

Establishing Relations eBook

Establishing Relations by W. W. Jacobs

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ESTABLISHING RELATIONS

Mr. Richard Catesby, second officer of the ss. *Wizard*, emerged from the dock-gates in high good-humour to spend an evening ashore. The bustle of the day had departed, and the inhabitants of Wapping, in search of coolness and fresh air, were sitting at open doors and windows indulging in general conversation with any-body within earshot.

[Illustration: "Mr. Richard Catesby, second officer of the ss. *Wizard*, emerged from the dock-gates in high good-humour."]

Mr. Catesby, turning into Bashford's Lane, lost in a moment all this life and colour. The hum of distant voices certainly reached there, but that was all, for Bashford's Lane, a retiring thoroughfare facing a blank dock wall, capped here and there by towering spars, set an example of gentility which neighbouring streets had long ago decided crossly was impossible for ordinary people to follow. Its neatly grained shutters, fastened back by the sides of the windows, gave a pleasing idea of uniformity, while its white steps and polished brass knockers were suggestive of almost a Dutch cleanliness.

Mr. Catesby, strolling comfortably along, stopped suddenly for another look at a girl who was standing in the ground-floor window of No. 5. He went on a few paces and then walked back slowly, trying to look as though he had forgotten something. The girl was still there, and met his ardent glances unmoved: a fine girl, with large, dark eyes, and a complexion which was the subject of much scandalous discussion among neighbouring matrons.

"It must be something wrong with the glass, or else it's the bad light," said Mr. Catesby to himself; "no girl is so beautiful as that."

He went by again to make sure. The object of his solicitude was still there and apparently unconscious of his existence. He passed very slowly and sighed deeply.

"You've got it at last, Dick Catesby," he said, solemnly; "fair and square in the most dangerous part of the heart. It's serious this time."

He stood still on the narrow pavement, pondering, and then, in excuse of his flagrant misbehaviour, murmured, "It was meant to be," and went by again. This time he fancied that he detected a somewhat supercilious expression in the dark eyes—a faint raising of well-arched eyebrows.

His engagement to wait at Aldgate Station for the second-engineer and spend an evening together was dismissed as too slow to be considered. He stood for some time in uncertainty, and then turning slowly into the Beehive, which stood at the corner, went into the private bar and ordered a glass of beer.



He was the only person in the bar, and the land-lord, a stout man in his shirt-sleeves, was the soul of affability. Mr. Catesby, after various general remarks, made a few inquiries about an uncle aged five minutes, whom he thought was living in Bashford's Lane.



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[Illustration: "Mr. Catesby made a few inquiries."]

"I don't know 'im," said the landlord.

"I had an idea that he lived at No. 5," said Catesby.

The landlord shook his head. "That's Mrs. Truefitt's house," he said, slowly.

Mr. Catesby pondered. "Truefitt, Truefitt," he repeated; "what sort of a woman is she?"

"Widder-woman," said the landlord; "she lives there with 'er daughter Prudence."

Mr. Catesby said "Indeed!" and being a good listener learned that Mrs. Truefitt was the widow of a master-lighterman, and that her son, Fred Truefitt, after an absence of seven years in New Zealand, was now on his way home. He finished his glass slowly and, the landlord departing to attend to another customer, made his way into the street again.

He walked along slowly, picturing as he went the home-corning of the long-absent son. Things were oddly ordered in this world, and Fred Truefitt would probably think nothing of his brotherly privileges. He wondered whether he was like Prudence. He wondered

"By Jove, I'll do it!" he said, recklessly, as he turned. "Now for a row."

He walked back rapidly to Bashford's Lane, and without giving his courage time to cool plied the knocker of No. 5 briskly.

The door was opened by an elderly woman, thin, and somewhat querulous in expression. Mr. Catesby had just time to notice this, and then he flung his arm round her waist, and hailing her as "Mother!" saluted her warmly.

The faint scream of the astounded Mrs. Truefitt brought her daughter hastily into the passage. Mr. Catesby's idea was ever to do a thing thoroughly, and, relinquishing Mrs. Truefitt, he kissed Prudence with all the ardour which a seven-years' absence might be supposed to engender in the heart of a devoted brother. In return he received a box on the ears which made his head ring.

"He's been drinking," gasped the dismayed Mrs. Truefitt.

"Don't you know me, mother?" inquired Mr. Richard Catesby, in grievous astonishment.

"He's mad," said her daughter.

"Am I so altered that you don't know me, Prudence?" inquired Mr. Catesby; with pathos. "Don't you know your Fred?"



“Go out,” said Mrs. Truefitt, recovering; “go out at once.”

Mr. Catesby looked from one to the other in consternation.

“I know I’ve altered,” he said, at last, “but I’d no idea—”

“If you don’t go out at once I’ll send for the police,” said the elder woman, sharply.
“Prudence, scream!”

“I’m not going to scream,” said Prudence, eyeing the intruder with great composure.
“I’m not afraid of him.”

Despite her reluctance to have a scene—a thing which was strongly opposed to the traditions of Bashford’s Lane—Mrs. Truefitt had got as far as the doorstep in search of assistance, when a sudden terrible thought occurred to her: Fred was dead, and the visitor had hit upon this extraordinary fashion of breaking the news gently.



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“Come into the parlour,” she said, faintly.

Mr. Catesby, suppressing his surprise, followed her into the room. Prudence, her fine figure erect and her large eyes meeting his steadily, took up a position by the side of her mother.

“You have brought bad news?” inquired the latter.

“No, mother,” said Mr. Catesby, simply, “only myself, that’s all.”

Mrs. Truefitt made a gesture of impatience, and her daughter, watching him closely, tried to remember something she had once read about detecting insanity by the expression of the eyes. Those of Mr. Catesby were blue, and the only expression in them at the present moment was one of tender and respectful admiration.

“When did you see Fred last?” inquired Mrs. Truefitt, making another effort.

“Mother,” said Mr. Catesby, with great pathos, “don’t you know me?”

“He has brought bad news of Fred,” said Mrs. Truefitt, turning to her daughter; “I am sure he has.”

“I don’t understand you,” said Mr. Catesby, with a bewildered glance from one to the other. “I am Fred. Am I much changed? You look the same as you always did, and it seems only yesterday since I kissed Prudence good-bye at the docks. You were crying, Prudence.”

Miss Truefitt made no reply; she gazed at him unflinchingly and then bent toward her mother.

“He is mad,” she whispered; “we must try and get him out quietly. Don’t contradict him.”

“Keep close to me,” said Mrs. Truefitt, who had a great horror of the insane. “If he turns violent open the window and scream. I thought he had brought bad news of Fred. How did he know about him?”

Her daughter shook her head and gazed curiously at their afflicted visitor. She put his age down at twenty-five, and she could not help thinking it a pity that so good-looking a young man should have lost his wits.

“Bade Prudence good-bye at the docks,” continued Mr. Catesby, dreamily. “You drew me behind a pile of luggage, Prudence, and put your head on my shoulder. I have thought of it ever since.”



Miss Truefitt did not deny it, but she bit her lips, and shot a sharp glance at him. She began to think that her pity was uncalled-for.

“I’m just going as far as the corner.”

“Tell me all that’s happened since I’ve been away,” said Mr. Catesby.

Mrs. Truefitt turned to her daughter and whispered. It might have been merely the effect of a guilty conscience, but the visitor thought that he caught the word “policeman.”

“I’m just going as far as the corner,” said Mrs. Truefitt, rising, and crossing hastily to the door.

[Illustration: “‘I’m just going as far as the corner,’ said Mrs. Truefitt.”]

The young man nodded affectionately and sat in doubtful consideration as the front door closed behind her. “Where is mother going?” he asked, in a voice which betrayed a little pardonable anxiety.



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“Not far, I hope,” said Prudence.

“I really think,” said Mr. Catesby, rising—“I really think that I had better go after her. At her age——”

He walked into the small passage and put his hand on the latch. Prudence, now quite certain of his sanity, felt sorely reluctant to let such impudence go unpunished.

“Are you going?” she inquired.

“I think I’d better,” said Mr. Catesby, gravely. “Dear mother——”

“You’re afraid,” said the girl, calmly.

Mr. Catesby coloured and his buoyancy failed him. He felt a little bit cheap.

“You are brave enough with two women,” continued the girl, disdainfully; “but you had better go if you’re afraid.”

Mr. Catesby regarded the temptress uneasily. “Would you like me to stay?” he asked.

“I?” said Miss Truefitt, tossing her head. “No, I don’t want you. Besides, you’re frightened.”

Mr. Catesby turned, and with a firm step made his way back to the room; Prudence, with a half-smile, took a chair near the door and regarded her prisoner with unholy triumph.

“I shouldn’t like to be in your shoes,” she said, agreeably; “mother has gone for a policeman.”

“Bless her,” said Mr. Catesby, fervently. “What had we better say to him when he comes?”

“You’ll be locked up,” said Prudence; “and it will serve you right for your bad behaviour.”

Mr. Catesby sighed. “It’s the heart,” he said, gravely. “I’m not to blame, really. I saw you standing in the window, and I could see at once that you were beautiful, and good, and kind.”

“I never heard of such impudence,” continued Miss Truefitt.

“I surprised myself,” admitted Mr. Catesby. “In the usual way I am very quiet and well-behaved, not to say shy.”

Miss Truefitt looked at him scornfully. “I think that you had better stop your nonsense and go,” she remarked.



“Don’t you want me to be punished?” inquired the other, in a soft voice.

“I think that you had better go while you can,” said the girl, and at that moment there was a heavy knock at the front-door. Mr. Catesby, despite his assurance, changed colour; the girl eyed him in perplexity. Then she opened the small folding-doors at the back of the room.

“You’re only—stupid,” she whispered. “Quick! Go in there. I’ll say you’ve gone. Keep quiet, and I’ll let you out by-and-by.”

She pushed him in and closed the doors. From his hiding-place he heard an animated conversation at the street-door and minute particulars as to the time which had elapsed since his departure and the direction he had taken.

“I never heard such impudence,” said Mrs. Truefitt, going into the front-room and sinking into a chair after the constable had taken his departure. “I don’t believe he was mad.”

“Only a little weak in the head, I think,” said Prudence, in a clear voice. “He was very frightened after you had gone; I don’t think he will trouble us again.”



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“He’d better not,” said Mrs. Truefitt, sharply. “I never heard of such a thing—never.”

She continued to grumble, while Prudence, in a low voice, endeavoured to soothe her. Her efforts were evidently successful, as the prisoner was, after a time, surprised to hear the older woman laugh—at first gently, and then with so much enjoyment that her daughter was at some pains to restrain her. He sat in patience until evening deepened into night, and a line of light beneath the folding-doors announced the lighting of the lamp in the front-room. By a pleasant clatter of crockery he became aware that they were at supper, and he pricked up his ears as Prudence made another reference to him.

“If he comes to-morrow night while you are out I sha’n’t open the door,” she said. “You’ll be back by nine, I suppose.”

Mrs. Truefitt assented.

“And you won’t be leaving before seven,” continued Prudence. “I shall be all right.”

Mr. Catesby’s face glowed and his eyes grew tender; Prudence was as clever as she was beautiful. The delicacy with which she had intimated the fact of the unconscious Mrs. Truefitt’s absence on the following evening was beyond all praise. The only depressing thought was that such resourcefulness savoured of practice.

He sat in the darkness for so long that even the proximity of Prudence was not sufficient amends for the monotony of it, and it was not until past ten o’clock that the folding-doors were opened and he stood blinking at the girl in the glare of the lamp.

“Quick!” she whispered.

Mr. Catesby stepped into the lighted room.

“The front-door is open,” whispered Prudence. “Make haste. I’ll close it.”

She followed him to the door; he made an ineffectual attempt to seize her hand, and the next moment was pushed gently outside and the door closed behind him. He stood a moment gazing at the house, and then hastened back to his ship.

“Seven to-morrow,” he murmured; “seven to-morrow. After all, there’s nothing pays in this world like cheek—nothing.”

He slept soundly that night, though the things that the second-engineer said to him about wasting a hard-working man’s evening would have lain heavy on the conscience of a more scrupulous man. The only thing that troubled him was the manifest intention of his friend not to let him slip through his fingers on the following evening. At last, in sheer despair at his inability to shake him off, he had to tell him that he had an appointment with a lady.



“Well, I’ll come, too,” said the other, glowering at him. “It’s very like she’ll have a friend with her; they generally do.”

“I’ll run round and tell her,” said Catesby. “I’d have arranged it before, only I thought you didn’t care about that sort of thing.”

“Female society is softening,” said the second-engineer. “I’ll go and put on a clean collar.”



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[Illustration: "I'll go and put on a clean collar."]

Catesby watched him into his cabin and then, though it still wanted an hour to seven, hastily quitted the ship and secreted himself in the private bar of the Beehive.

He waited there until a quarter past seven, and then, adjusting his tie for about the tenth time that evening in the glass behind the bar, sallied out in the direction of No. 5.

He knocked lightly, and waited. There was no response, and he knocked again. When the fourth knock brought no response, his heart sank within him and he indulged in vain speculations as to the reasons for this unexpected hitch in the programme. He knocked again, and then the door opened suddenly and Prudence, with a little cry of surprise and dismay, backed into the passage.

"You!" she said, regarding him with large eyes. Mr. Catesby bowed tenderly, and passing in closed the door behind him.

"I wanted to thank you for your kindness last night," he said, humbly.

"Very well," said Prudence; "good-bye."

Mr. Catesby smiled. "It'll take me a long time to thank you as I ought to thank you," he murmured. "And then I want to apologise; that'll take time, too."

"You had better go," said Prudence, severely; "kindness is thrown away upon you. I ought to have let you be punished."

"You are too good and kind," said the other, drifting by easy stages into the parlour.

Miss Truefitt made no reply, but following him into the room seated herself in an easy-chair and sat coldly watchful.

"How do you know what I am?" she inquired.

"Your face tells me," said the infatuated Richard. "I hope you will forgive me for my rudeness last night. It was all done on the spur of the moment."

"I am glad you are sorry," said the girl, softening.

"All the same, if I hadn't done it," pursued Mr. Catesby, "I shouldn't be sitting here talking to you now."

Miss Truefitt raised her eyes to his, and then lowered them modestly to the ground. "That is true," she said, quietly.



“And I would sooner be sitting here than any-where,” pursued Catesby. “That is,” he added, rising, and taking a chair by her side, “except here.”

Miss Truefitt appeared to tremble, and made as though to rise. Then she sat still and took a gentle peep at Mr. Catesby from the corner of her eye.

“I hope that you are not sorry that I am here?” said that gentleman.

Miss Truefitt hesitated. “No,” she said, at last.”

“Are you—are you glad?” asked the modest Richard.

Miss Truefitt averted her eyes altogether. “Yes,” she said, faintly.

A strange feeling of solemnity came over the triumphant Richard. He took the hand nearest to him and pressed it gently.

“I—I can hardly believe in my good luck,” he murmured.

“Good luck?” said Prudence, innocently.



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“Isn’t it good luck to hear you say that you are glad I’m here?” said Catesby.

“You’re the best judge of that,” said the girl, withdrawing her hand. “It doesn’t seem to me much to be pleased about.”

Mr. Catesby eyed her in perplexity, and was about to address another tender remark to her when she was overcome by a slight fit of coughing. At the same moment he started at the sound of a shuffling footstep in the passage. Somebody tapped at the door.

“Yes?” said Prudence.

“Can’t find the knife-powder, miss,” said a harsh voice. The door was pushed open and disclosed a tall, bony woman of about forty. Her red arms were bare to the elbow, and she betrayed several evidences of a long and arduous day’s charring.

“It’s in the cupboard,” said Prudence. “Why, what’s the matter, Mrs. Porter?”

Mrs. Porter made no reply. Her mouth was wide open and she was gazing with starting eyeballs at Mr. Catesby.

“Joe!” she said, in a hoarse whisper. “Joe!”

Mr. Catesby gazed at her in chilling silence. Miss Truefitt, with an air of great surprise, glanced from one to the other.

“Joe!” said Mrs. Porter again. “Ain’t you goin’ to speak to me?”

Mr. Catesby continued to gaze at her in speechless astonishment. She skipped clumsily round the table and stood before him with her hands clasped.

“Where ’ave you been all this long time?” she demanded, in a higher key.

“You—you’ve made a mistake,” said the bewildered Richard.

“Mistake?” wailed Mrs. Porter. “Mistake! Oh, where’s your ’art?”

Before he could get out of her way she flung her arms round the horrified young man’s neck and embraced him copiously. Over her bony left shoulder the frantic Richard met the ecstatic gaze of Miss Truefitt, and, in a flash, he realised the trap into which he had fallen.

“Mrs. Porter!” said Prudence.



"It's my 'usband, miss," said the Amazon, reluctantly releasing the flushed and dishevelled Richard; "e left me and my five eighteen months ago. For eighteen months I 'aven't 'ad a sight of 'is blessed face."

She lifted the hem of her apron to her face and broke into discordant weeping.

"Don't cry," said Prudence, softly; "I'm sure he isn't worth it."

Mr. Catesby looked at her wanly. He was beyond further astonishment, and when Mrs. Truefitt entered the room with a laudable attempt to twist her features into an expression of surprise, he scarcely noticed her.

"It's my Joe," said Mrs. Porter, simply.

"Good gracious!" said Mrs. Truefitt. "Well, you've got him now; take care he doesn't run away from you again."

"I'll look after that, ma'am," said Mrs. Porter, with a glare at the startled Richard.

[Illustration: "I'll look after that, ma'am."]

"She's very forgiving," said Prudence. "She kissed him just now."



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“Did she, though,” said the admiring Mrs. Truefitt. “I wish I’d been here.”

“I can do it agin, ma’am,” said the obliging Mrs. Porter.

“If you come near me again—” said the breathless Richard, stepping back a pace.

“I shouldn’t force his love,” said Mrs. Truefitt; “it’ll come back in time, I dare say.”

“I’m sure he’s affectionate,” said Prudence.

Mr. Catesby eyed his tormentors in silence; the faces of Prudence and her mother betokened much innocent enjoyment, but the austerity of Mrs. Porter’s visage was unrelaxed.

“Better let bygones be bygones,” said Mrs. Truefitt; “he’ll be sorry by-and-by for all the trouble he has caused.”

“He’ll be ashamed of himself—if you give him time,” added Prudence.

Mr. Catesby had heard enough; he took up his hat and crossed to the door.

“Take care he doesn’t run away from you again,” repeated Mrs. Truefitt.

“I’ll see to that, ma’am,” said Mrs. Porter, taking him by the arm. “Come along, Joe.”

Mr. Catesby attempted to shake her off, but in vain, and he ground his teeth as he realised the absurdity of his position. A man he could have dealt with, but Mrs. Porter was invulnerable. Sooner than walk down the road with her he preferred the sallies of the parlour. He walked back to his old position by the fireplace, and stood gazing moodily at the floor.

Mrs. Truefitt tired of the sport at last. She wanted her supper, and with a significant glance at her daughter she beckoned the redoubtable and reluctant Mrs. Porter from the room. Catesby heard the kitchen-door close behind them, but he made no move. Prudence stood gazing at him in silence.

“If you want to go,” she said, at last, “now is your chance.”

Catesby followed her into the passage without a word, and waited quietly while she opened the door. Still silent, he put on his hat and passed out into the darkening street. He turned after a short distance for a last look at the house and, with a sudden sense of elation, saw that she was standing on the step. He hesitated, and then walked slowly back.

“Yes?” said Prudence.



“I should like to tell your mother that I am sorry,” he said, in a low voice.

“It is getting late,” said the girl, softly; “but, if you really wish to tell her—Mrs. Porter will not be here to-morrow night.”

She stepped back into the house and the door closed behind her.