

The Changing Numbers eBook

The Changing Numbers by W. W. Jacobs

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Contents

The Changing Numbers eBook.....	1
Contents.....	2
Table of Contents.....	3
Page 1.....	4
Page 2.....	6
Page 3.....	8
Page 4.....	10
Page 5.....	12
Page 6.....	14
Page 7.....	16
Page 8.....	18
Page 9.....	20

Table of Contents

Section	Table of Contents	Page
Start of eBook		1
THE CHANGING NUMBERS		1

Page 1

THE CHANGING NUMBERS

The tall clock in the corner of the small living-room had just struck eight as Mr. Samuel Gunnill came stealthily down the winding staircase and, opening the door at the foot, stepped with an appearance of great care and humility into the room. He noticed with some anxiety that his daughter Selina was apparently engrossed in her task of attending to the plants in the window, and that no preparations whatever had been made for breakfast.

[Illustration: "Mr. Samuel Gunnill came stealthily down the winding staircase."]

Miss Gunnill's horticultural duties seemed interminable. She snipped off dead leaves with painstaking precision, and administered water with the jealous care of a druggist compounding a prescription; then, with her back still toward him, she gave vent to a sigh far too intense in its nature to have reference to such trivialities as plants. She repeated it twice, and at the second time Mr. Gunnill, almost without his knowledge, uttered a deprecatory cough.

His daughter turned with alarming swiftness and, holding herself very upright, favoured him with a glance in which indignation and surprise were very fairly mingled.

"That white one—that one at the end," said Mr. Gunnill, with an appearance of concentrated interest, "that's my fav'rite."

Miss Gunnill put her hands together, and a look of infinite long-suffering came upon her face, but she made no reply.

"Always has been," continued Mr. Gunnill, feverishly, "from a—from a cutting."

"Bailed out," said Miss Gunnill, in a deep and thrilling voice; "bailed out at one o'clock in the morning, brought home singing loud enough for half-a-dozen, and then talking about flowers!"

Mr. Gunnill coughed again.

"I was dreaming," pursued Miss Gunnill, plaintively, "sleeping peacefully, when I was awoke by a horrible noise."

"That couldn't ha' been me," protested her father. "I was only a bit cheerful. It was Benjamin Ely's birthday yesterday, and after we left the Lion they started singing, and I just hummed to keep 'em company. I wasn't singing, mind you, only humming—when up comes that interfering Cooper and takes me off."

Miss Gunnill shivered, and with her pretty cheek in her hand sat by the window the very picture of despondency. "Why didn't he take the others?" she inquired.

"Ah!" said Mr. Gunnill, with great emphasis, "that's what a lot more of us would like to know. P'r'aps if you'd been more polite to Mrs. Cooper, instead o' putting it about that she looked young enough to be his mother, it wouldn't have happened."

His daughter shook her head impatiently and, on Mr. Gunnill making an allusion to breakfast, expressed surprise that he had got the heart to eat any-thing. Mr. Gunnill pressing the point, however, she arose and began to set the table, the undue care with which she smoothed out the creases of the table-cloth, and the mathematical exactness with which she placed the various articles, all being so many extra smarts in his wound. When she finally placed on the table enough food for a dozen people he began to show signs of a little spirit.

Page 2

"Ain't you going to have any?" he demanded, as Miss Gunnill resumed her seat by the window.

"Me?" said the girl, with a shudder. "Breakfast? The disgrace is breakfast enough for me. I couldn't eat a morsel; it would choke me."

Mr. Gunnill eyed her over the rim of his teacup. "I come down an hour ago," he said, casually, as he helped himself to some bacon.

Miss Gunnill started despite herself. "Oh!" she said, listlessly.

"And I see you making a very good breakfast all by yourself in the kitchen," continued her father, in a voice not free from the taint of triumph.

The discomfited Selina rose and stood regarding him; Mr. Gunnill, after a vain attempt to meet her gaze, busied himself with his meal.

"The idea of watching every mouthful I eat!" said Miss Gunnill, tragically; "the idea of complaining because I have some breakfast! I'd never have believed it of you, never! It's shameful! Fancy grudging your own daughter the food she eats!"

Mr. Gunnill eyed her in dismay. In his confusion he had overestimated the capacity of his mouth, and he now strove in vain to reply to this shameful perversion of his meaning. His daughter stood watching him with grief in one eye and calculation in the other, and, just as he had put himself into a position to exercise his rights of free speech, gave a pathetic sniff and walked out of the room.

She stayed indoors all day, but the necessity of establishing his innocence took Mr. Gunnill out a great deal. His neighbours, in the hope of further excitement, warmly pressed him to go to prison rather than pay a fine, and instanced the example of an officer in the Salvation Army, who, in very different circumstances, had elected to take that course. Mr. Gunnill assured them that only his known antipathy to the army, and the fear of being regarded as one of its followers, prevented him from doing so. He paid instead a fine of ten shillings, and after listening to a sermon, in which his silver hairs served as the text, was permitted to depart. His feeling against Police-constable Cooper increased with the passing of the days. The constable watched him with the air of a proprietor, and Mrs. Cooper's remark that "her husband had had his eye upon him for a long time, and that he had better be careful for the future," was faithfully retailed to him within half an hour of its utterance. Convivial friends counted his cups for him; teetotal friends more than hinted that Cooper was in the employ of his good angel.

[Illustration: "The constable watched him with the air of a proprietor."]

Miss Gunnill's two principal admirers had an arduous task to perform. They had to attribute Mr. Gunnill's disaster to the vindictiveness of Cooper, and at the same time to

agree with his daughter that it served him right. Between father and daughter they had a difficult time, Mr. Gunnill's sensitiveness having been much heightened by his troubles.

Page 3

“Cooper ought not to have taken you,” said Herbert Sims for the fiftieth time.

“He must ha’ seen you like it dozens o’ times before,” said Ted Drill, who, in his determination not to be outdone by Mr. Sims, was not displaying his usual judgment. “Why didn’t he take you then? That’s what you ought to have asked the magistrate.”

“I don’t understand you,” said Mr. Gunnill, with an air of cold dignity.

“Why,” said Mr. Drill, “what I mean is—look at that night, for instance, when——”

He broke off suddenly, even his enthusiasm not being proof against the extraordinary contortions of visage in which Mr. Gunnill was indulging.

“When?” prompted Selina and Mr. Sims together. Mr. Gunnill, after first daring him with his eye, followed suit.

“That night at the Crown,” said Mr. Drill, awkwardly. “You know; when you thought that Joe Baggs was the landlord. You tell ’em; you tell it best. I’ve roared over it.”

“I don’t know what you’re driving at,” said the harassed Mr. Gunnill, bitterly.

“H’m!” said Mr. Drill, with a weak laugh. “I’ve been mixing you up with somebody else.”

Mr. Gunnill, obviously relieved, said that he ought to be more careful, and pointed out, with some feeling, that a lot of mischief was caused that way.

“Cooper wants a lesson, that’s what he wants,” said Mr. Sims, valiantly. “He’ll get his head broke one of these days.”

Mr. Gunnill acquiesced. “I remember when I was on the *Peewit*,” he said, musingly, “one time when we were lying at Cardiff, there was a policeman there run one of our chaps in, and two nights afterward another of our chaps pushed the policeman down in the mud and ran off with his staff and his helmet.”

Miss Gunnill’s eyes glistened. “What happened?” she inquired.

“He had to leave the force,” replied her father; “he couldn’t stand the disgrace of it. The chap that pushed him over was quite a little chap, too. About the size of Herbert here.”

Mr. Sims started.

“Very much like him in face, too,” pursued Mr. Gunnill; “daring chap he was.”



Miss Gunnill sighed. "I wish he lived in Little-stow," she said, slowly. "I'd give anything to take that horrid Mrs. Cooper down a bit. Cooper would be the laughing-stock of the town."

Messrs. Sims and Drill looked unhappy. It was hard to have to affect an attitude of indifference in the face of Miss Gunnill's lawless yearnings; to stand before her as respectable and law-abiding cravens. Her eyes, large and sorrowful; dwelt on them both.

"If I—I only get a chance at Cooper!" murmured Mr. Sims, vaguely.

To his surprise, Mr. Gunnill started up from his chair and, gripping his hand, shook it fervently. He looked round, and Selina was regarding him with a glance so tender that he lost his head completely. Before he had recovered he had pledged himself to lay the helmet and truncheon of the redoubtable Mr. Cooper at the feet of Miss Gunnill; exact date not specified.

Page 4

"Of course, I shall have to wait my opportunity," he said, at last.

"You wait as long as you like, my boy," said the thoughtless Mr. Gunnill.

Mr. Sims thanked him.

"Wait till Cooper's an old man," urged Mr. Drill.

Miss Gunnill, secretly disappointed at the lack of boldness and devotion on the part of the latter gentleman, eyed his stalwart frame indignantly and accused him of trying to make Mr. Sims as timid as himself. She turned to the valiant Sims and made herself so agreeable to that daring blade that Mr. Drill, a prey to violent jealousy, bade the company a curt good-night and withdrew.

He stayed away for nearly a week, and then one evening as he approached the house, carrying a carpet-bag, he saw the door just opening to admit the fortunate Herbert. He quickened his pace and arrived just in time to follow him in. Mr. Sims, who bore under his arm a brown-paper parcel, seemed somewhat embarrassed at seeing him, and after a brief greeting walked into the room, and with a triumphant glance at Mr. Gunnill and Selina placed his burden on the table.

[Illustration: "He saw the door just opening to admit the fortunate Herbert."]

"You—you ain't got it?" said Mr. Gunnill, leaning forward.

"How foolish of you to run such a risk!" said Selina.

"I brought it for Miss Gunnill," said the young man, simply. He unfastened the parcel, and to the astonishment of all present revealed a policeman's helmet and a short boxwood truncheon.

"You—you're a wonder," said the gloating Mr. Gunnill. "Look at it, Ted!"

Mr. Drill was looking at it; it may be doubted whether the head of Mr. Cooper itself could have caused him more astonishment. Then his eyes sought those of Mr. Sims, but that gentleman was gazing tenderly at the gratified but shocked Selina.

"How ever did you do it?" inquired Mr. Gunnill.

"Came behind him and threw him down," said Mr. Sims, nonchalantly. "He was that scared I believe I could have taken his boots as well if I'd wanted them."

Mr. Gunnill patted him on the back. "I fancy I can see him running bare-headed through the town calling for help," he said, smiling.

Mr. Sims shook his head. "Like as not it'll be kept quiet for the credit of the force," he said, slowly, "unless, of course, they discover who did it."

A slight shade fell on the good-humoured countenance of Mr. Gunnill, but it was chased away almost immediately by Sims reminding him of the chaff of Cooper's brother-constables.

"And you might take the others away," said Mr. Gunnill, brightening; "you might keep on doing it."

Mr. Sims said doubtfully that he might, but pointed out that Cooper would probably be on his guard for the future.

"Yes, you've done your share," said Miss Gunnill, with a half-glance at Mr. Drill, who was still gazing in a bewildered fashion at the trophies. "You can come into the kitchen and help me draw some beer if you like."

Page 5

Mr. Sims followed her joyfully, and reaching down a jug for her watched her tenderly as she drew the beer. All women love valour, but Miss Gunnill, gazing sadly at the slight figure of Mr. Sims, could not help wishing that Mr. Drill possessed a little of his spirit.

[Illustration: "Mr. Sims watched her tenderly as she drew the beer."]

She had just finished her task when a tremendous bumping noise was heard in the living-room, and the plates on the dresser were nearly shaken off their shelves.

"What's that?" she cried.

They ran to the room and stood aghast in the doorway at the spectacle of Mr. Gunnill, with his clenched fists held tightly by his side, bounding into the air with all the grace of a trained acrobat, while Mr. Drill encouraged him from an easy-chair. Mr. Gunnill smiled broadly as he met their astonished gaze, and with a final bound kicked something along the floor and subsided into his seat panting.

Mr. Sims, suddenly enlightened, uttered a cry of dismay and, darting under the table, picked up what had once been a policeman's helmet. Then he snatched a partially consumed truncheon from the fire, and stood white and trembling before the astonished Mr. Gunnill.

"What's the matter?" inquired the latter. "You—you've spoilt 'em," gasped Mr. Sims. "What of it?" said Mr. Gunnill, staring.

"I was—going to take 'em away," stammered Mr. Sims.

"Well, they'll be easier to carry now," said Mr. Drill, simply.

Mr. Sims glanced at him sharply, and then, to the extreme astonishment of Mr. Gunnill, snatched up the relics and, wrapping them up in the paper, dashed out of the house. Mr. Gunnill turned a look of blank inquiry upon Mr. Drill.

"It wasn't Cooper's number on the helmet," said that gentleman.

"Eh?" shouted Mr. Gunnill.

"How do you know?" inquired Selina.

"I just happened to notice," replied Mr. Drill. He reached down as though to take up the carpet-bag which he had placed by the side of his chair, and then, apparently thinking better of it, leaned back in his seat and eyed Mr. Gunnill.

"Do you mean to tell me," said the latter, "that he's been and upset the wrong man?"

Mr. Drill shook his head. "That's the puzzle," he said, softly.

He smiled over at Miss Gunnill, but that young lady, who found him somewhat mysterious, looked away and frowned. Her father sat and exhausted conjecture, his final conclusion being that Mr. Sims had attacked the first policeman that had come in his way and was now suffering the agonies of remorse.

He raised his head sharply at the sound of hurried footsteps outside. There was a smart rap at the street door, then the handle was turned, and the next moment, to the dismay of all present, the red and angry face of one of Mr. Cooper's brother-constables was thrust into the room.

Mr. Gunnill gazed at it in helpless fascination. The body of the constable garbed in plain clothes followed the face and, standing before him in a menacing fashion, held out a broken helmet and staff.

Page 6

"Have you seen these afore?" he inquired, in a terrible voice.

"No," said Mr. Gunnill, with an attempt at surprise. "What are they?"

"I'll tell you what they are," said Police-constable Jenkins, ferociously; "they're my helmet and truncheon. You've been spoiling His Majesty's property, and you'll be locked up."

"Yours?" said the astonished Mr. Gunnill.

"I lent 'em to young Sims, just for a joke," said the constable. "I felt all along I was doing a silly thing."

"It's no joke," said Mr. Gunnill, severely. "I'll tell young Herbert what I think of him trying to deceive me like that."

"Never mind about deceiving," interrupted the constable. "What are you going to do about it?"

"What are you?" inquired Mr. Gunnill, hardily. "It seems to me it's between you and him; you'll very likely be dismissed from the force, and all through trying to deceive. I wash my hands of it."

"You'd no business to lend it," said Drill, interrupting the constable's indignant retort; "especially for Sims to pretend that he had stolen it from Cooper. It's a roundabout sort of thing, but you can't tell of Mr. Gunnill without getting into trouble yourself."

"I shall have to put up with that," said the constable, desperately; "it's got to be explained. It's my day-helmet, too, and the night one's as shabby as can be. Twenty years in the force and never a mark against my name till now."

"If you'd only keep quiet a bit instead of talking so much," said Mr. Drill, who had been doing some hard thinking, "I might be able to help you, p'r'aps."

"How?" inquired the constable.

"Help him if you can, Ted," said Mr. Gunnill, eagerly; "we ought all to help others when we get a chance."

Mr. Drill sat bolt upright and looked very wise.

He took the smashed helmet from the table and examined it carefully. It was broken in at least half-a-dozen places, and he laboured in vain to push it into shape. He might as well have tried to make a silk hat out of a concertina. The only thing that had escaped injury was the metal plate with the number.

“Why don’t you mend it?” he inquired, at last.

“Mend it?” shouted the incensed Mr. Jenkins. “Why don’t you?”

“I think I could,” said Mr. Drill, slowly; “give me half an hour in the kitchen and I’ll try.”

“Have as long as you like,” said Mr. Gunnill.

“And I shall want some glue, and Miss Gunnill, and some tin-tacks,” said Drill.

“What do you want me for?” inquired Selina.

“To hold the things for me,” replied Mr. Drill.

Miss Gunnill tossed her head, but after a little demur consented; and Drill, ignoring the impatience of the constable, picked up his bag and led the way into the kitchen.

Messrs. Gunnill and Jenkins, left behind in the living-room, sought for some neutral topic of discourse, but in vain; conversation would revolve round hard labour and lost pensions. From the kitchen came sounds of hammering, then a loud “Ooh!” from Miss Gunnill, followed by a burst of laughter and a clapping of hands. Mr. Jenkins shifted in his seat and exchanged glances with Mr. Gunnill.

Page 7

[Illustration: "From the kitchen came sounds of hammering."]

"He's a clever fellow," said that gentleman, hopefully. "You should hear him imitate a canary; life-like it is."

Mr. Jenkins was about to make a hasty and obvious rejoinder, when the kitchen door opened and Selina emerged, followed by Drill. The snarl which the constable had prepared died away in a murmur of astonishment as he took the helmet. It looked as good as ever.

He turned it over and over in amaze, and looked in vain for any signs of the disastrous cracks. It was stiff and upright. He looked at the number: it was his own. His eyes round with astonishment he tried it on, and then his face relaxed.

"It don't fit as well as it did," he said.

"Well, upon my word, some people are never satisfied," said the indignant Drill. "There isn't another man in England could have done it better."

"I'm not grumbling," said the constable, hastily; "it's a wonderful piece o' work. Wonderful! I can't even see where it was broke. How on earth did you do it?"

Drill shook his head. "It's a secret process," he said, slowly. "I might want to go into the hat trade some day, and I'm not going to give things away."

"Quite right," said Mr. Jenkins. "Still—well, it's a marvel, that's what it is; a fair marvel. If you take my advice you'll go in the hat trade to-morrow, my lad."

"I'm not surprised," said Mr. Gunnill, whose face as he spoke was a map of astonishment. "Not a bit. I've seen him do more surprising things than that. Have a go at the staff now, Teddy."

"I'll see about it," said Mr. Drill, modestly. "I can't do impossibilities. You leave it here, Mr. Jenkins, and we'll talk about it later on."

Mr. Jenkins, still marvelling over his helmet, assented, and, after another reference to the possibilities in the hat trade to a man with a born gift for repairs, wrapped his property in a piece of newspaper and departed, whistling.

"Ted," said Mr. Gunnill, impressively, as he sank into his chair with a sigh of relief. "How you done it I don't know. It's a surprise even to me."

"He is very clever," said Selina, with a kind smile

Mr. Drill turned pale, and then, somewhat emboldened by praise from such a quarter, dropped into a chair by her side and began to talk in low tones. The grateful Mr. Gunnill, more relieved than he cared to confess, thoughtfully closed his eyes.

"I didn't think all along that you'd let Herbert outdo you," said Selina.

"I want to outdo him," said Mr. Drill, in a voice of much meaning.

Miss Gunnill cast down her eyes and Mr. Drill had just plucked up sufficient courage to take her hand when footsteps stopped at the house, the handle of the door was turned, and, for the second time that evening, the inflamed visage of Mr. Jenkins confronted the company.

Page 8

"Don't tell me it's a failure," said Mr. Gunnill, starting from his chair. "You must have been handling it roughly. It was as good as new when you took it away."

Mr. Jenkins waved him away and fixed his eyes upon Drill.

"You think you're mighty clever, I dare say," he said, grimly; "but I can put two and two together. I've just heard of it."

"Heard of two and two?" said Drill, looking puzzled.

"I don't want any of your nonsense," said Mr. Jenkins. "I'm not on duty now, but I warn you not to say anything that may be used against you."

"I never do," said Mr. Drill, piously.

"Somebody threw a handful o' flour in poor Cooper's face a couple of hours ago," said Mr. Jenkins, watching him closely, "and while he was getting it out of his eyes they upset him and made off with his helmet and truncheon. I just met Brown and he says Cooper's been going on like a madman."

"By Jove! it's a good job I mended your helmet for you," said Mr. Drill, "or else they might have suspected you."

Mr. Jenkins stared at him. "I know who did do it," he said, significantly.

"Herbert Sims?" guessed Mr. Drill, in a stage whisper.

"You'll be one o' the first to know," said Mr. Jenkins, darkly; "he'll be arrested to-morrow. Fancy the impudence of it! It's shocking."

Mr. Drill whistled. "Nell, don't let that little affair o' yours with Sims be known," he said, quietly. "Have that kept quiet—if you can."

Mr. Jenkins started as though he had been stung. In the joy of a case he had overlooked one or two things. He turned and regarded the young man wistfully.

"Don't call on me as a witness, that's all," continued Mr. Drill. "I never was a mischief-maker, and I shouldn't like to have to tell how you lent your helmet to Sims so that he could pretend he had knocked Cooper down and taken it from him."

[Illustration: "Don't call on me as a witness, that's all," continued Mr. Drill.]

"Wouldn't look at all well," said Mr. Gunnill, nodding his head sagely.

Mr. Jenkins breathed hard and looked from one to the other. It was plain that it was no good reminding them that he had not had a case for five years.

"When I say that I know who did it," he said, slowly, "I mean that I have my suspicions."

"Don't call on me as a witness, that's all," continued Mr. Drill."

"Ah," said Mr. Drill, "that's a very different thing."

"Nothing like the same," said Mr. Gunnill, pouring the constable a glass of ale.

Mr. Jenkins drank it and smacked his lips feebly.

"Sims needn't know anything about that helmet being repaired," he said at last.

"Certainly not," said everybody.

Mr. Jenkins sighed and turned to Drill.

"It's no good spoiling the ship for a ha'porth o' tar," he said, with a faint suspicion of a wink. "No," said Drill, looking puzzled.

Page 9

“Anything that’s worth doing at all is worth doing well,” continued the constable, “and while I’m drinking another glass with Mr. Gunnill here, suppose you go into the kitchen with that useful bag o’ yours and finish repairing my truncheon?”