

A Complete Story

THE PARROT

(By REGINALD POUND, in *John o' London's Weekly*.)

After six years' silence the parrot had spoken.

From its perch in the ornate gilt cage which its owner, Jacob Cruden, newly in from sea, had set down on the steps, it had peered with an unwinking fullstop of an eye at the woman who stood in the doorway and had broken into the conversation with a throatily-irrelevant, "What ho, she bumps, ma!"

Whereupon the woman, a neater figure than most of her kind in that mean Dockland street, had raised her hands and uttered a sharp, astounded "Gracious!" followed by a no less incredulous, "Well, I never! Well—"

Jacob Cruden's astonishment, as profound as the woman's, manifested itself more forcibly. He struck the cage with the back of his great red hand, making the wires twang and scattering seed and water with a fine disregard for the code of strict economy he ordinarily imposed on himself.

"Go on, y'old rip, you!" he growled. "Take that!"

Momentarily it seemed that the woman, who, according to the legend in the window, had "superior lodgings" to let, would shut the door on Jacob Cruden; she stepped back uncertainly, gazing at the cage, then at Jacob Cruden, and then reflectively, into the gathering lamp-lit dusk behind him.

The notion flashed through Jacob Cruden's mind that this woman did not like him, that in some indefinite way he repelled her. He had noticed—or was it that he only thought he had noticed?—that one or two other landladies of whom, earlier in the day, he had sought lodgings, had looked at him in the same queer, hesitant fashion. Was it that he looked—well, bad? Women's intuition was a deuced funny thing sometimes! Scornfully dismissing these assuredly foolish ideas, he insisted again that he wanted permanent lodgings, which provoked the landlady to ask:

"Permanent? But aren't you—aren't you sailing again?"

"Maybe not, missus," he answered. "Tired of the sea a man gets after—"

"Tired? Well, I never knew a—"

"—after thirty-two years of it. There's more sailormen get tired of the sea than'll own it. Fact! Now, what about that room you spoke of?"

"Room? I see. Yes, of course." The woman appeared to be thinking deeply. Then, deliberately: "Yes, I can let you have a room. This way."

She stood aside, pressing closely against the door to let him pass, as if she had no desire for contact with him—the fancy was his. Blinking in the glare of the gaslight within, he precipitated the question of terms. Jacob Cruden liked giving the impression that there was no hanky-panky about him. "Straight to the point" might have been his motto, always.

"A permanency, mind, missus," he reiterated presently, when everything had been

settled. "You'll find us easy to please—me an' the old bird here; no fuss—best lodgers you ever had. See if we ain't!" Ensnconced now in an easy chair beside a glowing grate, he laughed good-humoredly, feeling more complacent, more self-satisfied, more secure than he had felt for a long time.

The landlady, moving from kitchen to scullery, from table to cupboard, from pantry to kitchen again, about the business of getting supper for the new lodger, three gentlemen upstairs, and a gentleman and his wife in the next room, apparently preferred listening to talking. Jacob Cruden decided very soon that she was not one of the talkative sort. In the light of the tidy, homely-smelling kitchen, where he sprawled luxuriously before taking up his quarters in the room assigned to him, she seemed to have shed some of her years, to be less matronly and more attractive, in a gentle way, than he had thought her. Was she, he wondered, a widow? She was wearing black, with a becoming little frill of white at the neck. No sooner thought of than the question was put bluntly. But the way she answered somehow stifled the other questions that rose to his tongue.

"Yes," she said. Then, as she turned aside to reach for plates on the dresser, she brushed her hand across her cheek, but too late to hide the tear that glistened there. Jacob Cruden relapsed into a thoughtful, respectful silence.

He had his supper alone in the kitchen, the landlady telling him to help himself; she was obliged to go out to buy extra provisions for the next day's breakfast. Afterwards, if he cared, he could sit by the fire and smoke his pipe; it would save her, if he did not mind, bothering to light a fire at that advanced hour in his room, which would be ready for permanent occupation on the morrow. Announcing this, the landlady suddenly remembered the parrot. Should she give it some food: some bread and milk? Unless he happened to have some seed by him. Jacob Cruden fumbled in the bundle he had brought with him and found a big packet of seed.

"What ho, she bumps, ma," said the parrot, comically, as the landlady bent over the cage.

When she had gone out, Jacob Cruden slewed round and fixed the parrot with a malicious eye. "What the devil—!" he muttered, and pulled with sudden fervor at his pipe.

Strange it was that after all this time that bird should suddenly find speech! Rum speech, too. Where did it learn that silly catch phrase, anyway? Sinking deeper into the chair—the most comfortable, enticing chair he had ever sat in; no doubt of that!—he rapidly reviewed the parrot's past, and unavoidably, since the two were inextricably bound up, the latter portion of his own.

Dark thoughts burrowed again in his mind, as too often they tended to do of late. His pipe, listing hard to port, fell with a clatter

to the floor; he made no effort to pick it up. His lips puckered grossly, accentuating the look of evil that clouded his face. And his eyes were screwed up, as if to emphasize the intensity of the memories that shuttled now in his brain.

Events of the past, the too-recent past, swung before his inner vision like episodes in some satanic pageant. He saw himself aboard the barque *Mary Loring*, of which he had been the hard-hitting second in command, until one thick night the captain mysteriously disappeared, being logged as washed overboard. With almost indecently little delay, Jacob Cruden had stepped into the late skipper's sea boots, as it were, to reopen negotiations with a strange vessel which, having hailed the barque that morning, had hove-to and made overtures to the now dead captain. But the captain had refused to have anything to do with gun-running for Mexican rebels.

Briefly, the cargo-running agent of the rebels, having enlisted the *Mary Loring's* help in landing a consignment of rifles north of Tampico, had prevailed on Jacob Cruden to accompany him to the rebel headquarters a mile or so inland, where the G.O.C. would disburse in person the balance due for services rendered. The G.O.C., to cut the longish and very vexing story short, had let Jacob Cruden down, coolly repudiating the bargain and ordering him to make himself scarce on penalty of being hanged if he did not do so.

Jacob Cruden, who had pluck told the G.O.C. exactly what he thought of him, and for his trouble found himself shut up in a nasty smelling, damp-walled jail, from which a week later he was released, to be offered the job of private in the rebel army on terms which made it imperative that he should accept them forthwith. So the tenth day saw Jacob Cruden climbing the high *serras* in the ranks of a nondescript force, on the way to join the main body, which was mobilizing somewhere in the interior. In Jacob Cruden's heart there was black rage; on his shoulder there perched the late captain's pet parrot, which had shown an unaccountable attachment for him almost from the moment of its old master's painfully sudden death.

The parrot was about the only thing in creation that Jacob Cruden, at this stage, was even remotely thankful for; it was at any rate something to talk to, something to feel a grudging friendship towards. As for the *Mary Loring*, her crew, having no morals and no affection for Jacob Cruden, decided, on sighting a low, business-like hull on the horizon, to do the vanishing trick, and did it effectively.

Weeks later Jacob Cruden, having escaped from the rebels, staggered down to the coast, where he got a trading ship for the Bahamas, sailing thereafter three times round the world, before coming ashore for the last time. Henceforth he was going to be a landlubber. The sea made him think of things that he wanted to forget; things that were becoming more and more persistent in refusing to be forgotten.

Bah! Opening his eyes suddenly, he sat upright in the chair. Giving way to these moods was not doing him any good; none