

SELF-HELP and THE TOLL-HOUSE

William Wyman Jacobs

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SELF-HELP

by W.W. Jacobs

THE night-watchman sat brooding darkly over life and its troubles. A shooting corn on the little toe of his left foot, and a touch of liver, due, he was convinced, to the unlawful cellar-work of the landlord of the Queen's Head, had induced in him a vein of profound depression. A discarded boot stood by his side, and his grey-stockinged foot protruded over the edge of the jetty until a passing waterman gave it a playful rap with his oar. A subsequent inquiry as to the price of pigs' trotters fell on ears rendered deaf by suffering.

"I might 'ave expected it," said the watchman at last. "I done that man—if you can call him a man—a kindness once, and this is my reward for it. Do a man a kindness, and years arterwards 'e comes along and hits you over your tenderest corn with a oar."

He took up his boot, and, inserting his foot with loving care, stooped down and fastened the laces.

Do a man a kindness, he continued, assuming a safer posture, and 'e tries to borrow money off of you; do a woman a kindness and she thinks you want to marry 'er; do an animal a kindness and it tries to bite you—same as a horse bit a sailor-man I knew once, when 'e sat on its head to 'elp it get up. He sat too far for'ard, pore chap.

Kindness never gets any thanks. I remember a man whose pal broke his leg while they was working together unloading a barge; and he went off to break the news to 'is pal's wife. A kind-'earted man 'e was as ever you see, and, knowing 'ow she would take on when she 'eard the news, he told her fust of all that 'er husband was killed. She took on like a mad thing, and at last, when she couldn't do anything more and 'ad quieted down a bit, he told 'er that it was on'y a case of a broken leg, thinking that 'er joy would be so great that she wouldn't think anything of that. He 'ad to tell her three times afore she understood 'im, and then, instead of being thankful to 'im for 'is thoughtfulness, she chased him 'arf over Wapping with a chopper, screaming with temper.

I remember Ginger Dick and Peter Russet trying to do old Sam Small a kindness one time when they was 'aving a rest ashore arter a v'y'ge. They 'ad took a room together as usual, and for the fust two or three days they was like brothers. That couldn't last, o' course, and Sam was so annoyed one evening at Ginger's suspiciousness by biting a 'arf-dollar Sam owed 'im and finding it was a bad 'un, that 'e went off to spend the evening all alone by himself.

He felt a bit dull at fust, but arter he had 'ad two or three 'arf-pints 'e began to take a brighter view of things. He found a very nice, cosy little public-'ouse he hadn't been in before, and, arter getting two and three-pence and a pint for the 'arf-dollar with Ginger's tooth-marks on, he began to think that the world wasn't 'arf as bad a place as people tried to make out.

There was on'y one other man in the little bar Sam was in—a tall, dark chap, with black side-whiskers and spectacles, wot kept peeping round the partition and looking very 'ard at everybody that came in.

"I'm just keeping my eye on 'em, cap'n," he ses to Sam, in a low voice.

"Ho!" ses Sam.

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"They don't know me in this disguise," ses the dark man, "but I see as 'ow you spotted me at once. Anybody 'ud have a 'ard time of it to deceive you; and then they wouldn't gain nothing by it."

"Nobody ever 'as yet," ses Sam, smiling at 'im.

"And nobody ever will," ses the dark man, shaking his 'ead; "if they was all as fly as you, I might as well put the shutters up. How did you twig I was a detective officer, cap'n?"

Sam, wot was taking a drink, got some beer up 'is nose with surprise.

"That's my secret," he says, arter the 'tec 'ad patted 'im on the back and brought 'im round.

"You're a marvel, that's wot you are," ses the 'tec, shaking his 'ead. "Have one with me."

Sam said he didn't mind if 'e did, and arter drinking each other's healths very perlite 'e ordered a couple o' twopenny smokes, and by way of showing off paid for 'em with 'arf a quid.

"That's right ain't it?" ses the barmaid, as he stood staring very 'ard at the change. "I ain't sure about that 'arf-crown, now I come to look at it; but it's the one you gave me."

Pore Sam, with a 'tec standing alongside of 'im, said it was quite right, and put it into 'is pocket in a hurry and began to talk to the 'tec as fast as he could about a murder he 'ad been reading about in the paper that morning. They went and sat down by a comfortable little fire that was burning in the bar, and the 'tec told 'im about a lot o' murder cases he 'ad been on himself.

"I'm down 'ere now on special work," he ses, "looking arter sailor-men."

"Wot ha' they been doing?" ses Sam.

"When I say looking arter, I mean protecting 'em," ses the 'tec. "Over and over agin some pore feller, arter working 'ard for months at sea, comes 'ome with a few pounds in 'is pocket and gets robbed of the lot. There's a couple o' chaps down 'ere I'm told off to look arter special, but it's no good unless I can catch 'em red-'anded."

"Red-'anded?" ses Sam.

"With their hands in the chap's pockets, I mean," ses the 'tec.

Sam gave a shiver. "Somebody had their 'ands in my pockets once," he says "Four pun ten and some coppers they got."

"Wot was they like?" ses the 'tec, starting.

Sam shook his 'ead. "They seemed to me to be all hands, that's all I know about 'em," he ses. "Arter they 'ad finished they leaned me up agin the dock wall an' went off."

"It sounds like 'em," ses the 'tec thoughtfully. "It was Long Pete and fair Alf, for a quid; that's the two I'm arter."

He put 'is finger in 'is weskit-pocket. "That's who I am," he ses, 'anding Sam a card; "Detective-Sergeant Cubbins. If you ever get into any trouble at any time you come to me."

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Sam said 'e would, and arter they had 'ad another drink together the 'tec shifted 'is seat alongside of 'im and talked in 'is ear.

"If I can nab them two chaps I shall get promotion," he ses; "and it's a fi'-pun note to anybody that helps me. I wish I could persuade you to."

"Ow's it to be done?" ses Sam, looking at 'im.

"I want a respectable-looking seafaring man," ses the 'tec, speaking very slow; "that's you. He goes up Tower Hill to-morrow night at nine o'clock, walking very slow and very unsteady on 'is pins, and giving my two beauties the idea that 'e is three sheets in the wind. They come up and rob 'im, and I catch 'em red-'anded. I get promotion, and you get a fiver."

"But 'ow do you know they'll be there?" ses Sam, staring at 'im.

Mr. Cubbins winked at 'im and tapped 'is nose.

"We 'ave to know a good deal in our line o' business," he ses.

"Still," ses Sam. "I don't see-----"

"Narks," says the 'tec; "coppers' narks. You've 'eard of them, cap'n? Now, look 'ere. Have you got any money?"

"I got a matter o' twelve quid or so," ses Sam, in a off-hand way.

"The very thing," says the 'tec. "Well, to-morrow night you put that in your pocket, and be walking up Tower Hill just as the clock strikes nine. I promise you you'll be robbed afore two minutes past, and by two and a 'arf past I shall 'ave my 'ands on both of 'em. Have all the money in one pocket, so as they can get it neat and quick, in case they get interrupted. Better still, 'ave it in a purse; that makes it easier to bring it 'ome to 'em"

"Wouldn't it be enough if they stole the purse?" ses Sam. "I should feel safer that way. too."

Mr. Cubbins shook 'is 'ead, very slow and solemn. "That wouldn't do at all," he ses. "The more money they steal, the longer they'll get; you know that, cap'n, without me tellin' you. If you could put fifty quid in it would be so much the better. And, whatever you do, don't make a noise. I don't want a lot o' clumsy policemen interfering in my business."

"Still, s'pose you didn't catch 'em," ses Sam, "where should I be?"

"You needn't; be afraid o' that," ses the 'tec, with a laugh. "Here, I'll tell you wot I'll do, and that'll show you the trust I put in you."

He drew a big di'mond ring off of 'is finger and handed it to Sam.

"Put that on your finger," he ses, "and keep it there till I give you your money back and the fi'-pun note reward. It's worth seventy quid if it's worth a farthing, and was given to me by a lady of title for getting back 'er jewellery for 'er. Put it on, and wotever you do, don't lose it."

He sat and watched while Sam forced it on 'is finger.

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"You don't need to flash it about too much," he ses, looking at 'im rather anxious. "There's men I know as 'ud cut your finger off to get that."

Sam shoved his 'and in his pocket, but he kept taking it out every now and then and 'olding his finger up to the light to look at the di'mond. Mr. Cubbins got up to go at last, saying that he 'ad got a call to make at the police-station, and they went out together.

"Nine o'clock sharp," he ses, as they shook hands, "on Tower Hill."

"I'll be there," ses Sam.

"And, wotever you do, no noise, no calling out," ses the 'tec, "and don't mention a word of this to a living soul."

Sam shook 'ands with 'im agin, and then, hiding his 'and in his pocket, went off 'ome, and, finding Ginger and Peter Russet wasn't back, went off to bed.

He 'eard 'em coming upstairs in the dark in about an hour's time, and, putting the 'and with the ring on it on the counterpane, shut 'is eyes and pretended to be fast asleep. Ginger lit the candle, and they was both beginning to undress when Peter made a noise and pointed to Sam's 'and.

"Wot's up?" ses Ginger, taking the candle and going over to Sam's bed. "Who've you been robbing, you fat pirate?"

Sam kept 'is eyes shut and 'eard 'em whispering; then he felt 'em take 'is hand up and look at it.

"Where did you get it, Sam?" ses Peter.

"He's asleep," ses Ginger, "sound asleep. I b'lieve if I was to put 'is finger in the candle he wouldn't wake up."

"You try it," ses Sam, sitting up in bed very sharp and snatching his 'and away. "Wot d'ye mean coming 'ome at all hours and waking me up?"

"Where did you get the ring?" ses Ginger.

"Friend 'o mine," ses Sam, very short.

"Who was it?" ses Peter.

"It's a secret," ses Sam.

"You wouldn't 'ave a secret from your old pal Ginger, Sam, would you?" ses Ginger.

"Old wot?" ses Sam. "Wot did you call me this arternoon?"

"I called you a lot o' things I'm sorry for," ses Ginger, who was bursting with curiosity, "and I beg your pardin, Sam."

"Shake 'ands on it," ses Peter, who was nearly as curious as Ginger.

They shook hands, but Sam said he couldn't tell 'em about the ring; and several times Ginger was on the point of calling 'im the names he 'ad called 'im in the arternoon, on'y Peter trod on 'is foot and stopped him. They wouldn't

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let 'im go to sleep for talking, and at last, when 'e was pretty near tired out, he told 'em all about it.

"Going—to 'ave your—pocket picked?" ses Ginger, staring at 'im, when 'e had finished.

"I shall be watched over," ses Sam.

"He's gorn stark, staring mad," ses Ginger. "Wot a good job it is he's got me and you to look arter 'im, Peter."

"Wot d'ye mean?" ses Sam.

"Mean?" ses Ginger. "Why, it's a put-up job to rob you, o' course. I should ha' thought even your fat 'ead could ha' seen that!"

"When I want your advice, I'll ask you for it," ses Sam, losing 'is temper. "Wot about the di'mond ring—eh?"

"You stick to it," ses Ginger, "and keep out o' Mr. Cubbins's way. That's my advice to you. 'Sides, p'raps it ain't a real one."

Sam told 'im agin he didn't want none of 'is advice, and, as Ginger wouldn't leave off talking, he pretended to go to sleep. Ginger woke 'im up three times to tell 'im wot, a fool 'e was, but 'e got so fierce that he gave it up at last and told 'im to go 'is own way.

Sam wouldn't speak to either of 'em next morning, and arter breakfast he went off on 'is own. He came back while Peter and Ginger was out, and they wasted best part o' the day trying to find 'im.

"We'll be on Tower Hill just afore nine and keep 'im out o' mischief, any way," ses Peter.

Ginger nodded. "And be called names for our pains," he ses. "I've a good mind to let 'im be robbed."

"It 'ud serve 'im right," ses Peter, "on'y then he'd want to borrar off of us. Look here! Why not—why not rob 'im ourselves?"

"Wot?" ses Ginger, starting.

"Walk up behind 'im and rob 'im," ses Peter. "He'll think it's them two chaps he spoke about, and when 'e comes 'ome complaining to us we'll tell 'im it serves 'im right. Arter we've 'ad a game with 'im for a day or two we'll give 'im his money back."

"But he'd reckernise us," ses Ginger.

"We must disguise ourselves," ses Peter in a whisper. "There's a barber's shop in Cable Street, where I've seen beards in the winder. You hook 'em un over your ears. Get one of 'em each, pull our caps over our eyes and turn our collars up, and there you are."

Ginger made a lot of objections, not because he didn't think it was a good idea, but because he didn't like Peter thinking of it instead of 'im; but he gave way at last, and, arter he 'ad got the beard, he stood for a long time in front o' the glass thinking wot a difference it would ha' made to his looks if he had 'ad black 'air instead o' red.

Waiting for the evening made the day seem very long to 'em; but it came at last, and, with the beards in their pockets, they slipped out and went for a walk round. They 'ad arf a pint each at a public-'ouse at the top of the Minories, just to steady themselves, and then they came out and hooked on their beards; and wot with them, and

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pulling their caps down and turning their coat-collars up, there wasn't much of their faces to be seen by anybody.

It was just five minutes to nine when they got to Tower Hill, and they walked down the middle of the road, keeping a bright look-out for old Sam. A little way down they saw a couple o' chaps leaning up agin a closed gate in the dock wall lighting their pipes, and Peter and Ginger both nudged each other with their elbows at the same time. They 'ad just got to the bottom of the Hill when Sam turned the corner.

Peter wouldn't believe at fust that the old man wasn't really the worse fo' liquor, 'e was so life-like. Many a drunken man would ha' been proud to ha' done it 'arf so well, and it made 'im pleased to think that Sam was a pal of 'is. Him and Ginger turned and crept up behind the old man on tip-toe, and then all of a sudden he tilted Sam's cap over 'is eyes and flung his arms round 'im, while Ginger felt in 'is coat-pockets and took out a leather purse chock-full o' money.

It was all done and over in a moment, and then, to Ginger's great surprise, Sam suddenly lifted 'is foot and gave 'im a fearful kick on the shin of 'is leg, and at the same time let drive with all his might in 'is face. Ginger went down as if he 'ad been shot, and as Peter went to 'elp him up he got a bang over the head that put 'im alongside o' Ginger, arter which Sam turned and trotted off down the Hill like a dancing-bear.

"He let drive with all his might in 'is face."

For 'arf a minute Ginger didn't know where 'e was, and afore he found out the two men they'd seen in the gateway came up, and one of 'em put his knee in Ginger's back and 'eld him, while the other caught hold of his 'and and dragged the purse out of it. Arter which they both made off up the Hill as 'ard as they could go, while Peter Russet in a faint voice called "Police!" arter them.

He got up presently and helped Ginger up, and they both stood there pitying themselves, and 'elping each other to think of names to call Sam.

"Well, the money's gorn, and it's 'is own silly fault," ses Ginger. "But wotever 'appens, he mustn't know that we had a 'and in it, mind that."

"He can starve for all I care," ses Peter, feeling his 'ead. "I won't lend 'im a ha'penny—not a single, blessed ha'penny."

"Who'd ha' thought 'e could ha' hit like that?" says Ginger. "That's wot gets over me. I never 'ad such a bang in my life—never. I'm going to 'ave a little drop o' brandy—my 'ead is fair swimming."

Peter 'ad one, too; but though they went into the private bar, it wasn't private enough for them; and when the landlady asked Ginger who'd been kissing 'im, he put 'is glass down with a bang and walked straight off 'ome.

Sam 'adn't turned up by the time they got there, and pore Ginger took advantage of it to put a little warm candle-grease on 'is bad leg. Then he bathed 'is face very careful and 'elped Peter bathe his 'ear. They 'ad just finished when they heard Sam coming upstairs, and Ginger sat down on 'is bed and began to whistle, while Peter took up a bit o' newspaper and stood by the candle reading it.

"Lor lumme, Ginger?" ses Sam, staring at 'im. "What ha' you been a-doing to your face?"

"Me?" ses Ginger, careless-like. "Oh, we 'ad a bit of a scrap down Limehouse way with some Scotchies. Peter got a crack over the 'ead at the same time."

"Ah, I've 'ad bit of a scrap, too," ses Sam, smiling all over, "but I didn't get marked."

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"Oh!" ses Peter, without looking up from 'is paper.

"Was it a little boy, then?" ses Ginger.

"No, it wasn't a little boy neither, Ginger," ses Sam; "it was a couple o' men twice the size of you and Peter here, and I licked 'em both. It was the two men I spoke to you about last night."

"Oh!" ses Peter agin, yawning.

"I did a bit o' thinking this mornings" ses Sam, nodding at 'em, "and I don't mind owning up that if was owing to wot you said. You was right, Ginger, arter all."

Ginger grunted.

"Fust thing I did arter breakfast," ses Sam, "I took that di'mond ring to a pawn-shop and found out it wasn't a di'mond ring. Then I did a bit more thinking, and I went round to a shop I know and bought a couple o' knuckle-dusters."

"Couple o' wot?" ses Ginger, in a choking voice.

"Knuckle-dusters," ses Sam, "and I turned up to-night at Tower Hill with one on each 'and just as the clock was striking nine. I see 'em the moment I turned the corner—two enormous big chaps, a yard across the shoulders, coming down the middle of the road— You've got a cold, Ginger!"

"No, I ain't," ses Ginger.

"I pretended to be drunk, same as the 'tec told me," ses Sam, "and then I felt 'em turn round and creep up behind me. One of 'em come up behind and put 'is knee in my back and caught me by the throat, and the other gave me a punch in the chest, and while I was gasping for breath took my purse away. Then I started on 'em."

"Lor'!" ses Ginger, very nasty.

"I fought like a lion," ses Sam. "Twice they 'ad me down, and twice I got up agin and hammered 'em. They both of 'em 'ad knives, but my blood was up, and I didn't take no more notice of 'em than if they was made of paper. I knocked 'em both out o' their hands, and if I hit 'em in the face once I did a dozen times. I surprised myself."

"You surprise me," ses Ginger.

"All of a sudden," ses Sam, "they see they 'ad got to do with a man wot didn't know wot fear was, and they turned round and ran off as hard as they could run. You ought to ha' been there, Ginger. You'd 'ave enjoyed it."

Ginger Dick didn't answer 'im. Having to sit still and listen to all them lies without being able to say anything nearly choked 'im. He sat there gasping for breath.

"O' course, you got your purse back in the fight, Sam?" ses Peter.

"No, mate," ses Sam. "I ain't going to tell you no lies—I did not."

"And 'ow are you going to live, then, till you get a ship, Sam?" ses Ginger, in a nasty voice. "You won't get nothing out o' me, so you needn't think it."

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"Nor me," ses Peter. "Not a brass farthing."

"There's no call to be nasty about it, mates," ses Sam. "I 'ad the best fight I ever 'ad in my life, and I must put up with the loss. A man can't 'ave it all his own way."

"Ow much was it?" ses Peter.

"Ten brace-buttons, three French ha'-pennies, and a bit o' tin," ses Sam. "Wot on earth's the matter, Ginger?"

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IT'S all nonsense," said Jack Barnes. "Of course people have died in the house; people die in every house. As for the noises--wind in the chimney and rats in the wainscot are very convincing to a nervous man. Give me another cup of tea, Meagle."

"Lester and White are first," said Meagle, who was presiding at the tea-table of the Three Feathers Inn. "You've had two."

Lester and White finished their cups with irritating slowness, pausing between sips to sniff the aroma, and to discover the sex and dates of arrival of the "strangers" which floated in some numbers in the beverage. Mr. Meagle served them to the brim, and then, turning to the grimly expectant Mr. Barnes, blandly requested him to ring for hot water.

"We'll try and keep your nerves in their present healthy condition," he remarked. "For my part I have a sort of half-and-half belief in the supernatural."

"All sensible people have," said Lester. "An aunt of mine saw a ghost once."

White nodded.

"I had an uncle that saw one," he said.

"It always is somebody else that sees them," said Barnes.

"Well, there is the house," said Meagle, "a large house at an absurdly low rent, and nobody will take it. It has taken toll of at least one life of every family that has lived there--however short the time--and since it has stood empty caretaker after caretaker has died there. The last caretaker died fifteen years ago."

"Exactly," said Barnes. "Long enough ago for legends to accumulate."

"I'll bet you a sovereign you won't spend the night there alone, for all your talk," said White suddenly.

"And I," said Lester.

"No," said Barnes slowly. "I don't believe in ghosts nor in any supernatural things whatever; all the same, I admit that I should not care to pass a night there alone."

"But why not?" inquired White.

"Wind in the chimney," said Meagle, with a grin.

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"Rats in the wainscot," chimed in Lester.

"As you like," said Barnes, colouring.

"Suppose we all go?" said Meagle. "Start after supper, and get there about eleven? We have been walking for ten days now without an adventure—except Barnes's discovery that ditch-water smells longest. It will be a novelty, at any rate, and, if we break the spell by all surviving, the grateful owner ought to come down handsome."

"Let's see what the landlord has to say about it first," said Lester. "There is no fun in passing a night in an ordinary empty house. Let us make sure that it is haunted."

He rang the bell, and, sending for the landlord, appealed to him in the name of our common humanity not to let them waste a night watching in a house in which spectres and hobgoblins had no part. The reply was more than reassuring, and the landlord, after describing with considerable art the exact appearance of a head which had been seen hanging out of a window in the moonlight, wound up with a polite but urgent request that they would settle his bill before they went.

"It's all very well for you young gentlemen to have your fun," he said indulgently; "but, supposing as how you are all found dead in the morning, what about me? It ain't called the Toll-House for nothing, you know."

"Who died there last?" inquired Barnes, with an air of polite derision.

"A tramp," was the reply. "He went there for the sake of half-a-crown, and they found him next morning hanging from the balusters, dead."

"Suicide," said Barnes. "Unsound mind."

The landlord nodded. "That's what the jury brought it in," he said slowly; "but his mind was sound enough when he went in there. I'd known him, off and on, for years. I'm a poor man, but I wouldn't spend the night in that house for a hundred pounds."

He repeated this remark as they started on their expedition a few hours later. They left as the inn was closing for the night; bolts shot noisily behind them, and, as the regular customers trudged slowly homewards, they set off at a brisk pace in the direction of the house. Most of the cottages were already in darkness, and lights in others went out as they passed.

"It seems rather hard that we have got to lose a night's rest in order to convince Barnes of the existence of ghosts," said White.

"It's in a good cause," said Meagle. "A most worthy object; and something seems to tell me that we shall succeed. You didn't forget the candles, Lester?"

"I have brought two," was the reply; "all the old man could spare."

There was but little moon, and the night was cloudy. The road between high hedges was dark, and in one place, where it ran through a wood, so black that they twice stumbled in the uneven ground at the side of it.

"Fancy leaving our comfortable beds for this!" said White again. "Let me see; this desirable residential sepulchre lies to the right, doesn't it?"

"Farther on," said Meagle.

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They walked on for some time in silence, broken only by White's tribute to the softness, the cleanliness, and the comfort of the bed which was receding farther and farther into the distance. Under Meagle's guidance they turned off at last to the right, and, after a walk of a quarter of a mile, saw the gates of the house before them.

The lodge was almost hidden by over-grown shrubs and the drive was choked with rank growths. Meagle leading, they pushed through it until the dark pile of the house loomed above them.

"There is a window at the back where we can get in, so the landlord says," said Lester, as they stood before the hall door.

"Window?" said Meagle. "Nonsense. Let's do the thing properly. Where's the knocker?"

He felt for it in the darkness and gave a thundering rat-tat-tat at the door.

"Don't play the fool," said Barnes crossly.

"Ghostly servants are all asleep," said Meagle gravely, "but I'll wake them up before I've done with them. It's scandalous keeping us out here in the dark."

He plied the knocker again, and the noise volleyed in the emptiness beyond. Then with a sudden exclamation he put out his hands and stumbled forward.

"Why, it was open all the time," he said, with an odd catch in his voice. "Come on."

"I don't believe it was open," said Lester, hanging back. "Somebody is playing us a trick."

"Nonsense," said Meagle sharply. "Give me a candle. Thanks. Who's got a match?"

Barnes produced a box and struck one, and Meagle, shielding the candle with his hand, led the way forward to the foot of the stairs. "Shut the door, somebody," he said; "there's too much draught."

"It is shut," said White, glancing behind him.

Meagle fingered his chin. "Who shut it?" he inquired, looking from one to the other. "Who came in last?"

"I did," said Lester, "but I don't remember shutting it—perhaps I did, though."

Meagle, about to speak, thought better of it, and, still carefully guarding the flame, began to explore the house, with the others close behind. Shadows danced on the walls and lurked in the corners as they proceeded. At the end of the passage they found a second staircase, and ascending it slowly gained the first floor.

"Careful!" said Meagle, as they gained the landing.

He held the candle forward and showed where the balusters had broken away. Then he peered curiously into the void beneath.

"This is where the tramp hanged himself, I suppose," he said thoughtfully.

"You've got an unwholesome mind," said White, as they walked on. "This place is quite creepy enough without you remembering that. Now let's find a comfortable room and have a little nip of whisky apiece and a pipe. How will this do?"

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He opened a door at the end of the passage and revealed a small square room. Meagle led the way with the candle, and, first melting a drop or two of tallow, stuck it on the mantelpiece. The others seated themselves on the floor and watched pleasantly as White drew from his pocket a small bottle of whisky and a tin cup.

"H'm! I've forgotten the water," he exclaimed.

"I'll soon get some," said Meagle.

He tugged violently at the bell-handle, and the rusty jangling of a bell sounded from a distant kitchen. He rang again.

"Don't play the fool," said Barnes roughly.

Meagle laughed. "I only wanted to convince you," he said kindly. "There ought to be, at any rate, one ghost in the servants' hall."

Barnes held up his hand for silence.

"Yes?" said Meagle, with a grin at the other two. "Is anybody coming?"

"Suppose we drop this game and go back," said Barnes suddenly. "I don't believe in spirits, but nerves are outside anybody's command. You may laugh as you like, but it really seemed to me that I heard a door open below and steps on the stairs."

His voice was drowned in a roar of laughter.

"He is coming round," said Meagle, with a smirk. "By the time I have done with him he will be a confirmed believer. Well, who will go and get some water? Will, you, Barnes?"

"No," was the reply.

"If there is any it might not be safe to drink after all these years," said Lester. "We must do without it."

Meagle nodded, and taking a seat on the floor held out his hand for the cup. Pipes were lit, and the clean, wholesome smell of tobacco filled the room. White produced a pack of cards; talk and laughter rang through the room and died away reluctantly in distant corridors.

"Empty rooms always delude me into the belief that I possess a deep voice," said Meagle. "To-morrow I-----"

He started up with a smothered exclamation as the light went out suddenly and something struck him on the head. The others sprang to their feet. Then Meagle laughed.

"It's the candle," he exclaimed. "I didn't stick it enough."

Barnes struck a match, and re-lighting the candle, stuck it on the mantelpiece, and sitting down took up his cards again.

"What was I going to say?" said Meagle. "Oh, I know; to-morrow I-----"

"Listen!" said White, laying his hand on the other's sleeve. "Upon my word I really thought I heard a laugh."

SELF-HELP and THE TOLL-HOUSE

"Look here!" said Barnes. "What do you say to going back? I've had enough of this. I keep fancying that I hear things too; sounds of something moving about in the passage outside. I know it's only fancy, but it's uncomfortable."

"You go if you want to," said Meagle, "and we will play dummy. Or you might ask the tramp to take your hand for you, as you go downstairs."

Barnes shivered and exclaimed angrily. He got up, and, walking to the half-closed door, listened.

"Go outside," said Meagle, winking at the other two. "I'll dare you to go down to the hall door and back by yourself."

Barnes came back, and, bending forward, lit his pipe at the candle.

"I am nervous, but rational," he said, blowing out a thin cloud of smoke. "My nerves tell me that there is something prowling up and down the long passage outside; my reason tells me that that is all nonsense. Where are my cards?"

He sat down again, and, taking up his hand, looked through it carefully and led.

"Your play, White," he said, after a pause.

White made no sign.

"Why, he is asleep," said Meagle. "Wake up, old man. Wake up and play."

Lester, who was sitting next to him, took the sleeping man by the arm and shook him, gently at first and then with some roughness but White, with his back against the wall and his head bowed, made no sign. Meagle bawled in his ear, and then turned a puzzled face to the others.

"He sleeps like the dead," he said, grimacing. "Well, there are still three of us to keep each other company."

"Yes," said Lester, nodding. "Unless— Good Lord! suppose——"

He broke off, and eyed them, trembling.

"Suppose what?" inquired Meagle.

"Nothing," stammered Lester. "Let's wake him. Try him again. White! WHITE!"

"It's no good," said Meagle seriously; "there's something wrong about that sleep."

"That's what I meant," said Lester; "and if he goes to sleep like that, why shouldn't——"

Meagle sprang to his feet. "Nonsense," he said roughly. "He's tired out; that's all. Still, let's take him up and clear out. You take his legs and Barnes will lead the way with the candle. Yes? Who's that?"

He looked up quickly towards the door. "Thought I heard somebody tap," he said, with a shamefaced laugh. "Now, Lester, up with him. One, two— Lester! Lester!"

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He sprang forward too late; Lester, with his face buried in his arms, had rolled over on the floor fast asleep, and his utmost efforts failed to awake him.

"He--is--asleep," he stammered. "Asleep!"

Barnes, who had taken the candle from the mantelpiece, stood peering at the sleepers in silence and dropping tallow over the floor.

"We must get out of this," said Meagle. "Quick!"

Barnes hesitated. "We can't leave them here--" he began.

"We must," said Meagle, in strident tones. "If you go to sleep I shall go-- Quick! Come!"

He seized the other by the arm and strove to drag him to the door. Barnes shook him off, and, putting the candle back on the mantelpiece, tried again to arouse the sleepers.

"It's no good," he said at last, and, turning from them, watched Meagle. "Don't you go to sleep," he said anxiously.

Meagle shook his head, and they stood for some time in uneasy silence. "May as well shut the door," said Barnes at last.

He crossed over and closed it gently. Then at a scuffling noise behind him he turned and saw Meagle in a heap on the hearthstone.

With a sharp catch in his breath he stood motionless. Inside the room the candle, fluttering in the draught, showed dimly the grotesque attitudes of the sleepers. Beyond the door there seemed to his overwrought imagination a strange and stealthy unrest. He tried to whistle, but his lips were parched, and in a mechanical fashion he stooped, and began to pick up the cards which littered the floor.

He stopped once or twice and stood with bent head listening. The unrest outside seemed to increase; a loud creaking sounded from the stairs.

"Who is there?" he cried loudly.

The creaking ceased. He crossed to the door, and, flinging it open, strode out into the corridor. As he walked his fears left him suddenly.

"Come on!" he cried, with a low laugh. "All of you! All of you! Show your faces--your infernal ugly faces! Don't skulk!"

He laughed again and walked on; and the heap in the fireplace put out its head tortoise fashion and listened in horror to the retreating footsteps. Not until they had become inaudible in the distance did the listener's features relax.

"Good Lord, Lester, we've driven him mad," he said, in a frightened whisper. "We must go after him."

There was no reply. Meagle sprang to his feet.

"Do you hear?" he cried. "Stop your fooling now; this is serious. White! Lester! Do you hear?"

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He bent and surveyed them in angry bewilderment. "All right," he said, in a trembling voice. "You won't frighten me, you know."

He turned away and walked with exaggerated carelessness in the direction of the door. He even went outside and peeped through the crack, but the sleepers did not stir. He glanced into the blackness behind, and then came hastily into the room again.

He stood for a few seconds regarding them. The stillness in the house was horrible; he could not even hear them breathe. With a sudden resolution he snatched the candle from the mantelpiece and held the flame to White's finger. Then as he reeled back stupefied, the footsteps again became audible.

He stood with the candle in his shaking hand, listening. He heard them ascending the farther staircase, but they stopped suddenly as he went to the door. He walked a little way along the passage, and they went scurrying down the stairs and then at a jog-trot along the corridor below. He went back to the main staircase, and they ceased again.

For a time he hung over the balusters, listening and trying to pierce the blackness below; then slowly, step by step, he made his way downstairs, and, holding the candle above his head, peered about him.

"Barnes!" he called. "Where are you?"

Shaking with fright, he made his way along the passage, and summoning up all his courage, pushed open doors and gazed fearfully into empty rooms. Then, quite suddenly, he heard the footsteps in front of him.

He followed slowly for fear of extinguishing the candle, until they led him at last into a vast bare kitchen, with damp walls and a broken floor. In front of him a door leading into an inside room had just closed. He ran towards it and flung it open, and a cold air blew out the candle. He stood aghast.

"Barnes!" he cried again. "Don't be afraid! It is I--Meagle!"

There was no answer. He stood gazing into the darkness, and all the time the idea of something close at hand watching was upon him. Then suddenly the steps broke out overhead again.

He drew back hastily, and passing through the kitchen groped his way along the narrow passages. He could now see better in the darkness, and finding himself at last at the foot of the staircase, began to ascend it noiselessly. He reached the landing just in time to see a figure disappear round the angle of a wall. Still careful to make no noise, he followed the sound of the steps until they led him to the top floor, and he cornered the chase at the end of a short passage.

"Barnes!" he whispered. "Barnes!"

Something stirred in the darkness. A small circular window at the end of the passage just softened the blackness and revealed the dim outlines of a motionless figure. Meagle, in place of advancing, stood almost as still as a sudden horrible doubt took possession of him. With his eyes fixed on the shape in front he fell back slowly, and, as it advanced upon him, burst into a terrible cry.

"Barnes! For God's sake! Is it you?"

The echoes of his voice left the air quivering, but the figure before him paid no heed. For a moment he tried to brace his courage up to endure its approach, then with a smothered cry he turned and fled.

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The passages wound like a maze, and he threaded them blindly in a vain search for the stairs. If he could get down and open the hall door-----

He caught his breath in a sob; the steps had begun again. At a lumbering trot they clattered up and down the bare passages, in and out, up and down, as though in search of him. He stood appalled, and then as they drew near entered a small room and stood behind the door as they rushed by. He came out and ran swiftly and noiselessly in the other direction, and in a moment the steps were after him. He found the long corridor and raced along it at top speed. The stairs he knew were at the end, and with the steps close behind he descended them in blind haste. The steps gained on him, and he shrank to the side to let them pass, still continuing his headlong flight. Then suddenly he seemed to slip off the earth into space.

Lester awoke in the morning to find the sunshine streaming into the room, and White sitting up and regarding with some perplexity a badly-blistered finger.

"Where are the others?" inquired Lester.

"Gone, I suppose," said White. "We must have been asleep."

Lester arose, and, stretching his stiffened limbs, dusted his clothes with his hands and went out into the corridor. White followed. At the noise of their approach a figure which had been lying asleep at the other end sat up and revealed the face of Barnes. "Why, I've been asleep," he said, in surprise. "I don't remember coming here. How did I get here?"

"Nice place to come for a nap," said Lester severely, as he pointed to the gap in the balusters. "Look there! Another yard and where would you have been?"

He walked carelessly to the edge and looked over. In response to his startled cry the others drew near, and all three stood staring at the dead man below.

"The others drew near, and all three stood gazing at the dead man below."