

Deserted eBook

Deserted by W. W. Jacobs

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Contents

Deserted eBook.....	1
Contents.....	2
Table of Contents.....	3
Page 1.....	4
Page 2.....	6
Page 3.....	8
Page 4.....	10
Page 5.....	12
Page 6.....	14
Page 7.....	16

Table of Contents

Section	Table of Contents	Page
Start of eBook		1
DESERTED		1

Page 1

DESERTED

“Sailormen ain’t wot you might call dandyfied as a rule,” said the night-watchman, who had just had a passage of arms with a lighterman and been advised to let somebody else wash him and make a good job of it; “they’ve got too much sense. They leave dressing up and making eyesores of theirselves to men wot ’ave never smelt salt water; men wot drift up and down the river in lighters and get in everybody’s way.”

He glanced fiercely at the retreating figure of the lighterman, and, turning a deaf ear to a request for a lock of his hair to patch a favorite doormat with, resumed with much vigor his task of sweeping up the litter.

The most dressy sailorman I ever knew, he continued, as he stood the broom up in a corner and seated himself on a keg, was a young feller named Rupert Brown. His mother gave ’im the name of Rupert while his father was away at sea, and when he came ’ome it was too late to alter it. All that a man could do he did do, and Mrs. Brown ’ad a black eye till ’e went to sea agin. She was a very obstinate woman, though—like most of ’em—and a little over a year arterwards got pore old Brown three months’ hard by naming ’er next boy Roderick Alfonso.

Young Rupert was on a barge when I knew ’im fust, but he got tired of always ’aving dirty hands arter a time, and went and enlisted as a soldier. I lost sight of ’im for a while, and then one evening he turned up on furlough and come to see me.

O’ course, by this time ’e was tired of soldiering, but wot upset ’im more than anything was always ’aving to be dressed the same and not being able to wear a collar and neck-tie. He said that if it wasn’t for the sake of good old England, and the chance o’ getting six months, he’d desert. I tried to give ’im good advice, and, if I’d only known ’ow I was to be dragged into it, I’d ha’ given ’im a lot more.

As it ’appened he deserted the very next arternoon. He was in the Three Widders at Aldgate, in the saloon bar—which is a place where you get a penn’orth of ale in a glass and pay twopence for it—and, arter being told by the barmaid that she had got one monkey at ’ome, he got into conversation with another man wot was in there.

He was a big man with a black moustache and a red face, and ’is fingers all smothered in di’mond rings. He ’ad got on a gold watch-chain as thick as a rope, and a scarf-pin the size of a large walnut, and he had ’ad a few words with the barmaid on ’is own account. He seemed to take a fancy to Rupert from the fust, and in a few minutes he ’ad given ’im a big cigar out of a sealskin case and ordered ’im a glass of sherry wine.

[Illustration: He seemed to take a fancy to Rupert from the fust.]

“Have you ever thought o’ going on the stage?” he ses, arter Rupert ’ad told ’im of his dislike for the Army.

“No,” ses Rupert, staring.

Page 2

"You s'prise me," ses the big man; "you're wasting of your life by not doing so."

"But I can't act," ses Rupert.

"Stuff and nonsense!" ses the big man. "Don't tell me. You've got an actor's face. I'm a manager myself, and I know. I don't mind telling you that I refused twenty-three men and forty-eight ladies only yesterday."

"I wonder you don't drop down dead," ses the barmaid, lifting up 'is glass to wipe down the counter.

The manager looked at her, and, arter she 'ad gone to talk to a gentleman in the next bar wot was knocking double knocks on the counter with a pint pot, he whispered to Rupert that she 'ad been one of them.

"She can't act a bit," he ses. "Now, look 'ere; I'm a business man and my time is valuable. I don't know nothing, and I don't want to know nothing; but, if a nice young feller, like yourself, for example, was tired of the Army and wanted to escape, I've got one part left in my company that 'ud suit 'im down to the ground."

"Wot about being reckernized?" ses Rupert.

The manager winked at 'im. "It's the part of a Zulu chief," he ses, in a whisper.

Rupert started. "But I should 'ave to black my face," he ses.

"A little," ses the manager; "but you'd soon get on to better parts—and see wot a fine disguise it is."

He stood 'im two more glasses o' sherry wine, and, arter he' ad drunk 'em, Rupert gave way. The manager patted 'im on the back, and said that if he wasn't earning fifty pounds a week in a year's time he'd eat his 'ead; and the barmaid, wot 'ad come back agin, said it was the best thing he could do with it, and she wondered he 'adn't thought of it afore.

They went out separate, as the manager said it would be better for them not to be seen together, and Rupert, keeping about a dozen yards behind, follered 'im down the Mile End Road. By and by the manager stopped outside a shop-window wot 'ad been boarded up and stuck all over with savages dancing and killing white people and hunting elephants, and, arter turning round and giving Rupert a nod, opened the door with a key and went inside.

"That's all right," he ses, as Rupert follered 'im in. "This is my wife, Mrs. Alfredi," he ses, introducing 'im to a fat, red-'aired lady wot was sitting inside sewing. "She has performed before all the crowned 'eads of Europe. That di'mond brooch she's wearing

was a present from the Emperor of Germany, but, being a married man, he asked 'er to keep it quiet."

Rupert shook 'ands with Mrs. Alfredi, and then her 'usband led 'im to a room at the back, where a little lame man was cleaning up things, and told 'im to take his clothes off.

"If they was mine," he ses, squinting at the fire-place, "I should know wot to do with 'em."

Rupert laughed and slapped 'im on the back, and, arter cutting his uniform into pieces, stuffed it into the fireplace and pulled the dampers out. He burnt up 'is boots and socks and everything else, and they all three laughed as though it was the best joke in the world. Then Mr. Alfredi took his coat off and, dipping a piece of rag into a basin of stuff wot George 'ad fetched, did Rupert a lovely brown all over.

Page 3

"That's the fust coat," he ses. "Now take a stool in front of the fire and let it soak in."

He gave 'im another coat arf an hour arterwards, while George curled his 'air, and when 'e was dressed in bracelets round 'is ankles and wrists, and a leopard-skin over his shoulder, he was as fine a Zulu as you could wish for to see. His lips was naturally thick and his nose flat, and even his eyes 'appened to be about the right color.

"He's a fair perfect treat," ses Mr. Alfredi. "Fetch Kumbo in, George."

The little man went out, and came back agin shoving in a fat, stumpy Zulu woman wot began to grin and chatter like a poll-parrot the moment she saw Rupert.

"It's all right," ses Mr. Alfredi; "she's took a fancy to you."

"Is—is she an actress?" ses Rupert.

"One o' the best," ses the manager. "She'll teach you to dance and shy assegais. Pore thing! she buried her 'usband the day afore we come here, but you'll be surprised to see 'ow skittish she can be when she has got over it a bit."

They sat there while Rupert practised—till he started shying the assegais, that is—and then they went out and left 'im with Kumbo. Considering that she 'ad only just buried her 'usband, Rupert found her quite skittish enough, and he couldn't 'elp wondering wot she'd be like when she'd got over her grief a bit more.

The manager and George said he 'ad got on wonderfully, and arter talking it over with Mrs. Alfredi they decided to open that evening, and pore Rupert found out that the shop was the theatre, and all the acting he'd got to do was to dance war-dances and sing in Zulu to people wot had paid a penny a 'ead. He was a bit nervous at fust, for fear anybody should find out that 'e wasn't a real Zulu, because the manager said they'd tear 'im to pieces if they did, and eat 'im arterwards, but arter a time 'is nervousness wore off and he jumped about like a monkey.

They gave performances every arf hour from ha'-past six to ten, and Rupert felt ready to drop. His feet was sore with dancing and his throat ached with singing Zulu, but wot upset 'im more than anything was an elderly old party wot would keep jabbing 'im in the ribs with her umbrella to see whether he could laugh.

[Illustration: An elderly old party wot would keep jabbing 'im in the ribs with her umbrella.]

They 'ad supper arter they 'ad closed, and then Mr. Alfredi and 'is wife went off, and Rupert and George made up beds for themselves in the shop, while Kumbo 'ad a little place to herself at the back.

He did better than ever next night, and they all said he was improving fast; and Mr. Alfredi told 'im in a whisper that he thought he was better at it than Kumbo. "Not that I should mind 'er knowing much," he ses, "seeing that she's took such a fancy to you."

"Ah, I was going to speak to you about that," ses Rupert. "Forwardness is no name for it; if she don't keep 'erself to 'erself, I shall chuck the whole thing up."

Page 4

The manager coughed behind his 'and. "And go back to the Army?" he ses. "Well, I should be sorry to lose you, but I won't stand in your way."

Mrs. Alfredi, wot was standing by, stuffed her pocket-'ankercher in 'er mouth, and Rupert began to feel a bit uneasy in his mind.

"If I did," he ses, "you'd get into trouble for 'elping me to desert."

"Desert!" ses Mr. Alfredi. "I don't know anything about your deserting."

"Ho!" ses Rupert. "And wot about my uniform?"

"Uniform?" ses Mr. Alfredi. "Wot uniform? I ain't seen no uniform. Where is it?"

Rupert didn't answer 'im, but arter they 'ad gone 'ome he told George that he 'ad 'ad enough of acting and he should go.

"Where to?" ses George.

"I'll find somewhere," ses Rupert. "I sha'n't starve."

"You might ketch your death o' cold, though," ses George.

Rupert said he didn't mind, and then he shut 'is eyes and pretended to be asleep. His idea was to wait till George was asleep and then pinch 'is clothes; consequently 'is feelings when 'e opened one eye and saw George getting into bed with 'is clothes on won't bear thinking about. He laid awake for hours, and three times that night George, who was a very heavy sleeper, woke up and found Rupert busy tucking him in.

By the end of the week Rupert was getting desperate. He hated being black for one thing, and the more he washed the better color he looked. He didn't mind the black for out o' doors, in case the Army was looking for 'im, but 'aving no clothes he couldn't get out o' doors; and when he said he wouldn't perform unless he got some, Mr. Alfredi dropped 'ints about having 'im took up for a deserter.

"I've 'ad my suspicions of it for some days," he ses, with a wink, "though you did come to me in a nice serge suit and tell me you was an actor. Now, you be a good boy for another week and I'll advance you a couple o' pounds to get some clothes with."

Rupert asked him to let 'im have it then, but 'e wouldn't, and for another week he 'ad to pretend 'e was a Zulu of an evening, and try and persuade Kumbo that he was an English gentleman of a daytime.

He got the money at the end of the week and 'ad to sign a paper to give a month's notice any time he wanted to leave, but he didn't mind that at all, being determined the

fust time he got outside the place to run away and ship as a nigger cook if 'e couldn't get the black off.

He made a list o' things out for George to get for 'im, but there seemed to be such a lot for two pounds that Mr. Alfredi shook his 'ead over it; and arter calling 'imself a soft-'arted fool, and saying he'd finish up in the workhouse, he made it three pounds and told George to look sharp.

"He's a very good marketer," he ses, arter George 'ad gone; "he don't mind wot trouble he takes. He'll very likely haggle for hours to get sixpence knocked off the trousers or twopence off the shirt."

Page 5

It was twelve o'clock in the morning when George went, and at ha'-past four Rupert turned nasty, and said 'e was afraid he was trying to get them for nothing. At five o'clock he said George was a fool, and at ha'-past he said 'e was something I won't repeat.

It was just eleven o'clock, and they 'ad shut up for the night, when the front door opened, and George stood there smiling at 'em and shaking his 'ead.

"Sush a lark," he ses, catching 'old of Mr. Alfredi's arm to steady 'imself. "I gave 'im shlip."

"Wot d'ye mean?" ses the manager, shaking him off. "Gave who the slip? Where's them clothes?"

"Boy's got 'em," ses George, smiling agin and catching hold of Kumbo's arm. "Sush a lark; he's been car-carrying 'em all day—all day. Now I've given 'im the—the shlip, 'stead o'—stead o' giving 'im fourpence. Take care o' the pensh, an' pouns—"

He let go o' Kumbo's arm, turned round twice, and then sat down 'eavy and fell fast asleep. The manager rushed to the door and looked out, but there was no signs of the boy, and he came back shaking his 'ead, and said that George 'ad been drinking agin.

"Well, wot about my clothes?" ses Rupert, hardly able to speak.

"P'r'aps he didn't buy 'em arter all," ses the manager. "Let's try 'is pockets."

He tried fust, and found some strawberries that George 'ad spoilt by sitting on. Then he told Rupert to have a try, and Rupert found some bits of string, a few buttons, two penny stamps, and twopenny ha'penny in coppers.

"Never mind," ses Mr. Alfredi; "I'll go round to the police-station in the morning; p'r'aps the boy 'as taken them there. I'm disapp'inted in George. I shall tell 'im so, too."

He bid Rupert good-night and went off with Mrs. Alfredi; and Rupert, wishful to make the best o' things, decided that he would undress George and go off in 'is clothes. He waited till Kumbo 'ad gone off to bed, and then he started to take George's coat off. He got the two top buttons undone all right, and then George turned over in 'is sleep. It surprised Rupert, but wot surprised 'im more when he rolled George over was to find them two buttons done up agin. Arter it had 'appened three times he see 'ow it was, and he come to the belief that George was no more drunk than wot he was, and that it was all a put-up thing between 'im and Mr. Alfredi.

He went to bed then to think it over, and by the morning he 'ad made up his mind to keep quiet and bide his time, as the saying is. He spoke quite cheerful to Mr. Alfredi,

and pretended to believe 'im when he said that he 'ad been to the police-station about the clothes.

Two days arterwards he thought of something; he remembered me. He 'ad found a dirty old envelope on the floor, and with a bit o' lead pencil he wrote me a letter on the back of one o' the bills, telling me all his troubles, and asking me to bring some clothes and rescue 'im. He stuck on one of the stamps he 'ad found in George's pocket, and opening the door just afore going to bed threw it out on the pavement.

Page 6

The world is full of officious, interfering busy-bodies. I should no more think of posting a letter that didn't belong to me, with an unused stamp on it, than I should think o' flying; but some meddle-some son of a ——a gun posted that letter and I got it.

I was never more surprised in my life. He asked me to be outside the shop next night at ha'-past eleven with any old clothes I could pick up. If I didn't, he said he should 'ang 'imself as the clock struck twelve, and that his ghost would sit on the wharf and keep watch with me every night for the rest o' my life. He said he expected it 'ud have a black face, same as in life.

A wharf is a lonely place of a night; especially our wharf, which is full of dark corners, and, being a silly, good-natured fool, I went. I got a pal off of one of the boats to keep watch for me, and, arter getting some old rags off of another sailorman as owed me arf a dollar, I 'ad a drink and started off for the Mile End Road.

I found the place easy enough. The door was just on the jar, and as I tapped on it with my finger-nails a wild-looking black man, arf naked, opened it and said "H'sh!" and pulled me inside. There was a bit o' candle on the floor, shaded by a box, and a man fast asleep and snoring up in one corner. Rupert dressed like lightning, and he 'ad just put on 'is cap when the door at the back opened and a 'orrid fat black woman came out and began to chatter.

Rupert told her to hush, and she 'ushed, and then he waved 'is hand to 'er to say "good-bye," and afore you could say Jack Robinson she 'ad grabbed up a bit o' dirty blanket, a bundle of assegaïs, and a spear, and come out arter us.

"Back!" ses Rupert in a whisper, pointing.

[Illustration: "Back!" ses Rupert in a whisper, pointing.]

Kumbo shook her 'ead, and then he took hold of 'er and tried to shove 'er back, but she wouldn't go. I lent him a 'and, but all wimmen are the same, black or white, and afore I knew where I was she 'ad clawed my cap off and scratched me all down one side of the face.

"Walk fast," ses Rupert.

I started to run, but it was all no good; Kumbo kept up with us easy, and she was so pleased at being out in the open air that she began to dance and play about like a kitten. Instead o' minding their own business people turned and follered us, and quite a crowd collected.

"We shall 'ave the police in a minute," ses Rupert. "Come in 'ere— quick."



He pointed to a pub up a side street, and went in with Kumbo holding on to his arm. The barman was for sending us out at fust, but such a crowd follered us in that he altered 'is mind. I ordered three pints, and, while I was 'anding Rupert his, Kumbo finished 'ers and began on mine. I tried to explain, but she held on to it like grim death, and in the confusion Rupert slipped out.

He 'adn't been gone five seconds afore she missed 'im, and I never see anybody so upset in all my life. She spilt the beer all down the place where 'er bodice ought to ha' been, and then she dropped the pot and went arter 'im like a hare. I follered in a different way, and when I got round the corner I found she 'ad caught 'im and was holding 'im by the arm.

Page 7

O' course, the crowd was round us agin, and to get rid of 'em I did a thing I'd seldom done afore—I called a cab, and we all bundled in and drove off to the wharf, with the spear sticking out o' the window, and most of the assegais sticking into me.

"This is getting serious," ses Rupert.

"Yes," I ses; "and wot 'ave I done to be dragged into it? You must ha' been paying 'er some attention to make 'er carry on like this."

I thought Rupert would ha' bust, and the things he said to the man wot was spending money like water to rescue 'im was disgraceful.

We got to the wharf at last, and I was glad to see that my pal 'ad got tired of night-watching and 'ad gone off, leaving the gate open. Kumbo went in 'anging on to Rupert's arm, and I follered with the spear, which I 'ad held in my 'and while I paid the cabman.

They went into the office, and Rupert and me talked it over while Kumbo kept patting 'is cheek. He was afraid that the manager would track 'im to the wharf, and I was afraid that the guv'nor would find out that I 'ad been neglecting my dooty, for the fust time in my life.

We talked all night pretty near, and then, at ha'-past five, arf an hour afore the 'ands came on, I made up my mind to fetch a cab and drive 'em to my 'ouse. I wanted Rupert to go somewhere else, but 'e said he 'ad got nowhere else to go, and it was the only thing to get 'em off the wharf. I opened the gates at ten minutes to six, and just as the fust man come on and walked down the wharf we slipped in and drove away.

We was all tired and yawning. There's something about the motion of a cab or an omnibus that always makes me feel sleepy, and arter a time I closed my eyes and went off sound. I remember I was dreaming that I 'ad found a bag o' money, when the cab pulled up with a jerk in front of my 'ouse and woke me up. Opposite me sat Kumbo fast asleep, and Rupert 'ad disappeared!

I was dazed for a moment, and afore I could do anything Kumbo woke up and missed Rupert. Wot made matters worse than anything was that my missis was kneeling down in the passage doing 'er door-step, and 'er face, as I got down out o' that cab with Kumbo 'anging on to my arm was something too awful for words. It seemed to rise up slow-like from near the door-step, and to go on rising till I thought it 'ud never stop. And every inch it rose it got worse and worse to look at.

[Illustration: She stood blocking up the doorway with her 'ands on her 'ips.]

She stood blocking up the doorway with her 'ands on her 'ips, while I explained, with Kumbo still 'anging on my arm and a crowd collecting behind, and the more I explained, the more I could see she didn't believe a word of it.

She never 'as believed it. I sent for Mr. Alfredi to come and take Kumbo away, and when I spoke to 'im about Rupert he said I was dreaming, and asked me whether I wasn't ashamed o' myself for carrying off a pore black gal wot 'ad got no father or mother to look arter her. He said that afore my missis, and my character 'as been under a cloud ever since, waiting for Rupert to turn up and clear it away.