs of uneasiness. They had not been home since early morning.

"I'll break 'er stutterin' jaw if my missis locks me out," growled a heavily-bearded man, known as "Ruddy Bill" on account of the intensity of his language.

"Jest the sort o' thing you would do," said Bindle genially. "You got a sweet nature, Bill, in spite of them whiskers."

Ruddy Bill growled something in his beard, while several of the other men drained their pewters and slipped out, intent on discovering whether or no their own domestic bliss were threatened by this new and unexpected danger.

From then on, the public bar of The Yellow Ostrich hummed with angry talk and threats of what would happen if the lords, who there gloried and drank deep, should return to their hearths and find manifestations of rebellion.

Two of the men, who had gone to investigate the state of their own domestic barometers, were back in half an hour with the news that they too had been locked out from home and beauty.

About three o'clock, Ruddy Bill returned, streams of profanity flowing from his lips. Finding himself bolted out, he had broken open the door; but no one was there. Now he was faced with a threat of ejection from the landlord, who had heard of the wilful damage to his property, plus the cost of a new door.

Several times that afternoon the landlord of The Yellow Ostrich, himself regarded as an epicure in the matter of "language," found it necessary to utter the stereotyped phrase, "Now gents, if *you* please," which, with him, meant that the talk was becoming unfit for the fo'c'sle of a tramp steamer.

II

Left to herself by the departure of Bindle for The Yellow Ostrich, Mrs. Bindle had, for some time, stood by the dresser deep in thought. She had then wrung-out the house-flannel, emptied the pail, placed them under the sink and once more returned to the dresser. Five minutes' meditation was followed by swift action.

First she took her bonnet from the dresser-drawer, then unhooking a dark brown mackintosh from behind the door, she proceeded to make her outdoor toilet in front of the looking-glass on the mantelpiece.

She then sought out ink-bottle and pen, and wrote her defiance with an ink-eaten nib. This accomplished, she bolted the front-door on the inside, first attaching her strike-notice. Leaving the house by the door giving access to the scullery, she locked it, taking the key with her.

Her face was grim and her walk was determined, as she made her way to the yard at which Bindle was employed. There she demanded to see the manager and, after some difficulty, was admitted.

She began by reproaching him and ordering him to stop the strike. When, however, he had explained that the strike was entirely due to the action of the men, she ended by telling him of her own drastic action, and her determination to continue her strike until the men went back.

The manager surprised her by leaning back in his chair and laughing uproariously.

"Mrs. Bindle," he cried at length, as he wiped the tears from his eyes, "you're a genius; but I'm sorry for Bindle. Now, do you want to end the strike in a few hours?"

Mrs. Bindle looked at him suspiciously; but, conscious of the very obvious admiration with which he regarded her act, she relented sufficiently to listen to what he had to say.

Ten minutes later she left the office with a list of the names and addresses of the strikers, including that of the branch organising secretary of the Union. She had decided upon a counter-offensive.

Her first call was upon Mrs. Gilkes, a quiet little woman who had been subdued to meekness by the "solidarity of labour." Here she had to admit failure.

"I know what you mean, my dear," said Mrs. Gilkes; "but you see, Mr. Gilkes wouldn't like it." There was a tremor of fear in her voice.

"Wouldn't like it!" echoed Mrs. Bindle. "Of course he wouldn't like it. Bindle won't like it when he knows," her jaws met grimly and her lips disappeared. "You're afraid," she added accusingly.

"That's it, my dear, I am," was the disconcerting reply. "I never 'ad no 'eart for a fight, that's why Mr. Gilkes 'as come it over me like 'e 'as. My sister, Mary, was sayin' only last Toosday – no it wasn't, it was We'n'sday, I remember because it was the day we 'ad sausages wot Mr. Gilkes said wasn't fresh. 'Amelia,' she says, 'you ain't got the 'eart of a rabbit, or else you wouldn't stand wot you do,'" and, looking up into Mrs. Bindle's face, she added, "It's true, Mrs. Gimble, although I didn't own it to Mary, 'er bein' my sister an' so uppish in 'er ways."

"Well, you'll be sorry," was Mrs. Bindle's comment, as she turned towards the door. "I'll be no man's slave."

"You see, I 'aven't the 'eart, Mrs. Gimber."

"Bindle!" snapped Mrs. Bindle over her shoulder.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Spindle, my mistake."

Mrs. Bindle stalked along the passage, through the front door and out of the gate, leaving Mrs. Gilkes murmuring deprecatingly that she "'adn't no 'eart for a fight."

Although she would not own it, Mrs. Bindle was discouraged by the failure of her first attempt at strike-breaking. But for her good-fortune in encountering Mrs. Hopton at her second venture, she might even have relinquished the part of Lysistrata and have returned home to prepare Bindle's dinner.

It was with something like misgiving that she knocked at No. 32 Wessels Street. This feeling was accentuated when the door was opened with great suddenness by an enormously big woman with a square chin, fighting eyes, and very little hair.

With arms akimbo, one elbow touching either side of the passage, as if imbued with the sentiments of Horatius Cocles, Mrs. Hopton stood with tightly-shut mouth regarding her caller. As soon as Mrs. Bindle had made her mission known, however, Mrs. Hopton's manner underwent an entire change. Her hands dropped from her hips, her fixed expression relaxed, and she stood invitingly aside.

"I'm your woman," she cried. "You come in, Mrs. –"

"Bindle!" prompted Mrs. Bindle.

"You come in, Mrs. Bindle, you got the woman you want in Martha 'Opton. Us women 'ave stood this sort of thing long enough. I've always said so."

She led the way into an airless little parlour, in which a case of wax-fruit, a dusty stuffed dog and a clothes-horse hung with the familiarities of Mrs. Hopton's laundry, first struck the eye.

"I've always said," continued Mrs. Hopton, "that us women was too meek and mild by half in the way we takes things. My man's a fool," she added with conviction. "'E's that easily led by them arbitrators, that's wot I call 'em, that they makes 'im do just wotever they wants, dirty, lazy set o' tykes. Never done a day's work in their lives, they 'aven't, not one of 'em."

"That's what I say," cried Mrs. Bindle, for once in her life finding a congenial spirit outside the walls of the Alton Road Chapel. "I've locked up my house," she continued, "and put a note on the door that I've struck too."

The effect of these words upon Mrs. Hopton was startling. Her head went back like that of a chicken drinking, her hands rose once more to her hips, and her huge frame shook and pulsated as if it contained a high-power motor-engine. Mrs. Bindle gazed at her with widened eyes.

"Her-her-her!" came in deep, liquid gutturals from Mrs. Hopton's lips. "Her-her-her!" Then her head came down again, and Mrs. Bindle saw that the grim lips were parted, displaying some very yellow, unprepossessing teeth. Mrs. Hopton was manifesting amusement.

Without further comment, Mrs. Hopton left the room. In her absence, Mrs. Bindle proceeded to sum-up her character from the evidence that her home contained. The result was unfavourable. She had just decided that her hostess was dirty and untidy, without sense of decency or religion, when Mrs. Hopton re-entered. In one hand she carried a piece of paper, in the other a small ink-bottle, out of which an orange-coloured pen-holder reared its fluted length.

Clearing a space on the untidy table, she bent down and, with squared elbows and cramped fingers, proceeded to scrawl the words: "I have struck too. M. Hopton."

Then, straightening herself, she once more threw back her head, and another stream of "Her-her-her's" gushed towards the ceiling.

"Now I'll come with you," she said at length. Without waiting to don cloak or bonnet, she proceeded to pin the notice on the front door, which she bolted on the inside. She then left by the scullery door, locking it, just as Mrs. Bindle had done, and carrying with her the key.

Although Mrs. Bindle felt that she suffered socially from being seen with the lumbering, untidy Mrs. Hopton, she regarded it as a sacrifice to a just cause. It was not long, however, before she discovered that she had recruited, not a lieutenant, but a leader.

Seizing the list of names and addresses from her companion's hand, Mrs. Hopton glanced at it and turned in the direction of the street in which lived the timid Mrs. Gilkes. As they walked, Mrs. Bindle told the story of Mrs. Gilkes's cowardice, drawing from the Amazon-like Mrs. Hopton the significant words "Leave 'er to me."

"Now then, none of this," was her greeting to Mrs. Gilkes as she opened her front door. "Out you comes and joins the strike-breakers. None o' your nonsense or – " she paused significantly.

Mrs. Gilkes protested her cowardice, she grovelled, she dragged in her sister, Mary, and the wrathful Gilkes; but without avail. Almost before she knew what had happened, she was walking between Mrs. Hopton and Mrs. Bindle, the back-door key clasped in one hand, striving to tie the strings of her bonnet beneath a chin that was obviously too shallow for the purpose. In her heart was a great terror; yet she was conscious of a strange and not unpleasant thrill at the thought of her own daring. She comforted herself with Mrs. Hopton's promise of protection against her lord's anger.

The overpowering personality of Mrs. Hopton was too much for the other wives. The one or two who made a valiant endeavour to stand out were overwhelmed by her ponderous ridicule, which bordered upon intimidation.

"'Ere, get a pen an' ink," she would cry and, before the reluctant housewife knew what had happened, she had announced that she too had struck, and Mrs. Hopton's army had been swelled by another recruit.

At one house they found the husband about to sit down to an early dinner. That gave Mrs. Hopton her chance.

"You lazy, guzzling, good-for-nothing son of a God-damn loafer!" she shouted, her deep voice throbbing with passion. "Call yourself a man? Fine sort of man you are, letting your wife work and slave while you strike and fill your belly with beef and beer. I've seen better things than you thrown down the sink, that I 'ave."

At the first attack, the man had risen from the table in bewilderment. As Mrs. Hopton emptied upon him the vials of her anger, he had slowly retreated towards the scullery door. She made a sudden movement in his direction; he turned – wrenched open the door, and fled.

"I'm sorry to interrupt you, Mrs. – "

"Bolton," said the neat little woman.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Bolton," said Mrs. Hopton; "but we're going to break this 'ere strike, me and Mrs. Bindle and all these other ladies." She waved her hand to indicate the army she had already collected.

Then she went on to explain; but Mrs. Bolton was adamant against all her invitations to join the emancipationists.

"I suppose we got to fight your battle," Mrs. Hopton cried, and proceeded to drench her victim with ridicule; but Mrs. Bolton stood fast, and the strike-breakers had to acknowledge defeat.

It was Mrs. Bindle's idea that they should hold a meeting outside the organising secretary's house. The suggestion was acclaimed with enthusiasm.

"Let's get a tidy few, first," counselled Mrs. Hopton. "It'll make 'im think 'arder."

At the end of an hour, even Mrs. Hopton was satisfied with the number of her supporters, and she gave the word for the opening of hostilities.

That afternoon, just as he was rising from an excellent meal, Mr. James Cunham was surprised to find that his neatly-kept front-garden was filled with women, while more women seemed to occupy the street. Neighbours came out, errand-boys called to friends, that they might not miss the episode, children paused on their way to school; all seemed to realise the dramatic possibilities of the situation.

Mrs. Hopton played a fugue upon Mr. Cunham's knocker, bringing him to the door in person.

"Well, monkey-face," she boomed. There was a scream of laughter from her followers.

Mr. Cunham started back as if he had been struck.

"Want to starve us, do you?" continued Mrs. Hopton.

"What's all this about?" he enquired, recovering himself. He was a man accustomed to handling crowds, even unfriendly crowds; but never had he encountered anything like the cataract of wrathful contumely that now poured from Mrs. Hopton's lips.

"Just 'ad a good dinner, I suppose," she cried scornfully. "Been enjoyin' it, eh? Cut from the joint and two vegs, puddin' to follow, with a glass of stout to wash it down. That the meenyou, eh? What does it cost you when our men strike? Do you 'ave to keep 'alf a dozen bellies full on a pound a week?"

There was a murmur from the women behind her, a murmur that Mr. Cunham did not like.

"Nice little 'ouse you got 'ere," continued Mrs. Hopton critically, as she peered into the neat and well-furnished hall. "All got out o' strikes," she added over her shoulder to her companions. "All got on the do-nothin'-at-all-easy-purchase-system."

This time there was no mistaking the menace in the murmur from the women behind her.

"You're a beauty, you are," continued Mrs. Hopton. "Not much sweat about your lily brow, Mr. Funny Cunham."

Mr. Cunham felt that the time had come for action.

"What's the meaning of this?" he demanded. "Why have you come here, and who are you?"

"Who are we?" cried Mrs. Hopton scornfully. "He asks who we are," she threw over her shoulder.

Again there was an angry murmur from the rank and file.

"We're the silly fools wot married the men you brought out on strike," said Mrs. Hopton, looking the organising secretary up and down as if he were on show. "Creases in 'is trousers, too," she cried. "You ain't 'alf a swell. Well, we just come to tell you that the strike's orf, because we've struck. Get me, Steve?"

"We've declared a lock-out," broke in Mrs. Bindle with inspiration.

Back went Mrs. Hopton's head, up went her hands to her hips, and deep-throated "Her-her-her's" poured from her parted lips.

"A lock-out!" she cried. "Her-her-her, a lock-out! That's the stuff to give 'em!" and the rank and file took up the cry and, out of the plenitude of his experience, Mr. Cunham recognised that the crowd was hopelessly out of hand.

"Are we down-hearted?" cried a voice, and the shrieks of "No!" that followed confirmed Mr. Cunham in his opinion that the situation was not without its serious aspect.

He was not a coward and he stood his ground, listening to Mrs. Hopton's inspiring oratory of denunciation. It was three o'clock before he saw his garden again – a trampled waste; an offering to the Moloch of strikes.

"Damn the woman!" he cried, as, shutting the door, he returned to the room he used as an office, there to deliberate upon this new phase of the situation. "Curse her!"

III

It was nearly half-past ten that night when Bindle tip-toed up the tiled-path leading to the front door of No. 7 Fenton Street.

Softly he inserted his key in the lock and turned it; but the door refused to give. He stepped back to gaze up at the bedroom window; there was no sign of a light.

It suddenly struck him that the piece of paper on the door was not the same in shape as that he had seen at dinner-time. It was too dark to see if there was anything written on it. Taking a box of matches from his pocket, he struck a light, shielding it carefully so that it should shine only on the paper.

His astonishment at what he read caused him to forget the lighted match, which burnt his fingers.

"Well, I'm blowed!" he muttered. "If this ain't it," and once more he read the sinister notice:

"You have struck. We women have declared a lock-out.

"E. Bindle."

After a few minutes' cogitation, he tip-toed down the path and round to the back of the house; but the scullery door was inflexible in its inhospitality.

He next examined the windows. Each was securely fastened.

"Where'm I goin' to sleep?" he muttered, as once more he tip-toed up the path.

After a further long deliberation, he lifted the knocker, gave three gentle taps – and waited. As nothing happened, he tried four taps of greater strength. These, in turn, produced no response. Then he gave a knock suggestive of a telegraph boy, or a registered letter. At each fresh effort he stepped back to get a view of the bedroom window.

He fancied that the postman-cum-telegraph-boy's knock had produced a slight fluttering of the curtain. He followed it up with something that might have been the police, or a fire.

As he stepped back, the bedroom-window was thrown up, and Mrs. Bindle's head appeared.

"What's the matter?" she cried.

"I can't get in," said Bindle.

"I know you can't," was the uncompromising response, "and I don't mean you shall."

"But where'm I goin' to sleep?" he demanded, anxiety in his voice.

"That's for you to settle."

"'Ere, Lizzie, come down an' let me in," he cried, falling to cajolery.

For answer Mrs. Bindle banged-to the window. He waited expectantly for the door to be opened. At the end of five minutes he realised that Mrs. Bindle had probably gone back to bed.

"Well, I can't stay 'ere all the bloomin' night, me with various veins in my legs," he muttered, conscious that from several windows interested heads were thrust.

Fully convinced that Mrs. Bindle was not on her way down to admit him, he once more fell back upon the knocker, awakening the echoes of Fenton Street.

At the sound of the window-sash being raised, he stepped back and looked up eagerly.

"'Ere, wot the – !"

Something seemed to flash through the night, and he received the contents of the ewer full in the face.

"That'll teach you to come waking me up at this time of night," came the voice of Mrs. Bindle, who, a moment later, retreated into the room. Bindle, rightly conjecturing that she had gone for more water, retired out of reach.

"You soaked me through to the skin," he cried, when she re-appeared.

"And serve you right, too, you and your strikes."

"But ain't you goin' to let me in?"

"When the strike's off the lock-out'll cease," was the oracular retort.

"But I didn't want to strike," protested Bindle.

"Then you should have been a man and said so, instead of letting that little rat make you do everything he wants, him sitting down to a good dinner every day, all paid for out of strikes."

There were sympathetic murmurs from the surrounding darkness.

"But – " began Bindle.

"Don't let me 'ear anything more of you to-night, Joe Bindle," came Mrs. Bindle's uncompromising voice, "or next time I'll throw the jug an' all at you," and with that she banged-to the window in a way that convinced Bindle it was useless to parley further.

"Catch my death o' cold," he grumbled, as he turned on a reluctant heel in the direction of Fulham High Street, with the intention of claiming hospitality from his sister-in-law, Mrs. Hearty. "Wot am I goin' to do for duds," he added. "Funny ole bird I should look in one of 'Earty's frock-coats."

IV

The next morning at nine o'clock, the wives of the strikers met by arrangement outside the organising secretary's house; but the strikers themselves were before them, and Mr. Cunham found himself faced with the ugliest situation he had ever encountered.

At the sight of the groups of strikers, the women raised shrill cries. The men, too, lifted their voices, not in derision or criticism of their helpmates; but at the organising secretary.

The previous night the same drama that had been enacted between Bindle and Mrs. Bindle had taken place outside the houses of many of the other strikers, with the result that they had become "fed up to the blinkin' neck with the whole ruddy business."

"Well!" cried Mrs. Hopton as, at the head of her legion of Amazons, she reached the first group of men. "How jer like it?"

The men turned aside, grumbling in their throats.

"Her-her-her!" she laughed. "Boot's on the other foot now, my pretty canaries, ain't it? Nobody mustn't do anythink to upset you; but you can do what you streamin' well like, you lot o' silly mugs!"

"Wotjer let that little rat-faced sniveller turn you round 'is little finger for? You ain't men, you're just Unionists wot 'ave got to do wot 'e tells you. I see 'im yesterday," she continued after a slight pause, "'aving a rare ole guzzle wot you pays for by striking. 'Ow much does it cost 'im? That's wot I want to know, the rat-faced little stinker!"

At that moment "the rat-faced little stinker" himself appeared, hat on head and light overcoat thrown over his arm. He smiled wearily, he was not favourably impressed by the look of things.

His appearance was the signal for shrill shouts from the women, and a grumbling murmur from the men.

"'Ere's Kayser Cunham," shouted one woman, and then individual cries were drowned in the angry murmur of protest and recrimination.

Mr. Cunham found himself faced by the same men who, the day before, had greeted his words with cheers. Now they made it manifest that if he did not find a way out of the strike difficulty, there would be trouble.

"Take that!" roared Mrs. Hopton hoarsely, as she snatched something from a paper-bag she was carrying, and hurled it with all her might at the leader. Her aim was bad, and a small man, standing at right angles to the Union secretary, received a large and painfully ripe tomato full on the chin.

Mrs. Hopton's cry was a signal to the other women. From beneath cloaks and capes they produced every conceivable missile, including a number of eggs far gone towards chickenhood. With more zeal than accuracy of aim, they hurled them at the unfortunate Mr. Cunham. For a full minute he stood his ground valiantly, then, an egg catching him between the eyes brought swift oblivion.

The strikers, however, did not manifest the courage of their leader. Although intended for the organising secretary, most of the missiles found a way into their ranks. They wavered and, a moment after, turned and fled.

Approaching nearer, the women concentrated upon him whom they regarded as responsible for the strike, and their aim improved. Some of their shots took effect on his person, but most of them on the front of the house. Three windows were broken, and it was not until Mrs. Cunham came and dragged her egg-bespattered lord into the passage, banging to the street door behind her, that the storm began to die down.

By this time a considerable crowd of interested spectators had gathered.

"Just shows you what us women can do if we've a mind to do it," was the oracular utterance of one woman, who prided herself upon having been the first arrival outside the actual combatants.

"She ain't 'alf a caution," remarked a "lady friend," who had joined her soon after the outbreak of hostilities. "That big un," she added, nodding in the direction of Mrs. Hopton, who, arms on hips and head thrown back, was giving vent to her mirth in a series of "her-her-her's."

A policeman pushed his way through the crowd towards the gate. Mrs. Hopton, catching sight of him, turned.

"You take my advice, my lad, and keep out of this."

The policeman looked about him a little uncertainly.

"What's the matter?" he enquired.

"It's a strike and a lock-out," she explained, "an' they got a bit mixed. We ain't got no quarrel with a good-looking young chap like you, an' we're on private premises, so you just jazz along as if you 'adn't seen us."

A smile fluttered about the lips of the policeman. The thought of passing Mrs. Hopton without seeing her amused him; still he took no active part in the proceedings, beyond an official exhortation to the crowd to "pass along, please."

"Well, ladies," said Mrs. Hopton, addressing her victorious legions; "it's all over now, bar shoutin'. If any o' your men start a-knockin' you about, tell 'em we're a-goin' to stand together, and just let me know. We'll come round and make 'em wish they'd been born somethink wot can't feel."

That morning the manager at the yard received a deputation from the men, headed by Mr. Cunham, who, although he had changed his clothes and taken a hot bath, was still conscious of the disgusting reek of rotten eggs. Before dinner-time the whole matter had been settled, and the men were to resume work at two o'clock.

Bindle reached home a few minutes to one, hungry and expectant. The notice had been removed from the front door, and he found Mrs. Bindle in the kitchen ironing.

"Well," she demanded as he entered, "what do you want?"

"Strike's orf, Lizzie," he said genially, an anxious eye turned to the stove upon which, however, there were no saucepans. This decided him that his dinner was in the oven.

"I could have told you that!" was her sole comment, and she proceeded with her ironing.

For a few minutes Bindle looked about him, then once more fixed his gaze upon the oven.

"Wot time you goin' to 'ave dinner, Lizzie?" he asked, with all the geniality of a prodigal doubtful of his welcome.

"I've had it." Mrs. Bindle's lips met in a hard, firm line.

"Is mine in the oven?"

"Better look and see."

He walked across to the stove and opened the oven door. It was as bare as the cupboard of Mrs. Hubbard.

"Wot you done with it, Lizzie?" he enquired, misgiving clutching at his heart.

"What have I done with what?" she snapped, as she brought her iron down with a bang that caused him to jump.

"My little bit o' groundsel."

"When you talk sense, perhaps I can understand you."

"My dinner," he explained with an injured air.

"When you've done a day's work you'll get a day's dinner, and not before."

"But the strike's orf."

"So's the lock-out."

"But – "

"Don't stand there 'butting' me. Go and do some work, then you'll have something to eat," and Mrs. Bindle reversed the pillow-case she was ironing, and got in a straight right full in the centre of it, whilst Bindle turned gloomily to the door and made his way to The Yellow Ostrich, where, over a pint of beer and some bread and cheese, he gloomed his discontent.

"No more strikes for me," said a man seated opposite, who was similarly engaged.

"Same 'ere," said Bindle.

"Bob Cunham got a flea in 'is ear this mornin' wot 'e's been askin' for," said the man, and Bindle, nodding in agreement, buried his face in his pewter.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Hopton was explaining to a few personal friends how it all had happened.

"She done good work in startin' of us orf," was her tribute to Mrs. Bindle; "but I can't say I takes to her as a friend."

CHAPTER II

MRS. BINDLE'S WASHING-DAY

I

Shooooooooosssh!

Like a silver flash, the contents of a water-jug descended upon the back of the moth-eaten sandy cat, engaged in excavating Mrs. Bindle's geranium-bed.

A curve of yellow, and Mrs. Sawney's "Sandy" had taken the dividing wall between No. 7 and No. 9 in one movement – and the drama was over.

Mrs. Bindle closed her parlour-window. She refilled the jug, placing it ready for the next delinquent and then returned to her domestic duties.

On the other side of a thin partitioning wall, Mrs. Sawney left the window from which she had viewed her cat's attack upon Mrs. Bindle's geranium-bed, and Mrs. Bindle's counter-attack upon Sandy's person. Passing into the small passage she opened the front door, her lips set in a determined line.

"Sandy, Sandy, Sandy, Sandy," she called, in accents that caused Sandy, now three gardens away, to pause in the act of shaking his various members one by one, in an endeavour to disembarrass himself of the contents of Mrs. Bindle's water-jug.

"Sandy, Sandy, Sandy, Sandy," cooed Mrs. Sawney. "Poor pussy."

The tone of his mistress' voice rendered Sandy suspicious as to her intentions. He was a cat who had fought his way from kittenhood to a three-year-old, and that with the loss of nothing more conspicuous than the tip of his left ear. He could not remember the time when he had not been engaged in warfare, either predatory or defensive, and he had accumulated much wisdom in the process.

"Sandy, Sandy, Sandy, Sandy. Puss, puss, puss." Mrs. Sawney's tone grew in mellowness as her anger increased. "Poor pussy."

With a final shake of his near hind leg, Sandy put two more gardens between himself and that voice, and proceeded to damn to-morrow's weather by washing clean over his right ear.

Mrs. Sawney closed her front-door and retired to the regions that knew her best. In her heart was a great anger. Water had been thrown over her cat, an act which, according to Mrs. Sawney's code of ethics, constituted a personal affront.

It was Monday, and with Mrs. Sawney the effect of the Monday-morning feeling, coupled with the purifying of the domestic linen, was a sore trial to her never very philosophical nature.

"To-morrow'll be 'er washing-day," she muttered, as she poked down the clothes in the bubbling copper with a long stick, bleached and furred by constant immersion in boiling water. "I'll show 'er, throwing water over my cat, the stuck-up baggage!"

Late that afternoon, she called upon Mrs. Grimps, who lived at No. 5, to return the scrubbing-board she had borrowed that morning. With Mrs. Sawney, to borrow was to manifest the qualities of neighbourliness, and one of her grievances against Mrs. Bindle was that she was "too stuck up to borrow a pin."

Had Sandy heard the sentiments that fell from his mistress's lips that afternoon, and had he not been the Ulysses among cats that he undoubtedly was, he would have become convinced that a new heaven or a new earth was in prospect. As it was, Sandy was two streets away, engaged in an affair with a lady of piebald appearance and coy demeanour.

When, half an hour later, Mrs. Sawney returned to No. 9, her expression was even more grim. The sight of the pink tie-ups with which the white lace curtains at No. 7 were looped back, rendered

her forgetful of her recently expressed sentiments. She sent Sandy at express speed from her sight, and soundly boxed Harriet's ears. Mrs. Sawney was annoyed.

II

All her life Mrs. Bindle had been exclusive. She prided herself upon the fact that she was never to be seen gossiping upon doorstep, or at garden-gate. In consequence, she was regarded as "a stuck-up cat"; she called it keeping herself to herself.

Another cause of her unpopularity with the housewives of Fenton Street was the way she stared at their windows as she passed. There was in that look criticism and disdain, and it inspired her neighbours with fury, the more so because of their impotence.

Mrs. Bindle judged a woman by her windows – and by the same token condemned her. Fenton Street knew it, and treasured up the memory.

It was this attitude towards their windows, more than Mrs. Bindle's exclusiveness in the matter of front-door, or back-door gossip, that made for her unpopularity with those among whom circumstances and the jerry-builder had ordained that she should spend her days. She regarded it as a virtue not to be on speaking terms with anyone in the street.

For the most part, Mrs. Bindle and her immediate neighbours lived in a state of armed neutrality. On the one side was Mrs. Sawney, a lath of a woman with an insatiable appetite for scandal and the mouth of a scold, whose windows were, in Mrs. Bindle's opinion, a disgrace; on the other was Mrs. Grimps, a big, jolly-looking woman, who laughed loudly at things, about which Mrs. Bindle did not even permit herself to think.

In spite of the armistice that prevailed, there were occasions when slumbering dislike would develop into open hostilities. The strategy employed was almost invariably the same, just as were the forces engaged.

These encounters generally took place on Tuesdays, Mrs. Bindle's washing-day. To a woman, Fenton Street washed on Monday, and the fact of Mrs. Bindle selecting Tuesday for the cleansing her household linen was, in the eyes of other housewives, a direct challenge. It was an endeavour to vaunt her own superiority, and Fenton Street, despite its cockney good-nature, found it impossible to forgive what it regarded as "swank".

The result was that occasionally Fenton Street gave tongue, sometimes through the medium of its offspring; at others from the lips of the women themselves.

Mrs. Grimps and Mrs. Sawney had conceived a clever strategy, which never failed in its effect upon their victim. On Mrs. Bindle's washing-days, when hostilities had been decided on, Mrs. Grimps would go up to the back-bedroom window, whilst Mrs. Sawney would stand at her back-door, or conversely. From these positions, the fences being low, they had an excellent view of the back garden of No. 7, and would carry on a conversation, the subject of which would be Mrs. Bindle, or the garments she was exposing to the public gaze.

The two women seemed to find a never-ending source of interest in their neighbour's laundry. Being intensely refined in all such matters, Mrs. Bindle subjected her weekly wash to a strict censorship, drying the more intimate garments before the kitchen fire. This evoked frankly-expressed speculation between her two enemies as to how anyone could live without change of clothing.

In her heart, Mrs. Bindle had come to dislike, almost to dread, washing-days, although she in no way mitigated her uncompromising attitude towards her neighbours.

When, on the Wednesday morning following one of these one-sided battles, Mrs. Bindle went out shopping, her glances at the front-windows of Mrs. Grimps's house, or those of Mrs. Sawney, according to the direction she took, were steadier and more critical than ever. Mrs. Bindle was not one to strike her flag to the enemy.

Soon after nine on the Tuesday morning after Sandy had constituted himself a *casus belli*, Mrs. Bindle emerged from her scullery carrying a basketful of clothes, on the top of which lay a handful of clothes-pegs. Placing the basket on the ground, she proceeded to wipe with a cloth the clothes-line, which Bindle had put up before breakfast.

The sight of her neat, angular form in the garden was the signal for Mrs. Grimps to come to her back door, whilst Mrs. Sawney ascended her stairs. A moment later, the back window of No. 9 was thrown up with a flourish, and the hard face of Sandy's mistress appeared.

It was a curious circumstance that, although there was never any pre-arrangement, Mrs. Sawney always seemed to appear at the window just as Mrs. Grimps emerged from her back door, or the order would be reversed. Never had they been known both to appear together, either at window or at door. Their mutual understanding seemed to be that of the ancient pair in the old-fashioned weather-indicator.

"Good morning, Mrs. Grimps," called Mrs. Sawney from her post of vantage.

"Good morning, Mrs. Sawney," responded Mrs. Grimps. "Beautiful day, ain't it?"

"Fine dryin' weather," responded Mrs. Sawney.

"I see you got your washin' finished early yes'day."

"Yes, an' a rare lot there was this week," said Mrs. Sawney, settling her arms comfortably upon the window-sill. "You 'ad a tidy bit, too, I see."

"Yes," replied Mrs. Grimps, picking a back-tooth with a hair-pin. "Mr. Grimps is like Mr. Sawney, must 'ave 'is clean pair o' pants every week, 'e must, an' a shirt an' vest, too. I tell 'im he ought to 'ave been a millionaire."

"Ah!" said Mrs. Sawney, "I sometimes wishes my 'usband would be content with calico linings to 'is trousers, like some folks I could name. 'E's afraid o' them rubbin' 'im, 'e says; but then 'e always was clean in 'is 'abits."

This remark was directly levelled at Mrs. Bindle's censorship of everything appertaining to nether-laundry.

"Well, I must say I sympathises with 'im," remarked Mrs. Grimps, returning the hair-pin to where it belonged. "When I sees some folks' washing, I says to myself, I says, 'Wot can they wear underneath?'"

"An' well you might, Mrs. Grimps," cried Mrs. Sawney meaningly. "P'raps they spend the money on pink ribbons to tie up their lace curtains. It's all very well to make a show with yer windows, but," with the air of one who has made an important discovery, "you can't be clean unless you're clean all over, I says."

Whilst these remarks were being bandied to and fro over her head, Mrs. Bindle had been engaged in pegging to the clothes-line the first batch of her week's wash. Her face was grimmer and harder than usual, and there was in her eyes a cold, grey look, suggestive of an iron control.

"Yes," proceeded Mrs. Grimps, "I always 'ave said an' always shall, that it's the underneaths wot count."

Mrs. Bindle stuck a peg in the corner of a tablecloth and, taking another from her mouth, she proceeded to the other end of the tablecloth and jabbed that, too, astride the line.

"'Always 'ave dainty linjerry, 'Arriet,' my pore mother used to say," continued Mrs. Sawney, "an' I always 'ave. After all, who wants three pillow-cases a week?"

This was in the nature of a direct challenge, as Mrs. Bindle had just stepped back from attaching to the line a third pillow-case, which immediately proceeded to balloon itself into joyous abandon.

"If you *are* religious, you didn't ought to be cruel to dumb animals," announced Mrs. Grimps, "throwin' water over the pore creatures."

"That sort never is kind to any think but theirselves," commented Mrs. Sawney, with the air of one who is well-versed in the ways of the devout.

Each time Mrs. Bindle emerged from her scullery that morning, her two relentless neighbours appeared as if by magic, and oblique pleasantries ebbed and flowed above her head.

The episode of Mrs. Bindle's lock-out was discussed in detail. The "goody-goody" qualities affected by "some people" were commented on in relation to the more brutal instincts they occasionally manifested.

The treatment that certain pleasant-spoken husbands, whom it was "a pleasure to meet," received from their wives, whose faces were like "vinegar on the point of a needle," left both Mrs. Grimps and Mrs. Sawney incapable of expressing the indignation that was within them.

When Bindle came home to dinner, he found "Mrs. B. with a temper wot 'ad got a nasty edge on it," as he expressed it to one of his mates on his return to work. He was too wise, however, to venture an enquiry as to the cause. He realised that to ask for the wind might mean reaping the whirlwind.

Immediately after the meal, Mrs. Bindle proceeded to clear the lines to make room for another batch. She hoped to get done whilst her neighbours were at dinner; but she had not been in the garden half-a-minute before her tormentors appeared.

"I been thinkin' of keepin' a few fowls," remarked Mrs. Sawney, her mouth full of bread and cheese, "jest a 'andful of cocks an' a few 'ens," and she winked down at Mrs. Grimps, as Mrs. Bindle pegged a lace window-curtain on the line, having first subjected it to a vigorous rubbing with a duster.

"An' very nice too," agreed Mrs. Grimps; "I must say I likes an egg for my tea," she added, "only them cocks do fight so."

"Well, I shouldn't get too many," continued Mrs. Sawney, "say three cocks an' three 'ens. They ought to get on nicely together."

These remarks had reference to a one-time project of Mrs. Bindle to supply her table with new-laid eggs, in the pursuit of which she had purchased three pairs of birds, equally divided as to sex.

"That was the only time I ever enjoyed a bit o' cock-fightin' on my own," Bindle was wont to remark, when telling the story of Mrs. Bindle's application of the rule of monogamy to a fowl-run.

He had made one endeavour to enlighten Mrs. Bindle upon the fact that the domestic cock (she insisted on the term "rooster") had neither rounded Cape Turk, nor weathered Seraglio Point; but he was told not to be disgusting, Mrs. Bindle's invariable rejoinder when sex matters cropped up. He had therefore desisted, enjoying to the full Mrs. Bindle's efforts to police her new colony.

In those days, the Bindle's back garden had been a riot of flying feathers, belligerent cocks and squawking hens, chivvied about by Mrs. Bindle, armed with mop or broom.

Mrs. Sawney and a Mrs. Telcher, who had preceded Mrs. Grimps in the occupancy of No. 5, had sat at their bedroom windows, laughing until the tears ran down their dubious cheeks and their sides ached. When their mirth permitted, they had tendered advice; but for the most part they were so weak from laughing that speech was denied them.

Mrs. Bindle's knowledge of the ways of fowls was limited; but it embraced one important piece of information – that without "roosters", hens would not lay. When Bindle had striven to set her right, he had been silenced with the inevitable, "Don't be disgusting."

She had reasoned that if hens were stimulated to lay by the presence of the "male bird", then a cavalier each would surely result in an increased output.

The fowls, however, had disappeared as suddenly as they had come, and thereafter Bindle realised that it was neither safe nor politic to refer to the subject. It had taken a plate of rice, hurled at his head from the other side of the kitchen, to bring him to this philosophical frame of mind.

For weeks afterwards, the children of Fenton Street would greet Mrs. Bindle's appearance with strange crowing noises, which pleased them and convulsed their parents; for Mrs. Bindle's fowls had become *the* joke of the neighbourhood.

"I must say I likes a man wots got a pleasant word for everyone," remarked Mrs. Sawney, some two hours later, as Mrs. Bindle picked up the clothes-basket containing the last of the day's wash, and made for the scullery door, "even when 'e ain't 'appy in 'is 'ome life," she added, as the scullery door

banged-to for the day, and Mrs. Grimps concurred as she disappeared, to catch-up with the day's work as best she could, and prepare the children's tea.

III

That evening at supper, Bindle heard what had been withheld from Mrs. Grimps and Mrs. Sawney – Mrs. Bindle's opinion of her neighbours. With great dexterity, she managed to link him up with their misdeeds. He should have got on as his brother-in-law, Mr. Hearty, had got on, and then she would not have been forced to reside in a neighbourhood so utterly dead to all sense of refinement and proper conduct.

Bindle had come to regard Tuesdays as days of wrath, and he usually managed to slip out after supper with as little ostentation as possible. Reasoning that religion and cleanliness were productive of such mental disturbances, he was frankly for what he called "a dirty 'eathen"; but he was wise enough to keep his views to himself.

"If you were a man you'd stop it," she stormed, "allowing me to be insulted as I've been to-day."

"But 'ow can I stop you an' them a-scrappin'?" he protested, with corrugated forehead.

"You can go in and tell them that you won't have it."

"But then Sawney an' Grimps would start on me."

"That's what it is, you're afraid," she cried, triumphantly. "If you was a man you'd hit back; but you're not."

"But I ain't a-goin' to start fightin' because some one says I don't wear – "

"Stop it!"

And Bindle stopped it.

"Why don't you do something like Mr. Hearty?" demanded Mrs. Bindle, as he pushed back his chair and rose. She was determined not to be deprived of her scapegoat, at least not without another offensive.

He paused before replying, making sure that his line of retreat was open. The greengrocering success of her brother-in-law was used by Mrs. Bindle as a whip of scorpions.

"'Earty don't do things," he replied, sidling towards the door. "'E does people," and with footwork that would have made a champion fly-weight envious, he was out in the passage before Mrs. Bindle could retort.

Long and late that night she pondered over the indignities to which she had been subjected during the day. There were wanton moments when she yearned to be able to display to the neighbours the whole of her laundry – and Bindle's. Herself a connoisseur of garments that passed through the wash-tub, she knew that those of her house could hold their own, as joyously white and playful in the breeze as any that her neighbours were able to produce.

She had suffered with a still tongue; yet it had not turned aside wrath, particularly her own wrath. Instinctively, her thoughts reverted to the time when an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth were regarded as legal tender.

All that night and the next day she pondered. When Bindle returned on the Wednesday evening, he found her almost light-hearted. "Gospel Bells", Mrs. Bindle's favourite hymn, was going with a rare swing, and during the meal that followed, she was bordering on the conversational.

Several times he regarded her curiously.

"Somethink's up," he muttered; but, too wise in his experience, he made no endeavour to probe the mystery.

For the rest of the week Mrs. Bindle spent every odd moment she could spare from her domestic duties in collecting what she mentally described as "rubbish". She went through each room with a toothcomb. By Saturday night, she had accumulated in the wash-house, a pile of odds and ends which, as Bindle said, would have been enough to start a rag-and-bone shop.

Curiously enough, Mrs. Bindle did not resent his remark; instead she almost smiled, so marked was her expression of grim complacency.

On Sunday at chapel, she sang with a vigour and fervency that attracted to her the curious gaze of more than one pair of eyes.

"Mrs. B.'s got somethink in 'er stockin'," mumbled Bindle, as he rose from the supper-table that night. "Never seen 'er so cheerio in all my puff. I 'ope it ain't drink."

Monday morning dawned, and Mrs. Bindle was up an hour earlier than usual, still almost blithe in her manner.

"Shouldn't be surprised if she's a-goin' to run away with ole 'Earty," muttered Bindle, as he took from her almost gracious hands his third cup of tea at breakfast.

"You sings like a two-year-old, Lizzie," he ventured. "I like them little twiddley bits wot you been puttin' into that 'ymn."

The "twiddley bits" to which Bindle referred was her rendering of "bells," as a word of three syllables, "be-e-ells."

"You get on with your breakfast," was her retort; but there was about it neither reproach nor rancour.

Again he looked at her curiously.

"Can't make 'er out these last few days," he muttered, as he rose and picked up his cap. "Somethink's up!"

Mrs. Bindle proceeded to wash-up the breakfast things to the tune of "Hold the Fort." From time to time during the morning, she would glance out of the window to see if Mrs. Grimps, or Mrs. Sawney had yet begun to "hang-out".

They were usually late; but this morning they were later than usual. It was after ten before Mrs. Grimps appeared with the first basket of wet clothes. She was followed a few minutes later by Mrs. Sawney.

The two women exchanged greetings, the day was too busy a one for anything more.

As they pegged the various items of the week's wash to their respective lines, Mrs. Bindle watched from the back-bedroom window, her eyes like points of steel, her lips a grim grey line. She was experiencing the sensations of the general who sees the enemy delivered into his hands.

As soon as Mrs. Grimps and Mrs. Sawney had returned to their wash-tubs, Mrs. Bindle descended to the scullery, where lay the heap of rubbish she had collected during the previous week. With great deliberation she proceeded to stuff it into a clothes-basket, by means of which she transported the mass to the bottom of the garden, a proceeding which required several journeys.

Mrs. Sawney and Mrs. Grimps were too busily occupied to concern themselves with the movements of their neighbour.

Her task completed, Mrs. Bindle returned to her domestic duties, and in due time ate a solitary dinner, Bindle being engaged too far away to admit of his sharing it with her. She then proceeded upstairs to perform her toilette, as on Monday afternoons she always arranged to go out "dressed". This in itself was a direct challenge to Fenton Street, which had to stay at home and attend to the cleansing of its linen.

Her toilette finished, Mrs. Bindle slipped into the back bedroom. Below, her two neighbours were engaged in hanging-out the second instalment of their wash, the first batch having been gathered-in ready for the mangle. After that, they would eat their mid-day meal. Although no gossip, Mrs. Bindle was not unobservant, and she knew the movements of her neighbours as well as they knew hers.

A quarter of an hour later, the front door of No. 7 banged-to. Mrs. Bindle, in brown alpaca, a brown bonnet with a dash of purple, and biscuit-coloured gloves, was going to see her niece, Millie Dixon, née Hearty, with whom she had arranged to spend the afternoon.

IV

"Mrs. Sawney! Mrs. Sawney! Come and look at your clothes!"

Mrs. Grimps, her hands on the top of the fence, shouted her thrilling appeal across the intervening garden.

Mrs. Sawney appeared, as if propelled from her scullery door by some unseen force.

For a moment she stood blinking stupidly, as dense volumes of smut-laden smoke ascended to the blueness of heaven from the garden of No. 7. It was only the smoke, however, that ascended. One glance at the piebald garments hanging from her linen-lines was sufficient to convince Mrs. Sawney of that.

"It's that woman," she almost screamed, as she began to pound at the fence dividing her garden from that of Mrs. Bindle. "I'll show 'er."

"Yes; but what about the – " Mrs. Grimps broke-off, stifled by a volume of dense black smoke that curled across to her. "Look at them smuts."

Mrs. Bindle had taken the precaution of adding some paraffin and colza oil to her bonfire, which was now blazing merrily, sending forth an ever-increasing deluge of smuts, as if conscious of what was expected of it.

Mrs. Sawney continued to bang on the fence, whilst Mrs. Grimps dashed through her house and proceeded to pound at Mrs. Bindle's front door with a vigour born of hate and desperation.

"She's gorn out."

The information was vouchsafed by a little boy in petticoats, who had toddled uncertainly from the other side of the street, and now stood clinging to the railings with grubby hands.

Mrs. Grimps scurried back again to the scene of disaster.

She was just in time to see Mrs. Sawney take what appeared to be the tail-end of a header into Mrs. Bindle's back-garden, displaying in the process a pair of stockings that owed little to the wash-tub, and less to the darning-needle.

"Get some water," she gasped, as she picked herself up and once more consigned her hosiery to the seclusion of her skirts. Mrs. Grimps dashed into the scullery.

A minute later she re-appeared with a large pail, from which water slopped as she walked. With much grunting and a considerable wetting of her own clothes, she succeeded in passing it over the fence to her neighbour.

With one hand grasping the handle and the other the rim at the base, Mrs. Sawney staggered towards the fire and inverted the pail. Then, with a scream, she dropped the pail, threw her apron over her head, and ran from the cloud of steam and the deluge of blacks that her rash act had occasioned.

"'Urt yerself?" enquired Mrs. Grimps, solicitously as she gazed mournfully at her ruined "wash", upon which big flakes of black were descending like locusts upon the fair lands of Pharaoh.

Mrs. Sawney removed the apron from her head, and blinked up at the sky, as if to assure herself that the blessing of sight was still hers.

"The wicked cat!" she vociferated, when she found that no damage had been done. "Come on, let's put it out," she exhorted as, with a swift movement, she picked up the pail and handed it over the fence to the waiting Mrs. Grimps.

Ten minutes later, the fire was extinguished; but the washing was ruined.

Mrs. Sawney gazed across the fence at a dishevelled caricature of Mrs. Grimps, with the full consciousness that she herself must look even worse. She also realised that she had to make the return journey over the fence, under the critical eyes of Mrs. Grimps, and that to climb a fence without an exposure of leg was an impossibility.

Both women were wet to the skin, as neither had proved expert in the handing of brimming pails of water over a wooden fence; both were spotted like the pard; both were in their hearts breathing

dire vengeance upon the perpetrator of the outrage, who just at that moment was alighting from a tram at Hammersmith.

Throughout that afternoon, Mrs. Sawney and Mrs. Grimps waited; grim-lipped and hard-eyed they waited. Fenton Street was to see something that it had not even dreamed of. Mrs. Sawney and Mrs. Grimps had decided unanimously to "show 'er."

Their offspring had been instructed that, at the sight of Mrs. Bindle, they were to return hot-foot and report.

The children had told their friends, and their friends had told their mothers, with the result that not only Mrs. Sawney and Mrs. Grimps; but every housewife in Fenton Street was on the qui vive.

Soon after six there were cries of "Here she comes," as if Mrs. Bindle had been the Boat Race, followed by a sudden stampede of children.

Mrs. Sawney and Mrs. Grimps rushed to action-quarters. Mrs. Sawney gave a stir to a pail of blacklead and water behind the front door, whilst Mrs. Grimps seized a soft broom, which she had saturated in water used for washing-up the dinner-things.

The children clustered round the gate, and hung on to the railings. Housewives came to their doors, or appeared at their bedroom windows. Fenton Street loved Drama, the bigger the "D" with which it was spelled, the more they enjoyed it.

Behind their front doors, Mrs. Sawney and Mrs. Grimps waited and watched. Suddenly the crowd that had attached itself to the railings began to melt away, and the babel of clattering voices died down. Several women were seen to leave their garden-gates and walk up the street. Still the two grim-faced women waited behind their "street-doors."

At length, as the last child left the railings and tore up the street, both women decided that something must have happened.

The sight of Mrs. Sawney at her door brought Mrs. Grimps to hers, just as Harriet, the nine years old daughter of Mrs. Sawney, rushed up breathless.

"She's comin'," gasped the child, whereat both women disappeared, Mrs. Sawney to grasp the handle of her pail, and Mrs. Grimps to seize her broom.

When Mrs. Bindle appeared, the centre of an eddying mass of children, with a few women on the outer fringe, she was carrying in her arms a child of about five, who was whimpering pitifully. Her bonnet had slipped back, her right hand, from which the biscuit-coloured glove had been removed, was stained with blood, whilst her umbrella was being carried, as if it were a sacred relic, by a curly-headed little lad who was living his hour.

At the sight of the procession, Mrs. Sawney let the handle of her pail fall with a clang, whilst Mrs. Grimps dropped her broom.

"It's my 'Ector," she screamed, as she bolted down the garden path. "Oh, my God! 'e's dead."

"Get some hot water," ordered Mrs. Bindle, as she pushed the mother aside and entered the gate. "He's cut his leg."

Followed by Mrs. Bindle, Mrs. Grimps bolted into the house. There was something in Mrs. Bindle's tone that brooked of no delay.

Watched by Mrs. Grimps, Mrs. Sawney, and several of their friends, Mrs. Bindle washed the wound and bound it up with clean white rag, in place of her own blood-soaked handkerchief, and she did her work with the thoroughness with which she did everything.

When she had finished, she took the child in her arms, and for an hour soothed it with the assurance that it was "the bravest little precious in all the world." When she made to transfer her burden to its mother's arms, the uproar that ensued decided Mrs. Bindle to continue her ministrations.

It was ten o'clock before she finally left Mrs. Grimps's house, and she did so without a word.

"Who'd 'ave thought it!" remarked Mrs. Sawney, as Mrs. Bindle closed the gate.

"She's got a way with kids," admitted Mrs. Grimps. "I will say that for 'er," and in turning back along the dark hall, she fell over the broom with which she had intended to greet her neighbour.

Mrs. Sawney returned to her own house and hurled a saucepan at Sandy, a circumstance which kept him from home for two days and three nights – he was not a cat to take undue risks.

CHAPTER III

MRS. BINDLE ENTERTAINS

I

"Bindle!" Mrs. Bindle stepped down from a chair, protected by her ironing-blanket, on which she had been standing to replace a piece of holly that had fallen from a picture.

She gazed at the mid-Victorian riot about her with obvious pride; it constituted her holy of holies. Upon it she had laboured for days with soap-and-water and furniture-polish, with evergreen and coloured candles, to render it worthy of the approaching festivity. She had succeeded only in emphasising its uncompromising atmosphere of coldness and angularity.

Antimacassars seemed to shiver self-consciously upon the backs of stamped-plush chairs, photo-frames, and what she called "knick-knacks," stared at one another in wide-eyed desolation; whilst chains of coloured paper, pale green and yellow predominating, stretched in bilious festoons from picture-nail to picture-nail.

On the mantelpiece, in wine-coloured lustres, which were Mrs. Bindle's especial glory, two long candles reared aloft their pink nakedness. They were never to be lit and they knew it; chilly, pink and naked they would remain, eventually to be packed away once more in the cardboard-box, from which for years they had been taken to grace each successive festivity.

It had always been Bindle's ambition to light these candles, which were probably the most ancient pieces of petroleum-wax in the kingdom; but he lacked the moral courage.

"Funny thing you can't be clean without stinkin' like this," he had mumbled that morning, as he sniffed the air, reeking of turpentine with an underlying motif of yellow-soap. "I suppose 'appiness is like drink," he added, "it takes people different ways."

Passing over to the sideboard, Mrs. Bindle gazed down at the refreshments: sausage-rolls, sandwiches, rock-cakes, blanc-mange, jellies, three-cornered tarts, exuding their contents at every joint, chocolate-shape, and other delicacies.

In the centre stood a large open jam-tart made on a meat-dish. It was Mrs. Bindle's masterpiece, a tribute alike to earth and to heaven. On the jam, in letters contrived out of strips of pastry, appeared the exhortation, "Prepare to Meet Thy God."

Bindle had gasped at the sight of this superlative work of art and religion. "That's a funny sort o' way to give a cove a appetite," he had murmured. "If it 'adn't been Mrs. B., I'd 'ave said it was a joke."

It was with obvious satisfaction that Mrs. Bindle viewed her handiwork. At the sight of an iced-cake, sheltering itself behind a plate of bananas, she smiled. Here again her devotional instincts had triumphed. On the uneven white surface, in irregular letters of an uncertain blue, was the statement, "The Wages of Sin is Death."

"Well, well, it ain't my idea of 'appiness."

She span round to find Bindle, who had entered unheard, gazing dubiously at the tart bearing the disconcerting legend.

"What's not your idea of happiness?" she demanded.

He grinned genially across at her.

"You'd like beer-bottles on the mantelpiece, I suppose," she continued, "and clay pipes and spittoons and –"

"Not for me, Mrs. B.," he retorted; "no one ain't never known me miss the fire-place yet."

Mrs. Bindle's lips tightened, as if she were striving to restrain the angry words that were eager to leap out.

She had planned a musical evening, with the object of assisting her brother-in-law in his aspirations as trainer of the choir at the Alton Road Chapel, a post which had recently fallen vacant.

By inviting some of the more humble members of the choir, those on a higher social plane than her own would scarcely be likely to accept, Mrs. Bindle had thought to further Mr. Hearty's candidature.

She recognised that their influence would be indirect in its action; but even that, she decided, would be an asset.

Mr. Hearty had readily consented to lend his harmonium, and had sent it round by his van. It took two men and a boy, together with Mr. Hearty and Mrs. Bindle, a long time to persuade it along the narrow passage. Here it had incontinently stuck for nearly an hour. It was not until Bindle returned, to bring his professional experience to bear, that it had been coaxed into the parlour.

Christmas was near at hand, and for weeks past the choir had been working under forced-draught, practising carols. That had given Mrs. Bindle the idea of devoting her evening entirely to seasonable music.

"Wot jer call me for?" demanded Bindle presently, remembering the reason of his presence.

"Don't forget to get a pail of coals and put it in the kitchen," she ordered.

"We shan't want no coals, Mrs. B., with all that 'ot stuff we got a-comin'," he muttered lugubriously. "Why ain't we got a bit o' mistletoe?" he demanded.

"Don't be disgusting," she retorted.

"Disgustin'!" he cried innocently. "There ain't nothink disgustin' in a bit o' mistletoe."

"I won't have such things in my house," she announced with decision. "You've got a lewd mind."

"There ain't nothink lood in kissin' a gal under the mistletoe," he demurred, "or under anythink else," he added as an after-thought.

"You're nasty-minded, Bindle, and you know it."

"Well, wot are we goin' to do at a party if there ain't goin' to be no kissin'?" he persisted, looking about him with unwonted despondency.

"Mr. Hearty has lent us his harmonium!" she said with unction, gazing reverently across at the instrument, which was the pride of her brother-in-law's heart.

"But wot's the use of an 'armonium," he complained. "You can't play 'unt the slipper, or postman's knock with an 'armonium."

"We're going to sing."

"Wot, 'ymns?" he groaned.

"No, carols," was the retort. "It's Christmas," she added as if by way of explanation.

"Well, it don't look like it, and it don't smell like it." He sniffed the atmosphere with obvious disgust. "Puts me in mind of 'orse-oils," he added.

"That's right, go on," she retorted tartly. "You're not hurting me, if you think it." She drew in her lips and crossed her hands in front of her, with Mrs. Bindle a manifestation of Christian resignation.

"I don't want to 'urt you, Lizzie; but I ask you, can you see me a-singin' carols?" He turned towards her a despondent eye of interrogation. "Me, at my age?"

"You're not asked to sing. You can go out and spend the evening swearing and drinking with your low companions." She moved over to the mantelpiece, and adjusted one of her beloved pink candles. "You'd only spoil the music," she added.

"If there wasn't no music there wouldn't be no religion," he grumbled. "It's 'armoniums in this world and 'arps in the next. I'd sooner be a pussyfoot than play an 'arp."

Mrs. Bindle ignored the remark, and proceeded to re-pile a plate of sausage-rolls to a greater symmetry, flicking an imaginary speck of dust from a glass-jug of lemonade.

"Now mind," she cried, as he walked towards the door, "I won't have you spoiling my evening, you'd better go out."

"An 'usband's cross-roads, or why Bindle left 'ome," he grinned as he turned, winked at the right-hand pink candle and disappeared, leaving Mrs. Bindle to gaze admiringly at her handiwork. She had laboured very hard in preparing for the evening's festivities.

II

Half-way down the stairs, Mrs. Bindle paused to listen. Her quick ears had detected the sound of voices at the back-door, and what was undoubtedly the clink of bottles. Continuing her descent, she entered the kitchen, pausing just inside the door.

"That's all right, 'Op-o'-my-thumb. A dozen it is," she heard Bindle remark to someone in the outer darkness. There was a shrill "Good-night," and Bindle entered the kitchen from the scullery, carrying a beer-bottle under each arm and one in either hand.

"Who was that?" she demanded, her eyes fixed upon the bottles.

"Oh! jest a nipper wot 'ad brought somethink for me," he said with assumed unconcern.

"What did he bring?" she demanded, her eyes still fixed on the bottles.

"Some beer wot I ordered."

"What for?"

"To drink." He looked at her as if surprised at the question.

"I didn't suppose you'd bought it to wash in," was the angry retort. "There are four bottles in the cupboard. They'll last till Saturday. Why did you order more?" Mrs. Bindle was obviously suspicious.

"P'raps somebody'll get dry to-night," he temporised.

"Don't you tell me any of your wicked lies, Bindle," she cried angrily. "You know they're all temperance. How many did you order?"

"Oh, jest a few," he said, depositing the bottles on the lower shelf of the dresser. "Nothink like 'avin' a bottle or two up yer sleeve."

"Why have you got your best suit on?" She regarded with disapproval the blue suit and red necktie Bindle was wearing. Her eyes dropped to the white cuffs that only a careful manipulation of his thumbs prevented from slipping off altogether.

"Ain't it the night of the party?" he enquired innocently.

"I told you that I won't have you come in, you with your common ways and low talk."

"That's all right," he replied cheerfully. "I'm a-goin' to sit in the kitchen."

"And what good will that do you?" she demanded suspiciously. "Another time, when I'm alone, you can go out fast enough. Now because I've got a few friends coming, nothing will move you."

"But I want to 'ear the music," he protested. "P'raps I'll get to like carols if I 'ear enough of 'em," he added, with the air of one who announces that some day he hopes to acquire a taste for castor-oil.

"You're enough to try the patience of a saint," she cried, still eyeing the bottles of beer. "I suppose you're up to some devilment. It wouldn't be you to let me enjoy myself."

"I likes to see you enjoyin' yerself, Lizzie," he protested. "'Ow'd you like ole Ginger to run in an' – ?"

"If that man enters my house I'll insult him!" she cried, her eyes glinting angrily.

"That ain't easy," he replied cheerfully, "unless you was to drink 'is beer. That always gets 'is rag out."

"I won't have that man in my house," she stormed. "You shall not pollute my home with your foul-mouthed, public-house companions. I – "

"Ole Ging is all right," Bindle assured her, as he proceeded to fetch four more bottles from the scullery. "All you got to do is to give 'im some beer, play 'All is Forgiven Wot 'Appened on Peace Night,' an' let 'im stamp 'is feet to the chorus, an' 'e's one of the cheerfulest coves wot you'll find."

"Well, you bring him here and see what I'll do," she announced darkly.

"That's all right, Mrs. B., don't you worry. I jest asked 'Uggles to run round an' keep me company, and Wilkie may drop in if 'e ain't too busy coughin'; but they shan't get mixed up with the canaries – they won't want to after wot I'm goin' to tell 'em, an' we'll all be as quiet as mice."

"If you bring any of your friends into the parlour, Bindle," she cried, "I'll turn the gas out."

"Naughty!" he admonished, wagging at her a playful forefinger. "I ain't a-goin' to allow –"

"Stop it!" and with that she bounced out of the kitchen and dashed upstairs to the bedroom, banging the door behind her.

"Ain't women funny," he grumbled, as he fetched the remaining four bottles of beer from the scullery, and placed them upon the shelf of the dresser. "Nice ole row there'd 'ave been if I'd said anythink about turnin' out the gas. That's why ole 'Earty's so keen on them choir practices. I bet they got a penny-in-the-slot meter, an' everybody takes bloomin' good care to leave all their coppers at 'ome."

Overhead, Mrs. Bindle could be heard giving expression to her feelings in the opening and shutting of drawers.

"Well, well!" he sighed philosophically, "I suppose you can't 'ave everythink, as the cove said when 'e found the lodger 'ad gone orf with 'is trousers on Bank 'Oliday," and he proceeded to gather together two cracked tumblers, which had been censored by Mrs. Bindle as unfit for her guests, a large white mug, with a pink band and the remains of a view of Margate, and a pint jug with a pink butterfly on the spout.

"We're a-goin' to enjoy ourselves, any-old-'ow," he murmured as, picking up a meat-dish from the dresser, he slipped into the parlour, returning a moment later with it piled with rock-cakes, sandwiches and sausage-rolls. These he hid on the bottom shelf of the dresser, placing a pair of boots in front of them.

"Jest in time," he muttered, as Mrs. Bindle was heard descending the stairs. "It's – 'Ullo!" he broke off, "'ere's the first appetite," as a knock was heard at the front door.

For the next ten minutes, Mrs. Bindle was busy conducting her guests upstairs to "take off their things." Their escorts waited in the passage, clearing their throats, or stroking their chins. Convention demanded that they should wait to make a formal entry into the parlour with their wives.

With his ear pressed against the kitchen door, Bindle listened with interest, endeavouring to identify from their voices the arrivals as they passed.

By ten minutes past seven, the sounds in the passage had ceased – the guests had all come. In Mrs. Bindle's circle it was customary to take literally the time mentioned in the invitation, and to apologise for even a few minutes' lateness.

In order that the Montagues should not become confused with the Capulets, Bindle had taken the precaution of asking his own friends to come to the back door. He had added that the beer would be in the kitchen.

Mrs. Bindle had always been immovable in her determination that Bindle's "low public-house companions" should not have an opportunity of "insulting" her friends from the Alton Road Chapel.

With Mrs. Bindle the first quarter-of-an-hour of her rare social gatherings was always a period of anguish and uncertainty. Although everybody knew everybody else, all were constrained and ill-at-ease.

Miss Lamb kept twirling her rolled-gold bracelet round her lace-mittened wrist, smiling vacantly the while. Miss Death seemed unable to keep her hard grey eyes, set far too closely together, from the refreshment sideboard, whilst Mrs. Dykes, a tiny woman in a fawn skirt and a coral-pink blouse, was continually feeling the back of her head, as if anticipating some catastrophe to her hair.

Mrs. Hearty, who began in a bright blue satin blouse, and ended in canary-coloured stockings thrust into cloth shoes with paste buckles, beat her breast and struggled for breath. Mr. Hearty was negative, conversationally he was a bankrupt, whilst Mrs. Stitchley was garrulous and with a purpose. She was bent upon talking down the consciousness that she had not been invited.

Her excuse for coming, at least the excuse she made to herself, was that of chaperoning her daughter, a near-sighted, shapeless girl, with no chest and a muddy complexion, who never had and never would require such an attention.

The others were just neuter, except Mr. Thimbell, whose acute nervousness and length of limb rendered him a nuisance.

Mrs. Bindle was conscious that she was looking her best in a dark blue alpaca dress, with a cream-coloured lace yoke, which modesty had prompted her to have lined with the material of the dress. To her, the display of any portion of her person above the instep, or below the feminine equivalent of the "Adam's apple," was a tribute to the Mammon of Unrighteousness, and her dressmaker was instructed accordingly.

She moved about the room, trying to make everyone feel at home, and succeeding only in emphasising the fact that they were all out.

Everybody was anxious to get down to the serious business of the evening; still the social amenities had to be observed. There must be a preliminary period devoted to conversation.

After a quarter-of-an-hour's endeavour to exchange the ideas which none of them possessed, Mrs. Bindle moved over to Mr. Hearty and whispered something, at the same time glancing across at the harmonium. There was an immediate look of interest and expectancy on faces which, a moment before, had been blank and apathetic.

Mr. Goslett, a little man with high cheekbones and a criminal taste in neckwear, cleared his throat; Mr. Hearty surreptitiously slipped into his mouth an acid drop, which he had just taken from his waistcoat pocket; Mr. Dykes, a long, thin man, who in his youth had been known to his contemporaries as "Razor," drew his handkerchief with a flourish, and tested Mrs. Bindle's walls as if he were a priest before Jericho.

Some difficulty arose as to who should play Mr. Hearty's beloved instrument. Mrs. Stitchley made it clear that she expected her daughter, Mabel, to be asked. Mrs. Bindle, however, decided that Mrs. Snarch, a colourless woman who sang contralto (her own contralto) and sniffed when she was not singing contralto, should preside; her influence with her fellow-members of the choir was likely to be greater. Thus in the first ten minutes Mrs. Bindle scored two implacable enemies and one dubious friend.

Mrs. Snarch took her seat at the harmonium, fidgetted about with her skirts and blinked near-sightedly at the book of carols, which seemed disinclined to remain open. The others grouped themselves about her.

There was a medley of strange sounds, as each member of the party took the necessary steps to ensure purity of vocal tone. Added to this, Mr. Dykes pulled his collar away from his throat and stretched his neck upwards, as if to clear a passage for the sound he intended to send forth. Mr. Goslett pushed his sandy moustache up from his full lips with the back of his right forefinger, whilst Miss Stitchley moistened and remoistened her thin, colourless lips.

Then they joined together in song.

After a preliminary carol, in which no one seemed to take any particular interest, they got off well together with "Good King Wenceslas," a prime favourite at the Alton Road Chapel.

This evening it proved an enormous success.

Miss Stitchley's shrillness clashed with Mrs. Bindle's sharpness more than in the preceding carol. Mr. Hearty shut his eyes more tightly and was woollier, Mr. Dykes got more breath behind his boom, and Mrs. Dykes made more mistakes in her "harmony." Mr. Goslett raised his head higher, looking more than ever like a chicken drinking, whilst Miss Death's thin, upper notes seemed to pierce even Mr. Dykes's boom, just as they put Miss Lamb, always uncertain as to pitch, even further off her stroke.

Still, everyone enjoyed it immensely. Even Mrs. Stitchley, who confessed that she was "no 'and at singin'," croaked a few husky notes, as she sat acutely upright, due to a six-and-elevenpenny pair of stays she had bought that afternoon, nodding her head and beating time.

Mrs. Stitchley never lost an opportunity of making clear her position in regard to music.

"I'm musical, my dear," she would say. "It's in the fambly; but I don't sing, I 'as spasms, you know." She volunteered this information much as a man might seek to excuse his inability to play the French horn by explaining that he is addicted to bass viol.

"Now that's what I call a carol," said Mrs. Stitchley, endeavouring to prevent the upper portion of her stay-busk from burying itself in her flesh. Then, with sudden inspiration, she cried, "Encore! Encore!" and made a motion to clap her hands; but the stay-busk took the opportunity of getting in a vicious dig. With a little yelp of pain, Mrs. Stitchley's hands flew to her rescue.

Everybody was too pleased with "Good King Wenceslas" to trouble about Mrs. Stitchley's stay-busk. The word "encore," however, had given them an idea. Mr. Hearty looked interrogatingly at Mrs. Bindle.

"Do you think – " he began.

"Shall we have it again?" she queried, and there was a chorus of pleased acquiescence. Everybody was determined to put a little bit more into the encore than into the original rendering. There was only one dissentient voice, that of Mr. Dykes, who was eager for "The First Noël," which gave him such a chance for individual effort. When out with the Chapel Christmas singers, Mr. Dykes had been known to awaken as many as six streets with a single verse of that popular carol.

Mrs. Bindle almost smiled. Her party was proving a success.

Mrs. Stitchley, still holding the top of her stay-busk in her left hand, nodded approval, her beady little eyes fixed upon the singers. She was awaiting an opportunity to bring from her pocket a half-quartern bottle containing what, if she had been caught drinking it, she would have described as clove-water, taken medicinally.

To give colour to her assertion, she always chewed a clove after each reference to the bottle.

At The Golden Horse, Mrs. Stitchley's clove-water was known as Old Tom Special.

For an hour Mrs. Bindle's guests sang, encoring themselves with enthusiasm. Mr. Dykes got in his famous "Noël," he pronounced it "No-ho-hell," and everyone else seemed satisfied, if a little sore of throat.

It was half-past eight when Mrs. Bindle decided that the time had come for refreshments.

Throughout the evening her ears had been keenly alert for sounds from the kitchen; but beyond a suppressed hum of voices, she could detect nothing; still she was ill-at-ease. If Mrs. Hearty, for instance, knew that Bindle was in the house, she would certainly go over to the enemy.

In the matter of catering for her guests Mrs. Bindle had nothing to learn. She was a good cook and delighted in providing well for those she entertained. Her sausage-rolls, straightforward affairs in which the sausage had something more than a walking-on part, were famous among her friends. Her blanc-mange, jam puffs, rock-cakes, and sandwiches had already established her reputation with those who had been privileged to taste them. She basked in the sunshine of the praise lavished on what she provided. Without it she would have felt that her party was a failure.

This evening there was no lack of approval, cordially expressed. Mrs. Stitchley, who purposely had partaken of a light luncheon and no tea, was particularly loud in her encomiums, preluding each sausage-roll she took, from the sixth onwards, with some fresh adjective.

Mrs. Bindle was almost happy.

She was in the act of pouring out a glass of lemonade for Miss Lamb, when suddenly she paused. An unaccustomed sound from the kitchen had arrested her hand. Others heard it too, and the hum of conversation died away into silence, broken only by Mr. Hearty's mastication of a sausage-roll.

Through the dividing wall came the sound of a concertina. Mrs. Bindle put down the jug and turned towards the door. As she did so a thin, nasal voice broke into song:

For 'e was oiled in every joint,
A bobby came up who was standin' point.
He blew 'is whistle to summon more,
Bill got 'ome on the point of 'is jaw.
Then 'e screamed, an' kicked, an' bit their knees,
As each grabbed a leg or an arm by degrees.
An' that's 'ow Bill Morgan was taken 'ome
On the night of 'is first wife's funeral.

The verse was followed by a full-throated chorus, accompanied by a pounding as if someone were hurling bricks about.

After that came silence; but for the hum of conversation, above which rose Bindle's voice forbidding further singing until "them next door 'ave 'ad a go."

The guests looked at one another in amazement. The set expression of Mrs. Bindle's face hardened, and the lines of her mouth became grim. Her first instinct had been to rush to the kitchen; but she decided to wait. She did not want a scene whilst her guests were there.

Gradually the carol-singers returned to their plates and glasses, and Mr. Hearty's mastication was once more heard in their midst. Mr. Hearty always ate with relish.

Unobserved by Mrs. Bindle, Mrs. Hearty stole out of the parlour on her way to investigate; a minute later Mrs. Stitchley followed. The solitude of the passage gave her an admirable opportunity of finishing the "clove-water" she had brought with her.

When everyone had assured Mrs. Bindle, in answer to her pressing invitation to refresh themselves still further, that they "really couldn't, not if she were to pay them," she turned once more to Mr. Hearty for the necessary encouragement to start another carol.

Their first effort, however, clearly showed that Mrs. Bindle's refreshments had taken the edge off their singing. Miss Stitchley had lost much of her shrillness, Mrs. Bindle was less sharp and Mr. Hearty more woolly. Mr. Dykes's boom was but a wraith of its former self, proving the truth of Mrs. Dykes's laughing remark that if he ate so many of Mrs. Bindle's sausage-rolls he wouldn't be able to sing at all. Only Miss Death was up to form, her shrill soprano still cleaving the atmosphere like a javelin.

As the last chords of the carol died away, the concertina in the kitchen took up the running, followed a minute later by the same voice as before, singing nasally about the adventures of a particularly rollicking set of boon-companions who knew neither care nor curfew.

At the first sound, Mrs. Bindle moved swiftly to the door, where she paused uncertainly. She was in a quandary. Her conception of good manners did not admit of a hostess leaving her guests; still something had to be done.

At the conclusion of the verse the voice ceased; but the concertina wailed on. Mrs. Bindle drew breath. Her guests gazed at one another in a dazed sort of way. Then with a crash came the chorus, rendered with enthusiasm:

We'll all roll 'ome, we'll all roll 'ome,
For 'ome's the only place for weary men like us,
We'll all roll 'ome, we'll all roll 'ome,
For we 'aven't got the money to pay for a bus.
For it's only 'alf-past two,
An' it won't be three just yet.
So we'll all roll 'ome, we'll all roll 'ome,
An' lay down in the passage to be out of the wet.

The applause that followed was annihilating. Accompanying it again was the curious banging sound which Mrs. Bindle had noticed before. She was sure she recognised amid the cries of approval, the sound of a woman's voice. That decided her. She had already noted the absence of Mrs. Hearty and Mrs. Stitchley.

Without so much as an apology to her guests, who stood still gazing blankly at one another, Mrs. Bindle slipped out into the passage, closing the door behind her, much to the disappointment of the others.

A moment later she threw open the kitchen door, conscious that one of the most dramatic moments of her life was at hand.

Through a grey film of tobacco smoke she saw half-a-dozen men, one seated on the floor, another on the fender, and two on the table. All were smoking.

About the room were dotted bottles and various drinking vessels, mostly cups, whilst on the mantelpiece were Bindle's white cuffs, discarded on account of their inconvenient habit of slipping off at every movement of his hands.

Mrs. Hearty was seated in front of the dresser, holding a glass of beer in one hand and beating her breast with the other, whilst opposite to her sat Mrs. Stitchley, one hand still clutching the top of her stay-busk, an idiotic smirk upon her moist face.

As Mrs. Bindle gazed upon the scene, she was conscious of a feeling of disappointment; no one seemed to regard her presence as any deviation from the normal. Mrs. Stitchley looked up and nodded. Bindle deliberately avoided her eye.

Mrs. Bindle's attention became focussed upon the man seated on her fender. In his hands he grasped a concertina, before him were stretched a pair of thin legs in tight blue trousers. Above a violent blue necktie there rose a pasty face, terminating in a quiff of amazing dimensions, which glistened greasily in the gaslight. His heavy-lidded eyes were half-closed, whilst in his mouth he held a cigarette, the end of which was most unwholesomely chewed. His whole demeanour was that of a man who had not yet realised that the curtain had risen upon a new act in the drama.

As Mrs. Bindle appeared at the kitchen door, the concertina once more began to speak. A moment later the musician threw back his head and gave tongue, like a hound baying at the moon:

For I love my mother, love 'er with all my 'eart,
I can see 'er now on the doorstep, the day we 'ad to part.
A man that's got a tanner, can always get a wife,
But a mother is just a treasure that comes once in a life.

"Now then, ladies and gents, chorus if *you* please," he cried.

They did please, and soon Mrs. Bindle's kitchen echoed with a full-throated rendering of:

We all love mother, love her all the time,
For there ain't no other who seems to us the same.
From babyhood to manhood, she watches o'er our lives,
For it's mother, mother, mother, bless the dear old name.

It was a doleful refrain, charged with cockney melancholy; yet there could be no doubt about the enthusiasm of the singers. Mrs. Hearty spilled beer over her blue satin bosom, as a result of the energy with which she beat time; Mrs. Stitchley's hand, the one not grasping her stay-busk, was also beating time, different time from Mrs. Hearty's, whilst two light-coloured knees rose and fell with the regularity of piston-rods, solving for Mrs. Bindle the mystery of the sounds like the tossing about of bricks she had heard in the parlour.

Ginger was joining in the chorus!

As the singer started the second verse, Mrs. Bindle was conscious that someone was behind her. She turned to find Miss Stitchley standing at her shoulder. A moment later she realised that the little passage was overflowing with carol-singers.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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