

Dual Control eBook

Dual Control by W. W. Jacobs

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DUAL CONTROL

"Never say 'die,' Bert," said Mr. Culpepper, kindly; "I like you, and so do most other people who know what's good for 'em; and if Florrie don't like you she can keep single till she does."

Mr. Albert Sharp thanked him.

"Come in more oftener," said Mr. Culpepper. "If she don't know a steady young man when she sees him, it's her mistake."

"Nobody could be steadier than what I am," sighed Mr. Sharp.

Mr. Culpepper nodded. "The worst of it is, girls don't like steady young men," he said, rumpling his thin grey hair; "that's the silly part of it."

"But you was always steady, and Mrs. Culpepper married you," said the young man.

Mr. Culpepper nodded again. "She thought I was, and that came to the same thing," he said, composedly. "And it ain't for me to say, but she had an idea that I was very good-looking in them days. I had chestnutty hair. She burnt a piece of it only the other day she'd kept for thirty years."

[Illustration: A very faint squeeze in return decided him]

"Burnt it? What for?" inquired Mr. Sharp.

"Words," said the other, lowering his voice. "When I want one thing nowadays she generally wants another; and the things she wants ain't the things I want."

Mr. Sharp shook his head and sighed again.

"You ain't talkative enough for Florrie, you know," said Mr. Culpepper, regarding him.

"I can talk all right as a rule," retorted Mr. Sharp. "You ought to hear me at the debating society; but you can't talk to a girl who doesn't talk back."

"You're far too humble," continued the other. "You should cheek her a bit now and then. Let 'er see you've got some spirit. Chaff 'er."

"That's no good," said the young man, restlessly. "I've tried it. Only the other day I called her 'a saucy little kipper,' and the way she went on, anybody would have thought I'd insulted her. Can't see a joke, I s'pose. Where is she now?"

"Upstairs," was the reply.



“That’s because I’m here,” said Mr. Sharp. “If it had been Jack Butler she’d have been down fast enough.”

“It couldn’t be him,” said Mr. Culpepper, “because I won’t have ’im in the house. I’ve told him so; I’ve told her so, and I’ve told ’er aunt so. And if she marries without my leave afore she’s thirty she loses the seven hundred pounds ’er father left her. You’ve got plenty of time—ten years.”

Mr. Sharp, sitting with his hands between his knees, gazed despondently at the floor. “There’s a lot o’ girls would jump at me,” he remarked. “I’ve only got to hold up my little finger and they’d jump.”

“That’s because they’ve got sense,” said Mr. Culpepper. “They’ve got the sense to prefer steadiness and humdrumness to good looks and dash. A young fellow like you earning thirty-two-and-six a week can do without good looks, and if I’ve told Florrie so once I have told her fifty times.”



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"Looks are a matter of taste," said Mr. Sharp, morosely. "Some of them girls I was speaking about just now—"

"Yes, yes," said Mr. Culpepper, hastily. "Now, look here; you go on a different tack. Take a glass of ale like a man or a couple o' glasses; smoke a cigarette or a pipe. Be like other young men. Cut a dash, and don't be a namby-pamby. After you're married you can be as miserable as you like."

Mr. Sharp, after a somewhat lengthy interval, thanked him.

"It's my birthday next Wednesday," continued Mr. Culpepper, regarding him benevolently; "come round about seven, and I'll ask you to stay to supper. That'll give you a chance. Anybody's allowed to step a bit over the mark on birthdays, and you might take a glass or two and make a speech, and be so happy and bright that they'd 'ardly know you. If you want an excuse for calling, you could bring me a box of cigars for my birthday."

"Or come in to wish you 'Many Happy Returns of the Day,'" said the thrifty Mr. Sharp.

"And don't forget to get above yourself," said Mr. Culpepper, regarding him sternly; "in a gentlemanly way, of course. Have as many glasses as you like—there's no stint about me."

"If it ever comes off," said Mr. Sharp, rising—"if I get her through you, you shan't have reason to repent it. I'll look after that."

Mr. Culpepper, whose feelings were a trifle ruffled, said that he would "look after it too." He had a faint idea that, even from his own point of view, he might have made a better selection for his niece's hand.

Mr. Sharp smoked his first cigarette the following morning, and, encouraged by the entire absence of any after-effects, purchased a pipe, which was taken up by a policeman the same evening for obstructing the public footpath in company with a metal tobacco-box three parts full.

In the matter of ale he found less difficulty. Certainly the taste was unpleasant, but, treated as medicine and gulped down quickly, it was endurable. After a day or two he even began to be critical, and on Monday evening went so far as to complain of its flatness to the wide-eyed landlord of the "Royal George."

"Too much cellar-work," he said, as he finished his glass and made for the door.

"Too much! 'Ere, come 'ere," said the landlord, thickly. "I want to speak to you."



The expert shook his head, and, passing out into, the street, changed colour as he saw Miss Garland approaching. In a blundering fashion he clutched at his hat and stammered out a “Good evening.”

Miss Garland returned the greeting and, instead of passing on, stopped and, with a friendly smile, held out her hand. Mr. Sharp shook it convulsively.

“You are just the man I want to see,” she exclaimed. “Aunt and I have been talking about you all the afternoon.”

Mr. Sharp said “Really!”

“But I don’t want uncle to see us,” pursued Miss Garland, in the low tones of confidence. “Which way shall we go?”



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Mr. Sharp's brain reeled. All ways were alike to him in such company. He walked beside her like a man in a dream.

"We want to give him a lesson," said the girl, presently. "A lesson that he will remember."

"Him?" said the young man.

"Uncle," explained the girl. "It's a shocking thing, a wicked thing, to try and upset a steady young man like you. Aunt is quite put out about it, and I feel the same as she does."

"But," gasped the astonished Mr. Sharp, "how did you?"

"Aunt heard him," said Miss Garland. "She was just going into the room when she caught a word or two, and she stayed outside and listened. You don't know what a lot she thinks of you."

Mr. Sharp's eyes opened wider than ever. "I thought she didn't like me," he said, slowly.

"Good gracious!" said Miss Garland. "Whatever could have put such an idea as that into your head? Of course, aunt isn't always going to let uncle see that she agrees with him. Still, as if anybody could help—" she murmured to herself.

"Eh?" said the young man, in a trembling voice.

"Nothing."

Miss Garland walked along with averted face; Mr. Sharp, his pulses bounding, trod on air beside her.

"I thought," he said, at last "I thought that Jack Butler was a favourite of hers?"

"Jack Butler!" said the girl, in tones of scornful surprise. "The idea! How blind men are; you're all alike, I think. You can't see two inches in front of you. She's as pleased as possible that you are coming on Wednesday; and so am—"

Mr. Sharp caught his breath. "Yes?" he murmured.

"Let's go down here," said Miss Garland quickly; "down by the river. And I'll tell you what we want you to do."

She placed her hand lightly on his arm, and Mr. Sharp, with a tremulous smile, obeyed. The smile faded gradually as he listened, and an expression of anxious astonishment took its place. He shook his head as she proceeded, and twice ventured a faint



suggestion that she was only speaking in jest. Convinced at last, against his will, he walked on in silent consternation.

“But,” he said at last, as Miss Garland paused for breath, “your uncle would never forgive me. He’d never let me come near the house again.”

“Aunt will see to that,” said the girl, confidently. “But, of course, if you don’t wish to please me—”

She turned away, and Mr. Sharp, plucking up spirit, ventured to take her hand and squeeze it. A faint, a very faint, squeeze in return decided him.

“It will come all right afterwards,” said Miss Garland, “especially with the hold it will give aunt over him.”

“I hope so,” said the young man. “If not, I shall be far—farther off than ever.”

Miss Garland blushed and, turning her head, gazed steadily at the river.

“Trust me,” she said at last. “Me and auntie.”



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Mr. Sharp said that so long as he pleased her nothing else mattered, and, in the seventh heaven of delight, paced slowly along the towpath by her side.

“And you mustn’t mind what auntie and I say to you,” said the girl, continuing her instructions. “We must keep up appearances, you know; and if we seem to be angry, you must remember we are only pretending.”

Mr. Sharp, with a tender smile, said that he understood perfectly.

“And now I had better go,” said Florrie, returning the smile. “Uncle might see us together, or somebody else might see us and tell him. Good-bye.”

She shook hands and went off, stopping three times to turn and wave her hand. In a state of bewildered delight Mr. Sharp continued his stroll, rehearsing, as he went, the somewhat complicated and voluminous instructions she had given him.

By Wednesday evening he was part-perfect, and, in a state of mind divided between nervousness and exaltation, set out for Mr. Culpepper’s. He found that gentleman, dressed in his best, sitting in an easy-chair with his hands folded over a fancy waistcoat of startling design, and, placing a small box of small cigars on his knees, wished him the usual “Happy Returns.” The entrance of the ladies, who seemed as though they had just come off the ice, interrupted Mr. Culpepper’s thanks.

“Getting spoiled, that’s what I am,” he remarked, playfully. “See this waistcoat? My old Aunt Elizabeth sent it this morning.”

He leaned back in his chair and glanced down in warm approval. “The missis gave me a pipe, and Florrie gave me half a pound of tobacco. And I bought a bottle of port wine myself, for all of us.”

He pointed to a bottle that stood on the supper-table, and, the ladies retiring to the kitchen to bring in the supper, rose and placed chairs. A piece of roast beef was placed before him, and, motioning Mr. Sharp to a seat opposite Florrie, he began to carve.

“Just a nice comfortable party,” he said, genially, as he finished. “Help yourself to the ale, Bert.”

Mr. Sharp, ignoring the surprise on the faces of the ladies, complied, and passed the bottle to Mr. Culpepper. They drank to each other, and again a flicker of surprise appeared on the faces of Mrs. Culpepper and her niece. Mr. Culpepper, noticing it, shook his head waggishly at Mr. Sharp.

“He drinks it as if he likes it,” he remarked.



“I do,” asserted Mr. Sharp, and, raising his glass, emptied it, and resumed the attack on his plate. Mr. Culpepper unscrewed the top of another bottle, and the reckless Mr. Sharp, after helping himself, made a short and feeling speech, in which he wished Mr. Culpepper long life and happiness. “If you ain’t happy with Mrs. Culpepper,” he concluded, gallantly, “you ought to be.”

Mr. Culpepper nodded and went on eating in silence until, the keen edge of his appetite having been taken off, he put down his knife and fork and waxed sentimental.



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“Been married over thirty years,” he said, slowly, with a glance at his wife, “and never regretted it.”

“Who hasn’t?” inquired Mr. Sharp.

“Why, me,” returned the surprised Mr. Culpepper.

Mr. Sharp, who had just raised his glass, put it down again and smiled. It was a faint smile, but it seemed to affect his host unfavourably.

“What are you smiling at?” he demanded.

“Thoughts,” said Mr. Sharp, exchanging a covert glance with Florrie. “Something you told me the other day.”

Mr. Culpepper looked bewildered. “I’ll give you a penny for them thoughts,” he said, with an air of jocosity.

Mr. Sharp shook his head. “Money couldn’t buy ’em,” he said, with owlish solemnity, “espec—especially after the good supper you’re giving me.”

“Bert,” said Mr. Culpepper, uneasily, as his wife sat somewhat erect “Bert, it’s my birthday, and I don’t grudge nothing to nobody; but go easy with the beer. You ain’t used to it, you know.”

“What’s the matter with the beer?” inquired Mr. Sharp. “It tastes all right—what there is of it.”

“It ain’t the beer; it’s you,” explained Mr. Culpepper.

Mr. Sharp stared at him. “Have I said anything I oughtn’t to?” he inquired.

Mr. Culpepper shook his head, and, taking up a fork and spoon, began to serve a plum-pudding that Miss Garland had just placed on the table.

“What was it you said I was to be sure and not tell Mrs. Culpepper?” inquired Mr. Sharp, dreamily. “I haven’t said that, have I?”

“No!” snapped the harassed Mr. Culpepper, laying down the fork and spoon and regarding him ferociously. “I mean, there wasn’t anything. I mean, I didn’t say so. You’re raving.”

“If I did say it, I’m sorry,” persisted Mr. Sharp. “I can’t say fairer than that, can I?”



“You’re all right,” said Mr. Culpepper, trying, but in vain, to exchange a waggish glance with his wife.

“I didn’t say it?” inquired Mr. Sharp.

“No,” said Mr. Culpepper, still smiling in a wooden fashion.

“I mean the other thing?” said Mr. Sharp, in a thrilling whisper.

“Look here,” exclaimed the overwrought Mr. Culpepper; “why not eat your pudding, and leave off talking nonsense? Nobody’s listening to you.”

“Speak for yourself,” said his wife, tartly. “I like to hear Mr. Sharp talk. What was it he told you not to tell me?”

Mr. Sharp eyed her mistily. “I—I can’t tell you,” he said, slowly.

“Why not?” asked Mrs. Culpepper, coaxingly.

“Because it—it would make your hair stand on end,” said the industrious Mr. Sharp.

“Nonsense,” said Mrs. Culpepper, sharply.

“He said it would,” said Mr. Sharp, indicating his host with his spoon, “and he ought—to know— Who’s that kicking me under the table?”

Mr. Culpepper, shivering with wrath and dread, struggled for speech. “You’d better get home, Bert,” he said at last. “You’re not yourself. There’s nobody kicking you under the table. You don’t know what you are saying. You’ve been dreaming things. I never said anything of the kind.”



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"Memory's gone," said Mr. Sharp, shaking his head at him. "Clean gone. Don't you remember—"

"No!" roared Mr. Culpepper.

Mr. Sharp sat blinking at him, but his misgivings vanished before the glances of admiring devotion which Miss Garland was sending in his direction. He construed them rightly not only as a reward, but as an incentive to further efforts. In the midst of an impressive silence Mrs. Culpepper collected the plates and, producing a dish of fruit from the sideboard, placed it upon the table.

"Help yourself, Mr. Sharp," she said, pushing the bottle of port towards him.

Mr. Sharp complied, having first, after several refusals, put a little into the ladies' glasses, and a lot on the tablecloth near Mr. Culpepper. Then, after a satisfying sip or two, he rose with a bland smile and announced his intention of making a speech.

"But you've made one," said his host, in tones of fierce expostulation.

"That—that was las' night," said Mr. Sharp. "This is to-night—your birthday."

"Well, we don't want any more," said Mr. Culpepper.

Mr. Sharp hesitated. "It's only his fun," he said, looking round and raising his glass. "He's afraid I'm going to praise him up—praise him up. Here's to my old friend, Mr. Culpepper: one of the best. We all have our—faults, and he has his—has his. Where was I?"

"Sit down," growled Mr. Culpepper.

"Talking about my husband's faults," said his wife.

"So I was," said Mr. Sharp, putting his hand to his brow. "Don't be alarm'," he continued, turning to his host; "nothing to be alarm' about. I'm not going to talk about 'em. Not so silly as that, I hope. I don't want spoil your life."

"Sit down," repeated Mr. Culpepper.

"You're very anxious he should sit down," said his wife, sharply.

"No, I'm not," said Mr. Culpepper; "only he's talking nonsense."

Mr. Sharp, still on his legs, took another sip of port and, avoiding the eye of Mr. Culpepper, which was showing signs of incipient inflammation, looked for encouragement to Miss Garland.



“He’s a man we all look up to and respect,” he continued. “If he does go off to London every now and then on business, that’s his lookout. My idea is he always ought to take Mrs. Culpepper with him.

“He’d have pleasure of her company and, same time, he’d be money in pocket by it. And why shouldn’t she go to music-halls sometimes? Why shouldn’t she—”

“You get off home,” said the purple Mr. Culpepper, rising and hammering the table with his fist. “Get off home; and if you so much as show your face inside this ’ouse again there’ll be trouble. Go on. Out you go!”

“Home?” repeated Mr. Sharp, sitting down suddenly. “Won’t go home till morning.”

“Oh, we’ll soon see about that,” said Mr. Culpepper, taking him by the shoulders. “Come on, now.”



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Mr. Sharp subsided lumpishly into his chair, and Mr. Culpepper, despite his utmost efforts, failed to move him. The two ladies exchanged a glance, and then, with their heads in the air, sailed out of the room, the younger pausing at the door to bestow a mirthful glance upon Mr. Sharp ere she disappeared.

“Come—out,” said Mr. Culpepper, panting.

“You trying to tickle me?” inquired Mr. Sharp.

“You get off home,” said the other. “You’ve been doing nothing but make mischief ever since you came in. What put such things into your silly head I don’t know. I shall never hear the end of ’em as long as I live.”

“Silly head?” repeated Mr. Sharp, with an alarming change of manner. “Say it again.”

Mr. Culpepper repeated it with gusto.

“Very good,” said Mr. Sharp. He seized him suddenly and, pushing him backwards into his easychair, stood over him with such hideous contortions of visage that Mr. Culpepper was horrified. “Now you sit there and keep quite still,” he said, with smouldering ferocity. “Where did you put carving-knife? Eh? Where’s carving-knife?”

“No, no, Bert,” said Mr. Culpepper, clutching at his sleeve. “I—I was only joking. You—you ain’t quite yourself, Bert.”

“What?” demanded the other, rolling his eyes, and clenching his fists.

“I—I mean you’ve improved,” said Mr. Culpepper, hurriedly. “Wonderful, you have.”

Mr. Sharp’s countenance cleared a little. “Let’s make a night of it,” he said. “Don’t move, whatever you do.”

[Illustration: He felt the large and clumsy hand of Mr. Butler take him by the collar]

He closed the door and, putting the wine and a couple of glasses on the mantelpiece, took a chair by Mr. Culpepper and prepared to spend the evening. His instructions were too specific to be disregarded, and three times he placed his arm about the waist of the frenzied Mr. Culpepper and took him for a lumbering dance up and down the room. In the intervals between dances he regaled him with interminable extracts from speeches made at the debating society and recitations learned at school. Suggestions relating to bed, thrown out by Mr. Culpepper from time to time, were repelled with scorn. And twice, in deference to Mr. Sharp’s desires, he had to join in the chorus of a song.

Ten o’clock passed, and the hands of the clock crawled round to eleven. The hour struck, and, as though in answer, the door opened and the agreeable face of Florrie



Garland appeared. Behind her, to the intense surprise of both gentlemen, loomed the stalwart figure of Mr. Jack Butler.

“I thought he might be useful, uncle,” said Miss Garland, coming into the room. “Auntie wouldn’t let me come down before.”

Mr. Sharp rose in a dazed fashion and saw Mr. Culpepper grasp Mr. Butler by the hand. More dazed still, he felt the large and clumsy hand of Mr. Butler take him by the collar and propel him with some violence along the small passage, while another hand, which he dimly recognized as belonging to Mr. Culpepper, was inserted in the small of his back. Then the front door opened and he was thrust out into the night. The door closed, and a low feminine laugh sounded from a window above.