ho Steals My Purse

drawing in, the street lights by six o'clock were already marching in single file up the hills. Roslyn and Maori Hill lay massive and dark against the sky, but down on the flat the smoky dusk was broken by lights and noise and movement. Cars swung their headlights around the curves of the Oval, and down by the shops and lights of Cargill's Corner, a St. Kilda tram was dipping along under the bridge.

Inside the tram, young Mr. Wilson heard nothing. He sat in his neat and proper grey suit and grey hat, holding

himself carefully against 🏂 the motion of the tram and staring at the ticket he rolled and unrolled in his fingers. It was not his usual tram, so mercial fully be did not need to "But Vera." converse. he was mentally explaining, "I did count it, again and again. checked it a dozen times. The cash was three pounds short." He wondered how he should break the news to his "Darling," he would say, "I know I'm very late, but something rotten has happened. He could picture the look of quick concern coming into her eyes. "Oh, Les. What is it?" And he would sit in the warmth of the fire, tell-"I counted it ing her. over and over. I couldn't believe it," he would say.

The tram was now well out. He glanced through the window, shading the glass with his hand to make a tunnel through the reflections, and, recognising the shape of the houses, he pulled the bellcord, swung off, and began stepping smartly along the darkening street.

VERA, sitting in the kitchen before the enamel range, lowered the paper and glanced at the clock. Damn him, he was an hour late now. She opened the oven door; the bacon was dried to a crisp and the egg seemed stuck to the plate. What on earth had come over him all of a sudden? He'd never been as late as this before. I suppose this is the start, she thought, he's met some cobbers and gone to the pub. After two years of marriage she becoming rather complacently was knowing about masculine weaknesses. I suppose he's gone to the pub, she thought. Men are all the same. You rush round getting their meals ready and have the place looking nice for them and what thanks do you get. She stole into the bedroom to look at the baby. He was asleep, unknowing, intent on his own small existence. Bless him, I wonder where his father is?

Back in the kitchen, she stood before the range wondering whether to start She drew back. "Les, what on her meal or wait. This was so unlike earth are you talking about?"

that the days were Les; usually he was the soul of regularity. She could be getting quite worried. But I won't, she thought. I'll give him another 10 minutes.

She heard Mrs. Henderson next door out at the shed shovelling coal. She had a momentary impulse to rush out and confide in her. Mrs. Henderson was large and comfortable and full of good Vera sat down again. After all, it did sound triffing. Mrs. Henderson had been married 30 years.

And just then she heard the click of the gate and steps along the path. She quickly picked up the paper and had just settled herself when Les came in.

"Where on earth have you been? Look at the time."

"I checked it a dozen times. The cash was three pounds short"

Shifting her apron, which was hanging on his peg, he hung up his hat.

"Darling, I know I'm late--" began.

"I'll say you're late. Baby's been asleep for an hour and I've been waiting and waiting.'

"Something rotten has happened. . ." "Of course it has. Look at this." She threw open the oven door. was ready an hour ago and now look at it." She could feel her cheeks reddening as her indignation gained momentum. "I didn't know whether to start mine or what to do."

"But Vera . . ." He had been so full of his own troubles that he found it incredible she should want to discuss

She sat pink-cheeked looking up at his uncertainty. She mustn't let him get away with it or he'd be doing it again. "I suppose you've been to the pub if the truth's known," she said bitterly. "I suppose this is the start," but he was looking at her so miserably that she couldn't go on. "Darling, you haven't kissed me yet. What's the matter, really?"

With her cheek reassuringly against his chin he was muttering incoherently, "The money. I counted it over and over. I couldn't believe it at first. I counted it a dozen times."

Written for "The Listener" by A. P. GASKELL.

He recognised with some kind of satisfaction the look of concern in her eyes. "The cash," he said. "Come and sit down."

"But what . . ." she began fearfully. "The three pounds. I couldn't find mistake."

"But what three pounds, Les? What are you talking about? Is it at the

"Of course," he said impatiently. "The The books said cash box.

£84/16/2, and I could only find £81/16/2 in the cash box. It was £3 short."

She felt like laughing, "But somebody's made a mistake. They'll tell you to-morrow. Have you asked them all?" Men did make a fuss about business.

"Darling, we make mistakes with our system," he explained carefully, controlling his voice. "That's why we have this system. such a big office we can't afford to be careless. Everything is checked and double checked. If the books say £84/16/2, there must £84/16/2." be

"Are you sure you counted it right?"

"I'm positive counted it right. it right. counted it again and again. I checked the damn thing a dozen times. I've been checking it for the last hour if you want to know." He glared at her, sitting there so unconcerned and asking such artless questions about this tremendous thing. Somehow, in the tram, he had imagined that once he told her everything would be solved. And he dreaded the effect of what he had to say next. "In the end," he forced him-

He waited for the reaction. She looked at him in amazement. The enormity of it struck home. "Les! You put baby's insurance money into that filthy cash-box!"

self to say it, "I put it in out of my own pocket. The £3 for the insur-

"You know as well as I do that the place is perfectly clean." What damn silly things she said at times.

"Filthy or clean, you put our baby's insurance money into that blasted box. Our baby's . . .

He was tiring of it all. "I had to." He sank back in the chair. "The accountant banks to-morrow morning. It had to be there. I couldn't think of any other way."

"But couldn't you tell him? Explain that it was short. You should have done that to-night."

"He was gone. I'm usually the last to leave, and there was no one else (continued on next page)

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