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The Constable's Move by W. W. Jacobs

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The Constable's Move

THE CONSTABLE'S MOVE

[Illustration: "The Constable's Move."]

Mr. Bob Grummit sat in the kitchen with his corduroy-clad legs stretched on the fender. His wife's half-eaten dinner was getting cold on the table; Mr. Grummit, who was badly in need of cheering up, emptied her half-empty glass of beer and wiped his lips with the back of his hand.

"Come away, I tell you," he called. "D'ye hear? Come away. You'll be locked up if you don't."

He gave a little laugh at the sarcasm, and sticking his short pipe in his mouth lurched slowly to the front-room door and scowled at his wife as she lurked at the back of the window watching intently the furniture which was being carried in next door.

"Come away or else you'll be locked up," repeated Mr. Grummit. "You mustn't look at policemen's furniture; it's agin the law."

Mrs. Grummit made no reply, but, throwing appearances to the winds, stepped to the window until her nose touched, as a walnut sideboard with bevelled glass back was tenderly borne inside under the personal supervision of Police-Constable Evans.

"They'll be 'aving a pianner next," said the indignant Mr. Grummit, peering from the depths of the room.

"They've got one," responded his wife; "there's the end if it stickin' up in the van."

Mr. Grummit advanced and regarded the end fixedly. "Did you throw all them tin cans and things into their yard wot I told you to?" he demanded.

"He picked up three of 'em while I was upstairs," replied his wife. "I 'eard 'im tell her that they'd come in handy for paint and things."

"That's 'ow coppers get on and buy pianners," said the incensed Mr. Grummit, "sneaking other people's property. I didn't tell you to throw good 'uns over, did I? Wot d'ye mean by it?"

Mrs. Grummit made no reply, but watched with bated breath the triumphal entrance of the piano. The carman set it tenderly on the narrow footpath, while P. C. Evans, stooping low, examined it at all points, and Mrs. Evans, raising the lid, struck a few careless chords.

"Showing off," explained Mrs. Grummit, with a half turn; "and she's got fingers like carrots."

"It's a disgrace to Mulberry Gardens to 'ave a copper come and live in it," said the indignant Grummit; "and to come and live next to me!-- that's what I can't get over. To come and live next door to a man wot has been fined twice, and both times wrong. Why, for two pins I'd go in and smash 'is pianner first and 'im after it. He won't live 'ere long, you take my word for it."

"Why not?" inquired his wife.

"Why?" repeated Mr. Grummit. "Why? Why, becoss I'll make the place too 'ot to hold him. Ain't there enough houses in Tunwich without 'im a-coming and living next door to me?"

For a whole week the brain concealed in Mr. Grummit's bullet-shaped head worked in vain, and his temper got correspondingly bad. The day after the Evans' arrival he had found his yard littered with tins which he recognized as old acquaintances, and since that time they had travelled backwards and forwards with monotonous regularity. They sometimes made as many as three journeys a day, and on one occasion the heavens opened to drop a battered tin bucket on the back of Mr. Grummit as he was tying his bootlace. Five minutes later he spoke of the outrage to Mr. Evans, who had come out to admire the sunset.

"I heard something fall," said the constable, eyeing the pail curiously.

"You threw it," said Mr. Grummit, breathing furiously.

"Me? Nonsense," said the other, easily. "I was having tea in the parlour with my wife and my mother-in-law, and my brother Joe and his young lady."

"Any more of 'em?" demanded the hapless Mr. Grummit, aghast at this list of witnesses for an alibi.

"It ain't a bad pail, if you look at it properly," said the constable. "I should keep it if I was you; unless the owner offers a reward for it. It'll hold enough water for your wants."

Mr. Grummit flung indoors and, after wasting some time concocting impossible measures of retaliation with his sympathetic partner, went off to discuss affairs with his intimates at the *Bricklayers' Arms*. The company, although unanimously agreeing that Mr. Evans ought to be boiled, were miserably deficient in ideas as to the means by which such a desirable end was to be attained.

"Make 'im a laughing-stock, that's the best thing," said an elderly labourer. "The police don't like being laughed at."

"Ow?" demanded Mr. Grummit, with some asperity.

"There's plenty o' ways," said the old man.

"I should find 'em out fast enough if I 'ad a bucket dropped on my back, I know."

Mr. Grummit made a retort the feebleness of which was somewhat balanced by its ferocity, and subsided into glum silence. His back still ached, but, despite that aid to intellectual effort, the only ways he could imagine of making the constable look foolish contained an almost certain risk of hard labour for himself.

He pondered the question for a week, and meanwhile the tins---to the secret disappointment of Mr. Evans---remained untouched in his yard. For the whole of the time he went about looking, as Mrs. Grummit expressed it, as though his dinner had disagreed with him.

"I've been talking to old Bill Smith," he said, suddenly, as he came in one night.

Mrs. Grummit looked up, and noticed with wifely pleasure that he was looking almost cheerful.

"He's given me a tip," said Mr. Grummit, with a faint smile; "a copper mustn't come into a free-born Englishman's 'ouse unless he's invited."

"Wot of it?" inquired his wife. "You wasn't think of asking him in, was you?"

Mr. Grummit regarded her almost play-fully. "If a copper comes in without being told to," he continued, "he gets into trouble for it. Now d'ye see?"

"But he won't come," said the puzzled Mrs. Grummit.

Mr. Grummit winked. "Yes 'e will if you scream loud enough," he retorted. "Where's the copper-stick?"

"Have you gone mad?" demanded his wife, "or do you think I 'ave?"

"You go up into the bedroom," said Mr. Grummit, emphasizing his remarks with his forefinger. "I come up and beat the bed black and blue with the copper-stick; you scream for mercy and call out 'Help!' 'Murder!' and things like that. Don't call out 'Police!' cos Bill ain't sure about that part. Evans comes bursting in to save your life---I'll leave the door on the latch---and there you are. He's sure to get into trouble for it. Bill said so. He's made a study o' that sort o' thing."

Mrs. Grummit pondered this simple plan so long that her husband began to lose patience. At last, against her better sense, she rose and fetched the weapon in question.

"And you be careful what you're hitting," she said, as they went upstairs to bed. "We'd better have 'igh words first, I s'pose?"

"You pitch into me with your tongue," said Mr. Grummit, amiably.

Mrs. Grummit, first listening to make sure that the constable and his wife were in the bedroom the other side of the flimsy wall, complied, and in a voice that rose gradually to a piercing falsetto told Mr. Grummit things that had been rankling in her mind for some months. She raked up misdemeanours that he had long since forgotten, and, not content with that, had a fling at the entire Grummit family, beginning with her mother-in-law and ending with Mr. Grummit's youngest sister. The hand that held the copper-stick itched.

"Any more to say?" demanded Mr. Grummit advancing upon her.

Mrs. Grummit emitted a genuine shriek, and Mr. Grummit, suddenly remembering himself, stopped short and attacked the bed with extraordinary fury. The room resounded with the blows, and the efforts of Mrs. Grummit were a revelation even to her husband.

[Illustration: "Mr. Grummit, suddenly remembering himself, stopped short and attacked the bed with extraordinary fury."]

"I can hear 'im moving," whispered Mr. Grummit, pausing to take breath.

"Mur---der!" wailed his wife. "Help! Help!"

Mr. Grummit, changing the stick into his left hand, renewed the attack; Mrs. Grummit, whose voice was becoming exhausted, sought a temporary relief in moans.

"Is---he-----deaf?" panted the wife-beater, "or wot?"

He knocked over a chair, and Mrs. Grummit contrived another frenzied scream. A loud knocking sounded on the wall.

"Hel---lp!" moaned Mrs. Grummit.

"Halloa, there!" came the voice of the constable. "Why don't you keep that baby quiet? We can't get a wink of sleep."

Mr. Grummit dropped the stick on the bed and turned a dazed face to his wife.

"He---he's afraid---to come in," he gasped. "Keep it up, old gal."

He took up the stick again and Mrs. Grummit did her best, but the heart had gone out of the thing, and he was about to give up the task as hopeless when the door below was heard to open with a bang.

"Here he is," cried the jubilant Grummit. "Now!"

His wife responded, and at the same moment the bedroom door was flung open, and her brother, who had been hastily fetched by the neighbours on the other side, burst into the room and with one hearty blow sent Mr. Grummit sprawling.

"Hit my sister, will you?" he roared, as the astounded Mr. Grummit rose. "Take that!"

Mr. Grummit took it, and several other favours, while his wife, tugging at her brother, endeavoured to explain. It was not, however, until Mr. Grummit claimed the usual sanctuary of the defeated by refusing to rise that she could make herself heard.

"Joke?" repeated her brother, incredulously. "Joke?"

Mrs. Grummit in a husky voice explained.

Her brother passed from incredulity to amazement and from amazement to mirth. He sat down gurgling, and the indignant face of the injured Grummit only added to his distress.

"Best joke I ever heard in my life," he said, wiping his eyes. "Don't look at me like that, Bob; I can't bear it."

"Get off 'ome," responded Mr. Grummit, glowering at him.

"There's a crowd outside, and half the doors in the place open," said the other. "Well, it's a good job there's no harm done. So long."

He passed, beaming, down the stairs, and Mr. Grummit, drawing near the window, heard him explaining in a broken voice to the neighbours outside. Strong men patted him on the back and urged him gruffly to say what he had to say and laugh afterwards. Mr. Grummit turned from the window, and in a slow and stately fashion prepared to retire for the night. Even the sudden and startling disappearance of Mrs. Grummit as she got into bed failed to move him.

"The bed's broke, Bob," she said faintly.

"Beds won't last for ever," he said, shortly; "sleep on the floor."

Mrs. Grummit clambered out, and after some trouble secured the bedclothes and made up a bed in a corner of the room. In a short time she was fast asleep; but her husband, broad awake, spent the night in devising further impracticable schemes for the discomfiture of the foe next door.

He saw Mr. Evans next morning as he passed on his way to work. The constable was at the door smoking in his shirt-sleeves, and Mr. Grummit felt instinctively that he was waiting there to see him pass.

"I heard you last night," said the constable, playfully. "My word! Good gracious!"

"Wot's the matter with you?" demanded Mr. Grummit, stopping short.

The constable stared at him. "She has been knocking you about," he gasped. "Why, it must ha' been you screaming, then! I thought it sounded loud. Why don't you go and get a summons and have her locked up? I should be pleased to take her."

Mr. Grummit faced him, quivering with passion. "Wot would it cost if I set about you?" he demanded, huskily.

"Two months," said Mr. Evans, smiling serenely; "p'r'aps three."

Mr. Grummit hesitated and his fists clenched nervously. The constable, lounging against his door-post, surveyed him with a dispassionate smile. "That would be besides what you'd get from me," he said, softly.

"Come out in the road," said Mr. Grummit, with sudden violence.

"It's agin the rules," said Mr. Evans; "sorry I can't. Why not go and ask your wife's brother to oblige you?"

He went in laughing and closed the door, and Mr. Grummit, after a frenzied outburst, proceeded on his way, returning the smiles of such acquaintances as he passed with an icy stare or a strongly-worded offer to make them laugh the other side of their face. The rest of the day he spent in working so hard that he had no time to reply to the anxious inquiries of his fellow-workmen.

He came home at night glum and silent, the hardship of not being able to give Mr. Evans his deserts without incurring hard labour having weighed on his spirits all day. To avoid the annoyance of the piano next door, which was slowly and reluctantly yielding up "*The Last Rose of Summer*" note by note, he went out at the back, and the first thing he saw was Mr. Evans mending his path with tins and other bric-a-brac.

"Nothing like it," said the constable, looking up. "Your missus gave 'em to us this morning. A little gravel on top, and there you are."

He turned whistling to his work again, and the other, after endeavouring in vain to frame a suitable reply, took a seat on an inverted wash-tub and lit his pipe. His one hope was that Constable Evans was going to try and cultivate a garden.

The hope was realized a few days later, and Mr. Grummit at the back window sat gloating over a dozen fine geraniums, some lobelias and calceolarias, which decorated the constable's plot of ground. He could not sleep for thinking of them.

He rose early the next morning, and, after remarking to Mrs. Grummit that Mr. Evans's flowers looked as though they wanted rain, went off to his work. The cloud which had been on his spirits for some time had lifted, and he whistled as he walked. The sight of flowers in front windows added to his good humour.

He was still in good spirits when he left off work that afternoon, but some slight hesitation about returning home sent him to the Brick-layers' firms instead. He stayed there until closing time, and then, being still disinclined for home, paid a visit to Bill Smith, who lived the other side of Tunwich. By the time he started for home it was nearly midnight.

The outskirts of the town were deserted and the houses in darkness. The clock of Tunwich church struck twelve, and the last stroke was just dying away as he turned a corner and ran almost into the arms of the man he had been trying to avoid.

"Halloa!" said Constable Evans, sharply. "Here, I want a word with you."

Mr. Grummit quailed. "With me, sir?" he said, with involuntary respect.

"What have you been doing to my flowers?" demanded the other, hotly.

"Flowers?" repeated Mr. Grummit, as though the word were new to him. "Flowers? What flowers?"

"You know well enough," retorted the constable. "You got over my fence last night and smashed all my flowers down."

"You be careful wot you're saying," urged Mr. Grummit. "Why, I love flowers. You don't mean to tell me that all them beautiful flowers wot you put in so careful 'as been spoiled?"

"You know all about it," said the constable, choking. "I shall take out a summons against you for it."

"Ho!" said Mr. Grummit. "And wot time do you say it was when I done it?"

"Never you mind the time," said the other.

"Cos it's important," said Mr. Grummit.

"My wife's brother---the one you're so fond of---slept in my 'ouse last night. He was ill arf the night, pore chap; but, come to think of it, it'll make 'im a good witness for my innocence."

"If I wasn't a policeman," said Mr. Evans, speaking with great deliberation, "I'd take hold o' you, Bob Grummit, and I'd give you the biggest hiding you've ever had in your life."

"If you wasn't a policeman," said Mr. Grummit, yearningly, "I'd arf murder you."

The two men eyed each other wistfully, loth to part.

"If I gave you what you deserve I should get into trouble," said the constable.

"If I gave you a quarter of wot you ought to 'ave I should go to quod," sighed Mr. Grummit.

"I wouldn't put you there," said the constable, earnestly; "I swear I wouldn't."

"Everything's beautiful and quiet," said Mr. Grummit, trembling with eagerness, "and I wouldn't say a word to a soul. I'll take my solemn davit I wouldn't."

"When I think o' my garden---" began the constable. With a sudden movement he knocked off Mr. Grummit's cap, and then, seizing him by the coat, began to hustle him along the road. In the twinkling of an eye they had closed.

Tunwich church chimed the half-hour as they finished, and Mr. Grummit, forgetting his own injuries, stood smiling at the wreck before him. The constable's helmet had been smashed and trodden on; his uniform was torn and covered with blood and dirt, and his good looks marred for a fortnight at least. He stooped with a groan, and, recovering his helmet, tried mechanically to punch it into shape. He stuck the battered relic on his head, and Mr. Grummit fell back---awed, despite himself.

"It was a fair fight," he stammered.

The constable waved him away. "Get out o' my sight before I change my mind," he said, fiercely; "and mind, if you say a word about this it'll be the worse for you."

"Do you think I've gone mad?" said the other. He took another look at his victim and, turning away, danced fantastically along the road home. The constable, making his way to a gas-lamp, began to inspect damages.

They were worse even than he had thought, and, leaning against the lamp-post, he sought in vain for an explanation that, in the absence of a prisoner, would satisfy the inspector. A button which was hanging by a thread fell tinkling on to the footpath, and he had just picked it up and placed it in his pocket when a faint distant outcry broke upon his ear.

He turned and walked as rapidly as his condition would permit in the direction of the noise. It became louder and more imperative, and cries of "Police!" became distinctly audible. He quickened into a run, and turning a corner beheld a little knot of people standing at the gate of a large house. Other people only partially clad were hastening to-wards them. The constable arrived out of breath.

"Better late than never," said the owner of the house, sarcastically.

Mr. Evans, breathing painfully, supported himself with his hand on the fence.

"They went that way, but I suppose you didn't see them," continued the householder. "Halloa!" he added, as somebody opened the hall door and the constable's damaged condition became visible in the gas-light. "Are you hurt?"

"Yes," said Mr. Evans, who was trying hard to think clearly. To gain time he blew a loud call on his whistle.

"The rascals!" continued the other. "I think I should know the big chap with a beard again, but the others were too quick for me."

Mr. Evans blew his whistle again---thoughtfully. The opportunity seemed too good to lose.

"Did they get anything?" he inquired.

"Not a thing," said the owner, triumphantly. "I was disturbed just in time."

The constable gave a slight gulp. "I saw the three running by the side of the road," he said, slowly. "Their behaviour seemed suspicious, so I collared the big one, but they set on me like wild cats. They had me down three times; the last time I laid my head open against the kerb, and when I came to my senses again they had gone."

He took off his battered helmet with a flourish and, amid a murmur of sympathy, displayed a nasty cut on his head. A sergeant and a constable, both running, appeared round the corner and made towards them.

"Get back to the station and make your report," said the former, as Constable Evans, in a somewhat defiant voice, repeated his story. "You've done your best; I can see that."

Mr. Evans, enacting to perfection the part of a wounded hero, limped painfully off, praying devoutly as he went that the criminals might make good their escape. If not, he reflected that the word of a policeman was at least equal to that of three burglars.

He repeated his story at the station, and, after having his head dressed, was sent home and advised to keep himself quiet for a day or two. He was off duty for four days, and, the Tunwich Gazette having devoted a column to the affair, headed "A Gallant Constable," modestly secluded himself from the public gaze for the whole of that time.

To Mr. Grummit, who had read the article in question until he could have repeated it backwards, this modesty was particularly trying. The constable's yard was deserted and the front door ever closed. Once Mr. Grummit even went so far as to tap with his nails on the front parlour window, and the only response was the sudden lowering of the blind. It was not until a week afterwards that his eyes were gladdened by a sight of the constable sitting in his yard; and fearing that even then he might escape him, he ran out on tip-toe and put his face over the fence before the latter was aware of his presence.

"Wot about that 'ere burglary?" he demanded in truculent tones.

"Good evening, Grummit," said the constable, with a patronizing air.

"Wot about that burglary?" repeated Mr. Grummit, with a scowl. "I don't believe you ever saw a burglar."

Mr. Evans rose and stretched himself gracefully. "You'd better run indoors, my good man," he said, slowly.

"Telling all them lies about burglars," continued the indignant Mr. Grummit, producing his newspaper and waving it. "Why, I gave you that black eye, I smashed your 'elmet, I cut your silly 'ead open, I-----"

"You've been drinking," said the other, severely.

"You mean to say I didn't?" demanded Mr. Grummit, ferociously.

Mr. Evans came closer and eyed him steadily. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said, calmly.

Mr. Grummit, about to speak, stopped appalled at such hardihood.

"Of course, if you mean to say that you were one o' them burglars," continued the constable, "why, say it and I'll take you with pleasure. Come to think of it, I did seem to remember one o' their voices."

Mr. Grummit, with his eyes fixed on the other's, backed a couple of yards and breathed heavily.

"About your height, too, he was," mused the constable. "I hope for your sake you haven't been saying to anybody else what you said to me just now."

Mr. Grummit shook his head. "Not a word," he faltered.

"That's all right, then," said Mr. Evans. "I shouldn't like to be hard on a neighbour; not that we shall be neighbours much longer."

Mr. Grummit, feeling that a reply was expected of him, gave utterance to a feeble "Oh!"

"No," said Mr. Evans, looking round disparagingly. "It ain't good enough for us now; I was promoted to sergeant this morning. A sergeant can't live in a common place like this."

Mr. Grummit, a prey to a sickening fear, drew near the fence again. "A--- a sergeant?" he stammered.

Mr. Evans smiled and gazed carefully at a distant cloud. "For my bravery with them burglars the other night, Grummit," he said, modestly. "I might have waited years if it hadn't been for them."

He nodded to the frantic Grummit and turned away; Mr. Grummit, without any adieu at all, turned and crept back to the house.