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THE GRAY PARROT
By W. W. JACOBS.

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The chief engineer and the third sat at tea on the S. S. Curlew in the East India docks. The small and not over-clean steward, having placed everything he could think of upon the table and then added everything the chief could think of, had assiduously poured out two cups of tea and withdrawn by request. The two men ate steadily, conversing between bites and interrupted occasionally by a hoarse and sepulchral voice, the owner of which, being much exercised by the sight of the food, asked for it, prettily at first and afterward in a way which at least compelled attention.

"That's pretty good for a parrot," said the third critically. "Seems to know what he's saying too. No, don't give it anything. It'll stop if you do."

"There's no pleasure to me in listening to coarse language," said the chief with dignity.

He absently dipped a piece of bread and butter in the third's tea and, losing it, chased it round and round the bottom of the cup with his finger, the third regarding the operation with an interest and emotion which he was at first unable to understand.

"You'd better pour yourself out another cup," he said thoughtfully as he caught the third's eye.

"I'm going to," said the other dryly. "The man I bought it of," said the chief, giving the bird the sop, "said that it was a perfectly respectable parrot and wouldn't know a bad word if it heard it. I hardly like to give it to my wife now."

"It's no good being too particular," said the third, regarding the other with an ill concealed grin. "That's the worst of all you married fellows. Seem to think your wife has got to be wrapped up in brown paper. Ten chances to one she'll be amused."

The chief shrugged his shoulders disdainfully. "I bought the bird to be company for her," he said slowly. "She'll be very lonesome without me, Rogers."

"How do you know?" inquired the other.

"She said so," was the reply.

"When you've been married as long as I have," said the third, who, having been married some 15 years, felt that their usual positions were somewhat reversed, "you'll know that, generally speaking, they're glad to get rid of you."

"What for?" demanded the chief in a voice that Othello might have envied.

"Well, you get in the way a bit," said Rogers, with secret enjoyment. "You see, you upset the arrangements. Housecleaning and all that sort of thing gets interrupted. They're glad to see you back at first and then glad to see the back of you."

"There's wives and wives," said the bridegroom tenderly.

"And mine's a good one," said the third, "registered A1 at Lloyd's, but she don't worry about me going away. Your wife's 30 years younger than you, isn't she?"

"Twenty-five," corrected the other shortly. "You see, what I'm afraid of is that she'll get too much attention."

"Well, women like that," remarked the third.

"But I don't, dash it!" cried the chief hotly. "When I think of it, I go hot all over—boiling hot."

"That won't last," said the other reassuredly. "You won't care twopenny this time next year."

"We're not all alike," growled the chief. "Some of us have got finer feelings than others have. I saw the chap next door looking at her as we passed him this morning."

"Good heavens!" said the third wildly.

"I don't want any of your blanked impudence," said the chief sharply. "He put his hat on straighter when he passed us. What do you think of that?"

"Can't say," replied the other, with commendable gravity. "It might mean anything."

"If he has any of his nonsense while I'm away, I'll break his neck," said the chief passionately. "I shall know of it."

The other raised his eyebrows.

"I've asked the landlady to keep her eyes open a bit," said the chief. "My wife is very young and simple, so that it is quite right and proper for her to have a motherly old body to look after her."

"Told your wife?" queried Rogers.

"No," said the other. "Fact is, Rogers, I've got an idea about that parrot. I'm going to tell her it's a magic bird and will tell me everything she does while I'm away. Anything the landlady tells me I shall tell her I got from the parrot. For one thing, I don't want her to get out after 7 of an evening, and she's promised me she won't. If she does, I shall know and pretend that I know through the parrot. What do you think of it?"

"Think of it," said the third, staring at him, think of it? Fancy a man telling a grown up woman a yarn like that!"

"She believes in warnings and death watches and all that sort of thing," said the chief, "so why shouldn't she?"

"Well, you'll know whether she believes in it or not when you come back," said Rogers, "and it'll be a great pity, because it's a beautiful talker and the best swearer I ever heard."

"What do you mean?" said the other.

"I mean it'll get its little neck wrung," said the third.

"Well, we'll see," said Gannett. "I shall know what to think if it does die."

"I shall never see that bird again," said Rogers, shaking his head as the chief took up the cage and handed it to

the steward, who was to accompany him home with it.

The couple left the ship and proceeded down the East India dock road side by side, the only incident being a hot argument between a constable and the engineer as to whether he could or could not be held responsible for the language in which the parrot saw fit to indulge when the steward happened to drop it.

The engineer took the cage at his door and, not without some misgivings, took it up stairs into the parlor and set it on the table. Mrs. Gannett, a simple looking woman with sleepy brown eyes and a docile manner, clapped her hands with joy.

"Isn't it a beauty?" said Mr. Gannett, looking at it. "I bought it to be company for you while I'm away."

"You're too good to me, Jem," said his wife. She walked all round the cage admiring it, the parrot, which was of a highly suspicious and nervous disposition, having had boys at its last place, turning with her. After she had walked round him five times, he got sick of it and in a simple, sailorly fashion said so.

"Oh, Jem!" said his wife.

"It's a beautiful talker," said Gannett lastly, "and it's so clever that it picks up everything it hears, but it'll soon forget it."

"It looks as though it knows what you are saying," said his wife. "Just look at it, the artful thing!"

The opportunity was too good to be missed, and in a few straightforward lies the engineer acquainted Mrs. Gannett of the miraculous powers with which he had chosen to endow it.

"But you don't believe it?" said his wife, staring at him open mouthed.

"I do," said the engineer firmly.

"But how can it know what I'm doing when I'm away?" persisted Mrs. Gannett.

"Ah, that's its secret," said the engineer. "A good many people would like to know that, but nobody has found out yet. It's a magic bird, and when you've said that you've said all there is to say about it."

Mrs. Gannett, wrinkling her forehead, eyed the marvelous bird curiously.

"You'll find it's quite true," said Gannett. "When I come back, that bird'll be able to tell me how you've been and all about you. Everything you've done during my absence."

"Good gracious!" said the astonished Mrs. Gannett.

"If you stay out after 7 of an evening or do anything else that I shouldn't like, that bird'll tell me," continued the engineer impressively. "It'll tell me who comes to see you, and, in fact, it will tell me everything you do while I'm away."

"Well, it won't have anything bad to tell of me," said Mrs. Gannett composedly, "unless it tells lies."

"It can't tell lies," said her husband confidently, "and now if you will go and put your bonnet on we'll drop in at the theater for half an hour."

It was a prophetic utterance, for he made such a fuss over the man next to his wife offering her his opera glasses that they left, at the urgent request of the management, in almost exactly that space of time.

"You'd better carry me about in a handbox," said Mrs. Gannett wearily as the outraged engineer stalked home beside her. "What harm was the man doing?"

"You must have given him some encouragement," said Mr. Gannett fiercely; "made eyes at him or something. A man wouldn't offer to lend a lady his opera glasses without—"

Mrs. Gannett tossed her head, and that so decidedly that a passing stranger turned his head and looked at her. Mr. Gannett accelerated his pace and, taking his wife's arm, led her swiftly home with a passion too great for words.

By the morning his anger had evaporated, but the misgivings remained. He left after breakfast for the Curlew, which was to sail in the afternoon.

"Oh, Jem!" said his wife.

noon, leaving behind him copious instructions, by following which his wife would be enabled to come down and see him off with the minimum exposure of her fatal charms.

Left to herself, Mrs. Gannett dusted the room until, coming to the parrot's cage, she put down the duster and eyed its occupant curiously. She fancied that she saw an evil glitter in the creature's eye, and the knowing way in which it drew the film over it was as near an approach to a wink as a bird could get.

She was still looking at it when there was a knock at the door, and a bright little woman, rather smartly dressed, bustled into the room and greeted her effusively.

"I just came to see you, my dear, because I thought a little outing would do me good," she said briskly, "and if you've no objection I'll come down to the docks with you to see the boat off."

Mrs. Gannett assented readily. It would ease the engineer's mind, she thought, if he saw her with a chaperon.

"Nice bird," said Mrs. Cluffins, mechanically bringing her parasol to the charge.

"Don't do that," said her friend hastily.

"Why not?" said the other.

"Language!" said Mrs. Gannett solemnly.

"Well, I must do something to it," said Mrs. Cluffins restlessly.

She held the parasol near the cage and suddenly opened it. It was a flaming scarlet, and for the moment the shock took the parrot's breath away.

"He don't mind that," said Mrs. Gannett.

The parrot, hopping to the farther corner of the bottom of his cage, said something feebly. Finding that nothing dreadful happened, he repeated his remark somewhat more boldly and, being convinced after all that the apparition was quite harmless and that he had displayed his craven spirit for nothing, hopped back on his perch and raved wickedly.

"If that was my bird," said Mrs. Cluffins, almost as scarlet as her parasol, "I should wring its neck."

"No, you wouldn't," said Mrs. Gannett solemnly and, having quieted the bird by throwing a cloth over its cage, explained its properties.

"What?" said Mrs. Cluffins, unable to sit still in her chair. "You mean to tell me that your husband said that?"

Mrs. Gannett nodded. "He's awfully jealous of me," she said, with a slight simper.

"I wish he was my husband," said Mrs. Cluffins in a thin, hard voice. "I wish you would talk to me like that. I wish somebody would try and persuade C to talk to me like that."

"It shows he's fond of me," said Mrs. Gannett, looking down.

Mrs. Cluffins jumped up and, snatching the cover off the cage, endeavored, but in vain, to get the parrot through the bars.

"And you believe that rubbish?" she said scathingly. "Bah, you wretch!"

"I don't believe it," said her friend, taking her gently away and covering the cage hastily just as the bird was recovering, "but I let him think I do."

"I call it an outrage," said Mrs. Cluffins, waving the parasol wildly. "I never heard of such a thing. I'd like to give Mr. Gannett a piece of my mind. Just about half an hour of it. He wouldn't be the same man afterward. I'd parrot him."

Mrs. Gannett, soothing her agitated friend as well as she was able, led her gently to a chair and removed her bonnet and, finding that complete recovery was impossible while the parrot remained in the room, took that wonder working bird outside.

By the time they had reached the docks and boarded the Curlew Mrs. Cluffins had quite recovered her spirits. She roamed about the steamer asking questions which savored more of idle curiosity than a genuine thirst for knowledge and was at no pains to conceal her opinion of those who were unable to furnish her with satisfactory replies.

"I shall think of you every day, Jem," said Mrs. Gannett tenderly.

"I shall think of you every minute," said the engineer reproachfully.

He sighed gently and gazed in a scandalized fashion at Mrs. Cluffins, who was carrying on a desperate flirtation with one of the apprentices.

"She's very light hearted," said his wife, following the direction of his eyes.

"She is," said Mr. Gannett curtly as the unconscious Mrs. Cluffins shortened her parasol and rapped the apprentice playfully with the handle.

"She seems to be on very good terms with Jenkins, laughing and carrying on. I don't suppose she's ever seen him before," said the engineer.

"Poor young thing," said Mrs. Cluffins solemnly, as she came up to them. "Don't you worry, Mr. Gannett. I'll look after her and keep her from moping."

"You're very kind," said the engineer slowly.

"We'll have a jolly time," said Mrs. Cluffins. "I often wish my husband was a seafaring man. A wife does have more freedom, doesn't she?"

"More what?" inquired Mr. Gannett buskily.

"More freedom," said Mrs. Cluffins gravely. "I always envy sailors' wives. They can do as they like. No husband to look after them for nine or ten months in the year."

Before the unhappy engineer could put his indignant thoughts into words there was a warning cry from the gangway, and with a hasty farewell he hurried below. The visitors went ashore, the gangway was shipped, and in response to the clang of the telegraph the Curlew drifted slowly away from the quay and headed for the swing bridge slowly opening in front of her.

The two ladies hurried to the pier-head and watched the steamer down the river until a bend hid it from view. Then Mrs. Gannett, with a sensation of having lost something, due, her friend assured her, to the want of a cup of tea, went slowly back to her lonely home.

In the period of grass widowhood which ensued, Mrs. Cluffins' visits formed almost the sole relief to the bare monotony of existence. As a companion the parrot was an utter failure, its language being so irredeemably bad that it spent most of its time in the spare room with a cloth over its cage wondering when the days were going to lengthen a bit.

Mrs. Cluffins suggested selling it, but her friend repelled the suggestion with horror and refused to entertain it at any price, even that of the publican at the corner, who had heard of the bird's command of language and was bent upon buying it.

"I wonder what that beauty will have to tell your husband," said Mrs. Cluffins as they sat together one day some four months after the Curlew's departure.

"I should hope that he has forgotten

that nonsense," said Mrs. Gannett, reddening. "He never alludes to it in his letters."

"Sell it," said Mrs. Cluffins peremptorily. "It's no good to you, and Jimson would give anything for it almost."

Mrs. Gannett shook her head. "The house wouldn't hold my husband if I did," she remarked, with a shiver.

"Oh, yes, it would!" said Mrs. Cluffins. "You do as I tell you, and a much smaller house than this would hold him. I told C to tell Jimson he should have it for £5."

"But he mustn't," said her friend in alarm.

"Leave yourself right in my hands," said Mrs. Cluffins, spreading out two small palms and regarding them complacently. "It'll be all right, I promise you."

She put her arm around her friend's waist and led her to the window, talking earnestly. In five minutes Mrs. Gannett was wavering, in ten she had given away, and in 15 the energetic Mrs. Cluffins was en route for Jimson's, swinging the cage so violently in her excitement that the parrot was reduced to holding on to its perch with claws and bill and could only think. Mrs. Gannett watched their progress from the window and with a queer look on her face sat down to think out the points of attack and defense in the approaching fray.

A week later a four wheeler drove up to the door, and the engineer, darting up stairs three steps at a time, dropped an armful of parcels on the floor and caught his wife in an embrace which would have done credit to a bear. Mrs. Gannett, for reasons, of which lack of muscle was only one, responded less ardently.

"Ha, it's good to be home again!" said Gannett, sinking into an easy chair and pulling his wife on his knee. "And how have you been? Lonely?"

"I got used to it," said Mrs. Gannett softly.

The engineer coughed. "You had the parrot," he remarked.

"Yes, I had the magic parrot," said Mrs. Gannett.

"How's it getting on?" said her husband, looking round. "Where is it?"

"Part of it is on the mantelpiece," said Mrs. Gannett, trying to speak calmly, "part of it is in a bonnet box up stairs, some of it's in my pocket, and here is the remainder."

She fumbled in her pocket and placed in his hand a cheap two bladed clasp knife.

"On the mantelpiece?" repeated the engineer, staring at the knife. "In a bonnet box?"

"Those blue vases," said his wife.

Mr. Gannett put his hand to his head. If he had heard aright, one parrot had changed into a pair of blue vases, a bonnet and a knife. A magic bird with a vengeance!

"I sold it," said Mrs. Gannett suddenly.

The engineer's knee stiffened inhospitably, and his arm dropped from his wife's waist. She rose quietly and took a chair opposite.

"Sold it!" said Mr. Gannett in awful tones. "Sold my parrot!"

"I didn't like it, Jem," said his wife. "I didn't want that bird watching me, and I did want the vases and the bonnet and the little present for you."

Mr. Gannett pitched the little present to the other end of the room.

"You see, it mightn't have told the truth, Jem," continued Mrs. Gannett. "It might have told all sorts of lies about me and made no end of mischief."

"It couldn't lie," shouted the engineer passionately, rising from his chair and pacing the room. "It's your guilty conscience that's made a coward of you. How dare you sell my parrot?"

"Because it wasn't truthful, Jem," said his wife, who was somewhat pale. "If you were half as truthful, you'd do," vociferated the engineer, standing over her. "You, you deceitful woman!"

Mrs. Gannett fumbled in her pocket again and producing a small handkerchief applied it delicately to her eyes.

"I got rid of it for your sake," she stammered. "It used to tell such lies about you I couldn't bear to listen to it."

"About me?" said Mr. Gannett, sinking into his seat and staring at his wife with very natural amazement. "Tell lies about me? Nonsense. How could it?"

"I suppose it could tell me about you as easily as it could you about me," said Mrs. Gannett. "There was more magic in that bird than you thought, Jem. It used to say shocking things about you. I couldn't bear it."

"Do you think you're talking to a child or a fool?" demanded the engineer hotly.

Mrs. Gannett shook her head feebly. She still kept the handkerchief to her eyes, but allowed a portion to drop over her mouth.

"I should like to hear some of the lies it told about me," said the engineer, with bitter sarcasm, "if you can remember them."

"The first lie," said Mrs. Gannett in a feeble but ready voice, "was about the time you were at Genoa. The parrot said you were at some concert gardens at the upper end of the town."

One moist eye came mildly from behind the handkerchief just in time to see the engineer stiffen suddenly in his chair.

"I don't suppose there even is such a place," she continued.

"I believe there is," said her husband jerkily. "I've heard our chaps talk of it."

"But you haven't been there?" said his wife anxiously.

"Never!" said the engineer, with extraordinary vehemence.

"That wicked bird said that you got intoxicated there," said Mrs. Gannett, in solemn accents, "that you smashed a little marble topped table and knocked down two waiters and that if it,

