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LIGHT FREIGHTS

AN ODD FREAK

"SPEAKING o' money," said the night-watchman, thoughtfully, as he selected an empty soap-box on the wharf for a seat, "the whole world would be different if we all 'ad more of it. It would be a brighter and a 'appier place for everybody."

He broke off to open a small brass tobacco-box and place a little quid of tobacco tenderly into a pouch in his left cheek, critically observing at the same time the efforts of a somewhat large steamer to get alongside the next wharf without blocking up more than three-parts of the river. He watched it as though the entire operation depended upon his attention, and, the steamer fast, he turned his eyes back again and resumed his theme.

"Of course it's the being short that sharpens people," he admitted, thoughtfully; "the sharpest man I ever knew never 'ad a ha'penny in 'is

pocket, and the ways 'e had o' getting other chaps to pay for 'is beer would ha' made 'is fortin at the law if 'e'd only 'ad the eddication. Playful little chap 'e was. I've seen men wot didn't know 'im stand 'im a pot o' beer and then foller 'im up the road to see 'im knock down a policeman as 'e'd promised. They'd foller 'im to the fust policeman 'e met, an' then 'e'd point them out and say they were goin' to half kill 'im, an' the policeman 'ud just stroll up an' ask 'em wot they were 'anging about for, but I never 'eard of a chap telling 'im. They used to go away struck all of a 'eap. He died in the accident ward of the London Horsepittle, poor chap."

He shook his head thoughtfully, and ignoring the statement of the watchman at the next wharf that it was a fine evening, shifted his quid and laughed rumblingly.

"The funniest way o' raising the wind I ever 'eard of," he said, in explanation, "was one that 'appened about fifteen years ago. I'd just taken my discharge as A.B. from the *North Star*, trading between here and the Australian ports, and the men wot the thing 'appened to was shipmates o' mine, although on'y firemen.

"I know it's a true story, becos I was in it a little bit myself, and the other part I 'ad from all of 'em, and besides, they didn't see anything

funny in it at all, or anything out of the way. It seemed to them quite a easy way o' making money, and I dessay if it 'ad come off all right I should have thought so too.

"In about a week arter we was paid off at the Albert Docks these chaps was all cleaned out, and they was all in despair, with a thirst wot wasn't half quenched and a spree wot was on'y in a manner o' speaking just begun, and at the end of that time they came round to a room wot I 'ad, to see wot could be done. There was four of 'em in all: old Sam Small, Ginger Dick, Peter Russet, and a orphan nevy of Sam's whose father and mother was dead. The mother 'ad been 'alf nigger an' 'alf Malay when she was living, and Sam was always pertickler careful to point out that his nevy took arter 'er. It was enough to make the pore woman turn in 'er grave to say so, but Sam used to say that 'e owed it to 'is brother to explain.

"'Wot's to be done?' ses Peter Russet, arter they'd all said wot miserable chaps they was, an' 'ow badly sailor-men was paid. 'We're all going to sign on in the *Land's End*, but she doesn't sail for a fortnight; wot's to be done in the meantime for to live?'

"'There's your watch, Peter,' ses old Sam, dreamy-like, 'and there's Ginger's ring. It's a

good job you kep' that ring, Ginger. We're all in the same boat, mates, an' I on'y wish as I'd got something for the general good. It's 'aving an orphan nevy wot's kep' me pore.'

"'Stow it,' ses the nevy, short-like.

"'Everything's agin us,' ses old Sam. 'There's them four green parrots I brought from Brazil, all dead.'

"'So are my two monkeys,' ses Peter Russet, shaking 'is 'ead; 'they used to sleep with me, too.'

"They all shook their 'eads then, and Russet took Sam up very sharp for saying that p'raps if he 'adn't slep' with the monkeys they wouldn't ha' died. He said if Sam knew more about monkeys than wot 'e did, why didn't 'e put 'is money in them instead o' green parrots wot pulled their feathers out and died of cold.

"'Talking about monkeys,' ses Ginger Dick, interrupting old Sam suddenly, 'wot about young Beauty here?'

"'Well, wot about him?' ses the nevy, in a nasty sort o' way.

"'W'y, 'e's worth forty monkeys an' millions o' green parrots,' ses Ginger, starting up; 'an' here 'e is a-wasting of 'is opportunities, going about dressed like a Christian. Open your mouth, Beauty, and stick your tongue out and roll your eyes a bit.'

"'W'y not leave well alone, Ginger?' ses Russet; and I thought so too. Young Beauty was quite enough for me without that.

"'Ter 'blige me,' ses Ginger, anxiously, 'just make yourself as ugly as wot you can, Beauty.'

"'Leave 'im alone,' ses old Sam, as his nevy snarled at 'em. 'You ain't everybody's money yourself, Ginger.'

"'I tell you, mates,' ses Ginger, speaking very slow and solemn, 'there's a fortin in 'im. I was lookin' at 'im just now, trying to think who 'e reminded me of. At fust I thought it was that big stuffed monkey we saw at Melbourne, then I suddenly remembered it was a wild man of Borneo I see when I was a kid up in Sunderland. When I say 'e was a 'andsome, good-'arted looking gentleman alongside o' you, Beauty, do you begin to get my meaning?'

"'Wot's the idea, Ginger?' ses Sam, getting up to lend me and Russet a 'and with 'is nevy.

"'My idea is this,' ses Ginger: 'take 'is cloes off 'im and dress 'im up in that there winder-blind, or something o' the kind; tie 'im up with a bit o' line, and take 'im round to Ted Reddish in the 'Ighway and sell 'im for a 'undered quid as a wild man of Borneo.'

"'Wot?' screams Beauty, in an awful voice. 'Let go, Peter; let go, d'ye hear?'

“‘Old your noise, Beauty, while your elders is speaking,’ ses ‘is uncle, and I could see ‘e was struck with the idea.

“‘You jest try dressing me up in a winder-blind,’ ses his nevy, half-crying with rage.

“‘Listen to reason, Beauty,’ ses Ginger; ‘you’ll ave your share of the tin; it’ll only be for a day or two, and then when we’ve cleared out you can make your escape, and there’ll be twenty-five pounds for each of us.’

“‘Ow do you make that out, Ginger?’ ses Sam, in a cold voice.

“‘Fours into a ‘undered,’ ses Ginger.

“‘Ho,’ ses Sam. ‘Ho, indeed. I wasn’t aweer that ‘e was your nevy, Ginger.’

“‘Share and share alike,’ ses Russet. ‘It’s a very good plan o’ yours, Ginger.’

“Ginger holds ‘is ‘ead up and looks at ‘im ‘ard.

“‘I thought o’ the plan,’ ‘e ses, speaking very slow and deliberate. ‘Sam’s ‘is uncle, and ‘e’s the wild man. Threes into a ‘undered go—’

“‘You needn’t bother your fat ‘ead adding up sums, Ginger,’ ses Russet, very polite. ‘I’m going to ‘ave my share; else I’ll split to Ted Reddish.’

“None of ‘em said a word about me: two of ‘em was sitting on my bed; Ginger was using a

‘ankerchief o’ mine wot ‘e found in the fireplace, and Peter Russet ‘ad ‘ad a drink out o’ the jug on my washstand, and yet they never even mentioned me. That’s firemen all over, and that’s ‘ow it is they get themselves so disliked.

“It took ‘em best part of an ‘our to talk round young Beauty, an’ the langwidge they see fit to use made me thankful to think that the parrots didn’t live to larn it.

“You never saw anything like Beauty when they ‘ad finished with ‘im. If ‘e was bad in ‘is cloes, ‘e was a perfeck horror without ‘em. Ginger Dick faked ‘im up beautiful, but there was no pleasing ‘im. Fust he found fault with the winder-blind, which ‘e said didn’t fit; then ‘e grumbled about going bare-foot, then ‘e wanted somethink to ‘ide ‘is legs, which was natural considering the shape of ‘em. Ginger Dick nearly lost ‘is temper with ‘im, and it was all old Sam could do to stop himself from casting ‘im off for ever. He was finished at last, and arter Peter Russet ‘ad slipped downstairs and found a bit o’ broken clothes-prop in the yard, and ‘e’d been shown ‘ow to lean on it and make a noise, Ginger said as ‘ow if Ted Reddish got ‘im for a ‘undered pounds ‘e’d get ‘im a bargain.

“‘We must ‘ave a cab,’ ses old Sam

“‘Cab?’ ses Ginger. ‘What for?’

“‘We should ’ave half Wapping following us,’ ses Sam. ‘Go out and put your ring up, Ginger, and fetch a cab.’

“Ginger started grumbling, but he went, and presently came back with the cab and the money, and they all went downstairs leading the wild man by a bit o’ line. They only met one party coming up, and ’e seemed to remember somethink ’e’d forgotten wot ought to be fetched at once.

“Ginger went out fust and opened the cab-door, and then stood there waiting becos at the last moment the wild man said the winder-blind was slipping down. They got ’im out at last, but before ’e could get in the cab was going up the road at ten miles an hour, with Ginger ’anging on to the door calling to it to stop.

“It came back at about a mile an’ a ’alf an hour, an’ the remarks of the cabman was eggstrordinary. Even when he got back ’e wouldn’t start till ’e’d got double fare paid in advance; but they got in at last and drove off.

“There was a fine scene at Ted Reddish’s door. Ginger said that if there was a bit of a struggle it would be a good advertisement for Ted Reddish, and they might p’r’aps get more than a ’undered, and all the three of ’em could do, they couldn’t get the wild man out o’ that cab, and the cabman was hopping about ’arf crazy. Every

now and then they’d get the wild man ’arf out, and then he’d get in agin and snarl. ’E didn’t seem to know when to leave off, and Ginger and the others got almost as sick of it as the cabman. It must ha’ taken two years’ wear out o’ that cab, but they got ’im out at last, and Reddish’s door being open to see what the row was about, they went straight in.

“‘Wot’s all this?’ ses Reddish, who was a tall, thin man, with a dark moustache.

“‘It’s a wild man o’ Borneo,’ ses Ginger, panting; ‘we caught ’im in a forest in Brazil, an’ we’ve come ’ere to give you the fust offer.’

“Ted Reddish was so surprised ’e couldn’t speak at fust. The wild man seemed to take ’is breath away, and ’e looked in a ’elpless kind o’ way at ’is wife, who’d just come down. She was a nice-lookin’ woman, fat, with a lot o’ yaller hair, and she smiled at ’em as though she’d known ’em all their lives.

“‘Come into the parlour,’ she ses, kindly, just as Ted was beginning to get ’is breath.

“They followed ’em in, and the wild man was just going to make hisself comfortable in a easy-chair, when Ginger give ’im a look, an’ ’e curled up on the ’earthrug instead.

“‘E ain’t a very fine specimen,’ ses Ted Reddish, at last.

"It's the red side-whiskers I don't like,' ses his wife. 'Besides, who ever 'eard of a wild man in a collar an' necktie?'

"You've got hold o' the wrong one,' ses Ted Reddish, afore Ginger Dick could speak up for hisself.

"Oh, I beg your pardin,' ses Mrs. Reddish to Ginger, very polite. 'I thought it was funny a wild man should be wearing a collar. It's my mistake. That's the wild man, I s'pose, on the 'earthrug?'

"That's 'im, mum,' ses old Sam, very short.

"He don't look wild enough,' ses Reddish.

"No; 'e's much too tame,' ses 'is wife, shaking her yaller curls.

"The chaps all looked at each other then, and the wild man began to think it was time he did somethink; and the nearest thing 'andy being Ginger's leg, 'e put 'is teeth into it. *Anybody* might ha' thought Ginger was the wild man then, the way 'e went on, and Mrs. Reddish said that even if he so far forgot hisself as to use sich langwidge afore 'er, 'e oughtn't to before a poor 'eathen animal.

"How much do you want for 'im?' ses Ted Reddish, arter Ginger 'ad got 'is leg away, and taken it to the winder to look at it.

"One 'undered pounds,' ses old Sam.

"Ted Reddish looked at 'is wife, and they both larfed as though they'd never leave orf.

"Why, the market price o' the best wild men is only thirty shillings,' ses Reddish, wiping 'is eyes. 'I'll give you a pound for 'im.'

"Old Sam looked at Russet, and Russet looked at Ginger, and then *they* all larfed.

"Well, there's no getting over you, I can see that,' ses Reddish, at last. 'Is he strong?'

"Strong? Strong ain't the word for it,' ses Sam.

"Bring 'im to the back and let 'im 'ave a wrestle with one o' the brown bears, Ted,' ses 'is wife.

"'E'd kill it,' ses old Sam, hastily.

"Never mind,' ses Reddish, getting up; 'brown bears is cheap enough.'

"They all got up then, none of 'em knowing wot to do, except the wild man, that is, and *he* got 'is arms tight round the leg o' the table.

"Well,' ses Ginger, 'we'll be pleased for 'im to wrestle with the bear, but we must 'ave the 'undered quid fust, in case 'e injures 'isself a little.'

"Ted Reddish looked 'ard at 'im, and then he looked at 'is wife agin.

"I'll just go outside and talk it over with the missus,' he ses, at last, and they both got up and went out.

"'It's all right,' ses old Sam, winking at Ginger.

"'Fair cop,' ses Ginger, who was still rubbing his leg. 'I told you it would be, but there's no need for Beauty to overdo it. He nearly 'ad a bit out o' my leg.'

"'A'right,' ses the wild man, shifting along the 'earthrug to where Peter was sitting; 'but it don't do for me to be too tame. You 'eard wot she said.'

"'How are you feeling, old man?' ses Peter, in a kind voice, as 'e tucked 'is legs away under 'is chair.

"'Gurr,' ses the wild man, going on all fours to the back of the chair, 'gur—wug—wug—'

"'Don't play the fool, Beauty,' ses Peter, with a uneasy smile, as he twisted 'is 'ead round. 'Call 'im off, Sam.'

"'Gurr,' ses the wild man, sniffing at 'is legs; 'gurr.'

"'Easy on, Beauty, it's no good biting 'im till they come back,' ses old Sam.

"'I won't be bit at all,' ses Russet, very sharp, 'mind that, Sam. It's my belief Beauty's gone mad.'

"'Hush,' ses Ginger, and they 'eard Ted Reddish and 'is wife coming back. They came in and sat down agin, and after Ted 'ad 'ad

another good look at the wild man and prodded 'im all over an' looked at 'is teeth, he spoke up and said they'd decided to give a 'undered pun for 'im at the end o' three days if 'e suited.

"'I s'pose,' ses Sam, looking at the others, 'that we could 'ave a bit of it now to go on with?'

"'It's agin our way of doing business,' ses Ted Reddish. 'If it 'ud been a lion or a tiger we could, but wild men we never do.'

"'The thing is,' ses Mrs. Reddish, as the wild man started on Russet's leg and was pulled off by Sam and Ginger, 'where to put 'im.'

"'Why not put 'im in with the black leopard?' ses her 'usband.

"'There's plenty o' room in his cage,' says 'is wife, thoughtfully, 'and it 'ud be company for 'im too.'

"'I don't think the wild man 'ud like that,' ses Ginger.

"'I'm sartain sure 'e wouldn't,' says old Sam, shaking 'is 'ead.

"'Well, we must put 'im in a cage by hisself, I s'pose,' ses Reddish, 'but we can't be put to much expense. I'm sure the money we spent in cat's meat for the last wild man we 'ad was awful.'

"'Don't you spend too much money on cat's meat for 'im,' ses Sam, 'e'd very likely leave it.

Bringing 'im 'ome, we used to give 'im the same as we 'ad ourselves, and he got on all right.'

"'It's a wonder you didn't kill 'im,' ses Reddish, severely. 'He 'll be fed very different 'ere, I can tell you. You won't know 'im at the end o' three days.'

"'Don't change 'im too sudden,' ses Ginger, keeping 'is 'ead turned away from the wild man, wot was trying to catch 'is eye. 'Cook 'is food at fust, 'cos 'e's been used to it.'

"'I know wot to give 'im,' ses Reddish, off-handedly. 'I ain't been in the line twenty-seven years for nothink. Bring 'im out to the back, an' I'll put 'im in 'is new 'ome.'

"They all got up and, taking no notice of the wild man's whispers, follered Ted Reddish and 'is wife out to the back, where all the wild beasts in the world seemed to 'ave collected to roar out to each other what a beastly place it was.

"'I'm going to put 'im in "'Appy Cottage" for a time,' says Reddish; 'lend a hand 'ere, William,' he says, beckoning to one of 'is men.

"'Is *that* "'Appy Cottage"?' ses old Sam, sniffing, as they got up to a nasty, empty cage with a chain and staple in the wall.

"Ted Reddish said it was.

"'Wot makes you call it that?' ses Sam.

"Reddish didn't seem to 'ear 'im, and it took all Ginger's coaxing to get Beauty to go in.

"'It's on'y for a day or two,' he whispers.

"'But 'ow am I to escape when you've got the brass?' ses the wild man.

"'We'll look arter that,' ses Ginger, who 'adn't got the least idea.

"The wild man 'ad a little show for the last time, jist to impress Ted Reddish, an' it was pretty to see the way William 'andled 'im. The look on the wild man's face showed as 'ow it was a revelashun to 'im. Then 'is three mates took a last look at 'im and went off.

"For the fust day Sam felt uneasy about 'im, and used to tell us tales about 'is dead brother which made us think Beauty was lucky to take arter 'is mother; but it wore off, and the next night, in the 'Admiral Cochrane,' 'e put 'is 'ead on Ginger's shoulder, and wep' for 'appiness as 'e spoke of 'is nevy's home at "'Appy Cottage.'

"On the third day Sam was for going round in the morning for the money, but Ginger said it wasn't advisable to show any 'aste; so they left it to the evening, and Peter Russet wrote Sam a letter signed 'Barnum,' offering 'im two 'undered for the wild man, in case Ted Reddish should want to beat 'em down. They all 'ad a drink before they went in, and was smiling with good temper to sich an extent that they 'ad to wait a minute to get their faces straight afore going in.

"Come in,' ses Reddish, and they follered 'im into the parler, where Mrs. Reddish was sitting in a armchair shaking 'er 'ead and looking at the carpet very sorrowful.

"I was afraid you'd come,' she ses, in a low voice.

"So was I,' ses Reddish.

"What for?' ses old Sam. It didn't look much like money, and 'e felt cross.

"We've 'ad a loss,' ses Mrs. Reddish. She touched 'erself, and then they see she was all in black, and that Ted Reddish was wearing a black tie and a bit o' crape round 'is arm.

"Sorry to 'ear it, mum,' ses old Sam.

"It was very sudden, too,' ses Mrs. Reddish, wiping 'er eyes.

"That's better than laying long,' ses Peter Russet, comforting like.

"Ginger Dick gives a cough. 'Twenty-five pounds was wot 'e'd come for; not to 'ear this sort o' talk.'

"We've been in the wild-beast line seven-an'-twenty years,' ses Mrs. Reddish, 'and it's the fust time anythink of this sort 'as 'appened.'

"Ealthy family, I s'pose,' ses Sam, staring.

"Tell 'im, Ted,' ses Mrs. Reddish, in a 'usky whisper.

"No, you,' ses Ted.

"It's your place,' ses Mrs. Reddish.

"A woman can break it better,' ses 'er usband.

"Tell us wot?' ses Ginger, very snappish.

"Ted Reddish cleared 'is throat.

"It wasn't our fault,' he ses, slowly, while Mrs. Reddish began to cry agin; 'gin'rally speakin', animals is afraid o' wild men, and night before last, as the wild man wot you left on approval didn't seem to like "'Appy Cottage," we took 'im out an' put 'im in with the tiger.'

"Put him in with the WOT?' ses the unfort'nit man's uncle, jumping off 'is chair.

"The tiger,' ses Reddish. 'We 'eard something in the night, but we thought they was only 'aving a little bit of a tiff, like. In the morning I went down with a bit o' cold meat for the wild man, and I thought at first he'd escaped; but looking a little bit closer—'

"Don't, Ted,' ses 'is wife. 'I can't bear it.'

"Do you mean to tell me that the tiger 'as eat 'im?' screams old Sam.

"Most of 'im,' ses Ted Reddish; 'but 'e couldn't ha' been much of a wild man to let a tiger get the better of 'im. I must say I was surprised.'

"We both was,' ses Mrs. Reddish, wiping 'er eyes.

"You might ha' 'eard a pin drop; old Sam's

eyes was large and staring, Peter Russet was sucking 'is teeth, an' Ginger was wondering wot the law would say to it—if it 'eard of it.

“‘It's an unfortunit thing for all parties,' ses Ted Reddish, at last, getting up and standing on the 'earthrug.

“‘‘Orrible,' ses Sam, 'uskily. 'You ought to ha' known better than to put 'im in with a tiger. Wot could you expect? W'y, it was a mad thing to do.'

“‘Crool thing,' ses Peter Russet.

“‘You don't know the bisness properly,' ses Ginger, 'that's about wot it is. W'y, I should ha' known better than that.'

“‘Well, it's no good making a fuss about it,' ses Reddish. 'It was only a wild man arter all, and he'd ha' died anyway, cos 'e wouldn't eat the raw meat we gave 'im, and 'is pan o' water was scarcely touched. He'd ha' starved himself anyhow. I'm sorry, as I said before, but I must be off; I've got an appointment down at the docks.'

“He moved towards the door; Ginger Dick gave Russet a nudge and whispered something, and Russet passed it on to Sam.

“‘What about the 'undered quid?' ses pore Beauty's uncle, catching 'old o' Reddish as 'e passed 'im.

“‘Eh?' ses Reddish, surprised—'Oh, that's off.'

“‘Ho!' says Sam. 'Ho! is it? We want a 'undered quid off of you; an' wot's more, we mean to 'ave it.'

“‘But the tiger's ate 'im,' says Mrs. Reddish, explaining.

“‘I know that,' ses Sam, sharply. 'But 'e was our wild man, and we want to be paid for 'im. You should ha' been more careful. We'll give you five minutes; and if the money ain't paid by that time, we'll go straight off to the police-station.'

“‘Well, go,' ses Ted Reddish.

“Sam got up, very stern, and looked at Ginger.

“‘You'll be ruined if we do,' ses Ginger.

“‘All right,' ses Ted Reddish, comfortably.

“‘I'm not sure they can't 'ang you,' ses Russet.

“‘I ain't sure either,' says Reddish; 'and I'd like to know 'ow the law stands, in case it 'appens agin.'

“‘Come on, Sam,' ses Ginger; 'come straight to the police-station.'

“He got up, and moved towards the door. Ted Reddish didn't move a muscle, but Mrs. Reddish flopped on her knees and caught old Sam round the legs, and 'eld him so's 'e couldn't move.

“‘Spare 'im,' she ses, crying.

“‘Lea' go o' my legs, mum,' ses Sam.

"'Come on, Sam,' ses Ginger; 'come to the police.'

"Old Sam made a desperit effort, and Mrs. Reddish called 'im a crool monster, and let go and 'id 'er face on 'er husband's shoulder as they all moved out of the parlour, larfing like a mad thing with hysterics.

"They moved off slowly, not knowing wot to do, as, of course, they knew they daren't go to the police about it. Ginger Dick's temper was awful; but Peter Russet said they mustn't give up all 'ope—he'd write to Ted Reddish and tell 'im as a friend wot a danger 'e was in. Old Sam didn't say anything, the loss of his nevy and twenty-five pounds at the same time being almost more than 'is 'art could bear, and in a slow, melancholy fashion they walked back to old Sam's lodgings.

"'Well, what the blazes is up now?' ses Ginger Dick, as they turned the corner.

"There was three or four 'undered people standing in front of the 'ouse, and women's 'eads out of all the winders screaming their 'ardest for the police, and as they got closer they 'eard a incessant knocking. It took 'em nearly five minutes to force their way through the crowd, and then they nearly went crazy as they saw the wild man with 'alf the winder-blind missing, but

otherwise well and 'arty, standing on the step and giving rat-a-tat-tats at the door for all 'e was worth.

"They never got to know the rights of it, Beauty getting so excited every time they asked 'im 'ow he got on that they 'ad to give it up. But they began to 'ave a sort of idea at last that Ted Reddish 'ad been 'aving a game with 'em, and that Mrs. Reddish was worse than wot 'e was."