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THE TEMPTATION OF
SAMUEL BURGE

William Wymark Jacobs
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The Temptation of Samuel Burge / Captains All, Book 8

THE TEMPTATION OF SAMUEL BURGE

Mr. Higgs, jeweller, sat in the small parlour behind his shop, gazing hungrily at a supper-table which had been laid some time before. It was a quarter to ten by the small town clock on the mantelpiece, and the jeweller rubbing his hands over the fire tried in vain to remember what etiquette had to say about starting a meal before the arrival of an expected guest.

"He must be coming by the last train after all, sir," said the housekeeper entering the room and glancing at the clock. "I suppose these London gentlemen keep such late hours they don't understand us country folk wanting to get to bed in decent time. You must be wanting your supper, sir."

Mr. Higgs sighed. "I shall be glad of my supper," he said slowly, "but I dare say our friend is hungrier still. Travelling is hungry work."

"Perhaps he is thinking over his words for the seventh day,"

said the housekeeper solemnly. "Forgetting hunger and thirst and all our poor earthly feelings in the blessedness of his work."

"Perhaps so," assented the other, whose own earthly feelings were particularly strong just at that moment.

"Brother Simpson used to forget all about meal-times when he stayed here," said the housekeeper, clasping her hands. "He used to sit by the window with his eyes half-closed and shake his head at the smell from the kitchen and call it flesh-pots of Egypt. He said that if it wasn't for keeping up his strength for the work, luscious bread and fair water was all he wanted. I expect Brother Burge will be a similar sort of man."

"Brother Clark wrote and told me that he only lives for the work," said the jeweller, with another glance at the clock. "The chapel at Clerkenwell is crowded to hear him. It's a blessed favour and privilege to have such a selected instrument staying in the house. I'm curious to see him; from what Brother Clark said I rather fancy that he was a little bit wild in his younger days."

"Hallelujah!" exclaimed the housekeeper with fervour. "I mean to think as he's seen the error of his ways," she added sharply, as her master looked up.

"There he is," said the latter, as the bell rang.

The housekeeper went to the side-door, and drawing back the bolt admitted the gentleman whose preaching had done so much for the small but select sect known as the Seventh Day Primitive Apostles. She came back into the room followed by a tall stout man, whose upper lip and short stubby beard streaked with grey

seemed a poor match for the beady eyes which lurked behind a pair of clumsy spectacles.

"Brother Samuel Burge?" inquired the jeweller, rising.

The visitor nodded, and regarding him with a smile charged with fraternal love, took his hand in a huge grip and shook it fervently.

"I am glad to see you, Brother Higgs," he said, regarding him fondly. "Oh, 'ow my eyes have yearned to be set upon you! Oh, 'ow my ears 'ave longed to hearken unto the words of your voice!"

He breathed thickly, and taking a seat sat with his hands upon his knees, looking at a fine piece of cold beef which the housekeeper had just placed upon the table.

"Is Brother Clark well?" inquired the jeweller, placing a chair for him at the table and taking up his carving-knife.

"Dear Brother Clark is in excellent 'ealth, I thank you," said the other, taking the proffered chair. "Oh! what a man he is; what a instrument for good. Always stretching out them blessed hands of 'is to make one of the fallen a Seventh Day Primitive."

"And success attends his efforts?" said the jeweller.

"Success, Brother!" repeated Mr. Burge, eating rapidly and gesticulating with his knife. "Success ain't no name for it. Why, since this day last week he has saved three pick-pockets, two Salvationists, one bigamist and a Roman Catholic."

Brother Higgs murmured his admiration. "You are also a power for good," he said wistfully. "Brother Clark tells me in his letter that your exhortations have been abundantly blessed."

Mr. Burge shook his head. "A lot of it falls by the wayside," he said modestly, "but some of it is an eye-opener to them as don't entirely shut their ears. Only the day before yesterday I 'ad two jemmies and a dark lantern sent me with a letter saying as 'ow the owner had no further use for 'em."

The jeweller's eyes glistened with admiration not quite tinged with envy. "Have you expounded the Word for long?" he inquired.

"Six months," replied the other. "It come to me quite natural—I was on the penitent bench on the Saturday, and the Wednesday afterwards I preached as good a sermon as ever I've preached in my life. Brother Clark said it took 'is breath away."

"And he's a judge too," said the admiring jeweller.

"Now," continued Brother Burge, helping himself plentifully to pickled walnuts. "Now there ain't standing room in our Bethel when I'm expounding. People come to hear me from all parts—old and young—rich and poor—and the Apostles that don't come early 'ave to stand outside and catch the crumbs I throw 'em through the winders."

"It is enough," sighed Brother Higgs, whose own audience was frequently content to be on the wrong side of the window, "it is enough to make a man vain."

"I struggle against it, Brother," said Mr. Burge, passing his cup up for some more tea. "I fight against it hard, but once the Evil One was almost too much for me; and in spite of myself, and knowing besides that it was a plot of 'is, I nearly felt uplifted."

Brother Higgs, passing him some more beef, pressed for details.

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