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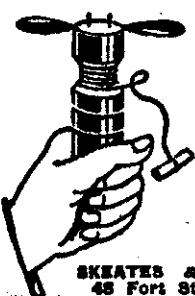
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WHO STEALS MY PURSE

(continued from previous page)

"Hey, Les, sack for you," said the office-boy. "The accountant wants to see you. Get your wages and get out." "Go to hell," said Les sourly.

AT home, Vera bustled round to get done early, and in the afternoon took the baby out in his pram. Mrs. Henderson had remarked over the fence that her Ella had had another bad night. Her teeth gave her what-oh. Other people have their troubles, too, thought Vera. And here I am worrying Les over a measly £3. I wonder what I would do if he were taken ill and couldn't work. "What would we do, you wee pet?" she asked the baby. He looked at her and went on blowing bubbles. That evening, when she heard of Les's failure she was not so sympathetic.

As she went about her work the next day, she thought it over again. Of course it wasn't fair. Here we are, she'd say, addressing the manager or the accountant, or one of those very important names Les was always mentioning, here we are with a baby who cost us a lot of money. We're still paying off the furniture. Les needs a new overcoat, and I want a new dress. Somebody pinches £3 out of the cash-box and Les has to put it back out of the baby's insurance money. Now you can't call that fair, can you? Of course not, Mrs. Wilson, he would say—she saw him as a nice elderly gentleman with a white moustache—of course not. Your husband should have come to me and explained the whole position. Why didn't he do that?

Ah, that was the question. Why on earth hadn't Les explained to someone? She had been thinking a lot about Les, really standing back and trying to see him. For a time after they were married, he had been like a part of her, the other half of her existence, but now she discovered that she had the power of drawing back far enough to see him as a separate human being. It was rather frightening. Of course, she knew him like her own hand—he took sugar in his tea, wore woollen underwear in winter, liked travel books and had a habit of rumpling his hair while reading, he liked to have everything in order, there were dozens of facts like that she knew about him, yet in spite of it all there was still something separate about him, something remote and not predictable. Perhaps it was because he rushed off each day to this mysterious world at the office where queer standards of conduct were observed and money came into everything. And now, of course, the baby made a difference. In a way it helped her to detach herself and really look at Les. "And he shouldn't have taken our £3, should he, precious?" she asked the child, as she fed it.

After a few days they drew closer together again, helped by a lovely Sunday afternoon walk round to St. Clair, where the surf thrashed on the beach and the cliffs and headlands butted out on the skyline, and a merry evening spent at a friend's place, but each had the £3 incident tucked away for reference, Les as a warning against someone unknown, and Vera as a kind of warning also, but against someone very well known.

A FORTNIGHT later, under similar circumstances, Less discovered that the cash-box was £2 short. His first thought was that he would not tell Vera, but he finally did.

"It's just the same," he kept saying. "It's just the same. They'll think I'm the thief. And if I tell them about the other one now, they'll say why didn't you mention it at the time. It'll look more suspicious because I didn't mention it."

"Well, why didn't you mention it?" she asked. "You said you were going to. Why didn't you?"

"Because I damn well didn't choose to," he shouted.

Her lip curled. "What are you, a man or a mouse?"

He had never heard her speak so scornfully. He was afraid he might strike her. He went outside to take his guilt along the dark streets and didn't return until late. She was in bed and didn't open her eyes when he put the light on. In spite of all she could say, he took his bank book in the next morning and made up the loss.

He passed the day in a whirl, thinking one thing and doing another all day long. He locked the cash-box every time he had to leave it. He would be staring speculatively at one of the clerks or typists, and when the person looked up and met his eye, he would smile or blush guiltily and pretend to busy himself. He couldn't understand it—the system was fool-proof. He liked things to be definite and orderly, and it was the efficiency and neatness of the system that had attracted him from the start. Yet something had gone wrong. And the way Vera was behaving was astounding. Who would have thought she had that steely core, that made her keep springing back at you, all hard and glittering. She had practically accused him of being a coward, driven him out of the house with her tongue. A fine helpmeet for a man to have in his troubles. She used to be so soft and sympathetic, too. You didn't know where you were with her now—like that business over breakfast, icily polite, calling him "Mr. Wilson" as though they were strangers.

"Open Sesame!"

"Eh?" He looked up and blinked.

"Open Sesame." Fred, the shipping clerk was grinning at him. "You've been locking that box, then opening it and staring at the cash, then locking it again for the last five minutes. Why

