WILLIAM WYMARK JACOBS

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THE CHANGING NUMBERS

The tall clock in the corner of the small living-room had just struck eight as Mr. Samuel Gunnill came stealthily down the winding staircase and, opening the door at the foot, stepped with an appearance of great care and humility into the room. He noticed with some anxiety that his daughter Selina was apparently engrossed in her task of attending to the plants in the window, and that no preparations whatever had been made for breakfast.

Miss Gunnill's horticultural duties seemed interminable. She snipped off dead leaves with painstaking precision, and administered water with the jealous care of a druggist compounding a prescription; then, with her back still toward him, she gave vent to a sigh far too intense in its nature to have reference to such trivialities as plants. She repeated it twice, and at the second time Mr. Gunnill, almost without his knowledge, uttered a deprecatory cough.

His daughter turned with alarming swiftness and, holding

herself very upright, favoured him with a glance in which indignation and surprise were very fairly mingled.

"That white one—that one at the end," said Mr. Gunnill, with an appearance of concentrated interest, "that's my fav'rite."

Miss Gunnill put her hands together, and a look of infinite long-suffering came upon her face, but she made no reply.

"Always has been," continued Mr. Gunnill, feverishly, "from a—from a cutting."

"Bailed out," said Miss Gunnill, in a deep and thrilling voice; "bailed out at one o'clock in the morning, brought home singing loud enough for half-a-dozen, and then talking about flowers!"

Mr. Gunnill coughed again.

"I was dreaming," pursued Miss Gunnill, plaintively, "sleeping peacefully, when I was awoke by a horrible noise."

"That couldn't ha' been me," protested her father. "I was only a bit cheerful. It was Benjamin Ely's birthday yesterday, and after we left the Lion they started singing, and I just hummed to keep 'em company. I wasn't singing, mind you, only humming—when up comes that interfering Cooper and takes me off."

Miss Gunnill shivered, and with her pretty cheek in her hand sat by the window the very picture of despondency. "Why didn't he take the others?" she inquired.

"Ah!" said Mr. Gunnill, with great emphasis, "that's what a lot more of us would like to know. P'r'aps if you'd been more polite to Mrs. Cooper, instead o' putting it about that she looked young enough to be his mother, it wouldn't have happened."

His daughter shook her head impatiently and, on Mr. Gunnill making an allusion to breakfast, expressed surprise that he had got the heart to eat any-thing. Mr. Gunnill pressing the point, however, she arose and began to set the table, the undue care with which she smoothed out the creases of the table-cloth, and the mathematical exactness with which she placed the various articles, all being so many extra smarts in his wound. When she finally placed on the table enough food for a dozen people he began to show signs of a little spirit.

"Ain't you going to have any?" he demanded, as Miss Gunnill resumed her seat by the window.

"Me?" said the girl, with a shudder. "Breakfast? The disgrace is breakfast enough for me. I couldn't eat a morsel; it would choke me."

Mr. Gunnill eyed her over the rim of his teacup. "I come down an hour ago," he said, casually, as he helped himself to some bacon.

Miss Gunnill started despite herself. "Oh!" she said, listlessly.

"And I see you making a very good breakfast all by yourself in the kitchen," continued her father, in a voice not free from the taint of triumph.

The discomfited Selina rose and stood regarding him; Mr. Gunnill, after a vain attempt to meet her gaze, busied himself with his meal.

"The idea of watching every mouthful I eat!" said Miss Gunnill, tragically; "the idea of complaining because I have some

breakfast! I'd never have believed it of you, never! It's shameful! Fancy grudging your own daughter the food she eats!"

Mr. Gunnill eyed her in dismay. In his confusion he had overestimated the capacity of his mouth, and he now strove in vain to reply to this shameful perversion of his meaning. His daughter stood watching him with grief in one eye and calculation in the other, and, just as he had put himself into a position to exercise his rights of free speech, gave a pathetic sniff and walked out of the room.

She stayed indoors all day, but the necessity of establishing his innocence took Mr. Gunnill out a great deal. His neighbours, in the hope of further excitement, warmly pressed him to go to prison rather than pay a fine, and instanced the example of an officer in the Salvation Army, who, in very different circumstances, had elected to take that course. Mr. Gunnill assured them that only his known antipathy to the army, and the fear of being regarded as one of its followers, prevented him from doing so. He paid instead a fine of ten shillings, and after listening to a sermon, in which his silver hairs served as the text, was permitted to depart. His feeling against Police-constable Cooper increased with the passing of the days. The constable watched him with the air of a proprietor, and Mrs. Cooper's remark that "her husband had had his eye upon him for a long time, and that he had better be careful for the future," was faithfully retailed to him within half an hour of its utterance. Convivial friends counted his cups for him; teetotal friends more

than hinted that Cooper was in the employ of his good angel.

Miss Gunnill's two principal admirers had an arduous task to perform. They had to attribute Mr. Gunnill's disaster to the vindictiveness of Cooper, and at the same time to agree with his daughter that it served him right. Between father and daughter they had a difficult time, Mr. Gunnill's sensitiveness having been much heightened by his troubles.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.