

The Third String eBook

The Third String by W. W. Jacobs

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THE THIRD STRING

Love? said the night-watchman, as he watched in an abstracted fashion the efforts of a skipper to reach a brother skipper on a passing barge with a boathook. Don't talk to me about love, because I've suffered enough through it. There ought to be teetotalers for love the same as wot there is for drink, and they ought to wear a piece o' ribbon to show it, the same as the teetotalers do; but not an attractive piece o' ribbon, mind you. I've seen as much mischief caused by love as by drink, and the funny thing is, one often leads to the other. Love, arter it is over, often leads to drink, and drink often leads to love and to a man committing himself for life afore it is over.

[Illustration: "Don't talk to me about love, because I've suffered enough through it."]

Sailormen give way to it most; they see so little o' wimmen that they naturally 'ave a high opinion of 'em. Wait till they become night-watchmen and, having to be at 'ome all day, see the other side of 'em. If people on'y started life as night-watchmen there wouldn't be one 'arf the falling in love that there is now.

I remember one chap, as nice a fellow as you could wish to meet, too. He always carried his sweet-heart's photograph about with 'im, and it was the on'y thing that cheered 'im up during the fourteen years he was cast away on a deserted island. He was picked up at last and taken 'ome, and there she was still single and waiting for 'im; and arter spending fourteen years on a deserted island he got another ten in quod for shooting 'er because she 'ad altered so much in 'er looks.

Then there was Ginger Dick, a red-'aired man I've spoken about before. He went and fell in love one time when he was lodging in Wapping 'ere with old Sam Small and Peter Russet, and a nice mess 'e made of it.

They was just back from a v'y'ge, and they 'adn't been ashore a week afore both of 'em noticed a change for the worse in Ginger. He turned quiet and peaceful and lost 'is taste for beer. He used to play with 'is food instead of eating it, and in place of going out of an evening with Sam and Peter took to going off by 'imself.

"It's love," ses Peter Russet, shaking his 'ead, "and he'll be worse afore he's better."

"Who's the gal?" ses old Sam.

Peter didn't know, but when they came 'ome that night 'e asked. Ginger, who was sitting up in bed with a far-off look in 'is eyes, cuddling 'is knees, went on staring but didn't answer.

"Who is it making a fool of you this time, Ginger?" ses old Sam.

“You mind your business and I’ll mind mine,” ses Ginger, suddenly waking up and looking very fierce.

“No offence, mate,” ses Sam, winking at Peter. “I on’y asked in case I might be able to do you a good turn.”

“Well, you can do that by not letting her know you’re a pal o’ mine,” ses Ginger, very nasty.

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Old Sam didn't understand at fust, and when Peter explained to 'im he wanted to hit 'im for trying to twist Ginger's words about.

"She don't like fat old men," ses Ginger.

"Ho!" ses old Sam, who couldn't think of anything else to say. "Ho! don't she? Ho! Ho! indeed!"

He undressed 'imself and got into the bed he shared with Peter, and kept 'im awake for hours by telling 'im in a loud voice about all the gals he'd made love to in his life, and partikler about one gal that always fainted dead away whenever she saw either a red-'aired man or a monkey.

Peter Russet found out all about it next day, and told Sam that it was a barmaid with black 'air and eyes at the Jolly Pilots, and that she wouldn't 'ave anything to say to Ginger.

He spoke to Ginger about it agin when they were going to bed that night, and to 'is surprise found that he was quite civil. When 'e said that he would do anything he could for 'im, Ginger was quite affected.

"I can't eat or drink," he ses, in a miserable voice; "I lay awake all last night thinking of her. She's so diff'rent to other gals; she's got—If I start on you, Sam Small, you'll know it. You go and make that choking noise to them as likes it."

"It's a bit o' egg-shell I got in my throat at break-fast this morning, Ginger," ses Sam. "I wonder whether she lays awake all night thinking of you?"

"I dare say she does," ses Peter Russet, giving 'im a little push.

"Keep your 'art up, Ginger," ses Sam; "I've known gals to 'ave the most ext'ordinary likings afore now."

"Don't take no notice of 'im," ses Peter, holding Ginger back. "'Ow are you getting on with her?"

Ginger groaned and sat down on 'is bed and looked at the floor, and Sam went and sat on his till it shook so that Ginger offered to step over and break 'is neck for 'im.

"I can't 'elp the bed shaking," ses Sam; "it ain't my fault. I didn't make it. If being in love is going to make you so disagreeable to your best friends, Ginger, you'd better go and live by yourself."

"I 'eard something about her to-day, Ginger," ses Peter Russet. "I met a chap I used to know at Bull's Wharf, and he told me that she used to keep company with a chap



named Bill Lumm, a bit of a prize-fighter, and since she gave 'im up she won't look at anybody else."

"Was she very fond of 'im, then?" asks Ginger.

"I don't know," ses Peter; "but this chap told me that she won't walk out with anybody agin, unless it's another prize-fighter. Her pride won't let her, I s'pose."

"Well, that's all right, Ginger," ses Sam; "all you've got to do is to go and be a prize-fighter."

"If I 'ave any more o' your nonsense—" ses Ginger, starting up.

"That's right," ses Sam; "jump down anybody's throat when they're trying to do you a kindness. That's you all over, Ginger, that is. Wot's to prevent you telling 'er that you're a prize-fighter from Australia or somewhere? She won't know no better."

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He got up off the bed and put his 'ands up as Ginger walked across the room to 'im, but Ginger on'y wanted to shake 'ands, and arter he 'ad done that 'e patted 'im on the back and smiled at 'im.

"I'll try it," he ses. "I'd tell any lies for 'er sake. Ah! you don't know wot love is, Sam."

"I used to," ses Sam, and then he sat down agin and began to tell 'em all the love-affairs he could remember, until at last Peter Russet got tired and said it was 'ard to believe, looking at 'im now, wot a perfick terror he'd been with gals, and said that the face he'd got now was a judgment on 'im. Sam shut up arter that, and got into trouble with Peter in the middle o' the night by waking 'im up to tell 'im something that he 'ad just thought of about his face.

The more Ginger thought o' Sam's idea the more he liked it, and the very next evening 'e took Peter Russet into the private bar o' the Jolly Pilots. He ordered port wine, which he thought seemed more 'igh-class than beer, and then Peter Russet started talking to Miss Tucker and told her that Ginger was a prize-fighter from Sydney, where he'd beat everybody that stood up to 'im.

The gal seemed to change toward Ginger all in a flash, and 'er beautiful black eyes looked at 'im so admiring that he felt quite faint. She started talking to 'im about his fights at once, and when at last 'e plucked up courage to ask 'er to go for a walk with 'im on Sunday arternoon she seemed quite delighted.

"It'll be a nice change for me," she ses, smiling. "I used to walk out with a prize-fighter once before, and since I gave 'im up I began to think I was never going to 'ave a young man agin. You can't think 'ow dull it's been."

"Must ha' been," ses Ginger.

"I s'pose you've got a taste for prize-fighters, miss," ses Peter Russet.

"No," ses Miss Tucker; "I don't think that it's that exactly, but, you see, I couldn't 'ave anybody else. Not for their own sakes."

[Illustration: "Miss Tucker."]

"Why not?" ses Ginger, looking puzzled.

"Why not?" ses Miss Tucker. "Why, because o' Bill. He's such a 'orrid jealous disposition. After I gave 'im up I walked out with a young fellow named Smith; fine, big, strapping chap 'e was, too, and I never saw such a change in any man as there was in 'im after Bill 'ad done with 'im. I couldn't believe it was 'im. I told Bill he ought to be ashamed of 'imself."



"Wot did 'e say?" asks Ginger.

"Don't ask me wot 'e said," ses Miss Tucker, tossing her 'ead. "Not liking to be beat, I 'ad one more try with a young fellow named Charlie Webb."

"Wot 'appened to 'im?" ses Peter Russet, arter waiting a bit for 'er to finish.

"I can't bear to talk of it," ses Miss Tucker, holding up Ginger's glass and giving the counter a wipe down. "He met Bill, and I saw 'im six weeks afterward just as 'e was being sent away from the 'ospital to a seaside home. Bill disappeared after that."

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"Has he gone far away?" ses Ginger, trying to speak in a off-'and way.

"Oh, he's back now," ses Miss Tucker. "You'll see 'im fast enough, and, wotever you do, don't let 'im know you're a prize-fighter."

"Why not?" ses pore Ginger.

"Because o' the surprise it'll be to 'im," ses Miss Tucker. "Let 'im rush on to 'is doom. He'll get a lesson 'e don't expect, the bully. Don't be afraid of 'urting 'im. Think o' pore Smith and Charlie Webb."

"I am thinkin' of 'em," ses Ginger, slow-like. "Is—is Bill—very quick —with his 'ands?"

"Rather," ses Miss Tucker; "but o' course he ain't up to your mark; he's on'y known in these parts."

She went off to serve a customer, and Ginger Dick tried to catch Peter's eye, but couldn't, and when Miss Tucker came back he said 'e must be going.

"Sunday afternoon at a quarter past three sharp, outside 'ere," she ses. "Never mind about putting on your best clothes, because Bill is sure to be hanging about. I'll take care o' that."

She reached over the bar and shook 'ands with 'im, and Ginger felt a thrill go up 'is arm which lasted 'im all the way 'ome.

He didn't know whether to turn up on Sunday or not, and if it 'adn't ha' been for Sam and Peter Russet he'd ha' most likely stayed at home. Not that 'e was a coward, being always ready for a scrap and gin'rally speaking doing well at it, but he made a few inquiries about Bill Lumm and 'e saw that 'e had about as much chance with 'im as a kitten would 'ave with a bulldog.

Sam and Peter was delighted, and they talked about it as if it was a pantermime, and old Sam said that when he was a young man he'd ha' fought six Bill Lumms afore he'd ha' given a gal up. He brushed Ginger's clothes for 'im with 'is own hands on Sunday afternoon, and, when Ginger started, 'im and Peter follered some distance behind to see fair play.

The on'y person outside the Jolly Pilots when Ginger got there was a man; a strong-built chap with a thick neck, very large 'ands, and a nose which 'ad seen its best days some time afore. He looked 'ard at Ginger as 'e came up, and then stuck his 'ands in 'is trouser pockets and spat on the pavement. Ginger walked a little way past and then back agin, and just as he was thinking that 'e might venture to go off, as Miss Tucker 'adn't come, the door opened and out she came.

"I couldn't find my 'at-pins," she ses, taking Ginger's arm and smiling up into 'is face.

Before Ginger could say anything the man he 'ad noticed took his 'ands out of 'is pockets and stepped up to 'im.

"Let go o' that young lady's arm," he ses. "Sha'n't," ses Ginger, holding it so tight that Miss Tucker nearly screamed.

"Let go 'er arm and put your 'ands up," ses the chap agin.

[Illustration: "'Let go o' that young lady's arm,' he ses."]

"Not 'ere," ses Ginger, who 'ad laid awake the night afore thinking wot to do if he met Bill Lumm. "If you wish to 'ave a spar with me, my lad, you must 'ave it where we can't be interrupted. When I start on a man I like to make a good job of it."

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"Good job of it!" ses the other, starting. "Do you know who I am?"

"No, I don't," ses Ginger, "and, wot's more, I don't care."

"My name," ses the chap, speaking in a slow, careful voice, "is Bill Lumm."

"Wot a 'orrid name!" ses Ginger.

"Otherwise known as the Wapping Basher," ses Bill, shoving 'is face into Ginger's and glaring at 'im.

"Ho!" ses Ginger, sniffing, "a amatoor."

"*Amatoor?*" ses Bill, shouting.

"That's wot we should call you over in Australia," ses Ginger; "my name is Dick Duster, likewise known as the Sydney Puncher. I've killed three men in the ring and 'ave never 'ad a defeat."

"Well, put 'em up," ses Bill, doubling up 'is fists and shaping at 'im.

"Not in the street, I tell you," ses Ginger, still clinging tight to Miss Tucker's arm. "I was fined five pounds the other day for punching a man in the street, and the magistrate said it would be 'ard labour for me next time. You find a nice, quiet spot for some arternoon, and I'll knock your 'ead off with pleasure."

"I'd sooner 'ave it knocked off now," ses Bill; "I don't like waiting for things."

"Thursday arternoon," ses Ginger, very firm; "there's one or two gentlemen want to see a bit o' my work afore backing me, and we can combine bisness with pleasure."

He walked off with Miss Tucker, leaving Bill Lumm standing on the pavement scratching his 'ead and staring arter 'im as though 'e didn't quite know wot to make of it. Bill stood there for pretty near five minutes, and then arter asking Sam and Peter, who 'ad been standing by listening, whether they wanted anything for themselves, walked off to ask 'is pals wot they knew about the Sydney Puncher.

Ginger Dick was so quiet and satisfied about the fight that old Sam and Peter couldn't make 'im out at all. He wouldn't even practise punching at a bolster that Peter rigged up for 'im, and when 'e got a message from Bill Lumm naming a quiet place on the Lea Marshes he agreed to it as comfortable as possible.

"Well, I must say, Ginger, that I like your pluck," ses Peter Russet.

"I always 'ave said that for Ginger; 'e's got pluck," ses Sam.

Ginger coughed and tried to smile at 'em in a superior sort o' way. "I thought you'd got more sense," he ses, at last. "You don't think I'm going, do you?"

"Wot?" ses old Sam, in a shocked voice.

"You're never going to back out of it, Ginger?" ses Peter.

"I am," ses Ginger. "If you think I'm going to be smashed up by a prize-fighter just to show my pluck you're mistook."

"You must go, Ginger," ses old Sam, very severe. "It's too late to back out of it now. Think of the gal. Think of 'er feelings."

"For the sake of your good name," ses Peter.

"I should never speak to you agin, Ginger," ses old Sam, pursing up 'is lips.

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“Nor me neither,” ses Peter Russet.

“To think of our Ginger being called a coward,” ses old Sam, with a shudder, “and afore a gal, too.”

“The loveliest gal in Wapping,” ses Peter.

“Look ’ere,” ses Ginger, “you can shut up, both of you. I’m not going, and that’s the long and short of it. I don’t mind an ordinary man, but I draw the line at prize-fighters.”

Old Sam sat down on the edge of ’is bed and looked the picture of despair. “You must go, Ginger,” he ses, “for my sake.”

“Your sake?” ses Ginger, staring.

“I’ve got money on it,” ses Sam, “so’s Peter. If you don’t turn up all bets’ll be off.”

“Good job for you, too,” ses Ginger. “If I did turn up you’d lose it, to a dead certainty.”

Old Sam coughed and looked at Peter, and Peter ’e coughed and looked at Sam.

“You don’t understand, Ginger,” said Sam, in a soft voice; “it ain’t often a chap gets the chance o’ making a bit o’ money these ’ard times.”

“So we’ve put all our money on Bill Lumm,” ses Peter. “It’s the safest and easiest way o’ making money I ever ’eard of. You see, we know you’re not a prize-fighter and the others don’t.”

Pore Ginger looked at ’em, and then ’e called ’em all the names he could lay ’is tongue to, but, with the idea o’ the money they was going make, they didn’t mind a bit. They let him ’ave ’is say, and that night they brought ’ome two other sailormen wot ’ad bet agin Ginger to share their room, and, though they ’ad bet agin ’im, they was so fond of ’im that it was evident that they wasn’t going to leave ’im till the fight was over.

Ginger gave up then, and at twelve o’clock next day they started off to find the place. Mr. Webson, the landlord of the Jolly Pilots, a short, fat man o’ fifty, wot ’ad spoke to Ginger once or twice, went with ’em, and all the way to the station he kept saying wot a jolly spot it was for that sort o’ thing. Perfickly private; nice soft green grass to be knocked down on, and larks up in the air singing away as if they’d never leave off.

They took the train to Homerton, and, being a slack time o’ the day, the porters was surprised to see wot a lot o’ people was travelling by it. So was Ginger. There was the landlords of ’arf the public-’ouses in Wapping, all smoking big cigars; two dock policemen in plain clothes, wot ’ad got the arternoon off—one with a raging toothache and the other with a baby wot wasn’t expected to last the day out. They was as full o’



fun as kittens, and the landlord o' the Jolly Pilots pointed out to Ginger wot reasonable 'uman beings policemen was at 'art. Besides them there was quite a lot o' sailormen, even skippers and mates, nearly all of 'em smoking big cigars, too, and looking at Ginger out of the corner of one eye and at the Wapping Basher out of the corner of the other.

"Hit 'ard and hit straight," ses the landlord to Ginger in a low voice, as they got out of the train and walked up the road. "Ow are you feeling?"

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"I've got a cold coming on," ses pore Ginger, looking at the Basher, who was on in front, "and a splitting 'eadache, and a sharp pain all down my left leg. I don't think——"

"Well, it's a good job it's no worse," ses the land-lord; "all you've got to do is to hit 'ard. If you win it's a 'undered pounds in my pocket, and I'll stand you a fiver of it. D'ye understand?"

They turned down some little streets, several of 'em going diff'rent ways, and arter crossing the River Lea got on to the marshes, and, as the landlord said, the place might ha' been made for it.

A little chap from Mile End was the referee, and Bill Lumm, 'aving peeled, stood looking on while Ginger took 'is things off and slowly and carefully folded 'em up. Then they stepped toward each other, Bill taking longer steps than Ginger, and shook 'ands; immediately arter which Bill knocked Ginger head over 'eels.

[Illustration: "Bill Lumm, 'aving peeled, stood looking on while Ginger took 'is things off."]

"Time!" was called, and the landlord o' the Jolly Pilots, who was nursing Ginger on 'is knee, said that it was nothing at all, and that bleeding at the nose was a sign of 'ealth. But as it happened Ginger was that mad 'e didn't want any encouragement, he on'y wanted to kill Bill Lumm.

He got two or three taps in the next round which made his 'ead ring, and then he got 'ome on the mark and follered it up by a left-'anded punch on Bill's jaw that surprised 'em both—Bill because he didn't think Ginger could hit so 'ard, and Ginger because 'e didn't think that prize-fighters 'ad any feelings.

They clinched and fell that round, and the land-lord patted Ginger on the back and said that if he ever 'ad a son he 'oped he'd grow up like 'im.

Ginger was surprised at the way 'e was getting on, and so was old Sam and Peter Russet, and when Ginger knocked Bill down in the sixth round Sam went as pale as death. Ginger was getting marked all over, but he stuck, to 'is man, and the two dock policemen, wot 'ad put their money on Bill Lumm, began to talk of their dooty, and say as 'ow the fight ought to be stopped.

At the tenth round Bill couldn't see out of 'is eyes, and kept wasting 'is strength on the empty air, and once on the referee. Ginger watched 'is opportunity, and at last, with a terrific smash on the point o' Bill's jaw, knocked 'im down and then looked round for the landlord's knee.

Bill made a game try to get up when "Time!" was called, but couldn't; and the referee, who was 'olding a 'andkerchief to 'is nose, gave the fight to Ginger.



It was the proudest moment o' Ginger Dick's life. He sat there like a king, smiling 'orribly, and Sam's voice as he paid 'is losings sounded to 'im like music, in spite o' the words the old man see fit to use. It was so 'ard to get Peter Russet's money that it a'most looked as though there was going to be another prize-fight, but 'e paid up at last and went off, arter fust telling Ginger part of wot he thought of 'im.

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There was a lot o' quarrelling, but the bets was all settled at last, and the landlord o' the Jolly Pilots, who was in 'igh feather with the money he'd won, gave Ginger the five pounds he'd promised and took him 'ome in a cab.

"You done well, my lad," he ses. "No, don't smile. It looks as though your 'ead's coming off."

"I 'ope you'll tell Miss Tucker 'ow I fought," ses Ginger.

"I will, my lad," ses the landlord; "but you'd better not see 'er for some time, for both your sakes."

"I was thinking of 'aving a day or two in bed," ses Ginger.

"Best thing you can do," ses the landlord; "and mind, don't you ever fight Bill Lumm agin. Keep out of 'is way."

"Why? I beat 'im once, an' I can beat 'im agin," ses Ginger, offended.

"Beat 'im?" ses the landlord. He took 'is cigar out of 'is mouth as though 'e was going to speak, and then put it back agin and looked out of the window.

"Yes, beat 'im," ses Ginger'. "You was there and saw it."

"He lost the fight a-purpose," ses the landlord, whispering. "Miss Tucker found out that you wasn't a prize-fighter—leastways, I did for 'er—and she told Bill that, if 'e loved 'er so much that he'd 'ave 'is sinful pride took down by letting you beat 'im, she'd think diff'rent of 'im. Why, 'e could 'ave settled you in a minute if he'd liked. He was on'y playing with you."

Ginger stared at 'im as if 'e couldn't believe 'is eyes. "Playing?" he ses, feeling 'is face very gently with the tips of his fingers.

"Yes," ses the landlord; "and if he ever hits you agin you'll know I'm speaking the truth."

Ginger sat back all of a heap and tried to think. "Is Miss Tucker going to keep company with 'im agin, then?" he ses, in a faint voice.

"No," ses the landlord; "you can make your mind easy on that point."

"Well, then, if I walk out with 'er I shall 'ave to fight Bill all over agin," ses Ginger.

The landlord turned to 'im and patted 'im on the shoulder. "Don't you take up your troubles afore they come, my lad," he ses, kindly; "and mind and keep wot I've told you dark, for all our sakes."



He put 'im down at the door of 'is lodgings and, arter shaking 'ands with 'im, gave the landlady a shilling and told 'er to get some beefsteak and put on 'is face, and went home. Ginger went straight off to bed, and the way he carried on when the landlady fried the steak afore bringing it up showed 'ow upset he was.

[Illustration: "The way he carried on when the landlady fried the steak showed 'ow upset he was."]

It was over a week afore he felt 'e could risk letting Miss Tucker see 'im, and then at seven o'clock one evening he felt 'e couldn't wait any longer, and arter spending an hour cleaning 'imself he started out for the Jolly Pilots.

He felt so 'appy at the idea o' seeing her agin that 'e forgot all about Bill Lumm, and it gave 'im quite a shock when 'e saw 'im standing outside the Pilots. Bill took his 'ands out of 'is pockets when he saw 'im and came toward 'im.

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"It's no good to-night, mate," he ses; and to Ginger's great surprise shook 'ands with 'im.

"No good?" ses Ginger, staring.

"No," ses Bill; "he's in the little back-parlour, like a whelk in 'is shell; but we'll 'ave 'im sooner or later."

"Him? Who?" ses Ginger, more puzzled than ever.

"Who?" ses Bill; "why, Webson, the landlord. You don't mean to tell me you ain't heard about it?"

"Heard wot?" ses Ginger. "I haven't 'card any-thing. I've been indoors with a bad cold all the week."

"Webson and Julia Tucker was married at eleven o'clock yesterday morning," ses Bill Lumm, in a hoarse voice. "When I think of the way I've been done, and wot I've suffered, I feel 'arf crazy. He won a 'undered pounds through me, and then got the gal I let myself be disgraced for. I 'ad an idea some time ago that he'd got 'is eye on her."

Ginger Dick didn't answer 'im a word. He staggered back and braced 'imself up agin the wall for a bit, and arter staring at Bill Lumm in a wild way for pretty near three minutes he crawled back to 'is lodgings and went straight to bed agin.