TALES OF MEAN STREETS

BY

ARTHUR MORRISON

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TALES OF MEAN STREETS

LIZERUNT
SQUIRE NAPPER
WITHOUT VISIBLE MEANS
THREE ROUNDS

AND OTHERS

BY

ARTHUR MORRISON

METHUEN & CO.
36 ESSEX STREET, STRAND
LONDON
1894

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TO

WILLIAM ERNEST HENLEY

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NOTE.—*The greater number of these stories and studies were first printed in* The National Observer; *the introduction, in a slightly different form, in* Macmillan's Magazine; *'That Brute Simmons' and 'A Conversion' have been published in* The Pall Mall Budget; *and 'The Red Cow Group' is new.*

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INTRODUCTION

A STREET

THIS street is in the East End. There is no need to say in the East End of what. The East End is a vast city, as famous in its way as any the hand of man has made. But who knows the East End? It is down through Cornhill and out beyond Leadenhall Street and Aldgate Pump, one will say: a shocking place, where he once went with a curate; an evil plexus of slums that hide human creeping things; where filthy men and

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women live on penn'orths of gin, where collars and clean shirts are decencies unknown, where every citizen wears a black eye, and none ever combs his hair. The East End is a place, says another, which is given over to the Unemployed. And the Unemployed is a race whose token is a clay pipe, and whose enemy is soap: now and again it migrates bodily to Hyde Park with banners, and furnishes adjacent police courts with disorderly drunks. Still another knows the East End only as the place whence begging letters come; there are coal and blanket funds there, all perennially insolvent, and everybody always wants a day in the country. Many and misty are people's notions of the East End; and each is commonly but the distorted shadow of a minor feature. Foul slums

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there are in the East End, of course, as there are in the West; want and misery there are, as wherever a host is gathered together to fight for food. But they are not often spectacular in kind.

Of this street there are about one hundred and fifty yards—on the same pattern all. It is not pretty to look at. A dingy little brick house twenty feet high, with three square holes to carry the windows, and an oblong hole to carry the door, is not a pleasing object; and each side of this street is formed by two or three score of such houses in a row, with one front wall in common. And the effect is as of stables.

Round the corner there are a baker's, a chandler's, and a beer-shop. They are not included in the view from any of the rectangular holes; but they are well known

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to every denizen, and the chandler goes to church on Sunday and pays for his seat. At the opposite end, turnings lead to streets less rigidly respectable: some where 'Mangling done here' stares from windows, and where doors are left carelessly open; others where squalid women sit on doorsteps, and girls go to factories in white aprons. Many such turnings, of as many grades of decency, are set between this and the nearest slum.

They are not a very noisy or obtrusive lot in this street. They do not go to Hyde Park with banners, and they seldom fight. It is just possible that one or two among them, at some point in a life of ups and downs, may have been indebted to a coal and blanket fund; but whosoever these may be, they would rather die than publish the disgrace, and it is prob-

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able that they very nearly did so ere submitting to it.

Some who inhabit this street are in the docks, some in the gasworks, some in one or other of the few shipbuilding yards that yet survive on the Thames. Two families in a house is the general rule, for there are six rooms behind each set of holes: this, unless 'young men lodgers' are taken in, or there are grown sons paying for bed and board. As for the grown daughters, they marry as soon as may be. Domestic service is a social descent, and little under millinery and dressmaking is compatible with self-respect. The general servant may be caught young among the turnings at the end where mangling is done; and the factory girls live still further off, in places skirting slums.

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Every morning at half-past five there is a curious demonstration. The street resounds with thunderous knockings, repeated upon door after door, and acknowledged ever by a muffled shout from within. These signals are the work of the night-watchman or the early policeman, or both, and they summon the sleepers to go forth to the docks, the gasworks, and the ship-yards. To be awakened in this wise costs fourpence a week, and for this fourpence a fierce rivalry rages between night-watchmen and policemen. The night-watchman—a sort of by-blow of the ancient 'Charley,' and himself a fast vanishing quantity—is the real professional performer; but he goes to the wall, because, a large connection must be worked if the pursuit is to pay at four-fourpence a knocker. Now, it is not easy

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to bang at two knockers three-quarters of a mile apart, and a hundred others lying between, all punctually at half-past five. Wherefore the policeman, to whom the fourpence is but a perquisite, and who is content with a smaller round, is rapidly supplanting the night-watchman, whose cry of 'Past nine o'clock,' as he collects orders in the evening, is now seldom heard.

The knocking and the shouting pass, and there comes the noise of opening and shutting of doors, and a clattering away to the docks, the gasworks and the ship-yards. Later more door-shutting is heard, and then the trotting of sorrow-laden little feet along the grim street to the grim Board School three grim streets off. Then silence, save for a subdued sound of scrubbing here and there, and the puny squall of croupy infants. After this, a new trotting

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of little feet to docks, gasworks, and ship-yards with father's dinner in a basin and a red handkerchief, and so to the Board School again. More muffled scrubbing and more squalling, and perhaps a feeble attempt or two at decorating the blankness of a square hole here and there by pouring water into a grimy flower-pot full of dirt. Then comes the trot of little feet toward the oblong holes, heralding the slower tread of sooty artisans; a smell of bloater up and down; nightfall; the fighting of boys in the street, perhaps of men at the corner near the beer-shop; sleep. And this is the record of a day in this street; and every day is hopelessly the same.

Every day, that is, but Sunday. On Sunday morning a smell of cooking floats round the corner from the half-shut baker's, and the little feet trot down the street

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under steaming burdens of beef, potatoes, and batter pudding — the lucky little feet these, with Sunday boots on them, when father is in good work and has brought home all his money; not the poor little feet in worn shoes, carrying little bodies in the thread-bare clothes of all the week, when father is out of work, or ill, or drunk, and the Sunday cooking may very easily be done at home—if any there be to do.

On Sunday morning one or two heads of families appear in wonderful black suits, with unnumbered creases and wrinklings at the seams. At their sides and about their heels trot the unresting little feet, and from under painful little velvet caps and straw hats stare solemn little faces towelled to a polish. Thus disposed and arrayed, they fare gravely through the grim

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little streets to a grim Little Bethel where are gathered together others in like garb and attendance; and for two hours they endure the frantic menace of hell-fire.

Most of the men, however, lie in shirt and trousers on their beds and read the Sunday paper; while some are driven forth —for they hinder the housework—to loaf, and await the opening of the beer-shop round the corner. Thus goes Sunday in this street, and every Sunday is the same as every other Sunday, so that one monotony is broken with another. For the women, however, Sunday is much as other days, except that there is rather more work for them. The break in their round of the week is washing day.

No event in the outer world makes any impression in this street. Nations may rise, or may totter in ruin; but here the

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colourless day will work through its twenty-four hours just as it did yesterday, and just as it will to-morrow. Without there may be party strife, wars and rumours of wars, public rejoicings; but the trotting of the little feet will be neither quickened nor stayed. Those quaint little women, the girl-children of this street, who use a motherly management toward all girl-things younger than themselves, and toward all boys as old or older, with 'Bless the child!' or 'Drat the children!' — those quaint little women will still go marketing with big baskets, and will regard the price of bacon as chief among human considerations. Nothing disturbs this street—nothing but a strike.

Nobody laughs here—life is too serious a thing; nobody sings. There was once a woman who sang — a young wife from the country. But she bore children, and

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her voice cracked. Then her man died, and she sang no more. They took away her home, and with her children about her skirts she left this street for ever. The other women did not think much of her. She was 'helpless.

One of the square holes in this street—one of the single, ground-floor holes—is found, on individual examination, to differ from the others. There has been an attempt to make it into a shop-window. Half a dozen candles, a few sickly sugarsticks, certain shrivelled bloaters, some bootlaces, and a bundle or two of firewood compose a stock which at night is sometimes lighted by a little paraffin lamp in a tin sconce, and sometimes by a candle. A widow lives here—a gaunt, bony widow, with sunken, red eyes. She has other sources of income than the candles and the bootlaces: she

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washes and chars all day, and she sews cheap shirts at night. Two 'young men lodgers,' moreover, sleep upstairs, and the children sleep in the back room; she herself is supposed not to sleep at all. The police-man does not knock here in the morning—the widow wakes the lodgers herself; and nobody in the street behind ever looks out of window before going to bed, no matter how late, without seeing a light in the widow's room where she plies her needle. She is a quiet woman, who speaks little with her neighbours, having other things to do: a woman of pronounced character, to whom it would be unadvisable—even dangerous—to offer coals or blankets. Hers was the strongest contempt for the helpless woman who sang: a contempt whose added bitterness might be traced to its source. For when the sing-

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ing woman was marketing, from which door of the pawnshop had she twice met the widow coming forth?

This is not a dirty street, taken as a whole. The widow's house is one of the cleanest, and the widow's children match the house. The one house cleaner than the widow's is ruled by a despotic Scotch-woman, who drives every hawker off her whitened step, and rubs her door handle if a hand have rested on it. The Scotch-woman has made several attempts to accommodate 'young men lodgers,' but they have ended in shrill rows.

There is no house without children in this street, and the number of them grows ever and ever greater. Nine-tenths of the doctor's visits are on this account alone, and his appearances are the chief matter of such conversation as the women

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make across the fences. One after another the little strangers come, to live through lives as flat and colourless as the day's life in this street. Existence dawns, and the doctor-watchman's door knock resounds along the row of rectangular holes. Then a muffled cry announces that a small new being has come to trudge and sweat its way in the appointed groove. Later, the trotting of little feet and the school; the mid-day play hour, when love peeps even into this street; after that more trotting of little feet—strange little feet, new little feet—and the scrubbing, and the squalling, and the barren flower-pot; the end of the sooty day's work; the last home-coming; nightfall; sleep.

When love's light falls into some corner of the street, it falls at an early hour of this mean life, and is itself but a dusty

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ray. It falls early, because it is the sole bright thing which the street sees, and is watched for and counted on. Lads and lasses, awkwardly arm-in-arm, go pacing up and down this street, before the natural interest in marbles and doll's houses would have left them in a brighter place. They are 'keeping company'; the manner of which proceeding is indigenous — is a custom native to the place. The young people first 'walk out' in pairs. There is no exchange of promises, no troth-plight, no engagement, no love-talk. They patrol the streets side by side, usually in silence, sometimes with fatuous chatter. There are no dances, no tennis, no water-parties, no picnics to bring them together: so they must walk out, or be unacquainted. If two of them grow dissatisfied with each other's company, nothing

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is easier than to separate and walk out with somebody else. When by these means each has found a fit mate (or thinks so), a ring is bought, and the odd association becomes a regular engagement; but this is not until the walking out has endured for many months. The two stages of courtship are spoken of indiscriminately as 'keeping company,' but a very careful distinction is drawn between them by the parties concerned. Nevertheless, in the walking out period it would be almost as great a breach of faith for either to walk out with more than one, as it would be if the full engagement had been made. And love-making in this street is a dreary thing, when one thinks of love-making in other places. It begins—and it ends—too soon.

Nobody from this street goes to the theatre. That would mean a lon

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journey, and it would cost money which might buy bread and beer and boots. For those, too, who wear black Sunday suits it would be sinful. Nobody reads poetry or romance. The very words are foreign. A Sunday paper in some few houses provides such reading as this street is disposed to achieve. Now and again a penny novel has been found among the private treasures of a growing daughter, and has been wrathfully confiscated. For the air of this street is unfavourable to the ideal.

Yet there are aspirations. There has lately come into the street a young man lodger who belongs to a Mutual Improvement Society. Membership in this society is regarded as a sort of learned degree, and at its meetings debates are held and papers smugly read by lamentably self-

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satisfied young men lodgers, whose only preparation for debating and writing is a fathomless ignorance. For ignorance is the inevitable portion of dwellers here: seeing nothing, reading nothing, and considering nothing.

Where in the East End lies this street? Everywhere. The hundred-and-fifty yards is only a link in a long and a mightily tangled chain—is only a turn in a tortuous maze. This street of the square holes is hundreds of miles long. That it is planned in short lengths is true, but there is no other way in the world that can more properly be called a single street, because of its dismal lack of accent, its sordid uniformity, its utter remoteness from delight.

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LIZERUNT

I

LIZER'S WOOING

SOMEWHERE in the register was written the name Elizabeth Hunt; but seventeen years after the entry the spoken name was Lizerunt. Lizerunt worked at a pickle factory, and appeared abroad in an elaborate and shabby costume, usually supplemented by a white apron. Withal she was something of a beauty. That is to say, her cheeks were very red, her teeth were very large and white, her nose was small and snub, and her fringe was long and shiny; while her face, new-washed, was susceptible of a

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high polish. Many such girls are married at sixteen, but Lizerunt was belated, and had never a bloke at all.

Billy Chope was a year older than Lizerunt. He wore a billycock with a thin brim and a permanent dent in the crown; he had a bob-tail coat, with the collar turned up at one side and down at the other, as an expression of independence; between his meals he carried his hands in his breeches pockets; and he lived with his mother, who mangled. His conversation with Lizerunt consisted long of perfunctory nods; but great things happened this especial Thursday evening, as Lizerunt, making for home, followed the fading red beyond the furthermost end of Commercial Road. For Billy Chope, slouching in the opposite direction, lurched across the pavement as they met, and taking the nearer hand from his pocket, caught and twisted her arm, bumping her against the wall.

'Garn,' said Lizerunt, greatly pleased: 'le' go!' For she knew that this was love.

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'Where yer auf to, Lizer?'

''Ome, o' course, cheeky. Le' go;' and she snatched—in vain—at Billy's hat.

Billy let go, and capered in front of her. She feigned to dodge by him, careful not to be too quick, because affairs were developing.

'I say, Lizer,' said Billy, stopping his dance and becoming business-like, 'goin' anywhere Monday?'

'Not along o' you, cheeky; you go 'long o' Beller Dawson, like wot you did Easter.'

'Blow Beller Dawson; *she* ain't no good. I'm goin' on the Flats. Come?'

Lizerunt, delighted but derisive, ended with a promise to 'see.' The bloke had come at last, and she walked home with the feeling of having taken her degree. She had half assured herself of it two days before, when Sam Cardew threw an orange peel at her, but went away after a little prancing on the pavement. Sam was a smarter fellow than Billy, and earned his own living; probably his attentions were serious; but one

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must prefer the bird in hand. As for Billy Chope, he went his way, resolved himself to take home what mangling he should find his mother had finished, and stick to the money; also, to get all he could from her by blandishing and bullying: that the jaunt to Wanstead Flats might be adequately done.

There is no other fair like Whit Monday's on Wanstead Flats. Here is a square mile and more of open land where you may howl at large; here is no danger of losing yourself as in Epping Forest; the public-houses are always with you; shows, shies, swings, merry-go-rounds, fried fish stalls, donkeys are packed closer than on Hampstead Heath; the ladies' tormentors are larger, and their contents smell worse than at any other fair. Also, you may be drunk and disorderly without being locked up,—for the stations won't hold everybody,—and when all else has palled, you may set fire to the turf. Hereinto Billy and Lizerunt projected them-

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selves from the doors of the Holly Tree on Whit Monday morning. But through hours on hours of fried fish and half-pints both were conscious of a deficiency. For the hat of Lizerunt was brown and old; plush it was not, and its feather was a mere foot long and of a very rusty black. Now, it is not decent for a factory girl from Limehouse to go bank-holidaying under any but a hat of plush, very high in the crown, of a wild blue or a wilder green, and carrying withal an ostrich feather, pink or scarlet or what not; a feather that springs from the fore-part, climbs the crown, and drops as far down the shoulders as may be. Lizerunt knew this, and, had she had no bloke, would have stayed at home. But a chance is a chance. As it was, only another such hapless girl could measure her bitter envy of the feathers about her, or would so joyfully have given an ear for the proper splendour. Billy, too, had a vague impression, muddled by but not drowned in half-pints, that some degree of plush was condign to the occasion and to his

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own expenditure. Still, there was no quarrel; and the pair walked and ran with arms about each other's necks; and Lizerunt thumped her bloke on the back at proper intervals; so that the affair went regularly on the whole: although, in view of Lizerunt's shortcomings, Billy did not insist on the customary exchange of hats.

Everything, I say, went well and well enough until Billy bought a ladies' tormentor and began to squirt it at Lizerunt. For then Lizerunt went scampering madly, with piercing shrieks, until her bloke was left some little way behind, and Sam Cardew, turning up at that moment and seeing her running alone in the crowd, threw his arms about her waist and swung her round him again and again, as he floundered gallantly this way and that, among the shies and the hokey-pokey barrows.

''Ullo, Lizer! Where *are* y' a-comin' to? If I 'adn't laid 'old o' ye—!' But here Billy Chope arrived to demand what the 'ell Sam Cardew was doing with his gal. Now Sam was ever

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readier for a fight than Billy was; but the sum of Billy's half-pints was large: wherefore the fight began. On the skirt of an hilarious ring Lizerunt, after some small outcry, triumphed aloud. Four days before, she had no bloke; and here she stood with two, and those two fighting for her! Here in the public gaze, on the Flats! For almost five minutes she was Helen of Troy.

And in much less time Billy tasted repentance. The haze of half-pints was dispelled, and some teeth went with it. Presently, whimpering and with a bloody muzzle, he rose and made a running kick at the other. Then, being thwarted in a bolt, he flung himself down; and it was like to go hard with him at the hands of the crowd. Punch you may on Wanstead Flats, but execration and worse is your portion if you kick anybody except your wife. But, as the ring closed, the helmets of two policemen were seen to be working in over the surrounding heads; and Sam Cardew, quickly assuming his coat, turned away with such

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an air of blamelessness as is practicable with a damaged eye; while Billy went off unheeded in an opposite direction.

Lizerunt and her new bloke went the routine of half-pints and merry-go-rounds, and were soon on right thumping terms; and Lizerunt was as well satisfied with the issue as she was proud of the adventure. Billy was all very well; but Sam was better. She resolved to draw him for a feathered hat before next bank holiday. So the sun went down on her and her bloke hanging on each other's necks and straggling toward the Romford Road with shouts and choruses. The rest was tram-car, Bow Music Hall, half-pints, and darkness.

Billy took home his wounds, and his mother, having moved his wrath by asking their origin, sought refuge with a neighbour. He accomplished his revenge in two instalments. Two nights later Lizerunt was going with a jug of beer; when somebody sprang from a dark corner,

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landed her under the ear, knocked her sprawling; and made off to the sound of her lamentations. She did not see who it was, but she knew; and next day Sam Cardew was swearing he'd break Billy's back. He did not, however, for that same evening a gang of seven or eight fell on him with sticks and belts. (They were Causeway chaps, while Sam was a Brady's Laner, which would have been reason enough by itself, even if Billy Chope had not been one of them). Sam did his best for a burst through and a run, but they pulled and battered him down; and they kicked him about the head, and they kicked him about the belly; and they took to their heels when he was speechless and still.

He lay at home for near four weeks, and when he stood up again it was in many bandages. Lizerunt came often to his bedside, and twice she brought an orange. On these occasions there was much talk of vengeance. But the weeks went on. It was a month since Sam had left his bed; and Lizerunt was getting a little

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tired of bandages. Also, she had begun to doubt and to consider bank holiday — scarce a fortnight off. For Sam was stone broke, and a plush hat was further away than ever. And all through the later of these weeks Billy Chope was harder than ever on his mother, and she, well knowing that if he helped her by taking home he would pocket the money at the other end, had taken to finishing and delivering in his absence, and, threats failing to get at the money, Billy Chope was impelled to punch her head and gripe her by the throat.

There was a milliner's window, with a show of nothing but fashionable plush-and-feather hats, and Lizerunt was lingering hereabouts one evening; when someone took her by the waist, and someone said, 'Which d'yer like, Lizer?—The yuller un?'

Lizerunt turned and saw that it was Billy. She pulled herself away, and backed off, sullen and distrustful. 'Garn,' she said.

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'Straight,' said Billy, 'I'll sport yer one. . . . No kid, I will.'

'Garn,' said Lizerunt once more. 'Wot yer gittin' at now?'

But presently, being convinced that bashing wasn't in it, she approached less guardedly; and she went away with a paper bag and the reddest of all the plushes and the bluest of all the feathers; a hat that challenged all the Flats the next bank holiday, a hat for which no girl need have hesitated to sell her soul. As for Billy, why, he was as good as another; and you can't have everything; and Sam Cardew, with his bandages and his grunts and groans, was no great catch after all.

This was the wooing of Lizerunt: for in a few months she and Billy married under the blessing of a benignant rector, who periodically set aside a day for free weddings, and, on principle, encouraged early matrimony. And they lived with Billy's mother.

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II

LIZER'S FIRST

WHEN Billy Chope married Lizerunt there was a small rejoicing. There was no wedding-party; because it was considered that what there might be to drink would be better in the family. Lizerunt's father was not, and her mother felt no interest in the affair; not having seen her daughter for a year, and happening, at the time, to have a month's engagement in respect of a drunk and disorderly. So that there were but three of them; and Billy Chope got exceedingly tipsy early in the day; and in the evening his bride bawled a continual chorus, while his mother, influenced by that unwonted quartern of gin the occasion sanctioned, wept dismally over her boy, who was much too far gone to resent it.

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His was the chief reason for rejoicing. For Lizerunt had always been able to extract ten shillings a week from the pickle factory, and it was to be presumed that as Lizer Chope her earning capacity would not diminish; and the wages would make a very respectable addition to the precarious revenue, depending on the mangle, that Billy extorted from his mother. As for Lizer, she was married. That was the considerable thing; for she was but a few months short of eighteen, and that, as you know, is a little late.

Of course there were quarrels very soon; for the new Mrs Chope, less submissive at first than her mother-in-law, took a little breaking in, and a liberal renewal of the manual treatment once applied in her courting days. But the quarrels between the women were comforting to Billy: a diversion and a source of better service.

As soon as might be Lizer took the way of womankind. This circumstance brought an un-

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expected half-crown from the evangelical rector who had married the couple gratis; for recognising Billy in the street by accident, and being told of Mrs Chopc's prospects, as well as that Billy was out of work (a fact undeniable), he reflected that his principles did on occasion lead to discomfort of a material sort. And Billy, to whose comprehension the half-crown opened a new field of receipt, would doubtless have long remained a client of the rector, had not that zealot hastened to discover a vacancy for a warehouse porter, the offer of presentation whereunto alienated Billy Chope for ever. But there were meetings and demonstrations of the Unemployed; and it was said that shillings had been given away; and, as being at a meeting in a street was at least as amusing as being in a street where there was no meeting, Billy often went, on the off chance. But his lot was chiefly disappointment: wherefore he became more especially careful to furnish himself ere he left home.

For certain weeks cash came less freely than ever

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from the two women. Lizer spoke of providing for the necessities of the expected child : a manifestly absurd procedure, as Billy pointed out, since, if they were unable to clothe or feed it, the duty would fall on its grandmother. That was law, and nobody could get over it. But even with this argument, a shilling cost him many more demands and threats than it had used, and a deal more general trouble.

At last Lizer ceased from going to the pickle factory, and could not even help Billy's mother at the mangle for long. This lasted for near a week, when Billy, rising at ten with a bad mouth, resolved to stand no nonsense, and demanded two shillings.

'Two bob? Wot for?' Lizer asked.

''Cos I want it. None o' yer lip.'

'Ain't got it,' said Lizer sulkily.

'That's a bleed'n' lie.'

'Lie yerself.'

'I'll break y'in 'arves, ye blasted 'eifer!' He ran at her throat and forced her back over a

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chair. 'I'll pull yer face auf! If y' don't give me the money, gawblimy, I'll do for ye!'

Lizer strained and squalled. 'Le' go! You'll kill me an' the kid too!' she grunted hoarsely. Billy's mother ran in and threw her arms about him, dragging him away. 'Don't Billy,' she said, in terror. 'Don't Billy—not now! You'll get in trouble. Come away! She might go auf, an' you'd get in trouble!'

Billy Chope flung his wife over and turned to his mother. 'Take yer 'ands auf me,' he said: 'go on, or I'll gi' ye somethin' for yerself' And he punched her in the breast by way of illustration.

'You shall 'ave what I've got, Billy, if it's money,' the mother said. 'But don't go an' git yerself in trouble, don't. Will a shillin' do?'

'No, it won't. Think I'm a bloomin' kid? I mean 'avin' two bob this mornin'.'

'I was a-keepin' it for the rent, Billy, but—'

'Yus; think o' the bleed'n' lan'lord 'fore me doncher?' And he pocketed the two shillings.

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'I ain't settled with you yut, my gal,' he added to Lizer; 'mikin' about at 'ome an' 'idin' money. You wait a bit.'

Lizer had climbed into an erect position, and, gravid and slow, had got as far as the passage. Mistaking this for a safe distance, she replied with defiant railings. Billy made for her with a kick that laid her on the lower stairs, and, swinging his legs round his mother as she obstructed him, entreating him not to get in trouble, he attempted to kick again in a more telling spot. But a movement among the family upstairs and a tap at the door hinted of interference, and he took himself off.

Lizer lay doubled up on the stairs, howling: but her only articulate cry was,—'Gawd 'elp me, it's comin'!'

Billy went to the meeting of the Unemployed, and cheered a proposal to storm the Tower of London. But he did not join the procession following a man with a handkerchief on a stick, who promised destruction to every policeman in

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his path: for he knew the fate of such processions. With a few others he hung about the nearest tavern for a while, on the chance of the advent of a flush sailor from St Katharine's, disposed to treat out-o'-workers. Then he went alone to a quieter beer-house and took a pint or two at his own expense. A glance down the music-hall bills hanging in the bar having given him a notion for the evening, he bethought himself of dinner, and made for home.

The front door was open, and in the first room, where the mangle stood, there were no signs of dinner. And this was at three o'cock! Billy pushed into the room behind, demanding why.

'Billy,' Lizer said faintly from her bed, 'look at the baby!'

Something was moving feebly under a flannel petticoat. Billy pulled the petticoat aside, and said,—'That? Well, it *is* a measly snipe.' It was a blind, hairless homunculus, short of a foot long, with a skinny face set in a great skull. There was a black bruise on one side from hip

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to armpit. Billy dropped the petticoat and said, 'Where's my dinner?'

'I dunno,' Lizer responded hazily. 'Wot's the time?'

'Time? Don't try to kid me. You git up; go on. I want my dinner.'

'Mother's gittin' it, I think,' said Lizer. 'Doctor had to slap 'im like anythink 'fore 'e'd cry. 'E don't cry now much. 'E—'

'Go on; out ye git. I do'want no more damn jaw. Git my dinner.'

'I'm a-gittin' of it, Billy,' his mother said, at the door. She had begun when he first entered. 'It won't be a minute.'

'You come 'ere; y'aint alwis s' ready to do er' work, are ye? She ain't no call to stop there no longer, an' I owe 'er one for this mornin'. Will ye git out, or shall I kick ye?'

'She can't, Billy,' his mother said. And Lizer snivelled and said, 'You're a damn brute. Y'ought to be bleedin' well booted.'

But Billy had her by the shoulders and began

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to haul; and again his mother besought him to remember what he might bring upon himself. At this moment the doctor's dispenser, a fourth-year London Hospital student of many inches, who had been washing his hands in the kitchen, came in. For a moment he failed to comprehend the scene. Then he took Billy Chope by the collar, hauled him pell-mell along the passage, kicked him (hard) into the gutter, and shut the door.

When he returned to the room, Lizer, sitting up and holding on by the bed-frame, gasped hysterically: 'Ye bleedin' makeshift, I'd 'ave yer liver out if I could reach ye! You touch my 'usband, ye long pisenin' 'ound you! Ow!' And, infirm of aim, she flung a cracked teacup at his head. Billy's mother said, 'Y'ought to be ashamed of yourself, you low blaggard. If 'is father was alive 'e'd knock yer 'ead auf. Call yourself a doctor—a passel o' boys—! Git out! Go out o' my 'ouse or I'll give y'in charge!'

'But—why, hang it, he'd have killed her.' Then to Lizer—'Lie down.'

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'Sha'n't lay down. Keep auf! if you come near me I'll corpse ye. You go while ye're safe!'

The dispenser appealed to Billy's mother. 'For God's sake make her lie down. She'll kill herself. I'll go. Perhaps the doctor had better come.' And he went: leaving the coast clear for Billy Chope to return and avenge his kicking.

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III

A CHANGE OF CIRCUMSTANCES

LIZER was some months short of twenty-one when her third child was born. The pickle factory had discarded her some time before, and since that her trade had consisted in odd jobs of charing. Odd jobs of charing have a shade the better of a pickle factory in the matter of respectability, but they are precarious, and they are worse paid at that. In the East End they are sporadic and few. Moreover, it is in the household where paid help is a rarity that the bitterness of servitude is felt. Also, the uncertainty and irregularity of the returns were a trouble to Billy Chope. He was never sure of having got them all. It might be ninepence, or a shilling, or eighteenpence. Once or twice, to his knowledge,

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