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"The station-master's emigratin', and in cots a bit er money 'ud come useful, but 'e won't arst more'n two guineas. It's jest the 'ome. It's been a rare job fer 'im ter part with the bird."

"The parrot is in good health, I suppose?"

"'Ealth! 'E's in prime condition—a fine young bird. 'E'll live a censhury barrin' axdent, and in years to come—may the time be far distant, mum!—you cud will 'im ter the Zoo. They ain't got none like 'im. Two guineas; it's nothink—cige, food, kiver—"

"You may keep the cover," said Miss Pontigreve, feeling for her purse. "Leave the cage there. Yes—take the cover away with you, please."

Mr. Tipples sat in his pantry with a disturbed expression on his countenance. The cook, a buxom personage, with her right arm in a sling, was standing by the door; also Emma, the housemaid. Both looked "upset," and the cook held a handkerchief in her uninjured hand. All appeared to be listening for something.

"Hall—eeee—looo! Hall—eeee—looo! Hall—eee—looooo—oo!" The shrieks were repeated twice and thrice with increasing force each time. The expression on Mr. Tipples' face deepened into a look of ineffable disgust.

"Sunday afternoon," he said. "And a week ago this was a respectable 'ouse."

"I haven't a nerve but what isn't shattered completely," bemoaned the cook, pressing the handkerchief to her eyes.

"And there's Richard with four fingers tied up with the cruel nips 'e's got putting the food in the cage, and the poor little feller goin' about lookin' so miserable, feeling that the dog got lost through him being late in the garden."

"It's my firm belief and conviction," said Mr. Tipples, "that the miscreant want took in the missus with tales of good homes and emigrating station-masters—though I could understand anybody going to the end of the world to get away from that feathered demon—is the person we should look for if we want to find the dog. I'm a man of observation, and I can put two and two together."

"Hal—lee—loo!—Hal—lee—loo! Hal—lee—looooo!"

The shrieks were even more piercing than before. The cook and housemaid put their fingers in their ears. A bell rang sharply.

"That's for Richard to bring the bird indoors," said Mr. Tipples, rising. "I dessay he's in want of a lead pencil or a finger to chaw up. The neighborhood must be thinking we've gone mad. There was complaints yesterday. To-morrow you may be on the lookout for summonses."

With this reassuring forecast Mr. Tipples departed. He found his mistress at the drawing-room window. The cage was on the middle of the lawn, with the disconsolate Richard in attendance.

"I thought that green might be soothing," said Miss Pontigreve. "But perhaps he had better bring the bird in, and—"

"Hal—lee—looo—oo!" broke the afternoon stillness.

Some passers-by stopped to look over the gate.

"Bring in the cage at once, Richard," called his mistress.

The boy picked it up gingerly from the bottom, holding his head back as far as possible, and staggered past the window.

Some cheerful screeches marked the passage through the house, and, with a significant grunt, Mr. Tipples opened the door.

Richard put the cage down, and stood nervously aloof. However, the parrot now seemed restored to good humor, and bobbed and chortled gaily. The bottom of the cage was littered with a variety of propitiatory offerings reduced to splinters of wood and bone.

"As he gets more used to us, he will calm down; it is being with strangers, no doubt," said the old lady. "Well, Polly! Pretty Polly!"

But her approach seemed to goad the bird to frenzy. He swung himself wildly on his ring, and dashed against the bars, uttering a series of the most vociferous "Hal—lee—loos."

"Where's the cloth? Throw it over. Anything to stop that desprit noise," cried Mr. Tipples.

It ceased as suddenly as it had begun, and queer, low chuckles emanated from beneath the cover as though the bird took a delight in his scandalous behavior.

"They talk best, I believe, when covered up," said Miss Pontigreve, clinging obstinately to a last hope.

"This one's no talking bird," said Mr. Tipples firmly, feeling that she must be undeceived. "Not a word has he said since you've had him, ma'am. He's nothink but a screamer; it's a shameful imposition on a lady, as I ventured to remark before, and if we could lay our hands on that swindling rogue, it's my belief we shouldn't be far off from Fluffy."

Richard gave vent to a melancholy sniff. He was burdened by a sense of guilty responsibility for the loss of the pet whom the whole household mourned.

The spinster's face quivered slightly. "Go and ask in the kitchen for another chicken bone," she said, walking over to the fireplace where the poor little empty basket stood. "I will double the reward if we hear nothing by to-morrow," she added.

"Well, we must hope for good news," replied Mr. Tipples in a despondent voice. "It's clear enough to me. Fluffy wasn't a dog to wander. He was took, picked up by that scamp. I can see the whole thing with my eyes shut."

Richard returned with the bone, and a note, which Miss Pontigreve opened and read:

"MALABAR LODGE, Western Avenue, Sept. 28th.

"Colonel Curry presents his compliments to Miss Pontigreve, and begs to state that his life has been rendered absolutely intolerable for the past three days by the squalling of the parrot she has introduced into her household. Unless the nuisance subsides, he will be forced to put the matter into the hands of his solicitors."

Miss Pontigreve sat down in perplexed silence, which was speedily broken by a "Hal—lee—loo!" in the bird's most enthusiastic manner, accompanied by a yell from Richard, who had been poking the bone under the cover and retired with another wounded finger.

"Any answer, ma'am?" inquired Mr. Tipples, who divined the contents of the communication with considerable accuracy.

"Take the cage into the morning-room, and shut the door and window," said Miss Pontigreve, "and tell Richard to call at Dr. Bedford's on his way to church, and ask him to come to-morrow morning."

III
"The man told you he imitated trains and boys—two of the noisiest things in the world," said Dr. Bedford. "Really, my dear lady—"

They were in the morning-room, where the bird, exhilarated by change of air and scene, had given them a spirited greeting.

Dr. Bedford stood in front of the cage, eyeing him with a professional air. "Well, Polly, and how are we to quiet you? Is it a case of severing the vocal cord?"

"Don't talk vivisection," said Miss Pontigreve sharply.

Her old friend laughed heartily. "Well, what am I to suggest? Something will have to be done for the sake of the neighbors."

He turned towards a number of letters scattered on the table. Miss Pontigreve took up one, written on scented paper, with a heavy gilt monogram.

"INVERNESS, Western Avenue, Sept. 28th.

"Mrs. Waterford-Smythe encloses a medical certificate showing that she is laid up with a severe attack of nervous prostration from the fearful screeching of your bird. She does not want to make unpleasantness, but it must be put a stop to immediately."

"Waterford-Smythe, indeed!" exclaimed the old lady, flinging down the missive. "Did you ever hear such impertinence? They were Smiths till they made their fortune out of water-proofs and mackintoshes! And I believe the bird will quiet down when he grows more accustomed to us—he did not shriek once while the man was with him. I wish you could help me to find poor Fluffy."

"I take Tipples' view," said Dr. Bedford. "However, the reward is a bait.

Shall I call at the police-station, and give notice that you will increase it? Very well. Perhaps they might take Polly at the Zoo. Why not inquire? Let me know if I can do anything."

His going was a signal for a fresh outburst on the part of the bird, in the midst of which Mr. Tipples appeared. His face wore a hopeful look which had been strange to it of late. He bore a salver, on which was a plate containing a small quantity of green stuff.

"Cook says she's heard that parsley is poison to 'em, ma'am," he said, dropping his voice to a mysterious whisper. "It might be worth trying."

But experiment only falsified another theory. Polly's cage was strewn with morsels of the classic herb, and the many "fatal" doses he assimilated only acted as a tonic as far as his voice was concerned. After lunch he was banished to an upstairs room to see what solitary confinement would do, but his protests grew so uproarious that Richard and Emma took turns at keeping him company by ten-minute shifts.

Miss Pontigreve spent the afternoon in a fruitless visit to the Zoological Gardens, and thence went to the Dogs' Home, where there was no trace of Fluffy. A full domestic conclave was held meanwhile in Mr. Tipples' pantry, at which Richard, during one of his ten minutes off, timidly made a suggestion which seemed so promising to Mr. Tipples that he resolved to communicate it to the mistress.

Miss Pontigreve had little appetite for her solitary dinner that evening. She gazed with abstracted eyes at the vacant chair and cushion which was wont to be occupied by her little companion.

"I will not take any dessert," said she, pushing aside a dish of fine pears.

Mr. Tipples took the decanters back to the sideboard, fidgeted a little, and returned to the table.

"The lad, ma'am, has an idee," he observed.

The old lady looked up.

"About getting rid of the bird," he continued.

"Yes," she said.

"The lad's early 'ome was down by the docks," the butler went on, "and he says he knows shops that buy parrots and sech from the sailors. Why not send the bird there to be disposed of for what he would fetch? You would not mind if it was less than you gave for him, ma'am?"

"No," said Miss Pontigreve, thoughtfully. "You and Richard might go and try, perhaps."

Mr. Tipples gave a deprecating cough. "Well—under the circumstances, ma'am, I really shouldn't like leaving the 'ouse. It might not be pleasant for you, ma'am, with these complaints and injunctions coming in, and I know nothink of them low parts. I would suggest that cook should go with Richard. She's willing, and the lad knows the way well, he says."

Miss Pontigreve considered the proposal.

"No," she said suddenly. "I will go with Richard myself to-morrow morning. Send him to me."

IV

The cab stopped at the corner of a narrow street, blocked with meat and vegetable stalls, around which surged a throng of dirty, foreign-looking people.

Richard jumped down from his place by the driver.

"It's down 'ere, ma'am," he said at the cab door. "Cabby says he can't drive no further. Shall I go and you wait? It's a rough place."

At sight of the numerous faces peering in on either side, a nervous qualm passed over the old lady, sitting erect in her black silk mantle, but she braced herself to the adventure with characteristic determination.

"I think I will come, too," she said.

The cage, neatly shrouded in brown paper, was lifted from the roof of the cab with the driver's assistance, the bird, who seemed to approve of motion, contenting himself with a few bass chuckles. They walked down the street followed by a curious throng, who made free comments upon Miss Pontigreve's appearance and the neat livery of her attendant. They stopped at length before a dingy shop with a glazed front.