

Self-Help eBook

Self-Help by W. W. Jacobs

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SELF-HELP

The night-watchman sat brooding darkly over life and its troubles. A shooting corn on the little toe of his left foot, and a touch of liver, due, he was convinced, to the unlawful cellar work of the landlord of the Queen's Head, had induced in him a vein of profound depression. A discarded boot stood by his side, and his gray-stockinged foot protruded over the edge of the jetty until a passing waterman gave it a playful rap with his oar. A subsequent inquiry as to the price of pigs' trotters fell on ears rendered deaf by suffering.

"I might 'ave expected it," said the watchman, at last. "I done that man—if you can call him a man—a kindness once, and this is my reward for it. Do a man a kindness, and years arterwards 'e comes along and hits you over your tenderest corn with a oar."

[Illustration: "'E comes along and hits you over your tenderest corn with a oar.'"]

He took up his boot, and, inserting his foot with loving care, stooped down and fastened the laces.

Do a man a kindness, he continued, assuming a safer posture, and 'e tries to borrow money off of you; do a woman a kindness and she thinks you want tr marry 'er; do an animal a kindness and it tries to bite you—same as a horse bit a sailorman I knew once, when 'e sat on its head to 'elp it get up. He sat too far for'ard, pore chap.

Kindness never gets any thanks. I remember a man whose pal broke 'is leg while they was working together unloading a barge; and he went off to break the news to 'is pal's wife. A kind-'earted man 'e was as ever you see, and, knowing 'ow she would take on when she 'eard the news, he told her fust of all that 'er husband was killed. She took on like a mad thing, and at last, when she couldn't do anything more and 'ad quieted down a bit, he told 'er that it was on'y a case of a broken leg, thinking that 'er joy would be so great that she wouldn't think anything of that. He 'ad to tell her three times afore she understood 'im, and then, instead of being thankful to 'im for 'is thoughtfulness, she chased him 'arf over Wapping with a chopper, screaming with temper.

I remember Ginger Dick and Peter Russet trying to do old Sam Small a kindness one time when they was 'aving a rest ashore arter a v'y'ge. They 'ad took a room together as usual, and for the fust two or three days they was like brothers. That couldn't last, o' course, and Sam was so annoyed one evening at Ginger's suspiciousness by biting a 'arf-dollar Sam owed 'im and finding it was a bad 'un, that 'e went off to spend the evening all alone by himself.

He felt a bit dull at fust, but arter he had 'ad two or three 'arf-pints 'e began to take a brighter view of things. He found a very nice, cosey little public-'ouse he hadn't been in before, and, arter getting two and threepence and a pint for the 'arf-dollar with Ginger's

tooth-marks on, he began to think that the world wasn't 'arf as bad a place as people tried to make out.



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There was on'y one other man in the little bar Sam was in—a tall, dark chap, with black side-whiskers and spectacles, wot kept peeping round the partition and looking very 'ard at everybody that came in.

"I'm just keeping my eye on 'em, cap'n," he ses to Sam, in a low voice.

"Ho!" ses Sam.

"They don't know me in this disguise," ses the dark man, "but I see as 'ow you spotted me at once. Anybody 'ud have a 'ard time of it to deceive you; and then they wouldn't gain nothing by it."

"Nobody ever 'as yet," ses Sam, smiling at 'im.

"And nobody ever will," ses the dark man, shaking his 'cad; "if they was all as fly as you, I might as well put the shutters up. How did you twig I was a detective officer, cap'n?"

Sam, wot was taking a drink, got some beer up 'is nose with surprise.

"That's my secret," he ses, arter the tec 'ad patted 'im on the back and brought 'im round.

"You're a marvel, that's wot you are," ses the tec, shaking his 'ead. "Have one with me."

Sam said he didn't mind if 'e did, and arter drinking each other's healths very perlite 'e ordered a couple o' twopenny smokes, and by way of showing off paid for 'em with 'arf a quid.

"That's right, ain't it?" ses the barmaid, as he stood staring very 'ard at the change. "I ain't sure about that 'arf-crown, now I come to look at it; but it's the one you gave me."

Pore Sam, with a tec standing alongside of 'im, said it was quite right, and put it into 'is pocket in a hurry and began to talk to the tec as fast as he could about a murder he 'ad been reading about in the paper that morning. They went and sat down by a comfortable little fire that was burning in the bar, and the tec told 'im about a lot o' murder cases he 'ad been on himself.

"I'm down 'ere now on special work," he ses, "looking arter sailormen."

"Wot ha' they been doing?" ses Sam.

"When I say looking arter, I mean protecting 'em," ses the tec. "Over and over agin some pore feller, arter working 'ard for months at sea, comes 'ome with a few pounds in 'is pocket and gets robbed of the lot. There's a couple o' chaps down 'ere I'm told off to look arter special, but it's no good unless I can catch 'em red-'anded."



“Red-’anded?” ses Sam.

“With their hands in the chap’s pockets, I mean,” ses the tec.

Sam gave a shiver. “Somebody had their ’ands in my pockets once,” he ses. “Four pun ten and some coppers they got.”

“Wot was they like?” ses the tee, starting.

Sam shook his ’ead. “They seemed to me to be all hands, that’s all I know about ’em,” he ses. “Arter they ’ad finished they leaned me up agin the dock wall an’ went off.”

“It sounds like ’em,” ses the tec, thoughtfully. “It was Long Pete and Fair Alf, for a quid; that’s the two I’m arter.”

He put his finger in ’is weskit-pocket. “That’s who I am,” he ses, ’anding Sam a card; “Detective-Sergeant Cubbins. If you ever get into any trouble at any time, you come to me.”



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Sam said 'e would, and arter they had 'ad another drink together the tec shifted 'is seat alongside of 'im and talked in his ear.

"If I can nab them two chaps I shall get promotion," he ses; "and it's a fi'-pun note to anybody that helps me. I wish I could persuade you to."

"Ow's it to be done?" ses Sam, looking at 'im.

"I want a respectable-looking seafaring man," ses the tec, speaking very slow; "that's you. He goes up Tower Hill to-morrow night at nine o'clock, walking very slow and very unsteady on 'is pins, and giving my two beauties the idea that 'e is three sheets in the wind. They come up and rob 'im, and I catch them red-'anded. I get promotion, and you get a fiver."

"But 'ow do you know they'll be there?" ses Sam, staring at 'im.

Mr. Cubbins winked at 'im and tapped 'is nose.

[Illustration: "Mr. Cubbins winked at 'im and tapped 'is nose."]

"We 'ave to know a good deal in our line o' business," he ses.

"Still," ses Sam, "I don't see——"

"Narks," says the tec; "coppers' narks. You've 'eard of them, cap'n? Now, look 'ere. Have you got any money?"

"I got a matter o' twelve quid or so," ses Sam, in a of hand way.

"The very thing," says the tec. "Well, to-morrow night you put that in your pocket, and be walking up Tower Hill just as the clock strikes nine. I promise you you'll be robbed afore two minutes past, and by two and a 'arf past I shall 'ave my hands on both of 'em. Have all the money in one pocket, so as they can get it neat and quick, in case they get interrupted. Better still, 'ave it in a purse; that makes it easier to bring it 'ome to 'em."

"Wouldn't it be enough if they stole the purse?" ses Sam. "I should feel safer that way, too."

Mr. Cubbins shook his 'ead, very slow and solemn. "That wouldn't do at all," he ses. "The more money they steal, the longer they'll get; you know that, cap'n, without me telling you. If you could put fifty quid in it would be so much the better. And, what-ever you do, don't make a noise. I don't want a lot o' clumsy policemen interfering in my business."

"Still, s'pose you didn't catch 'em," ses Sam, "where should I be?"



“You needn’t be afraid o’ that,” ses the tec, with a laugh. “Here, I’ll tell you wot I’ll do, and that’ll show you the trust I put in you.”

He drew a big di’mond ring off of ’is finger and handed it to Sam.

“Put that on your finger,” he ses, “and keep it there till I give you your money back and the fi’-pun note reward. It’s worth seventy quid if it’s worth a farthing, and was given to me by a lady of title for getting back ’er jewellery for ’er. Put it on, and wotever you do, don’t lose it”

He sat and watched while Sam forced it on is finger.

“You don’t need to flash it about too much,” he ses, looking at ’im rather anxious. “There’s men I know as ’ud cut your finger off to get that.”

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Sam shoved his 'and in his pocket, but he kept taking it out every now and then and 'olding his finger up to the light to look at the di'mond. Mr. Cubbins got up to go at last, saying that he 'ad got a call to make at the police-station, and they went out together.

"Nine o'clock sharp," he ses, as they shook hands, "on Tower Hill."

"I'll be there," ses Sam.

"And, wotever you do, no noise, no calling out," ses the tec, "and don't mention a word of this to a living soul."

Sam shook 'ands with 'im agin, and then, hiding his 'and in his pocket, went off 'ome, and, finding Ginger and Peter Russet wasn't back, went off to bed.

He 'eard 'em coming upstairs in the dark in about an hour's time, and, putting the 'and with the ring on it on the counterpane, shut 'is eyes and pretended to be fast asleep. Ginger lit the candle, and they was both beginning to undress when Peter made a noise and pointed to Sam's 'and.

"Wot's up?" ses Ginger, taking the candle and going over to Sam's bed. "Who've you been robbing, you fat pirate?"

Sam kept 'is eyes shut and 'eard 'em whispering; then he felt 'em take 'is hand up and look at it. "Where did you get it, Sam?" ses Peter.

"He's asleep," ses Ginger, "sound asleep. I b'lieve if I was to put 'is finger in the candle he wouldn't wake up."

"You try it," ses Sam, sitting up in bed very sharp and snatching his 'and away. "Wot d'ye mean coming 'ome at all hours and waking me up?" "Where did you get that ring?" ses Ginger. "Friend o' mine," ses Sam, very short.

"Who was it?" ses Peter.

"It's a secret," ses Sam.

"You wouldn't 'ave a secret from your old pal Ginger, Sam, would you?" ses Ginger.

"Old wot?" ses Sam. "Wot did you call me this arternoon?"

"I called you a lot o' things I'm sorry for," ses Ginger, who was bursting with curiosity, "and I beg your pardin, Sam."

"Shake 'ands on it," ses Peter, who was nearly as curious as Ginger.



They shook hands, but Sam said he couldn't tell 'em about the ring; and several times Ginger was on the point of calling 'im the names he 'ad called 'im in the arternoon, on'y Peter trod on 'is foot and stopped him. They wouldn't let 'im go to sleep for talking, and at last, when 'e was pretty near tired out, he told 'em all about it.

"Going—to 'ave your—pocket picked?" ses Ginger, staring at 'im, when 'e had finished.

"I shall be watched over," ses Sam.

"He's gorn stark, staring mad," ses Ginger. "Wot a good job it is he's got me and you to look arter 'im, Peter."

"Wot d'ye mean?" ses Sam.

"*Mean?*" ses Ginger. "Why, it's a put-up job to rob you, o' course. I should ha' thought even your fat 'ead could ha' seen that'."

"When I want your advice I'll ask you for it," ses Sam, losing 'is temper. "Wot about the di'mond ring—eh?"



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“You stick to it,” ses Ginger, “and keep out o’ Mr. Cubbins’s way. That’s my advice to you. ’Sides, p’r’aps it ain’t a real one.”

Sam told ’im agin he didn’t want none of ’is advice, and, as Ginger wouldn’t leave off talking, he pretended to go to sleep. Ginger woke ’im up three times to tell ’im wot a fool ’e was, but ’e got so fierce that he gave it up at last and told ’im to go ’is own way.

Sam wouldn’t speak to either of ’em next morning, and arter breakfast he went off on ’is own. He came back while Peter and Ginger was out, and they wasted best part o’ the day trying to find ’im.

“We’ll be on Tower Hill just afore nine and keep ’im out o’ mischief, any way,” ses Peter.

Ginger nodded. “And be called names for our pains,” he ses. “I’ve a good mind to let ’im be robbed.”

“It ’ud serve ’im right,” ses Peter, “on’y then he’d want to borry off of us. Look here! Why not—why not rob ’im ourselves?”

“Wot?” ses Ginger, starting.

“Walk up behind ’im and rob ’im,” ses Peter. “He’ll think it’s them two chaps he spoke about, and when ’e comes ’ome complaining to us we’ll tell ’im it serves ’im right. Arter we’ve ’ad a game with ’im for a day or two we’ll give ’im ’is money back.”

“But he’d reckernize us,” ses Ginger.

“We must disguise ourselves,” ses Peter, in a whisper. “There’s a barber’s shop in Cable Street, where I’ve seen beards in the winder. You hook ’em on over your ears. Get one o’ them each, pull our caps over our eyes and turn our collars up, and there you are.”

Ginger made a lot of objections, not because he didn’t think it was a good idea, but because he didn’t like Peter thinking of it instead of ’im; but he gave way at last, and, arter he ’ad got the beard, he stood for a long time in front o’ the glass thinking wot a difference it would ha’ made to his looks if he had ’ad black ’air instead o’ red.

Waiting for the evening made the day seem very long to ’em; but it came at last, and, with the beards in their pockets, they slipped out and went for a walk round. They ’ad ’arf a pint each at a public-’ouse at the top of the Minories, just to steady themselves, and then they came out and hooked on their beards; and wot with them, and pulling their caps down and turning their coat-collars up, there wasn’t much of their faces to be seen by anybody.



It was just five minutes to nine when they got to Tower Hill, and they walked down the middle of the road, keeping a bright lookout for old Sam. A little way down they saw a couple o' chaps leaning up agin a closed gate in the dock wall lighting their pipes, and Peter and Ginger both nudged each other with their elbows at the same time. They 'ad just got to the bottom of the Hill when Sam turned the corner.

Peter wouldn't believe at fust that the old man wasn't really the worse for liquor, 'e was so lifelike. Many a drunken man would ha' been proud to ha' done it 'arf so well, and it made 'im pleased to think that Sam was a pal of 'is. Him and Ginger turned and crept up behind the old man on tiptoe, and then all of a sudden he tilted Sam's cap over 'is eyes and flung his arms round 'im, while Ginger felt in 'is coat-pockets and took out a leather purse chock full o' money.

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It was all done and over in a moment, and then, to Ginger's great surprise, Sam suddenly lifted 'is foot and gave 'im a fearful kick on the shin of 'is leg, and at the same time let drive with all his might in 'is face. Ginger went down as if he 'ad been shot, and as Peter went to 'elp him up he got a bang over the 'cad that put 'im alongside o' Ginger, arter which Sam turned and trotted off down the Hill like a dancing-bear.

[Illustration: "Let drive with all his might in 'is face. "]

For 'arf a minute Ginger didn't know where 'e was, and afore he found out the two men they'd seen in the gateway came up, and one of 'em put his knee in Ginger's back and 'eld him, while the other caught hold of his 'and and dragged the purse out of it. Arter which they both made off up the Hill as 'ard as they could go, while Peter Russet in a faint voice called "Police!" arter them.

He got up presently and helped Ginger up, and they both stood there pitying themselves, and 'elping each other to think of names to call Sam.

"Well, the money's gorn, and it's 'is own silly fault," ses Ginger. "But wotever 'appens, he mustn't know that we had a 'and in it, mind that."

"He can starve for all I care," ses Peter, feeling his 'ead. "I won't lend 'im a ha'penny—not a single, blessed ha'penny."

"Who'd ha' thought 'e could ha' hit like that?" says Ginger. "That's wot gets over me. I never 'ad such a bang in my life—never. I'm going to 'ave a little drop o' brandy—my 'ead is fair swimming."

Peter 'ad one, too; but though they went into the private bar, it wasn't private enough for them; and when the landlady asked Ginger who'd been kissing 'im, he put 'is glass down with a bang and walked straight off 'ome.

Sam 'adn't turned up by the time they got there, and pore Ginger took advantage of it to put a little warm candle-grease on 'is bad leg. Then he bathed 'is face very careful and 'elped Peter bathe his 'ead. They 'ad just finished when they heard Sam coming upstairs, and Ginger sat down on 'is bed and began to whistle, while Peter took up a bit o' newspaper and stood by the candle reading it.

"Lor' lumme, Ginger!" ses Sam, staring at 'im. "What ha' you been a-doing to your face?"

"Me?" ses Ginger, careless-like. "Oh, we 'ad a bit of a scrap down Limehouse way with some Scotchies. Peter got a crack over the 'ead at the same time."

"Ah, I've 'ad a bit of a scrap, too," ses Sam, smiling all over, "but I didn't get marked."



“Oh!” ses Peter, without looking up from ’is paper. “Was it a little boy, then?” ses Ginger.

“No, it wasn’t a little boy neither, Ginger,” ses Sam; “it was a couple o’ men twice the size of you and Peter here, and I licked ’em both. It was the two men I spoke to you about last night.”

“Oh!” ses Peter agin, yawning.

“I did a bit o’ thinking this morning,” ses Sam, noddin’ at ’em, “and I don’t mind ownin’ up that it was owing to wot you said. You was right, Ginger, arter all.”



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“Fust thing I did arter breakfast,” ses Sam, “I took that di’mond ring to a pawnshop and found out it wasn’t a di’mond ring. Then I did a bit more thinking, and I went round to a shop I know and bought a couple o’ knuckle-dusters.”

“Couple o’ wot?” ses Ginger, in a choking voice.

“Knuckle-dusters,” ses Sam, “and I turned up to-night at Tower Hill with one on each ’and just as the clock was striking nine. I see ’em the moment I turned the corner—two enormous big chaps, a yard acrost the shoulders, coming down the middle of the road—You’ve got a cold, Ginger!”

“No, I ain’t,” ses Ginger.

“I pretended to be drunk, same as the tec told me,” ses Sam, “and then I felt ’em turn round and creep up behind me. One of ’em come up behind and put ’is knee in my back and caught me by the throat, and the other gave me a punch in the chest, and while I was gasping for breath took my purse away. Then I started on ’em.”

“Lor’!” ses Ginger, very nasty.

“I fought like a lion,” ses Sam. “Twice they ’ad me down, and twice I got up agin and hammered ’em. They both of ’em ’ad knives, but my blood was up, and I didn’t take no more notice of ’em than if they was made of paper. I knocked ’em both out o’ their hands, and if I hit ’em in the face once I did a dozen times. I surprised myself.”

“You surprise me,” ses Ginger.

“All of a sudden,” ses Sam, “they see they ’ad got to do with a man wot didn’t know wot fear was, and they turned round and ran off as hard as they could run. You ought to ha’ been there, Ginger. You’d ’ave enjoyed it.”

Ginger Dick didn’t answer ’im. Having to sit still and listen to all them lies without being able to say anything nearly choked ’im. He sat there gasping for breath.

“O’ course, you got your purse back in the fight, Sam?” ses Peter.

“No, mate,” ses Sam. “I ain’t going to tell you no lies—I did not.”

“And ’ow are you going to live, then, till you get a ship, Sam?” ses Ginger, in a nasty voice. “You won’t get nothing out o’ me, so you needn’t think it.”

“Wot on earth’s the matter, Ginger?”

“Nor me,” ses Peter. “Not a brass farthing.”



“There’s no call to be nasty about it, mates,” ses Sam. “I ’ad the best fight I ever ’ad in my life, and I must put up with the loss. A man can’t ’ave it all his own way.”

“Ow much was it?” ses Peter.

“Ten brace-buttons, three French ha’pennies, and a bit o’ tin,” ses Sam. “Wot on earth’s the matter, Ginger?”

[Illustration: “Wot on earth’s the matter, Ginger?”]

Ginger didn’t answer him.