

Lawyer Quince eBook

Lawyer Quince by W. W. Jacobs

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LAWYER QUINCE

Lawyer Quince, so called by his neighbours in Little Haven from his readiness at all times to place at their disposal the legal lore he had acquired from a few old books while following his useful occupation of making boots, sat in a kind of wooden hutch at the side of his cottage plying his trade. The London coach had gone by in a cloud of dust some three hours before, and since then the wide village street had slumbered almost undisturbed in the sunshine.

[Illustration: "Lawyer Quince."]

Hearing footsteps and the sound of voices raised in dispute caused him to look up from his work. Mr. Rose, of Holly Farm, Hogg, the miller, and one or two neighbours of lesser degree appeared to be in earnest debate over some point of unusual difficulty.

Lawyer Quince took a pinch of snuff and bent to his work again. Mr. Rose was one of the very few who openly questioned his legal knowledge, and his gibes concerning it were only too frequent. Moreover, he had a taste for practical joking, which to a grave man was sometimes offensive.

"Well, here he be," said Mr. Hogg to the farmer, as the group halted in front of the hutch. "Now ask Lawyer Quince and see whether I ain't told you true. I'm willing to abide by what he says."

Mr. Quince put down his hammer and, brushing a little snuff from his coat, leaned back in his chair and eyed them with grave confidence.

"It's like this," said the farmer. "Young Pascoe has been hanging round after my girl Celia, though I told her she wasn't to have nothing to do with him. Half an hour ago I was going to put my pony in its stable when I see a young man sitting there waiting."

"Well?" said Mr. Quince, after a pause.

"He's there yet," said the farmer. "I locked him in, and Hogg here says that I've got the right to keep him locked up there as long as I like. I say it's agin the law, but Hogg he says no. I say his folks would come and try to break open my stable, but Hogg says if they do I can have the law of 'em for damaging my property."

"So you can," interposed Mr. Hogg, firmly. "You see whether Lawyer Quince don't say I'm right."

Mr. Quince frowned, and in order to think more deeply closed his eyes. Taking advantage of this three of his auditors, with remarkable unanimity, each closed one.

"It's your stable," said Mr. Quince, opening his eyes and speaking with great deliberation, "and you have a right to lock it up when you like."

"There you are," said Mr. Hogg; "what did I tell you?"

"If anybody's there that's got no business there, that's his look-out," continued Mr. Quince. "You didn't induce him to go in?"

"Certainly not," replied the farmer.

"I told him he can keep him there as long as he likes," said the jubilant Mr. Hogg, "and pass him in bread and water through the winder; it's got bars to it."

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"Yes," said Mr. Quince, nodding, "he can do that. As for his folks knocking the place about, if you like to tie up one or two of them nasty, savage dogs of yours to the stable, well, it's your stable, and you can fasten your dogs to it if you like. And you've generally got a man about the yard."

Mr. Hogg smacked his thigh in ecstasy.

"But—" began the farmer.

"That's the law," said the autocratic Mr. Quince, sharply. "O' course, if you think you know more about it than I do, I've nothing more to say."

"I don't want to do nothing I could get into trouble for," murmured Mr. Rose.

"You can't get into trouble by doing as I tell you," said the shoemaker, impatiently. "However, to be quite on the safe side, if I was in your place I should lose the key."

"Lose the key?" said the farmer, blankly.

"Lose the key," repeated the shoemaker, his eyes watering with intense appreciation of his own resourcefulness. "You can find it any time you want to, you know. Keep him there till he promises to give up your daughter, and tell him that as soon as he does you'll have a hunt for the key."

Mr. Rose regarded him with what the shoemaker easily understood to be speechless admiration.

"I—I'm glad I came to you," said the farmer, at last.

"You're welcome," said the shoemaker, loftily. "I'm always ready to give advice to them as require it."

"And good advice it is," said the smiling Mr. Hogg. "Why don't you behave yourself, Joe Garnham?" he demanded, turning fiercely on a listener.

Mr. Garnham, whose eyes were watering with emotion, attempted to explain, but, becoming hysterical, thrust a huge red handkerchief to his mouth and was led away by a friend. Mr. Quince regarded his departure with mild disdain.

"Little things please little minds," he remarked.

"So they do," said Mr. Hogg. "I never thought—What's the matter with you, George Askew?"

Mr. Askew, turning his back on him, threw up his hands with a helpless gesture and followed in the wake of Mr. Garnham. Mr. Hogg appeared to be about to apologise, and then suddenly altering his mind made a hasty and unceremonious exit, accompanied by the farmer.

Mr. Quince raised his eyebrows and then, after a long and meditative pinch of snuff, resumed his work. The sun went down and the light faded slowly; distant voices sounded close on the still evening air, snatches of hoarse laughter jarred upon his ears. It was clear that the story of the imprisoned swain was giving pleasure to Little Haven.

He rose at last from his chair and, stretching his long, gaunt frame, removed his leather apron, and after a wash at the pump went into the house. Supper was laid, and he gazed with approval on the home-made sausage rolls, the piece of cold pork, and the cheese which awaited his onslaught.

"We won't wait for Ned," said Mrs. Quince, as she brought in a jug of ale and placed it by her husband's elbow.

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Mr. Quince nodded and filled his glass.

"You've been giving more advice, I hear," said Mrs. Quince.

Her husband, who was very busy, nodded again.

"It wouldn't make no difference to young Pascoe's chance, anyway," said Mrs. Quince, thoughtfully.

Mr. Quince continued his labours. "Why?" he inquired, at last.

His wife smiled and tossed her head.

"Young Pascoe's no chance against our Ned," she said, swelling with maternal pride.

"Eh?" said the shoemaker, laying down his knife and fork. "Our Ned?"

"They are as fond of each other as they can be," said Mrs. Quince, "though I don't suppose Farmer Rose'll care for it; not but what our Ned's as good as he is."

"Is Ned up there now?" demanded the shoemaker, turning pale, as the mirthful face of Mr. Garnham suddenly occurred to him.

"Sure to be," tittered his wife. "And to think o' poor young Pascoe shut up in that stable while he's courting Celia!"

Mr. Quince took up his knife and fork again, but his appetite had gone. Whoever might be paying attention to Miss Rose at that moment he felt quite certain that it was not Mr. Ned Quince, and he trembled with anger as he saw the absurd situation into which the humorous Mr. Rose had led him. For years Little Haven had accepted his decisions as final and boasted of his sharpness to neighbouring hamlets, and many a cottager had brought his boots to be mended a whole week before their time for the sake of an interview.

He moved his chair from the table and smoked a pipe. Then he rose, and putting a couple of formidable law-books under his arm, walked slowly down the road in the direction of Holly Farm.

The road was very quiet and the White Swan, usually full at this hour, was almost deserted, but if any doubts as to the identity of the prisoner lingered in his mind they were speedily dissipated by the behaviour of the few customers who crowded to the door to see him pass.

A hum of voices fell on his ear as he approached the farm; half the male and a goodly proportion of the female population of Little Haven were leaning against the fence or

standing in little knots in the road, while a few of higher social status stood in the farm-yard itself.

“Come down to have a look at the prisoner?” inquired the farmer, who was standing surrounded by a little group of admirers.

[Illustration: “‘Come down to have a look at the prisoner?’ inquired the farmer.”]

“I came down to see you about that advice I gave you this afternoon,” said Mr. Quince.

“Ah!” said the other.

“I was busy when you came,” continued Mr. Quince, in a voice of easy unconcern, “and I gave you advice from memory. Looking up the subject after you’d gone I found that I was wrong.”

“You don’t say so?” said the farmer, uneasily. “If I’ve done wrong I’m only doing what you told me I could do.”

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"Mistakes will happen with the best of us," said the shoemaker, loudly, for the benefit of one or two murmurers. "I've known a man to marry a woman for her money before now and find out afterward that she hadn't got any."

One unit of the group detached itself and wandered listlessly toward the gate.

"Well, I hope I ain't done nothing wrong," said Mr. Rose, anxiously. "You gave me the advice; there's men here as can prove it. I don't want to do nothing agin the law. What had I better do?"

"Well, if I was you," said Mr. Quince, concealing his satisfaction with difficulty, "I should let him out at once and beg his pardon, and say you hope he'll do nothing about it. I'll put in a word for you if you like with old Pascoe."

Mr. Rose coughed and eyed him queerly.

"You're a Briton," he said, warmly. "I'll go and let him out at once."

He strode off to the stable, despite the protests of Mr. Hogg, and, standing by the door, appeared to be deep in thought; then he came back slowly, feeling in his pockets as he walked.

"William," he said, turning toward Mr. Hogg, "I s'pose you didn't happen to notice where I put that key?"

"That I didn't," said Mr. Hogg, his face clearing suddenly.

"I had it in my hand not half an hour ago," said the agitated Mr. Rose, thrusting one hand into his trouser-pocket and groping. "It can't be far."

Mr. Quince attempted to speak, and, failing, blew his nose violently.

"My memory ain't what it used to be," said the farmer. "Howsomever, I dare say it'll turn up in a day or two."

"You—you'd better force the door," suggested Mr. Quince, struggling to preserve an air of judicial calm.

"No, no," said Mr. Rose; "I ain't going to damage my property like that. I can lock my stable-door and unlock it when I like; if people get in there as have no business there, it's their look-out."

"That's law," said Mr. Hogg; "I'll eat my hat if it ain't."

“Do you mean to tell me you’ve really lost the key?” demanded Mr. Quince, eyeing the farmer sternly.

“Seems like it,” said Mr. Rose. “However, he won’t come to no hurt. I’ll put in some bread and water for him, same as you advised me to.”

Mr. Quince mastered his wrath by an effort, and with no sign of discomposure moved away without making any reference to the identity of the unfortunate in the stable.”

“Good-night,” said the farmer, “and thank you for coming and giving me the fresh advice. It ain’t everybody that ‘ud ha’ taken the trouble. If I hadn’t lost that key——”

The shoemaker scowled, and with the two fat books under his arm passed the listening neighbours with the air of a thoughtful man out for an evening stroll. Once inside his house, however, his manner changed, the attitude of Mrs. Quince demanding, at any rate, a show of concern.

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"It's no good talking," he said at last. "Ned shouldn't have gone there, and as for going to law about it, I sha'n't do any such thing; I should never hear the end of it. I shall just go on as usual, as if nothing had happened, and when Rose is tired of keeping him there he must let him out. I'll bide my time."

Mrs. Quince subsided into vague mutterings as to what she would do if she were a man, coupled with sundry aspersions upon the character, looks, and family connections of Farmer Rose, which somewhat consoled her for being what she was.

"He has always made jokes about your advice," she said at length, "and now everybody'll think he's right. I sha'n't be able to look anybody in the face. I should have seen through it at once if it had been me. I'm going down to give him a bit o' my mind."

"You stay where you are," said Mr. Quince, sharply, "and, mind, you are not to talk about it to anybody. Farmer Rose 'ud like nothing better than to see us upset about it. I ain't done with him yet. You wait."

Mrs. Quince, having no option, waited, but nothing happened. The following day found Ned Quince still a prisoner, and, considering the circumstances, remarkably cheerful. He declined point-blank to renounce his preposterous attentions, and said that, living on the premises, he felt half like a son-in-law already. He also complimented the farmer upon the quality of his bread.

The next morning found him still unsubdued, and, under interrogation from the farmer, he admitted that he liked it, and said that the feeling of being at home was growing upon him.

"If you're satisfied, I am," said Mr. Rose, grimly. "I'll keep you here till you promise; mind that."

"It's a nobleman's life," said Ned, peeping through the window, "and I'm beginning to like you as much as my real father."

"I don't want none o' yer impudence," said the farmer, reddening.

[Illustration: "'None o' yer impudence,' said the farmer."]

"You'll like me better when you've had me here a little longer," said Ned; "I shall grow on you. Why not be reasonable and make up your mind to it? Celia and I have."

"I'm going to send Celia away on Saturday," said Mr. Rose; "make yourself happy and comfortable in here till then. If you'd like another crust o' bread or an extra half pint o' water you've only got to mention it. When she's gone I'll have a hunt for that key, so as you can go back to your father and help him to understand his law-books better."

He strode off with the air of a conqueror, and having occasion to go to the village looked in at the shoe-maker's window as he passed and smiled broadly. For years Little Haven had regarded Mr. Quince with awe, as being far too dangerous a man for the lay mind to tamper with, and at one stroke the farmer had revealed the hollowness of his pretensions. Only that morning the wife of a labourer had called and asked him to hurry the mending of a pair of boots. She was a voluble woman, and having overcome her preliminary nervousness more than hinted that if he gave less time to the law and more to his trade it would be better for himself and everybody else.

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Miss Rose accepted her lot in a spirit of dutiful resignation, and on Saturday morning after her father's admonition not to forget that the coach left the White Swan at two sharp, set off to pay a few farewell visits. By half-past twelve she had finished, and Lawyer Quince becoming conscious of a shadow on his work looked up to see her standing before the window. He replied to a bewitching smile with a short nod and became intent upon his work again.

For a short time Celia lingered, then to his astonishment she opened the gate and walked past the side of the house into the garden. With growing astonishment he observed her enter his tool-shed and close the door behind her.

For ten minutes he worked on and then, curiosity getting the better of him, he walked slowly to the tool-shed and, opening the door a little way, peeped in. It was a small shed, crowded with agricultural implements. The floor was occupied by an upturned wheelbarrow, and sitting on the barrow, with her soft cheek leaning against the wall, sat Miss Rose fast asleep. Mr. Quince coughed several times, each cough being louder than the last, and then, treading softly, was about to return to the workshop when the girl stirred and muttered in her sleep. At first she was unintelligible, then he distinctly caught the words "idiot" and "blockhead."

"She's dreaming of somebody," said Mr. Quince to himself with conviction.

"Wonder who it is?"

"Can't see—a thing—under—his—nose," murmured the fair sleeper.

"Celia!" said Mr. Quince, sharply. "Celia!"

He took a hoe from the wall and prodded her gently with the handle. A singularly vicious expression marred the soft features, but that was all.

"Ce-lia!" said the shoemaker, who feared sun-stroke.

"Fancy if he—had—a moment's common sense," murmured Celia, drowsily, "and locked—the door."

Lawyer Quince dropped the hoe with a clatter and stood regarding her open-mouthed. He was a careful man with his property, and the stout door boasted a good lock. He sped to the house on tip-toe, and taking the key from its nail on the kitchen dresser returned to the shed, and after another puzzled glance at the sleeping girl locked her in.

For half an hour he sat in silent enjoyment of the situation—enjoyment which would have been increased if he could have seen Mr. Rose standing at the gate of Holly Farm, casting anxious glances up and down the road. Celia's luggage had gone down to the

White Swan, and an excellent cold luncheon was awaiting her attention in the living-room.

Half-past one came and no Celia, and five minutes later two farm labourers and a boy lumbered off in different directions in search of the missing girl, with instructions that she was to go straight to the White Swan to meet the coach. The farmer himself walked down to the inn, turning over in his mind a heated lecture composed for the occasion, but the coach came and, after a cheerful bustle and the consumption of sundry mugs of beer, sped on its way again.

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He returned home in silent consternation, seeking in vain for a satisfactory explanation of the mystery. For a robust young woman to disappear in broad day-light and leave no trace behind her was extraordinary. Then a sudden sinking sensation in the region of the waistcoat and an idea occurred simultaneously.

He walked down to the village again, the idea growing steadily all the way. Lawyer Quince was hard at work, as usual, as he passed. He went by the window three times and gazed wistfully at the cottage. Coming to the conclusion at last that two heads were better than one in such a business, he walked on to the mill and sought Mr. Hogg.

"That's what it is," said the miller, as he breathed his suspicions. "I thought all along Lawyer Quince would have the laugh of you. He's wonderful deep. Now, let's go to work cautious like. Try and look as if nothing had happened."

[Illustration: "I thought all along Lawyer Quince would have the laugh of you."]

Mr. Rose tried.

"Try agin," said the miller, with some severity. "Get the red out o' your face and let your eyes go back and don't look as though you're going to bite somebody."

Mr. Rose swallowed an angry retort, and with an attempt at careless ease sauntered up the road with the miller to the shoemaker's. Lawyer Quince was still busy, and looked up inquiringly as they passed before him.

"I s'pose," said the diplomatic Mr. Hogg, who was well acquainted with his neighbour's tidy and methodical habits—"I s'pose you couldn't lend me your barrow for half an hour? The wheel's off mine."

Mr. Quince hesitated, and then favoured him with a glance intended to remind him of his scurvy behaviour three days before.

"You can have it," he said at last, rising.

Mr. Hogg pinched his friend in his excitement, and both watched Mr. Quince with bated breath as he took long, slow strides toward the tool-shed. He tried the door and then went into the house, and even before his reappearance both gentlemen knew only too well what was about to happen. Red was all too poor a word to apply to Mr. Rose's countenance as the shoemaker came toward them, feeling in his waist-coat pocket with hooked fingers and thumb, while Mr. Hogg's expressive features were twisted into an appearance of rosy appreciation.

"Did you want the barrow very particular?" inquired the shoemaker, in a regretful voice.

"Very particular," said Mr. Hogg.

Mr. Quince went through the performance of feeling in all his pockets, and then stood meditatively rubbing his chin.

“The door’s locked,” he said, slowly, “and what I’ve done with that there key——”

“You open that door,” vociferated Mr. Rose, “else I’ll break it in. You’ve got my daughter in that shed and I’m going to have her out.”

“Your daughter?” said Mr. Quince, with an air of faint surprise. “What should she be doing in my shed?”

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"You let her out," stormed Mr. Rose, trying to push past him.

"Don't trespass on my premises," said Lawyer Quince, interposing his long, gaunt frame. "If you want that door opened you'll have to wait till my boy Ned comes home. I expect he knows where to find the key."

Mr. Rose's hands fell limply by his side and his tongue, turning prudish, refused its office. He turned and stared at Mr. Hogg in silent consternation.

"Never known him to be beaten yet," said that admiring weather-cock.

"Ned's been away three days," said the shoemaker, "but I expect him home soon."

Mr. Rose made a strange noise in his throat and then, accepting his defeat, set off at a rapid pace in the direction of home. In a marvellously short space of time, considering his age and figure, he was seen returning with Ned Quince, flushed and dishevelled, walking by his side.

"Here he is," said the farmer. "Now where's that key?"

Lawyer Quince took his son by the arm and led him into the house, from whence they almost immediately emerged with Ned waving the key.

"I thought it wasn't far," said the sapient Mr. Hogg.

Ned put the key in the lock and flinging the door open revealed Celia Rose, blinking and confused in the sudden sunshine. She drew back as she saw her father and began to cry with considerable fervour.

"How did you get in that shed, miss?" demanded her parent, stamping.

[Illustration: "'How did you get in that shed?' demanded her parent."]

Miss Rose trembled.

"I—I went there," she sobbed. "I didn't want to go away."

"Well, you'd better stay there," shouted the over-wrought Mr. Rose. "I've done with you. A girl that 'ud turn against her own father I—I—"

He drove his right fist into his left palm and stamped out into the road. Lawyer Quince and Mr. Hogg, after a moment's hesitation, followed.

"The laugh's agin you, farmer," said the latter gentleman, taking his arm.

Mr. Rose shook him off.

“Better make the best of it,” continued the peace-maker.

“She’s a girl to be proud of,” said Lawyer Quince, keeping pace with the farmer on the other side. “She’s got a head that’s worth yours and mine put together, with Hogg’s thrown in as a little makeweight.”

“And here’s the White Swan,” said Mr. Hogg, who had a hazy idea of a compliment, “and all of us as dry as a bone. Why not all go in and have a glass to shut folks’ mouths?”

“And cry quits,” said the shoemaker.

“And let bygones be bygones,” said Mr. Hogg, taking the farmer’s arm again.

Mr. Rose stopped and shook his head obstinately, and then, under the skilful pilotage of Mr. Hogg, was steered in the direction of the hospitable doors of the White Swan. He made a last bid for liberty on the step and then disappeared inside. Lawyer Quince brought up the rear.