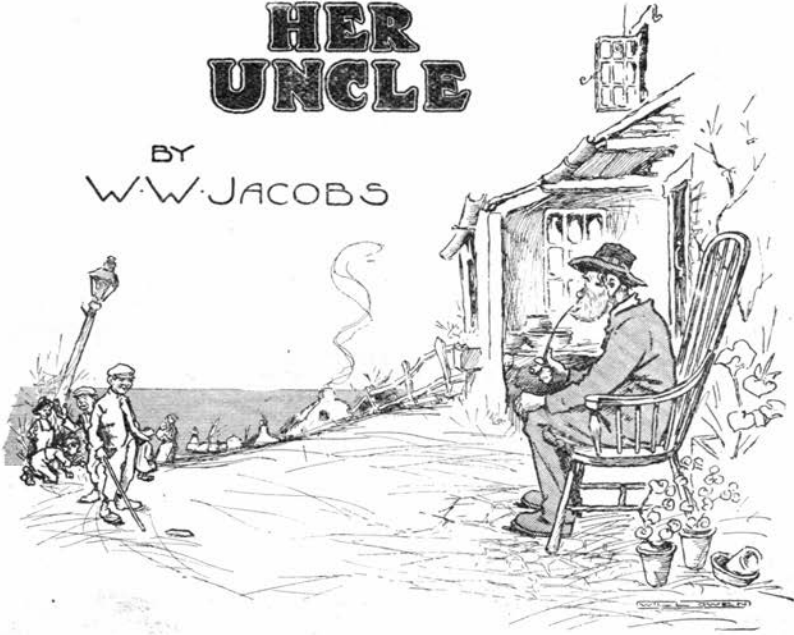


HER UNCLE

BY
W. W. JACOBS



MR. WRAGG sat in a high-backed Windsor chair at the door of his house, smoking. Before him the road descended steeply to the harbour, a small blue patch of which was visible from his door. Children over five were at school; children under that age, and suspiciously large for their years, played about in careless disregard of the remarks which Mr. Wragg occasionally launched at them. Twice a ball had whizzed past him; and a small but select party, with a tip-cat of huge dimensions and awesome points, played just out of reach. Mr. Wragg, snapping his eyes nervously, threatened in vain.

"Morning, old crusty-patch," said a cheerful voice at his elbow.

Mr. Wragg glanced up at the young fisherman towering above him, and eyed him disdainfully.

"Why don't you leave 'em alone?" inquired the young man. "Be cheerful and smile at 'em. You'd soon be able to smile with a little practice."

"You mind your business, George Gale, and I'll mind mine," said Mr. Wragg, fiercely; "I've 'ad enough of your impudence, and I'm not going to have any more. And don't lean up agin my wall, 'cos I won't 'ave it."

Mr. Gale laughed. "Got out o' bed the wrong side again, haven't you?" he inquired. "Why don't you put that side up against the wall?"

Mr. Wragg puffed in silence and became absorbed in a fishing-boat gliding past at the bottom of the hill.

"I hear you've got a niece coming to live with you?" pursued the young man.

Mr. Wragg smoked on.

"Poor thing!" said the other, with a sigh. "Does she take after you—in looks, I mean?"

"If I was twenty years younger nor what I am," said Mr. Wragg, sentimentally, "I'd give you a hiding, George Gale."

"It's what I want," agreed Mr. Gale, placidly. "Well, so long, Mr. Wragg. I can't stand talking to you all day."

He was about to move off, after pretending to pinch the ear of the infuriated Mr. Wragg, when he noticed a station-fly, with a big trunk on the box-seat, crawling slowly up the hill towards them.

"Good riddance," said Mr. Wragg, suggestively.

The other paid no heed. The vehicle came nearer, and a girl, who plainly owed none of her looks to Mr. Wragg's side of the family, came into view behind the trunk. She waved her hand, and Mr. Wragg, removing his pipe from his mouth, waved it in

return. Mr. Gale edged away about eighteen inches, and, with an air of assumed carelessness, gazed idly about him.

He saluted the driver as the fly stopped and gazed hard at the apparition that descended. Then he caught his breath as the girl, approaching her uncle, kissed him affectionately. Mr. Wragg, looking up fiercely at Mr. Gale, was surprised at the expression on that gentleman's face.

"Isn't it lovely here?" said the girl, looking about her; "and isn't the air nice?"

She followed Mr. Wragg inside, and the driver, a small man and elderly, began tugging at the huge trunk. Mr. Gale's moment had arrived.

"Stand away, Joe," he said, stepping forward. "I'll take that in for you."

He hoisted the trunk on his shoulders, and, rather glad of his lowered face, advanced slowly into the house. Uncle and niece had just vanished at the head of the stairs, and Mr. Gale, after a moment's hesitation, followed.

"In 'ere," said Mr. Wragg, throwing open a door. "Halloa! What are you doing in my house? Put it down. Put it down at once; d'ye hear?"

Mr. Gale caught the girl's surprised glance and, somewhat flustered, swung round so suddenly that the corner of the trunk took the gesticulating Mr. Wragg by the side of the head and bumped it against the wall. Deaf to his outcries, Mr. Gale entered the room and placed the box on the floor.

"Where shall I put it?" he inquired of the girl, respectfully.

"You go out of my house," stormed Mr. Wragg, entering with his hand to his head. "Go on. Out you go."

The young man surveyed him with solicitude. "I'm very sorry if I hurt you, Mr. Wragg——" he began.

"Out you go," repeated the other.

"It was a pure accident," pleaded Mr. Gale.

"And don't you set foot in my 'ouse agin," said the vengeful Mr. Wragg. "You made yourself officious bringing that box in a-purpose to give me a clump o' the side of the head."

Mr. Gale denied the charge so eagerly, and withal so politely, that the elder man regarded him in amazement. Then his glance fell on his niece, and he smiled with sudden malice as Mr. Gale slowly and humbly descended the stairs.

"One o' the worst chaps about here, my dear," he said, loudly. "Mate o' one o' the fishing-boats, and as impudent as they make 'em. Many's the time I've clouted his head for 'im."



"THE CORNER OF THE TRUNK TOOK THE GESTICULATING MR. WRAGG BY THE SIDE OF THE HEAD."

The girl regarded his small figure with surprised respect.

"When he was a boy, I mean," continued Mr. Wragg. "Now, there's your room, and when you've put things to rights, come down and I'll show you over the house."

He glanced at his niece several times during the day, trying hard to trace a likeness, first to his dead sister and then to himself. Several times he scrutinized himself in the small glass on the mantelpiece, but in vain. Even when he twisted his thin beard in his hand and tried to ignore his moustache, the likeness still eluded him.

His opinion of Miss Miller's looks was more than shared by the young men of Waterside. It was a busy youth who could not spare five minutes to chat with an uncle so fortunate, and in less than a couple of weeks Mr. Wragg was astonished at his popularity, and the deference accorded to his opinions.

The most humble of them all was Mr. Gale, and, with a pertinacity which was almost proof against insult, he strove to force his company upon the indignant Mr. Wragg. Debarred from that, he took to haunting the road, on one occasion passing the house no fewer than fifty-seven times in one afternoon. His infatuation was plain to be seen of all men. Wise men closed their eyes to it; others had theirs closed for them, Mr. Gale being naturally incensed to think that there was anything in his behaviour that attracted attention.

His father was at sea, and, to the dismay of the old woman who kept house for him, he began to neglect his food. A melancholy but not displeasing idea that he was slowly fading occurred to him when he found that he could only eat two herrings for breakfast instead of four. His particular friend, Joe Harris, to whom he confided the fact, remonstrated hotly.

"There's plenty of other girls," he suggested.

"Not like her," said Mr. Gale.

"You're getting to be a by-word in the place," complained his friend.

Mr. Gale flushed. "I'd do more than that for her sake," he said, softly.

"It ain't the way," said Mr. Harris, impatiently. "Girls like a man o' spirit; not a chap who hangs about without speaking, and looks as though he has been caught stealing the cat's milk. Why don't you go round and see her one afternoon when old Wragg is out?"

Mr. Gale shivered. "I dursen't," he confessed.

Mr. Harris pondered. "She was going to be a hospital nurse afore she came down here," he said, slowly. "Pr'aps if you was to break your leg or something she'd come and nurse you. She's wonderful fond of it, I understand."

"But then, you see, I haven't broken it," said the other, impatiently.

"You've got a bicycle," said Mr. Harris. "You—wait a minute——" he half-closed his eyes and waved aside a remark of his friend's. "Suppose you 'ad an accident and fell off it, just in front of the house?"

"I never fall off," said Mr. Gale, simply.

"Old Wragg is out, and me and Charlie Brown carry you into the house," continued Mr. Harris, closing his eyes entirely. "When you come to your senses, she's bending over you and crying."

He opened his eyes suddenly and then, closing one, gazed hard at the bewildered Gale. "To-morrow afternoon at two," he said, briskly, "me and Charlie'll be there waiting."

"Suppose old Wragg ain't out?" objected Mr. Gale, after ten minutes' explanation.

"He's at the Lobster Pot five days out of six at that time," was the reply; "if he ain't there to-morrow, it can't be helped."

Mr. Gale spent the evening practising falls in a quiet lane, and by the time night came had attained to such proficiency that on the way home he fell off without intending it. It seemed an easier thing than he had imagined, and next day at two o'clock punctually he put his lessons into practice.

By a slight error in judgment his head came into contact with Mr. Wragg's doorstep, and, half-stunned, he was about to rise, when Mr. Harris rushed up and forced him down again. Mr. Brown, who was also in attendance, helped to restore his faculties by a well-placed kick.

"He's lost his senses," said Mr. Harris, looking up at Miss Miller, as she came to the door.

"You could ha' heard him fall arf a mile away," added Mr. Brown.

Miss Miller stooped and examined the victim carefully. There was a nasty cut on the side of his head, and a general limpness of body which was alarming. She went indoors for some water, and by the time she returned the enterprising Mr. Harris had got the patient in the passage.

"I'm afraid he's going," he said, in answer to the girl's glance.

"Run for the doctor," she said, hastily. "Quick!"

"We don't like to leave 'im, miss," said Mr. Harris, tenderly. "I s'pose it would be too much to ask you to go?"

Miss Miller, with a parting glance at the prostrate man, departed at once.

"What did you do that for?" demanded



“WHAT DID YOU DO THAT FOR?” DEMANDED MR. GALE, SITTING UP.

Mr. Gale, sitting up. “I don’t want the doctor; he’ll spoil everything. Why didn’t you go away and leave us?”

“I sent ‘er for the doctor,” said Mr. Harris, slowly. “I sent ‘er for the doctor so as we can get you to bed afore she comes back.”

“Bed?” exclaimed Mr. Gale.

“Up you go,” said Mr. Harris, briefly. “We’ll tell *her* we carried you up. Now, don’t waste time.”

Pushed by his friends, and stopping to expostulate at every step, Mr. Gale was driven at last into Mr. Wragg’s bedroom.

“Off with your clothes,” said the leading spirit. “What’s the matter with you, Charlie Brown?”

“Don’t mind me; I’ll be all right in a minute,” said that gentleman, wiping his eyes. “I’m thinking of old Wragg.”

Before Mr. Gale had made up his mind his coat and waistcoat were off, and Mr. Brown was at work on his boots. In five minutes’ time he was tucked up in Mr. Wragg’s bed; his clothes were in a neat little pile on a chair, and Messrs. Harris and Brown were indulging in a congratulatory double-shuffle by the window.

“Don’t come to your senses yet awhile,”

said the former; “and when you do, tell the doctor you can’t move your limbs.”

“If they try to pull you out o’ bed,” said Mr. Brown, “scream as though you’re being killed. *H’sh!* Here they are.”

Voices sounded below; Miss Miller and the doctor had met at the door with Mr. Wragg, and a violent outburst on that gentleman’s part died away as he saw that the intruders had disappeared. He was still grumbling when Mr. Harris, putting his head over the balusters, asked him to make a little less noise.

Mr. Wragg came upstairs in three bounds, and his mien was so terrible that Messrs. Harris and Brown huddled together for protection. Then his

gaze fell on the bed and he strove in vain for speech.

“We done it for the best,” faltered Mr. Harris.

Mr. Wragg made a gurgling noise in his throat, and, as the doctor entered the room, pointed with a trembling finger at the bed. The other two gentlemen edged towards the door.

“Take him away; take him away at once,” vociferated Mr. Wragg.

The doctor motioned him to silence, and Joe Harris and Mr. Brown held their breaths nervously as he made an examination. For ten minutes he prodded and puzzled over the insensible form in the bed; then he turned to the couple at the door.

“How did it happen?” he inquired.

Mr. Harris told him. He also added that he thought it was best to put him to bed at once before he came round.

“Quite right,” said the doctor, nodding. “It’s a very serious case.”

“Well, I can’t ‘ave him ‘ere,” broke in Mr. Wragg.

“It won’t be for long,” said the doctor, shaking his head.

“I can’t ‘ave him ‘ere at all, and, what’s

more, I won't. Let him go to his own bed," said Mr. Wragg, quivering with excitement.

"He is not to be moved," said the doctor, decidedly. "If he comes to his senses and gets out of bed you must coax him back again."

"Coax?" stammered Mr. Wragg. "Coax? What's he got to do with me? This house isn't a 'orsepittle. Put his clothes on and take 'im away."

"Do nothing of the kind," was the stern reply. "In fact, his clothes had better be taken out of the room, in case he comes round and tries to dress."

Mr. Harris skipped across to the clothes and tucked them gleefully under his arm; Mr. Brown secured the boots.

"When he will come out of this stupor I can't say," continued the doctor. "Keep him perfectly quiet and don't let him see a soul."

"Look 'ere——" began Mr. Wragg, in a broken voice.

"As to diet—water," said the doctor, looking round.

"Water?" said Miss Miller, who had come quietly into the room.

"Water," repeated the doctor; "as much as he likes to take, of course. Let me see: to-day is Tuesday. I'll look in on Friday, or Saturday at latest; but till then he must have nothing but clear cold water."

Mr. Harris shot a horrified glance at the bed, which happened just then to creak. "But s'pose he asks for food, sir?" he said, respectfully.

"He mustn't have it," said the other, sharply. "If he is very insistent," he added, turning to the sullen Mr. Wragg, "tell him that he has just had food. He won't know any better, and he will be quite satisfied."

He motioned them out of the room, and then, lowering the blinds, followed downstairs on tip-toe. A murmur of voices, followed by the closing of the front door, sounded from below; and Mr. Gale, getting cautiously out of bed, saw Messrs. Harris and Brown walk up the street talking earnestly. He stole back on tip-toe to the door, and strove in vain to catch the purport of the low-voiced discussion below. Mr. Wragg's voice was raised, but indistinct. Then he fancied that he heard a laugh.

He waited until the door closed behind the doctor, and then went back to bed, to try and think out a situation which was fast becoming mysterious.

He lay in the darkened room until a cheerful clatter of crockery below heralded

the approach of tea-time. He heard Miss Miller call her uncle in from the garden, and with some satisfaction heard her pleasant voice engaged in brisk talk. At intervals Mr. Wragg laughed loud and long.

Tea was cleared away, and the long evening dragged along in silence. Uncle and niece were apparently sitting in the garden, but they came in to supper, and later on the fumes of Mr. Wragg's pipe pervaded the house. At ten o'clock he heard footsteps ascending the stairs, and through half-closed eyes saw Mr. Wragg enter the bedroom with a candle.

"Time the pore feller had 'is water," he said to his niece, who remained outside.

"Unless he is still insensible," was the reply.

Mr. Gale, who was feeling both thirsty and hungry, slowly opened his eyes, and fixed them in a vacant stare on Mr. Wragg.

"Where am I?" he inquired, in a faint voice.

"Buckingham Pallis," replied Mr. Wragg, promptly.

Mr. Gale ground his teeth. "How did I come here?" he said, at last.

"The fairies brought you," said Mr. Wragg.

The young man rubbed his eyes and blinked at the candle. "I seem to remember falling," he said, slowly; "has anything happened?"

"One o' the fairies dropped you," said Mr. Wragg, with great readiness; "fortunately, you fell on your head."

A sound suspiciously like a giggle came from the landing and fell heavily on Gale's ears. He closed his eyes and tried to think.

"How did I get in your bedroom, Mr. Wragg?" he inquired, after a long pause.

"Light-headed," confided Mr. Wragg to the landing, and significantly tapping his forehead. "This ain't my bedroom," he said, turning to the invalid. "It's the King's. His Majesty gave up 'is bed at once, directly he 'eard you was 'urt."

"And he's going to sleep on three chairs in the front parlour—if he can," said a low voice from the landing.

The humour faded from Mr. Wragg's face and was succeeded by an expression of great sourness. "Where is the pore feller's supper?" he inquired. "I don't suppose he can eat anything, but he might try."

He went to the door and a low-voiced colloquy ensued. The rival merits of cold chicken versus steak-pie as an invalid diet were discussed at some length. Finally the voice of Miss Miller insisted on chicken, and a glass of port-wine.

"I'll tell 'im it's chicken and port-wine then," said Mr. Wragg, reappearing with a bedroom jug and a tumbler, which he placed on a small table by the bedside.

"Don't let him eat too much, mind," said the voice from the landing, anxiously.

Mr. Wragg said that he would be careful, and addressing Mr. Gale implored him not to over-eat himself. The young man stared at him offensively, and, pretty certain now of the true state of affairs, thought only of escape.

"I feel better," he said, slowly. "I think I will go home."

"Yes, yes," said the other, soothingly.

"If you will fetch my clothes," continued Mr. Gale, "I will go now."

"Clothes!" said Mr. Wragg, in an astonished voice. "Why, you didn't 'ave any."

Mr. Gale sat up suddenly in bed and shook his fist at him. "Look here——" he began, in a choking voice.

"The fairies brought you as you was," continued Mr. Wragg, grinning furiously; "and of all the perfect pictures——"

A series of gasping sobs sounded from the landing, the stairs creaked, and a door slammed violently below. In spite of this precaution the sounds of a maiden in dire distress were distinctly audible.

"You give me my clothes," shouted the now furious Mr. Gale, springing out of bed.

Mr. Wragg drew back. "I'll go and fetch 'em," he said, hastily.

He ran lightly downstairs, and the young man, sitting on the edge of the bed, waited. Ten minutes passed, and he heard Mr. Wragg returning, followed by his niece. He slipped back into bed again.

"It's 'is pore brain again," he heard, in the unctuous tones which Mr. Wragg appeared to keep for this emergency. "It's clothes he

wants now; by and by I suppose it'll be something else. Well, the doctor said we'd got to humour him."

"Poor fellow!" sighed Miss Miller, with a break in her voice.

"See 'ow his face'll light up when he sees them," said her uncle.

He pushed the door open, and after surveying the patient with a benevolent smile triumphantly held up a collar and tie for his



"SURVEYING THE PATIENT WITH A BENEVOLENT SMILE, HE HELD UP A COLLAR AND TIE FOR HIS INSPECTION."

inspection and threw them on the bed. Then he disappeared hastily and, closing the door, turned the key in the lock.

"If you want any more chicken or anything," he cried through the door, "ring the bell."

The horrified prisoner heard them pass downstairs again, and, after a glass of water, sat down by the window and tried to think. He got up and tried the door, but it opened inwards, and after a severe onslaught the handle came off in his hand. Tired out at last he went to bed again, and slept fitfully until morning.

Mr. Wragg visited him again after breakfast, but with great foresight only put his head in at the door, while Miss Miller remained outside in case of need. In these

circumstances Mr. Gale met his anxious inquiries with a sullen silence, and the other, tired at last of baiting him, turned to go.

"I'll be back soon," he said, with a grin. "I'm just going out to tell folks 'ow you're getting on. There's a lot of 'em anxious."

He was as good as his word, and Mr. Gale, peeping from the window, raged helplessly as little knots of neighbours stood smiling up at the house. Unable to endure it any longer he returned to bed, resolving to wait until night came, and then drop from the window and run home in a blanket.

The smell of dinner was almost painful, but he made no sign. Mr. Wragg in high good humour smoked a pipe after his meal, and then went out again. The house was silent except for the occasional movements of the girl below. Then there was a sudden tap at his door.

"Well?" said Mr. Gale.

The door opened and, hardly able to believe his eyes, he saw his clothes thrown into the room. Hunger was forgotten, and he almost smiled as he hastily dressed himself.

The smile vanished as he thought of the people in the streets, and in a thoughtful fashion he made his way slowly downstairs. The bright face of Miss Miller appeared at the parlour door.

"Better?" she smiled.

Mr. Gale reddened and, drawing himself up stiffly, made no reply.

"That's polite," said the girl, indignantly. "After giving you your clothes, too. What do you think my uncle will say to me? He was going to keep you here till Friday."

Mr. Gale muttered an apology. "I've made a fool of myself," he added.

Miss Miller nodded cheerfully. "Are you hungry?" she inquired.

The other drew himself up again.

"Because there is some nice cold beef left," said the girl, glancing into the room.

Mr. Gale started and, hardly able to believe in his good

fortune, followed her inside. In a very short time the cold beef was a thing of the past, and the young man, toying with his beer-glass, sat listening to a lecture on his behaviour couched in the severest terms his hostess could devise.

"You'll be the laughing-stock of the place," she concluded.

"I shall go away," he said, gloomily.

"I shouldn't do that," said the girl, with a judicial air; "live it down."

"I shall go away," repeated Mr. Gale, decidedly. "I shall ship for a deep-sea voyage."

Miss Miller sighed. "It's too bad," she said, slowly; "perhaps you wouldn't look so foolish if——"

"If what?" inquired the other, after a long pause.

"If," said Miss Miller, looking down, "if——if——"

Mr. Gale started and trembled violently, as a wild idea, born of her blushes, occurred to him.

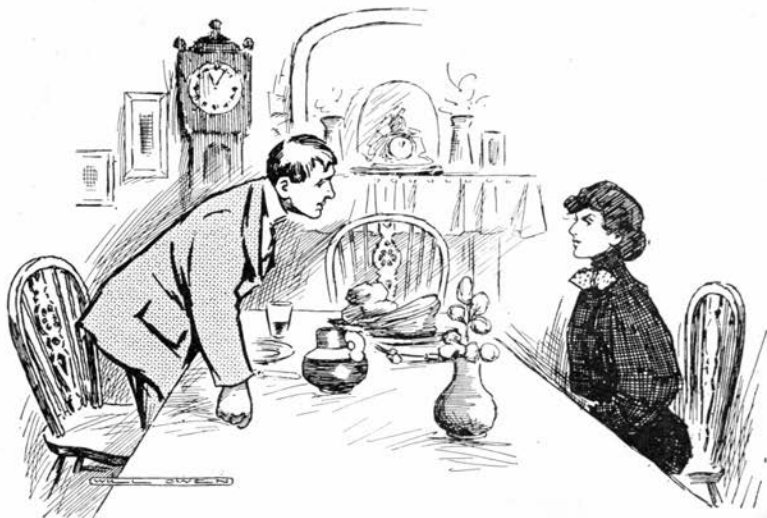
"If," he said, in quivering tones, "if——if——"

"Go on," said the girl, softly. "Why, I got as far as that: and you are a man."

Mr. Gale's voice became almost inaudible. "If we got married, do you mean?" he said, at last.

"Married!" exclaimed Miss Miller, starting back a full two inches. "Good gracious! the man *is* mad after all."

The bitter and loudly expressed opinion of Mr. Wragg when he returned an hour later was that they were both mad.



"GOOD GRACIOUS! THE MAN IS MAD AFTER ALL."