

THE CHANGELING



M

R. GEORGE HENSHAW let himself in at the front door, and stood for some time wiping his boots on the mat. The little house was ominously still, and a faint feeling, only partially due to the lapse of time since breakfast, manifested itself behind his waistcoat. He coughed—a matter-of-fact cough—and, with an attempt to hum a tune, hung his hat on the peg and entered the kitchen.

Mrs. Henshaw had just finished dinner. The neatly-cleaned bone of a chop was on a plate by her side; a small dish which had contained a rice-pudding was empty; and the only food left on the table was a small rind of cheese and a piece of stale bread. Mr. Henshaw's face fell, but he drew his chair up to the table and waited.

His wife regarded him with a fixed and offensive stare. Her face was red and her eyes were blazing. It was hard to ignore her gaze; harder still to meet it. Mr. Henshaw, steering a middle course, allowed his eyes to wander round the room and to dwell, for the fraction of a second, on her angry face.

"You've had dinner early?" he said at last, in a trembling voice.

"Have I?" was the reply.

Mr. Henshaw sought for a comforting explanation. "Clock's fast," he said, rising and adjusting it.

His wife rose almost at the same moment, and with slow and deliberate movements began to clear the table.

"What—what about dinner?" said Mr. Henshaw, still trying to control his fears.

"Dinner!" repeated Mrs. Henshaw, in a terrible voice. "You go and tell that creature you were on the 'bus with to get your dinner."

Mr. Henshaw made a gesture of despair. "I tell you," he said, emphatically, "it wasn't me. I told you so last night. You get an idea in your head and——"

"That'll do," said his wife, sharply. "I saw you, George Henshaw, as plain as I see you now. You were tickling her ear with a bit o' straw, and that good-for-nothing friend of yours, Ted Stokes, was sitting behind with another beauty. Nice way o' going on, and me at 'ome all alone by myself, slaving and slaving to keep things respectable!"

"It wasn't me," reiterated the unfortunate.

"When I called out to you," pursued the unheeding Mrs. Henshaw, "you started and pulled your hat over your eyes and turned away. I should have caught you if it hadn't been for all them carts in the way and falling down. I can't understand now how it was I wasn't killed; I was a mask of mud from head to foot."

Despite his utmost efforts to prevent it, a faint smile flitted across the pallid features of Mr. Henshaw.

"Yes, you may laugh," stormed his wife, "and I've no doubt them two beauties laughed too. I'll take care you don't have much more to laugh at, my man."

She flung out of the room and began to wash up the crockery. Mr. Henshaw, after standing irresolute for some time with his hands in his pockets, put on his hat again and left the house.

He dined badly at a small eating-house, and returned home at six o'clock that evening to find his wife out and the cupboard empty. He went back to the same restaurant for tea, and after a gloomy meal went round to discuss the situation with Ted Stokes. That gentleman's suggestion of a double alibi he thrust aside with disdain and a stern appeal to talk sense.

"Mind, if my wife speaks to you about it," he said, warningly, "it wasn't me, but somebody like me. You might say he 'ad been mistook for me before."

Mr. Stokes grinned and, meeting a freezing glance from his friend, at once became serious again.

"Why not say it was you?" he said, stoutly. "There's no 'arm in going for a 'bus-ride with a friend and a couple o' ladies."

"O' course there ain't," said the other, hotly, "else I shouldn't ha' done it. But you know what my wife is."

Mr. Stokes, who was by no means a favourite of the lady in question, nodded. "You *were* a bit larky, too," he said, thoughtfully. "You 'ad quite a little slapping game after you pretended to steal her brooch."

"I s'pose when a gentleman's with a lady he 'as got to make 'imself pleasant?" said Mr. Henshaw, with dignity. "Now, if my missis speaks to you about it, you say that it wasn't me, but a friend of yours up from the country who is as like me as two peas. See?"

"Name o' Dodd," said Mr. Stokes, with a knowing nod. "Tommy Dodd."

"I'm not playing the giddy goat," said the other, bitterly, "and I'd thank you not to."

"All right," said Mr. Stokes, somewhat taken aback. "Any name you like; I don't mind."

Mr. Henshaw pondered. "Any sensible name'll do," he said, stiffly.

"Bell?" suggested Mr. Stokes. "Alfred Bell? I did know a man o' that name once. He tried to borrow a bob off of me."

"That'll do," said his friend, after some consideration; "but mind you stick to the same name. And you'd better make up something about him—where he lives, and all that sort of thing—so that you can stand being questioned without looking more like a silly fool than you can help."

"I'll do what I can for you," said Mr. Stokes, "but I don't s'pose your missis'll come to me at all. She saw you plain enough."

They walked on in silence and, still deep in thought over the matter, turned into a neighbouring tavern for refreshment. Mr. Henshaw drank his with the air of a man performing a duty to his constitution; but Mr. Stokes, smacking his lips, waxed eloquent over the brew.

"I hardly know what I'm drinking," said his friend, forlornly. "I suppose it's six-half, because that's what I asked for."

Mr. Stokes gazed at him in deep sympathy. "It can't be so bad as that," he said, with concern.

"You wait till you're married," said Mr. Henshaw, brusquely. "You'd no business to ask me to go with you, and I was a good-natured fool to do it."

"You stick to your tale and it'll be all right," said the other. "Tell her that you spoke to me about it, and that his name is Alfred Bell—B E double L—and that he lives in—in Ireland. Here! I say!"

"Well?" said Mr. Henshaw, shaking off the hand which the other had laid on his arm.

"You—you be Alfred Bell," said Mr. Stokes, breathlessly.

Mr. Henshaw started and eyed him nervously. His friend's eyes were bright and, he fancied, a bit wild.

"Be Alfred Bell," repeated Mr. Stokes. "Don't you see? Pretend to be Alfred Bell and go with me to see your missis. I'll lend you a suit o' clothes and a fresh neck-tie, and there you are."

"*What?*" said the astounded Mr. Henshaw.

"It's as easy as easy," declared the other. "To-morrow evening, in a new rig-out, I walks you up to your house and asks for you to show you to yourself. Of course, I'm

sorry you ain't in, and perhaps we walks in to wait for you."

"Show me to myself?" gasped Mr. Henshaw.

Mr. Stokes winked. "On account o' the surprising likeness," he said, smiling. "It is surprising, ain't it? Fancy the two of us sitting there and talking to her and waiting for you to come in and wondering what's making you so late!"

Mr. Henshaw regarded him steadfastly for some seconds, and then, taking a firm hold of his mug, slowly drained the contents.

"And what about my voice?" he demanded, with something approaching a sneer.

"That's right," said Mr. Stokes, hotly; "it wouldn't be you if you didn't try to make difficulties."

"But what about it?" said Mr. Henshaw, obstinately.

"You can alter it, can't you?" said the other.

They were alone in the bar, and Mr. Henshaw, after some persuasion, was induced to try a few experiments. He ranged from bass, which hurt his throat, to a falsetto which put Mr. Stokes's teeth on edge, but in vain. The rehearsal was stopped at last by the landlord, who, having twice come into the bar under the impression that fresh customers had entered, spoke his mind at some length. "Seem to think you're in a blessed monkey-house," he concluded, severely.

"We thought we was," said Mr. Stokes, with a long appraising sniff, as he opened the door. "It's a mistake anybody might make."

He pushed Mr. Henshaw into the street as the landlord placed a hand on the flap of the bar, and followed him out.

"You'll have to 'ave a bad cold and talk in 'usky whispers," he said, slowly, as they walked along. "You caught a cold travelling in the train from Ireland day before yesterday, and you made it worse going for a ride on the outside of a 'bus with me and a couple o' ladies. See? Try 'usky whispers now."

Mr. Henshaw tried, and his friend, observing that he was taking but a languid interest in the scheme, was loud in his



"AND WHAT ABOUT MY VOICE?" HE DEMANDED."

praises. "I should never 'ave known you," he declared. "Why, it's wonderful! Why didn't you tell me you could act like that?"

Mr. Henshaw remarked modestly that he had not been aware of it himself, and, taking a more hopeful view of the situation, whispered himself into such a state of hoarseness that another visit for refreshment became absolutely necessary.

"Keep your 'art up and practise," said Mr. Stokes, as he shook hands with him some time later. "And if you can manage it, get off at four o'clock to-morrow and we'll go round to see her while she thinks you're still at work."

Mr. Henshaw complimented him upon his artfulness, and, with some confidence in a man of such resource, walked home in a more cheerful frame of mind. His heart sank as he reached the house, but to his relief the lights were out and his wife was in bed.

He was up early next morning, but his wife showed no signs of rising. The cupboard was still empty, and for some time he moved about hungry and undecided. Finally he mounted the stairs again, and with a view to arranging matters for the evening remonstrated with her upon her behaviour and loudly announced his intention of not coming

home until she was in a better frame of mind. From a disciplinary point of view the effect of the remonstrance was somewhat lost by being shouted through the closed door, and he also broke off too abruptly when Mrs. Henshaw opened it suddenly and confronted him. Fragments of the peroration reached her through the front door.

Despite the fact that he left two hours earlier, the day passed but slowly, and he was in a very despondent state of mind by the time he reached Mr. Stokes's lodging. The latter, however, had cheerfulness enough for both, and, after helping his visitor to change into fresh clothes and part his hair in the middle instead of at the side, surveyed him with grinning satisfaction. Under his directions Mr. Henshaw also darkened his eyebrows and beard with a little burnt cork, until Mr. Stokes declared that his own mother wouldn't know him.

"Now, be careful," said Mr. Stokes, as they

"Pet name!" said Mr. Henshaw, indignantly. "Pet name! You'll alter your ideas of married life when you're caught, I can tell you!"

He walked on in scornful silence, lagging farther and farther behind as they neared his house. When Mr. Stokes knocked at the door he stood modestly aside with his back against the wall of the next house.

"Is George in?" inquired Mr. Stokes, carelessly, as Mrs. Henshaw opened the door.

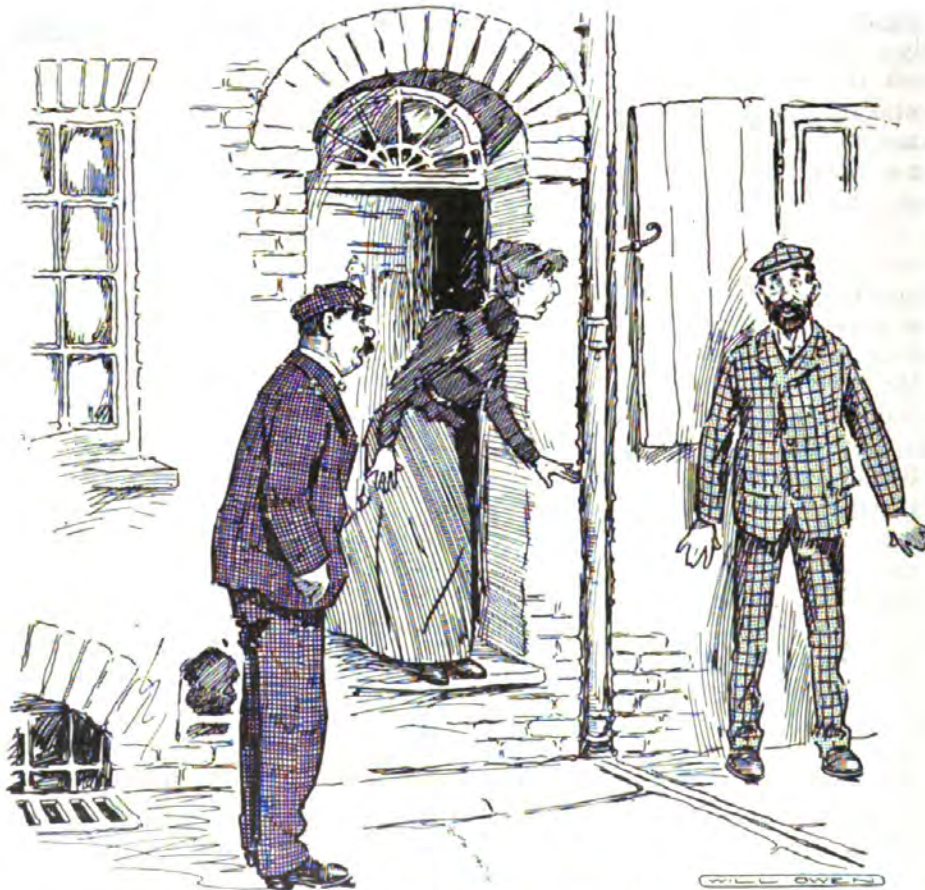
"No," was the reply.

Mr. Stokes affected to ponder; Mr. Henshaw instinctively edged away.

"He ain't in," said Mrs. Henshaw, preparing to close the door.

"I wanted to see 'im partikler," said Mr. Stokes, slowly. "I brought a friend o' mine, name o' Alfred Bell, up here on purpose to see 'im."

Mrs. Henshaw, following the direction of his eyes, put her head round the door.



"GEORGE!" SHE EXCLAIMED, SHARPLY."

set off. "Be bright and cheerful; be a sort o' ladies' man to her, same as she saw you with the one on the 'bus. Be as unlike yourself as you can, and don't forget yourself and call her by 'er pet name."

"George!" she exclaimed, sharply.

Mr. Stokes smiled. "That ain't George," he said, gleefully; "that's my friend, Mr. Alfred Bell. Ain't it a extraordinary likeness? Ain't it wonderful? That's

why I brought 'im up; I wanted George to see 'im."

Mrs. Henshaw looked from one to the other in wrathful bewilderment.

"His living image, ain't he?" said Mr. Stokes. "This is my pal George's missis," he added, turning to Mr. Bell.

"Good afternoon to you," said that gentleman, huskily.

"He got a bad cold coming from Ireland," explained Mr. Stokes, "and, foolish-like, he went outside a 'bus with me the other night and made it worse."

"O-oh!" said Mrs. Henshaw, slowly. "In-deed! Really!"

"He's quite curious to see George," said Mr. Stokes. "In fact, he was going back to Ireland to-night if it 'adn't been for that. He's waiting till to-morrow just to see George."

Mr. Bell, in a voice huskier than ever, said that he had altered his mind again.

"Nonsense!" said Mr. Stokes, sternly. "Besides, George would like to see you. I s'pose he won't be long?" he added, turning to Mrs. Henshaw, who was regarding Mr. Bell much as a cat regards a plump sparrow.

"I don't suppose so," she said, slowly.

"I dare say if we wait a little while——" began Mr. Stokes, ignoring a frantic glance from Mr. Henshaw.

"Come in," said Mrs. Henshaw, suddenly.

Mr. Stokes entered and, finding that his friend hung back, went out again and half led, half pushed him indoors. Mr. Bell's shyness he attributed to his having lived so long in Ireland.

"He is quite the ladies' man, though," he said, artfully, as they followed their hostess into the front room. "You should ha' seen 'im the other night on the 'bus. We had a couple o' lady friends o' mine with us, and even the conductor was surprised at his goings on."

Mr. Bell, by no means easy as to the results of the experiment, scowled at him despairingly.

"Carrying on, was he?" said Mrs. Henshaw, regarding the culprit steadily.

"Carrying on like one o'clock," said the imaginative Mr. Stokes. "Called one of 'em his little wife, and asked her where 'er wedding-ring was."

"I didn't," said Mr. Bell, in a suffocating voice. "I didn't."

"There's nothing to be ashamed of," said Mr. Stokes, virtuously. "Only, as I said to you at the time, 'Alfred,' I says, 'it's all right for you as a single man, but you might

be the twin-brother of a pal o' mine—George Henshaw by name—and if some people was to see you they might think it was 'im.' Didn't I say that?"

"You did," said Mr. Bell, helplessly.

"And he wouldn't believe me," said Mr. Stokes, turning to Mrs. Henshaw. "That's why I brought him round to see George."

"I should like to see the two of 'em together myself," said Mrs. Henshaw, quietly. "I should have taken him for my husband anywhere."

"You wouldn't if you'd seen 'im last night," said Mr. Stokes, shaking his head and smiling.

"Carrying on again, was he?" inquired Mrs. Henshaw, quickly.

"No!" said Mr. Bell, in a stentorian whisper.

His glance was so fierce that Mr. Stokes almost quailed. "I won't tell tales out of school," he said, nodding.

"Not if I ask you to?" said Mrs. Henshaw, with a winning smile.

"Ask 'im," said Mr. Stokes.

"Last night," said the whisperer, hastily, "I went for a quiet walk round Victoria Park all by myself. Then I met Mr. Stokes, and we had one half-pint together at a public-house. That's all."

Mrs. Henshaw looked at Mr. Stokes. Mr. Stokes winked at her.

"It's as true as my name is—Alfred Bell," said that gentleman, with slight but natural hesitation.

"Have it your own way," said Mr. Stokes, somewhat perturbed at Mr. Bell's refusal to live up to the character he had arranged for him.

"I wish my husband spent his evenings in the same quiet way," said Mrs. Henshaw, shaking her head.

"Don't he?" said Mr. Stokes. "Why, he always seems quiet enough to me. Too quiet, I should say. Why, I never knew a quieter man. I chaff 'im about it sometimes."

"That's his artfulness," said Mrs. Henshaw.

"Always in a hurry to get 'ome," pursued the benevolent Mr. Stokes.

"He may say so to you to get away from you," said Mrs. Henshaw, thoughtfully. "He does say you're hard to shake off sometimes."

Mr. Stokes sat stiffly upright and threw a fierce glance in the direction of Mr. Henshaw.

"Pity he didn't tell me," he said, bitterly. "I ain't one to force my company where it ain't wanted."

"I've said to him sometimes," continued Mrs. Henshaw, "'Why don't you tell Ted Stokes plain that you don't like his company?' but he won't. That ain't his way. He'd sooner talk of you behind your back."

"What does he say?" inquired Mr. Stokes, coldly ignoring a frantic headshake on the part of his friend.

"Promise me you won't tell him if I tell you," said Mrs. Henshaw.

Mr. Stokes promised.

"I don't know that I ought to tell you," said Mrs. Henshaw, reluctantly, "but I get so sick and tired of him coming home and grumbling about you."

"Go on," said the waiting Stokes.

Mrs. Henshaw stole a glance at him. "He says you act as if you thought yourself a man," she said, softly, "and your everlasting clack, clack, clack, worries him to death."

"Go on," said the listener, grimly.

"P'raps I'll tell you some things about him some day."

"It would be only fair," said Mrs. Henshaw, quickly. "Tell me now; I don't mind Mr. Bell hearing; not a bit."

Mr. Bell spoke up for himself. "I don't want to hear family secrets," he whispered, with an imploring glance at the vindictive Mr. Stokes. "It wouldn't be right."

"Well, I don't want to say things behind a man's back," said the latter, recovering himself. "Let's wait till George comes in, and I'll say 'em before his face."

Mrs. Henshaw, biting her lip with annoyance, argued with him, but in vain. Mr. Stokes was firm, and, with a glance at the clock, said that George would be in soon and he would wait till he came.



"MR. STOKES SPRANG FROM HIS CHAIR AND, WITH CLENCHED FISTS, STOOD ANGRILY REGARDING THE HORRIFIED MR. BELL."

"And he says it's so much trouble to get you to pay for your share of the drinks that he'd sooner pay himself and have done with it."

Mr. Stokes sprang from his chair and, with clenched fists, stood angrily regarding the horrified Mr. Bell. He composed himself by an effort and resumed his seat.

"Anything else?" he inquired.

"Heaps and heaps of things," said Mrs. Henshaw; "but I don't want to make bad blood between you."

"Don't mind me," said Mr. Stokes, glancing balefully over at his agitated friend.

Conversation flagged despite the efforts of Mrs. Henshaw to draw Mr. Bell out on the subject of Ireland. At an early stage of the catechism he lost his voice entirely, and thereafter sat silent while Mrs. Henshaw discussed the most intimate affairs of her husband's family with Mr. Stokes. She was in the middle of an anecdote about her mother-in-law when Mr. Bell rose and, with some difficulty, intimated his desire to depart.

"What, without seeing George?" said Mrs. Henshaw. "He can't be long now, and I should like to see you together."

"P'raps we shall meet him," said Mr.

Stokes, who was getting rather tired of the affair. "Good night."

He led the way to the door and, followed by the eager Mr. Bell, passed out into the street. The knowledge that Mrs. Henshaw was watching him from the door kept him silent until they had turned the corner, and then, turning fiercely on Mr. Henshaw, he demanded to know what he meant by it.

"I've done with you," he said, waving aside the other's denials. "I've got you out of this mess, and now I've done with you. It's no good talking, because I don't want to hear it."

"Good-bye, then," said Mr. Henshaw, with unexpected hauteur, as he came to a standstill.

"I'll 'ave my trousers first, though," said Mr. Stokes, coldly, "and then you can go, and welcome."

"It's my opinion she recognised me, and said all that just to try us," said the other, gloomily.

Mr. Stokes scorned to reply, and reaching his lodging stood by in silence while the other changed his clothes. He refused Mr. Henshaw's hand with a gesture he had once seen on the stage, and, showing him downstairs, closed the door behind him with a bang.

Left to himself, the small remnants of Mr. Henshaw's courage disappeared. He wandered forlornly up and down the streets until past ten o'clock, and then, cold and dispirited, set off in the direction of home. At the corner of the street he pulled himself together by a great effort, and walking rapidly to his house put the key in the lock and turned it.

The door was fast and the lights were out. He knocked, at first lightly, but gradually increasing in loudness. At the fourth knock a light appeared in the room

above, the window was raised, and Mrs. Henshaw leaned out.

"Mr. Bell!" she said, in tones of severe surprise.

"Bell?" said her husband, in a more surprised voice still. "It's me, Polly."

"Go away at once, sir!" said Mrs. Henshaw, indignantly. "How dare you call me by my Christian name? I'm surprised at you!"

"It's me, I tell you—George!" said her husband, desperately. "What do you mean by calling me Bell?"

"If you're Mr. Bell, as I suppose, you know well enough," said Mrs. Henshaw, leaning out and regarding him fixedly; "and if you're George you don't."

"I'm George," said Mr. Henshaw, hastily.

"I'm sure I don't know what to make of it," said Mrs. Henshaw, with a bewildered air. "Ted Stokes brought round a man named Bell this afternoon so like you that I can't tell the difference. I don't know what to do, but I do know this—I don't let you in until I have seen you both together, so that I can tell which is which."

"Both together!" exclaimed the startled Mr. Henshaw. "Here—look here!"

He struck a match and, holding it before his face, looked up at the window. Mrs. Henshaw scrutinized him gravely.

"It's no good," she said, despairingly. "I

can't tell. I must see you both together."

Mr. Henshaw ground his teeth. "But where is he?" he inquired.

"He went off with Ted Stokes," said his wife. "If you're George you'd better go and ask him."

She prepared to close the window, but Mr. Henshaw's voice arrested her.

"And suppose he is not there?" he said.

Mrs. Henshaw reflected. "If he is not



"HE STRUCK A MATCH AND, HOLDING IT BEFORE HIS FACE, LOOKED UP AT THE WINDOW."

there bring Ted Stokes back with you," she said at last, "and if he says you're George, I'll let you in."

The window closed and the light disappeared. Mr. Henshaw waited for some time, but in vain, and, with a very clear idea of the reception he would meet with at the hands of Mr. Stokes, set off to his lodging.

If anything, he had underestimated his friend's powers. Mr. Stokes, rudely disturbed just as he had got into bed, was the incarnation of wrath. He was violent, bitter, and insulting in a breath, but Mr. Henshaw was desperate, and Mr. Stokes, after vowing over and over again that nothing should induce him to accompany him back to his house, was at last so moved by his entreaties that he went upstairs and equipped himself for the journey.

"And, mind, after this I never want to see your face again," he said, as they walked swiftly back.

Mr. Henshaw made no reply. The events of the day had almost exhausted him, and silence was maintained until they reached the house. Much to his relief he heard somebody moving about up-stairs after the first knock, and in a very short time the window was gently raised and Mrs. Henshaw looked out.

"What, you've come back?" she said, in a low, intense voice. "Well, of all the impudence! How dare you carry on like this?"

"It's me," said her husband.

"Yes, I see it is," was the reply.

"It's him right enough; it's your husband," said Mr. Stokes. "Alfred Bell has gone."

"How dare you stand there and tell me them falsehoods!" exclaimed Mrs. Henshaw. "I wonder the ground don't open and swallow you up. It's Mr. Bell, and if he don't go away I'll call the police."

Messrs. Henshaw and Stokes, amazed at their reception, stood blinking up at her. Then they conferred in whispers.

"If you can't tell 'em apart, how do you know this is Mr. Bell?" inquired Mr. Stokes, turning to the window again.

"How do I know?" repeated Mrs. Henshaw. "How do I know? Why, because my husband came home almost directly Mr. Bell had gone. I wonder he didn't meet him."

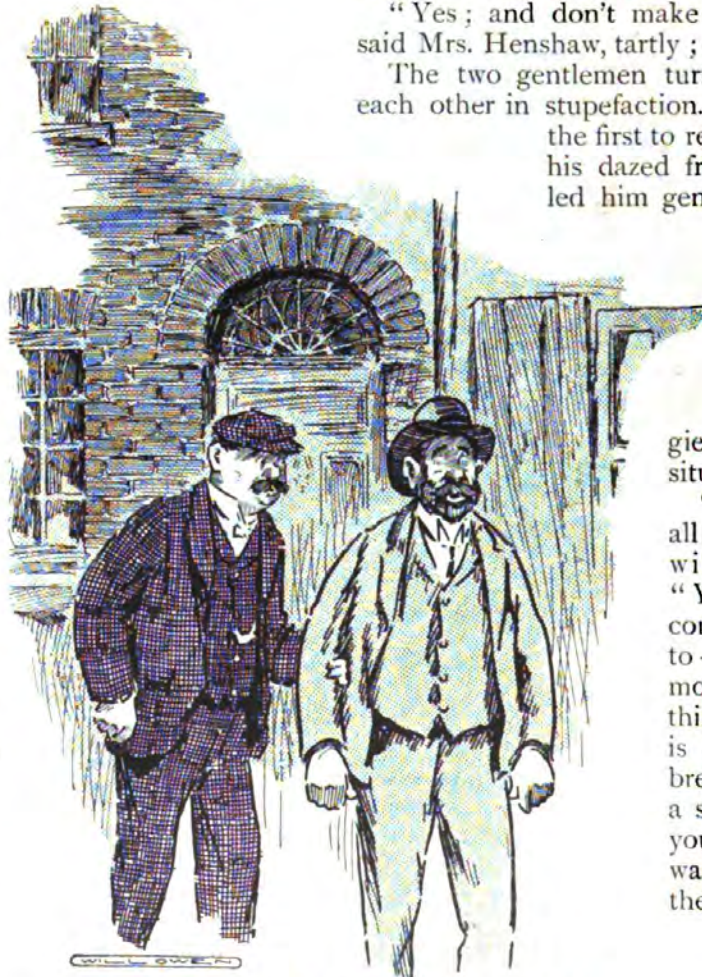
"Came home?" cried Mr. Henshaw, shrilly. "Came home?"

"Yes; and don't make so much noise," said Mrs. Henshaw, tartly; "he's asleep."

The two gentlemen turned and gazed at each other in stupefaction. Mr. Stokes was the first to recover, and, taking his dazed friend by the arm, led him gently away.

At the end of the street he took a deep breath, and, after a slight pause to collect his scattered energies, summed up the situation.

"She's twigged it all along," he said, with conviction. "You'll have to come home with me to-night, and to-morrow the best thing you can do is to make a clean breast of it. It was a silly game, and, if you remember, I was against it from the first."



"MR. STOKES, TAKING HIS DAZED FRIEND BY THE ARM, LED HIM GENTLY AWAY."