

# A DISTANT RELATIVE



BY

W. W. JACOBS

**M**R. POTTER had just taken Ethel Spriggs into the kitchen to say good-bye; in the small front room Mr. Spriggs, with his fingers already fumbling at the linen collar of ceremony, waited impatiently.

"They get longer and longer over their good-byes," he complained.

"It's only natural," said Mrs. Spriggs, looking up from a piece of fine sewing. "Don't you remember——"

"No, I don't," said her husband, doggedly. "I know that your pore father never 'ad to put on a collar for me; and, mind you, I won't wear one after they're married, not if you all went on your bended knees and asked me to."

He composed his face as the door opened, and nodded good night to the rather overdressed young man who came through the room with his daughter. The latter opened the front-door and, passing out with Mr. Potter, held it slightly open. A penetrating draught played upon the exasperated Mr. Spriggs. He coughed loudly.

"Your father's got a cold," said Mr. Potter, in a concerned voice.

"No; it's only too much smoking," said the girl. "He's smoking all day long."

The indignant Mr. Spriggs coughed again; but the young people had found a new subject of conversation. It ended some minutes later in a playful scuffle, during which the door acted the part of a ventilating fan.

"It's only for another fortnight," said Mrs. Spriggs, hastily, as her husband rose.

"After they're spliced," said the vindictive Mr. Spriggs, resuming his seat, "I'll go round and I'll play about with their front-door till——"

He broke off abruptly as his daughter, darting into the room, closed the door with a bang that nearly extinguished the lamp, and turned the key. Before her flushed and laughing face Mr. Spriggs held his peace.

"What's the matter?" she asked, eyeing him. "What are you looking like that for?"

"Too much draught—for your mother," said Mr. Spriggs, feebly. "I'm afraid of her asthma agin."

He fell to work on the collar once more,



and, escaping at last from the clutches of that enemy, laid it on the table and unlaced his boots. An attempt to remove his coat was promptly frustrated by his daughter.

"You'll get doing it when you come round to see us," she explained.

Mr. Spriggs sighed, and lighting a short clay pipe—*forbidden in the presence of his future son-in-law*—fell to watching mother and daughter as they gloated over dress materials and discussed double-widths.

"Anybody who can't be 'appy with her," he said, half an hour later, as his daughter slapped his head by way of bidding him good night, and retired, "don't deserve to be 'appy."

"I wish it was over," whispered his wife. "She'll break her heart if anything happens, and—and Gussie will be out now in a day or two."

"A gal can't 'elp what her uncle does," said Mr. Spriggs, fiercely; "if Alfred throws her over for that, he's no man."

"Pride is his great fault," said his wife, mournfully.

"It's no good taking up troubles afore they come," observed Mr. Spriggs. "P'raps Gussie won't come 'ere."

"He'll come straight here," said his wife, with conviction; "he'll come straight here and try and make a fuss of me, same as he used to do when we was children and I'd got a ha'penny. I know him."

"Cheer up, old gal," said Mr. Spriggs; "if he does, we must try and get rid of 'im; and, if he won't go, we must tell Alfred that he's been to Australia, same as we did Ethel."

His wife smiled faintly.

"That's the ticket," continued Mr. Spriggs. "For one thing, I b'leve he'll be ashamed to show his face here; but, if he does, he's come back from Australia. See? It'll make it nicer for 'im too. You don't suppose he wants to boast of where he's been?"

"And suppose he comes while Alfred is here?" said his wife.

"Then I say,

'How 'ave you left 'em all in Australia?' and wink at him," said the ready Mr. Spriggs.

"And s'pose you're not here?" objected his wife.

"Then you say it and wink at him," was the reply. "No; I know you can't," he added, hastily, as Mrs. Spriggs raised another objection; "you've been too well brought up. Still, you can try."

It was a slight comfort to Mrs. Spriggs that Mr. Augustus Price did, after all, choose a convenient time for his reappearance. A faint knock sounded on the door two days afterwards as she sat at tea with her husband, and an anxious face with somewhat furtive eyes was thrust into the room.

"Emma!" said a mournful voice, as the upper part of the intruder's body followed the face.

"Gussie!" said Mrs. Spriggs, rising in disorder.

Mr. Price drew his legs into the room, and, closing the door with extraordinary care, passed the cuff of his coat across his eyes and surveyed them tenderly.

"I've come home to die," he said, slowly, and, tottering across the room, embraced his sister with much unction.

"What are you going to die of?" inquired Mr. Spriggs, reluctantly accepting the extended hand.

"Broken 'art, George," replied his brother-in-law, sinking into a chair.



"AN ANXIOUS FACE WAS THRUST INTO THE ROOM."

Mr. Spriggs grunted, and, moving his chair a little farther away, watched the intruder as his wife handed him a plate. A troubled glance from his wife reminded him of their arrangements for the occasion, and he cleared his throat several times in vain attempts to begin.

"I'm sorry that we can't ask you to stay with us, Gussie, 'specially as you're so ill," he said, at last; "but p'raps you'll be better after picking a bit."

Mr. Price, who was about to take a slice of bread and butter, refrained, and, closing his eyes, uttered a faint moan. "I sha'n't last the night," he muttered.

"That's just it," said Mr. Spriggs, eagerly. "You see, Ethel is going to be married in a fortnight, and if you died here that would put it off."

"I might last longer if I was took care of," said the other, opening his eyes.

"And, besides, Ethel don't know where you've been," continued Mr. Spriggs. "We told 'er that you had gone to Australia. She's going to marry a very partikler young chap—a grocer—and if he found it out it might be awk'ard."

Mr. Price closed his eyes again, but the lids quivered.

"It took 'im some time to get over me being a bricklayer," pursued Mr. Spriggs. "What he'd say to you——"

"Tell 'im I've come back from Australia, if you like," said Mr. Price, faintly. "I don't mind."

Mr. Spriggs cleared his throat again. "But, you see, we told Ethel as you was doing well out there," he said, with an embarrassed laugh, "and girl-like, and Alfred talking a good deal about his relations, she—she's made the most of it."

"It don't matter," said the complaisant Mr. Price; "you say what you like. I sha'n't interfere with you."

"But, you see, you don't look as though you've been making money," said his sister, impatiently. "Look at your clothes."

Mr. Price held up his hand. "That's easy got over," he remarked; "while I'm having a bit of tea George can go out and buy me some new ones. You get what you think I should look richest in, George—a black tail-coat would be best, I should think, but I leave it to you. A bit of a fancy waistcoat, p'raps, lightish trousers, and a pair o' nice boots, easy sevens."

He sat upright in his chair and, ignoring the look of consternation that passed between

husband and wife, poured himself out a cup of tea and took a slice of cake.

"Have you got any money?" said Mr. Spriggs, after a long pause.

"I left it behind me—in Australia," said Mr. Price, with ill-timed facetiousness.

"Getting better, ain't you?" said his brother-in-law, sharply. "How's that broken 'art getting on?"

"It'll go all right under a fancy waistcoat," was the reply; "and while you're about it, George, you'd better get me a scarf-pin, and, if you *could* run to a gold watch and chain——"

He was interrupted by a frenzied outburst from Mr. Spriggs; a somewhat incoherent summary of Mr. Price's past, coupled with unlawful and heathenish hopes for his future.

"You're wasting time," said Mr. Price, calmly, as he paused for breath. "Don't get 'em if you don't want to. I'm trying to help you, that's all. I don't mind anybody knowing where I've been. I was inncerent. If you will give way to sinful pride you must pay for it."

Mr. Spriggs, by a great effort, regained his self-control. "Will you go away if I give you a quid?" he asked, quietly.

"No," said Mr. Price, with a placid smile. "I've got a better idea of the value of money than that. Besides, I want to see my dear niece, and see whether that young man's good enough for her."

"Two quid?" suggested his brother-in-law.

Mr. Price shook his head. "I couldn't do it," he said, calmly. "In justice to myself I couldn't do it. You'll be feeling lonely when you lose Ethel, and I'll stay and keep you company."

The bricklayer nearly broke out again; but, obeying a glance from his wife, closed his lips and followed her obediently upstairs. Mr. Price, filling his pipe from a paper of tobacco on the mantelpiece, winked at himself encouragingly in the glass, and smiled gently as he heard the chinking of coins upstairs.

"Be careful about the size," he said, as Mr. Spriggs came down and took his hat from a nail; "about a couple of inches shorter than yourself and not near so much round the waist."

Mr. Spriggs regarded him sternly for a few seconds, and then, closing the door with a bang, went off down the street. Left alone, Mr. Price strolled about the room investigating, and then, drawing an easy-chair up



to the fire, put his feet on the fender and relapsed into thought.

Two hours later he sat in the same place, a changed and resplendent being. His thin legs were hidden in light check trousers, and the companion waistcoat to Joseph's coat graced the upper part of his body. A large chrysanthemum in the button-hole of his frock-coat completed the picture of an Australian millionaire, as understood by Mr. Spriggs.

"A nice watch and chain, and a little money in my pockets, and I shall be all right," murmured Mr. Price.

"You won't get any more out o' me," said

head back and blew smoke to the ceiling. He was in the same easy position when Ethel arrived home accompanied by Mr. Potter.

"It's—it's your Uncle Gussie," said Mrs. Spriggs, as the girl stood eyeing the visitor.

"From Australia," said her husband, thickly.

Mr. Price smiled, and his niece, noticing that he removed his pipe and wiped his lips with the back of his hand, crossed over and kissed his eyebrow. Mr. Potter was then introduced and received a gracious reception, Mr. Price commenting on the extraordinary likeness he bore to a young friend of his who had just come in for forty thousand a year.



"MR. POTTER WAS THEN INTRODUCED AND RECEIVED A GRACIOUS RECEPTION."

Mr. Spriggs, fiercely. "I've spent every farthing I've got."

"Except what's in the bank," said his brother-in-law. "It'll take you a day or two to get at it, I know. S'pose we say Saturday for the watch and chain?"

Mr. Spriggs looked helplessly at his wife, but she avoided his gaze. He turned and gazed in a fascinated fashion at Mr. Price, and received a cheerful nod in return.

"I'll come with you and help choose it," said the latter. "It'll save you trouble if it don't save your pocket."

He thrust his hands in his trouser-pockets and, spreading his legs wide apart, tilted his

"That's nearly as much as you're worth, uncle, isn't it?" inquired Miss Spriggs, daringly.

Mr. Price shook his head at her and pondered. "Rather more," he said, at last, "rather more."

Mr. Potter caught his breath sharply; Mr. Spriggs, who was stooping to get a light for his pipe, nearly fell into the fire. There was an impressive silence.

"Money isn't everything," said Mr. Price, looking round and shaking his head. "It's not much good, except to give away."

His eye roved round the room and came to a rest finally upon Mr. Potter. The young



man noticed with a thrill that it beamed with benevolence.

"Fancy coming over without saying a word to anybody, and taking us all by surprise like this!" said Ethel.

"I felt I must see you all once more before I died," said her uncle, simply. "Just a flying visit I meant it to be, but your father and mother won't hear of my going back just yet."

"Of course not," said Ethel, who was helping the silent Mrs. Spriggs to lay supper.

"When I talked of going your father 'eld me down in my chair," continued the veracious Mr. Price.

"Quite right, too," said the girl. "Now draw your chair up and have some supper, and tell us all about Australia."

Mr. Price drew his chair up, but, as to talking about Australia, he said ungratefully that he was sick of the name of the place, and preferred instead to discuss the past and future of Mr. Potter. He learned, among other things, that that gentleman was of a careful and thrifty disposition, and that his savings, augmented by a lucky legacy, amounted to a hundred and ten pounds.

"Alfred is going to stay with Palmer and Mays for another year, and then we shall take a business of our own," said Ethel.

"Quite right," said Mr. Price, meaningly. "I like to see young people make their own way. It's good for 'em."

It was plain to all that he had taken a great fancy to Mr. Potter. He discussed the grocery trade with the air of a rich man seeking a good investment, and threw out dark hints about returning to England after a final visit to Australia and settling down in the bosom of his family. He accepted a cigar from Mr. Potter after supper, and, when the young man left—at an unusually late hour—walked home with him.

It was the first of several pleasant evenings, and Mr. Price, who had bought a book dealing with Australia from a second-hand book-stall, no longer denied them an account of his adventures there. A gold watch and chain, which had made a serious hole in his brother-in-law's Savings Bank account, lent an air of substance to his waistcoat, and a pin of excellent paste sparkled in his neck-tie. Under the influence of good food and home comforts he improved every day, and the unfortunate Mr. Spriggs was at his wits' end to resist further encroachments. From the

second day of their acquaintance he called Mr. Potter "Alf," and the young people listened with great attention to his discourse on "Money: How to Make It and How to Keep It."

His own dealings with Mr. Spriggs afforded an example which he did not quote. Beginning with shillings, he led up to half-crowns, and, encouraged by success, one afternoon boldly demanded a half-sovereign to buy a wedding-present with. Mrs. Spriggs drew her overwrought husband into the kitchen and argued with him in whispers.

"Give him what he wants till they're married," she entreated; "after that Alfred can't help himself, and it'll be as much to his interest to keep quiet as anybody else."

Mr. Spriggs, who had been a careful man all his life, found the half-sovereign and a few new names, which he bestowed upon Mr. Price at the same time. The latter listened unmoved. In fact, a bright eye and a pleasant smile seemed to indicate that he regarded them rather in the nature of compliments than otherwise.

"I telegraphed over to Australia this morning," he said, as they all sat at supper that evening.

"About my money?" said Mr. Potter, eagerly.



"A GOLD WATCH AND CHAIN LENT AN AIR OF SUBSTANCE TO HIS WAISTCOAT."

Mr. Price frowned at him swiftly. "No; telling my head clerk to send over a wedding-present for you," he said, his face softening under the eye of Mr. Spriggs. "I've got just the thing for you there. I can't see anything good enough over here."

The young couple were warm in their thanks.

"What did you mean, about your money?" inquired Mr. Spriggs, turning to his future son-in-law.

"Nothing," said the young man, evasively.

"It's a secret," said Mr. Price.

"What about?" persisted Mr. Spriggs, raising his voice.

"It's a little private business between me and Uncle Gussie," said Mr. Potter, somewhat stiffly.

"You—you haven't been lending him money?" stammered the bricklayer.

"Don't be silly, father," said Miss Spriggs, sharply. "What good would Alfred's little bit o' money be to Uncle Gussie? If you must know, Alfred is drawing it out for uncle to invest it for him."

The eyes of Mr. and Mrs. Spriggs and Mr. Price engaged in a triangular duel. The latter spoke first.

"I'm putting it into my business for him," he said, with a threatening glance, "in Australia."

"And he didn't want his generosity known," added Mr. Potter.

The bewildered Mr. Spriggs looked helplessly round the table. His wife's foot pressed his, and like a mechanical toy his lips snapped together.

"I didn't know you had got your money handy," said Mrs. Spriggs, in trembling tones.

"I made special application, and I'm to have it on Friday," said Mr. Potter, with a smile. "You don't get a chance like that every day."

He filled Uncle Gussie's glass for him, and that gentleman at once raised it and proposed the health of the young couple. "If anything was to 'appen to break it off now," he said, with a swift glance at his sister, "they'd be miserable for life, I can see that."

"Miserable for ever," assented Mr. Potter, in a sepulchral voice, as he squeezed the hand of Miss Spriggs under the table.

"It's the only thing worth 'aving—love," continued Mr. Price, watching his brother-in-law out of the corner of his eye. "Money is nothing."

Mr. Spriggs emptied his glass and, knitting his brows, drew patterns on the cloth with the back of his knife. His wife's foot

was still pressing on his, and he waited for instructions.

For once, however, Mrs. Spriggs had none to give. Even when Mr. Potter had gone and Ethel had retired upstairs she was still voiceless. She sat for some time looking at the fire and stealing an occasional glance at Uncle Gussie as he smoked a cigar; then she arose and bent over her husband.

"Do what you think best," she said, in a weary voice. "Good night."

"What about that money of young Alfred's?" demanded Mr. Spriggs, as the door closed behind her.

"I'm going to put it in my business," said Uncle Gussie, blandly; "my business in Australia."

"Ho! You've got to talk to me about that first," said the other.

His brother-in-law leaned back and smoked with placid enjoyment. "You do what you like," he said, easily. "Of course, if you tell Alfred, I sha'n't get the money, and Ethel won't get 'im. Besides that, he'll find out what lies you've been telling."

"I wonder you can look me in the face," said the raging bricklayer.

"And I should give him to understand that you were going shares in the hundred and ten pounds and then thought better of it," said the unmoved Mr. Price. "He's the sort o' young chap as'll believe anything. Bless 'im!"

Mr. Spriggs bounced up from his chair and stood over him with his fists clenched. Mr. Price glared defiance.

"If you're so partikler you can make it up to him," he said, slowly. "You've been a saving man, I know, and Emma 'ad a bit left her that I ought to have 'ad. When you've done play-acting I'll go to bed. So long!"

He got up, yawning, and walked to the door, and Mr. Spriggs, after a momentary idea of breaking him in pieces and throwing him out into the street, blew out the lamp and went upstairs to discuss the matter with his wife until morning.

Mr. Spriggs left for his work next day with the question still undecided, but a pretty strong conviction that Mr. Price would have to have his way. The wedding was only five days off, and the house was in a bustle of preparation. A certain gloom which he could not shake off he attributed to a raging toothache, turning a deaf ear to the various remedies suggested by Uncle Gussie, and the name of an excellent dentist who had broken a tooth of Mr. Potter's three times before extracting it.



Uncle Gussie he treated with bare civility in public, and to blood-curdling threats in private. Mr. Price, ascribing the latter to the toothache, also varied his treatment to his company; prescribing whisky held in the mouth, and other agreeable remedies, when there were listeners, and recommending him to fill his mouth with cold water and sit on the fire till it boiled, when they were alone.

He was at his worst on Thursday morning; on Thursday afternoon he came home a bright and contented man. He hung his cap on the nail with a flourish, kissed his wife, and, in full view of the disapproving Mr. Price, executed a few clumsy steps on the hearthrug.

"Come in for a fortune?" inquired the latter, eyeing him sourly.

"No; I've saved one," replied Mr. Spriggs, gaily. "I wonder I didn't think of it myself."

"Think of what?" inquired Mr. Price.

"You'll soon know," said Mr. Spriggs, "and you've only got yourself to thank for it."

Uncle Gussie sniffed suspiciously; Mrs. Spriggs pressed for particulars.

"I've got out of the difficulty," said her husband, drawing his chair to the tea-table. "Nobody'll suffer but Gussie."

"Ho!" said that gentleman, sharply.

"I took the day off," said Mr. Spriggs, smiling contentedly at his wife, "and went to see a friend of mine, Bill White the policeman, and told him about Gussie."

Mr. Price stiffened in his chair.

"Acting—under—his—advice," said Mr. Spriggs, sipping his tea, "I wrote to Scotland Yard and told 'em that Augustus Price, ticket-of-leave man, was trying to obtain a hundred and ten pounds by false pretences."

Mr. Price, white and breathless, rose and confronted him.

"The beauty o' that is, as Bill says," continued Mr. Spriggs, with much enjoyment, "that Gussie'll 'ave to set out on his travels again. He'll have to go into hiding, because if they catch him he'll 'ave to finish his time. And Bill says if he writes letters to any of us it'll only make it easier to find him. You'd better take the first train to Australia, Gussie."

"What—what time did you post—the letter?" inquired Uncle Gussie, jerkily.

"'Bout two o'clock," said Mr. Spriggs, glaring at the clock. "I reckon you've just got time."

Mr. Price stepped swiftly to the small sideboard, and, taking up his hat, clapped it on. He paused a moment at the door to glance

up and down the street, and then the door closed softly behind him. Mrs. Spriggs looked at her husband.

"Called away to Australia by special telegram," said the latter, winking. "Bill White is a trump; that's what he is."

"Oh, George!" said his wife. "Did you really write that letter?"

Mr. Spriggs winked again.



"HE PAUSED A MOMENT AT THE DOOR TO GLANCE UP AND DOWN THE STREET."