

Double Dealing eBook

Double Dealing by W. W. Jacobs

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DOUBLE DEALING

Mr. Fred Carter stood on the spacious common, inhaling with all the joy of the holiday-making Londoner the salt smell of the sea below, and regarding with some interest the movements of a couple of men who had come to a stop a short distance away. As he looked they came on again, eying him closely as they approached—a strongly built, shambling man of fifty, and a younger man, evidently his son.

[Illustration: “Stood on the spacious common, inhaling the salt smell of the sea below.”]

“Good-evening,” said the former, as they came abreast of Mr. Carter.

“Good-evening,” he replied.

“That’s him,” said both together.

They stood regarding him in a fashion unmistakably hostile. Mr. Carter, with an uneasy smile, awaited developments.

“What have you got to say for yourself?” demanded the elder man, at last. “Do you call yourself a man?”

“I don’t call myself anything,” said the puzzled Mr. Carter. “Perhaps you’re mistaking me for somebody else.”

“Didn’t I tell you,” said the younger man, turning to the other—“didn’t I tell you he’d say that?”

“He can say what he likes,” said the other, “but we’ve got him now. If he gets away from me he’ll be cleverer than what he thinks he is.”

“What are we to do with him now we’ve got him?” inquired his son.

The elder man clenched a huge fist and eyed Mr. Carter savagely. “If I was just considering myself,” he said, “I should hammer him till I was tired and then chuck him into the sea.”

His son nodded. “That wouldn’t do Nancy much good, though,” he remarked.

“I want to do everything for the best,” said the other, “and I s’pose the right and proper thing to do is to take him by the scruff of his neck and run him along to Nancy.”

“You try it,” said Mr. Carter, hotly. “Who is Nancy?”

The other growled, and was about to aim a blow at him when his son threw himself upon him and besought him to be calm.

“Just one,” said his father, struggling, “only one. It would do me good; and perhaps he’d come along the quieter for it.”

“Look here!” said Mr. Carter. “You’re mistaking me for somebody else, that’s what you are doing. What am I supposed to have done?”

“You’re supposed to have come courting my daughter, Mr. Somebody Else,” said the other, re-leasing himself and thrusting his face into Mr. Carter’s, “and, after getting her promise to marry you, nipping off to London to arrange for the wedding. She’s been mourning over you for four years now, having an idea that you had been made away with.”

“Being true to your memory, you skunk,” said the son.

“And won’t look at decent chaps that want to marry her,” added the other.

“It’s all a mistake,” said Mr. Carter. “I came down here this morning for the first time in my life.”

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"Bring him along," said the son, impatiently. "It's a waste of time talking to him."

Mr. Carter took a step back and parleyed. "I'll come along with you of my own free will," he said, hastily, "just to show you that you are wrong; but I won't be forced."

He turned and walked back with them towards the town, pausing occasionally to admire the view. Once he paused so long that an ominous growl arose from the elder of his captors.

"I was just thinking," said Mr. Carter, eying him in consternation; "suppose that she makes the same mistake that you have made? Oh, Lord!"

"Keeps it up pretty well, don't he, Jim?" said the father.

The other grunted and, drawing nearer to Mr. Carter as they entered the town, stepped along in silence. Questions which Mr. Carter asked with the laudable desire of showing his ignorance concerning the neighborhood elicited no reply. His discomfiture was increased by the behavior of an elderly boatman, who, after looking at him hard, took his pipe from his mouth and bade him "Good-evening." Father and son exchanged significant glances.

[Illustration: "An elderly boatman, who, after looking at him hard, took his pipe from his mouth and bade him 'Good-evening.'"]

They turned at last into a small street, and the elder man, opening the door of a neat cottage, laid his hand on the prisoner's shoulder and motioned him in. Mr. Carter obeyed, and, entering a spotless living-room, removed his hat and with affected composure seated himself in an easy-chair.

"I'll go up and tell Nan," said Jim. "Don't let him run away."

He sprang up the stairs, which led from a corner of the room, and the next moment the voice of a young lady, laboring under intense excitement, fell on the ears of Mr. Carter. With a fine attempt at unconcern he rose and inspected an aged engraving of "The Sailor's Return."

"She'll be down in a minute," said Jim, returning

"P'r'aps it's as well that I didn't set about him, after all," said his father. "If I had done what I should like to do, his own mother wouldn't have known him."

Mr. Carter sniffed defiantly and, with a bored air, resumed his seat. Ten minutes passed—fifteen; at the end of half an hour the elder man's impatience found vent in a tirade against the entire sex.

“She’s dressing up; that’s what it is,” explained Jim. “For him!”

A door opened above and a step sounded on the stairs. Mr. Carter looked up uneasily, and, after the first sensation of astonishment had passed, wondered vaguely what his double had run away for. The girl, her lips parted and her eyes bright, came swiftly down into the room.

“Where is he?” she said, quickly.

“Eh?” said her father, in surprise. “Why, there! Can’t you see?”

The light died out of the girl’s face and she looked round in dismay. The watchful Mr. Carter thought that he also detected in her glance a spice of that temper which had made her relatives so objectionable.

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"That!" she said, loudly. "That! That's not my Bert!"

"That's what I told 'em," said Mr. Carter, deferentially, "over and over again."

"What!" said her father, loudly. "Look again."

"If I looked all night it wouldn't make any difference," said the disappointed Miss Evans. "The idea of making such a mistake!"

"We're all liable to mistakes," said Mr. Carter, magnanimously, "even the best of us."

"You take a good look at him," urged her brother, "and don't forget that it's four years since you saw him. Isn't that Bert's nose?"

"No," said the girl, glancing at the feature in question, "not a bit like it. Bert had a beautiful nose."

"Look at his eyes," said Jim.

Miss Evans looked, and meeting Mr. Carter's steady gaze tossed her head scornfully and endeavored to stare him down. Realizing too late the magnitude of the task, but unwilling to accept defeat, she stood confronting him with indignant eyes.

"Well?" said Mr. Evans, misunderstanding.

"Not a bit like," said his daughter, turning thank-fully. "And if you don't like Bert, you needn't insult him."

She sat down with her back towards Mr. Carter and looked out at the window.

"Well, I could ha' sworn it was Bert Simmons," said the discomfited Mr. Evans.

"Me, too," said his son. "I'd ha' sworn to him anywhere. It's the most extraordinary likeness I've ever seen."

He caught his father's eye, and with a jerk of his thumb telegraphed for instructions as to the disposal of Mr. Carter.

"He can go," said Mr. Evans, with an attempt at dignity; "he can go this time, and I hope that this'll be a lesson to him not to go about looking like other people. If he does, next time, p'r'aps, he won't escape so easy."

"You're quite right," said Mr. Carter, blandly. "I'll get a new face first thing to-morrow morning. I ought to have done it before."



He crossed to the door and, nodding to the fermenting Mr. Evans, bowed to the profile of Miss Evans and walked slowly out. Envy of Mr. Simmons was mingled with amazement at his deplorable lack of taste and common sense. He would willingly have changed places with him. There was evidently a strong likeness, and——

Busy with his thoughts he came to a standstill in the centre of the footpath, and then, with a sudden air of determination, walked slowly back to the house.

“Yes?” said Mr. Evans, as the door opened and the face of Mr. Carter was thrust in. “What have you come back for?”

The other stepped into the room and closed the door softly behind him. “I have come back,” he said, slowly—“I have come back because I feel ashamed of myself.”

“Ashamed of yourself?” repeated Mr. Evans, rising and confronting him.

Mr. Carter hung his head and gazed nervously in the direction of the girl. “I can’t keep up this deception,” he said, in a low but distinct voice. “I am Bert Simmons. At least, that is the name I told you four years ago.”

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"I knew I hadn't made a mistake," roared Mr. Evans to his son. "I knew him well enough. Shut the door, Jim. Don't let him go."

"I don't want to go," said Mr. Carter, with a glance in the direction of Nancy. "I have come back to make amends."

"Fancy Nancy not knowing him!" said Jim, gazing at the astonished Miss Evans.

"She was afraid of getting me into trouble," said Mr. Carter, "and I just gave her a wink not to recognize me; but she knew me well enough, bless her."

"How dare you!" said the girl, starting up. "Why, I've never seen you before in my life."

"All right, Nan," said the brazen Mr. Carter; "but it's no good keeping it up now. I've come back to act fair and square."

Miss Evans struggled for breath.

"There he is, my girl," said her father, patting her on the back. "He's not much to look at, and he treated you very shabby, but if you want him I suppose you must have him."

"Want him?" repeated the incensed Miss Evans. "Want him? I tell you it's not Bert. How dare he come here and call me Nan?"

"You used not to mind it," said Mr. Carter, plaintively.

"I tell you," said Miss Evans, turning to her father and brother, "it's not Bert. Do you think I don't know?"

"Well, he ought to know who he is," said her father, reasonably.

"Of course I ought," said Mr. Carter, smiling at her. "Besides, what reason should I have for saying I am Bert if I am not?"

"That's a fair question," said Jim, as the girl bit her lip. "Why should he?"

"Ask him," said the girl, tartly.

"Look here, my girl," said Mr. Evans, in ominous accents. "For four years you've been grieving over Bert, and me and Jim have been hunting high and low for him. We've got him at last, and now you've got to have him."

"If he don't run away again," said Jim. "I wouldn't trust him farther than I could see him."

Mr. Evans sat and glowered at his prospective son-in-law as the difficulties of the situation developed themselves. Even Mr. Carter's reminders that he had come back

and surrendered of his own free will failed to move him, and he was hesitating between tying him up and locking him in the attic and hiring a man to watch him, when Mr. Carter himself suggested a way out of the difficulty.

“I’ll lodge with you,” he said, “and I’ll give you all my money and things to take care of. I can’t run away without money.”

He turned out his pockets on the table. Seven pounds eighteen shillings and fourpence with his re-turn ticket made one heap; his watch and chain, penknife, and a few other accessories another. A suggestion of Jim’s that he should add his boots was vetoed by the elder man as unnecessary.

“There you are,” said Mr. Evans, sweeping the things into his own pockets; “and the day you are married I hand them back to you.”

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His temper improved as the evening wore on. By the time supper was finished and his pipe alight he became almost jocular, and the coldness of Miss Evans was the only drawback to an otherwise enjoyable evening.

“Just showing off a little temper,” said her father, after she had withdrawn; “and wants to show she ain’t going to forgive you too easy. Not but what you behaved badly; however, let bygones be bygones, that’s my idea.”

The behavior of Miss Evans was so much better next day that it really seemed as though her father’s diagnosis was correct. At dinner, when the men came home from work, she piled Mr. Carter’s plate up so generously that her father and brother had ample time at their disposal to watch him eat. And when he put his hand over his glass she poured half a pint of good beer, that other men would have been thankful for, up his sleeve.

[Illustration: “She piled Mr. Carter’s plate up so generously that her father and brother had ample time at their disposal to watch him eat.”]

She was out all the afternoon, but at tea time she sat next to Mr. Carter, and joined brightly in the conversation concerning her marriage. She addressed him as Bert, and when he furtively pressed her hand beneath the table-cloth she made no attempt to withdraw it.

“I can’t think how it was you didn’t know him at first,” said her father. “You’re usually wide-awake enough.”

“Silly of me,” said Nancy; “but I am silly sometimes.”

Mr. Carter pressed her hand again, and gazing tenderly into her eyes received a glance in return which set him thinking. It was too cold and calculating for real affection; in fact, after another glance, he began to doubt if it indicated affection at all.

“It’s like old times, Bert,” said Miss Evans, with an odd smile. “Do you remember what you said that afternoon when I put the hot spoon on your neck?”

“Yes,” was the reply.

“What was it?” inquired the girl.

“I won’t repeat it,” said Mr. Carter, firmly.

He was reminded of other episodes during the meal, but, by the exercise of tact and the plea of a bad memory, did fairly well. He felt that he had done very well indeed when, having cleared the tea-things away, Nancy came and sat beside him with her hand in

his. Her brother grunted, but Mr. Evans, in whom a vein of sentiment still lingered, watched them with much satisfaction.

Mr. Carter had got possession of both hands and was murmuring fulsome flatteries when the sound of somebody pausing at the open door caused them to be hastily withdrawn.

“Evening, Mr. Evans,” said a young man, putting his head in. “Why, halloa! Bert! Well, of all the——”

“Halloa!” said Mr. Carter, with attempted enthusiasm, as he rose from his chair.

“I thought you was lost,” said the other, stepping in and gripping his hand. “I never thought I was going to set eyes on you again. Well, this is a surprise. You ain’t forgot Joe Wilson, have you?”

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"Course I haven't, Joe," said Mr. Carter. "I'd have known you anywhere."

He shook hands effusively, and Mr. Wilson, after a little pretended hesitation, accepted a chair and began to talk about old times.

"I lay you ain't forgot one thing, Bert," he said at last.

"What's that?" inquired the other.

"That arf-quid I lent you," said Mr. Wilson.

Mr. Carter, after the first shock of surprise, pretended to think, Mr. Wilson supplying him with details as to time and place, which he was in no position to dispute. He turned to Mr. Evans, who was still acting as his banker, and, after a little hesitation, requested him to pay the money. Conversation seemed to fail somewhat after that, and Mr. Wilson, during an awkward pause, went off whistling.

"Same old Joe," said Mr. Carter, lightly, after he had gone. "He hasn't altered a bit."

Miss Evans glanced at him, but said nothing. She was looking instead towards a gentleman of middle age who was peeping round the door indulging in a waggish game of peep-bo with the unconscious Mr. Carter. Finding that he had at last attracted his attention, the gentleman came inside and, breathing somewhat heavily after his exertions, stood before him with outstretched hand.

[Illustration: "A gentleman of middle age was peeping round the door."]

"How goes it?" said Mr. Carter, forcing a smile and shaking hands.

"He's grown better-looking than ever," said the gentleman, subsiding into a chair.

"So have you," said Mr. Carter. "I should hardly have known you."

"Well, I'm glad to see you again," said the other in a more subdued fashion. "We're all glad to see you back, and I 'ope that when the wedding cake is sent out there'll be a bit for old Ben Prout."

"You'll be the first, Ben," said Mr. Carter, quickly.

Mr. Prout got up and shook hands with him again. "It only shows what mistakes a man can make," he said, resuming his seat. "It only shows how easy it is to misjudge one's fellow-creeturs. When you went away sudden four years ago, I says to myself, 'Ben Prout,' I says, 'make up your mind to it, that two quid has gorn.'"

The smile vanished from Mr. Carter's face, and a sudden chill descended upon the company.

"Two quid?" he said, stiffly. "What two quid?"

"The two quid I lent you," said Mr. Prout, in a pained voice.

"When?" said Mr. Carter, struggling.

"When you and I met him that evening on the pier," said Miss Evans, in a matter-of-fact voice.

Mr. Carter started, and gazed at her uneasily. The smile on her lip and the triumphant gleam in her eye were a revelation to him. He turned to Mr. Evans and in as calm a voice as he could assume, requested him to discharge the debt. Mr. Prout, his fingers twitching, stood waiting "Well, it's your money," said Mr. Evans, grudgingly extracting a purse from his trouser-pocket; "and I suppose you ought to pay your debts; still——"

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He put down two pounds on the table and broke off in sudden amazement as Mr. Prout, snatching up the money, bolted headlong from the room. His surprise was shared by his son, but the other two made no sign. Mr. Carter was now prepared for the worst, and his voice was quite calm as he gave instructions for the payment of the other three gentlemen who presented claims during the evening endorsed by Miss Evans. As the last departed Mr. Evans, whose temper had been gradually getting beyond his control, crossed over and handed him his watch and chain, a few coppers, and the return half of his railway ticket.

"I think we can do without you, after all," he said, breathing thickly. "I've no doubt you owe money all over England. You're a cadger, that's what you are."

He pointed to the door, and Mr. Carter, after twice opening his lips to speak and failing, blundered towards it. Miss Evans watched him curiously.

"Cheats never prosper," she said, with gentle severity.

"Good-by," said Mr. Carter, pausing at the door.

"It's your own fault," continued Miss Evans, who was suffering from a slight touch of conscience. "If you hadn't come here pretending to be Bert Simmons and calling me 'Nan' as if you had known me all my life, I wouldn't have done it."

"It doesn't matter," said Mr. Carter. "I wish I was Bert Simmons, that's all. Good-by."

"Wish you was!" said Mr. Evans, who had been listening in open-mouthed astonishment. "Look here! Man to man—are you Bert Simmons or are you not?"

"No," said Mr. Carter.

"Of course not," said Nancy.

"And you didn't owe that money?"

"Nobody owed it," said Nancy. "It was done just to punish him."

Mr. Evans, with a strange cry, blundered towards the door. "I'll have that money out of 'em," he roared, "if I have to hold 'em up and shake it out of their trouser-pockets. You stay here."

He hurried up the road, and Jim, with the set face of a man going into action against heavy odds, followed him.

"Your father told me to stay," said Mr. Carter, coming farther into the room.

Nancy looked up at him through her eyelashes. “You need not unless you want to,” she said, very softly.