

Morrison Arthur

Tales of Mean Streets



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Содержание

INTRODUCTION TO THE AMERICAN EDITION	5
INTRODUCTION	7
LIZERUNT	11
I. LIZER'S WOOING	12
II. LIZER'S FIRST	15
III. A CHANGE OF CIRCUMSTANCES	18
WITHOUT VISIBLE MEANS	21
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	23

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INTRODUCTION TO THE AMERICAN EDITION

It was considered an intrepid thing for Walter Besant to do when, twelve or thirteen years ago, he invaded the great East End of London and drew upon its unknown wealth of varied material to people that most charming novel, "All Sorts and Conditions of Men." Until then the West End knew little of its contiguous neighbor in the East. Dickens's kaleidoscopic views of low life in the South of London were manifestly caricatures of the slum specimens of human nature which he purposely sought and often distorted to suit his bizarre humor. Mr. Besant may be fairly considered as the pioneer of those who have since descended to the great unchartered region of East London, about which, so far as our knowledge of the existing conditions of human life in that community are concerned, we remained until, as it were yesterday, almost as ignorant as of the undiscovered territories in Central Africa. Contemporaneous with Mr. Besant's "discovery" of East London began the eastward march of the Salvation Army, which has since honeycombed this quarter of the metropolis with its militant camps. Gradually the barriers were thrown down, and the East has become accessible to literature and to civilization as it never had been to the various Charity and Church missionary organizations.

It was as the secretary of an old Charity Trust that Mr. Arthur Morrison first made his acquaintance with East London, and by dint of several years' residence and attentive study acquired his knowledge of the East End and its myriad denizens. Right in the midst of the great square bounded by the Thames, the Lea, the City, Kingsland, and the Hackney open spaces lie the dreary "Mean Streets" which Mr. Morrison has described with uncommon power and vigor, and among which the operations of his secretaryship engaged him laboriously for years. The possibility of presenting his observations of East London in narrative form began to grow upon him while casting around for literary pabulum to convert into magazine articles, and in October, 1891, appeared his first sketch, entitled "A Street," in "Macmillan's Magazine." This, in a remodelled form, now serves as an introductory chapter to the present collection. The article in "Macmillan's" attracted a good deal of attention, and won for its author the good fellowship of Mr. W. E. Henley, who encouraged him in his idea of writing a series of short stories and studies which should describe East End life with austerity, restraint, and frankness. A large number of the "Tales" appeared in the "National Observer" and several followed in the "Pall Mall Budget." The dedication to Mr. Henley of "Tales of Mean Streets" is a grateful acknowledgment by the author of the kindly and frank counsel of his friendly critic; whose criticism, it may be added, has been mainly directed towards the author's craftsmanship – his conceptions of the life he was portraying the critic was wise enough to let alone. Mr. Morrison has also been indebted on the side of art in fiction to Mr. Walter Besant, whom he met in the East End.

Mr. Morrison has been fortunate in his literary experience. He is another witness to the fact that merit makes its way from the outside, without necessarily receiving aid or having influence brought to bear on editors or publishers. It is curious to note that a manuscript of his which happened to be rejected once was accepted on the day following, and now has a place in this book. Some cycling verses contributed as a lad to a cycling magazine began his literary career, and for some years he continued to write on what was then a novel sport. He drifted into broader channels and became a frequent contributor to popular papers and magazines. During this period he was working on the Charity Commission, and wrote only by way of relaxation. About five years ago he resigned his office on the Trust, and, occupying chambers near the Strand, joined the editorial staff of an old-established evening paper, where for some months he continued to write leaderettes and miscellaneous articles and notes until, becoming convinced that he could not do justice to such ability for better work which

he might possess amidst the grinding routine of newspaper scribbling, he gave up his post and applied himself to more serious writing, contributing to the "Strand," and other magazines and reviews. About this time he began the series which is now gathered under the common title "Tales of Mean Streets." On its recent publication in England it was received with instant recognition as a book of extraordinary merit, and it has met with signal success. Some idea of the strong impression which it has made in England may be gathered from Mr. Arthur Waugh's warm tribute to the author's distinction in a recent letter to the "Critic." "He deals exclusively," writes Mr. Waugh, "with life in the East End of London, and he does so with a fearlessness and originality which are of more value than many sermons. I do not know whether his book is published in America; but if so, I strongly advise every reader of this letter to secure it. Those who do so will learn from its pages more of the degradation and misery of a certain side of London life than they could in many weeks of philanthropic 'slumming.' Mr. Morrison's will be a name to conjure with in another season."

Mr. Arthur Morrison is but thirty-one, and has just stepped on to the threshold of literary fame as a writer of decided promise and strength. He has only broken ground as yet in the field which has brought him his spurs, and is at present contemplating a longer story of East End life. The number of those who have attempted to write familiarly of the seamy side of our great cities from close observation and laborious study of its life in a first-hand fashion is so small that it is easy to believe that the author of "Tales of Mean Streets," possessing as he does the prime qualities of a novelist, has a future before him in an unprecedented form of literature.

JAMES MACARTHUR.

New York, March 2, 1895.

INTRODUCTION

A STREET

This street is in the East End. There is no need to say in the East End of what. The East End is a vast city, as famous in its way as any the hand of man has made. But who knows the East End? It is down through Cornhill and out beyond Leadenhall Street and Aldgate Pump, one will say: a shocking place, where he once went with a curate; an evil plexus of slums that hide human creeping things, where filthy men and women live on penn'orths of gin, where collars and clean shirts are decencies unknown, where every citizen wears a black eye, and none ever combs his hair. The East End is a place, says another, which is given over to the Unemployed. And the Unemployed is a race whose token is a clay pipe, and whose enemy is soap: now and again it migrates bodily to Hyde Park with banners, and furnishes adjacent police courts with disorderly drunks. Still another knows the East End only as the place whence begging letters come; there are coal and blanket funds there, all perennially insolvent, and everybody always wants a day in the country. Many and misty are people's notions of the East End; and each is commonly but the distorted shadow of a minor feature. Foul slums there are in the East End, of course, as there are in the West; want and misery there are, as wherever a host is gathered together to fight for food. But they are not often spectacular in kind.

Of this street there are about one hundred and fifty yards – on the same pattern all. It is not pretty to look at. A dingy little brick house twenty feet high, with three square holes to carry the windows, and an oblong hole to carry the door, is not a pleasing object; and each side of this street is formed by two or three score of such houses in a row, with one front wall in common. And the effect is as of stables.

Round the corner there are a baker's, a chandler's, and a beer-shop. They are not included in the view from any of the rectangular holes; but they are well known to every denizen, and the chandler goes to church on Sunday and pays for his seat. At the opposite end, turnings lead to streets less rigidly respectable: some where "Mangling done here" stares from windows, and where doors are left carelessly open; others where squalid women sit on doorsteps, and girls go to factories in white aprons. Many such turnings, of as many grades of decency, are set between this and the nearest slum.

They are not a very noisy or obtrusive lot in this street. They do not go to Hyde Park with banners, and they seldom fight. It is just possible that one or two among them, at some point in a life of ups and downs, may have been indebted to a coal and blanket fund; but whosoever these may be, they would rather die than publish the disgrace, and it is probable that they very nearly did so ere submitting to it.

Some who inhabit this street are in the docks, some in the gasworks, some in one or other of the few shipbuilding yards that yet survive on the Thames. Two families in a house is the general rule, for there are six rooms behind each set of holes: this, unless "young men lodgers" are taken in, or there are grown sons paying for bed and board. As for the grown daughters, they marry as soon as may be. Domestic service is a social descent, and little under millinery and dressmaking is compatible with self-respect. The general servant may be caught young among the turnings at the end where mangling is done; and the factory girls live still further off, in places skirting slums.

Every morning at half-past five there is a curious demonstration. The street resounds with thunderous knockings, repeated upon door after door, and acknowledged ever by a muffled shout from within. These signals are the work of the night-watchman or the early policeman, or both, and they summon the sleepers to go forth to the docks, the gasworks, and the ship-yards. To be awakened in this wise costs fourpence a week, and for this fourpence a fierce rivalry rages between night-

watchmen and policemen. The night-watchman – a sort of by-blow of the ancient "Charley," and himself a fast vanishing quantity – is the real professional performer; but he goes to the wall, because a large connection must be worked if the pursuit is to pay at fourpence a knocker. Now, it is not easy to bang at two knockers three-quarters of a mile apart, and a hundred others lying between, all punctually at half-past five. Wherefore the policeman, to whom the fourpence is but a perquisite, and who is content with a smaller round, is rapidly supplanting the night-watchman, whose cry of "Past nine o'clock," as he collects orders in the evening, is now seldom heard.

The knocking and the shouting pass, and there comes the noise of opening and shutting of doors, and a clattering away to the docks, the gasworks and the ship-yards. Later more door-shutting is heard, and then the trotting of sorrow-laden little feet along the grim street to the grim Board School three grim streets off. Then silence, save for a subdued sound of scrubbing here and there, and the puny squall of croupy infants. After this, a new trotting of little feet to docks, gasworks, and ship-yards with father's dinner in a basin and a red handkerchief, and so to the Board School again. More muffled scrubbing and more squalling, and perhaps a feeble attempt or two at decorating the blankness of a square hole here and there by pouring water into a grimy flower-pot full of dirt. Then comes the trot of little feet toward the oblong holes, heralding the slower tread of sooty artisans; a smell of bloater up and down; nightfall; the fighting of boys in the street, perhaps of men at the corner near the beer-shop; sleep. And this is the record of a day in this street; and every day is hopelessly the same.

Every day, that is, but Sunday. On Sunday morning a smell of cooking floats round the corner from the half-shut baker's, and the little feet trot down the street under steaming burdens of beef, potatoes, and batter pudding – the lucky little feet these, with Sunday boots on them, when father is in good work and has brought home all his money; not the poor little feet in worn shoes, carrying little bodies in the threadbare clothes of all the week, when father is out of work, or ill, or drunk, and the Sunday cooking may very easily be done at home, – if any there be to do.

On Sunday morning one or two heads of families appear in wonderful black suits, with unnumbered creases and wrinklins at the seams. At their sides and about their heels trot the unresting little feet, and from under painful little velvet caps and straw hats stare solemn little faces towelled to a polish. Thus disposed and arrayed, they fare gravely through the grim little streets to a grim Little Bethel where are gathered together others in like garb and attendance; and for two hours they endure the frantic menace of hell-fire.

Most of the men, however, lie in shirt and trousers on their beds and read the Sunday paper; while some are driven forth – for they hinder the housework – to loaf, and await the opening of the beer-shop round the corner. Thus goes Sunday in this street, and every Sunday is the same as every other Sunday, so that one monotony is broken with another. For the women, however, Sunday is much as other days, except that there is rather more work for them. The break in their round of the week is washing day.

No event in the outer world makes any impression in this street. Nations may rise, or may totter in ruin; but here the colorless day will work through its twenty-four hours just as it did yesterday, and just as it will to-morrow. Without there may be party strife, wars and rumors of wars, public rejoicings; but the trotting of the little feet will be neither quickened nor stayed. Those quaint little women, the girl-children of this street, who use a motherly management toward all girl-things younger than themselves, and toward all boys as old or older, with "Bless the child!" or "Drat the children!" – those quaint little women will still go marketing with big baskets, and will regard the price of bacon as chief among human considerations. Nothing disturbs this street – nothing but a strike.

Nobody laughs here – life is too serious a thing; nobody sings. There was once a woman who sang – a young wife from the country. But she bore children, and her voice cracked. Then her man died, and she sang no more. They took away her home, and with her children about her skirts she left this street forever. The other women did not think much of her. She was "helpless."

One of the square holes in this street – one of the single, ground-floor holes – is found, on individual examination, to differ from the others. There has been an attempt to make it into a shop-window. Half a dozen candles, a few sickly sugar-sticks, certain shrivelled bloaters, some bootlaces, and a bundle or two of firewood compose a stock which at night is sometimes lighted by a little paraffine lamp in a tin sconce, and sometimes by a candle. A widow lives here – a gaunt, bony widow, with sunken, red eyes. She has other sources of income than the candles and the bootlaces: she washes and chars all day, and she sews cheap shirts at night. Two "young men lodgers," moreover, sleep upstairs, and the children sleep in the back room; she herself is supposed not to sleep at all. The policeman does not knock here in the morning – the widow wakes the lodgers herself; and nobody in the street behind ever looks out of window before going to bed, no matter how late, without seeing a light in the widow's room where she plies her needle. She is a quiet woman, who speaks little with her neighbors, having other things to do: a woman of pronounced character, to whom it would be unadvisable – even dangerous – to offer coals or blankets. Hers was the strongest contempt for the helpless woman who sang: a contempt whose added bitterness might be traced to its source. For when the singing woman was marketing, from which door of the pawnshop had she twice met the widow coming forth?

This is not a dirty street, taken as a whole. The widow's house is one of the cleanest, and the widow's children match the house. The one house cleaner than the widow's is ruled by a despotic Scotchwoman, who drives every hawker off her whitened step, and rubs her door handle if a hand have rested on it. The Scotchwoman has made several attempts to accommodate "young men lodgers," but they have ended in shrill rows.

There is no house without children in this street, and the number of them grows ever and ever greater. Nine-tenths of the doctor's visits are on this account alone, and his appearances are the chief matter of such conversation as the women make across the fences. One after another the little strangers come, to live through lives as flat and colorless as the day's life in this street. Existence dawns, and the doctor-watchman's door knock resounds along the row of rectangular holes. Then a muffled cry announces that a small new being has come to trudge and sweat its way in the appointed groove. Later, the trotting of little feet and the school; the midday play hour, when love peeps even into this street; after that more trotting of little feet – strange little feet, new little feet – and the scrubbing, and the squalling, and the barren flower-pot; the end of the sooty day's work; the last home-coming; nightfall; sleep.

When love's light falls into some corner of the street, it falls at an early hour of this mean life, and is itself but a dusty ray. It falls early, because it is the sole bright thing which the street sees, and is watched for and counted on. Lads and lasses, awkwardly arm in arm, go pacing up and down this street, before the natural interest in marbles and doll's houses would have left them in a brighter place. They are "keeping company"; the manner of which proceeding is indigenous – is a custom native to the place. The young people first "walk out" in pairs. There is no exchange of promises, no troth-plight, no engagement, no love-talk. They patrol the street side by side, usually in silence, sometimes with fatuous chatter. There are no dances, no tennis, no water-parties, no picnics to bring them together: so they must walk out, or be unacquainted. If two of them grow dissatisfied with each other's company, nothing is easier than to separate and walk out with somebody else. When by these means each has found a fit mate (or thinks so), a ring is bought, and the odd association becomes a regular engagement; but this is not until the walking out has endured for many months. The two stages of courtship are spoken of indiscriminately as "keeping company," but a very careful distinction is drawn between them by the parties concerned. Nevertheless, in the walking out period it would be almost as great a breach of faith for either to walk out with more than one, as it would be if the full engagement had been made. And love-making in this street is a dreary thing, when one thinks of love-making in other places. It begins – and it ends – too soon.

Nobody from this street goes to the theatre. That would mean a long journey, and it would cost money which might buy bread and beer and boots. For those, too, who wear black Sunday suits it would be sinful. Nobody reads poetry or romance. The very words are foreign. A Sunday paper in some few houses provides such reading as this street is disposed to achieve. Now and again a penny novel has been found among the private treasures of a growing daughter, and has been wrathfully confiscated. For the air of this street is unfavorable to the ideal.

Yet there are aspirations. There has lately come into the street a young man lodger who belongs to a Mutual Improvement Society. Membership in this society is regarded as a sort of learned degree, and at its meetings debates are held and papers smugly read by lamentably self-satisfied young men lodgers, whose only preparation for debating and writing is a fathomless ignorance. For ignorance is the inevitable portion of dwellers here: seeing nothing, reading nothing, and considering nothing.

Where in the East End lies this street? Everywhere. The hundred and fifty yards is only a link in a long and a mightily tangled chain – is only a turn in a tortuous maze. This street of the square holes is hundreds of miles long. That it is planned in short lengths is true, but there is no other way in the world that can more properly be called a single street, because of its dismal lack of accent, its sordid uniformity, its utter remoteness from delight.

LIZERUNT

LIZERUNT.

I. LIZER'S WOOING

Somewhere in the register was written the name Elizabeth Hunt; but seventeen years after the entry the spoken name was Lizerunt. Lizerunt worked at a pickle factory, and appeared abroad in an elaborate and shabby costume, usually supplemented by a white apron. Withal she was something of a beauty. That is to say, her cheeks were very red, her teeth were very large and white, her nose was small and snub, and her fringe was long and shiny; while her face, new-washed, was susceptible of a high polish. Many such girls are married at sixteen, but Lizerunt was belated, and had never a bloke at all.

Billy Chope was a year older than Lizerunt. He wore a billycock with a thin brim and a permanent dent in the crown; he had a bobtail coat, with the collar turned up at one side and down at the other, as an expression of independence; between his meals he carried his hands in his breeches pockets; and he lived with his mother, who mangled. His conversation with Lizerunt consisted long of perfunctory nods; but great things happened this especial Thursday evening, as Lizerunt, making for home, followed the fading red beyond the furthest end of Commercial Road. For Billy Chope, slouching in the opposite direction, lurched across the pavement as they met, and, taking the nearer hand from his pocket, caught and twisted her arm, bumping her against the wall.

"Garn," said Lizerunt, greatly pleased: "le' go!" For she knew that this was love.

"Where yer auf to, Lizer?"

"'Ome, o' course, cheeky. Le' go;" and she snatched – in vain – at Billy's hat.

Billy let go, and capered in front of her. She feigned to dodge by him, careful not to be too quick, because affairs were developing.

"I say, Lizer," said Billy, stopping his dance and becoming business-like, "goin' anywhere Monday?"

"Not along o' you, cheeky; you go 'long o' Beller Dawson, like wot you did Easter."

"Blow Beller Dawson; *she* ain't no good. I'm goin' on the Flats. Come?"

Lizerunt, delighted but derisive, ended with a promise to "see." The bloke had come at last, and she walked home with the feeling of having taken her degree. She had half assured herself of it two days before, when Sam Cardew threw an orange peel at her, but went away after a little prancing on the pavement. Sam was a smarter fellow than Billy, and earned his own living; probably his attentions were serious; but one must prefer the bird in hand. As for Billy Chope, he went his way, resolved himself to take home what mangling he should find his mother had finished, and stick to the money; also, to get all he could from her by blandishing and bullying, that the jaunt to Wanstead Flats might be adequately done.

There is no other fair like Whit Monday's on Wanstead Flats. Here is a square mile and more of open land where you may howl at large; here is no danger of losing yourself, as in Epping Forest; the public houses are always with you; shows, shies, swings, merry-go-rounds, fried fish stalls, donkeys, are packed closer than on Hampstead Heath; the ladies' tormentors are larger, and their contents smell worse, than at any other fair. Also, you may be drunk and disorderly without being locked up, – for the stations won't hold everybody, – and when all else has palled, you may set fire to the turf. Hereinto Billy and Lizerunt projected themselves from the doors of the Holly Tree on Whit Monday morning. But through hours on hours of fried fish and half-pints both were conscious of a deficiency. For the hat of Lizerunt was brown and old; plush it was not, and its feather was a mere foot long, and of a very rusty black. Now, it is not decent for a factory girl from Limehouse to go bank-holidaying under any but a hat of plush, very high in the crown, of a wild blue or a wilder green, and carrying withal an ostrich feather, pink or scarlet or what not; a feather that springs from the fore part, climbs the crown, and drops as far down the shoulders as may be. Lizerunt knew this, and, had she had no bloke, would have stayed at home. But a chance is a chance. As it was, only another such hapless girl

could measure her bitter envy of the feathers about her, or would so joyfully have given an ear for the proper splendor. Billy, too, had a vague impression, muddled by but not drowned in half-pints, that some degree of plush was condign to the occasion and to his own expenditure. Still, there was no quarrel; and the pair walked and ran with arms about each other's necks; and Lizerunt thumped her bloke on the back at proper intervals; so that the affair went regularly on the whole: although, in view of Lizerunt's shortcomings, Billy did not insist on the customary exchange of hats. Everything, I say, went well and well enough until Billy bought a ladies' tormentor and began to squirt it at Lizerunt. For then Lizerunt went scampering madly, with piercing shrieks, until her bloke was left some little way behind, and Sam Cardew, turning up at that moment and seeing her running alone in the crowd, threw his arms about her waist and swung her round him again and again, as he floundered gallantly this way and that, among the shies and the hokey-pokey barrows.

"Ulloo, Lizer! Where *are* y' a-comin' to? If I 'adn't laid 'old o' ye – !" But here Billy Chope arrived to demand what the 'ell Sam Cardew was doing with his gal. Now Sam was ever readier for a fight than Billy was; but the sum of Billy's half-pints was large: wherefore the fight began. On the skirt of an hilarious ring Lizerunt, after some small outcry, triumphed aloud. Four days before, she had no bloke; and here she stood with two, and those two fighting for her! Here in the public gaze, on the Flats! For almost five minutes she was Helen of Troy.

And in much less time Billy tasted repentance. The haze of half-pints was dispelled, and some teeth went with it. Presently, whimpering and with a bloody muzzle, he rose and made a running kick at the other. Then, being thwarted in a bolt, he flung himself down; and it was like to go hard with him at the hands of the crowd. Punch you may on Wanstead Flats, but execration and worse is your portion if you kick anybody except your wife. But, as the ring closed, the helmets of two policemen were seen to be working in over the surrounding heads, and Sam Cardew, quickly assuming his coat, turned away with such an air of blamelessness as is practicable with a damaged eye; while Billy went off unheeded in an opposite direction.

Lizerunt and her new bloke went the routine of half-pints and merry-go-rounds, and were soon on right thumping terms; and Lizerunt was as well satisfied with the issue as she was proud of the adventure. Billy was all very well; but Sam was better. She resolved to draw him for a feathered hat before next bank holiday. So the sun went down on her and her bloke hanging on each other's necks and straggling toward the Romford Road with shouts and choruses. The rest was tram-car, Bow Music Hall, half-pints, and darkness.

Billy took home his wounds, and his mother, having moved his wrath by asking their origin, sought refuge with a neighbor. He accomplished his revenge in two instalments. Two nights later Lizerunt was going with a jug of beer; when somebody sprang from a dark corner, landed her under the ear, knocked her sprawling, and made off to the sound of her lamentations. She did not see who it was, but she knew; and next day Sam Cardew was swearing he'd break Billy's back. He did not, however, for that same evening a gang of seven or eight fell on him with sticks and belts. (They were Causeway chaps, while Sam was a Brady's Laner, which would have been reason enough by itself, even if Billy Chope had not been one of them.) Sam did his best for a burst through and a run, but they pulled and battered him down; and they kicked him about the head, and they kicked him about the belly; and they took to their heels when he was speechless and still.

He lay at home for near four weeks, and when he stood up again it was in many bandages. Lizerunt came often to his bedside, and twice she brought an orange. On these occasions there was much talk of vengeance. But the weeks went on. It was a month since Sam had left his bed; and Lizerunt was getting a little tired of bandages. Also, she had begun to doubt and to consider bank holiday – scarce a fortnight off. For Sam was stone-broke, and a plush hat was further away than ever. And all through the later of these weeks Billy Chope was harder than ever on his mother, and she, well knowing that if he helped her by taking home he would pocket the money at the other end, had

taken to finishing and delivering in his absence, and, threats failing to get at the money, Billy Chope was impelled to punch her head and gripe her by the throat.

There was a milliner's window, with a show of nothing but fashionable plush-and-feather hats, and Lizerunt was lingering hereabouts one evening, when some one took her by the waist, and some one said, "Which d'yer like, Lizer? – The yuller un?"

Lizerunt turned and saw that it was Billy. She pulled herself away, and backed off, sullen and distrustful. "Garn," she said.

"Straight," said Billy, "I'll sport yer one. – No kid, I will."

"Garn," said Lizerunt once more. "Wot yer gittin' at now?"

But presently, being convinced that bashing wasn't in it, she approached less guardedly; and she went away with a paper bag and the reddest of all the plushes and the bluest of all the feathers; a hat that challenged all the Flats the next bank holiday, a hat for which no girl need have hesitated to sell her soul. As for Billy, why, he was as good as another; and you can't have everything; and Sam Cardew, with his bandages and his grunts and groans, was no great catch after all.

This was the wooing of Lizerunt: for in a few months she and Billy married under the blessing of a benignant rector, who periodically set aside a day for free weddings, and, on principle, encouraged early matrimony. And they lived with Billy's mother.

II. LIZER'S FIRST

When Billy Chope married Lizerunt there was a small rejoicing. There was no wedding-party; because it was considered that what there might be to drink would be better in the family. Lizerunt's father was not, and her mother felt no interest in the affair; not having seen her daughter for a year, and happening, at the time, to have a month's engagement in respect of a drunk and disorderly. So that there were but three of them; and Billy Chope got exceedingly tipsy early in the day; and in the evening his bride bawled a continual chorus, while his mother, influenced by that unwonted quartern of gin the occasion sanctioned, wept dismally over her boy, who was much too far gone to resent it.

His was the chief reason for rejoicing. For Lizerunt had always been able to extract ten shillings a week from the pickle factory, and it was to be presumed that as Lizer Chope her earning capacity would not diminish; and the wages would make a very respectable addition to the precarious revenue, depending on the mangle, that Billy extorted from his mother. As for Lizer, she was married. That was the considerable thing; for she was but a few months short of eighteen, and that, as you know, is a little late.

Of course there were quarrels very soon; for the new Mrs. Chope, less submissive at first than her mother-in-law, took a little breaking in, and a liberal renewal of the manual treatment once applied in her courting days. But the quarrels between the women were comforting to Billy: a diversion and a source of better service.

As soon as might be, Lizer took the way of womankind. This circumstance brought an unexpected half-crown from the evangelical rector who had married the couple gratis; for recognizing Billy in the street by accident, and being told of Mrs. Chope's prospects, as well as that Billy was out of work (a fact undeniable), he reflected that his principles did on occasion lead to discomfort of a material sort. And Billy, to whose comprehension the half-crown opened a new field of receipt, would doubtless have long remained a client of the rector, had not that zealot hastened to discover a vacancy for a warehouse porter, the offer of presentation whereunto alienated Billy Chope forever. But there were meetings and demonstrations of the Unemployed; and it was said that shillings had been given away; and, as being at a meeting in a street was at least as amusing as being in a street where there was no meeting, Billy often went, on the off chance. But his lot was chiefly disappointment: wherefore he became more especially careful to furnish himself ere he left home.

For certain weeks cash came less freely than ever from the two women. Lizer spoke of providing for the necessities of the expected child: a manifestly absurd procedure, as Billy pointed out, since, if they were unable to clothe or feed it, the duty would fall on its grandmother. That was law, and nobody could get over it. But even with this argument, a shilling cost him many more demands and threats than it had used, and a deal more general trouble.

At last Lizer ceased from going to the pickle factory, and could not even help Billy's mother at the mangle for long. This lasted for near a week, when Billy, rising at ten with a bad mouth, resolved to stand no nonsense, and demanded two shillings.

"Two bob? Wot for?" Lizer asked.

"'Cos I want it. None o' yer lip."

"Ain't got it," said Lizer sulkily.

"That's a bleed'n' lie."

"Lie yerself."

"I'll break y' in 'arves, ye blasted 'eifer!" He ran at her throat and forced her back over a chair. "I'll pull yer face auf! If y' don't give me the money, gawblimy, I'll do for ye!"

Lizer strained and squalled. "Le' go! You'll kill me an' the kid too!" she grunted hoarsely. Billy's mother ran in and threw her arms about him, dragging him away. "Don't, Billy," she said, in terror. "Don't, Billy – not now! You'll get in trouble. Come away! She might go auf, an' you'd get in trouble!"

Billy Chope flung his wife over and turned to his mother. "Take yer 'ands auf me," he said: "go on, or I'll gi' ye somethin' for yerself." And he punched her in the breast by way of illustration.

"You shall 'ave what I've got, Billy, if it's money," the mother said. "But don't go an' git yerself in trouble, don't. Will a shillin' do?"

"No, it won't. Think I'm a bloomin' kid? I mean 'avin' two bob this mornin'."

"I was a-keepin' it for the rent, Billy, but –"

"Yus; think o' the bleed'n' lan'lord 'fore me, doncher?" And he pocketed the two shillings. "I ain't settled with you yut, my gal," he added to Lizer; "mikin' about at 'ome an' 'idin' money. You wait a bit."

Lizer had climbed into an erect position, and, gravid and slow, had got as far as the passage. Mistaking this for a safe distance, she replied with defiant railings. Billy made for her with a kick that laid her on the lower stairs, and, swinging his legs round his mother as she obstructed him, entreating him not to get in trouble, he attempted to kick again in a more telling spot. But a movement among the family upstairs and a tap at the door hinted of interference, and he took himself off.

Lizer lay doubled upon the stairs, howling: but her only articulate cry was, "Gawd 'elp me, it's comin'!"

Billy went to the meeting of the Unemployed, and cheered a proposal to storm the Tower of London. But he did not join the procession following a man with a handkerchief on a stick, who promised destruction to every policeman in his path: for he knew the fate of such processions. With a few others, he hung about the nearest tavern for a while, on the chance of the advent of a flush sailor from St. Katharine's, disposed to treat out-o'-workers. Then he went alone to a quieter beer-house and took a pint or two at his own expense. A glance down the music-hall bills hanging in the bar having given him a notion for the evening, he bethought himself of dinner, and made for home.

The front door was open, and in the first room, where the mangle stood, there were no signs of dinner. And this was at three o'clock! Billy pushed into the room behind, demanding why.

"Billy," Lizer said faintly from her bed, "look at the baby!"

Something was moving feebly under a flannel petticoat. Billy pulled the petticoat aside, and said, "That? Well, it *is* a measly snipe." It was a blind, hairless homunculus, short of a foot long, with a skinny face set in a great skull. There was a black bruise on one side from hip to armpit. Billy dropped the petticoat and said, "Where's my dinner?"

"I dunno," Lizer responded hazily. "Wot's the time?"

"Time? Don't try to kid me. You git up; go on. I want my dinner."

"Mother's gittin' it, I think," said Lizer. "Doctor had to slap 'im like anythink 'fore 'e'd cry. 'E don't cry now much. 'E –"

"Go on; out ye git. I do' want no more damn jaw. Git my dinner."

"I'm a-gittin' of it, Billy," his mother said, at the door. She had begun when he first entered. "It won't be a minute."

"You come 'ere; y' ain't alwis s' ready to do 'er work, are ye? She ain't no call to stop there no longer, an' I owe 'er one for this mornin'. Will ye git out, or shall I kick ye?"

"She can't, Billy," his mother said. And Lizer snivelled and said, "You're a damn brute. Y' ought to be bleedin' well booted."

But Billy had her by the shoulders and began to haul; and again his mother besought him to remember what he might bring upon himself. At this moment the doctor's dispenser, a fourth-year London Hospital student of many inches, who had been washing his hands in the kitchen, came in. For a moment he failed to comprehend the scene. Then he took Billy Chope by the collar, hauled him pell-mell along the passage, kicked him (hard) into the gutter, and shut the door.

When he returned to the room, Lizer, sitting up and holding on by the bed-frame, gasped hysterically: "Ye bleedin' makeshift, I'd 'ave yer liver out if I could reach ye! You touch my 'usband, ye long pisenin' 'ound you! Ow!" And, infirm of aim, she flung a cracked teacup at his head. Billy's

mother said, "Y' ought to be ashamed of yourself, you low blaggard. If 'is father was alive 'e'd knock yer 'ead auf. Call yourself a doctor – a passel o' boys! – Git out! Go out o' my 'ouse, or I'll give y' in charge!"

"But – why, hang it, he'd have killed her." Then to Lizer, "Lie down."

"Sha'n't lay down. Keep auf! if you come near me I'll corpse ye. You go while ye're safe!"

The dispenser appealed to Billy's mother. "For God's sake make her lie down. She'll kill herself. I'll go. Perhaps the doctor had better come." And he went: leaving the coast clear for Billy Chope to return and avenge his kicking.

III. A CHANGE OF CIRCUMSTANCES

Lizer was some months short of twenty-one when her third child was born. The pickle factory had discarded her some time before, and since that her trade had consisted in odd jobs of charing. Odd jobs of charing have a shade the better of a pickle factory in the matter of respectability, but they are precarious, and they are worse paid at that. In the East End they are sporadic and few. Moreover, it is in the household where paid help is a rarity that the bitterness of servitude is felt. Also, the uncertainty and irregularity of the returns were a trouble to Billy Choep. He was never sure of having got them all. It might be ninepence, or a shilling, or eighteenpence. Once or twice, to his knowledge, it had been half-a-crown, from a chance job at a doctor's or a parson's, and once it was three shillings. That it might be half-a-crown or three shillings again, and that some of it was being kept back, was ever the suspicion evoked by Lizer's evening homing. Plainly, with these fluctuating and uncertain revenues, more bashing than ever was needed to insure the extraction of the last copper; empty-handedness called for bashing on its own account; so that it was often Lizer's hap to be refused a job because of a black eye.

Lizer's self was scarcely what it had been. The red of her cheeks, once bounded only by the eyes and the mouth, had shrunk to a spot in the depth of each hollow; gaps had been driven in her big white teeth; even the snub nose had run to a point, and the fringe hung dry and ragged, while the bodily outline was as a sack's. At home, the children lay in her arms or tumbled at her heels, puling and foul. Whenever she was near it, there was the mangle to be turned; for lately Billy's mother had exhibited a strange weakness, sometimes collapsing with a gasp in the act of brisk or prolonged exertion, and often leaning on whatever stood hard by and grasping at her side. This ailment she treated, when she had twopence, in such terms as made her smell of gin and peppermint; and more than once this circumstance had inflamed the breast of Billy her son, who was morally angered by this boozing away of money that was really his.

Lizer's youngest, being seven or eight months old, was mostly taking care of itself, when Billy made a welcome discovery after a hard and pinching day. The night was full of blinding wet, and the rain beat on the window as on a drum. Billy sat over a small fire in the front room smoking his pipe, while his mother folded clothes for delivery. He stamped twice on the hearth, and then, drawing off his boot, he felt inside it. It was a nail. The poker-head made a good anvil, and, looking about for a hammer, Billy bethought him of a brick from the mangle. He rose, and, lifting the lid of the weight-box, groped about among the clinkers and the other ballast till he came upon a small but rather heavy paper parcel. "'Ere – wot's this?" he said, and pulled it out.

His mother, whose back had been turned, hastened across the room, hand to breast (it had got to be her habit). "What is it, Billy?" she said. "Not that: there's nothing there. I'll get anything you want, Billy." And she made a nervous catch at the screw of paper. But Billy fended her off, and tore the package open. It was money, arranged in little columns of farthings, halfpence, and threepenny pieces, with a few sixpences, a shilling or two, and a single half-sovereign. "O," said Billy, "this is the game, is it? – 'idin' money in the mangle! Got any more?" And he hastily turned the brickbats.

"No, Billy, don't take that – don't!" implored his mother. "There'll be some money for them things when they go 'ome – 'ave that. I'm savin' it, Billy, for something partic'ler: s'elp me Gawd, I am, Billy."

"Yus," replied Billy, raking diligently among the clinkers, "savin' it for a good ol' booze. An' now you won't 'ave one. Bleedin' nice thing, 'idin' money away from yer own son!"

"It ain't for that, Billy – s'elp me, it ain't; it's case anythink 'appens to me. On'y to put me away decent, Billy, that's all. We never know, an' you'll be glad of it t'elp bury me if I should go any time – "

"I'll be glad of it now," answered Billy, who had it in his pocket; "an' I've got it. You ain't a dyin' sort, *you* ain't; an' if you was, the parish 'ud soon tuck *you* up. P'raps you'll be straighter about money after this."

"Let me 'ave *some*, then, – you can't want it all. Give me some, an' then 'ave the money for the things. There's ten dozen and seven, and you can take 'em yerself if ye like."

"Wot – in this 'ere rain? Not me! I bet I'd 'ave the money if I wanted it without that. 'Ere – change these 'ere fardens at the draper's wen you go out: there's two bob's worth an' a penn'orth; I don't want to bust my pockets wi' them."

While they spoke Lizer had come in from the back room. But she said nothing: she rather busied herself with a child she had in her arms. When Billy's mother, despondent and tearful, had tramped out into the rain with a pile of clothes in an oilcloth wrapper, she said sulkily, without looking up, "You might 'a' let 'er kep' that; you git all you want."

At another time this remonstrance would have provoked active hostilities; but now, with the money about him, Billy was complacently disposed. "You shutcher 'ead," he said, "I got this, any'ow. She can make it up out o' my rent if she likes." This last remark was a joke, and he chuckled as he made it. For Billy's rent was a simple fiction, devised, on the suggestion of a smart canvasser, to give him a parliamentary vote.

That night Billy and Lizer slept, as usual, in the bed in the back room, where the two younger children also were. Billy's mother made a bedstead nightly with three chairs and an old trunk in the front room by the mangle, and the eldest child lay in a floor-bed near her. Early in the morning Lizer awoke at a sudden outcry of the little creature. He clawed at the handle till he opened the door, and came staggering and tumbling into the room with screams of terror. "Wring 'is blasted neck," his father grunted sleepily. "Wot's the kid 'owlin' for?"

"I's 'f'aid o' g'anny – I's 'f'aid o' g'anny!" was all the child could say; and when he had said it, he fell to screaming once more.

Lizer rose and went to the next room; and straightway came a scream from her also. "O – O – Billy! Billy! O my Gawd! Billy, come 'ere!"

And Billy, fully startled, followed in Lizer's wake. He blundered in, rubbing his eyes, and saw.

Stark on her back in the huddled bed of old wrappers and shawls lay his mother. The outline of her poor face – strained in an upward stare of painful surprise – stood sharp and meagre against the black of the grate beyond. But the muddy old skin was white, and looked cleaner than its wont, and many of the wrinkles were gone.

Billy Chope, half-way across the floor, recoiled from the corpse, and glared at it pallidly from the doorway.

"Good Gawd!" he croaked faintly, "is she dead?"

Seized by a fit of shuddering breaths, Lizer sank on the floor, and, with her head across the body, presently broke into a storm of hysterical blubbering, while Billy, white and dazed, dressed hurriedly and got out of the house. He was at home as little as might be until the coroner's officer carried away the body two days later. When he came for his meals, he sat doubtful and querulous in the matter of the front room door's being shut. The dead once clear away, however, he resumed his faculties, and clearly saw that here was a bad change for the worse. There was the mangle, but who was to work it? If Lizer did, there would be no more charing jobs – a clear loss of one-third of his income. And it was not at all certain that the people who had given their mangling to his mother would give it to Lizer. Indeed, it was pretty sure that many would not, because mangling is a thing given by preference to widows, and many widows of the neighborhood were perpetually competing for it. Widows, moreover, had the first call in most odd jobs whereunto Lizer might turn her hand: an injustice whereon Billy meditated with bitterness.

The inquest was formal and unremarked, the medical officer having no difficulty in certifying a natural death from heart disease. The bright idea of a collection among the jury, which Billy

communicated, with pitiful representations, to the coroner's officer, was brutally swept aside by that functionary, made cunning by much experience. So the inquest brought him nought save disappointment and a sense of injury...

The mangling orders fell away as suddenly and completely as he had feared: they were duly absorbed among the local widows. Neglect the children as Lizer might, she could no longer leave them as she had done. Things, then, were bad with Billy, and neither threats nor thumps could evoke a shilling now.

It was more than Billy could bear: so that, "'Ere," he said one night, "I've 'ad enough o' this. You go and get some money; go on."

"Go an' git it?" replied Lizer. "O yus. That's easy, ain't it? 'Go an' git it,' says you. 'Ow?'"

"Any'ow – I don't care. Go on."

"Wy," replied Lizer, looking up with wide eyes, "d'ye think I can go an' pick it up in the street?"

"Course you can. Plenty others does, don't they?"

"Gawd, Billy ... wot d'ye mean?"

"Wot I say; plenty others does it. Go on – you ain't so bleed'n' innocent as all that. Go an' see Sam Cardew. Go on – 'ook it."

Lizer, who had been kneeling at the child's floor-bed, rose to her feet, pale-faced and bright of eye.

"Stow kiddin', Billy," she said. "You don't mean that. I'll go round to the fact'ry in the mornin': p'raps they'll take me on temp'ry."

"Damn the fact'ry."

He pushed her into the passage. "Go on – you git me some money, if ye don't want yer bleed'n' 'ead knocked auf."

There was a scuffle in the dark passage, with certain blows, a few broken words, and a sob. Then the door slammed, and Lizer Chope was in the windy street.

WITHOUT VISIBLE MEANS

All East London idled, or walked in a procession, or waylaid and bashed, or cried in an empty kitchen: for it was the autumn of the Great Strikes. One army of men, having been prepared, was ordered to strike – and struck. Other smaller armies of men, with no preparation, were ordered to strike to express sympathy – and struck. Other armies still were ordered to strike because it was the fashion – and struck. Then many hands were discharged because the strikes in other trades left them no work. Many others came from other parts in regiments to work, but remained to loaf in gangs: taught by the example of earlier regiments, which, the situation being explained (an expression devised to include mobbings and kickings and flingings into docks), had returned whence they came. So that East London was very noisy and largely hungry; and the rest of the world looked on with intense interest, making earnest suggestions, and comprehending nothing. Lots of strikers, having no strike pay and finding little nourishment in processions, started off to walk to Manchester, Birmingham, Liverpool, or Newcastle, where work might be got. Along the Great North Road such men might be seen in silent companies of a dozen or twenty, now and again singly or in couples. At the tail of one such gang, which gathered in the Burdett Road and found its way into the Enfield Road by way of Victoria Park, Clapton, and Stamford Hill, walked a little group of three: a voluble young man of thirty, a stolid workman rather older, and a pale, anxious little fellow, with a nasty spasmodic cough and a canvas bag of tools.

The little crowd straggled over the footpath and the road, few of its members speaking, most of them keeping to their places and themselves. As yet there was nothing of the tramp in the aspect of these mechanics. With their washed faces and well-mended clothes they might have been taken for a jury coming from a local inquest. As the streets got broken and detached, with patches of field between, they began to look about them. One young fellow in front (with no family to think of), who looked upon the enterprise as an amusing sort of tour, and had even brought an accordion, began to rebel against the general depression, and attempted a joke about going to the Alexandra Palace. But in the rear, the little man with the canvas bag, putting his hand abstractedly into his pocket, suddenly stared and stopped. He drew out the hand, and saw in it three shillings.

"S'elp me," he said, "the missis is done that – shoved it in unbeknown when I come away! An' she's on'y got a bob for 'erself an' the kids." He broke into a sweat of uneasiness. "I'll 'ave to send it back at the next post-office, that's all."

"Send it back? not you!" Thus with deep scorn the voluble young man at his side. "*She'll* be all right, you lay your life. A woman allus knows 'ow to look after 'erself. You'll bleed'n' soon want it, an' bad. You do as I tell you, Joey: stick to it. That's right, Dave, ain't it?"

"Matter o' fancy," replied the stolid man. "My missis cleared my pockets out 'fore I got away. Shouldn't wonder at bein' sent after for leavin' 'er chargeable if I don't soon send some more. Women's different."

The march continued, and grew dustier. The cheerful pilgrim in front produced his accordion. At Palmer's Green four went straight ahead to try for work at the Enfield Arms Factory. The others, knowing the thing hopeless, turned off to the left for Potter's Bar.

After a long silence, "Which 'll be nearest, Dave," asked little Joey Clayton, "Newcastle or Middlesbrough?"

"Middlesbrough," said Dave; "I done it afore."

"Trampin' ain't so rough on a man, is it, after all?" asked Joey wistfully. "*You* done all right, didn't you?"

"Got through. All depends, though it's rough enough. Matter o' luck. *I* 'ad the bad weather."

"If I don't get a good easy job where we're goin'," remarked the voluble young man, "I'll 'ave a strike there too."

"'Ave a strike there?" exclaimed Joey. "'Ow? Who'd call 'em out?"

"Wy, *I* would. I think I'm equal to doin' it, ain't I? An' when workin' men stand idle an' 'ungry in the midst o' the wealth an' the lukshry an' the igstravagance they've produced with the sweat of their brow, why, then, feller-workmen, it's time to act. It's time to bring the nigger-drivin' bloated capitalists to their knees."

"'Ear, 'ear," applauded Joey Clayton; tamely, perhaps, for the words were not new. "Good on yer, Newman!" Newman had a habit of practising this sort of thing in snatches whenever he saw the chance. He had learnt the trick in a debating society; and Joey Clayton was always an applaudive audience. There was a pause, the accordion started another tune, and Newman tried a different passage of his harangue.

"In the shop they call me Skulky Newman. Why? 'Cos I skulk, o' course" ("'Ear, 'ear," dreamily – from Dave this time). "I ain't ashamed of it, my friends. I'm a miker out an' out, an' I 'ope I shall always remain a miker. The less a worker does the more 'as to be employed, don't they? An' the more the toilers wrings out o' the capitalists, don't they? Very well then, I mike, an' I do it as a sacred dooty."

"You'll 'ave all the mikin' you want for a week or two," said Dave Burge placidly. "Stow it."

At Potter's Bar the party halted and sat under a hedge to eat hunks of bread and cheese (or hunks of bread and nothing else) and to drink cold tea out of cans. Skulky Newman, who had brought nothing, stood in with his two friends. As they started anew and turned into the Great North Road he said, stretching himself and looking slyly at Joey Clayton, "If *I'd* got a bob or two I'd stand you two blokes a pint apiece."

Joey looked troubled. "Well, as you ain't, I suppose I ought to," he said uneasily, turning toward the little inn hard by. "Dave," he cried to Burge, who was walking on, "won't you 'ave a drink?" And, "Well, if you *are* goin' to do the toff, I ain't proud," was the slow reply.

Afterward Joey was inclined to stop at the post-office to send away at least two shillings. But Newman wouldn't. He enlarged on the improvidence of putting out of reach that which might be required on an emergency, he repeated his axiom as to a woman's knack of keeping alive in spite of all things: and Joey determined not to send – for a day or so at any rate.

The road got looser and dustier; the symptoms of the tramp came out stronger and stronger on the gang. The accordion struck up from time to time, but ceased toward the end of the afternoon. The player wearied, and some of the older men, soon tired of walking, were worried by the noise. Joey Clayton, whose cough was aggravated by the dust, was especially tortured, after every fit, to hear the thing drawling and whooping the tune it had drawled and whooped a dozen times before; but he said nothing, scarce knowing what annoyed him.

At Hatfield Station two of the foremost picked up a few coppers by helping with a heavy trap-load of luggage. Up Digswell Hill the party tailed out lengthily, and Newman, who had been letting off a set speech, was fain to save his wind. The night came, clear to see and sweet to smell. Between Welwyn and Codicote the company broke up to roost in such barns as they might possess: all but the master of the accordion, who had stayed at a little public-house at Welwyn, with the notion of earning a pot of beer and a stable-corner (or better) by a tune in the tap-room. Dave Burge lighted on a lone shed of thatched hurdles with loose hay in it, and Newman straightway curled in the snuggest corner on most of the hay. Dave Burge pulled some from under him, and, having helped Joey Clayton to build a nest in the best place left, was soon snoring. But Joey lay awake all night, and sat up and coughed and turned restlessly, being unused to the circumstances and apprehensive of those months in jail which (it is well known) are rancorously dealt forth among all them that sleep in barns.

Luck provided a breakfast next morning at Codicote: for three bicyclists, going north, stood cold beef and bread round at The Anchor. The man with the accordion caught up. He had made his lodging and breakfast and eightpence: this had determined him to stay at Hitchin, and work it for at least a day, and then to diverge into the towns and let the rest go their way. So beyond Hitchin there was no music.

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