

Back to Back eBook

Back to Back by W. W. Jacobs

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Mrs. Scutts, concealed behind the curtain, gazed at the cab in uneasy amazement. The cabman clambered down from the box and, opening the door, stood by with his hands extended ready for any help that might be needed. A stranger was the first to alight, and, with his back towards Mrs. Scutts, seemed to be struggling with something in the cab. He placed a dangling hand about his neck and, staggering under the weight, reeled backwards supporting Mr. Scutts, whose other arm was round the neck of a third man. In a flash Mrs. Scutts was at the door.

"Oh, Bill!" she gasped. "And by daylight, too!"

Mr. Scutts raised his head sharply and his lips parted; then his head sank again, and he became a dead weight in the grasp of his assistants.

"He's all right," said one of them, turning to Mrs. Scutts.

A deep groan from Mr. Scutts confirmed the statement.

"What is it?" inquired his wife, anxiously.

"Just a little bit of a railway accident," said one of the strangers. "Train ran into some empty trucks. Nobody hurt—seriously," he added, in response to a terrible and annoyed groan from Mr. Scutts.

With his feet dragging helplessly, Mr. Scutts was conveyed over his own doorstep and placed on the sofa.

"All the others went off home on their own legs," said one of the strangers, reproachfully. "He said he couldn't walk, and he wouldn't go to a hospital."

"Wanted to die at home," declared the sufferer. "I ain't going to be cut about at no 'ospitals."

The two strangers stood by watching him; then they looked at each other.

I don't want—no—'ospitals," gasped Mr. Scutts, "I'm going to have my own doctor."

"Of course the company will pay the doctor's bill," said one of the strangers to Mrs. Scutts or they'll send their own doctor. I expect he'll be all right to-morrow."

"I 'ope so," said Mr. Scutts, "but I don't think it. Thank you for bringing of me 'ome."

He closed his eyes languidly, and kept them closed until the men had departed.

“Can’t you walk, Bill?” inquired the tearful Mrs. Scutts.

Her husband shook his head. “You go and fetch the doctor,” he said, slowly. “That new one round the corner.”

“He looks such a boy,” objected Mrs. Scutts.

“You go and fetch ’im,” said Mr. Scutts, raising his voice. “D’ye hear!”

“But—” began his wife.

“If I get up to you, my gal,” said the forgetful Mr. Scutts, “you’ll know it.”

“Why, I thought—” said his wife, in surprise.

Mr. Scutts raised himself on the sofa and shook his fist at her. Then, as a tribute to appearances, he sank back and groaned again. Mrs. Scutts, looking somewhat relieved, took her bonnet from a nail and departed.

The examination was long and tedious, but Mr. Scutts, beyond remarking that he felt chilly, made no complaint. He endeavoured, but in vain, to perform the tests suggested, and even did his best to stand, supported by his medical attendant. Self-preservation is the law of Nature, and when Mr. Scutts’s legs and back gave way he saw to it that the doctor was underneath.

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"We'll have to get you up to bed," said the latter, rising slowly and dusting himself.

Mr. Scutts, who was lying full length on the floor, acquiesced, and sent his wife for some neighbours. One of them was a professional furniture-remover, and, half-way up the narrow stairs, the unfortunate had to remind him that he was dealing with a British working man, and not a piano. Four pairs of hands deposited Mr. Scutts with mathematical precision in the centre of the bed and then proceeded to tuck him in, while Mrs. Scutts drew the sheet in a straight line under his chin.

"Don't look much the matter with 'im," said one of the assistants.

"You can't tell with a face like that," said the furniture-remover. "It's wot you might call a 'appy face. Why, he was 'arf smiling as we, carried 'im up the stairs."

"You're a liar," said Mr. Scutts, opening his eyes.

"All right, mate," said the furniture-remover; "all right. There's no call to get annoyed about it. Good old English pluck, I call it. Where d'you feel the pain?"

"All over," said Mr. Scutts, briefly.

His neighbours regarded him with sympathetic eyes, and then, led by the furniture-remover, filed out of the room on tip-toe. The doctor, with a few parting instructions, also took his departure.

"If you're not better by the morning," he said, pausing at the door, "you must send for your club doctor."

Mr. Scutts, in a feeble voice, thanked him, and lay with a twisted smile on his face listening to his wife's vivid narrative to the little crowd which had collected at the front door. She came back, followed by the next-door neighbour, Mr. James Flynn, whose offers of assistance ranged from carrying Mr. Scutts out pick-a-back when he wanted to take the air, to filling his pipe for him and fetching his beer.

"But I dare say you'll be up and about in a couple o' days," he concluded. "You wouldn't look so well if you'd got anything serious the matter; rosy, fat cheeks and——"

"That'll do," said the indignant invalid. "It's my back that's hurt, not my face."

"I know," said Mr. Flynn, nodding sagely; "but if it was hurt bad your face would be as white as that sheet-whiter."

"The doctor said as he was to be kep' quiet," remarked Mrs. Scutts, sharply.



“Right-o,” said Mr. Flynn. “Ta-ta, old pal. Keep your pecker up, and if you want your back rubbed with turps, or anything of that sort, just knock on the wall.”

He went, before Mr. Scutts could think of a reply suitable for an invalid and, at the same time, bristling with virility. A sinful and foolish desire to leap out of bed and help Mr. Flynn downstairs made him more rubicund than ever.

He sent for the club doctor next morning, and, pending his arrival, partook of a basin of arrowroot and drank a little beef-tea. A bottle of castor-oil and an empty pill-box on the table by the bedside added a little local colour to the scene.

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"Any pain?" inquired the doctor, after an examination in which bony and very cold fingers had played a prominent part.

"Not much pain," said Mr. Scutts. "Don't seem to have no strength in my back."

"Ah!" said the doctor.

"I tried to get up this morning to go to my work," said Mr. Scutts, "but I can't stand! couldn't get out of bed."

"Fearfully upset, he was, pore dear," testified Mrs. Scutts. "He can't bear losing a day. I s'pose—I s'pose the railway company will 'ave to do something if it's serious, won't they, sir?"

"Nothing to do with me," said the doctor. "I'll put him on the club for a few days; I expect he will be all right soon. He's got a healthy colour—a very healthy colour."

Mr. Scutts waited until he had left the house and then made a few remarks on the colour question that for impurity of English and strength of diction have probably never been surpassed.

A second visitor that day came after dinner—a tall man in a frock-coat, bearing in his hand a silk hat, which, after a careful survey of the room, he hung on a knob of the bedpost.

"Mr. Scutts?" he inquired, bowing.

"That's me," said Mr. Scutts, in a feeble voice.

"I've called from the railway company," said the stranger. "We have seen now all those who left their names and addresses on Monday afternoon, and I am glad to say that nobody was really hurt. Nobody."

Mr. Scutts, in a faint voice, said he was glad to hear it.

"Been a wonder if they had," said the other, cheerfully. "Why, even the paint wasn't knocked off the engine. The most serious damage appears to be two top-hats crushed and an umbrella broken."

He leaned over the bed-rail and laughed joyously. Mr. Scutts, through half-closed eyes, gazed at him in silent reproach.

"I don't say that one or two people didn't receive a little bit of a shock to their nerves," said the visitor, thoughtfully. "One lady even stayed in bed next day. However, I made it all right with them. The company is very generous, and although of course there is no

legal obligation, they made several of them a present of a few pounds, so that they could go away for a little change, or anything of that sort, to quiet their nerves.”

Mr. Scutts, who had been listening with closed eyes, opened them languidly and said, “Oh.”

“I gave one gentleman twen-ty pounds!” said the visitor, jingling some coins in his trouser-pocket. “I never saw a man so pleased and grateful in my life. When he signed the receipt for it—I always get them to sign a receipt, so that the company can see that I haven’t kept the money for myself—he nearly wept with joy.”

“I should think he would,” said Mr. Scutts, slowly—“if he wasn’t hurt.”

“You’re the last on my list,” said the other, hastily. He produced a slip of paper from his pocket-book and placed it on the small table, with a fountain pen. Then, with a smile that was both tender and playful, he plunged his hand in his pocket and poured a stream of gold on the table.

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"What do you say to thir-ty pounds?" he said, in a hushed voice. "Thirty golden goblins?"

"What for?" inquired Mr. Scutts, with a notable lack of interest.

"For—well, to go away for a day or two," said the visitor. "I find you in bed; it may be a cold or a bilious attack; or perhaps you had a little upset of the nerves when the trains kissed each other."

"I'm in bed—because—I can't walk-or stand," said Mr. Scutts, speaking very distinctly. "I'm on my club, and if as 'ow I get well in a day or two, there's no reason why the company should give me any money. I'm pore, but I'm honest."

"Take my advice as a friend," said the other; "take the money while you can get it."

He nodded significantly at Mr. Scutts and closed one eye. Mr. Scutts closed both of his.

"I 'ad my back hurt in the collision," he said, after a long pause. "I 'ad to be helped 'ome. So far it seems to get worse, but I 'ope for the best."

"Dear me," said the visitor; "how sad! I suppose it has been coming on for a long time. Most of these back cases do. At least all the doctors say so."

"It was done in the collision," said Mr. Scutts, mildly but firmly. "I was as right as rain before then."

The visitor shook his head and smiled. "Ah! you would have great difficulty in proving that," he said, softly; "in fact, speaking as man to man, I don't mind telling you it would be impossible. I'm afraid I'm exceeding my duty, but, as you're the last on my list, suppose—suppose we say forty pounds. Forty! A small fortune."

He added some more gold to the pile on the table, and gently tapped Mr. Scutts's arm with the end of the pen.

"Good afternoon," said the invalid.

The visitor, justly concerned at his lack of intelligence, took a seat on the edge of the bed and spoke to him as a friend and a brother, but in vain. Mr. Scutts reminded him at last that it was medicine-time, after which, pain and weakness permitting, he was going to try to get a little sleep.

"Forty pounds!" he said to his wife, after the official had departed. "Why didn't 'e offer me a bag o' sweets?"

"It's a lot o' money," said Mrs. Scutts, wistfully.



"So's a thousand," said her husband. "I ain't going to 'ave my back broke for nothing, I can tell you. Now, you keep that mouth o' yours shut, and if I get it, you shall 'ave a new pair o' boots."

"A thousand!" exclaimed the startled Mrs. Scutts. "Have you took leave of your senses, or what?"

"I read a case in the paper where a man got it," said Mr. Scutts. "He 'ad his back 'urt too, pore chap. How would you like to lay on your back all your life for a thousand pounds?"

"Will you 'ave to lay abed all your life?" inquired his wife, staring.

"Wait till I get the money," said Mr. Scutts; "then I might be able to tell you better."

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He gazed wistfully at the window. It was late October, but the sun shone and the air was clear. The sound of traffic and cheerful voices ascended from the little street. To Mr. Scutts it all seemed to be a part of a distant past.

"If that chap comes round to-morrow and offers me five hundred," he said, slowly, "I don't know as I won't take it. I'm sick of this mouldy bed."

He waited expectantly next day, but nothing happened, and after a week of bed he began to realize that the job might be a long one. The monotony, to a man of his active habits, became almost intolerable, and the narrated adventures of Mr. James Flynn, his only caller, filled him with an uncontrollable longing to be up and doing.

The fine weather went, and Mr. Scutts, in his tumbled bed, lay watching the rain beating softly on the window-panes. Then one morning he awoke to the darkness of a London fog.

"It gets worse and worse," said Mrs. Scutts, as she returned home in the afternoon with a relish for his tea. "Can't see your 'and before your face."

Mr. Scutts looked thoughtful. He ate his tea in silence, and after he had finished lit his pipe and sat up in bed smoking.

"Penny for your thoughts," said his wife.

"I'm going out," said Mr. Scutts, in a voice that defied opposition. "I'm going to 'ave a walk, and when I'm far enough away I'm going to 'ave one or two drinks. I believe this fog is sent a-purpose to save my life."

Mrs. Scutts remonstrated, but in vain, and at half-past six the invalid, with his cap over his eyes and a large scarf tied round the lower part of his face, listened for a moment at his front door and then disappeared in the fog.

Left to herself, Mrs. Scutts returned to the bedroom and, poking the tiny fire into a blaze, sat and pondered over the willfulness of men.

She was awakened from a doze by a knocking at the street-door. It was just eight o'clock, and, inwardly congratulating her husband on his return to common sense and home, she went down and opened it. Two tall men in silk hats entered the room.

"Mrs. Scutts?" said one of them.

Mrs. Scutts, in a dazed fashion, nodded.

"We have come to see your husband," said the intruder. "I am a doctor."

The panic-stricken Mrs. Scutts tried in vain to think.

“He-he’s asleep,” she said, at last.

“Doesn’t matter,” said the doctor.

“Not a bit,” said his companion.

“You—you can’t see him,” protested Mrs. Scutts. “He ain’t to be seen.”

“He’d be sorry to miss me,” said the doctor, eyeing her keenly as she stood on guard by the inner door. “I suppose he’s at home?”

“Of course,” said Mrs. Scutts, stammering and flushing. “Why, the pore man can’t stir from his bed.”

“Well, I’ll just peep in at the door, then,” said the doctor. “I won’t wake him. You can’t object to that. If you do—”

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Mrs. Scutts's head began to swim. "I'll go up and see whether he's awake," she said.

She closed the door on them and stood with her hand to her throat, thinking. Then, instead of going upstairs, she passed into the yard and, stepping over the fence, opened Mr. Flynn's back door.

"Halloa!" said that gentleman, who was standing in the scullery removing mud from his boots. "What's up?"

In a frenzied gabble Mrs. Scutts told him. "You must be 'im," she said, clutching him by the coat and dragging him towards the door. "They've never seen 'im, and they won't know the difference."

"But—" exclaimed the astonished James.

"Quick!" she said, sharply. "Go into the back room and undress, then nip into his room and get into bed. And mind, be fast asleep all the time."

Still holding the bewildered Mr. Flynn by the coat, she led him into the house and waved him upstairs, and stood below listening until a slight creaking of the bed announced that he had obeyed orders. Then she entered the parlour.

"He's fast asleep," she said, softly; "and mind, I won't 'ave him disturbed. It's the first real sleep he's 'ad for nearly a week. If you promise not to wake 'im you may just have a peep."

"We won't disturb him," said the doctor, and, followed by his companion, noiselessly ascended the stairs and peeped into the room. Mr. Flynn was fast asleep, and not a muscle moved as the two men approached the bed on tip-toe and stood looking at him. The doctor turned after a minute and led the way out of the room.

"We'll call again," he said, softly.

"Yes, sir," said Mrs. Scutts. "When?"

The doctor and his companion exchanged glances. "I'm very busy just at present," he said, slowly. "We'll look in some time and take our chance of catching him awake."

Mrs. Scutts bowed them out, and in some perplexity returned to Mr. Flynn. "I don't like the look of 'em," she said, shaking her head. "You'd better stay in bed till Bill comes 'ome in case they come back."

"Right-o," said the obliging Mr. Flynn. "Just step in and tell my landlady I'm 'aving a chat with Bill."

He lit his pipe and sat up in bed smoking until a knock at the front door at half-past eleven sent him off to sleep again. Mrs. Scutts, who was sitting downstairs, opened it and admitted her husband.

“All serene?” he inquired. “What are you looking like that for? What’s up?”

He sat quivering with alarm and rage as she told him, and then, mounting the stairs with a heavy tread, stood gazing in helpless fury at the slumbering form of Mr. James Flynn.

“Get out o’ my bed,” he said at last, in a choking voice.

“What, Bill!” said Mr. Flynn, opening his eyes.

“Get out o’ my bed,” repeated the other. “You’ve made a nice mess of it between you. It’s a fine thing if a man can’t go out for ’arf a pint without coming home and finding all the riffraff of the neighbourhood in ’is bed.”

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"Ow's the pore back, Bill?" inquired Mr. Flynn, with tenderness.

Mr. Scutts gurgled at him. "Outside!" he said as soon as he could get his breath.

"Bill," said the voice of Mrs. Scutts, outside the door.

"Halloa," growled her husband.

"He mustn't go," said Mrs. Scutts. "Those gentlemen are coming again, and they think he is you."

"*What!*" roared the infuriated Mr. Scutts.

"Don't you see? It's me what's got the pore back now, Bill," said Mr. Flynn. "You can't pass yourself off as me, Bill; you ain't good-looking enough."

Mr. Scutts, past speech, raised his clenched fists to the ceiling.

"He'll 'ave to stay in your bed," continued the voice of Mrs. Scutts. "He's got a good 'art, and I know he'll do it; won't you, Jim?"

Mr. Flynn pondered. "Tell my landlady in the morning that I've took your back room," he said. "What a fortunit thing it is I'm out o' work. What are you walking up and down like that for, Bill? Back coming on agin?"

"Then o' course," pursued the voice of Mrs. Scutts, in meditative accents, "there's the club doctor and the other gentleman that knows Bill. They might come at any moment. There's got to be two Bills in bed, so that if one party comes one Bill can nip into the back room, and if the other Bill—party, I mean—comes, the other Bill—you know what I mean!"

Mr. Scutts swore himself faint.

"That's 'ow it is, mate," said Mr. Flynn. "It's no good standing there saying your little piece of poetry to yourself. Take off your clo'es and get to bed like a little man. Now! now! Naughty! Naughty!"

"P'r'aps I oughn't to 'ave let 'em up, Bill," said his wife; "but I was afraid they'd smell a rat if I didn't. Besides, I was took by surprise."

"You get off to bed," said Mr. Scutts. "Get off to bed while you're safe."

"And get a good night's rest," added the thoughtful Mr. Flynn. "If Bill's back is took bad in the night I'll look after it."

Mr. Scutts turned a threatening face on him. "For two pins—" he began.

"For two pins I'll go back 'ome and stay there," said Mr. Flynn.

He put one muscular leg out of bed, and then, at the earnest request of Mr. Scutts, put it back again. In a few simple, manly words the latter apologized, by putting all the blame on Mrs. Scutts, and, removing his clothes, got into bed.

Wrapped in bedclothes, they passed the following day listening for knocks at the door and playing cards. By evening both men were weary, and Mr. Scutts made a few pointed remarks concerning dodging doctors and deceitful visitors to which Mr. Flynn listened in silent approval.

"They mightn't come for a week," he said, dismally. "It's all right for you, but where do I come in? Halves?"

Mr. Scutts had a rush of blood to the head.

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"You leave it to me, mate," he said, controlling himself by an effort. "If I get ten quid, say, you shall have 'arf."

"And suppose you get more?" demanded the other.

"We'll see," said Mr. Scutts, vaguely.

Mr. Flynn returned to the charge next day, but got no satisfaction. Mr. Scutts preferred to talk instead of the free board and lodging his friend was getting. On the subject of such pay for such work he was almost eloquent.

"I'll bide my time," said Mr. Flynn, darkly. "Treat me fair and I'll treat you fair."

His imprisonment came to an end on the fourth day. There was a knock at the door, and the sound of men's voices, followed by the hurried appearance of Mrs. Scutts.

"It's Jim's lot," she said, in a hurried whisper. "I've just come up to get the room ready."

Mr. Scutts took his friend by the hand, and after warmly urging him not to forget the expert instructions he had received concerning his back, slipped into the back room, and, a prey to forebodings, awaited the result.

"Well, he looks better," said the doctor, regarding Mr. Flynn.

"Much better," said his companion.

Mrs. Scutts shook her head. "His pore back don't seem no better, sir," she said in a low voice. "Can't you do something for it?"

"Let me have a look at it," said the doctor. "Undo your shirt."

Mr. Flynn, with slow fingers, fumbled with the button at his neck and looked hard at Mrs. Scutts.

"She can't bear to see me suffer," he said, in a feeble voice, as she left the room.

He bore the examination with the fortitude of an early Christian martyr. In response to inquiries he said he felt as though the mainspring of his back had gone.

"How long since you walked?" inquired the doctor.

"Not since the accident," said Mr. Flynn, firmly.

"Try now," said the doctor.

Mr. Flynn smiled at him reproachfully.

“You can’t walk because you think you can’t,” said the doctor; “that is all. You’ll have to be encouraged the same way that a child is. I should like to cure you, and I think I can.”

He took a small canvas bag from the other man and opened it. “Forty pounds,” he said. “Would you like to count it?”

Mr. Flynn’s eyes shone.

“It is all yours,” said the doctor, “if you can walk across the room and take it from that gentleman’s hand.”

“Honour bright?” asked Mr. Flynn, in tremulous tones, as the other man held up the bag and gave him an encouraging smile.

“Honour bright,” said the doctor.

With a spring that nearly broke the bed, Mr. Flynn quitted it and snatched the bag, and at the same moment Mrs. Scutts, impelled by a maddened arm, burst into the room.

“Your back!” she moaned. “It’ll kill you Get back to bed.”

“I’m cured, lovey,” said Mr. Flynn, simply.

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“His back is as strong as ever,” said the doctor, giving it a thump.

Mr. Flynn, who had taken his clothes from a chair and was hastily dressing himself, assented.

“But if you’ll wait ’arf a tick I’ll walk as far as the corner with you,” he said, quickly. “I’d like to make sure it’s all right.”

He paused at the foot of the stairs and, glancing up at the palid and murderous face of Mr. Scutts, which protruded from the back bedroom, smiled at him rapturously. Then, with a lordly air, he tossed him five pieces of gold.