

ACCOUNT RENDERED

THAT was it, Ponting was dead and it was morning and Miss Beckham was slowly coming to focus upon the roses on the wallpaper. Death was really of no great moment except that the office would close for the day. She had typed the notice herself about that, and it was a quite inhuman document to the effect that the office would remain closed owing to the death of the Senior Partner, Mr. Ponting.

"This office will remain closed . . . this office will remain . . . will remain. Ah, bring me Watkin and Watkin's file, Miss Beckham. That will do. Take a letter, Miss Beckham . . . Yes, yours of the 9th inst. to hand; we regret to inform you that this office will remain . . . Ah, you must be more careful, Miss Beckham; I'm afraid you've made a mistake. Ponting. Ponting dabbling at the rolls of fat above his collar. Get me on to the Customs, Miss Beckham. Yes, I'll fix them . . . The Collector . . . what poppycock. Ponting, Ponting, lifting his hat and bowing at the end of a 'phone conversation with a lady friend. Ponting, wearing his hat back to front when he went fishing. Ah, rising well, rising well. Ponting, in a casket now. I'm afraid you've been very careless, Mr. Ponting. Ponting, most pitiful without his pipe and bun hat. Get me on to God, Miss Beckham, book-keeping must be very sketchy, I know I should have a lot more credited to my account."

Miss Beckham paused in the flow of her thought and smiled a superior sort of smile and stretched her toes. Through the boarding-house swept the ever-increasing noise of agitation and desperate purpose. Quite familiar sounds of bathroom and kitchen and banging doors and running feet. If she half-turned her head she could see, obliquely, into the mirror, which was a pool of distortion in the half darkness. And on the floor lay scattered shoes, shaped by swift feet, but now oddly still and uncomfortably inactive. Miss Beckham spread her consciousness and allowed her ear to be titillated by the metallic gong of tram bell and the swish of speeding cars. Soon she must move and break the precious circle of her peace. Soon she must eat her breakfast and let Mrs. Maloney "clear." But she reached for the blind cord and eyed the day. It opened into serene blueness with a blackbird sitting upon a paling fence and a coppery prunus next door tracing a stocky pattern against the sky.

"It'll do," said Miss Beckham, taking out her curlers carefully.

MRS. MALONEY was bustling round with an "imposed upon" look about her, but Miss Beckham was intent upon her day.

"A great day for a funeral, Mrs. Maloney."

"Now, now, eat up your egg and don't be brooding on such sad things."

"It's not sad, though, and I mean it. The Senior Partner had an option on gilt-edged days and I had to file away all the outstanding clouds first thing this morning."

"You are a one," opined Mrs. Maloney, with half her mind. "Me daughter sent Nicky over for me to mind for the day, how about taking him to the beach now . . . do you both good, sitting in the sun like."

"Of course it will. Nicky will come with Auntie Beck and build castles or dig graves . . . I seem to be happily depressed, Mrs. Maloney."

They went. Miss Beckham carried a striped canvas bag with her sunhat and glasses and her purse, and Nicky carried a piece of string. The asphalt footpaths were already heating and later on the tar would melt. Nicky ran a tentative finger along the windowsills of fruit and lolly shops but never asked for anything. If he had, Miss Beckham wouldn't have bought a single thing, but, because he didn't, she bought him some dark red cherries whilst they waited for the beach tram. Nicky didn't say a word.

"This was most unexpected, Nicky," said Miss Beckham as she unlaced her shoes on the hot sand.

"What, Auntie Beck?"

"Unexpected, my pet, this holiday."

"Yes, wasn't it?" said Nicky, beginning to scratch in the sand.

"But that's quite aimless, Nick, and we must have an object, a plan, a purpose. You don't think we are on earth simply by chance, do you, Nicky? You do know we are part of an unfolding plan?"

"What? What're you saying, Auntie Beck?"

"I was just saying, dear, that we must build things. Railways and stations and things with a purpose. You run off and find empty matchboxes for trains and bits of seaweed and cardboard and all the forgotten things of a great civilisation. The things from which anthropologists deduce the past history of man. Orange peel, ice-cream boxes and bottle tops."

"And this nice piece of paper."

"A beautiful little find, Nicky. It's a jolly old daily paper and only two days old. Why, it's historical, though. You get a big foundation stone for the Grand Central and we'll put the daily paper under it. You always put newspapers and money and things under foundation stones, Nicky."

"For the fairies, like teeth?"

"No, the paper's for the man who pulls the station down again. He can light a fire with it to warm the pie he bought with the money, only we aren't going to put money under this one."

"Course we can't, we're poor, aren't we, Auntie Beck?"

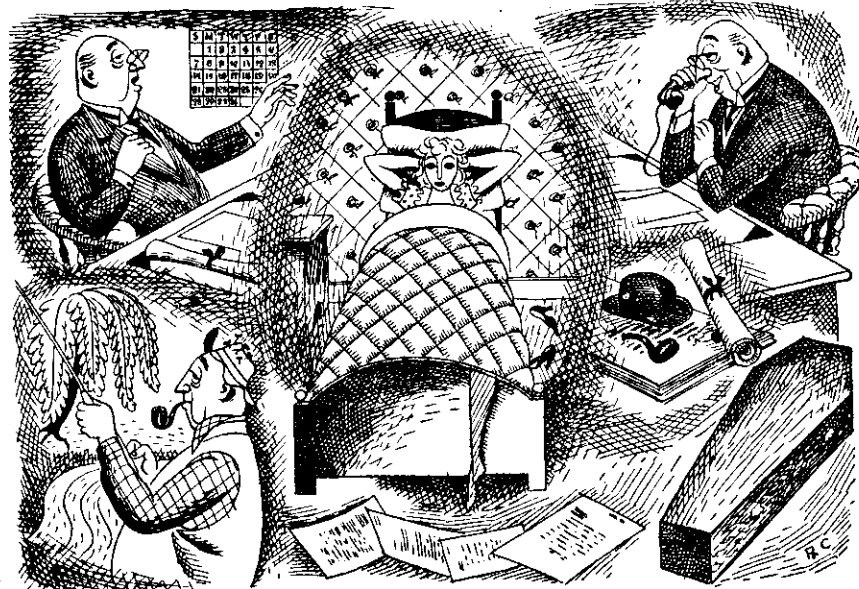
"Poor as poor," nodded Miss Beckham severely.

"And I can be driver and take the little trains away full of sand."

"Yes, you can be the senior partner. The man who drives the train and taps the wheels and blows the whistle . . . and you can be the man who punches the tickets too."

"But you can be somebody too, Auntie Beck."

"Course I can, my pet, I can be the blue print for Railways or the Time-table or the Lost Luggage."



"Boo . . . boo . . ." the matchbox train puffed along and Nicky crawled over the sand, pushing.

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"HAVE you ever noticed," said Miss Beckham with weight, "that there are always dogs on beaches . . . not supposed to be, you know." A great shaggy dog came uneasily towards them, overhearing the last remark.

"Look, Nicky, this is a special sort of dog, it wears a collar. I wouldn't be a bit surprised to find he was the guard off the last train."

The collar was white and very broad. In fact, it was a large pie box opened up at both ends and thrust over the dog's head. The dog was humbly proud of its distinction, and a bit afraid of it.

"Perhaps he isn't the guard after all, Nicky. I do believe he is a circus dog escaped out of the van because he didn't like the clown. This is a clown dog, Nicky. He can jump through hoops and stand on his tail and count ten and give three cheers . . ."

"How do you know, Auntie?"

"Oh, well, he looks like that. I don't really know."

"Then you shouldn't tell lies; you won't go to heaven."

"And will you?"

"Yes, I go to Church and sing hymns."

"That's fine. Sing one now, the one you like best."

Nicky sat on his heels and pursed up his mouth and wrinkled his head. The sun on his red hair made it glint like carrots and gold.

"The God's my Lord for Crucies sake," he warbled to his own queer tune.

"For Crucies sake Jesus is on the Cross," and then he stopped and coughed.

"You poor wee lamb," said Miss Beckham. "What does it all mean?"

"Well," he said, between coughs and beating at the sand, "that's what they sing at Church and I go to Church every Sunday at home."

"Ah, then you know all about it, Nicky . . . the purpose and the plan . . ."

"If you don't shift, this train'll run over you."

"My goodness, I was nearly a goner."

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THE waves tumbled up in sweeping curves, slowly spreading an even darker stain on the shining white sand. Big waves, slumbrous, welling on and spreading, and then becoming less and less, and falling back again into the ocean's fullness. Ponting . . .

"I think the poor dog would like his collar off."

"I believe you're right, Nicky; he'd sooner be just a common sort of dog. You help him off with it."

"And then are we going to eat the cherries? They must be getting awfully ripe now."

"Juice running everywhere, if you please. But if it runs down your Sunday shirt your Grandma will wallop you."

"I like cherries, Auntie Beck, and it's nice playing on the beach . . . nicer 'an home."

"Nicer than anything I know," confirmed Miss Beckham, nodding. "And I feel so kindly disposed to all men that I shall buy you an ice cream . . . if you eat ice creams, of course."

"Ooh, Auntie Beck."

They left the dog to guard the railway and wandered slowly to the little shop on the corner where there were so many bottles of red drink that one was quite dazzled. They had to walk very carefully, as the esplanade had been all newly gravelled and hurt their feet.

"Once I had a great big threepenny one," mused Nicky.

"And so you shall again, my pet," said Auntie Beck largely.

They licked with great deliberation. This was a moment that could be stretched into eternity . . . the very eternity that had swallowed Ponting. Gone, he was, like a licked ice cream or the hole a bird's wing makes when it cuts the air—nothing. Gone the laughter, the wringing of hands, the paid and unpaid bills, the caught and uncaught