

The Head of the Family eBook

The Head of the Family by W. W. Jacobs

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THE HEAD OF THE FAMILY

Mr. Letts had left his ship by mutual arrangement, and the whole of the crew had mustered to see him off and to express their sense of relief at his departure. After some years spent in long voyages, he had fancied a trip on a coaster as a change, and, the schooner Curlew having no use for a ship's carpenter, had shipped as cook. He had done his best, and the unpleasant epithets that followed him along the quay at Dunchurch as he followed in the wake of his sea-chest were the result. Master and mate nodded in grim appreciation of the crew's efforts.

[Illustration: "After some years spent in long voyages"]

He put his chest up at a seamen's lodging-house, and, by no means perturbed at this sudden change in his fortunes, sat on a seat overlooking the sea, with a cigarette between his lips, forming plans for his future. His eyes closed, and he opened them with a start to find that a middle-aged woman of pleasant but careworn appearance had taken the other end of the bench.

"Fine day," said Mr. Letts, lighting another cigarette.

The woman assented and sat looking over the sea.

"Ever done any cooking?" asked Mr. Letts, presently.

"Plenty," was the surprised reply. "Why?"

"I just wanted to ask you how long you would boil a bit o' beef," said Mr. Letts. "Only from curiosity; I should never ship as cook again."

He narrated his experience of the last few days, and, finding the listener sympathetic, talked at some length about himself and his voyages; also of his plans for the future.

"I lost my son at sea," said the woman, with a sigh. "You favor him rather."

Mr. Letts's face softened. "Sorry," he said. "Sorry you lost him, I mean."

"At least, I suppose he would have been like you," said the other; "but it's nine years ago now. He was just sixteen."

Mr. Letts—after a calculation—nodded. "Just my age," he said. "I was twenty-five last March."

"Sailed for Melbourne," said the woman. "My only boy."

Mr. Letts cleared his throat, sympathetically.

“His father died a week after he sailed,” continued the other, “and three months afterwards my boy’s ship went down. Two years ago, like a fool, I married again. I don’t know why I’m talking to you like this. I suppose it is because you remind me of him.”

“You talk away as much as you like,” said Mr. Letts, kindly. “I’ve got nothing to do.”

He lit another cigarette, and, sitting in an attitude of attention, listened to a recital of domestic trouble that made him congratulate himself upon remaining single.

“Since I married Mr. Green I can’t call my soul my own,” said the victim of matrimony as she rose to depart. “If my poor boy had lived things would have been different. His father left the house and furniture to him, and that’s all my second married me for, I’m sure. That and the bit o’ money that was left to me. He’s selling some of my boy’s furniture at this very moment. That’s why I came out; I couldn’t bear it.”

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"P'r'aps he'll turn up after all," said Mr. Letts. "Never say die."

Mrs. Green shook her head.

"I s'pose," said Mr. Letts, regarding her—"I s'pose you don't let lodgings for a night or two?" Mrs. Green shook her head again.

"It don't matter," said the young man. "Only I would sooner stay with you than at a lodging-house. I've taken a fancy to you. I say, it would be a lark if you did, and I went there and your husband thought I was your son, wouldn't it?"

Mrs. Green caught her breath, and sitting down again took his arm in her trembling fingers.

"Suppose," she said, unsteadily—"suppose you came round and pretended to be my son—pretended to be my son, and stood up for me?"

Mr. Letts stared at her in amazement, and then began to laugh.

"Nobody would know," continued the other, quickly. "We only came to this place just before he sailed, and his sister was only ten at the time. She wouldn't remember."

Mr. Letts said he couldn't think of it, and sat staring, with an air of great determination, at the sea. Arguments and entreaties left him unmoved, and he was just about to express his sorrow for her troubles and leave, when she gave a sudden start and put her arm through his.

"Here comes your sister!" she exclaimed.

Mr. Letts started in his turn.

"She has seen me holding your arm," continued Mrs. Green, in a tense whisper. "It's the only way I can explain it. Mind, your name is Jack Foster and hers is Betty."

Mr. Letts gazed at her in consternation, and then, raising his eyes, regarded with much approval the girl who was approaching. It seemed impossible that she could be Mrs. Green's daughter, and in the excitement of the moment he nearly said so.

"Betty," said Mrs. Green, in a voice to which nervousness had imparted almost the correct note—"Betty, this is your brother Jack!"

Mr. Letts rose sheepishly, and then to his great amazement a pair of strong young arms were flung round his neck, and a pair of warm lips—after but slight trouble—found his. Then and there Mr. Letts's mind was made up.

[Illustration: "Then and there Mr. Letts's mind was made up.]

"Oh, Jack!" said Miss Foster, and began to cry softly.

"Oh, Jack!" said Mrs. Green, and, moved by thoughts, perhaps, of what might have been, began to cry too.

"There, there!" said Mr. Letts.

He drew Miss Foster to the seat, and, sitting between them, sat with an arm round each. There was nothing in sight but a sail or two in the far distance, and he allowed Miss Foster's head to lie upon his shoulder undisturbed. An only child, and an orphan, he felt for the first time the blessing of a sister's love.

"Why didn't you come home before?" murmured the girl.

Mr. Letts started and squinted reproachfully at the top of her hat. Then he turned and looked at Mrs. Green in search of the required information. "He was shipwrecked," said Mrs. Green.

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"I was shipwrecked," repeated Mr. Letts, nodding.

"And had brain-fever after it through being in the water so long, and lost his memory," continued Mrs. Green.

"It's wonderful what water will do—salt water," said Mr. Letts, in confirmation.

Miss Foster sighed, and, raising the hand which was round her waist, bent her head and kissed it. Mr. Letts colored, and squeezed her convulsively.

Assisted by Mrs. Green he became reminiscent, and, in a low voice, narrated such incidents of his career as had escaped the assaults of the brain-fever. That his head was not permanently injured was proved by the perfect manner in which he remembered incidents of his childhood narrated by his newly found mother and sister. He even volunteered one or two himself which had happened when the latter was a year or two old.

"And now," said Mrs. Green, in a somewhat trembling voice, "we must go and tell your step-father."

Mr. Letts responded, but without briskness, and, with such moral support as an arm of each could afford, walked slowly back. Arrived at a road of substantial cottages at the back of the town, Mrs. Green gasped, and, coming to a standstill, nodded at a van that stood half-way up the road.

"There it is," she exclaimed.

"What?" demanded Mr. Letts.

"The furniture I told you about," said Mrs. Green. "The furniture that your poor father thought such a lot of, because it used to belong to his grandfather. He's selling it to Simpson, though I begged and prayed him not to."

Mr. Letts encouraged himself with a deep cough. "My furniture?" he demanded.

Mrs. Green took courage. "Yes," she said, hope-fully; "your father left it to you."

Mr. Letts, carrying his head very erect, took a firmer grip of their arms and gazed steadily at a disagreeable-looking man who was eying them in some astonishment from the doorway. With arms still linked they found the narrow gateway somewhat difficult, but they negotiated it by a turning movement, and, standing in the front garden, waited while Mrs. Green tried to find her voice.

[Illustration: "A disagreeable-looking man was eying them in some astonishment from the doorway."]



“Jack,” she said at last, “this is your stepfather.”

Mr. Letts, in some difficulty as to the etiquette on such occasions, released his right arm and extended his hand.

“Good-evening, stepfather,” he said, cheerfully.

Mr. Green drew back a little and regarded him unfavorably.

“We—we thought you was drowned,” he said at last.

“I was nearly,” said Mr. Letts.

“We all thought so,” pursued Mr. Green, grudgingly. “Everybody thought so.”

He stood aside, as a short, hot-faced man, with a small bureau clasped in his arms and supported on his knees, emerged from the house and staggered towards the gate. Mr. Letts reflected.

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"Halloa!" he said, suddenly. "Why, are you moving, mother?"

Mrs. Green sniffed sadly and shook her head. "Well," said Mr. Letts, with an admirable stare, "what's that chap doing with my furniture?"

"Eh?" spluttered Mr. Green. "What?"

"I say, what's he doing with my furniture?" repeated Mr. Letts, sternly.

Mr. Green waved his arm. "That's all right," he said, conclusively; "he's bought it. Your mother knows."

"But it ain't all right," said Mr. Letts. "Here! bring that back, and those chairs too."

The dealer, who had just placed the bureau on the tail-board of the van, came back wiping his brow with his sleeve.

"Wots the little game?" he demanded.

Mr. Letts left the answer to Mr. Green, and going to the van took up the bureau and walked back to the house with it. Mr. Green and the dealer parted a little at his approach, and after widening the parting with the bureau he placed it in the front room while he went back for the chairs. He came back with three of them, and was, not without reason, called a porcupine by the indignant dealer.

He was relieved to find, after Mr. Simpson had taken his departure, that Mr. Green was in no mood for catechising him, and had evidently accepted the story of his escape and return as a particularly disagreeable fact. So disagreeable that the less he heard of it the better.

"I hope you've not come home after all these years to make things unpleasant?" he remarked presently, as they sat at tea.

"I couldn't be unpleasant if I tried," said Mr. Letts.

"We've been very happy and comfortable here—me and your mother and sister," continued Mr. Green. "Haven't we, Emily?"

"Yes," said his wife, with nervous quickness.

"And I hope you'll be the same," said Mr. Green. "It's my wish that you should make yourself quite comfortable here—till you go to sea again."

“Thankee,” said Mr. Letts; “but I don’t think I shall go to sea any more. Ship’s carpenter is my trade, and I’ve been told more than once that I should do better ashore. Besides, I don’t want to lose mother and Betty again.”

He placed his arm round the girl’s waist, and, drawing her head on to his shoulder, met with a blank stare the troubled gaze of Mrs. Green.

“I’m told there’s wonderful openings for carpenters in Australia,” said Mr. Green, trying to speak in level tones. “Wonderful! A good carpenter can make a fortune there in ten years, so I’m told.”

Mr. Letts, with a slight wink at Mrs. Green and a reassuring squeeze with his left arm, turned an attentive ear.

“O’ course, there’s a difficulty,” he said, slowly, as Mr. Green finished a vivid picture of the joys of carpentering in Australia.

“Difficulty?” said the other.

“Money to start with,” explained Mr. Letts. “It’s no good starting without money. I wonder how much this house and furniture would fetch? Is it all mine, mother?”

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"M-m-most of it," stammered Mrs. Green, gazing in a fascinated fashion at the contorted visage of her husband.

"All except a chair in the kitchen and three stair-rods," said Betty.

"Speak when you're spoke to, miss!" snarled her stepfather. "When we married we mixed our furniture up together—mixed it up so that it would be impossible to tell which is which. Nobody could."

"For the matter o' that, you could have all the kitchen chairs and all the stair-rods," said Mr. Letts, generously. "However, I don't want to do anything in a hurry, and I shouldn't dream of going to Australia without Betty. It rests with her."

"She's going to be married," said Mr. Green, hastily; "and if she wasn't she wouldn't turn her poor, ailing mother out of house and home, that I'm certain of. She's not that sort. We've had a word or two at times—me and her—but I know a good daughter when I see one."

"Married?" echoed Mr. Letts, as his left arm relaxed its pressure. "Who to?"

"Young fellow o' the name of Henry Widden," replied Mr. Green, "a very steady young fellow; a great friend of mine."

"Oh!" said Mr. Letts, blankly.

"I'd got an idea, which I've been keeping as a little surprise," continued Mr. Green, speaking very rapidly, "of them living here with us, and saving house-rent and furniture."

Mr. Letts surveyed him with a dejected eye.

"It would be a fine start for them," continued the benevolent Mr. Green.

Mr. Letts, by a strong effort, regained his composure.

"I must have a look at him first," he said, briskly. "He mightn't meet with my approval."

"Eh?" said Mr. Green, starting. "Why, if Betty——"

"I must think it over," interrupted Mr. Letts, with a wave of his hand. "Betty is only nineteen, and, as head of the family, I don't think she can marry without my consent. I'm not sure, but I don't think so. Anyway, if she does, I won't have her husband here sitting in my chairs, eating off my tables, sleeping in my beds, wearing out my stair-rods, helping himself——"

"Stow it," said Miss Foster, calmly.

Mr. Letts started, and lost the thread of his discourse. "I must have a look at him," he concluded, lamely; "he may be all right, but then, again, he mightn't."

He finished his tea almost in silence, and, the meal over, emphasized his position as head of the family by taking the easy-chair, a piece of furniture sacred to Mr. Green, and subjecting that injured man to a catechism which strained his powers of endurance almost to breaking-point.

"Well, I sha'n't make any change at present," said Mr. Letts, when the task was finished. "There's plenty of room here for us all, and, so long as you and me agree, things can go on as they are. To-morrow morning I shall go out and look for a job."

He found a temporary one almost at once, and, determined to make a favorable impression, worked hard all day. He came home tired and dirty, and was about to go straight to the wash-house to make his toilet when Mr. Green called him in.

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"My friend, Mr. Widden," he said, with a satisfied air, as he pointed to a slight, fair young man with a well-trimmed moustache.

Mr. Letts shook hands.

"Fine day," said Mr. Widden.

"Beautiful," said the other. "I'll come in and have a talk about it when I've had a wash."

"Me and Miss Foster are going out for a bit of a stroll," said Mr. Widden.

"Quite right," agreed Mr. Letts. "Much more healthy than staying indoors all the evening. If you just wait while I have a wash and a bit o' something to eat I'll come with you."

"Co-come with us!" said Mr. Widden, after an astonished pause.

Mr. Letts nodded. "You see, I don't know you yet," he explained, "and as head of the family I want to see how you behave yourself. Properly speaking, my consent ought to have been asked before you walked out with her; still, as everybody thought I was drowned, I'll say no more about it."

"Mr. Green knows all about me," said Mr. Widden, rebelliously.

"It's nothing to do with him," declared Mr. Letts. "And, besides, he's not what I should call a judge of character. I dare say you are all right, but I'm going to see for myself. You go on in the ordinary way with your love-making, without taking any notice of me. Try and forget I'm watching you. Be as natural as you can be, and if you do anything I don't like I'll soon tell you of it."

The bewildered Mr. Widden turned, but, reading no hope of assistance in the infuriated eyes of Mr. Green, appealed in despair to Betty.

"I don't mind," she said. "Why should I?"

Mr. Widden could have supplied her with many reasons, but he refrained, and sat in sulky silence while Mr. Letts got ready. From his point of view the experiment was by no means a success, his efforts to be natural being met with amazed glances from Mr. Letts and disdainful requests from Miss Foster to go home if he couldn't behave himself. When he relapsed into moody silence Mr. Letts cleared his throat and spoke.

"There's no need to be like a monkey-on-a-stick, and at the same time there's no need to be sulky," he pointed out; "there's a happy medium."

“Like you, I s’pose?” said the frantic suitor. “Like me,” said the other, gravely. “Now, you watch; fall in behind and watch.”

He drew Miss Foster’s arm through his and, leaning towards her with tender deference, began a long conversation. At the end of ten minutes Mr. Widden intimated that he thought he had learned enough to go on with.

“Ah! that’s only your conceit,” said Mr. Letts over his shoulder. “I was afraid you was conceited.”

He turned to Miss Foster again, and Mr. Widden, with a despairing gesture, abandoned himself to gloom. He made no further interruptions, but at the conclusion of the walk hesitated so long on the door-step that Mr. Letts had to take the initiative.

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“Good-night,” he said, shaking hands. “Come round to-morrow night and I’ll give you another lesson. You’re a slow learner, that’s what you are; a slow learner.”

He gave Mr. Widden a lesson on the following evening, but cautioned him sternly against imitating the display of brotherly fondness of which, in a secluded lane, he had been a wide-eyed observer.

“When you’ve known her as long as I have—nineteen years,” said Mr. Letts, as the other protested, “things’ll be a bit different. I might not be here, for one thing.”

By exercise of great self-control Mr. Widden checked the obvious retort and walked doggedly in the rear of Miss Foster. Then, hardly able to believe his ears, he heard her say something to Mr. Letts.

“Eh?” said that gentleman, in amazed accents.

“You fall behind,” said Miss Foster.

“That—that’s not the way to talk to the head of the family,” said Mr. Letts, feebly.

“It’s the way I talk to him,” rejoined the girl.

It was a position for which Mr. Letts was totally unprepared, and the satisfied smile of Mr. Widden as he took the vacant place by no means improved matters. In a state of considerable dismay Mr. Letts dropped farther and farther behind until, looking up, he saw Miss Foster, attended by her restive escort, quietly waiting for him. An odd look in her eyes as they met his gave him food for thought for the rest of the evening.

At the end of what Mr. Letts was pleased to term a month’s trial, Mr. Widden was still unable to satisfy him as to his fitness for the position of brother-in-law. In a spirit of gloom he made suggestions of a mutinous nature to Mr. Green, but that gentleman, who had returned one day pale and furious, but tamed, from an interview that related to his treatment of his wife, held out no hopes of assistance.

“I wash my hands of him,” he said bitterly. “You stick to it; that’s all you can do.”

“They lost me last night,” said the unfortunate. “I stayed behind just to take a stone out of my shoe, and the earth seemed to swallow them up. He’s so strong. That’s the worst of it.”

“Strong?” said Mr. Green.

Mr. Widden nodded. “Tuesday evening he showed her how he upset a man once and stood him on his head,” he said, irritably. “I was what he showed her with.”

“Stick to it!” counselled Mr. Green again. “A brother and sister are bound to get tired of each other before long; it’s nature.”

Mr. Widden sighed and obeyed. But brother and sister showed no signs of tiring of each other’s company, while they displayed unmistakable signs of weariness with his. And three weeks later Mr. Letts, in a few well-chosen words, kindly but firmly dismissed him.

“I should never give my consent,” he said, gravely, “so it’s only wasting your time. You run off and play.”

Mr. Widden ran off to Mr. Green, but before he could get a word out discovered that something unusual had happened. Mrs. Green, a picture of distress, sat at one end of the room with a handkerchief to her eyes; Mr. Green, in a condition compounded of joy and rage, was striding violently up and down the room.

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"He's a fraud!" he shouted. "A fraud! I've had my suspicions for some time, and this evening I got it out of her."

Mr. Widden stared in amazement.

"I got it out of her," repeated Mr. Green, pointing at the trembling woman. "He's no more her son than what you are."

"What?" said the amazed listener.

"She's been deceiving me," said Mr. Green, with a scowl, "but I don't think she'll do it again in a hurry. You stay here," he shouted, as his wife rose to leave the room. "I want you to be here when he comes in."

Mrs. Green stayed, and the other two, heedless of her presence, discussed the situation until the front door was heard to open, and Mr. Letts and Betty came into the room. With a little cry the girl ran to her mother.

"What's the matter?" she cried.

"She's lost another son," said Mr. Green, with a ferocious sneer—"a flash, bullying, ugly chap of the name o' Letts."

"Halloa!" said Mr. Letts, starting.

"A chap she picked up out of the street, and tried to pass off on me as her son," continued Mr. Green, raising his voice. "She ain't heard the end of it yet, I can tell you."

Mr. Letts fidgeted. "You leave her alone," he said, mildly. "It's true I'm not her son, but it don't matter, because I've been to see a lawyer about her, and he told me that this house and half the furniture belongs by law to Betty. It's got nothing to do with you."

"Indeed!" said Mr. Green. "Now you take yourself off before I put the police on to you. Take your face off these premises."

Mr. Letts, scratching his head, looked vaguely round the room.

"Go on!" vociferated Mr. Green. "Or will you have the police to put you out?"

Mr. Letts cleared his throat and moved towards the door. "You stick up for your rights, my girl," he said, turning to Betty. "If he don't treat your mother well, give him back his kitchen chair and his three stair-rods and pack him off."

"Henry," said Mr. Green, with dangerous calm, "go and fetch a policeman."



"I'm going," said Mr. Letts, hastily. "Good-by, Betty; good-by, mother. I sha'n't be long. I'm only going as far as the post-office. And that reminds me. I've been talking so much that I quite forget to tell you that Betty and me were married yesterday morning."

He nodded pleasantly at the stupefied Mr. Green, and, turning to Mr. Widden, gave him a friendly dig in the ribs with his finger.

"What's mine is Betty's," he said, in a clear voice, "and what's Betty's is *mine*! D'ye understand, step-father?"

He stepped over to Mrs. Green, and putting a strong arm around her raised her to her feet. "And what's mine is mother's," he concluded, and, helping her across the room, placed her in the best arm-chair.

[Illustration: "What's mine is mother's."]