

The Gray Parrot

by W.W. Jacobs



HE Chief engineer and the Third sat at tea on the ss. *Curlew* in the East India Docks. The small and not over-clean steward having placed everything he could think of upon the table, and then added everything the Chief could think of, had assiduously poured out two cups of tea and withdrawn by request. The two men ate steadily, conversing between bites and interrupted occasionally by a hoarse and sepulchral voice, the owner of which, being much exercised by the sight of the food, asked for it, prettily at first, and afterwards in a way which at least compelled attention.

"That's pretty good for a parrot," said the Third, critically. "Seems to know what he's saying, too. No, don't give it anything. It'll stop, if you do."

"There's no pleasure to *me* in listening to coarse language," said the Chief, with dignity.

He absently dipped a piece of bread and butter in the Third's tea, and, losing it, chased it round and round the bottom of the cup with his finger, the Third regarding the operation with an interest and emotion which he was at first unable to understand.

"You'd better pour yourself out another cup," he said, thoughtfully, as he caught the Third's eye.

"I'm going to," said the other, drily.

"The man I bought it of," said the Chief,

giving the bird the sop, "said that it was a perfectly respectable parrot, and wouldn't know a bad word if it heard it. I hardly like to give it to my wife now."

"It's no good being too particular," said the Third, regarding the other with an ill-concealed grin; "that's the worst of all you young married fellows. Seem to think your wife has got to be wrapped up in brown paper. Ten chances to one she'll be amused."

The Chief shrugged his shoulders disdainfully. "I bought the bird to be company for her," he said, slowly; "she'll be very lonesome without me, Rogers."

"How do you know?" inquired the other.

"She said so," was the reply.

"When you've been married as long as I have," said the Third, who, having been married some fifteen years, felt that their usual positions were somewhat reversed, "you'll know that, generally speaking, they're glad to get rid of you."

"What for?" demanded the Chief, in a voice that Othello might have envied.

"Well, you get in the way a bit," said Rogers, with secret enjoyment; "you see, you upset the arrangements. House cleaning and all that sort of thing gets interrupted. They're glad to see you back at first, and then glad to see the back of you."

"There's wives and wives," said the bridegroom, tenderly.

"And mine's a good one," said the Third,

"registered A 1 at Lloyd's, but she don't worry about me going away. Your wife's thirty years younger than you, isn't she?"

"Twenty-five," corrected the other, shortly. "You see, what I'm afraid of is, that she'll get too much attention."

"Well, women like that," remarked the Third.

"But I don't, curse it," cried the Chief, hotly. "When I think of it I go hot all over—boiling hot."

"That won't last," said the other, reassuringly. "You won't care twopence this time next year."

"We're not all alike," growled the Chief; "some of us have got finer feelings than others have. I saw the chap next door looking at her as we passed him this morning."

"Good heavens," said the Third, wildly.

"I don't want any of your confounded impudence," said the Chief, sharply. "He put his hat on straighter when he passed us. What do you think of that?"

"Can't say," replied the other, with commendable gravity; "it might mean anything."

"If he has any of his nonsense while I'm away, I'll break his neck," said the Chief, passionately. "I shall know of it."

The other raised his eyebrows.

"I've asked the landlady to keep her eyes open a bit," said the Chief. "My wife was brought up in the country, and she's very young and simple, so that it is quite right and proper for her to have a motherly old body to look after her."

"Told your wife?" queried Rogers.

"No," said the other. "Fact is, Rogers, I've got an idea about that parrot. I'm going to tell her it's a magic bird, and will tell me everything she does while I'm away. Anything the landlady tells me, I shall tell her I got from the parrot. For one thing, I don't want

her to go out after seven of an evening, and she's promised me she won't. If she does I shall know, and pretend that I know through the parrot. What do you think of it?"

"Think of it?" said the Third, staring at him. "Think of it? Fancy a man telling a grown-up woman a yarn like that!"

"She believes in warnings, and death watches, and all that sort of thing," said the Chief, "so why shouldn't she?"

"Well, you'll know whether she believes in it or not when you come back," said Rogers, "and it'll be a great pity, because it's a beautiful talker, and the best swearer I ever heard."

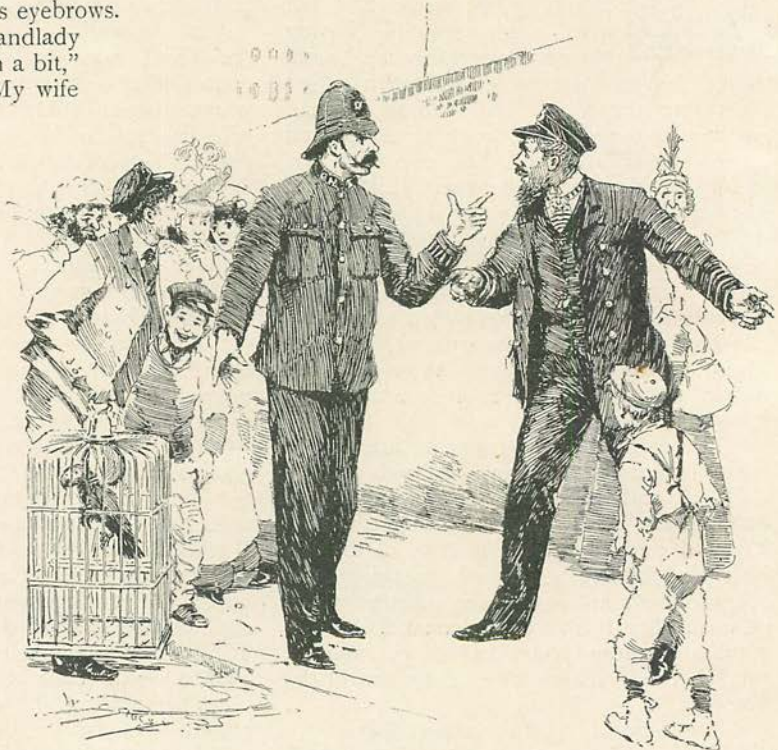
"What do you mean?" said the other.

"I mean it'll get its little neck wrung," said the Third.

"Well, we'll see," said Gannett. "I shall know what to think if it does die."

"I shall never see that bird again," said Rogers, shaking his head as the Chief took up the cage and handed it to the steward, who was to accompany him home with it.

The couple left the ship, and proceeded down the East India Dock road side by side, the only incident being a hot argument



A HOT ARGUMENT."

between a constable and the engineer as to whether he could or could not be held responsible for the language in which the parrot saw fit to indulge when the steward happened to drop it.

The engineer took the cage at his door, and, not without some misgivings, took it upstairs into the parlour and set it on the table. Mrs. Gannett, a simple-looking woman, with sleepy brown eyes and a docile manner, clapped her hands with joy.

"Isn't it a beauty?" said Mr. Gannett, looking at it. "I bought it to be company for you while I'm away."

"You're too good to me, Jem," said his wife. She walked all round the cage admiring it; the parrot, which was of a highly suspicious and nervous disposition, having had boys at its last place, turning with her. After she had walked round him five times, he got sick of it, and, in a simple, sailorly fashion, said so.

"Oh, Jem!" said his wife.

"It's a beautiful talker," said Gannett, hastily, "and it's so clever that it picks up everything it hears, but it'll soon forget it."

"It looks as though it knows what you are saying," said his wife. "Just look at it—the artful thing!"

The opportunity was too good to be missed, and in a few straightforward lies the engineer acquainted Mrs. Gannett of the miraculous powers with which he had chosen to endow it.

"But you don't believe it?" said his wife, staring at him, open-mouthed.

"I do," said the engineer, firmly.

"But how can it know what I'm doing, when I'm away?" persisted Mrs. Gannett.

"Ah, that's its secret," said the engineer; "a good many people would like to know that, but nobody has found out yet. It's a magic bird, and when you've said that, you've said all there is to say about it."

Mrs. Gannett, wrinkling her forehead, eyed the marvellous bird curiously.

"You'll find it's quite true," said Gannett; "when I come back that bird'll be able to tell me how you've been, and all about you—everything you've done during my absence."

"Good gracious!" said the astonished Mrs. Gannett.

"If you stay out after seven of an evening or do anything else that I shouldn't like, that bird'll tell me," continued the engineer, impressively. "It'll tell me who comes to see you, and, in fact, it will tell me everything you do while I'm away."

"Well, it won't have anything bad to tell

of me," said Mrs. Gannett, composedly, "unless it tells lies."

"It can't tell lies," said her husband, confidently; "and now, if you go and put your bonnet on, we'll drop in at the theatre for half an hour."

It was a prophetic utterance, for he made such a fuss over the man next to his wife offering her his opera-glasses that they left, at the urgent request of the management, in almost exactly that space of time.

"You'd better carry me about in a band-box," said Mrs. Gannett, wearily, as the outraged engineer stalked home beside her. "What harm was the man doing?"

"You must have given him some encouragement," said Mr. Gannett, fiercely; "made eyes at him or something. A man wouldn't offer to lend a lady his opera-glasses without——"

Mrs. Gannett tossed her head, and that so decidedly, that a passing stranger turned his head and looked at her. Mr. Gannett accelerated his pace, and taking his wife's arm led her swiftly home with a passion too great for words.

By the morning his anger had evaporated, but the misgivings remained. He left after breakfast for the *Curlew*, which was to sail in the afternoon, leaving behind him copious instructions by following which his wife would be enabled to come down and see him off with the minimum exposure of her fatal charms.

Left to herself, Mrs. Gannett dusted the room, until coming to the parrot's cage she put down the duster and eyed its eerie occupant curiously. She fancied that she saw an evil glitter in the creature's eye, and thought that the knowing way in which it drew the film over it was as near an approach to a wink as a bird could get.

She was still looking at it when there was a knock at the door, and a bright little woman, rather smartly dressed, bustled into the room and greeted her effusively.

"I just came to see you, my dear, because I thought a little outing would do me good," she said, briskly; "and, if you've no objection, I'll come down to the docks with you to see the boat off."

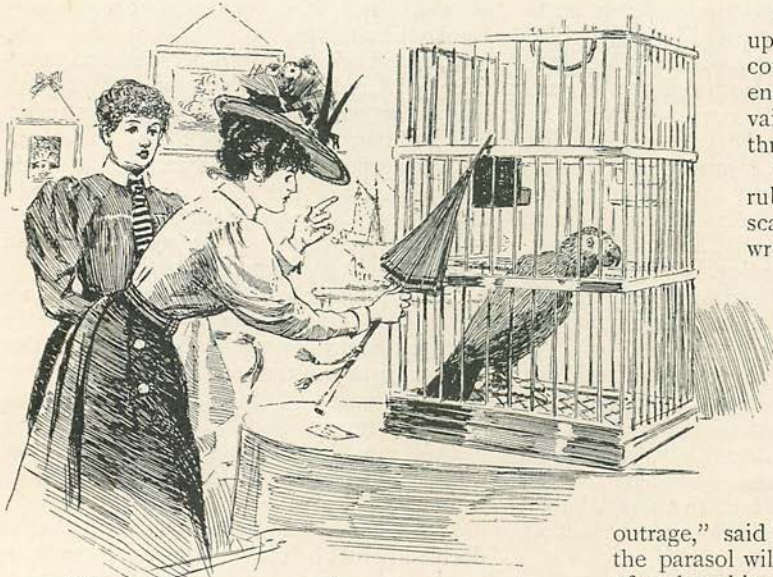
Mrs. Gannett assented readily; it would ease the engineer's mind, she thought, if he saw her with a chaperon.

"Nice bird," said Mrs. Cluffins, mechanically bringing her parasol to the charge.

"Don't do that," said her friend, hastily.

"Why not?" said the other.

"Language!" said Mrs. Gannett, solemnly.



"I MUST DO SOMETHING TO IT," SAID MRS. CLUFFINS."

"Well, I must do something to it," said Mrs. Cluffins, restlessly.

She held the parasol near the cage and suddenly opened it. It was a flaming scarlet, and for the moment the shock took the parrot's breath away.

"He don't mind that," said Mrs. Gannett.

The parrot, hopping to the farther corner of the bottom of his cage, said something, feebly. Finding that nothing dreadful happened, he repeated his remark somewhat more boldly, and being convinced after all that the apparition was quite harmless, and that he had displayed his craven spirit for nothing, hopped back on his perch and raved wickedly.

"If that was my bird," said Mrs. Cluffins, almost as scarlet as her parasol, "I should wring its neck."

"No, you wouldn't," said Mrs. Gannett, solemnly; and, having quieted the bird, by throwing a cloth over its cage, explained its properties.

"What!" said Mrs. Cluffins, unable to sit still in her chair. "You mean to tell me that your husband said that?"

Mrs. Gannett nodded. "He's awfully jealous of me," she said, with a slight simper.

"I wish he was my husband," said Mrs. Cluffins, in a thin, hard voice. "I wish C. would talk to *me* like that. I wish somebody would try and persuade C. to talk to me like that."

"It shows he's fond of me," said Mrs. Gannett, looking down.

Mrs. Cluffins jumped up and, snatching the cover off the cage, endeavoured, but in vain, to get the parasol through the bars.

"And you believe that rubbish?" she said, scathingly. "Booh, you wretch!"

"I don't believe it," said her friend, taking her gently away and covering the cage hastily just as the bird was recovering; "but I let him think I do."

"I call it an outrage," said Mrs. Cluffins, waving the parasol wildly. "I never heard of such a thing. I'd like to give Mr. Gannett a piece of my mind. Just about half an hour of it. He wouldn't be the same man afterwards. I'd parrot him."

Mrs. Gannett, soothing her agitated friend as well as she was able, led her gently to a chair and removed her hat, and finding that complete recovery was impossible while the parrot remained in the room, took that wonder-working bird outside.

By the time they had reached the docks and boarded the *Curlew*, Mrs. Cluffins had quite recovered her spirits. She roamed about the steamer, asking questions which savoured more of idle curiosity than a genuine thirst for knowledge, and was at no pains to conceal her opinion of those who were unable to furnish her with satisfactory replies.

"I shall think of you every day, Jem," said Mrs. Gannett, tenderly.

"I shall think of you every minute," said the engineer, reproachfully.

He sighed gently and gazed in a scandalized fashion at Mrs. Cluffins, who was carrying on a desperate flirtation with one of the apprentices.

"She's very light-hearted," said his wife, following the direction of his eyes.

"She is," said Mr. Gannett, curtly, as the unconscious Mrs. Cluffins shortened her parasol and rapped the apprentice playfully with the handle.

"She seems to be on very good terms with Jenkins, laughing and carrying on. I don't suppose she's ever seen him before," said the engineer.



"MRS. CLUFFINS WAS CARRYING ON A DESPERATE FLIRTATION."

"Poor young things," said Mrs. Cluffins, solemnly, as she came up to them. "Don't you worry, Mr. Gannett. I'll look after her and keep her from moping."

"You're very kind," said the engineer, slowly.

"We'll have a jolly time," said Mrs. Cluffins. "I often wish my husband was a seafaring man. A wife does have more freedom, doesn't she?"

"More what?" inquired Mr. Gannett, with huskiness.

"More freedom," said Mrs. Cluffins, gravely. "I always envy sailors' wives. They can do as they like. No husband to look after them for nine or ten months in the year."

Before the unhappy engineer could put his indignant thoughts into words, there was a warning cry from the gangway, and with a hasty farewell, he hurried below. The visitors went ashore, the gangway was shipped, and in response to the clang of the telegraph, the *Curlew* drifted slowly away from the quay and headed for the swing-bridge slowly opening in front of her.

The two ladies hurried to the pier-head, and watched the steamer down the river

until a bend hid it from view. Then Mrs. Gannett, with a sensation of having lost something, due, so her friend assured her, to the want of a cup of tea, went slowly back to her lonely home.

In the period of grass widowhood which ensued, Mrs. Cluffins's visits formed almost the sole relief to the bare monotony of existence. As a companion, the parrot was an utter failure, its language being so irredeemably bad, that it spent most of its time in the spare room with a cloth over its cage, wondering when the days were going to lengthen a bit.

Mrs. Cluffins suggested selling it, but her friend repelled the suggestion with horror, and refused to entertain it at any price, even that of the publican at the corner who, having heard of the bird's command of language, was bent upon buying it.

"I wonder what that beauty will have to tell your husband," said Mrs. Cluffins, as they sat together one day some four months after the *Curlew's* departure.

"I should hope that he has forgotten that nonsense," said Mrs. Gannett, reddening; "he never alludes to it in his letters."

"Sell it," said Mrs. Cluffins, peremptorily. "It's no good to you, and Hobson would give anything for it almost."

Mrs. Gannett shook her head. "The house wouldn't hold my husband if I did," she remarked, with a shiver.

"Oh, yes, it would," said Mrs. Cluffins; "you do as I tell you, and a much smaller house than this would hold him. I told C. to tell Hobson he should have it for £5."

"But he mustn't," said her friend, in alarm.

"Leave yourself right in my hands," said Mrs. Cluffins, spreading out two small palms and regarding them complacently. "It'll be all right, I promise you."

She put her arm round her friend's waist and led her to the window, talking earnestly. In five minutes Mrs. Gannett was wavering, in ten she had given way, and in fifteen the energetic Mrs. Cluffins was *en route* for Hobson's, swinging the cage so violently in

her excitement that the parrot was reduced to holding on to its perch with claws and bill, and could only think. Mrs. Gannett watched their progress from the window, and with a queer look on her face set down to think out the points of attack and defence in the approaching fray.

A week later a four-wheeler drove up to the door, and the engineer, darting up three steps at a time, dropped an armful of parcels on the floor, and caught his wife in an embrace which would have done credit to a bear. Mrs. Gannett, for reasons, of which lack of muscle was only one, responded less ardently.

"Ha! it's good to be home again," said Gannett, sinking into an easy chair, and pulling his wife on his knee. "And how have you been? Lonely?"

"I got used to it," said Mrs. Gannett, softly.

The engineer coughed. "You had the parrot," he remarked.

"Yes, I had the magic parrot," said Mrs. Gannett.

"How's it getting on?" said her husband, looking round. "Where is it?"

"Part of it is on the mantelpiece," said Mrs. Gannett, trying to speak calmly, "part of it is in a bonnet-box upstairs, some of it's in my pocket, and here is the remainder."

She fumbled in her pocket, and placed in his hand a cheap two-bladed clasp knife.

"On the mantelpiece," repeated the engineer, staring at the knife; "in a bonnet-box!"

"Those blue vases," said his wife.

Mr. Gannett put his hand to his head. If he had heard aright, one parrot had changed into a pair of blue vases, a bonnet, and a knife. A magic bird, with a vengeance.

"I sold it," said Mrs. Gannett, suddenly.

The engineer's knee stiffened inhospitably, and his arm dropped from his wife's waist. She rose quietly and took a chair opposite.

"Sold it!" said Mr. Gannett, in awful tones. "Sold my parrot?"

"I didn't like it, Jem," said his wife. "I didn't want that bird watching me, and I did want the vases, and the bonnet, and the little present for you."

Mr. Gannett pitched the little present to the other end of the room.

"You see, it mightn't have told the truth, Jem," continued Mrs. Gannett. "It might have told all sorts of lies about me and made no end of mischief."

"It couldn't lie," shouted the engineer, passionately, rising from his chair and pacing

the room. "It's your guilty conscience that's made a coward of you. How dare you sell my parrot?"

"Because it wasn't truthful, Jem," said his wife, who was somewhat pale.

"If you were half as truthful you'd do," vociferated the engineer, standing over her. "You—you deceitful woman!"

Mrs. Gannett fumbled in her pocket again, and producing a small handkerchief applied it delicately to her eyes.

"I—I got rid of it for your sake," she stammered. "It used to tell such lies about you, I couldn't bear to listen to it."

"About *me!*" said Mr. Gannett, sinking into his seat and staring at his wife with very natural amazement. "Tell lies about *me!* Nonsense! How could it?"

"I suppose it could tell me about you as easily as it could tell you about me," said Mrs. Gannett. "There was more magic in that bird than you thought, Jem. It used to say shocking things about you; I couldn't bear it."

"Do you think you're talking to a child or a fool?" demanded the engineer, hotly.

Mrs. Gannett shook her head feebly. She still kept the handkerchief to her eyes, but allowed a portion to drop over her mouth.

"I should like to hear some of the lies it told about me," said the engineer, with bitter sarcasm; "if you can remember them."

"The first lie," said Mrs. Gannett, in a feeble, but ready, voice, "was about the time you were at Genoa. The parrot said you were at some concert gardens at the upper end of the town."

One moist eye came mildly from behind the handkerchief just in time to see the engineer stiffen suddenly in his chair.

"I don't suppose there even is such a place," she continued.

"I—b'leve—there—is," said her husband, jerkily. "I've heard our chaps talk of it."

"But you haven't been there?" said his wife, anxiously.

"*Never,*" said the engineer, with extraordinary vehemence.

"That wicked bird said that you got intoxicated there," said Mrs. Gannett, in solemn accents; "that you smashed a little marble-topped table and knocked down two waiters, and that if it hadn't have been for the captain of the *Pursuit*, who was in there, and who got you away, you'd have been locked up. Wasn't it a wicked bird?"

"Horrible," said the engineer, huskily.

"I don't suppose there ever was a ship called the *Pursuit*," continued Mrs. Gannett.



"WASN'T IT A WICKED BIRD?"

jumped into the harbour and were nearly drowned."

Mr. Gannett, having loaded his pipe, lit it slowly and carefully, and, with tidy precision, got up and deposited the match in the fire-place.

"It used to frighten me so with its stories, that I hardly knew what to do with myself," continued Mrs. Gannett. "When you were at Suez——"

The engineer waved his hand imperiously.

"That's enough," he said, stiffly.

"I'm sure I don't want to have to repeat what it told me about Suez," said his wife. "I thought you'd like to hear it, that's all."

"Not at all," said the engineer, puffing at his pipe. "Not at all."

"But you see why I got rid of the bird, don't you?" said Mrs. Gannett. "If it had told you untruths about me, you would have believed

"Doesn't sound like a ship's name," murmured Mr. Gannett.

"Well, then, a few days later it said the *Curlew* was at Naples."

"I never went ashore all the time we were at Naples," remarked the engineer, casually.

"The parrot said you did," said Mrs. Gannett.

"I suppose you'll believe your own lawful husband before that cursed bird," shouted Gannett, starting up.

"Of course I didn't believe it, Jem," said his wife. "I'm trying to prove to you that the bird was not truthful; but you're so hard to persuade."

Mr. Gannett took a pipe from his pocket, and with a small knife dug with much severity and determination a hardened plug from the bowl, and blew noisily through the stem.

"There was a girl kept a fruit-stall just by the harbour," said Mrs. Gannett, "and, this evening, on the strength of having bought three-pennyworth of green figs, you put your arm round her waist and tried to kiss her, and her sweetheart, who was standing close by, tried to stab you. The parrot said that you were in such a state of terror, that you

them, wouldn't you?"

Mr. Gannett took his pipe from his mouth and took his wife in his extended arms. "No, my dear," he said, brokenly, "no more than you believed all this stuff about me."

"And I did quite right to sell it, didn't I, Jem?"

"Quite right," said Mr. Gannett, with a great assumption of heartiness. "Best thing to do with it."

"You haven't heard the worst yet," said Mrs. Gannett. "When you were at Suez——"

Mr. Gannett consigned Suez to its only rival, and thumping the table with his clenched fist, forbade his wife to mention the word again, and desired her to prepare supper.

Not until he heard her moving about in the kitchen below did he relax the severity of his countenance. Then his expression changed to one of extreme anxiety, and he restlessly paced the room, seeking for light. It came suddenly.

"It's Jenkins," he gasped, "that little brute, Jenkins! That's what he was writing to Mrs. Cluffins about, and I was going to tell Cluffins about him writing to his wife; I expect he knows the letters by heart."