

Friends in Need eBook

Friends in Need by W. W. Jacobs

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FRIENDS IN NEED

R. Joseph Gibbs finished his half-pint in the private bar of the Red Lion with the slowness of a man unable to see where the next was coming from, and, placing the mug on the counter, filled his pipe from a small paper of tobacco and shook his head slowly at his companions.

"First I've 'ad since ten o'clock this morning," he said, in a hard voice.

"Cheer up," said Mr. George Brown.

"It can't go on for ever," said Bob Kidd, encouragingly.

"All I ask for—is work," said Mr. Gibbs, impressively. "Not slavery, mind yer, but work."

"It's rather difficult to distinguish," said Mr. Brown.

"Specially for some people," added Mr. Kidd.

"Go on," said Mr. Gibbs, gloomily. "Go on. Stand a man 'arf a pint, and then go and hurt 'is feelings. Twice yesterday I wondered to myself what it would feel like to make a hole in the water."

"Lots o' chaps do do it," said Mr. Brown, musingly.

"And leave their wives and families to starve," said Mr. Gibbs, icily.

"Very often the wife is better off," said his friend. "It's one mouth less for her to feed. Besides, she gen'rally gets something. When pore old Bill went they 'ad a Friendly Lead at the 'King's Head' and got his missis pretty nearly seventeen pounds."

"And I believe we'd get more than that for your old woman," said Mr. Kidd. "There's no kids, and she could keep 'erself easy. Not that I want to encourage you to make away with yourself."

Mr. Gibbs scowled and, tilting his mug, peered gloomily into the interior.

"Joe won't make no 'ole in the water," said Mr. Brown, wagging his head. "If it was beer, now—"

Mr. Gibbs turned and, drawing himself up to five feet three, surveyed the speaker with an offensive stare.

"I don't see why he need make a 'ole in anything," said Mr. Kidd, slowly. "It 'ud do just as well if we said he 'ad. Then we could pass the hat round and share it."

“Divide it into three halves and each ’ave one,” said Mr. Brown, nodding; “but ’ow is it to be done?”

“’Ave some more beer and think it over,” said Mr. Kidd, pale with excitement. “Three pints, please.”

He and Mr. Brown took up their pints, and nodded at each other. Mr. Gibbs, toying idly with the handle of his, eyed them carefully. “Mind, I’m not promising anything,” he said, slowly. “Understand, I ain’t a-committing of myself by drinking this ’ere pint.”

“You leave it to me, Joe,” said Mr. Kidd.

Mr. Gibbs left it to him after a discussion in which pints played a persuasive part; with the result that Mr. Brown, sitting in the same bar the next evening with two or three friends, was rudely disturbed by the cyclonic entrance of Mr. Kidd, who, dripping with water, sank on a bench and breathed heavily.

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"What's up? What's the matter?" demanded several voices.

"It's Joe—poor Joe Gibbs," said Mr. Kidd. "I was on Smith's wharf shifting that lighter to the next berth, and, o' course Joe must come aboard to help. He was shoving her off with 'is foot when—"

He broke off and shuddered and, accepting a mug of beer, pending the arrival of some brandy that a sympathizer had ordered, drank it slowly.

"It all 'appened in a flash," he said, looking round. "By the time I 'ad run round to his end he was just going down for the third time. I hung over the side and grabbed at 'im, and his collar and tie came off in my hand. Nearly went in, I did."

He held out the collar and tie; and approving notice was taken of the fact that he was soaking wet from the top of his head to the middle button of his waistcoat.

"Pore chap!" said the landlord, leaning over the bar. "He was in 'ere only 'arf an hour ago, standing in this very bar."

"Well, he's 'ad his last drop o' beer," said a carman in a chastened voice.

"That's more than anybody can say," said the landlord, sharply. "I never heard anything against the man; he's led a good life so far as I know, and 'ow can we tell that he won't 'ave beer?"

He made Mr. Kidd a present of another small glass of brandy.

"He didn't leave any family, did he?" he inquired, as he passed it over.

"Only a wife," said Mr. Kidd; "and who's to tell that pore soul I don't know. She fair doated on 'im. 'Ow she's to live I don't know. I shall do what I can for 'er."

"Same 'ere," said Mr. Brown, in a deep voice.

"Something ought to be done for 'er," said the carman, as he went out.

"First thing is to tell the police," said the landlord. "They ought to know; then p'r'aps one of them'll tell her. It's what they're paid for."

"It's so awfully sudden. I don't know where I am 'ardly," said Mr. Kidd. "I don't believe she's got a penny-piece in the 'ouse. Pore Joe 'ad a lot o' pals. I wonder whether we could'nt get up something for her."

"Go round and tell the police first," said the landlord, pursing up his lips thoughtfully. "We can talk about that later on."



Mr. Kidd thanked him warmly and withdrew, accompanied by Mr. Brown. Twenty minutes later they left the station, considerably relieved at the matter-of-fact way in which the police had received the tidings, and, hurrying across London Bridge, made their way towards a small figure supporting its back against a post in the Borough market.

“Well?” said Mr. Gibbs, snappishly, as he turned at the sound of their footsteps.

“It’ll be all right, Joe,” said Mr. Kidd. “We’ve sowed the seed.”

“Sowed the wot?” demanded the other.

Mr. Kidd explained.

“Ho!” said Mr. Gibbs. “An’ while your precious seed is a-coming up, wot am I to do? Wot about my comfortable ’ome? Wot about my bed and grub?”

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His two friends looked at each other uneasily. In the excitement of the arrangements they had for gotten these things, and a long and sometimes painful experience of Mr. Gibbs showed them only too plainly where they were drifting.

"You'll 'ave to get a bed this side o' the river somewhere," said Mr. Brown, slowly. "Coffee-shop or something; and a smart, active man wot keeps his eyes open can always pick up a little money."

Mr. Gibbs laughed.

"And mind," said Mr. Kidd, furiously, in reply to the laugh, "anything we lend you is to be paid back out of your half when you get it. And, wot's more, you don't get a ha'penny till you've come into a barber's shop and 'ad them whiskers off. We don't want no accidents."

Mr. Gibbs, with his back against the post, fought for his whiskers for nearly half an hour, and at the end of that time was led into a barber's, and in a state of sullen indignation proffered his request for a "clean" shave. He gazed at the bare-faced creature that confronted him in the glass after the operation in open-eyed consternation, and Messrs. Kidd and Brown's politeness easily gave way before their astonishment.

"Well, I may as well have a 'air-cut while I'm here," said Mr. Gibbs, after a lengthy survey.

"And a shampoo, sir?" said the assistant.

"Just as you like," said Mr. Gibbs, turning a deaf ear to the frenzied expostulations of his financial backers. "Wot is it?"

[Illustration: Mr. Gibbs, with his back against the post, fought for nearly half an hour]

He sat in amazed discomfort during the operation, and emerging with his friends remarked that he felt half a stone lighter. The information was received in stony silence, and, having spent some time in the selection, they found a quiet public-house, and in a retired corner formed themselves into a Committee of Ways and Means.

"That'll do for you to go on with," said Mr. Kidd, after he and Mr. Brown had each made a contribution; "and, mind, it's coming off of your share."

Mr. Gibbs nodded. "And any evening you want to see me you'll find me in here," he remarked. "Beer's ripping. Now you'd better go and see my old woman."

The two friends departed, and, to their great relief, found a little knot of people outside the abode of Mrs. Gibbs. It was clear that the news had been already broken, and, pushing their way upstairs, they found the widow with a damp handkerchief in her hand

surrounded by attentive friends. In feeble accents she thanked Mr. Kidd for his noble attempts at rescue.

“He ain’t dry yet,” said Mr. Brown.

“I done wot I could,” said Mr. Kidd, simply. “Pore Joe! Nobody could ha’ had a better pal. Nobody!”

“Always ready to lend a helping ’and to them as was in trouble, he was,” said Mr. Brown, looking round.

“‘Ear, ’ear!” said a voice.

“And we’ll lend ’im a helping ’and,” said Mr. Kidd, energetically. “We can’t do ’im no good, pore chap, but we can try and do something for ’er as is left behind.”

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He moved slowly to the door, accompanied by Mr. Brown, and catching the eye of one or two of the men beckoned them to follow. Under his able guidance a small but gradually increasing crowd made its way to the “Red Lion.” For the next three or four days the friends worked unceasingly. Cards stating that a Friendly Lead would be held at the “Red Lion,” for the benefit of the widow of the late Mr. Joseph Gibbs, were distributed broadcast; and anecdotes portraying a singularly rare and beautiful character obtained an even wider circulation. Too late Wapping realized the benevolent disposition and the kindly but unobtrusive nature that had departed from it for ever.

Mr. Gibbs, from his retreat across the water, fully shared his friends’ enthusiasm, but an insane desire—engendered by vanity—to be present at the function was a source of considerable trouble and annoyance to them. When he offered to black his face and take part in the entertainment as a nigger minstrel, Mr. Kidd had to be led outside and kept there until such time as he could converse in English pure and undefiled.

“Getting above ’imself, that’s wot it is,” said Mr. Brown, as they wended their way home. “He’s having too much money out of us to spend; but it won’t be for long now.”

“He’s having a lord’s life of it, while we’re slaving ourselves to death,” grumbled Mr. Kidd. “I never see ’im looking so fat and well. By rights he oughtn’t to ’ave the same share as wot we’re going to ’ave; he ain’t doing none of the work.”

His ill-humour lasted until the night of the “Lead,” which, largely owing to the presence of a sporting fishmonger who had done well at the races that day, and some of his friends, realized a sum far beyond the expectations of the hard-working promoters. The fishmonger led off by placing a five-pound note in the plate, and the packed audience breathed so hard that the plate-holder’s responsibility began to weigh upon his spirits. In all, a financial tribute of thirty-seven pounds three and fourpence was paid to the memory of the late Mr. Gibbs.

“Over twelve quid apiece,” said the delighted Mr. Kidd as he bade his co-worker good night. “Sounds too good to be true.”

The next day passed all too slowly, but work was over at last, and Mr. Kidd led the way over London Bridge a yard or two ahead of the more phlegmatic Mr. Brown. Mr. Gibbs was in his old corner at the “Wheelwright’s Arms,” and, instead of going into ecstasies over the sum realized, hinted darkly that it would have been larger if he had been allowed to have had a hand in it.

“It’ll ’ardly pay me for my trouble,” he said, shaking his head. “It’s very dull over ’ere all alone by myself. By the time you two have ’ad your share, besides taking wot I owe you, there’ll be ’ardly anything left.”

“I’ll talk to you another time,” said Mr. Kidd, regarding him fixedly. “Wot you’ve got to do now is to come acrost the river with us.”

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"What for?" demanded Mr. Gibbs.

"We're going to break the joyful news to your old woman that you're alive afore she starts spending money wot isn't hers," said Mr. Kidd. "And we want you to be close by in case she don't believe us.

"Well, do it gentle, mind," said the fond husband. "We don't want 'er screaming, or anything o' that sort. I know 'er better than wot you do, and my advice to you is to go easy."

He walked along by the side of them, and, after some demur, consented, as a further disguise, to put on a pair of spectacles, for which Mr. Kidd's wife's mother had been hunting high and low since eight o'clock that morning.

"You doddle about 'ere for ten minutes," said Mr. Kidd, as they reached the Monument, "and then foller on. When you pass a lamp-post 'old your handkerchief up to your face. And wait for us at the corner of your road till we come for you."

He went off at a brisk pace with Mr. Brown, a pace moderated to one of almost funeral solemnity as they approached the residence of Mrs. Gibbs. To their relief she was alone, and after the usual amenities thanked them warmly for all they had done for her.

"I'd do more than that for pore Joe," said Mr. Brown.

"They—they 'aven't found 'im yet?" said the widow.

Mr. Kidd shook his head. "My idea is they won't find 'im," he said, slowly.

"Went down on the ebb tide," explained Mr. Brown; and spoilt Mr. Kidd's opening.

"Wherever he is 'e's better off," said Mrs. Gibbs.

"No more trouble about being out o' work; no more worry; no more pain. We've all got to go some day.

"Yes," began Mr. Kidd; "but—

"I'm sure I don't wish 'im back," said Mrs. Gibbs; "that would be sinful."

"But 'ow if he wanted to come back?" said Mr. Kidd, playing for an opening.

"And 'elp you spend that money," said Mr. Brown, ignoring the scowls of his friend.

Mrs. Gibbs looked bewildered. "Spend the money?" she began.

“Suppose,” said Mr. Kidd, “suppose he wasn’t drowned after all? Only last night I dreamt he was alive.”

“So did I,” said Mr. Brown.

“He was smiling at me,” said Mr. Kidd, in a tender voice. “‘Bob,’ he ses, ‘go and tell my pore missis that I’m alive,’ he ses; ‘break it to ‘er gentle.’”

“It’s the very words he said to me in my dream,” said Mr. Brown. “Bit strange, ain’t it?”

“Very,” said Mrs. Gibbs.

“I suppose,” said Mr. Kidd, after a pause, “I suppose you haven’t been dreaming about ‘im?”

“No; I’m a teetotaller,” said the widow.

The two gentlemen exchanged glances, and Mr. Kidd, ever of an impulsive nature, resolved to bring matters to a head.

“Wot would you do if Joe was to come in ‘ere at this door?” he asked.

“Scream the house down,” said the widow, promptly.

“Scream—scream the ‘ouse down?” said the distressed Mr. Kidd.

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Mrs. Gibbs nodded. "I should go screaming, raving mad," she said, with conviction.

"But—but not if 'e was alive!" said Mr. Kidd.

"I don't know what you're driving at," said Mrs. Gibbs. "Why don't you speak out plain? Poor Joe is drowned, you know that; you saw it all, and yet you come talking to me about dreams and things."

Mr. Kidd bent over her and put his hand affectionately on her shoulder. "He escaped," he said, in a thrilling whisper. "He's alive and well."

"*What?*" said Mrs. Gibbs, starting back.

"True as I stand 'ere," said Mr. Kidd; "ain't it, George?"

"Truer," said Mr. Brown, loyally.

Mrs. Gibbs leaned back, gasping. "Alive!" she said. "But 'ow? 'Ow can he be?"

"Don't make such a noise," said Mr. Kidd, earnestly. "Mind, if anybody else gets to 'ear of it you'll 'ave to give that money back."

"I'd give more than that to get 'im back," said Mrs. Gibbs, wildly. "I believe you're deceiving me."

"True as I stand 'ere," asseverated the other. "He's only a minute or two off, and if it wasn't for you screaming I'd go out and fetch 'im in."

"I won't scream," said Mrs. Gibbs, "not if I know it's flesh and blood. Oh, where is he? Why don't you bring 'im in? Let me go to 'im."

"All right," said Mr. Kidd, with a satisfied smile at Mr. Brown; "all in good time. I'll go and fetch 'im now; but, mind, if you scream you'll spoil everything."

He bustled cheerfully out of the room and downstairs, and Mrs. Gibbs, motioning Mr. Brown to silence, stood by the door with parted lips, waiting. Three or four minutes elapsed.

"'Ere they come," said Mr. Brown, as footsteps sounded on the stairs. "Now, no screaming, mind!"

Mrs. Gibbs drew back, and, to the gratification of all concerned, did not utter a sound as Mr. Kidd, followed by her husband, entered the room. She stood looking expectantly towards the doorway.

"Where is he?" she gasped.

"Eh?" said Mr. Kidd, in a startled voice. "Why here. Don't you know 'im?"

"It's me, Susan," said Mr. Gibbs, in a low voice.

"Oh, I might 'ave known it was a joke," cried Mrs. Gibbs, in a faint voice, as she tottered to a chair. "Oh, 'ow cruel of you to tell me my pore Joe was alive! Oh, 'ow could you?"

"Lor' lumme," said the incensed Mr. Kidd, pushing Mr. Gibbs forward. "Here he is. Same as you saw 'im last, except for 'is whiskers. Don't make that sobbing noise; people'll be coming in."

"Oh! Oh! Oh! Take 'im away," cried Mrs. Gibbs. "Go and play your tricks with somebody else's broken 'art."

"But it's your husband," said Mr. Brown.

"Take 'im away," wailed Mrs. Gibbs.

Mr. Kidd, grinding his teeth, tried to think. "'Ave you got any marks on your body, Joe?" he inquired.

"I ain't got a mark on me," said Mr. Gibbs with a satisfied air, "or a blemish. My skin is as whi—"

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"That's enough about your skin," interrupted Mr. Kidd, rudely.

"If you ain't all of you gone before I count ten," said Mrs. Gibbs, in a suppressed voice, "I'll scream. 'Ow dare you come into a respectable woman's place and talk about your skins? Are you going? One! Two! Three! Four! Five!"

Her voice rose with each numeral; and Mr. Gibbs himself led the way downstairs, and, followed by his friends, slipped nimbly round the corner.

"It's a wonder she didn't rouse the whole 'ouse," he said, wiping his brow on his sleeve; "and where should we ha' been then? I thought at the time it was a mistake you making me 'ave my whiskers off, but I let you know best. She's never seen me without 'em. I 'ad a remarkable strong growth when I was quite a boy. While other boys was—"

"Shut-up!" vociferated Mr. Kidd.

"Sha'n't!" said Mr. Gibbs, defiantly. "I've 'ad enough of being away from my comfortable little 'ome and my wife; and I'm going to let 'em start growing agin this very night. She'll never reckernize me without 'em, that's certain."

"He's right, Bob," said Mr. Brown, with conviction.

"D'ye mean to tell me we've got to wait till 'is blasted whiskers grow?" cried Mr. Kidd, almost dancing with fury. "And go on keeping 'im in idleness till they do?"

"You'll get it all back out o' my share," said Mr. Gibbs, with dignity. "But you can please yourself. If you like to call it quits now, I don't mind."

Mr. Brown took his seething friend aside, and conferred with him in low but earnest tones. Mr. Gibbs, with an indifferent air, stood by whistling softly.

"'Ow long will they take to grow?" inquired Mr. Kidd, turning to him with a growl.

Mr. Gibbs shrugged his shoulders. "Can't say," he replied; "but I should think two or three weeks would be enough for 'er to reckernize me by. If she don't, we must wait another week or so, that's all."

"Well, there won't be much o' your share left, mind that," said Mr. Kidd, glowering at him.

"I can't help it," said Mr. Gibbs. "You needn't keep reminding me of it."

They walked the rest of the way in silence; and for the next fortnight Mr. Gibbs's friends paid nightly visits to note the change in his appearance, and grumble at its slowness.

"We'll try and pull it off to-morrow night," said Mr. Kidd, at the end of that period. "I'm fair sick o' lending you money."

Mr. Gibbs shook his head and spoke sagely about not spoiling the ship for a ha'porth o' tar; but Mr. Kidd was obdurate.

"There's enough for 'er to reckonize you by," he said, sternly, "and we don't want other people to. Meet us at the Monument at eight o'clock to-morrow night, and we'll get it over."

"Give your orders," said Mr. Gibbs, in a nasty voice.

"Keep your 'at well over your eyes," commanded Mr. Kidd, sternly. "Put them spectacles on wot I lent you, and it wouldn't be a bad idea if you tied your face up in a piece o' red flannel."

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"I know wot I'm going to do without you telling me," said Mr. Gibbs, nodding. "I'll bet you pots round that you don't either of you reckernize me tomorrow night."

The bet was taken at once, and from eight o'clock until ten minutes to nine the following night Messrs. Kidd and Brown did their best to win it. Then did Mr. Kidd, turning to Mr. Brown in perplexity, inquire with many redundant words what it all meant.

[Illustration: "Gone!" exclaimed both gentlemen. "Where?"]

"He must 'ave gone on by 'imself," said Mr. Brown. "We'd better go and see."

In a state of some disorder they hurried back to Wapping, and, mounting the stairs to Mrs. Gibbs's room, found the door fast. To their fervent and repeated knocking there was no answer.

"Ah, you won't make her 'ear," said a woman, thrusting an untidy head over the balusters on the next landing. "She's gone."

"Gone!" exclaimed both gentlemen. "Where?"

"Canada," said the woman. "She went off this morning."

Mr. Kidd leaned up against the wall for support; Mr. Brown stood open-mouthed and voiceless.

"It was a surprise to me," said the woman, "but she told me this morning she's been getting ready on the quiet for the last fortnight. Good spirits she was in, too; laughing like anything."

"Laughing!" repeated Mr. Kidd, in a terrible voice.

The woman nodded. "And when I spoke about it and reminded 'er that she 'ad only just lost 'er pore husband, I thought she would ha' burst," she said, severely. "She sat down on that stair and laughed till the tears ran downn 'er face like water."

Mr. Brown turned a bewildered face upon his partner. "Laughing!" he said, slowly. "Wot 'ad she got to laugh at?"

"Two born-fools," replied Mr. Kidd.