

The NEST EGG

By W. W. JACOBS

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ARTFULNESS—said the night watchman, smoking placidly—is a gift, but it don't pay always. I've met some artful ones in my time—plenty of 'em—but I can't truthfully say as 'ow any of them was the better for meeting me.

He rose slowly from the packing case on which he had been sitting and, stamping down the point of a rusty nail with his heel, resumed his seat, remarking that he had endured it for some time under the impression that it was only a splinter.

I've surprised more than one in my time—he continued slowly. When I met one of these 'ere artful ones I used fust of all to pretend to be more stupid than wot I really am.

He stopped and stared fixedly. More stupid than I looked—he said.

He stopped again.

More stupid than wot they thought I looked—he said, speaking with marked deliberation—and I'd let 'em go on and on until I thought I had 'ad 'bout enough and then turn round on 'em. Nobody ever got the better of me except my wife, and that was only before we was married. Two nights afterward she found a fishhook in my trouser pocket, and arter that I could ha' left untold gold there—if I'd ha' had it. It spoilt wot some people call the honeymoon, but it paid in the long run.

One o' the worst things a man can do is to take up artfulness all of a sudden. I never knew it to answer yet, and I can tell you of a case that'll prove my words true.

It's some years ago now, and the chap I 'appened to was a young man, a shipmate o' mine, named Charlie Tagg. Very steady young chap he was—too steady for most of 'em. That's 'ow it was me and 'im got to be such pals.

He'd been saving up for years to get married, and all the advice we could give 'im didn't 'ave any effect. He saved up nearly every penny of 'is money and gave it to his gal to keep for 'im, and the time I'm speaking of she'd got '72 of 'is and seventeen and six of 'er own to set up housekeeping with.

Then a thing happened that I've known to 'appen to sailor men afore. At Sydney he got silly on another gal and started walking out with her, and afore he knew wot he was about he'd promised to marry 'er too.

Sydney and London being a long way from each other was in 'is favor, but the thing that troubled 'im was 'ow to get that '72 out of Emma Cook, 'is London gal, so as he could marry the other with it. It worried 'im all the way home, and by the time we got into the London river 'is head was all in a maze with it. Emma Cook 'ad got it all saved up in the bank to take a little shop with when they got spliced, and 'ow to get it he could not think.

He went straight off to Poplar, where she lived, as soon as the ship was berthed. He walked all the way so as 'is 'ave more time for thinking, but wot with bumping into two old gentlemen with bad tempers and being nearly run over by a cabman with a white dress and red whiskers, he got to the house without 'aving thought of anything.

They was just finishing their tea as he got there, and they all seemed so pleased to see 'im that it made it worse than ever for 'im. Mrs. Cook, who 'ad 'er own parlour, gave 'im her own cup to drink out of and said that she 'ad dreamt of 'im the night afore last, and old Cook said that he 'ad got so good looking he shouldn't 'ave known it.

"I should 'ave passed 'im in the street," he ses. "I never see such an alteration."

"They'll be a nice looking couple," ses 'is wife looking at a young chap named George Smith that 'ad been sitting next to Emma.

Charlie Tagg filled 'is mouth with bread and butter and wondered 'ow he was to begin. He squeezed Emma's hand and just for the sake of keeping up appearances, and all the time he was thinking of the other gal waiting for 'is thousands o' miles away.

"You've come 'ome just in the nick o' time," ses old Cook. "If you'd done it 'er purpose you couldn't 'ave arranged better."

"Somebody's birthday?" ses Charlie, trying to smile.

Old Cook shook 'is 'ead. "Though it's next Wednesday," he ses, "and I don't see you for thinking of it. No; you're just in time for the biggest bargain in the chandlery line that anybody ever 'ad a chance of. If you 'adn't come back we should have 'ad to do it without you."

"Eighty pounds," ses Mrs. Cook, smiling at Charlie. "With the money Emma's got saved and I 'aves this 'ere, you'll 'ave plenty. You must come and arter tea and 'ave a look at it."

"Little place not arf a mile from 'ere," ses old Cook. "Properly worked up, the way Emma'll do it, it'll be a little fortune. I wish I'd had a chance like it in my young time."

He sat shaking 'is 'ead to think wot 'ad lost, and Charlie Tagg sat staring at 'im and wondering wot he was to do.

My idea is for Charlie to go for a few more 'ere arter they're married, 'is Emma works up the business," ses Mrs. Cook. "She'll be all right with young Bill and Sarah Ann to 'elp her

and keep her company while he's away."

"We'll see as she ain't lonely," ses George Smith, turning to Charlie.

Charlie Tagg gave a bit of a cough and said it wotted considering. He said it was no good doing things in a 'urry and then repenting of 'em all the rest of your life. And he said he'd been given to understand that chandlery wasn't wot it 'ad been, and some of the cleverest people he knew thought that it would be worse before it was better. By the time he'd finished they was all looking at 'im as though they couldn't believe their ears.

"You just step round and 'ave a look at the place," ses old Cook. "If that don't make you alter your tune, call me a sinner."

Charlie Tagg felt as though he could ha' called 'im a lot o' worse things than that, but he took up 'is hat and Mrs. Cook and Emma got their bonnets on and they went round.

"I don't think much of it for '80," ses Charlie, beginning his artfulness as they came near a big shop with plate glass and a double front.

"Eh?" ses old Cook, staring at 'im. "Why, that ain't the place. Why, you wouldn't get that for eight 'undred."

"Well, I don't think much of it," ses Charlie. "If it's worse than that I can't look at it—I can't, indeed."

"You ain't been drinking, Charlie?" ses old Cook in a puzzled voice.

"Certainly not," ses Charlie.

He was pleased to see 'ow anxious they all looked, and when they did come to the shop he set up a laugh that old Cook said chilled 'is marrer in 'is bones. He stood looking in a 'elpless sort o' way at 'is wife and Emma, and then at last he ses, "There it is, and a fair bargain at the price."

"I s'pose you ain't been drinking?" ses Charlie.

"Wot's the matter with it?" ses Mrs. Cook, flaring up.

"Come inside and look at it," ses Emma, taking 'old of his arm.

"Not me," ses Charlie, hanging back. "Why, I wouldn't take it as a gift."

He stood there on the curbstone, and all they could do he wouldn't budge. He said it was a bad road and a little shop, and 'ad got a look about it he didn't like. They walked back 'ome like a funeral procession, and Emma 'ad to keep saying "H's" in w'ispers to 'er mother all the way.

"I don't know wot Charlie does want, I'm sure," ses Mrs. Cook, taking off 'er bonnet as soon as she got indoors and pitching it on the chair he was just going to set down on.

"It's so awkward," ses old Cook, rubbing his 'ead. "Fact is, Charlie, we pretty near gave 'em to understand as we'd buy it."

"It's as good as settled," ses Mrs. Cook, trembling all over with temper.

"They won't settle till they get the money," ses Charlie. "You may make your mind easy about that."

"Emma's drawn it all out of the bank ready," ses old Cook, eager-like.

Charlie felt 'ot and cold all over. "I'd better take care of it," he ses in a trembling voice. "You might be robbed."

"So might you be," ses Mrs. Cook. "Don't you worry; it's in a safe place."

"Sailor men are always being robbed," ses George Smith, who 'ad been helping

can't tell you wot it is, because I've promised to keep it secret for a time. You'll be surprised when I do tell you."

"If I wait till then till I'm surprised," ses Mrs. Cook. "I shall 'ave to wait a long time. My advice to you is to take that shop and ha' done wot it is."

Charlie sat there arguing all the evening, but it was no good, and the idea o' them people sitting there and refusing to let 'im have his own money pretty near sent 'im crazy. It was all he could do to kiss Emma good night, and he couldn't have 'elped slamming the front door if he'd been paid for it. The only comfort he 'ad got left was the Sydney gal's photograph, and he took that out and looked at it under nearly every lamppost he passed.

He went round the next night and 'ad another try to get 'is money, but it was no use, and all the good he done was to make Mrs. Cook in such a temper that she 'ad to go to bed before he 'ad arf finished. It was no good talking to old Cook and Emma, because they daren't do anything without 'er, and it was no good calling things up the stairs to 'er, because she didn't answer. Three nights running Mrs. Cook went off to bed afore 8 o'clock for fear she should say something to 'im as she'd be sorry for arterwards, and for three nights Charlie made 'imself so disagreeable that Emma told 'im plain the sooner he went back to sea ag'in the better she would like it. The only one who seemed to enjoy it was George Smith, and he used to bring bits out o' newspapers and read to 'em, showing 'ow silly people was done out o' their money.

On the fourth night Charlie dropped it and made 'imself so amiable that Mrs. Cook stayed up and made 'im a Welsh rabbit for 'is supper and made 'im drink two glasses o' beer instead of one, while old Cook sat and drank three glasses o' water just out o' temper and to show that he didn't mind. When she started on the chandlery's shop ag'in Charlie said he'd think it over, and when he went away Mrs. Cook called 'im her sailor boy and wished 'im pleasant dreams.

But Charlie Tagg 'ad got better things to do than to dream, and he sat up in bed arf the night thinking out a new plan he'd thought of to get that money. When he did fall asleep at last he dreamt of taking a little farm in Australia and riding about on 'orseback with the Sydney gal watching his men at work.

In the morning he went and hunted up a shipmate of 'is, a young feller named Jack Bates. Jack was one o' these 'ere chaps nobody's enemy but their own, as the saying is—a good 'arted, free 'anded chap as you could wish to see. Everybody liked 'im, and the ship's cat loved 'im. He'd ha' sold the shirt off 'is back to oblige a pal, and three times in one week he got 'is face scratched for trying to prevent 'is 'usbands knocking their wives about.

Charlie Tagg went to 'im because he was the only man he could trust, and for over arf an hour he was telling Jack Bates all 'is troubles, and at last, as a great favor, he let 'im see the Sydney gal's photograph, and told him that all that pore gal's future 'appiness depended upon 'im.

"I'll step round tonight and rob 'em of that '72," ses Jack. "It's your money, and you've a right to it."

Charlie shook 'is 'ead. "That wouldn't do," he ses. "Besides, I don't know where they keep it. No; I've got a better plan than that. Come round to the Crooked Billet, so we can talk it over in peace and quiet."

He stood Jack three or four arf pints afore he told 'im his plan, and Jack was so pleased with it that he wanted to start at once, but Charlie persuaded 'im to wait.

"And don't you spare me, mind, out o' friendship," ses Charlie, "because the blincker you point me the better I shall like it."

"You trust me, mate," ses Jack Bates. "If I don't get that '72 for you you may call me a Dutchman. Why, it's fair robbery, I call it, sticking to your money like that."

They spent the rest o' the day together, and when evening came Charlie went off to the Cooks'. Emma 'ad arf expected they was going to a theater that night, but Charlie said he wasn't feeling the thing, and he sat there so quiet and miserable they didn't know wot to make of 'im.

"'Ave you got any trouble on your mind, Charlie?" ses Mrs. Cook. "Or is the toothache?"

"It ain't the toothache," ses Charlie. He sat there pulling a long face and staring at the floor, but all Mrs. Cook and Emma could do he wouldn't tell them wot was the matter with 'im. He said he didn't want to worry other people with 'is troubles. Let everybody bear their own, that was 'is motto. Even when George Smith offered to go to the theater with Emma in if it didn't ha' been for Mrs. Cook George wouldn't ha' been sorry that he spoke.

"Theaters ain't for me," ses Charlie, with a groan. "I'm more likely to go to jail, so far as I can see, than a theater."

Mrs. Cook and Emma both screamed and Sarah Ann did 'er first highest-terks, and very well, too, considering that she 'ad only just turned fifteen.

"Jail!" ses old Cook as soon as they 'ad quieted Sarah Ann with a bowl o' cold water that young Bill 'ad the presence o' mind to go and fetch.

"Jail! What for?"

"You wouldn't believe if I was to tell you," ses Charlie, getting up to go. "and, besides, I don't want any of you to think as 'ow I am worse than wot I am."

He shook 'is 'ead at them sorrowful-like, and afore they could stop 'im he 'ad gone. Old Cook shouted arter 'im, but it was no use, and the others was

staring into the scullery to fill the bowl ag'in for Emma.

Mrs. Cook went round to 'is lodgings next morning, but found that he was out. They began to fancy all sorts of things then, but Charlie turned up ag'in that evening more miserable than ever.

"I went round to see you this morning," ses Mrs. Cook, "but you wasn't at 'ome."

"I never am, 'artly," ses Charlie. "I can't be. It ain't safe."

"Why not?" ses Mrs. Cook, fidgeting.

"If I was to tell you, you'd lose your good opinion of me," ses Charlie.

"It wouldn't be much to lose," ses Mrs. Cook, frowning.

Charlie didn't answer 'er. When he did speak, he spoke to the old man, and he was so down'arted that he gave 'im the chills 'almost. He 'ardly took any notice of Emma and when Mrs. Cook spoke about the shop ag'in said that chandlery's shops was for happy people, not for 'im.

By the time they sat down to supper they was nearly all as miserable as Charlie 'imself. From words he let drop they all seemed to 'ave the idea that the police was arter 'im, and Mrs. Cook was just asking 'im for wot she called the third and last time, but wot he'd done when there was a knock at the front door so loud and so sudden that old Cook and young Bill both cut their mouths at the same time.

"Anybody 'ere o' the name of Emma Cook?" ses a man's voice when young Bill opened the door.

"She's inside," ses the boy, and the next moment Jack Bates followed 'im into the room and then fell back, with a start, as he saw Charlie Tagg.

"Ho, 'ere you are, are you?" he ses, looking at 'im very black.

"Wot's the matter?" ses Mrs. Cook, very sharp.

"I didn't expect to 'ave the pleasure o' seeing you 'ere, my lad," ses Jack, still staring at Charlie and twisting 'is face up into awful scowls. "Which is Emma Cook?"

"Miss Cook is my name," ses Emma, very sharp. "Wot d'ye want?"

"Very good," ses Jack Bates, looking at Charlie ag'in. "Then p'raps you'll do me the kindness of telling that lie o' yours ag'in afore this young lady."

"It's the truth," ses Charlie, looking down at 'is plate.

"If somebody don't tell me wot all this is about in two minutes, I shall do something desprit," ses Mrs. Cook, getting up.

"This 'ere—er—man," ses Jack Bates, pointing at Charlie, "owes me '75 and won't pay. When I ask 'im for it he ses a party he's keeping company with by the name of Emma Cook 'as got it, and he can't get it."

"So she has," ses Charlie, without looking up.

"Wot does he owe you the money for?" ses Mrs. Cook.

"Cos I lent it to 'im," ses Jack.

"Lent it? What for?" ses Mrs. Cook.

"Cos I was a fool, I s'pose," ses Jack Bates; "a good natured fool. Anyway, I'm sick and tired of asking for it, and if I don't get it tonight I'm going to see the police about it."

He sat down on a chair with 'is hat cocked over one eye, and they all sat staring at 'im as though they didn't know wot to say next.

"So this is wot you meant when you said you'd got the chance of a lifetime, is it?" ses Mrs. Cook to Charlie. "This is wot you wanted it for, is it? Wot did you borrow all that money for?"

"Spent," ses Charlie, in a sulky voice.

"Spent?" ses Mrs. Cook, with a scream. "Wot in?"

"Drink and cards mostly," ses Jack Bates, remembering wot Charlie 'ad told 'im about blackening 'is character.

"You might ha' heard a pin drop 'almost, and Charlie sat there without saying a word.

"Charlie's been led away," ses Mrs. Cook, looking 'ard at Jack Bates. "I s'pose you lent 'im the money to win it back from 'im at cards, didn't you?"

"And give 'im too much 'icker fust," ses old Cook. "I've 'eard of your kind, if Charlie takes my advice he won't pay you a farthing. I should let you do your worst if I was 'im; that's wot I should do. You've got a low face, a nasty, ugly, low face."

"One o' the worst I ever see," ses Mrs. Cook. "It looks as though it might ha' been cut out o' the Police News."

"O'wver could you ha' trusted a man with a face like that, Charlie?" ses old Cook. "Come away from 'im, Bill, I don't like such a chap in the room."

Jack Bates began to feel very awkward. They was all glaring at 'im as though they could eat 'im, and he wasn't used to such treatment. And, as a matter o' fact, he'd got a very good 'arted face.

"You go out o' that door," ses old Cook, pointing to it. "Go and do your worst. You won't get any money 'ere."

"Stop a minute," ses Emma, and afore they could stop 'er she ran upstairs. Mrs. Cook went arter 'er, and 'igh words was heard up in the bedroom, but by and by Emma came down holding her head very 'igh and looking at Jack Bates as though he was dirt.

"How am I to know Charlie owes you this money?" she ses.

Jack Bates turned very red and arter fumbling 'is pockets took out about a dozen dirty bits o' paper which Charlie 'ad given 'im for 1 O U's. Emma read 'em all, and then she threw a little 'agrel on the table.

"There's your money," she ses; "take it and go."

Mrs. Cook and 'er father began to call out, but it was no good.

"There's '72 there," ses Emma, who was very pale, "and 'ere's the rest." And she drew Charlie's ring off and threwed it on the table. "I've done

with 'im for good," she ses, with a look at 'er mother.

Jack Bates took up the money and the ring and stood there looking at 'er and trying to think wot to say. He'd always been uncommon partial to the ses, and it did seem 'ard to stand there and take all that on account of Charlie Tagg.

"I only wanted my own," he ses, at last, shuffling about the floor.

"Well, you've got it," ses Mrs. Cook. "and now you can go."

"You're p'isoning the air of my front parlor," ses old Cook, opening the window a little at the top.

"P'raps I ain't so bad as you think I am," ses Jack Bates, still looking at Emma, and with that he walked over to Charlie and dumped down the money on the table in front of 'im. "Take it," he ses, "and don't borrow any more. I make you a free gift of it. P'raps my 'art ain't as black as my face," he ses, turning to Mrs. Cook.

They was all so surprised at fust that they couldn't speak, but old Cook

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"Come inside and look at it," ses Emma, taking 'old of his arm.

young Bill with 'is smus while they 'ad gone to look at the shop. "There's more sailor men robbed than all the rest put together."

"They won't rob Charlie," ses Mrs. Cook, pressing her lips together. "I'll take care of that."

Charlie tried to laugh, but he made such a queer noise that young Bill made a large blot on 'is exercise book, and old Cook, wot was lighting his pipe, burnt 'is fingers through not looking wot he was doing.

"You see," ses Charlie, "if I was robbed, which ain't at all likely, it 'ud only be me losing my own money, but if you was robbed of it you'd never forgive yourselves."

"I despay, I should get over it," ses Mrs. Cook, smiling. "I'd 'ave a try, at all events."

Charlie started to laugh ag'in, and old Cook, who had struck another match, blew it out and waited till he'd finished.

"The whole truth is," ses Charlie, looking round, "I've got something better to do with the money. I've got a chance offered me that'll make me able to double it afore you know where you are."

"Not afore I know where I am," ses Mrs. Cook, with a laugh that was worse than Charlie's.

"The chance of a lifetime," ses Charlie, trying to keep 'is temper. "I