

Blundell's Improvement eBook

Blundell's Improvement by W. W. Jacobs

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BLUNDELL'S IMPROVEMENT

Venia Turnbull in a quiet, unobtrusive fashion was enjoying herself. The cool living-room at Turnbull's farm was a delightful contrast to the hot sunshine without, and the drowsy humming of bees floating in at the open window was charged with hints of slumber to the middle-aged. From her seat by the window she watched with amused interest the efforts of her father—kept from his Sunday afternoon nap by the assiduous attentions of her two admirers—to maintain his politeness.

"Father was so pleased to see you both come in," she said, softly; "it's very dull for him here of an afternoon with only me."

[Illustration: "Father was so pleased to see you both come in," she said, softly.]

"I can't imagine anybody being dull with only you," said Sergeant Dick Daly, turning a bold brown eye upon her.

Mr. John Blundell scowled; this was the third time the sergeant had said the thing that he would have liked to say if he had thought of it.

"I don't mind being dull," remarked Mr. Turnbull, casually.

Neither gentleman made any comment.

"I like it," pursued Mr. Turnbull, longingly; "always did, from a child."

The two young men looked at each other; then they looked at Venia; the sergeant assumed an expression of careless ease, while John Blundell sat his chair like a human limpet. Mr. Turnbull almost groaned as he remembered his tenacity.

"The garden's looking very nice," he said, with a pathetic glance round.

"Beautiful," assented the sergeant. "I saw it yesterday."

"Some o' the roses on that big bush have opened a bit more since then," said the farmer.

Sergeant Daly expressed his gratification, and said that he was not surprised. It was only ten days since he had arrived in the village on a visit to a relative, but in that short space of time he had, to the great discomfort of Mr. Blundell, made himself wonderfully at home at Mr. Turnbull's. To Venia he related strange adventures by sea and land, and on subjects of which he was sure the farmer knew nothing he was a perfect mine of information. He began to talk in low tones to Venia, and the heart of Mr. Blundell sank within him as he noted her interest. Their voices fell to a gentle murmur, and the

sergeant's sleek, well-brushed head bent closer to that of his listener. Relieved from his attentions, Mr. Turnbull fell asleep without more ado.

Blundell sat neglected, the unwilling witness of a flirtation he was powerless to prevent. Considering her limited opportunities, Miss Turnbull displayed a proficiency which astonished him. Even the sergeant was amazed, and suspected her of long practice.

"I wonder whether it is very hot outside?" she said, at last, rising and looking out of the window.

"Only pleasantly warm," said the sergeant. "It would be nice down by the water."

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"I'm afraid of disturbing father by our talk," said the considerate daughter. "You might tell him we've gone for a little stroll when he wakes," she added, turning to Blundell.

Mr. Blundell, who had risen with the idea of acting the humble but, in his opinion, highly necessary part of chaperon, sat down again and watched blankly from the window until they were out of sight. He was half inclined to think that the exigencies of the case warranted him in arousing the farmer at once.

It was an hour later when the farmer awoke, to find himself alone with Mr. Blundell, a state of affairs for which he strove with some pertinacity to make that aggrieved gentleman responsible.

"Why didn't you go with them?" he demanded. "Because I wasn't asked," replied the other.

Mr. Turnbull sat up in his chair and eyed him disdainfully. "For a great, big chap like you are, John Blundell," he exclaimed, "it's surprising what a little pluck you've got."

"I don't want to go where I'm not wanted," retorted Mr. Blundell.

"That's where you make a mistake," said the other, regarding him severely; "girls like a masterful man, and, instead of getting your own way, you sit down quietly and do as you're told, like a tame—tame—"

"Tame what?" inquired Mr. Blundell, resentfully.

"I don't know," said the other, frankly; "the tamest thing you can think of. There's Daly laughing in his sleeve at you, and talking to Venia about Waterloo and the Crimea as though he'd been there. I thought it was pretty near settled between you."

"So did I," said Mr. Blundell.

"You're a big man, John," said the other, "but you're slow. You're all muscle and no head."

"I think of things afterward," said Blundell, humbly; "generally after I get to bed."

Mr. Turnbull sniffed, and took a turn up and down the room; then he closed the door and came toward his friend again.

"I dare say you're surprised at me being so anxious to get rid of Venia," he said, slowly, "but the fact is I'm thinking of marrying again myself."

"You!" said the startled Mr. Blundell.

“Yes, me,” said the other, somewhat sharply. “But she won’t marry so long as Venia is at home. It’s a secret, because if Venia got to hear of it she’d keep single to prevent it. She’s just that sort of girl.”

Mr. Blundell coughed, but did not deny it. “Who is it?” he inquired.

“Miss Sippet,” was the reply. “She couldn’t hold her own for half an hour against Venia.”

Mr. Blundell, a great stickler for accuracy, reduced the time to five minutes.

“And now,” said the aggrieved Mr. Turnbull, “now, so far as I can see, she’s struck with Daly. If she has him it’ll be years and years before they can marry. She seems crazy about heroes. She was talking to me the other night about them. Not to put too fine a point on it, she was talking about you.”

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Mr. Blundell blushed with pleased surprise.

“Said you were not a hero,” explained Mr. Turnbull. “Of course, I stuck up for you. I said you’d got too much sense to go putting your life into danger. I said you were a very careful man, and I told her how particular you was about damp sheets. Your housekeeper told me.”

“It’s all nonsense,” said Blundell, with a fiery face. “I’ll send that old fool packing if she can’t keep her tongue quiet.”

“It’s very sensible of you, John,” said Mr. Turnbull, “and a sensible girl would appreciate it. Instead of that, she only sniffed when I told her how careful you always were to wear flannel next to your skin. She said she liked dare-devils.”

“I suppose she thinks Daly is a dare-devil,” said the offended Mr. Blundell. “And I wish people wouldn’t talk about me and my skin. Why can’t they mind their own business?”

Mr. Turnbull eyed him indignantly, and then, sitting in a very upright position, slowly filled his pipe, and declining a proffered match rose and took one from the mantel-piece.

“I was doing the best I could for you,” he said, staring hard at the ingrate. “I was trying to make Venia see what a careful husband you would make. Miss Sippet herself is most particular about such things— and Venia seemed to think something of it, because she asked me whether you used a warming-pan.”

[Illustration: “She asked me whether you used a warming-pan.”]

Mr. Blundell got up from his chair and, without going through the formality of bidding his host good-by, quitted the room and closed the door violently behind him. He was red with rage, and he brooded darkly as he made his way home on the folly of carrying on the traditions of a devoted mother without thinking for himself.

For the next two or three days, to Venia’s secret concern, he failed to put in an appearance at the farm—a fact which made flirtation with the sergeant a somewhat uninteresting business. Her sole recompense was the dismay of her father, and for his benefit she dwelt upon the advantages of the Army in a manner that would have made the fortune of a recruiting-sergeant.

“She’s just crazy after the soldiers,” he said to Mr. Blundell, whom he was trying to spur on to a desperate effort. “I’ve been watching her close, and I can see what it is now; she’s romantic. You’re too slow and ordinary for her. She wants somebody more dazzling. She told Daly only yesterday afternoon that she loved heroes. Told it to him to his face. I sat there and heard her. It’s a pity you ain’t a hero, John.”

“Yes,” said Mr. Blundell; “then, if I was, I expect she’d like something else.”

The other shook his head. “If you could only do something daring,” he murmured; “half-kill some-body, or save somebody’s life, and let her see you do it. Couldn’t you dive off the quay and save some-body’s life from drowning?”

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"Yes, I could," said Blundell, "if somebody would only tumble in."

"You might pretend that you thought you saw somebody drowning," suggested Mr. Turnbull.

"And be laughed at," said Mr. Blundell, who knew his Venia by heart.

"You always seem to be able to think of objections," complained Mr. Turnbull; "I've noticed that in you before."

"I'd go in fast enough if there was anybody there," said Blundell. "I'm not much of a swimmer, but—"

"All the better," interrupted the other; "that would make it all the more daring."

"And I don't much care if I'm drowned," pursued the younger man, gloomily.

Mr. Turnbull thrust his hands in his pockets and took a turn or two up and down the room. His brows were knitted and his lips pursed. In the presence of this mental stress Mr. Blundell preserved a respectful silence.

"We'll all four go for a walk on the quay on Sunday afternoon," said Mr. Turnbull, at last.

"On the chance?" inquired his staring friend.

"On the chance," assented the other; "it's just possible Daly might fall in."

"He might if we walked up and down five million times," said Blundell, unpleasantly.

"He might if we walked up and down three or four times," said Mr. Turnbull, "especially if you happened to stumble."

"I never stumble," said the matter-of-fact Mr. Blundell. "I don't know anybody more sure-footed than I am."

"Or thick-headed," added the exasperated Mr. Turnbull.

Mr. Blundell regarded him patiently; he had a strong suspicion that his friend had been drinking.

"Stumbling," said Mr. Turnbull, conquering his annoyance with an effort "stumbling is a thing that might happen to anybody. You trip your foot against a stone and lurch up against Daly; he tumbles overboard, and you off with your jacket and dive in off the quay after him. He can't swim a stroke."

Mr. Blundell caught his breath and gazed at him in speechless amaze.

“There’s sure to be several people on the quay if it’s a fine afternoon,” continued his instructor. “You’ll have half Dunchurch round you, praising you and patting you on the back—all in front of Venia, mind you. It’ll be put in all the papers and you’ll get a medal.”

“And suppose we are both drowned?” said Mr. Blundell, soberly.

“Drowned? Fiddlesticks !” said Mr. Turnbull. “However, please yourself. If you’re afraid _____”

“I’ll do it,” said Blundell, decidedly.

“And mind,” said the other, “don’t do it as if it’s as easy as kissing your fingers; be half-drowned yourself, or at least pretend to be. And when you’re on the quay take your time about coming round. Be longer than Daly is; you don’t want him to get all the pity.”

“All right,” said the other.

“After a time you can open your eyes,” went on his instructor; “then, if I were you, I should say, ‘Good-bye, Venia,’ and close ’em again. Work it up affecting, and send messages to your aunts.”

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"It sounds all right," said Blundell.

"It is all right," said Mr. Turnbull. "That's just the bare idea I've given you. It's for you to improve upon it. You've got two days to think about it."

Mr. Blundell thanked him, and for the next two days thought of little else. Being a careful man he made his will, and it was in a comparatively cheerful frame of mind that he made his way on Sunday afternoon to Mr. Turnbull's.

The sergeant was already there conversing in low tones with Venia by the window, while Mr. Turnbull, sitting opposite in an oaken armchair, regarded him with an expression which would have shocked Iago.

"We were just thinking of having a blow down by the water," he said, as Blundell entered.

"What! a hot day like this?" said Venia.

"I was just thinking how beautifully cool it is in here," said the sergeant, who was hoping for a repetition of the previous Sunday's performance.

"It's cooler outside," said Mr. Turnbull, with a wilful ignoring of facts; "much cooler when you get used to it."

He led the way with Blundell, and Venia and the sergeant, keeping as much as possible in the shade of the dust-powdered hedges, followed. The sun was blazing in the sky, and scarce half-a-dozen people were to be seen on the little curved quay which constituted the usual Sunday afternoon promenade. The water, a dozen feet below, lapped cool and green against the stone sides.

At the extreme end of the quay, underneath the lantern, they all stopped, ostensibly to admire a full-rigged ship sailing slowly by in the distance, but really to effect the change of partners necessary to the after-noon's business. The change gave Mr. Turnbull some trouble ere it was effected, but he was successful at last, and, walking behind the two young men, waited somewhat nervously for developments.

Twice they paraded the length of the quay and nothing happened. The ship was still visible, and, the sergeant halting to gaze at it, the company lost their formation, and he led the complaisant Venia off from beneath her father's very nose.

"You're a pretty manager, you are, John Blundell," said the incensed Mr. Turnbull.

"I know what I'm about," said Blundell, slowly.

“Well, why don’t you do it?” demanded the other. “I suppose you are going to wait until there are more people about, and then perhaps some of them will see you push him over.”

“It isn’t that,” said Blundell, slowly, “but you told me to improve on your plan, you know, and I’ve been thinking out improvements.”

“Well?” said the other.

“It doesn’t seem much good saving Daly,” said Blundell; “that’s what I’ve been thinking. He would be in as much danger as I should, and he’d get as much sympathy; perhaps more.”

“Do you mean to tell me that you are backing out of it?” demanded Mr. Turnbull.

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"No," said Blundell, slowly, "but it would be much better if I saved somebody else. I don't want Daly to be pitied."

"Bah! you are backing out of it," said the irritated Mr. Turnbull. "You're afraid of a little cold water."

[Illustration: "Bah! you are backing out of it," said the irritated Mr. Turnbull.]"

"No, I'm not," said Blundell; "but it would be better in every way to save somebody else. She'll see Daly standing there doing nothing, while I am struggling for my life. I've thought it all out very carefully. I know I'm not quick, but I'm sure, and when I make up my mind to do a thing, I do it. You ought to know that."

"That's all very well," said the other; "but who else is there to push in?"

"That's all right," said Blundell, vaguely. "Don't you worry about that; I shall find somebody."

Mr. Turnbull turned and cast a speculative eye along the quay. As a rule, he had great confidence in Blundell's determination, but on this occasion he had his doubts.

"Well, it's a riddle to me," he said, slowly. "I give it up. It seems— Halloa! Good heavens, be careful. You nearly had me in then."

"Did I?" said Blundell, thickly. "I'm very sorry."

Mr. Turnbull, angry at such carelessness, accepted the apology in a grudging spirit and trudged along in silence. Then he started nervously as a monstrous and unworthy suspicion occurred to him. It was an incredible thing to suppose, but at the same time he felt that there was nothing like being on the safe side, and in tones not quite free from significance he intimated his desire of changing places with his awkward friend.

"It's all right," said Blundell, soothingly.

"I know it is," said Mr. Turnbull, regarding him fixedly; "but I prefer this side. You very near had me over just now."

"I staggered," said Mr. Blundell.

"Another inch and I should have been overboard," said Mr. Turnbull, with a shudder. "That would have been a nice how d'ye do."

Mr. Blundell coughed and looked seaward. "Accidents will happen," he murmured.

They reached the end of the quay again and stood talking, and when they turned once more the sergeant was surprised and gratified at the ease with which he bore off Venia. Mr. Turnbull and Blundell followed some little way behind, and the former gentleman's suspicions were somewhat lulled by finding that his friend made no attempt to take the inside place. He looked about him with interest for a likely victim, but in vain.

"What are you looking at?" he demanded, impatiently, as Blundell suddenly came to a stop and gazed curiously into the harbour.

"Jelly-fish," said the other, briefly. "I never saw such a monster. It must be a yard across."

Mr. Turnbull stopped, but could see nothing, and even when Blundell pointed it out with his finger he had no better success. He stepped forward a pace, and his suspicions returned with renewed vigour as a hand was laid caressingly on his shoulder. The next moment, with a wild shriek, he shot suddenly over the edge and disappeared. Venia and the sergeant, turning hastily, were just in time to see the fountain which ensued on his immersion.

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[Illustration: "With a wild shriek, he shot suddenly over the edge and disappeared."]

"Oh, save him!" cried Venia.

The sergeant ran to the edge and gazed in helpless dismay as Mr. Turnbull came to the surface and disappeared again. At the same moment Blundell, who had thrown off his coat, dived into the harbour and, rising rapidly to the surface, caught the fast-choking Mr. Turnbull by the collar.

"Keep still," he cried, sharply, as the farmer tried to clutch him; "keep still or I'll let you go."

"Help!" choked the farmer, gazing up at the little knot of people which had collected on the quay.

A stout fisherman who had not run for thirty years came along the edge of the quay at a shambling trot, with a coil of rope over his arm. John Blundell saw him and, mindful of the farmer's warning about kissing of fingers, *etc.*, raised his disengaged arm and took that frenzied gentleman below the surface again. By the time they came up he was very glad for his own sake to catch the line skilfully thrown by the old fisherman and be drawn gently to the side.

"I'll tow you to the steps," said the fisherman; "don't let go o' the line."

Mr. Turnbull saw to that; he wound the rope round his wrist and began to regain his presence of mind as they were drawn steadily toward the steps. Willing hands drew them out of the water and helped them up on to the quay, where Mr. Turnbull, sitting in his own puddle, coughed up salt water and glared ferociously at the inanimate form of Mr. Blundell. Sergeant Daly and another man were rendering what they piously believed to be first aid to the apparently drowned, while the stout fisherman, with both hands to his mouth, was yelling in heart-rending accents for a barrel.

"He—he—push—pushed me in," gasped the choking Mr. Turnbull.

Nobody paid any attention to him; even Venia, seeing that he was safe, was on her knees by the side of the unconscious Blundell.

"He—he's shamming," bawled the neglected Mr. Turnbull.

"Shame!" said somebody, without even looking round.

"He pushed me in," repeated Mr. Turnbull. "He pushed me in."

"Oh, father," said Venia, with a scandalised glance at him, "how can you?"

“Shame!” said the bystanders, briefly, as they, watched anxiously for signs of returning life on the part of Mr. Blundell. He lay still with his eyes closed, but his hearing was still acute, and the sounds of a rapidly approaching barrel trundled by a breathless Samaritan did him more good than anything.

“Good-bye, Venia,” he said, in a faint voice; “good-bye.”

Miss Turnbull sobbed and took his hand.

“He’s shamming,” roared Mr. Turnbull, incensed beyond measure at the faithful manner in which Blundell was carrying out his instructions. “He pushed me in.”

There was an angry murmur from the bystanders. “Be reasonable, Mr. Turnbull,” said the sergeant, somewhat sharply.

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“He nearly lost ’is life over you,” said the stout fisherman. “As plucky a thing as ever I see. If I ’adn’t ha’ been ’andy with that there line you’d both ha’ been drowned.”

“Give—my love—to everybody,” said Blundell, faintly. “Good-bye, Venia. Good-bye, Mr. Turnbull.”

“Where’s that barrel?” demanded the stout fisher-man, crisply. “Going to be all night with it? Now, two of you——”

Mr. Blundell, with a great effort, and assisted by Venia and the sergeant, sat up. He felt that he had made a good impression, and had no desire to spoil it by riding the barrel. With one exception, everybody was regarding him with moist-eyed admiration. The exception’s eyes were, perhaps, the moistest of them all, but admiration had no place in them.

“You’re all being made fools of,” he said, getting up and stamping. “I tell you he pushed me over-board for the purpose.”

“Oh, father! how can you?” demanded Venia, angrily. “He saved your life.”

“He pushed me in,” repeated the farmer. “Told me to look at a jelly-fish and pushed me in.”

“What for?” inquired Sergeant Daly.

“Because——” said Mr. Turnbull. He looked at the unconscious sergeant, and the words on his lips died away in an inarticulate growl.

“What for?” pursued the sergeant, in triumph. “Be reasonable, Mr. Turnbull. Where’s the reason in pushing you overboard and then nearly losing his life saving you? That would be a fool’s trick. It was as fine a thing as ever I saw.”

“What you ’ad, Mr. Turnbull,” said the stout fisherman, tapping him on the arm, “was a little touch o’ the sun.”

“What felt to you like a push,” said another man, “and over you went.”

“As easy as easy,” said a third.

“You’re red in the face now,” said the stout fisherman, regarding him critically, “and your eyes are starting. You take my advice and get ’ome and get to bed, and the first thing you’ll do when you get your senses back will be to go round and thank Mr. Blundell for all ’e’s done for you.”

[Illustration: “You take my advice and get ’ome and get to bed.”]

Mr. Turnbull looked at them, and the circle of intelligent faces grew misty before his angry eyes. One man, ignoring his sodden condition, recommended a wet handkerchief tied round his brow.

“I don’t want any thanks, Mr. Turnbull,” said Blundell, feebly, as he was assisted to his feet. “I’d do as much for you again.”

The stout fisherman patted him admiringly on the back, and Mr. Turnbull felt like a prophet beholding a realised vision as the spectators clustered round Mr. Blundell and followed their friends’ example. Tenderly but firmly they led the hero in triumph up the quay toward home, shouting out eulogistic descriptions of his valour to curious neighbours as they passed. Mr. Turnbull, churlishly keeping his distance in the rear of the procession, received in grim silence the congratulations of his friends.

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The extraordinary hallucination caused by the sun-stroke lasted with him for over a week, but at the end of that time his mind cleared and he saw things in the same light as reasonable folk. Venia was the first to congratulate him upon his recovery; but his extraordinary behaviour in proposing to Miss Sippet the very day on which she herself became Mrs. Blundell convinced her that his recovery was only partial.