Our Mr. Jupp

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You knew the man at once by his likeness to a thousand others. His clothes were always in good condition; the gloss of his linen declared a daily renewal; he was scrupulously shaven, and blew his nose with a silk handkerchief. Yet the impression he made was sordid. The very flower in his buttonhole took a taint of vulgarity, and became suggestive of cheap promenade concerts, or of the public dancing−saloon. He had a fresh colour, proof of time spent chiefly out of doors; his features were blunt, trivial, not to be remembered; in his yellowish eyes lurked a speculative cunning, a cold self−conceit which tuned with the frequent simper upon his loose lips.

At his present age of nine−and−twenty Mr. Jupp represented a South London firm of wholesale haberdashers, a house struggling hard against early difficulties — he was their town traveller, and they thought a good deal of him. He had the use of a pony−trap and attendant boy; to observe him as he drove about the highways and byways was to enter into the spirit of commercial democracy. Proud of his personal appearance and of his turn−out, proud of his skill in cutting the corners, he rattled from shop to shop with zealous absorption in the business of the day, with an eye for nothing but what concerned his immediate interests. Out of business hours Jupp became a gentleman of untroubled leisure, visited the theatre or music−hall several times in the week, looked in at the Criterion bar about eleven, was home at Kennington not later than half−past twelve.

He lived with his mother and sister, in a very small house, in a squalid little street. His address mattered nothing to him, for he would never have dreamt of asking any one to come and see him at home. For board and lodging he paid Mrs. Jupp ten−and−sixpence a week, out of which sum he expected her to provide him with succulent breakfasts, with savoury suppers when he chose to return early, with a substantial dinner on Sundays, and with bitter ale to his heart's content. The mother grumbled privately, but stinted nothing. Miss Jupp, on the other hand, made frequent protest, and quarrelled with her brother every Sunday. She, a girl of twenty−two, worked very hard at the making of baby linen; of necessity nearly all her earnings went to the support of the house, and every year her temper grew more acrid.

One other person there was who had a decided opinion as to John Jupp's domestic behaviour. Martha Pimm knew the family through having lodged in the same house with them some years ago; she kept up an acquaintance with Ada Jupp, and learnt from her all about the brother's gross selfishness. 'I wish I was his sister, that's all!' she often remarked, and her eyes twinkled with scorn. The truth was that, in days gone by, Jupp had allowed Miss Pimm to suspect that he regarded her with a certain interest; she gave him neither encouragement nor the reverse, and presently, as his position improved, John began to spend his leisure elsewhere; nowadays they very seldom saw each other.

His income fluctuated, but for the last three years he had averaged an annual three hundred pounds, and of this he spent every penny upon himself. Whatever the difficulties and hardships at home, it never occurred to him to supplement his weekly ten−and−sixpence. In all sincerity he believed that he had barely sufficient for his wants. He groaned over the laundry bill, and thought it a hard thing that his mother would not discharge this out of what he gave her. If the cooking were not to his taste he piped querulously, and threatened to take rooms in a lodging house, where his modest wants could be decently attended to. He wrangled with his sister about halfpence charged by her for the mending of his socks. With the cares of the house he would have nothing whatever to do; on one occasion he gently refused a loan to make up the rent, and Mrs. Jupp had to visit the pawnbroker.

He did not care to encounter Martha Pimm, for she always looked and spoke in a way that made him feel uneasy. After such meeting he continued to think of her in spite of himself. She was rather a comely girl, and very sprightly; had a good−natured 'cheekiness' of tone that sat well on her; altogether, the kind of young woman that a fellow might get to think too much of. Jupp had not the slightest intention of marrying until he could find a wife with money: he wanted capital to start a business for himself. But he was by no means insensible to female charm, and he thought it just as well to keep out of Martha's way.

But one evening, when he had come home early to have a cheap supper, he found Miss Pimm in the dingy little sitting−room. She was high−coloured and in a state of joyous animation.

'Hallo!' he exclaimed at the door. 'That you?'

'Used to be,' Martha replied, perkily.

'What's up? Come in for a fortune?'

Martha gave a ringing laugh, which was moderately joined in by Mrs. Jupp and her daughter.

'There's many a true word said in joke,' she observed, with a little toss of the head.

It came out that Miss Pimm had actually inherited possessions. Her stepfather, a rag merchant in Bermondsey, a snuffy, grimy, miserly old fellow, had died at Guy's Hospital after a long illness. Martha had been to visit him now and then, though she hardly counted him a relative; she pitied the poor old curmudgeon, and made him a promise that he should not be buried by the parish. To her, by formal testament, the dying man bequeathed all he had, which, on inquiry in a certain indicated quarter, proved to be a matter of two or three thousand pounds, shrewdly invested.

John Jupp listened with wide eyes.

'And what are you going to do with it?' he asked.

'Spend it all on myself, of course — like other people that has lots o' money.'

Jupp laughed — the allusion was not dark to him; but it left his withers unwrung. Long ago he had learnt to despise such rebukes.

But that night he lay awake for an unusual time. Two thousand pounds was a sum of money; he could see his way to making use of it And it was wonderful how Martha Pimm had improved since he last met her. Had the money brought that fine colour to her cheeks? She was rather off−hand with him, but that meant pique at his neglect If he chose to alter his tone, to approach the girl flatteringly — why, a man of his advantages, personal and other, was not likely to condescend in vain.

He took the resolve; he began to seek Martha's society.

She lived with a widowed aunt of hers, who kept a small tobacco−shop in a street off Kennington Road. The girl performed a multiplicity of services waiting upon a female lodger, helping in the general domestic work (her aunt had four young children), and frequently attending to customers. This life was not altogether to her taste, and she could have earned more money by resuming her former occupation of dressmaking; but it would have been difficult for Mrs. Pimm to find any one else able and willing to give such thorough assistance: Martha's goodness of heart found compensation for the things she relinquished.

When the children were abed Mrs. Pimm and her niece took turns at sitting behind the counter, evening by evening. And presently Mr. Jupp began to patronise the little place for his cigars, tobacco, and other trifles: he would pass along the street about nine o'clock, and peep in just to see whether Martha was there. If so he took a chair, and talked genially, sometimes for an hour or more.

'Don't you want a commission?' Martha asked one evening, when he at length bought a box of vestas and prepared to depart.

'Commission?'

'You re a sort of advertisement for the shop, you know. It brings custom when people see a swell like you sitting here.'

Jupp laughed; he was flattered.

'I must think about it Suppose we have a walk together one of these evenings, and talk it over?'

There was a sly smile on Martha's lips. She behaved as though the young man's advances were not at all disagreeable. It seemed to John that she had no suspicion of the motive which truly actuated him. All the same, he would be prudent; there must be no direct love−making yet awhile. Enough that he ingratiated himself by frequent exhibition of his spotless hats, his diverse neckties, the flower in his buttonhole. He studied a manner of suave politeness — and Jupp believed that, like Samuel Johnson, he was well−bred to a degree of needless scrupulosity.

Martha consented to take a walk with him. Not to shame his gentility, she donned her best attire, and in the summer evening they sauntered as far as Westminster. In the fulness of his heart John proposed that they should enter a confectioner's. Martha gaily assented, and merrily made choice of the most expensive delicacies; she ate with such a hearty appetite that her companion, who had calculated on an expenditure of sixpence, found that he had two or three shillings to pay. It made him tremble with wrath; but he commanded his countenance, and

thought on the ragman's legacy.

Before they parted he asked if he might take her to the theatre next Saturday. There was a good piece at the Adelphi.

'I should like it awfully!' exclaimed the girl. 'But you must take your sister as well.'

'Oh, nonsense! It'll spoil all the fun.'

Martha insisted. She would not go unless Ada Jupp were of the company.

'I shall come and see her to−morrow, and tell her you're going to take us,' she said with childlike exultation. 'You're very nice, you know; much nicer than I thought.'

Jupp grinned in torment. Never mind; if this was the way to win her, all right. A rapid computation, and he had decided that he would risk the bait.

He reached home the next evening about eight o'clock, and had not been in the house many minutes — just time enough to exhibit unusual surliness — when Martha came.

'What do you think, Ada!' she cried, on entering the kitchen, where Mrs. Jupp and her daughter were ironing linen, 'your brother's going to take us to the Adelphi on Saturday, you and me — to the upper circle!'

The listeners stood amazed. John, in the background, grinned horribly. He had intended seats in the pit.

'How can I go?' said Ada, pettishly. 'I haven't a decent thing to put on.'

'Then you'll have to get 'em. Your brother will pay for 'em, I'm sure.'

'Hollo! Who said so?' cried a choking voice.

But it was overwhelmed by Martha's laughing protest. What! he wouldn't buy a hat and jacket for his own sister — a man rolling in money as he was! Of course that was only his fun. And in five minutes the whole thing was arranged. Martha suggested the shop where Ada's new trappings should be purchased. She herself would go with the girl, and assist her choice.

'I can't stay any longer, now. I only just looked in for a minute. I suppose you ain't walking my way, Mr. Jupp?'

John was led off gnashing his teeth, and secretly vowing a future vengeance, but supported by the reflection that already Martha could not keep away from him.

'You don't mean to go on working for your aunt, do you?' he asked, as they walked away, venturing for the first time upon delicate ground.

'It wouldn't be kind to leave her all at oncet, you know.'

'And where are you going when you do leave here?'

Martha seemed embarrassed.

'I don't know. I haven't thought about it. Time enough when I get my money. I'm going to see the lawyer again next week.'

He made inquiries, in a jesting tone, and the girl informed him of all he desired to know. The money was absolutely for her own use; she had learnt the nature of the investments, and what they produced. John expressed an anxious hope that her lawyer was an honest man; he offered his services as a man of business. But Martha had an air of complete confidence; she smiled her sweetest, and John felt an unwonted flutter in his breast.

That evening at the theatre was the beginning of a round of delights. When Jupp proposed another entertainment, Martha insisted that he should take his mother this time; she knew it was so long since poor Mrs. Jupp had been anywhere at all. But the widow was even worse provided in the matter of costume than her daughter, and Martha, having purposely led the conversation to this point, one evening at the Jupps', took upon herself to promise that John, like the excellent son he was, would buy his mother a whole new outfit. And she gained her point. By this time, John, whether conqueror or not, was undoubtedly himself subdued; he could not let an evening pass without seeing Martha. He offered her presents, but, to his surprise and relief, Martha would have none of them; he might pay for entertainments, and for little feasts as much as he liked, but of gifts from hand to hand she would not hear. Never had Mrs. Jupp and Ada known such a season of gaiety. Wherever Martha went with her cavalier, one or other of them, and sometimes both, went also. Theatres, music−halls, Kensington Exhibitions, shows at Westminster, the Crystal Palace, Rosherville Gardens — all were visited in turn, and invariably with a maximum of expense to Mr Jupp. He groaned after each expedition like a man with colic; in the privacy of his home he had fits of frenzied wrath; but still the expenditure ceased not, for Martha ruled him with her laughing eye and her 'cheeky' words, and he always reminded himself that the ragman's legacy would make

abundant reparation. Miss Pimm spent a great deal of time at the Jupps' house, and never went away without suggesting — that is to say, commanding — some outlay or trouble for the comfort of Mrs. Jupp and Ada. Their rooms were in a disgraceful state; John had to call in the services of paper−hanger and upholsterer. The roof leaked; John had to badger the landlord until it was seen to. All sorts of things were wanted for the kitchen; John had to buy them. Finally, one evening of autumn, as he and Martha walked idly in Kennington Road, the girl said to him:

'I tell you what it is: you don't pay half enough for your board and lodging, you know.'

He checked his steps.

'What! after all I've done for them! Why, I've spent pounds, pounds!'

'Well; it's no more than you ought to have done. Fancy, only ten−and−sixpence a week. Make it a pound.'

'A pound! Do you suppose I'm made of money?'

The discussion brought him to a point already several times approached. When was Martha going to marry him? Come, now, he had waited a long time. She knew that he was nothing but a downright slave to her. If he could only say all he felt ——

'When did it begin?' asked Martha, slyly.

'Begin? Why, years ago. I've been fond of you ever since I first saw you ——'

The girl laughed noisily. She would not allow him to be sentimental, would not discuss the question of marriage. As on each previous occasion, she put him off with the vaguest references to a future time. And John had to go home thus unsatisfied. He had a bad taste in his mouth; he felt bilious. What if Martha had only played with him? And the money he had spent in pursuit of her, of the legacy! That night he raged at his mother and his sister. They were in a plot to rob him. He would sell all the new furniture he had bought them, and go off to lodgings in another house. Mrs. Jupp, seriously concerned, talked of Martha, and tried to assure him that the girl was ready to be his wife, only he must let her take her own time. Ada answered wrath with wrath, and said it served him right, whatever happened; he was a sneak and a skinflint; he had only made up to Martha when she came in for money, and did he suppose a girl couldn't see that?

There was a terrific uproar in the house. After the women, worn out with disputation, had gone to bed, John sat up for an hour drinking bitter ale, accompaniment to bitter thoughts.

The next day he had an unpleasant interview with the partners of his firm. 'Our Mr. Jupp' no longer stood in such high favour with these gentlemen as a year ago, partly because of a falling−off in their business, partly as a result of John's personal demeanour lately. It had always been John's weakness to pose as indispensable; as long as they thought him so, his employers gladly bore with this trait, but when it appeared to them that he was no longer so skilful as of old in the hunt for orders, they grew disposed to resent his loftiness as mere impudence The business, they remarked, stood in need of a decided impulse, and Mr. Jupp, it seemed to them, had begun to exhibit laxity. One of them suspected underhand dealing; somebody had been whispering that Jupp had in view an enterprise of his own, and that he might already be estranging the connections of the house in his own interests. Briefly, there was what is called a 'rumpus,' and when it ended in Jupp's announcing that their engagement might terminate whenever his employers chose, that confirmed them in their suspicion. John had notice to take himself elsewhere at an early date.

Very well. It was now his business to arrive at an understanding with Martha Pimm. This very night he would have it out with her, and he doubted not of success.

The little shop put up its shutters at ten. Just as the boy employed for this purpose had finished his work, Jupp pushed open the door. Martha was behind the counter, putting things in order for the night. She looked up and smiled, but not at all in her wonted way; rather as she might have greeted any strange customer.

'What can I do for you, Mr. Jupp?'

'Hollo! What's the matter?'

'Matter? Nothing that I know of.'

She was friendly, but distant. After a few minutes' idle talk, she again asked him what he had come for.

'Aunt has gone to bed, and I want to get the place locked up.'

Speaking, she turned off one jet of gas, and lowered another, so that they stood in a dim light. Jupp leaned to her across the counter, and began to plead. It was singular love−making; the man's voice, and even his words, strongly suggested the insistence of a commercial traveller who is representing the merits of some new 'line.'

Martha interrupted him.

'Are you going to give your mother a pound a week?' she asked, in a tone of good−humoured interest.

'I will! I promise you, Martha, Only let's settle the time of our marriage, there's a dear girl.'

'Oh, there's plenty of time to think of that.'

He interrupted her with a thump on the counter, and began to speak in a thick, angry voice. He wouldn't be played with; she had as good as promised to marry him long ago; did she think he was to be fooled in this way? From Martha came a sharp reply: she had never hinted in word or look that she meant to marry him; who was he to talk to her like this? Let him go and behave decently to his mother and sister, and show that he wasn't such a selfish cur as he used to be, and then it would be time enough to ask a girl to marry him. As he listened, Jupp's face became livid.

'Look 'ere!' he exclaimed, again thumping the counter. 'You've gone too far to draw back. You've got to marry me!'

'Who? Me?' cried Martha. 'Marry you? A man as comes making up to me just when he hears I've had money left, and before that thought too much of himself to look at me! Not me indeed!'

Thwarted passion and baffled interest made such a whirl in the man's brain that he lost all control of himself When Martha had ceased speaking, he stood for a moment staring her in the face with round, idiotic eyes; then he raised his right hand and dealt her a ringing box on the ear. Martha tottered aside, and gave a cry, but of astonishment rather than of pain or fright. It brought Jupp to his senses terrified at what he had done, he turned on his heels and bolted into the street. The door stood wide open behind him.

On the morrow he carried out his oft−repeated threat, and took lodgings in another part of London. From that day Mrs. Jupp and Ada saw nothing of him for many months, and of course received no more of his bounty. After waiting in vain for a visit from Martha Pimm, Ada went to seethe girl. Martha was quite herself, but professed that she knew nothing whatever of Mr. Jupp. She came no more to her friend's house, and before very long her aunt removed from the little shop to one much larger in Brixton Road, where Martha took the tobacconist business seriously in hand, and to all appearances it throve.

When something like a year had passed Martha Pimm and Ada Jupp met by chance on a Bank holiday at the Crystal Palace. Martha was accompanied by two of her little cousins, and had a look of frank enjoyment; Ada was walking about alone, looked rather cheerless, and wore the dress which her brother had so reluctantly purchased for her more than twelve months ago. They approached each other, and talked. Martha was just going to get seats for the afternoon concert; she made the lonely girl join her. Subsequently she took her and the children to have tea, not a 'ninepenny,' but a really festive meal at the exclusive tables. And here, bending forward, she asked with a smile what had become of John.

'He's been married about three months,' Ada replied.

'Who to?' the other inquired, with a merry twinkle in her eyes.

'A publican's widow. She had money — of course. And he's gone into the public line with her. The 'ouse is at 'Ammersmith.'

Martha relieved her feelings in a laugh of the most undeniable mirthfulness.

'Is he 'appy?'

'I don't know. We never see nothing of him.'

But in due time Martha had an answer to her inquiry; she came upon it in a newspaper, of date some half a year subsequent to that Bank holiday. Here she read of one John Jupp, publican, who had answered a summons to the police−court, where he was charged with certain irregularities in the conduct of this business, chiefly the permission of gambling on the premises. The case was amusing; it gave scope to the reporter's humour. Mr. Jupp appeared before the magistrates with a very black black−eye, interrogated as to which, he made known that it was bestowed upon him by his wife, with whom he lived in anything but ideal felicity. Mrs. Jupp, he asserted, was no better than a 'she demon;' to her he attributed all the ill report which had gathered about his house. Whereupon from another part of the court there sounded a fierce shout, or rather yell; it came from the lady in question; she shrieked menaces at her husband, and quietness could only be restored by her forcible removal. In the end, Mr. John Jupp found himself mulcted in a heavy fine, and retired disconsolate.

Having read this bit of drama, Martha Pimm laughed till the tears ran down her cheeks.

Two months later, on a dreary November morning, she received at her shop in Brixton a letter of which the

signature greatly surprised her. John Jupp wrote to ask if she would grant him an interview. He wished particularly to see her and as soon as possible, and he remained hers very faithfully. The address he appended was other than that of the house at Hammersmith. Martha at once wrote a reply, inviting him to come that very evening.

And he came about eight o'clock. Martha received him in a sitting−room above the shop. Seedily habited, and with a face which made suggestion of fresh assaults from his vigorous spouse, John moved humbly forward.

'Miss Pimm,' he began, stopping at a few paces from her, 'I am leaving London, and I wish before I go to ask your pardon for — for something I did a long time ago.'

'Oh, you do, Mr. Jupp, do you?' Martha replied, checking herself from laughter.

'Yes. In earnest I do. I ought to have come long ago, but I was ashamed, and that's the truth. I'm leaving London — I've got a little place in the Midlands, in fact, though I don't care to mention where it is, not even to you. And I want to hear as you've forgiven me.'

'And what good'll it do you, Mr. Jupp?'

Standing, he entered upon a narrative of his matrimonial experiences. It lasted a quarter of an hour, and the listener enjoyed herself as at a play; but she did not laugh. When he was silent she said that he hadn't behaved to her exactly like a gentleman, but that she too had something with which to reproach herself; she pardoned him freely, and wished him better luck.

But John still kept his position.

'Anything else you want to say, Mr. Jupp?'

'Only this, Miss Pimm. At my age of one−and−thirty I am a broken and a penniless man. I'm going away to 'ide my 'ead. You've been doing well, and I'm glad to see it. What I want to ask is — could you find it in your 'art to offer me a little help ?'

Martha looked at him for full a minute, during which he kept his eyes down. Then she felt in her pocket and produced a purse.

'How much did you think of asking?' she inquired gravely, but with a curious hint of mirth about her twitching mouth.

'Oh!' his note was joyful. 'I leave that to you, Miss Pimm. I never thought I should come to this ——'

'Would ten pounds be any use?'

'T — ten ?' He had not hoped for so much, and consequently felt aggrieved that it was not more. 'Oh, thank you! I think ten pounds would give me a nice little start. You see, Miss Pimm, I haven't a penny of my own. The house is my wife's — all the money is hers. I've had to save myself from her with just what I stand up in ——'

'All right. Wait a minute while I go downstairs.'

Martha had been examining the contents of her purse; she now hurriedly put back the coins, and in doing so allowed half a sovereign to fall to the floor. It fell noiselessly upon the carpet, but not unobserved by Mr. Jupp's eye. His head was perked forward; he seemed about to draw attention to the accident; but as Martha walked away in seeming unconsciousness of what had happened, he stood still and spoke not a word.

She was absent five minutes, then reappeared with a ten−pound note in her hand. Advancing to her former place she looked on the ground, but not in a way to excite Jupp's attention. He, meanwhile, stood just where she had left him.

'Well, here's ten pounds,' she said, eyeing him strangely, severely.

'I thank you with all my 'art, dear Miss Pimm!'

'With that,' she continued, her voice hardening, 'and the ten shillings you've just stolen, you ought to make a nice start, don't you think?'

He staggered and turned deadly pale.

'Stolen — ten shillings — what d'you mean?'

Martha pointed to the floor.

'I saw it drop, and I thought I'd try you. I wanted to see what sort of a man you really were — understand? I shall give you the ten pounds all the same. I wouldn't have given a penny, only I've felt that I made rather a fool of you once — you remember? I never felt sorry for you, and now I see I was right. Just take yourself off; Mr. Jupp, before I pay you back something you once gave me, though I hadn't asked for it!'

And he turned and slunk away, in his fingers the squeezed banknote, in his pocket the half−sovereign.