

The Castaway eBook

The Castaway by W. W. Jacobs

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THE CASTAWAY

Mrs. John Boxer stood at the door of the shop with her hands clasped on her apron. The short day had drawn to a close, and the lamps in the narrow little thorough-fares of Shinglesea were already lit. For a time she stood listening to the regular beat of the sea on the beach some half-mile distant, and then with a slight shiver stepped back into the shop and closed the door.

[Illustration: "Mrs. John Boxer stood at the door of the shop with her hands clasped on her apron."]

The little shop with its wide-mouthed bottles of sweets was one of her earliest memories. Until her marriage she had known no other home, and when her husband was lost with the *North Star* some three years before, she gave up her home in Poplar and returned to assist her mother in the little shop.

In a restless mood she took up a piece of needle-work, and a minute or two later put it down again. A glance through the glass of the door leading into the small parlour revealed Mrs. Gimpson, with a red shawl round her shoulders, asleep in her easy-chair.

Mrs. Boxer turned at the clang of the shop bell, and then, with a wild cry, stood gazing at the figure of a man standing in the door-way. He was short and bearded, with oddly shaped shoulders, and a left leg which was not a match; but the next moment Mrs. Boxer was in his arms sobbing and laughing together.

Mrs. Gimpson, whose nerves were still quivering owing to the suddenness with which she had been awakened, came into the shop; Mr. Boxer freed an arm, and placing it round her waist kissed her with some affection on the chin.

"He's come back!" cried Mrs. Boxer, hysterically.

"Thank goodness," said Mrs. Gimpson, after a moment's deliberation.

"He's alive!" cried Mrs. Boxer. "He's alive !"

She half-dragged and half-led him into the small parlour, and thrusting him into the easy-chair lately vacated by Mrs. Gimpson seated herself upon his knee, regardless in her excitement that the rightful owner was with elaborate care selecting the most uncomfortable chair in the room.

"Fancy his coming back!" said Mrs. Boxer, wiping her eyes. "How did you escape, John? Where have you been? Tell us all about it."

Mr. Boxer sighed. "It 'ud be a long story if I had the gift of telling of it," he said, slowly, "but I'll cut it short for the present. When the *North Star* went down in the South Pacific most o' the hands got away in the boats, but I was too late. I got this crack on the head with something falling on it from aloft. Look here."

He bent his head, and Mrs. Boxer, separating the stubble with her fingers, uttered an exclamation of pity and alarm at the extent of the scar; Mrs. Gimpson, craning forward, uttered a sound which might mean anything—even pity.

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"When I come to my senses," continued Mr. Boxer, "the ship was sinking, and I just got to my feet when she went down and took me with her. How I escaped I don't know. I seemed to be choking and fighting for my breath for years, and then I found myself floating on the sea and clinging to a grating. I clung to it all night, and next day I was picked up by a native who was paddling about in a canoe, and taken ashore to an island, where I lived for over two years. It was right out o' the way o' craft, but at last I was picked up by a trading schooner named the *Pearl*, belonging to Sydney, and taken there. At Sydney I shipped aboard the *Marston Towers*, a steamer, and landed at the Albert Docks this morning."

"Poor John," said his wife, holding on to his arm. "How you must have suffered!"

"I did," said Mr. Boxer. "Mother got a cold?" he inquired, eying that lady.

"No, I ain't," said Mrs. Gimpson, answering for herself. "Why didn't you write when you got to Sydney?"

"Didn't know where to write to," replied Mr. Boxer, staring. "I didn't know where Mary had gone to."

"You might ha' wrote here," said Mrs. Gimpson.

"Didn't think of it at the time," said Mr. Boxer. "One thing is, I was very busy at Sydney, looking for a ship. However, I'm 'ere now."

"I always felt you'd turn up some day," said Mrs. Gimpson. "I felt certain of it in my own mind. Mary made sure you was dead, but I said 'no, I knew better.'"

There was something in Mrs. Gimpson's manner of saying this that impressed her listeners unfavourably. The impression was deepened when, after a short, dry laugh a *propos* of nothing, she sniffed again—three times.

"Well, you turned out to be right," said Mr. Boxer, shortly.

"I gin'rally am," was the reply; "there's very few people can take me in."

She sniffed again.

"Were the natives kind to you?" inquired Mrs. Boxer, hastily, as she turned to her husband.

"Very kind," said the latter. "Ah! you ought to have seen that island. Beautiful yellow sands and palm-trees; cocoa-nuts to be 'ad for the picking, and nothing to do all day but lay about in the sun and swim in the sea."

"Any public-'ouses there?" inquired Mrs. Gimpson.

"Cert'nly not," said her son-in-law. "This was an island—one o' the little islands in the South Pacific Ocean."

"What did you say the name o' the schooner was?" inquired Mrs. Gimpson.

"*Pearl*," replied Mr. Boxer, with the air of a resentful witness under cross-examination.

"And what was the name o' the captin?" said Mrs. Gimpson.

"Thomas—Henery—Walter—Smith," said Mr. Boxer, with somewhat unpleasant emphasis.

"An' the mate's name?"

"John Brown," was the reply.

"Common names," commented Mrs. Gimpson, "very common. But I knew you'd come back all right—I never 'ad no alarm. 'He's safe and happy, my dear,' I says. 'He'll come back all in his own good time.'"

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"What d'you mean by that?" demanded the sensitive Mr. Boxer. "I come back as soon as I could."

"You know you were anxious, mother," interposed her daughter. "Why, you insisted upon our going to see old Mr. Silver about it."

"Ah! but I wasn't uneasy or anxious afterwards," said Mrs. Gimpson, compressing her lips.

"Who's old Mr. Silver, and what should he know about it?" inquired Mr. Boxer.

"He's a fortune-teller," replied his wife. "Reads the stars," said his mother-in-law.

Mr. Boxer laughed—a good ringing laugh. "What did he tell you?" he inquired. "Nothing," said his wife, hastily. "Ah!" said Mr. Boxer, waggishly, "that was wise of 'im. Most of us could tell fortunes that way."

"That's wrong," said Mrs. Gimpson to her daughter, sharply. "Right's right any day, and truth's truth. He said that he knew all about John and what he'd been doing, but he wouldn't tell us for fear of 'urting our feelings and making mischief."

"Here, look 'ere," said Mr. Boxer, starting up; "I've 'ad about enough o' this. Why don't you speak out what you mean? I'll mischief 'im, the old humbug. Old rascal."

"Never mind, John," said his wife, laying her hand upon his arm. "Here you are safe and sound, and as for old Mr. Silver, there's a lot o' people don't believe in him."

"Ah! they don't want to," said Mrs. Gimpson, obstinately. "But don't forget that he foretold my cough last winter."

"Well, look 'ere," said Mr. Boxer, twisting his short, blunt nose into as near an imitation of a sneer as he could manage, "I've told you my story and I've got witnesses to prove it. You can write to the master of the Marston Towers if you like, and other people besides. Very well, then; let's go and see your precious old fortune-teller. You needn't say who I am; say I'm a friend, and tell 'im never to mind about making mischief, but to say right out where I am and what I've been doing all this time. I have my 'opes it'll cure you of your superstitiousness."

[Illustration: "'Well, look 'ere,' said Mr. Boxer, 'I've told you my story and I've got witnesses to prove it.'"]

"We'll go round after we've shut up, mother," said Mrs. Boxer. "We'll have a bit o' supper first and then start early."

Mrs. Gimpson hesitated. It is never pleasant to submit one's superstitions to the tests of the unbelieving, but after the attitude she had taken up she was extremely loath to allow her son-in-law a triumph.

"Never mind, we'll say no more about it," she said, primly, "but I 'ave my own ideas."

"I dessay," said Mr. Boxer; "but you're afraid for us to go to your old fortune-teller. It would be too much of a show-up for 'im."

"It's no good your trying to aggravate me, John Boxer, because you can't do it," said Mrs. Gimpson, in a voice trembling with passion.

"O' course, if people like being deceived they must be," said Mr. Boxer; "we've all got to live, and if we'd all got our common sense fortune-tellers couldn't. Does he tell fortunes by tea-leaves or by the colour of your eyes?"

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"Laugh away, John Boxer," said Mrs. Gimpson, icily; "but I shouldn't have been alive now if it hadn't ha' been for Mr. Silver's warnings."

"Mother stayed in bed for the first ten days in July," explained Mrs. Boxer, "to avoid being bit by a mad dog."

"Tchee—tchee—tchee," said the hapless Mr. Boxer, putting his hand over his mouth and making noble efforts to restrain himself; "tchee—tch

"I s'pose you'd ha' laughed more if I 'ad been bit?" said the glaring Mrs. Gimpson.

"Well, who did the dog bite after all?" inquired Mr. Boxer, recovering.

"You don't understand," replied Mrs. Gimpson, pityingly; "me being safe up in bed and the door locked, there was no mad dog. There was no use for it."

"Well," said Mr. Boxer, "me and Mary's going round to see that old deceiver after supper, whether you come or not. Mary shall tell 'im I'm a friend, and ask him to tell her everything about 'er husband. Nobody knows me here, and Mary and me'll be affectionate like, and give 'im to understand we want to marry. Then he won't mind making mischief."

"You'd better leave well alone," said Mrs. Gimpson.

Mr. Boxer shook his head. "I was always one for a bit o' fun," he said, slowly. "I want to see his face when he finds out who I am."

Mrs. Gimpson made no reply; she was looking round for the market-basket, and having found it she left the reunited couple to keep house while she went out to obtain a supper which should, in her daughter's eyes, be worthy of the occasion.

She went to the High Street first and made her purchases, and was on the way back again when, in response to a sudden impulse, as she passed the end of Crowner's Alley, she turned into that small by-way and knocked at the astrologer's door.

A slow, dragging footstep was heard approaching in reply to the summons, and the astrologer, recognising his visitor as one of his most faithful and credulous clients, invited her to step inside. Mrs. Gimpson complied, and, taking a chair, gazed at the venerable white beard and small, red-rimmed eyes of her host in some perplexity as to how to begin.

"My daughter's coming round to see you presently," she said, at last.

The astrologer nodded.

“She—she wants to ask you about ‘er husband,” faltered Mrs. Gimpson; “she’s going to bring a friend with her—a man who doesn’t believe in your knowledge. He—he knows all about my daughter’s husband, and he wants to see what you say you know about him.”

The old man put on a pair of huge horn spectacles and eyed her carefully.

“You’ve got something on your mind,” he said, at last; “you’d better tell me everything.”

Mrs. Gimpson shook her head.

“There’s some danger hanging over you,” continued Mr. Silver, in a low, thrilling voice; “some danger in connection with your son-in-law. There” he waved a lean, shrivelled hand backward and for-ward as though dispelling a fog, and peered into distance—— “there is something forming over you. You—or somebody—are hiding something from me.”

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[Illustration: "There is something forming over you."]

Mrs. Gimpson, aghast at such omniscience, sank backward in her chair.

"Speak," said the old man, gently; "there is no reason why you should be sacrificed for others."

Mrs. Gimpson was of the same opinion, and in some haste she reeled off the events of the evening. She had a good memory, and no detail was lost.

"Strange, strange," said the venerable Mr. Silver, when he had finished. "He is an ingenious man."

"Isn't it true?" inquired his listener. "He says he can prove it. And he is going to find out what you meant by saying you were afraid of making mischief."

"He can prove some of it," said the old man, his eyes snapping spitefully. "I can guarantee that."

"But it wouldn't have made mischief if you had told us that," ventured Mrs. Gimpson. "A man can't help being cast away."

"True," said the astrologer, slowly; "true. But let them come and question me; and whatever you do, for your own sake don't let a soul know that you have been here. If you do, the danger to yourself will be so terrible that even I may be unable to help you."

Mrs. Gimpson shivered, and more than ever impressed by his marvellous powers made her way slowly home, where she found the unconscious Mr. Boxer relating his adventures again with much gusto to a married couple from next door.

"It's a wonder he's alive," said Mr. Jem Thompson, looking up as the old woman entered the room; "it sounds like a story-book. Show us that cut on your head again, mate."

The obliging Mr. Boxer complied.

"We're going on with 'em after they've 'ad sup-per," continued Mr. Thompson, as he and his wife rose to depart. "It'll be a fair treat to me to see old Silver bowled out."

Mrs. Gimpson sniffed and eyed his retreating figure disparagingly; Mrs. Boxer, prompted by her husband, began to set the table for supper.

It was a lengthy meal, owing principally to Mr. Boxer, but it was over at last, and after that gentleman had assisted in shutting up the shop they joined the Thompsons, who were waiting outside, and set off for Crowner's Alley. The way was enlivened by Mr. Boxer, who had thrills of horror every ten yards at the idea of the supernatural things he

was about to witness, and by Mr. Thompson, who, not to be outdone, persisted in standing stock-still at frequent intervals until he had received the assurances of his giggling better-half that he would not be made to vanish in a cloud of smoke.

By the time they reached Mr. Silver's abode the party had regained its decorum, and, except for a tremendous shudder on the part of Mr. Boxer as his gaze fell on a couple of skulls which decorated the magician's table, their behaviour left nothing to be desired. Mrs. Gimpson, in a few awkward words, announced the occasion of their visit. Mr. Boxer she introduced as a friend of the family from London.

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"I will do what I can," said the old man, slowly, as his visitors seated themselves, "but I can only tell you what I see. If I do not see all, or see clearly, it cannot be helped."

Mr. Boxer winked at Mr. Thompson, and received an understanding pinch in return; Mrs. Thompson in a hot whisper told them to behave themselves.

The mystic preparations were soon complete. A little cloud of smoke, through which the fierce red eyes of the astrologer peered keenly at Mr. Boxer, rose from the table. Then he poured various liquids into a small china bowl and, holding up his hand to command silence, gazed steadfastly into it. "I see pictures," he announced, in a deep voice. "The docks of a great city; London. I see an ill-shaped man with a bent left leg standing on the deck of a ship."

Mr. Thompson, his eyes wide open with surprise, jerked Mr. Boxer in the ribs, but Mr. Boxer, whose figure was a sore point with him, made no response.

"The ship leaves the docks," continued Mr. Silver, still peering into the bowl. "As she passes through the entrance her stern comes into view with the name painted on it. The—the—the——"

"Look agin, old chap," growled Mr. Boxer, in an undertone.

"The North Star," said the astrologer. "The ill-shaped man is still standing on the fore-part of the ship; I do not know his name or who he is. He takes the portrait of a beautiful young woman from his pocket and gazes at it earnestly."

Mrs. Boxer, who had no illusions on the subject of her personal appearance, sat up as though she had been stung; Mr. Thompson, who was about to nudge Mr. Boxer in the ribs again, thought better of it and assumed an air of uncompromising virtue.

"The picture disappears," said Mr. Silver. "Ah! I see; I see. A ship in a gale at sea. It is the North Star; it is sinking. The ill-shaped man sheds tears and loses his head. I cannot discover the name of this man."

Mr. Boxer, who had been several times on the point of interrupting, cleared his throat and endeavoured to look unconcerned.

"The ship sinks," continued the astrologer, in thrilling tones. "Ah! what is this? a piece of wreck-age with a monkey clinging to it? No, no-o. The ill-shaped man again. Dear me!"

[Illustration: "Ah! what is this? a piece of wreckage with a monkey clinging to it?"]

His listeners sat spellbound. Only the laboured and intense breathing of Mr. Boxer broke the silence.

“He is alone on the boundless sea,” pursued the seer; “night falls. Day breaks, and a canoe propelled by a slender and pretty but dusky maiden approaches the castaway. She assists him into the canoe and his head sinks on her lap, as with vigorous strokes of her paddle she propels the canoe toward a small island fringed with palm trees.”

“Here, look ’ere—” began the overwrought Mr. Boxer.

“H’sh, h’sh!” ejaculated the keenly interested Mr. Thompson. “W’y don’t you keep quiet?”

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"The picture fades," continued the old man. "I see another: a native wedding. It is the dusky maiden and the man she rescued. Ah! the wedding is interrupted; a young man, a native, breaks into the group. He has a long knife in his hand. He springs upon the ill-shaped man and wounds him in the head."

Involuntarily Mr. Boxer's hand went up to his honourable scar, and the heads of the others swung round to gaze at it. Mrs. Boxer's face was terrible in its expression, but Mrs. Gimpson's bore the look of sad and patient triumph of one who knew men and could not be surprised at anything they do.

"The scene vanishes," resumed the monotonous voice, "and another one forms. The same man stands on the deck of a small ship. The name on the stern is the Peer—no, Paris—no, no, no, Pearl. It fades from the shore where the dusky maiden stands with hands stretched out imploringly. The ill-shaped man smiles and takes the portrait of the young and beautiful girl from his pocket."

"Look 'ere," said the infuriated Mr. Boxer, "I think we've 'ad about enough of this rubbish. I have—more than enough."

"I don't wonder at it," said his wife, trembling furiously. "You can go if you like. I'm going to stay and hear all that there is to hear."

"You sit quiet," urged the intensely interested Mr. Thompson. "He ain't said it's you. There's more than one misshaped man in the world, I s'pose?"

"I see an ocean liner," said the seer, who had appeared to be in a trance state during this colloquy. "She is sailing for England from Australia. I see the name distinctly: the *Marston Towers*. The same man is on board of her. The ship arrives at London. The scene closes; another one forms. The ill-shaped man is sitting with a woman with a beautiful face—not the same as the photograph."

"What they can see in him I can't think," muttered Mr. Thompson, in an envious whisper. "He's a perfick terror, and to look at him——"

"They sit hand in hand," continued the astrologer, raising his voice. "She smiles up at him and gently strokes his head; he——"

A loud smack rang through the room and startled the entire company; Mrs. Boxer, unable to contain herself any longer, had, so far from profiting by the example, gone to the other extreme and slapped her husband's head with hearty good-will. Mr. Boxer sprang raging to his feet, and in the confusion which ensued the fortune-teller, to the great regret of Mr. Thompson, upset the contents of the magic bowl.

"I can see no more," he said, sinking hastily into his chair behind the table as Mr. Boxer advanced upon him.

Mrs. Gimpson pushed her son-in-law aside, and laying a modest fee upon the table took her daughter's arm and led her out. The Thompsons followed, and Mr. Boxer, after an irresolute glance in the direction of the ingenuous Mr. Silver, made his way after them and fell into the rear. The people in front walked on for some time in silence, and then the voice of the greatly impressed Mrs. Thompson was heard, to the effect that if there were only more fortune-tellers in the world there would be a lot more better men.

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Mr. Boxer trotted up to his wife's side. "Look here, Mary," he began.

"Don't you speak to me," said his wife, drawing closer to her mother, "because I won't answer you."

Mr. Boxer laughed, bitterly. "This is a nice home-coming," he remarked.

He fell to the rear again and walked along raging, his temper by no means being improved by observing that Mrs. Thompson, doubtless with a firm belief in the saying that "Evil communications corrupt good manners," kept a tight hold of her husband's arm. His position as an outcast was clearly defined, and he ground his teeth with rage as he observed the virtuous uprightness of Mrs. Gimpson's back. By the time they reached home he was in a spirit of mad recklessness far in advance of the character given him by the astrologer.

His wife gazed at him with a look of such strong interrogation as he was about to follow her into the house that he paused with his foot on the step and eyed her dumbly.

"Have you left anything inside that you want?" she inquired.

[Illustration: "'Have you left anything inside that you want?' she inquired."]

Mr. Boxer shook his head. "I only wanted to come in and make a clean breast of it," he said, in a curious voice; "then I'll go."

Mrs. Gimpson stood aside to let him pass, and Mr. Thompson, not to be denied, followed close behind with his faintly protesting wife. They sat down in a row against the wall, and Mr. Boxer, sitting opposite in a hang-dog fashion, eyed them with scornful wrath.

"Well?" said Mrs. Boxer, at last.

"All that he said was quite true," said her husband, defiantly. "The only thing is, he didn't tell the arf of it. Altogether, I married three dusky maidens."

Everybody but Mr. Thompson shuddered with horror.

"Then I married a white girl in Australia," pursued Mr. Boxer, musingly. "I wonder old Silver didn't see that in the bowl; not arf a fortune-teller, I call 'im."

"What they see in 'im!" whispered the astounded Mr. Thompson to his wife.

"And did you marry the beautiful girl in the photograph?" demanded Mrs. Boxer, in trembling accents.

"I did," said her husband.

"Hussy," cried Mrs. Boxer.

"I married her," said Mr. Boxer, considering—"I married her at Camberwell, in eighteen ninety-three."

"Eighteen ninety-three!" said his wife, in a startled voice. "But you couldn't. Why, you didn't marry me till eighteen ninety-four."

"What's that got to do with it?" inquired the monster, calmly.

Mrs. Boxer, pale as ashes, rose from her seat and stood gazing at him with horror-struck eyes, trying in vain to speak.

"You villain!" cried Mrs. Gimpson, violently. "I always distrusted you."

[Illustration: "'You villain!' cried Mrs. Gimpson, violently. 'I always distrusted you.'"]

"I know you did," said Mr. Boxer, calmly. "You've been committing bigamy," cried Mrs. Gimpson.

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"Over and over agin," assented Mr. Boxer, cheerfully. "It's got to be a 'obby with me."

"Was the first wife alive when you married my daughter?" demanded Mrs. Gimpson.

"Alive?" said Mr. Boxer. "O' course she was. She's alive now—bless her."

He leaned back in his chair and regarded with intense satisfaction the horrified faces of the group in front.

"You—you'll go to jail for this," cried Mrs. Gimpson, breathlessly. "What is your first wife's address?"

"I decline to answer that question," said her son-in-law.

"What is your first wife's address?" repeated Mrs. Gimpson.

"Ask the fortune-teller," said Mr. Boxer, with an aggravating smile. "And then get 'im up in the box as a witness, little bowl and all. He can tell you more than I can."

"I demand to know her name and address," cried Mrs. Gimpson, putting a bony arm around the waist of the trembling Mrs. Boxer.

"I decline to give it," said Mr. Boxer, with great relish. "It ain't likely I'm going to give myself away like that; besides, it's agin the law for a man to criminate himself. You go on and start your bigamy case, and call old red-eyes as a witness."

Mrs. Gimpson gazed at him in speechless wrath and then stooping down conversed in excited whispers with Mrs. Thompson. Mrs. Boxer crossed over to her husband.

"Oh, John," she wailed, "say it isn't true, say it isn't true."

Mr. Boxer hesitated. "What's the good o' me saying anything?" he said, doggedly.

"It isn't true," persisted his wife. "Say it isn't true."

"What I told you when I first came in this evening was quite true," said her husband, slowly. "And what I've just told you is as true as what that lying old fortune-teller told you. You can please yourself what you believe."

"I believe you, John," said his wife, humbly.

Mr. Boxer's countenance cleared and he drew her on to his knee.

"That's right," he said, cheerfully. "So long as you believe in me I don't care what other people think. And before I'm much older I'll find out how that old rascal got to know the names of the ships I was aboard. Seems to me somebody's been talking."