

A GARDEN PLOT

THE able-bodied men of the village were at work, the children were at school singing the multiplication-table lullaby, while the wives and mothers at home nursed the baby with one hand and did the housework with the other. At the end of the village an old man past work sat at a rough deal table under the creaking sign-board of the "Cauliflower," gratefully drinking from a mug of ale supplied by a chance traveller who sat opposite him.

The shade of the elms was pleasant and the ale good. The traveller filled his pipe and, glancing at the dusty hedges and the white road baking in the sun, called for the mugs to be refilled, and pushed his pouch towards his companion. After which he paid a compliment to the appearance of the village.

"It ain't what it was when I was a boy," quavered the old man, filling his pipe with trembling fingers. "I mind when the grindstone was stuck just outside the winder o' the forge

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instead o' being one side as it now is; and as for the shop winder—it's twice the size it was when I was a young 'un."

He lit his pipe with the scientific accuracy of a smoker of sixty years' standing, and shook his head solemnly as he regarded his altered birth-place. Then his colour heightened and his dim eye flashed.

"It's the people about 'ere 'as changed more than the place 'as," he said, with sudden fierceness; "there's a set o' men about here nowadays as are no good to anybody; reg'lar raskels. And if you've the mind to listen I can tell you of one or two as couldn't be beat in London itself.

"There's Tom Adams for one. He went and started wot 'e called a Benevolent Club. Three-pence a week each we paid agin sickness or accident, and Tom was secretary. Three weeks arter the club was started he caught a chill and was laid up for a month. He got back to work a week, and then 'e sprained something in 'is leg; and arter that was well 'is inside went wrong. We didn't think much of it at first, not understanding figures; but at the end o' six months the club hadn't got a farthing, and they was in Tom's debt one pound seventeen-and-six.

"He isn't the only one o' that sort in the place, either. There was Herbert Richardson. He

went to town, and came back with the idea of a Goose Club for Christmas. We paid twopence a week into that for pretty near ten months, and then Herbert went back to town agin, and all we 'ear of 'im, through his sister, is that he's still there and doing well, and don't know when he'll be back.

"But the artfullest and worst man in this place—and that's saying a good deal, mind you—is Bob Pretty. Deep is no word for 'im. There's no way of being up to 'im. It's through 'im that we lost our Flower Show; and, if you'd like to 'ear the rights o' that, I don't suppose there's anybody in this place as knows as much about it as I do—barring Bob hisself that is, but 'e wouldn't tell it to you as plain as I can.

"We'd only 'ad the Flower Show one year, and little anybody thought that the next one was to be the last. The first year you might smell the place a mile off in the summer, and on the day of the show people came from a long way round, and brought money to spend at the 'Cauliflower' and other places.

"It was started just after we got our new parson, and Mrs. Pawlett, the parson's wife, 'is name being Pawlett, thought as she'd encourage men to love their 'omes and be better 'usbands by giving a prize every year for the best cottage

garden. Three pounds was the prize, and a metal teapot with writing on it.

"As I said, we only 'ad it two years. The fust year the garden as got it was a picter, and Bill Chambers, 'im as won the prize, used to say as 'e was out o' pocket by it, taking 'is time and the money 'e spent on flowers. Not as we believed that, you understand, 'specially as Bill did 'is very best to get it the next year, too. 'E didn't get it, and though p'r'aps most of us was glad 'e didn't, we was all very surprised at the way it turned out in the end.

"The Flower Show was to be 'eld on the 5th o' July, just as a'most everything about here was at its best. On the 15th of June Bill Chambers's garden seemed to be leading, but Peter Smith and Joe Gubbins and Sam Jones and Henery Walker was almost as good, and it was understood that more than one of 'em had got a surprise which they'd produce at the last moment, too late for the others to copy. We used to sit up here of an evening at this 'Cauliflower' public-house and put money on it. I put mine on Henery Walker, and the time I spent in 'is garden 'elping 'im is a sin and a shame to think of.

"Of course some of 'em used to make fun of it, and Bob Pretty was the worst of 'em all. He was always a lazy, good-for-nothing man, and 'is

garden was a disgrace. He'd chuck down any rubbish in it: old bones, old tins, bits of an old bucket, anything to make it untidy. He used to larf at 'em awful about their gardens and about being took up by the parson's wife. Nobody ever see 'im do any work, real 'ard work, but the smell from 'is place at dinner-time was always nice, and I believe that he knew more about game than the parson hisself did.

"It was the day arter this one I'm speaking about, the 16th o' June, that the trouble all began, and it came about in a very eggstrordinary way. George English, a quiet man getting into years, who used when 'e was younger to foller the sea, and whose only misfortin was that 'e was a brother-in-law o' Bob Pretty's, his sister marrying Bob while 'e was at sea and knowing nothing about it, 'ad a letter come from a mate of his who 'ad gone to Australia to live. He'd 'ad letters from Australia before, as we all knew from Miss Wicks at the post-office, but this one upset him altogether. He didn't seem like to know what to do about it.

"While he was wondering Bill Chambers passed. He always did pass George's 'ouse about that time in the evening, it being on 'is way 'ome, and he saw George standing at 'is gate with a letter in 'is 'and looking very puzzled.



*NOT BAD NEWS, I 'OPE?' SES BILL

“Evenin’, George,’ ses Bill.

“Evenin’;’ ses George.

“Not bad news, I ‘ope?’ ses Bill, noticing ‘is manner, and thinking it was strange.

“No,’ ses George. ‘I’ve just ‘ad a very eggstrordinary letter from Australia,’ he ses, ‘that’s all.’

“Bill Chambers was always a very inquisitive sort o’ man, and he stayed and talked to George until George, arter fust making him swear oaths that ‘e wouldn’t tell a soul, took ‘im inside and showed ‘im the letter.

“It was more like a story-book than a letter. George’s mate, John Biggs by name, wrote to say that an uncle of his who had just died, on ‘is deathbed told him that thirty years ago he ‘ad been in this very village, staying at this ‘ere very ‘Cauliflower,’ whose beer we’re drinking now. In the night, when everybody was asleep, he got up and went quiet-like and buried a bag of five hundred and seventeen sovereigns and one half-sovereign in one of the cottage gardens till ‘e could come for it agin. He didn’t say ‘ow he come by the money, and, when Bill spoke about that, George English said that, knowing the man, he was afraid ‘e ‘adn’t come by it honest, but anyway his friend John Biggs wanted it, and, wot was more, ‘ad asked ‘im in the letter to get it for ‘im

"And wot I'm to do about it, Bill,' he ses, 'I don't know. All the directions he gives is, that 'e thinks it was the tenth cottage on the right-'and side of the road, coming down from the "Cauliflower." He thinks it's the tenth, but 'e's not quite sure. Do you think I'd better make it known and offer a reward of ten shillings, say, to any one who finds it?'

"No,' ses Bill, shaking 'is 'ead. 'I should hold on a bit if I was you, and think it over. I shouldn't tell another single soul, if I was you.'

"I b'lieve you're right,' ses George. 'John Biggs would never forgive me if I lost that money for 'im. You'll remember about keeping it secret, Bill?'

"Bill swore he wouldn't tell a soul, and 'e went off 'ome and 'ad his supper, and then 'e walked up the road to the 'Cauliflower' and back, and then up and back again, thinking over what George 'ad been telling 'im, and noticing, what 'e'd never taken the trouble to notice before, that 'is very house was the tenth one from the 'Cauliflower.'

"Mrs. Chambers woke up at two o'clock next morning and told Bill to get up further, and then found 'e wasn't there. She was rather surprised at first, but she didn't think much of it, and thought, what happened to be true, that 'e was busy in the garden, it being a light night. She

turned over and went to sleep again, and at five when she woke up she could distinctly 'ear Bill working 'is 'ardest. Then she went to the winder and nearly dropped as she saw Bill in his shirt and trousers digging away like mad. A quarter of the garden was all dug up, and she shoved open the winder and screamed out to know what 'e was doing.

"Bill stood up straight and wiped 'is face with his shirt-sleeve and started digging again, and then his wife just put something on and rushed downstairs as fast as she could go.

"What on earth are you a-doing of, Bill?' she screams.

"Go indoors,' ses Bill, still digging.

"Have you gone mad?' she ses, half crying.

"Bill just stopped to throw a lump of mould at her, and then went on digging till Henery Walker who also thought 'e 'ad gone mad, and didn't want to stop 'im too soon, put 'is 'ead over the 'edge and asked 'im the same thing.

"Ask no questions and you'll 'ear no lies, and keep your ugly face your own side of the 'edge,' ses Bill. 'Take it indoors and frighten the children with,' he ses. 'I don't want it staring at me.'

"Henery walked off offended, and Bill went on with his digging. He wouldn't go to work, and 'e 'ad his breakfast in the garden, and his wife

spent all the morning in the front answering the neighbours' questions and begging of 'em to go in and say something to Bill. One of 'em did go, and came back a'most directly and stood there for hours telling diff'rent people wot Bill 'ad said to 'er, and asking whether 'e couldn't be locked up for it.

"By tea-time Bill was dead-beat, and that stiff he could 'ardly raise 'is bread and butter to his mouth. Several o' the chaps looked in in the evening, but all they could get out of 'im was, that it was a new way o' cultivating 'is garden 'e 'ad just 'eard of, and that those who lived the longest would see the most. By night-time 'e'd nearly finished the job, and 'is garden was just ruined.

"Afore people 'ad done talking about Bill, I'm blest if Peter Smith didn't go and cultivate 'is garden in exactly the same way. The parson and 'is wife was away on their 'oliday, and nobody could say a word. The curate who 'ad come over to take 'is place for a time, and who took the names of people for the Flower Show, did point out to 'im that he was spoiling 'is chances, but Peter was so rude to 'im that he didn't stay long enough to say much.

"When Joe Gubbins started digging up 'is garden people began to think they were all

bewitched, and I went round to see Henery Walker to tell 'im wot a fine chance 'e'd got, and to remind 'im that I'd put another ninepence on 'im the night before. All 'e said was, 'More fool you,' and went on digging a 'ole in his garden big enough to put a 'ouse in.

"In a fortnight's time there wasn't a garden worth looking at in the place, and it was quite clear there'd be no Flower Show that year, and of all the silly, bad-tempered men in the place them as 'ad dug up their pretty gardens was the wust.

"It was just a few days before the day fixed for the Flower Show, and I was walking up the road when I see Joe and Henery Walker and one or two more leaning over Bob Pretty's fence and talking to 'im. I stopped, too, to see what they were looking at, and found they was watching Bob's two boys a-weeding of 'is garden. It was a disgraceful, untidy sort of place, as I said before, with a few marigolds and nasturtiums, and sich-like put in anywhere, and Bob was walking up and down smoking of 'is pipe and watching 'is wife hoe atween the plants and cut off dead marigold blooms.

"'That's a pretty garden you've got there, Bob,' ses Joe, grinning.

"'I've seen wuss,' ses Bob.

“‘Going in for the Flower Show, Bob?’ ses Henery, with a wink at us.

“‘O’ course I am,’ ses Bob, ‘olding ’is ’ead up; ‘my marigolds ought to pull me through,’ he ses.

“Henery wouldn’t believe it at fust, but when he saw Bob show ’is missus ’ow to pat the path down with the back o’ the spade and hold the nails for ’er while she nailed a climbing nasturtium to the fence, he went off and fetched Bill Chambers and one or two others, and they all leaned over the fence breathing their ’ardest and a-saying of all the nasty things to Bob they could think of.

“‘It’s the best-kep’ garden in the place,’ ses Bob. ‘I ain’t afraid o’ your new way o’ cultivating flowers, Bill Chambers. Old-fashioned ways suit me best; I learnt ’ow to grow flowers from my father.’

“‘You ain’t ’ad the cheek to give your name in, Bob?’ ses Sam Jones, staring.

“Bob didn’t answer ’im. ‘Pick those bits o’ grass out o’ the path, old gal,’ he ses to ’is wife; ‘they look untidy, and untidiness I can’t abear.’

“He walked up and down smoking ’is pipe and pretending not to notice Henery Walker, wot ’ad moved farther along the fence, and was staring at some drabble-tailed-looking geraniums as if ’e’d seen ’em afore but wasn’t quite sure where.

“‘Admiring my geraniums, Henery?’ ses Bob, at last.

“‘Where’d you get ’em?’ ses Henery, ’ardly able to speak.

“‘My florist’s,’ ses Bob, in a off-hand manner.

“‘Your wot?’ asks Henery.

“‘My florist,’ ses Bob.

“‘And who might ’e be when ’e’s at home?’ asked Henery.

“‘Tain’t so likely I’m going to tell you that,’ ses Bob. ‘Be reasonable, Henery, and ask yourself whether it’s likely I should tell you ’is name. Why, I’ve never seen sich fine geraniums afore. I’ve been nursing ’em inside all the summer, and just planted ’em out.’

“‘About two days arter I threw mine over my back fence,’ ses Henery Walker, speaking very slowly.

“‘Ho,’ ses Bob, surprised. ‘I didn’t know you ’ad any geraniums, Henery. I thought you was digging for gravel this year.’

“Henery didn’t answer ’im. Not because ’e didn’t want to, mind you, but because he couldn’t.

“‘That one,’ ses Bob, pointing at a broken geranium with the stem of ’is pipe, ‘is a “Dook o’ Wellington,” and that white one there is wot I’m going to call “Pretty’s Pride.” That fine

marigold over there, wot looks like a sunflower, is called "Golden Dreams."

"Come along, Henery,' ses Bill Chambers, bursting, 'come and get something to take the taste out of your mouth.'

"I'm sorry I can't offer you a flower for your button-'ole,' ses Bob, perlately, 'but it's getting so near the Flower Show now I can't afford it. If you chaps only knew wot pleasure was to be 'ad sitting among your innercent flowers, you wouldn't want to go to the public-house so often.'

"He shook 'is 'ead at 'em, and telling his wife to give the 'Dook o' Wellington' a mug of water, sat down in the chair agin and wiped the sweat off 'is brow.

"Bill Chambers did a bit o' thinking as they walked up the road, and by and by 'e turns to Joe Gubbins and 'e ses—

"Seen anything o' George English lately, Joe?"

"Yes,' ses Joe.

"Seems to me we all 'ave,' ses Sam Jones.

"None of 'em liked to say wot was in their minds, 'aving all seen George English and swore pretty strong not to tell his secret, and none of 'em liking to own up that they'd been digging up their gardens to get money as 'e'd told 'em about. But presently Bill Chambers ses—

"Without telling no secrets or breaking no promises, Joe, supposing a certain 'ouse was mentioned in a certain letter from forrin parts, wot 'ouse was it?"

"Supposing it was so,' ses Joe, careful too; 'the second 'ouse counting from the "Cauliflower."

"The ninth 'ouse, you mean,' ses Henery Walker, sharply.

"Second 'ouse in Mill Lane, you mean,' ses Sam Jones, wot lived there.

"Then they all see 'ow they'd been done, and that they wasn't, in a manner o' speaking, referring to the same letter. They came up and sat 'ere where we're sitting now, all dazed-like. It wasn't only the chance o' losing the prize that upset 'em, but they'd wasted their time and ruined their gardens and got called mad by the other folks. Henery Walker's state o' mind was dreadful for to see, and he kep' thinking of 'orrible things to say to George English, and then being afraid they wasn't strong enough.

"While they was talking who should come along but George English hisself! He came right up to the table, and they all sat back on the bench and stared at 'im fierce, and Henery Walker crinkled 'is nose at him.

"Evening,' he ses, but none of 'em answered

'im; they all looked at Henery to see wot 'e was going to say.

"'Wot's up?' ses George, in surprise.

"'Gardens,' ses Henery.

"'So I've 'eard,' ses George.

"He shook 'is 'ead and looked at them sorrowful and severe at the same time.

"'So I 'eard, and I couldn't believe my ears till I went and looked for myself,' he ses, 'and wot I want to say is this: you know wot I'm referring to. If any man 'as found wot don't belong to him 'e knows who to give it to. It ain't wot I should 'ave expected of men wot's lived in the same place as *me* for years. Talk about honesty,' 'e ses, shaking 'is 'ead agin, 'I should like to see a little of it.'

"Peter Smith opened his mouth to speak, and 'ardly knowing wot 'e was doing took a pull at 'is beer at the same time, and if Sam Jones 'adn't been by to thump 'im on the back I b'lieve he'd ha' died there and then.

"'Mark my words,' ses George English, speaking very slow and solemn, 'there'll be no blessing on it. Whoever's made 'is fortune by getting up and digging 'is garden over won't get no real benefit from it. He may wear a black coat and new trousers on Sunday, but 'e won't be 'appy. I'll go and get my little taste o'

beer somewhere else,' 'e ses. 'I can't breathe here.'

"He walked off before any one could say a word; Bill Chambers dropped 'is pipe and smashed it, Henery Walker sat staring after 'im with 'is mouth wide open, and Sam Jones, who was always one to take advantage, drank 'is own beer under the firm belief that it was Joe's.

"'I shall take care that Mrs. Pawlett 'ears o' this,' ses Henery, at last.

"'And be asked wot you dug your garden up for,' ses Joe, 'and 'ave to explain that you broke your promise to George. Why, she'd talk at us for years and years.'

"'And parson 'ud preach a sermon about it,' ses Sam; 'where's your sense, Henery?'

"'We should be the larfing-stock for miles round,' ses Bill Chambers. 'If anybody wants to know, I dug my garden up to enrich the soil for next year, and also to give some other chap a chance of the prize.'

"Peter Smith 'as always been a unfortunite man; he's got the name for it. He was just 'aving another drink as Bill said that, and this time we all thought 'e'd gorn. He did hisself.

"Mrs. Pawlett and the parson came 'ome next day, an' 'er voice got that squeaky with surprise it was painful to listen to her. All the chaps

stuck to the tale that they'd dug their garden up to give the others a chance, and Henery Walker, 'e went further and said it was owing to a sermon on unselfishness wot the curate 'ad preached three weeks afore. He 'ad a nice little red-covered 'ymn-book the next day with 'From a friend' wrote in it.

"All things considered, Mrs. Pawlett was for doing away with the Flower Show that year and giving two prizes next year instead, but one or two other chaps, encouraged by Bob's example, 'ad given in their names too, and they said it wouldn't be fair to their wives. All the gardens but one was worse than Bob's, the men not having started till later than wot 'e did, and not being able to get their geraniums from 'is florist. The only better garden was Ralph Thomson's, who lived next door to 'im, but two nights afore the Flower Show 'is pig got walking in its sleep. Ralph said it was a mystery to 'im 'ow the pig could ha' got out; it must ha' put its foot through a hole too small for it, and turned the button of its door, and then climbed over a four-foot fence. He told Bob 'e wished the pig could speak, but Bob said that that was sinful and unchristian of 'im, and that most likely if it could, it would only call 'im a lot o' bad names, and ask 'im why he didn't feed it properly.

"There was quite a crowd on Flower Show day following the judges. First of all, to Bill Chambers's astonishment and surprise, they went to 'is place and stood on the 'eaps in 'is garden judging 'em, while Bill peeped at 'em through the kitchen winder 'arf crazy. They went to every garden in the place, until one of the young ladies got tired of it, and asked Mrs. Pawlett whether they was there to judge cottage-gardens or earthquakes.

"Everybody 'eld their breaths that evening in the schoolroom when Mrs. Pawlett got up on the platform and took a slip of paper from one of the judges. She stood a moment waiting for silence, and then 'eld up her 'and to stop what she thought was clapping at the back, but which was two or three wimmen who 'ad 'ad to take their crying babies, out trying to quiet 'em in the porch. Then Mrs. Pawlett put 'er glasses on her nose and just read out, short and sweet, that the prize of three sovereigns and a metal teapot for the best-kept cottage garden 'ad been won by Mr. Robert Pretty.

"One or two people patted Bob on the back as 'e walked up the middle to take the prize; then one or two more did, and Bill Chambers's pat was the 'earliest of 'em all. Bob stopped and spoke to 'im about it.

"You would 'ardly think that Bob 'ud have the cheek to stand up there and make a speech, but 'e did. He said it gave 'im great pleasure to take the teapot and the money, and the more pleasure because 'e felt that 'e had earned 'em. He said that if 'e told 'em all 'e'd done to make sure o' the prize they'd be surprised. He said that 'e'd been like Ralph Thomson's pig, up early and late.

"He stood up there talking as though 'e was never going to leave off, and said that 'e hoped as 'is example would be of benefit to 'is neighbours. Some of 'em seemed to think that digging was everything, but 'e could say with pride that 'e 'adn't put a spade to 'is garden for three years until a week ago, and then not much.

"He finished 'is remarks by saying that 'e was going to give a tea-party up at the 'Cauliflower' to christen the teapot, where 'e'd be pleased to welcome all friends. Quite a crowd got up and followed 'im out then, instead o' waiting for the dissolving views, and came back 'arf an hour arterwards, saying that until they'd got as far as the 'Cauliflower' they'd no idea as Bob was so pertickler who 'e mixed with.

"That was the last Flower Show we ever 'ad in Claybury, Mrs. Pawlett and the judges meeting the tea-party coming 'ome, and 'aving to get over

a gate into a field to let it pass. What with that and Mrs. Pawlett tumbling over something further up the road, which turned out to be the teapot, smelling strong of beer, the Flower Show was given up, and the parson preached three Sundays running on the sin of beer-drinking to children who'd never 'ad any and wimmen who couldn't get it."