Lou and Liz

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Table of Contents

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The great bell at Westminster was striking nine.

Sunlight streamed into the garret window, bathing a robust, comely girl, who stood half−dressed before a looking−glass and combed out her tawny hair. In bed lay another girl, seemingly asleep, and on the pillow beside her perched a baby boy of eighteen months, munching at a biscuit.

'Now then, Liz!' cried the girl who was dressing, as she took a hairpin from between her lips. 'Goin' to loy there all d'y? Wike up, do!' She began to sing in a strident voice, '"J'yful, j'yful will that meetin' be, — when from sin our 'arts are pure and free." Jacky, give mummy one on the 'ead. Liz, git up! 'Ow d'yer suppose we're goin' to git to London Bridge by eleven?' Again she sang: '"You can 'ear 'em soigh, an' wish to doy, an' see them wink the other eye, — at the man that browk the benk at Monty Car — lo!" Say, Liz, did you 'ear Mr Tunks come 'ome last night? Same old capers; fallin' down all the time he was goin' up — Wike up, I tell yer!'

Liz raised her head with a drowsy laugh.

'Stop yer jaw, Lou! What a chatter−mag you are!'

A rejoinder came in the shape of a pincushion, aimed sharply at the remonstrant. It missed Liz, and hit her child full in the face. The room rang with an infantile shriek of alarm and pain. In a moment Liz had jumped out of bed, had hurled back the missile with all her force at Lou, and in the same breath was trying to soothe the baby and to revile her friend. This time the pincushion knocked over the small looking−glass, which shattered upon the floor. For five minutes there was tumult — screaming, railing, scuffling; the storm of recrimination only ended when Lou discovered in her pocket — amid keys and coppers and dirt — a broken stick of chocolate, which she presented as peace−offering to Jacky.

"Ow'm oi to do my 'air?' asked Liz, as she stood in her nightgown and ruefully regarded the broken glass.

'Oi'll do it for you,' Lou replied, giving her own locks a final slap.

'An' now we've got to buy Mrs 'Uggins another glawss!'

'Don't fret yer gizzard about that. I can get a measly little thing like this for sixpence. What's the odds s'long as y're 'eppy! — "The man that browk the benk at Monty Car — lo!"'

'I dreamt it was rinin',' said Liz, as she drew the blind aside, and looked with satisfaction at the cloudless sky. 'Somethin' loike weather, this, for a Benk 'oliday. Say, Lou, you might give Jacky's face a wipe whilst I'm dressin'.'

Discord between the two (it happened about once every half−hour when they were long together) always ended in a request for some favour, urged by the younger girl and cheerfully granted by her companion.

They were nothing akin to each other, but had shared this garret for about a year. Liz worked at home, making quill toothpicks, and earning perhaps a shilling a day; Lou was a book folder, and her wages averaged eleven shillings a week; their money, on a system of pure communism, went to discharge their joint expenses. Alone, Liz could barely have supported herself and her child; as it was, they made ends meet, and somehow managed to save a few shillings against a Bank−holiday.

Lou wore a gold wedding ring, and round her neck, hidden by her dress, hung a little wash−leather bag which contained a marriage certificate. It was her firm belief that on the preservation of these 'lines' depended the validity of her marriage. Three years had elapsed since, at the birth of a child, her husband saw fit to disappear; the baby died, and Lou went back to her old calling.

Liz wore a brass wedding ring, and had no marriage certificate to show. She was known as 'Mrs Purkiss,' but was entitled only to 'Miss.' As to Jacky's father, his disappearance was as complete as that of Lou's husband.

In their way they had suffered not a little, these two girls. But the worst seemed to be over. With admirable

philosophy they lived for the day, for the hour. Liz was never burdened by a sense of gratitude to her friend; to Lou it never occurred that she herself was practising a singular generosity. They laughed and sang, squabbled and abused each other, drank beer when they could afford it, tea when they couldn't, starved themselves occasionally to have an evening at the Canterbury or at the Surrey (the baby, drugged if he were troublesome, sleeping now on his mother's lap, now on Lou's), and on a Bank−holiday mingled with the noisiest crowd they could discover.

To−day they were going to Rosherville.

Jacky wasn't very firm on his feet; considering the child's diet and his bringing up in general the wonder was that he trod this earth at all. He weighed very little, and the girls were so much in the habit of carrying him about wherever they went, that they rarely grumbled at the burden.

It would have pleased them best to go down to Rosherville by steamer, but that cost a little more than the journey by train, and every penny had to be considered. Their tickets, both together, came to three−and−sixpence; eighteen−pence apiece remained for refreshment at the Gardens. Dinner they took with them — bread and slices of tinned beef; for tea, of course, there would be 'srimps and creases.' Before and after, those great mugs of ale which add so to the romance of Rosherville.

What an Easter! Day after day, scarce a shadow across the sun. And so deliciously warm that one had been able to save no end of money from firing. On Good Friday they had lain in bed until dinner−time — 'doin' a good sleep,' as Lou said; the rest of the day they spent in patching up their hats and jackets. On Saturday, it was work again. Sunday, another good sleep, and an afternoon ramble just to show that they had some Easter finery, like other people. And now had come the real holiday. They were in wild spirits. On setting out, they ran, and leapt, and shouted. Lou, as the elder and stronger, took Jacky up on her shoulder, and rushed off with him, singing the great song of the day, about the man who, etc.; — the man's feat, by the by, signifying to Lou nothing more nor less than a successful burglary, perpetrated at some bank in a remote country where the police were probably deficient.

It rejoiced them to get far away from the familiar region, and to indulge their gaiety amid a revelling throng. They had few acquaintances they cared about. With the people who knew her story Liz could not be altogether at ease; the morality of her world pressed anything but heavily upon her, yet she was occasionally aware of slights and covert judgments. Lou, again, though strong in the possession of her amulet, was too proud to invite people's pity in the character of a deserted wife, and her sharp temper had before now subjected her to insults. 'No wonder y'r 'usband run aw'y an' left yer,' was a natural retort from any girl whom Lou's tongue had wounded. Except, of course, from Liz; who, however angry, could not permit herself that kind of weapon. This necessity of mutual forbearance made a strong link in their friendship. And the fact that Lou considered herself her friend's superior, morally and even socially, doubtless helped to keep them satisfied with each other.

Everything was fresh to them; even familiar posters acquired a new interest seen in the light of holiday. A wrestling lion and a boxing kangaroo, large and vivid on hoardings by the railway, excited them to enthusiasm. 'Look at it landin' 'im one in the jawr!' cried Liz, pointing out the kangaroo to Jacky, with educational fervour. And the monkey−faced little fellow seemed to understand, for he leapt on his mother's knee, and smote his sticky little hands together.

The grounds at Rosherville were a pretty show in this warm spring weather. Fresh verdure had begun to clothe the deciduous trees, and the thick−clustered evergreens made semblance of summer against a bright blue sky. From the cliffs of quarried chalk hung thick ivy; up and down and all about wound the maze of pathways, here through a wooded dell, there opening upon a lawn of smooth turf, or a terrace set with garden shrubs and flowers. Liz had never been here before; Lou not for several years. First of all they must needs scamper from place to place, uttering many an 'Ow!' of rapture. The bear−pit entertained them for long; so did the aviaries. But at length the sight of many people thronging about a liquor bar reminded them that it was nigh dinner−time. They found a spot within the area of beery odour, and sat down to eat and drink.

Jacky was encouraged to sip from the ale−mug; his wry face moved the girls to shrieks of laughter, interspersed with 'Pore dear! What a shime!' and the like exclamations. In her bag Liz had brought a bottle of milk; it was churned into acidity, but the infant, after his alcoholic thwartings, imbibed it eagerly. Bits of meat, too, he consumed, and lumps of heavy cake; and, by way of dessert, coloured sweets in considerable mass. The girls would have deemed it downright cruelty to refuse him any eatable thing that he appeared to relish.

Two or three hours went by. The pair encountered no acquaintance and gave only brief encouragement to

exhilarated youths who sought to make themselves agreeable. Rough banter, even a dance, they were quite ready for, but Lou's amulet and Liz's child forbade them to pursue flirtation beyond a certain discreet limit. When Jacky began to wail from weariness, indigestion, and need of sleep, they came to a rest within sight of the dancing platform, where a band made merry challenge to crowding couples; Liz, very red and perspiring, sat down with the baby on her lap, and tried to hush him into slumber.

A sudden exclamation from her companion caused her to look up. Lou was standing with eyes eagerly fixed on the round platform, her lips open, her face and attitude expressing some intense excitement.

'Liz!' she ejaculated. 'If there ain't my 'usband!'

In an instant the other girl was on her feet. The child, left to roll upon the grass, made an unregarded outcry.

'Where is 'e? Which is 'im, Lou?'

'That fellow in the brown pot 'at dauncin' with the girl in a blue dress. Down't yer see?'

'I see!' — Liz quivered with sympathetic agitation, and balanced forward on her toes. 'What are you goin' to do?' she added, in quick undertones.

The other made no reply. She took a step forward, looking like some animal about to spring. Her fists were clenched at her sides.

'Are you quite sure?' asked Liz, following her.

'Sure? D'you think I'm a bloomin' fool?' was the fierce answer.

'Down't make a row, Lou!' Liz entreated, looking anxiously at the people around them. 'You always said you didn't care nothin' about 'im.'

'I am' goin' to mike no row. Shut up, and go an' look after the child.'

She approached the dancers. It was several minutes before the man on whom her eye was fixed came out from amid the stamping, whirling, and shrieking throng; his companion in the blue dress followed him. Lou went steadily up to him, met his look, and stood expectant, without a word.

He wore the holiday attire of a rowdy mechanic; had a draggled flower in his coat, and in his mouth the extinct stump of a cigar. He was slim, and vulgarly good−looking; his age appeared to be not more than thirty. The flush on his cheeks told of much refreshment, but as yet he had not exceeded a fair Bank−holiday allowance. Only for a moment did the sight of Lou disconcert him; then he gave a broad grin, and spoke as if no encounter could have pleased him more.

'Thet you? Why, you've growed out of knowledge.' He turned to the blue dress, and said, 'Old friend o' mine, Sal. See y' again before long.' Then, going close up to Lou, 'You've growed that 'endsome, I shouldn't 'ardly 'ave known you. Let's have a bit of a stroll.'

He caught her by the arm, and drew her towards a part where there were fewer people.

'That's 'ow you tike it, is it?' said the girl in a thick voice, her eyes still fixed upon him.

'I always said you was good−looking, Lou, but to see you now fair tikes my breath away, s'elp me gawd! What 'a' you been doin' with yourself all this time?'

'What 'a' you been doin', that's what oi want to know?'

The delinquent affected compunction. He lowered his voice.

'I couldn't 'elp myself, Lou. Times was 'ard. I went off after a job an' I meant to send you somethin' to go on with, s'elp me I did. But it was all I could do to get grub for myself an' a fourpenny lodgin'. I've thought about yer d'y and night, an' 'oped as you wouldn't come to no 'arm. I knew your uncle 'ud look after you —'

Lou at length found her tongue, and for several minutes used it vigorously, but without creating a public disturbance. The man — she knew him by the name of Bishop — cast uneasy glances round about; he saw that his late partner remained at a distance, but that a girl with a child in her arms was following them.

'Who's that?' he asked at length, indicating Liz.

'It's a friend as I live with,' Lou answered, sharply. 'She knows all about you — no fear.'

'An' d' you mean to say as you 'aven't found another 'usband all this time?'

The reply was a fresh outburst of wrath. When it had spent itself, Bishop said in a wheedling voice:

'I behaved bad to you, Lou; there's no two ways about that. But I didn't mean it, an' I've always wanted to make things right again between us. 'Ev a drink, old girl. I've got something to say to you — but 'ev a drink first, and your pal, too. Let's be friendly together. There ain't no use in making a bother. I cawn't 'elp lookin' at yer, Lou. You're that 'endsome, I wouldn't 'a' believed it.'

In spite of everything, this flattery was so pleasant to Lou's ear that she had much ado not to smile. Old feelings began to revive as she regarded the man's features, and his insinuating talk tempted her to forget and forgive. Such an event as this was in harmony with the joyous nature of the day. Abruptly she turned round and beckoned Liz to approach.

'Moy oye, what a bebby!' exclaimed Bishop, as if in admiration. 'You don't mean to say as that's yours, Lou?'

'If you want to know,' Lou answered, sullenly, 'mine didn't live only three weeks.'

'Pore little thing! I'm sorry for that. But it's all for the best, I dessay. Come an' let's 'ev a drink. Let's be friendly. What's the odds, s'long as it all comes right in the finish.'

Liz, meanwhile, was suffering much mental disturbance. From the first moment, she had dreaded lest Lou and her husband should be reconciled: that would mean a parting with her friend, and how was she to get on alone? Obliged to disguise her uneasiness, she kept in the rear of Bishop, and glanced now at him, now at Lou. It became more obvious that the deserted wife was exulting in what had happened; her eyes had a strange gleam; she tossed her head, and walked with much swinging of the arms.

Bishop persuaded them to sit down on the grass whilst he fetched liquor from the neighbouring bar.

'Are you goin' back to him?' Liz asked of her friend in a hurried whisper.

'Me?' was the scornful reply. 'What d'you tike me for?'

'But you're goin' on as if you meant to.'

'He's my 'usband, I s'powse, ain't he?' Lou rejoined with a fierce glare.

'I wouldn't drink with a 'usband as had served me like 'e has.'

'Shut up!'

'Shut up yerself!'

The quarrel was interrupted by Bishop's return with two foaming pint mugs. They were speedily emptied and replenished. Liz quaffed the beverage without delight, for she saw that her objection only had the effect of making Lou stubborn in disregard of wrongs. One of the many concertina players who rambled about from group to group suddenly shrilled out a summons to dancing.

"Ev a turn, old girl?' said Bishop, who, as he sat, had already stolen an arm about Lou's waist.

After due show of snappy reluctance, the girl consented, and with dismay in her heart Liz saw the pair twirl away. This was Bishop's opportunity for private speech. After again assuring Lou of his penitence for past injury, he told her that in a day or two he was to begin work on a job at Woolwich, a job likely to last for some months, with good wages; he had lodgings out there already. His proposal was that Lou should return with him this evening. They would go together, at once, to her home, carry off her belongings, and to−morrow find themselves comfortably established as man and wife once more. The fiery colour in Lou's cheeks betrayed her mood of eager excitement, the disposition to forget everything but this unhoped−for chance of resuming her dignity of wifehood. Yet she could not, in fact, lose sight either of the risk she ran (for Bishop would as likely as not forsake her again when he grew tired of her), or of the distress she would inflict upon poor Liz. The dance, the seductive murmurs of her partner, told strongly in one direction; but every thime she cast her eyes on Liz and Jacky, fears and compunctions renewed their grasp upon her.

Just as breathlessness was compelling her to pause, she became aware that her friend and the child had disappeared. She stopped on the instant and looked in every direction; nowhere amid the moving clusters was Liz discoverable. She must have gone off in a sulk. Lou resented this behaviour. It diminished her anxiety on the girl's behalf, and when Bishop continued to urge an instant departure she sauntered slowly away with him.

But Liz had not purposely withdrawn. Sitting disconsolate on the grass, she happened to catch sight, at a distance, of that young woman in blue, with whom Bishop had first of all been seen. A thought flashed through her mind; she caught up Jacky and darted in pursuit of the conspicuous person.

Not, however, to overtake her readily, for in front of them was the Baronial Hall (name redolent of the old Vic. and of the Surrey Theatre), and the blue−clad girl vanished through its portals before Liz could come up to her. Within was the high scene of Rosherville riot. A crowd filled the long room from end to end, a crowd that sang and bellowed, that swayed violently backwards and forwards, that stamped on the wooden flooring in wild fandangoes, and raised such an atmosphere of dust, that on her attempt to enter, Liz began to cough and felt her eyes smart. Jacky, terrified by the din, burst into a howl, here inaudible. But the blue dress was once more in sight, and Liz would not relinquish her purpose; she crushed onward, until an opportunity came of touching and

addressing the object of her pursuit.

'Miss,' she said, speaking close to the young woman's ear, 'would you mind tellin' me somethin'?'

She of the blue robe seemed to be alone, but was stamping, like those around her, to the nearest concertina, and had a look of supreme good−humour on her blowzy countenance.

'What d'you want to know?' she shouted back.

'That gentleman as you was dancin' with out there on the platform —'

'What of 'im?'

'Is he a friend of yourn?'

"Course he is. Known him since't I was a choild.'

'But you don't know 'is wife, do you?'

'Course I do.'

'What — my friend Lou?'

The reply was a stare of astonishment.

'His wife ain't no Lou!' exclaimed the young woman. 'Her name's Marier. What d'you mean?'

Liz uttered a shriek of delight. She had hoped to discover something to Bishop's discredit, but nothing so good as this had struck her imagination.

'If you'll come along o' me,' she said, 'I'll tell you somethin' as you'd ought to know.'

Readily enough the stranger followed, and with a struggle they got into the open air. In the conversation that ensued, Liz learnt that the man of whom they spoke was not in reality named Bishop, and that he could not be legally Lou's husband. Some ten years ago he had married in his true name of Wilcox, and his wife, with four children, lived at Enfield. More than once he had left Mrs Wilcox to her own resources; but she, having a little shop, did not suffer much from her spouse's neglect.

Liz had now to rush in pursuit of her friend; the stranger, much interested by what she had heard, accompanied her. But Lou was by this time far from the spot where she had danced with her nominal husband.

'She'll have gone off with 'im!' cried Liz, in despair which was not wholly selfish. 'Where's the w'y out? If I 'edn't this baby to carry! I cawn't go no faster!'

Tears began to trickle down her cheeks, where dust had mingled muddily with perspiration. She saw before her a life of loneliness and want. The homely garret would have to be forsaken; she must shelter herself and Jacky in some miserable hole, — well if it didn't end in their going to the workhouse. Oh why had she been so snappy with Lou! Perhaps that very last bit of quarrel had decided her friend to go off without remorse. Yet, even amid the distress, Liz experienced a brief, intermittent comfort in the reflection that, after all, Lou was not really a married woman, that the 'lines' of which she so often boasted were worthless, and her gold ring no better than one of brass.

Her companion offered to take a turn at carrying the child whilst they hurried on in search. They made for the exit, and asked if such a couple as Lou and the brown−hatted man had been seen to depart in the last few minutes; answers were vaguely negative. Back again into the gardens; hither and thither amid the folk who were enjoying themselves — drinking, dancing, love−making, shooting in the rifle gallery, watching acrobats and niggers on the lawn, and a performance in the open−air theatre. Liz seemed to herself the only unhappy creature in this assembly of thousands. Presently it occurred to the pair that one or other of them ought to have remained at the exit; they had forgotten this. Liz, utterly wearied and woe−begone, stood still and let her tears have their way.

High up on the tops of the tall elms, nesting rooks uttered their 'Caw, caw' undisturbed by the uproar of humanity in lower regions. Grave, domestic rooks, models of reason and virtue in comparison with the rampant throng they wisely ignored.

Ultimately, half an hour after the beginning of their search, Liz and the blue girl found themselves near the spot whence they had started; and there — there in the very place where they had danced to the concertina — stood Lou and Wilcox−Bishop. Liz, now again with Jacky in her arms, bounded forward.

'Lou! Dear old Lou! Thenk Gawd! Come 'ere and let me tell you somethin'.'

'Where have you been?' cried the other impatiently.

'Lookin' for you, everywheres. Ow, Lou! Don't 'ave nothin' to do with 'im.' She spoke in a subdued voice, not to be heard by passing strangers. 'He ain't what he calls himself! He ain't your 'usband!'

The man had drawn near, not without a look of misgiving, for he saw the young woman in blue regarding him

ominously, and observed Liz's agitation. There followed a lively scene, brief, dramatic. Wilcox, made heedless by long impunity, and overcome by amorous temptation, had loitered about with Lou merely because she was unwilling to go away without seeing Liz he had met no one except the blue girl who could imperil his project, and it seemed to him most unlikely that she would have an opportunity of learning what he was about before he got safely off. It was true that he had work at Woolwich, and he saw no risk in living there with Lou, whilst he kept up communication with his legitimate wife at Enfield, whose little shop was too valuable to be definitely forsaken. But the unexpected had befallen. Face to face with him were three accusing women, one of them furious, the second exultant, the third scandalised. Useless to attempt denial; evidence could now be obtained against him at any moment. He stood at bay for two minutes, then, with a burst of foul language, turned tail and fled

Lou would have pursued him. She was beside herself with rage, jealousy, humiliation. But already a little crowd of amused observers was gathering, and followed her with whoops as she started after the escaping man. Upon these people Liz suddenly turned in wrath, asked them what business it was of theirs and so brought them to a standstill. Her voice had a restraining effect on Lou; she also stopped, turned, and glared savagely at the spectators, who fell back.

'See 'ere, Liz,' she said, 'you can do as you like; oi'm goin' 'ome'

'So'm oi,' was the answer.

Jacky had been roaring incessantly for the last quarter of an hour, and would continue until he fell asleep. The day was hopelessly spoilt. Wherever they went in the Gardens they would feel that people were pointing at them and talking about them. the blue girl would of course make known their story. So they moved dolefully towards the exit, exchanging not a word.

When they were out in the high road Lou paused.

'You don't think I meant to go with him, do you?' she asked fiercely. "Cause if you do, you're bloomin' well wrong. Think I'd a' gone back to a feller like that?'

There followed a string of violent epithets. Liz, though convinced that only an accident had saved her friend (and herself), was politic enough to protest that of course she had never feared anything so foolish; and when this assurance had been repeated some fifty times, the injured girl began to take comfort from it. Her wrath turned against the man once more. She would be revenged upon him; she would go to the police−station, and have him 'took up'; he should be sent to prison like the bigamist they had read about in Lloyd's only a week or two since.

'Where's a p'liceman?' she exclaimed, looking about her. 'He ain't far off yet, an' I'd like to see him copped, and took off with 'andcuffs.'

The policeman was not difficult to discover, but for all that Lou did not carry out her menace. She railed copiously but decided that it would be better to go to the 'station' when they got home, and make her charge with all formalities. Meanwhile Jacky kicked, struggled, and roared in his mother's arms.

"Ere, give 'im to me,' said Lou at length, when her companion was all but dropping in exhaustion. "Ow can y' expect to enjoy yerself when you 'ave to tike babbies out! We 'aven't had no tea, nor nothin'. Come on, an' let's git 'ome.'

They missed a train at Rosherville Station, and had to walk to Gravesend. The return journey was miserable, for very few people were going back at this early hour, and none of the accustomed singing in the carriage helped to restore their spirits Relieved from personal anxieties, Liz could now sympathise with her friend's distress. They squabbled as a matter of course and the necessity of postponing talk about what had happened until they were alone again exasperated the tempers of both.

By eight o'clock Jacky lay fast asleep in bed, and Liz was preparing tea. Lou had not entered; she went off somewhere by herself, promising to be back before very long. Within the house was perfect quietness; down in the street an intoxicated youth roared out a song which contested popularity with that concerning the bank−breaker of Monte Carlo — an invitation to a bride to take her marriage trip 'on a boycyle mide for two.

Three hours later Lou was still absent. Liz grew fearful once more. But perhaps her friend had really visited the police−station, and was detained there all this time by the gravity of her business. At half−past eleven there was an unfamiliar step on the stairs, ascending noisily. Liz threw open the door, called out, and was answered with a laugh which she recognised, though it had a strange note. Lou had not spent her evening with the police.

In the light of early morning Jacky's clamour for breakfast awakened the two girls. Having given the child

some cold tea (left in the pot all night), and a hunch of bread, Liz spoke to her companion. For a while there was no answer, but presently came muffled words.

'Say, Liz, you won't let on to nobody about it?'

'Not oi! I tike my hoath I won't, Lou.'

A pause, then Lou's voice was again heard.

'I woke up in the night, an' thought I'd burn them marriage−lines. But I won't neither. I'll keep somethin' to show.'

'Oi should, if oi was you. You was married, all the sime.'

'But I can git married again now, if I want.'

'Course you can,' Liz replied, half−heartedly.

'All right. Let's do another sleep. What's the odds s'long 's y're 'eppy?'

And they dozed till it was time to get up and begin the week's labour.