

# Husbandry eBook

## Husbandry by W. W. Jacobs

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# Page 1

## HUSBANDRY

Dealing with a man, said the night-watchman, thoughtfully, is as easy as a teetotaller walking along a nice wide pavement; dealing with a woman is like the same teetotaller, arter four or five whiskies, trying to get up a step that ain't there. If a man can't get 'is own way he eases 'is mind with a little nasty language, and then forgets all about it; if a woman can't get 'er own way she flies into a temper and reminds you of something you oughn't to ha' done ten years ago. Wot a woman would do whose 'usband had never done anything wrong I can't think.

I remember a young feller telling me about a row he 'ad with 'is wife once. He 'adn't been married long and he talked as if the way she carried on was unusual. Fust of all, he said, she spoke to 'im in a cooing sort o' voice and pulled his moustache, then when he wouldn't give way she worked herself up into a temper and said things about 'is sister. Arter which she went out o' the room and banged the door so hard it blew down a vase off the fireplace. Four times she came back to tell 'im other things she 'ad thought of, and then she got so upset she 'ad to go up to bed and lay down instead of getting his tea. When that didn't do no good she refused her food, and when 'e took her up toast and tea she wouldn't look at it. Said she wanted to die. He got quite uneasy till 'e came 'ome the next night and found the best part of a loaf o' bread, a quarter o' butter, and a couple o' chops he 'ad got in for 'is supper had gorn; and then when he said 'e was glad she 'ad got 'er appetite back she turned round and said that he grudged 'er the food she ate.

And no woman ever owned up as 'ow she was wrong; and the more you try and prove it to 'em the louder they talk about something else. I know wot I'm talking about because a woman made a mistake about me once, and though she was proved to be in the wrong, and it was years ago, my missus shakes her 'ead about it to this day.

It was about eight years arter I 'ad left off going to sea and took up night-watching. A beautiful summer evening it was, and I was sitting by the gate smoking a pipe till it should be time to light up, when I noticed a woman who 'ad just passed turn back and stand staring at me. I've 'ad that sort o' thing before, and I went on smoking and looking straight in front of me. Fat middle-aged woman she was, wot 'ad lost her good looks and found others. She stood there staring and staring, and by and by she tries a little cough.

I got up very slow then, and, arter looking all round at the evening, without seeing 'er, I was just going to step inside and shut the wicket, when she came closer.

"Bill!" she ses, in a choking sort o' voice.

"Bill!"

I gave her a look that made her catch 'er breath, and I was just stepping through the wicket, when she laid hold of my coat and tried to hold me back.

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“Do you know wot you’re a-doing of?” I ses, turning on her.

“Oh, Bill dear,” she ses, “don’t talk to me like that. Do you want to break my ’art? Arter all these years!”

She pulled out a dirt-coloured pocket-’ankercher and stood there dabbing her eyes with it. One eye at a time she dabbed, while she looked at me reproachful with the other. And arter eight dabs, four to each eye, she began to sob as if her ’art would break.

“Go away,” I ses, very slow. “You can’t stand making that noise outside my wharf. Go away and give somebody else a treat.”

Afore she could say anything the potman from the Tiger, a nasty ginger-’aired little chap that nobody liked, come by and stopped to pat her on the back.

“There, there, don’t take on, mother,” he ses. “Wot’s he been a-doing to you?”

“You get off ’ome,” I ses, losing my temper.

“Wot d’ye mean trying to drag me into it? I’ve never seen the woman afore in my life.”

“Oh, Bill!” ses the woman, sobbing louder than ever. “Oh! Oh! Oh!”

“Ow does she know your name, then?” ses the little beast of a potman.

I didn’t answer him. I might have told ’im that there’s about five million Bills in England, but I didn’t. I stood there with my arms folded acrost my chest, and looked at him, superior.

“Where ’ave you been all this long, long time?” she ses, between her sobs. “Why did you leave your happy ’ome and your children wot loved you?”

The potman let off a whistle that you could have ’eard acrost the river, and as for me, I thought I should ha’ dropped. To have a woman standing sobbing and taking my character away like that was a’most more than I could bear.

“Did he run away from you?” ses the potman.

“Ye-ye-yes,” she ses. “He went off on a vy’ge to China over nine years ago, and that’s the last I saw of ’im till to-night. A lady friend o’ mine thought she reckernized ’im yesterday, and told me.”

“I shouldn’t cry over ’im,” ses the potman, shaking his ’ead: “he ain’t worth it. If I was you I should just give ’im a bang or two over the ’ead with my umberella, and then give ’im in charge.”



I stepped inside the wicket—backwards—and then I slammed it in their faces, and putting the key in my pocket, walked up the wharf. I knew it was no good standing out there argufying. I felt sorry for the pore thing in a way. If she really thought I was her 'usband, and she 'ad lost me—— I put one or two things straight and then, for the sake of distracting my mind, I 'ad a word or two with the skipper of the John Henry, who was leaning against the side of his ship, smoking.

“Wot’s that tapping noise?” he ses, all of a sudden. “Ark!”

I knew wot it was. It was the handle of that umberella 'ammering on the gate. I went cold all over, and then when I thought that the pot-man was most likely encouraging 'er to do it I began to boil.

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"Somebody at the gate," ses the skipper.

"Aye, aye," I ses. "I know all about it."

I went on talking until at last the skipper asked me whether he was wandering in 'is mind, or whether I was. The mate came up from the cabin just then, and o' course he 'ad to tell me there was somebody knocking at the gate.

"Ain't you going to open it?" ses the skipper, staring at me.

"Let 'em ring," I ses, off-hand.

The words was 'ardly out of my mouth afore they did ring, and if they 'ad been selling muffins they couldn't ha' kept it up harder. And all the time the umberella was doing rat-a-tat tats on the gate, while a voice— much too loud for the potman's—started calling out: "Watch-man ahoy!"

"They're calling you, Bill," ses the skipper. "I ain't deaf," I ses, very cold.

"Well, I wish I was," ses the skipper. "It's fair making my ear ache. Why the blazes don't you do your dooty, and open the gate?"

"You mind your bisness and I'll mind mine," I ses. "I know wot I'm doing. It's just some silly fools 'aving a game with me, and I'm not going to encourage 'em."

"Game with you?" ses the skipper. "Ain't they got anything better than that to play with? Look 'ere, if you don't open that gate, I will."

"It's nothing to do with you," I ses. "You look arter your ship and I'll look arter my wharf. See? If you don't like the noise, go down in the cabin and stick your 'ead in a biscuit-bag."

To my surprise he took the mate by the arm and went, and I was just thinking wot a good thing it was to be a bit firm with people sometimes, when they came back dressed up in their coats and bowler-hats and climbed on to the wharf.

"Watchman!" ses the skipper, in a hoity-toity sort o' voice, "me and the mate is going as far as Aldgate for a breath o' fresh air. Open the gate."

I gave him a look that might ha' melted a 'art of stone, and all it done to 'im was to make 'im laugh.

"Hurry up," he ses. "It a'most seems to me that there's somebody ringing the bell, and you can let them in same time as you let us out. Is it the bell, or is it my fancy, Joe?" he ses, turning to the mate.



They marched on in front of me with their noses cocked in the air, and all the time the noise at the gate got worse and worse. So far as I could make out, there was quite a crowd outside, and I stood there with the key in the lock, trembling all over. Then I unlocked it very careful, and put my hand on the skipper's arm.

"Nip out quick," I ses, in a whisper.

"I'm in no hurry," ses the skipper. "Here! Halloa, wot's up?"

It was like opening the door at a theatre, and the fust one through was that woman, shoved behind by the potman. Arter 'im came a car-man, two big 'ulking brewers' draymen, a little scrap of a woman with 'er bonnet cocked over one eye, and a couple of dirty little boys.

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“Wot is it?” ses the skipper, shutting the wicket behind ’em. “A beanfeast?”

“This lady wants her ’usband,” ses the pot-man, pointing at me. “He run away from her nine years ago, and now he says he ’as never seen ’er before. He ought to be ’ung.”

“Bill,” ses the skipper, shaking his silly ’ead at me. “I can ’ardly believe it.”

“It’s all a pack o’ silly lies,” I ses, firing up. “She’s made a mistake.”

“She made a mistake when she married you,” ses the thin little woman. “If I was in ’er shoes I’d take ’old of you and tear you limb from limb.”

“I don’t want to hurt ’im, ma’am,” ses the other woman. “I on’y want him to come ’ome to me and my five. Why, he’s never seen the youngest, little Annie. She’s as like ’im as two peas.”

“Pore little devil,” ses the carman.

“Look here!” I ses, “you clear off. All of you. ’Ow dare you come on to my wharf? If you aren’t gone in two minutes I’ll give you all in charge.”

“Who to?” ses one of the draymen, sticking his face into mine. “You go ’ome to your wife and kids. Go on now, afore I put up my ’ands to you.”

“That’s the way to talk to ’im,” ses the pot-man, nodding at ’em.

They all began to talk to me then and tell me wot I was to do, and wot they would do if I didn’t. I couldn’t get a word in edgeways. When I reminded the mate that when he was up in London ’e always passed himself off as a single man, ’e wouldn’t listen; and when I asked the skipper whether ’is pore missus was blind, he on’y went on shouting at the top of ’is voice. It on’y showed me ’ow anxious most people are that everybody else should be good.

I thought they was never going to stop, and, if it ’adn’t been for a fit of coughing, I don’t believe that the scraggy little woman could ha’ stopped. Arter one o’ the draymen ’ad saved her life and spoilt ’er temper by patting ’er on the back with a hand the size of a leg o’ mutton, the carman turned to me and told me to tell the truth, if it choked me.

“I have told you the truth,” I ses. “She ses I’m her ’usband and I say I ain’t. Ow’s she going to prove it? Why should you believe her, and not me?”

“She’s got a truthful face,” ses the carman.

“Look here!” ses the skipper, speaking very slow, “I’ve got an idea, wot’ll settle it p’raps. You get outside,” he ses, turning sharp on the two little boys.

One o' the draymen 'elped 'em to go out, and 'arf a minute arterwards a stone came over the gate and cut the potman's lip open. Boys will be boys.

"Now!" ses the skipper, turning to the woman, and smiling with conceitedness. "Had your 'usband got any marks on 'im? Birth-mark, or moles, or anything of that sort?"

"I'm sure he is my 'usband," ses the woman, dabbing her eyes.

"Yes, yes," ses the skipper, "but answer my question. If you can tell us any marks your 'usband had, we can take Bill down into my cabin and——"

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"You'll do *wot*?" I ses, in a loud voice.

"You speak when you're spoke to," ses the carman. "It's got nothing to do with you."

"No, he ain't got no birthmarks," ses the woman, speaking very slow—and I could see she was afraid of making a mistake and losing me—"but he's got tattoo marks. He's got a mermaid tattooed on 'im."

"Where?" ses the skipper, a'most jumping.

I 'eld my breath. Five sailormen out of ten have been tattooed with mermaids, and I was one of 'em. When she spoke agin I thought I should ha' dropped.

"On 'is right arm," she ses, "unless he's 'ad it rubbed off."

"You can't rub out tattoo marks," ses the skipper.

They all stood looking at me as if they was waiting for something. I folded my arms—tight—and stared back at 'em.

"If you ain't this lady's 'usband," ses the skipper, turning to me, "you can take off your coat and prove it."

"And if you don't we'll take it off for you," ses the carman, coming a bit closer.

Arter that things 'appened so quick, I hardly knew whether I was standing on my 'cad or my heels. Both, I think. They was all on top o' me at once, and the next thing I can remember is sitting on the ground in my shirt-sleeves listening to the potman, who was making a fearful fuss because somebody 'ad bit his ear 'arf off. My coat was ripped up the back, and one of the draymen was holding up my arm and showing them all the mermaid, while the other struck matches so as they could see better."

"That's your 'usband right enough," he ses to the woman. "Take 'im."

"P'raps she'll carry 'im 'ome," I ses, very fierce and sarcastic.

"And we don't want none of your lip," ses the carman, who was in a bad temper because he 'ad got a fearful kick on the shin from somewhere.

I got up very slow and began to put my coat on again, and twice I 'ad to tell that silly woman that when I wanted her 'elp I'd let 'er know. Then I 'eard slow, heavy footsteps in the road outside, and, afore any of 'em could stop me, I was calling for the police.

I don't like policemen as a rule; they're too inquisitive, but when the wicket was pushed open and I saw a face with a helmet on it peeping in, I felt quite a liking for 'em.

“Wot’s up?” ses the policeman, staring ’ard at my little party.

They all started telling ’im at once, and I should think if the potman showed him ’is ear once he showed it to ’im twenty times. He lost his temper and pushed it away at last, and the potman gave a ’owl that set my teeth on edge. I waited till they was all finished, and the policeman trying to get ’is hearing back, and then I spoke up in a quiet way and told ’im to clear them all off of my wharf.

“They’re trespassing,” I ses, “all except the skipper and mate here. They belong to a little wash-tub that’s laying alongside, and they’re both as ’armless as they look.”

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It's wonderful wot a uniform will do. The policeman just jerked his 'ead and said "out-side," and the men went out like a flock of sheep. The on'y man that said a word was the carman, who was in such a hurry that 'e knocked his bad shin against my foot as 'e went by. The thin little woman was passed out by the policeman in the middle of a speech she was making, and he was just going for the other, when the skipper stopped 'im.

"This lady is coming on my ship," he ses, puffing out 'is chest.

I looked at 'im, and then I turned to the policeman. "So long as she goes off my wharf, I don't mind where she goes," I ses. "The skipper's goings-on 'ave got nothing to do with me."

"Then she can foller him 'ome in the morning," ses the skipper. "Good night, watch-man."

Him and the mate 'elped the silly old thing to the ship, and, arter I 'ad been round to the Bear's Head and fetched a pint for the police-man, I locked up and sat down to think things out; and the more I thought the worse they seemed. I've 'eard people say that if you have a clear conscience nothing can hurt you. They didn't know my missus.

I got up at last and walked on to the jetty, and the woman, wot was sitting on the deck of the John Henry, kept calling out: "Bill!" like a sick baa-lamb crying for its ma. I went back, and 'ad four pints at the Bear's Head, but it didn't seem to do me any good, and at last I went and sat down in the office to wait for morning.

It came at last, a lovely morning with a beautiful sunrise; and that woman sitting up wide awake, waiting to foller me 'ome. When I opened the gate at six o'clock she was there with the mate and the skipper, waiting, and when I left at five minutes past she was trotting along beside me.

Twice I stopped and spoke to 'er, but it was no good. Other people stopped too, and I 'ad to move on agin; and every step was bringing me nearer to my house and the missus.

I turned into our street, arter passing it three times, and the first thing I saw was my missus standing on the doorstep 'aving a few words with the lady next door. Then she 'appened to look up and see us, just as that silly woman was trying to walk arm-in-arm.

Twice I knocked her 'and away, and then, right afore my wife and the party next door, she put her arm round my waist. By the time I got to the 'ouse my legs was trembling so I could hardly stand, and when I got into the passage I 'ad to lean up against the wall for a bit.

[Illustration: *Right afore my wife and the party next door she put her arm round my waist.*]

“Keep ‘er out,” I ses.

“Wot do you want?” ses my missus, trembling with passion. “Wot do you think you’re doing?”

“I want my ‘usband, Bill,” ses the woman.

My missus put her ‘and to her throat and came in without a word, and the woman follered ‘er. If I hadn’t kept my presence o’ mind and shut the door two or three more would ‘ave come in too.

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I went into the kitchen about ten minutes arterwards to see 'ow they was getting on. Besides which they was both calling for me.

"Now then!" ses my missus, who was leaning up against the dresser with 'er arms folded, "wot 'ave you got to say for yourself walking in as bold as brass with this hussy?"

"Bill!" ses the woman, "did you hear wot she called me?"

She spoke to me like that afore my wife, and in two minutes they was at it, hammer and tongs.

Fust of all they spoke about each other, and then my missus started speaking about me. She's got a better memory than most people, because she can remember things that never 'appened, and every time I coughed she turned on me like a tiger.

"And as for you," she ses, turning to the woman, "if you did marry 'im you should ha' made sure that he 'adn't got a wife already."

"He married me fust," ses the woman.

"When?" ses my wife. "Wot was the date?"

"Wot was the date you married 'im?" ses the other one.

They stood looking at each other like a couple o' game-cocks, and I could see as plain as a pike-staff 'ow frightened both of 'em was o' losing me.

"Look here!" I ses at last, to my missus, "talk sense. 'Ow could I be married to 'er? When I was at sea I was at sea, and when I was ashore I was with you."

"Did you use to go down to the ship to see 'im off?" ses the woman.

"No," ses my wife. "I'd something better to do."

"Neither did I," ses the woman. "P'raps that's where we both made a mistake."

"You get out of my 'ouse!" ses my missus, very sudden. "Go on, afore I put you out."

"Not without my Bill," ses the woman. "If you lay a finger on me I'll scream the house down."

"You brought her 'ere," ses my wife, turning to me, "now you can take 'er away?"

"I didn't bring 'er," I ses. "She follered me."



“Well, she can foller you agin,” she ses. “Go on!” she ses, trembling all over. “Git out afore I start on you.”

I was in such a temper that I daren’t trust myself to stop. I just gave ’er one look, and then I drew myself up and went out. ’Alf the fools in our street was standing in front of the ’ouse, ’umming like bees, but I took no notice. I held my ’ead up and walked through them with that woman trailing arter me.

I was in such a state of mind that I went on like a man in a dream. If it had ha’ been a dream I should ha’ pushed ’er under an omnibus, but you can’t do things like that in real life.

“Penny for your thoughts, Bill,” she ses. I didn’t answer her.

“Why don’t you speak to me?” she ses.

“You don’t know wot you’re asking for,” I ses.

I was hungry and sleepy, and ’ow I was going to get through the day I couldn’t think. I went into a pub and ’ad a couple o’ pints o’ stout and a crust o’ bread and cheese for brekfuss. I don’t know wot she ’ad, but when the barman tried to take for it out o’ my money, I surprised ’im.

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We walked about till I was ready to drop. Then we got to Victoria Park, and I 'ad no sooner got on to the grass than I laid down and went straight off to sleep. It was two o'clock when I woke, and, arter a couple o' pork-pies and a pint or two, I sat on a seat in the Park smoking, while she kep' dabbing 'er eyes agin and asking me to come 'ome.

At five o'clock I got up to go back to the wharf, and, taking no notice of 'er, I walked into the street and jumped on a 'bus that was passing. She jumped too, and, arter the conductor had 'elped 'er up off of 'er knees and taken her arms away from his waist, I'm blest if he didn't turn on me and ask me why I 'adn't left her at 'ome.

We got to the wharf just afore six. The John Henry 'ad gorn, but the skipper 'ad done all the 'arm he could afore he sailed, and, if I 'adn't kept my temper, I should ha' murdered arf a dozen of 'em.

The woman wanted to come on to the wharf, but I 'ad a word or two with one o' the foremen, who owed me arf-a-dollar, and he made that all right.

"We all 'ave our faults, Bill," he ses as 'e went out, "and I suppose she was better looking once upon a time?"

I didn't answer 'im. I shut the wicket arter 'im, quick, and turned the key, and then I went on with my work. For a long time everything was as quiet as the grave, and then there came just one little pull at the bell. Five minutes arterwards there was another.

I thought it was that woman, but I 'ad to make sure. When it came the third time I crept up to the gate.

"Halloa!" I ses. "Who is it?"

"Me, darling," ses a voice I reckernized as the potman's. "Your missus wants to come in and sit down."

I could 'ear several people talking, and it seemed to me there was quite a crowd out there, and by and by that bell was going like mad. Then people started kicking the gate, and shouting, but I took no notice until, presently, it left off all of a sudden, and I 'eard a loud voice asking what it was all about. I suppose there was about fifty of 'em all telling it at once, and then there was the sound of a fist on the gate.

"Who is it?" I ses.

"Police," ses the voice.

I opened the wicket then and looked out. A couple o' policemen was standing by the gate and arf the riff-raff of Wapping behind 'em.



“Wot’s all this about?” ses one o’ the policemen.

I shook my ’ead. “Ask me another,” I ses. “Your missus is causing a disturbance,” he ses.

“She’s not my missus,” I ses; “she’s a complete stranger to me.”

“And causing a crowd to collect and refusing to go away,” ses the other policeman.

“That’s your business,” I ses. “It’s nothing to do with me.”

They talked to each other for a moment, and then they spoke to the woman. I didn’t ’ear wot she said, but I saw her shake her ’ead, and a’most direckly arterwards she was marching away between the two policemen with the crowd follering and advising ’er where to kick ’em.

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I was a bit worried at fust—not about her—and then I began to think that p'raps it was the best thing that could have 'appened.

I went 'ome in the morning with a load lifted off my mind; but I 'adn't been in the 'ouse two seconds afore my missus started to put it on agin. Fust of all she asked me 'ow I dared to come into the 'ouse, and then she wanted to know wot I meant by leaving her at 'ome and going out for the day with another woman.

"You told me to," I ses.

"Oh, yes," she ses, trembling with temper. "You always do wot I tell you, don't you? Always 'ave, especially when it's anything you like."

She fetched a bucket o' water and scrubbed the kitchen while I was having my brekfuss, but I kept my eye on 'er, and, the moment she 'ad finished, I did the perlite and emptied the bucket for 'er, to prevent mistakes.

I read about the case in the Sunday paper, and I'm thankful to say my name wasn't in it. All the magistrate done was to make 'er promise that she wouldn't do it again, and then he let 'er go. I should ha' felt more comfortable if he 'ad given 'er five years, but, as it turned out, it didn't matter. Her 'usband happened to read it, and, whether 'e was tired of living alone, or whether he was excited by 'caring that she 'ad got a little general shop, 'e went back to her.

The fust I knew about it was they came round to the wharf to see me. He 'ad been a fine-looking chap in 'is day, and even then 'e was enough like me for me to see 'ow she 'ad made the mistake; and all the time she was telling me 'ow it 'appened, he was looking me up and down and sniffing.

"'Ave you got a cold?" I ses, at last.

"Wot's that got to do with you?" he ses. "Wot do you mean by walking out with my wife? That's what I've come to talk about."

For a moment I thought that his bad luck 'ad turned 'is brain. "You've got it wrong," I ses, as soon as I could speak. "She walked out with me."

"Cos she thought you was her 'usband," he ses, "but you didn't think you was me, did you?"

"'Course I didn't," I ses.

"Then 'ow dare you walk out with 'er?" he ses.

“Look ’ere!” I ses. “You get off ’ome as quick as you like. I’ve ’ad about enough of your family. Go on, hook it.”

Afore I could put my ’ands up he ’it me hard in the mouth, and the next moment we was at it as ’ard as we could go. Nearly every time I hit ’im he wasn’t there, and every time ’e hit me I wished I hadn’t ha’ been. When I said I had ’ad enough, ’e contradicted me and kept on, but he got tired of it at last, and, arter telling me wot he would do if I ever walked ’is wife out agin, they went off like a couple o’ love-birds.

By the time I got ’ome next morning my eyes was so swelled up I could ’ardly see, and my nose wouldn’t let me touch it. I was so done up I could ’ardly speak, but I managed to tell my missus about it arter I had ’ad a cup o’ tea. Judging by her face anybody might ha’ thought I was telling ’er something funny, and, when I ’ad finished, she looks up at the ceiling and ses:

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"I 'ope it'll be a lesson to you," she ses.