

ANGELS' VISITS



W. W. JACOBS



MR. WILLIAM JOBLING leaned against his door-post, smoking. The evening air, pleasant in its coolness after the heat of the day, caressed his shirt-sleeved arms. Children played noisily in the long, dreary street, and an organ sounded faintly in the distance. To Mr. Jobling, who had just consumed three herrings and a pint and a half of strong tea, the scene was delightful. He blew a little cloud of smoke in the air, and with half-closed eyes corrected his first impression as to the tune being played round the corner.

"Bill!" cried the voice of Mrs. Jobling, who was washing-up in the tiny scullery.

"'Ullo!" responded Mr. Jobling, gruffly.

"You've been putting your wet teaspoon in the sugar-basin, and—well, I declare, if you haven't done it again."

"Done what?" inquired her husband, hunching his shoulders.

"Putting your herringy knife in the butter. Well, you can eat it now; I won't. A lot of good me slaving from morning to night and buying good food when you go and spoil it like that."

Mr. Jobling removed the pipe from his

mouth. "Not so much of it," he commanded. "I like butter with a little flavour to it. As for your slaving all day, you ought to come to the works for a week; you'd know what slavery was then."

Mrs. Jobling permitted herself a thin, derisive cackle, drowned hurriedly in a clatter of tea-cups as her husband turned and looked angrily up the little passage.

"Nag! nag! nag!" said Mr. Jobling.

He paused expectantly.

"Nag! nag! nag! from morning till night," he resumed. "It begins in the morning and it goes on till bedtime."

"It's a pity——" began Mrs. Jobling.

"Hold your tongue," said her husband, sternly; "I don't want any of your back answers. It goes on all day long up to bedtime, and last night I laid awake for two hours listening to you nagging in your sleep."

He paused again.

"Nagging in your sleep," he repeated.

There was no reply.

"Two hours!" he said, invitingly; "two whole hours, without a stop."

"I 'ope it done you good," retorted his wife. "I noticed you did wipe one foot when you come in to-night."

Mr. Jobling denied the charge hotly, and, by way of emphasizing his denial, raised his foot and sent the mat flying along the passage. Honour satisfied, he returned to the door-post and, looking idly out on the street again, exchanged a few desultory remarks with Mr. Joe Brown, who, with his hands in his pockets, was balancing himself with great skill on the edge of the kerb opposite.

His gaze wandered from Mr. Brown to a young and rather stylishly-dressed woman who was approaching—a tall, good-looking girl with a slight limp, whose hat encountered unspoken feminine criticism at every step. Their eyes met as she came up, and recognition flashed suddenly into both faces.

"Fancy seeing you here!" said the girl. "Well, this is a pleasant surprise."

She held out her hand, and Mr. Jobling, with a fierce glance at Mr. Brown, who was not behaving, shook it respectfully.

"I'm so glad to see you again," said the girl; "I know I didn't thank you half enough the other night, but I was too upset."

"Don't mention it," said Mr. Jobling, in a voice the humility of which was in strong contrast to the expression with which he was regarding the antics of Mr. Brown, as that gentleman wafted kisses to the four winds of heaven.

There was a pause, broken by a short, dry cough from the parlour window. The girl, who was almost touching the sill, started nervously.

"It's only my missis," said Mr. Jobling.

The girl turned and gazed in at the window. Mr. Jobling, with the stem of his pipe, performed a brief ceremony of introduction.

"Good evening," said Mrs. Jobling, in a thin voice. "I don't know who you are, but I s'pose my 'usband does."

"I met him the other night," said the girl, with a bright smile; "I slipped on a piece of peel or something and fell, and he was passing and helped me up."

Mrs. Jobling coughed again. "First I've heard of it," she remarked.

"I forgot to tell you," said Mr. Jobling, carelessly. "I hope you wasn't hurt much, miss?"

"I twisted my ankle a bit, that's all," said the girl; "it's painful when I walk."

"Painful now?" inquired Mr. Jobling, in concern.

The girl nodded. "A little; not very."

Mr. Jobling hesitated; the contortions of Mr. Brown's face as he strove to make a wink carry across the road would have given pause to a bolder man; and twice his wife's

husky little cough had sounded from the window.

"I s'pose you wouldn't like to step inside and rest for five minutes?" he said, slowly.

"Oh, thank you," said the girl, gratefully; "I should like to. It—it really is very painful."

She limped in behind Mr. Jobling, and after bowing to Mrs. Jobling sank into the easy-chair with a sigh of relief and looked keenly round the room. Mr. Jobling disappeared, and his wife flushed darkly as he came back with his coat on and his hair wet from combing. An awkward silence ensued.

"How strong your husband is!" said the girl, clasping her hands impulsively.

"Is he?" said Mrs. Jobling.

"He lifted me up as though I had been a feather," responded the girl. "He put his arm round my waist and had me on my feet before I knew where I was."

"Round your waist?" repeated Mrs. Jobling.

"Where else should I put it?" broke in her husband, with sudden violence.

His wife made no reply, but sat gazing in a hostile fashion at the bold, dark eyes and stylish hat of the visitor.

"I should like to be strong," said the latter, smiling agreeably over at Mr. Jobling.

"When I was younger," said the gratified man, "I can assure you I didn't know my own strength, as the saying is. I used to hurt people just in play like, without knowing it. I used to have a hug like a bear."

"Fancy being hugged like that!" said the girl. "How awful!" she added, hastily, as she caught the eye of the speechless Mrs. Jobling.

"Like a bear," repeated Mr. Jobling, highly pleased at the impression he had made. "I'm pretty strong now; there ain't many as I'm afraid of."

He bent his arm and thoughtfully felt his biceps, and Mrs. Jobling almost persuaded herself that she must be dreaming, as she saw the girl lean forward and pinch Mr. Jobling's arm. Mr. Jobling was surprised too, but he had the presence of mind to bend the other.

"Enormous!" said the girl, "and as hard as iron. What a prize-fighter you'd have made!"

"He don't want to do no prize-fighting," said Mrs. Jobling, recovering her speech; "he's a respectable married man."

Mr. Jobling shook his head over lost opportunities. "I'm too old," he remarked.

"He's forty-seven," said his wife.



"SHE SAW THE GIRL LEAN FORWARD AND PINCH MR. JOBLING'S ARM."

"Best age for a man, in my opinion," said the girl; "just entering his prime. And a man is as old as he feels, you know."

Mr. Jobling nodded acquiescence, and observed that he always felt about twenty-two; a state of affairs which he ascribed to regular habits, and a great partiality for the company of young people.

"I was just twenty-two when I married," he mused, "and my missis was just six months——"

"You leave my age alone," interrupted his wife, trembling with passion. "I'm not so fond of telling my age to strangers."

"You told mine," retorted Mr. Jobling, "and nobody asked you to do that. Very free you was in coming out with mine."

"I ain't the only one that's free," breathed the quivering Mrs. Jobling. "I 'ope your ankle is better?" she added, turning to the visitor.

"Much better, thank you," was the reply.

"Got far to go?" queried Mrs. Jobling.

The girl nodded. "But I shall take a tram at the end of the street," she said, rising.

Mr. Jobling rose too, and all that he had ever heard or read about etiquette came crowding into his mind. A weekly journal patronized by his wife had three columns regularly, but he taxed his memory in vain for any instructions concerning brown-eyed

strangers with sprained ankles. He felt that the path of duty led to the tram-lines. In a somewhat blundering fashion he proffered his services; the girl accepted them as a matter of course.

Mrs. Jobling, with lips tightly compressed, watched them from the door. The girl, limping slightly, walked along with the utmost composure, but the bearing of her escort betokened a mind fully conscious of the scrutiny of the street.

He returned in about half an hour, and having this time to run the gauntlet of the street alone, entered with a mien which caused his wife's complaints to remain unspoken. The cough of Mr. Brown, a particularly contagious one, still rang in his ears, and he sat for some time in fierce silence.

"I see her on the tram," he said, at last. "Her name's Robinson—Miss Robinson."

"In-deed!" said his wife.

"Seems a nice sort o' girl," said Mr. Jobling, carelessly. "She's took quite a fancy to you."

"I'm sure I'm much obliged to her," retorted his wife.

"So I—so I asked her to give you a look in now and then," continued Mr. Jobling, filling his pipe with great care, "and she said she would. It'll cheer you up a bit."

Mrs. Jobling bit her lip and, although she

had never felt more fluent in her life, said nothing. Her husband lit his pipe, and after a rapid glance in her direction took up an old newspaper and began to read.

He astonished Mrs. Jobling next day by the gift of a geranium in full bloom. Surprise impeded her utterance, but she thanked him at last with some warmth, and after a little deliberation decided to put it in the bedroom.

Mr. Jobling looked like a man who has suddenly discovered a flaw in his calculations. "I was thinking of the front parlour winder," he said, at last.

"It'll get more sun upstairs," said his wife.

She took the pot in her arms and disappeared. Her surprise when she came down again and found Mr. Jobling rearranging the furniture, and even adding a choice ornament or two from the kitchen, was too elaborate to escape his notice.

"Been going to do it for some time," he remarked.

Mrs. Jobling left the room and strove with herself in the scullery. She came back pale of face and with a gleam in her

eye which her husband was too busy to notice.

"It'll never look much till we get a new hearthrug," she said, shaking her head. "They've got one at Jackson's that would be just the thing; and they've got a couple of tall pink vases that would brighten up the fireplace wonderful. They're going for next to nothing, too."

Mr. Jobling's reply took the form of uncouth and disagreeable growlings. After that phase had passed he sat for some time with his hand placed protectingly in his trouser-pocket. Finally, in a fierce voice, he inquired the cost.

Ten minutes later, in a state fairly evenly

divided between pleasure and fury, Mrs. Jobling departed with the money. Wild yearnings for courage that would enable her to spend the money differently, and confront the dismayed Mr. Jobling in a new hat and jacket, possessed her on the way; but they were only yearnings, twenty-five years' experience of her husband's temper being a sufficient safeguard.

Miss Robinson came in the day after as they were sitting down to tea. Mr. Jobling, who was in his shirt-sleeves, just had time to disappear as the girl passed the window. His wife let her in, and after five remarks about the weather sat listening in grim pleasure to the efforts of Mr. Jobling to find his coat. He found it at last, under a chair cushion, and, somewhat red of face, entered the room and greeted the visitor.

Conversation was at first rather awkward. The girl's eyes wandered round the room and paused in astonishment

on the pink vases; the beauty of the rug also called for notice.

"Yes, they're pretty good," said Mr. Jobling, much gratified by her approval.

"Beautiful," murmured the girl. "What a thing it is to have money!" she said, wistfully.

"I could do with some," said Mr. Jobling, with jocularly. He helped himself to bread and butter and began to discuss money and how to spend it. His ideas favoured retirement and a nice little place in the country.

"I wonder you don't do it," said the girl, softly.

Mr. Jobling laughed. "Gingell and Watson don't pay on those lines," he said.



"HE ASTONISHED MRS. JOBLING NEXT DAY BY THE GIFT OF A GERANIUM."

"We do the work and they take the money."

"It's always the way," said the girl, indignantly; "they have all the luxuries, and the men who make the money for them all the hardships. I seem to know the name Gingell and Watson. I wonder where I've seen it?"

"In the paper, p'r'aps," said Mr. Jobling.

"Advertising?" asked the girl.

Mr. Jobling shook his head. "Robbery," he replied, seriously. "It was in last week's paper. Somebody got to the safe and got away with nine hundred pounds in gold and bank-notes."

"I remember now," said the girl, nodding. "Did they catch them?"

"No, and not likely to," was the reply.

Miss Robinson opened her big eyes and looked round with an air of pretty defiance. "I am glad of it," she said.

"Glad?" said Mrs. Jobling, involuntarily breaking a self-imposed vow of silence. "Glad?"

The girl nodded. "I like pluck," she said, with a glance in the direction of Mr. Jobling; "and, besides, whoever took it had as much right to it as Gingell and Watson; they didn't earn it."

Mrs. Jobling, appalled at such ideas, glanced at her husband to see how he received them. "The man's a thief," she said, with great energy, "and he won't enjoy his gains."

"I dare say—I dare say he'll enjoy it right enough," said Mr. Jobling, "if he ain't caught, that is."

"I believe he is the sort of man I should like," declared Miss Robinson, obstinately.

"I dare say," said Mrs. Jobling; "and I've no doubt he'd like you. Birds of a—"

"That'll do," said her husband, peremptorily; "that's enough about it. The gov'nors can afford to lose it; that's one comfort."

He leaned over as the girl asked for more sugar and dropped a spoonful in her cup, expressing surprise that she should like her tea so sweet. Miss Robinson, denying the sweetness, proffered her cup in proof, and Mrs. Jobling sat watching with blazing eyes the antics of her husband as he sipped at it.

"Sweets to the sweet," he said, gallantly, as he handed it back.

Miss Robinson pouted, and, raising the cup to her lips, gazed ardently at him over the rim. Mr. Jobling, who certainly felt not more than twenty-two that evening, stole her cake and received in return a rap from a tea-

spoon. Mr. Jobling retaliated, and Mrs. Jobling, unable to eat, sat looking on in helpless fury at little arts of fascination which she had discarded—at Mr. Jobling's earnest request—soon after their marriage.

By dint of considerable self-control, aided by an occasional glance from her husband, she managed to preserve her calm until he returned from seeing the visitor to her tram. Then her pent-up feelings found vent. Quietly scornful at first, she soon waxed hysterical over his age and figure. Tears followed as she bade him remember what a good wife she had been to him, loudly claiming that any other woman would have poisoned him long ago. Speedily finding that tears were of no avail, and that Mr. Jobling seemed to regard them rather as a tribute to his worth than otherwise, she gave way to fury, and, in a fine, but unpunctuated passage, told him her exact opinion of Miss Robinson.

"It's no good carrying on like that," said Mr. Jobling, magisterially, "and, what's more, I won't have it."

"Walking into my house and making eyes at my 'usband," stormed his wife.

"So long as I don't make eyes at her there's no harm done," retorted Mr. Jobling. "I can't help her taking a fancy to me, poor thing."

"I'd poor thing her," said his wife.

"She's to be pitied," said Mr. Jobling, sternly. "I know how she feels. She can't help herself, but she'll get over it in time. I don't suppose she thinks for a moment we have noticed her—her—her liking for me, and I'm not going to have her feelings hurt."

"What about my feelings?" demanded his wife.

"You have got me," Mr. Jobling reminded her.

The nine points of the law was Mrs. Jobling's only consolation for the next few days. Neighbouring matrons, exchanging sympathy for information, wished, strangely enough, that Mr. Jobling was their husband. Failing that they offered Mrs. Jobling her choice of at least a hundred plans for bringing him to his senses.

Mr. Jobling, who was a proud man, met their hostile glances as he passed to and from his work with scorn, until a day came when the hostility vanished and gave place to smiles. Never so many people in the street, he thought, as he returned from work; certainly never so many smiles. People came hurriedly from their back premises to smile at him, and, as he reached his door, Mr. Joe Brown opposite had all the appearance of a



"THEY OFFERED MRS. JOBLING HER CHOICE OF AT LEAST A HUNDRED PLANS FOR BRINGING HIM TO HIS SENSES."

human sunbeam. Tired of smiling faces, he yearned for that of his wife. She came out of the kitchen and met him with a look of sly content. The perplexed Mr. Jobling eyed her morosely.

"What are you laughing at me for?" he demanded.

"I wasn't laughing at you," said his wife.

She went back into the kitchen and sang blithely as she bustled over the preparations for tea. Her voice was feeble, but there was a triumphant effectiveness about the high notes which perplexed the listener sorely. He seated himself in the new easy-chair—procured to satisfy the supposed æsthetic tastes of Miss Robinson—and stared at the window.

"You seem very happy all of a sudden," he growled, as his wife came in with the tray.

"Well, why shouldn't I be?" inquired Mrs. Jobling. "I've got everything to make me so."

Mr. Jobling looked at her in undisguised amazement.

"New easy-chair, new vases, and a new hearthrug," explained his wife, looking round the room. "Did you order that little table you said you would?"

"Yes," growled Mr. Jobling.

"Pay for it?" inquired his wife, with a trace of anxiety.

"Yes," said Mr. Jobling again.

Mrs. Jobling's face relaxed. "I shouldn't like to lose it at the last moment," she said. "You've been good to me lately, Bill; buying all these nice things. There's not many women have got such a thoughtful husband as what I have."

"Have you gone dotty? or what?" inquired her husband.

"It's no wonder people like you," pursued Mrs. Jobling, ignoring the question, and smiling again as she placed three chairs at the table. "I'll wait a minute or two before I soak the tea; I expect Miss Robinson won't be long, and she likes it fresh."

Mr. Jobling, to conceal his amazement and to obtain a little fresh air, walked out of the room and opened the front door.

"Cheer oh!" said the watchful Mr. Brown, with a benignant smile.

Mr. Jobling scowled at him.

"It's all right," said Mr. Brown. "You go in and set down; I'm watching for her."

He nodded reassuringly, and, not having curiosity enough to accept the other's offer and step across the road and see what he would get, shaded his eyes with his hand and looked with exaggerated anxiety up the road. Mr. Jobling, heavy of brow, returned to the parlour and looked hard at his wife.

"She's late," said Mrs. Jobling, glancing at the clock. "I do hope she's all right, but I should feel anxious about her if she was my gal. It's a dangerous life."

"Dangerous life!" said Mr. Jobling, roughly. "What's a dangerous life?"

"Why, hers," replied his wife, with a nervous smile. "Joe Brown told me. He followed her 'ome last night, and this morning he found out all about her."

The mention of Mr. Brown's name caused Mr. Jobling at first to assume an air of indifference; but curiosity overpowered him.

"What lies has he been telling?" he demanded.

"I don't think it's a lie, Bill," said his wife, mildly. "Putting two and two——"

"What did he say?" cried Mr. Jobling, raising his voice.

"He said, 'She—she's a lady detective,'" stammered Mrs. Jobling, putting her handkerchief to her unruly mouth.

"A tec!" repeated her husband. "A lady tec?"

Mrs. Jobling nodded. "Yes, Bill. She—she—she——"

"Well?" said Mr. Jobling, in exasperation.

"She's being employed by Gingell and Watson," said his wife.

Mr. Jobling sprang to his feet, and with scarlet face and clenched fists strove to assimilate the information and all its meaning.

"What—what did she come here for?"

"You let me see you laugh again, that's all," he said, fiercely. "As for that Jezybill——"

"There she is," said his wife, as a knock sounded at the door. "Don't say anything to hurt her feelings, Bill. You said she was to be pitied. And it must be a hard life to 'ave to go round and flatter old married men. I shouldn't like it."

Mr. Jobling, past speech, stood and glared at her. Then, with an inarticulate cry, he rushed to the front door and flung it open. Miss Robinson, fresh and bright, stood smiling outside. Within easy distance a little group of neighbours were making conversation, while opposite Mr. Brown awaited events.

"What d'you want?" demanded Mr. Jobling, harshly.

Miss Robinson, who had put out her



"'I AM SORRY TO MISS AN AMUSING EVENING,' SHE SAID."

Do you mean to tell me she thinks *I* took the money?" he said, huskily, after a long pause.

Mrs. Jobling bent before the storm. "I think she took a fancy to you, Bill," she said, timidly.

Mr. Jobling appeared to swallow something; then he took a step nearer to her.

hand, drew it back and gave him a swift glance. His red face and knitted brows told their own story.

"Oh!" she said, with a winning smile, "will you please tell Mrs. Jobling that I can't come to tea with her this evening?"

"Isn't there anything else you'd like to say?" inquired Mr. Jobling, disdainfully, as she turned away.

The girl paused and appeared to reflect. "You can say that I am sorry to miss an amusing evening," she said, regarding him steadily. "Good-bye."

Mr. Jobling slammed the door.