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## T. HIDE'S,

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A COMPLETE HUMOROUS STORY.

## The Missing Lodger.

"Jane!" bellowed Mr Gubbs hoarsely. "Jane!"

Mrs Gubbs paused in her occupation of pounding a blob of dough about in a basin, and raised her eyebrows. She waited for further details.

"Jan-a-ane!" came the voice from the upper regions again. "Come up 'ere quick!"

Jane pushed the basin away from her, and scraped the flour off her fingers slowly and deliberately. She went to the door of the kitchen, and stood at the foot of the dark stairs.

"What's the matter, Jonathan Gubbs?" she called. "What's bit you?"

"Come 'ere!" came an agitated voice. "Quick!"

"You come down and tell me all about it," replied Mrs Gubbs indignantly. "Who are you to order me about?"

There was evidently no gainsaying this command. Presently footsteps sounded on the stairs, and Mr Gubbs appeared, following her into the kitchen with a wild, terrified look in his eyes, and a face that suggested that he had seen a ghost.

"Something's 'appened!" he announced hoarsely. "There's bin—!" He paused and gulped. "There's bin—murder!"

His worthy spouse looked at him contemptuously for a moment, and took stock of his countenance.

"You've bin drinking," she decided, putting her brawny bare arms akimbo. Gubbs shook his dishevelled head wildly. "No, ain't touched a drop. 'As true as I stand 'ere, Jane—"

"I've 'ard these tales before." Jane Gubbs did not move, but nevertheless she was impressed. "Where's this—this murder?"

"Upstairs!" gulped Mr Gubbs, "in the lodger's room. The—the door's locked. Can't get in. There's blood—"

He finished with a shudder. "Come on up," he said, "and see for yourself."

He moved towards the door. Mrs Gubbs hesitated, then also moved.

"If you're 'aving me," she threatened, shaking her fist, "if you're 'aving me—"

Mr Gubbs paused solemnly. He raised his right hand, and held it out for her inspection.

Mr Gubbs looked. She saw that his hand was flecked with crimson—the inner side of his fingers were stained in places a deep red.

"Jonathan!" almost shrieked Mrs Gubbs, "you—ain't—"

Gubbs stared at her in a horrified sort of way.

"No, no!" he said hoarsely. "No!" He shuddered. "Not that. I caught hold of the handle of Billing's door, and— and found this on my 'and."

"Gon on!" commanded Mrs Gubbs, "lead the way upstairs."

Jonathan took a step forward, and reached the foot of the stairs. He turned there, and stood aside to make way for her.

She stopped.

"Ladies first," murmured Mr Gubbs shakily.

Mrs Gubbs caught him by the shoulder and gave him a jerk forward.

"Go on up, you big booby!" she cried. "I'm coming."

Jonathan had no alternative. He placed his foot on the first stair gingerly, then crept up, silently, stealthily, and shivering.

The second floor, where Mr Billings, the lodger, had been in the habit of existing, was in darkness.

"Get a match out!" whispered Mrs Gubbs. "Strike a light, quick!"

Mr Gubbs wasn't sure, but it sounded to him as if her teeth were chattering. He fumbled in a pocket and produced a box of matches. After a little more fumbling he extracted one, and after several vain attempts to strike, he at last held up a light in a shaky hand.

The scene revealed by the flickering light was not very impressive. They were standing outside the door of Mr Billing's bed-sitting room, which was shut. To the left of them extended a small passage, comprising the bathroom and a lumber room.

Mrs Gibbs looked down at the door-handle. It was a brass affair, and she saw that it glistened in the light as though wet.

"Look!" said Jonathan dramatically. He was pointing down below the door. To

Mrs Gubbs it seemed as though his hair was standing straight on end.

Below the door-handle was a dark pool, in which the light was reflected. Mrs Gubbs saw it, then the match went out.

"Oh," gasped Mrs Gubbs. "Oh—"

There was a thud, and Mrs Gubbs gave a gasp of horror. It was quite two minutes before Jonathan's nerves would allow another match to be produced and lit, then he saw that Mrs Gubbs had swooned.

For a moment he was nonplussed. He stood looking down at her, his mouth half open, till the match went out.

Then he gave a sudden scream. With a whoop he had leaped and was down the stairs like a flash, not stopping till he was out in the street.

A police constable was pacing up and down on the other side of the road Jonathan ran over and button-holed him.

"Come quick—to Number—37!" he gasped. "You're wanted there!"

The constable looked down at him. Another policeman sauntered up and stopped.

"Both of you!" cried Mr Gubbs hoarsely. "Number 37!"

"What's wrong?" asked both the policemen together.

"Murder!" breathed Mr Gubbs in a tense voice. "Mu-ur-der!" He dwelt on the word as though it were a national calamity. "There's blood—"

He shuddered again. The policemen braced themselves up. They seemed to smack their lips. Then they led the way to No. 37.

Jonathan Gubbs took last place this time all right. He followed the sturdy constables up the stairs. One of them produced a bull's-eye lantern, turned the shade, and flashed it on to the scene of the tragedy.

It shone on the little pool beneath the door, and showed the dim passage stretching away to the left. One of the policemen bent down and sniffed at the door-handle, then he looked at the pool.

The other took out a notebook and pencil, which he began to use busily. While he was writing, the first constable, who seemed to be taking charge, put his hand on the door-nob and turned it.

The door would not give. He tried several times, but to no avail. The door was firmly secured.

"What up there?" he asked abruptly of Gubbs, pointing up the passage.

"Bathroom," murmured Jonathan. "Bathroom and lumber-room."

"And who lives here?" He jerked a thumb at the closed door.

"Mr Billings. He was in half an hour ago—I see him gettin' ready to go out. I never saw him go, though."

The two constables proceeded towards the bathroom, Gubbs following gingerly. The torch shone on the floor as they went, revealing sundry dark stains and blotches, which were duly noted.

The bathroom door was slightly ajar. The policemen entered, shining the light around.

"Ha!" The first constable pounced upon something that was lying on the shelf beside the bath. He picked it up, and held it to the light. It was an open razor.

Mr Gubbs had followed slowly, and stood in the doorway. His eyes started from his head as he peered over the second policeman's shoulder.

"There's blood—" he began faintly. Something dripped off the open blade and fell on the oilcloth covered floor with a little plop.

"That has been used," announced the policeman drily, "to cut—er—something." It seemed an obvious remark to make about a razor. He gazed quizzically at the deep stain on the steel, while the other man pencilled away for dear life. "Looks like—suicide," he finished.

Suddenly there came a diversion. Mr Gubbs, staring fascinated over the policeman's shoulder, had failed to hear someone coming ponderously up the passage. A hand descended heavily on his shoulder.

Both constables looked round in surprise as Gubbs gave a bloodcurdling howl, leapt about two feet in the air, and swung round, to face the bulky form of his wife occupying the doorway.

"Jonathan," said Mrs Gubbs severely, "am I nothing to you? I, who have worked and slaved for you for years, to faint and be left neglected like a person of no consequence—perhaps—to die?"

Jonathan gurgled something inarticulate. Jané Gubbs, lying in a swoon up the pas-

sage, had gone completely out of his mind.

"Jonathan, you hulking great—" Mrs Gubbs paused. Her eyes bulged. The policeman had turned, and was coming out of the bathroom, brandishing the open razor.

The sight was enough for Jane. She gave a shrill scream as the light flashed on the steel, and fainted again.

Mr Gubbs was distracted. He looked appealingly at the policemen.

"Fetch a doctor," said the man with the razor. "We'll want him for—the man in there." He nodded towards the locked room. "If he's alive or dead, we'll want him. There'll be an inquest—"

He closed the razor with a snap, and moved forward into the passage.

Doctor Ryman and a policeman reached the house. The doctor tore up the stairs with his bag in his hand. A candle had been lit in the passage. The policemen were standing sideways to the door, one holding the handle. They were leaning back.

"Now, together!" commanded the bigger. "One, two, three—go!"

There was a terrific thud as the constables launched themselves upon the door, together with a creaking, splintering sound. The door crashed open, the policemen crashed through, and fell in a heap on the floor.

They rose painfully to their feet. One of them muttered something in a dissatisfied tone. Gubbs couldn't catch the gist of the remark, but it was something unholy.

The interior of the room was in darkness. They could not see farther than a foot or so into the room.

"Where's this murdered man?" demanded Ryman, who was all impatience.

"All right. Wait a minute." The senior policeman adjusted his dress, felt in his pocket for his truncheon, and extracted it.

"You—you don't want truncheons for murdered men," observed Ryman. "I never heard of corpses showing fight before."

The policeman looked round. He waved an arm as though to keep the crowd back, and took a step forward.

"If the criminal is in here—" he muttered grimly. He took another step forward, then tripped over something, and fell with a crash to the floor.

"Bring a light, ordered the other policeman to Gubbs. "He's tripped over the body."

The other policeman, thrusting his note-book and pencil away, strode firmly into the dark room. He helped the fallen constable to his feet.

"It's—it's down here," the policeman muttered, when he rose. He bent down and felt around for the body. His groping hand found nothing at first. Then at last it seized something soft and clutched it tightly.

"I've got him," he announced from out the darkness, "his arm, or something. Where's—that light?"

Gubbs appeared in the doorway, the candle revealing his white and scared features vividly. Everybody gazed down eagerly to where the constable knelt.

The light revealed a strange sight. The first constable was kneeling, a fold of the ruffled carpet clutched tightly in his hand.

The man blinked at the contents of his hand, then let the innocent piece of cloth loose. Ryman came into the room.

"Where's this corpse?" he demanded impatiently. "I'm still waiting."

The policemen looked at him feebly. Then they gazed round the room.

Someone uttered a cry of horror. On the floor, near the table, lay another razor. It was half open, and there was more blood.

Gubbs uttered a feeble moan, and nearly dropped the candle.

"Two murders!" he murmured faintly, stretching the candle towards the table. "Look—look at that thing! There's—there's blood—"

He put his arm across his eyes to shut out the dread sight. The doctor rushed forward and picked up a once white object which lay near the razor. It turned out to be a towel, soaked red in a good many places.

Ryman gazed keenly at the stains, sniffed at them, then nodded gravely.

"Blood," he remarked, "human blood. The murderer has wiped his hands on this towel, after hiding the corpse."

"Ah, the corpse!" put in one of the constables eagerly. "Where is that?"

"How should I know?" asked the doctor calmly. "I am a doctor, not a corpse-finder. The body has been disposed of."

One of the constables uttered an exclamation.

"The window is open!" he said. "Can the body have been thrown out?"

There was an instantaneous rush to the window. The two officials of the law reached it first and peered eagerly down at the pavement below.

"What's all this?" came a voice from

the direction of the doorway. The crowd at the window started up, looked round.

Police-Inspector Wilskin, a short, man, with side-whiskers and beard, was standing in the doorway.

"Is this the room?" the little, ror-stricken Mrs Gubbs, who had shown him the way up.

"Yes!" Mrs Gubbs gasped. The inspector entered, looking about him, as he did so the interior of the room revealed to the unnerved Mrs Gubbs saw the second razor, and gave a scream of terror, and fled.

"Inspector," announced the big policeman, coming forward from the window, tragedy has occurred in this room. We are searching for the body."

"Hump!" the inspector granted. "Give me the details," he commanded.

The other man produced his book, commenced reading in a loud voice. The inspector nodded gravely while the sordid story was unfolded, from the vent of Jonathan Gubbs to the discovery of the second razor and stained towel.

Dead silence filled the room as the inspector scribbled furiously in his book. Then everyone jumped as though electrified.

"Help! Police! Murder!"

Hoarse cries came from the street below the open window. Loud sounds of scuffling, fighting, and shouting floated to them. Above the din came the roar of police-whistles.

There was another rush to the window. Far below, Inspector Wilskin was a furious battle raging.

He didn't stop long. He turned and dashed out of the room in a frenzy, other policemen following him.

The police-whistles were still going when the two men reached the street. Policemen were fighting furiously with third person, whose legs, arms, head, and body all seemed to be waving and waving in a superhuman effort to confound the authorities.

Wilskin and his companion dashed in the rescue. There was a short, sharp scuffle during which the lashing arms and legs worked with redoubled fury.

"Got him!" breathed Wilskin. "Who he? What is he?"

Then he noticed that the hand and arm he held were covered with blood.

"Good Heavens!" he gasped. "The murderer!"

Grainger, the policeman who had been sent off to make a search, nodded.

"This is him," he said. "I've been making investigation round the outside of the house, when I found this blotter underneath the window looking up. His movements was suspicious like, so I came nearer. Then I discovered he was covered in blood. Look at his face!"

"Where's his face?" grunted Inspector Wilskin. They searched for a few minutes after the arms and legs they held and finally discovered the object's head near the pavement.

"Hum!" observed Wilskin, staring at the features of the prisoner as he was put on his feet. "He's looks like a desperate character. Fetch him upstairs. We'll cross-examine him, and find out where the body is."

"Darned fools!" he spluttered. "Thundering bobbies! I live here!"

Gubbs gazed at the apparition for a minute, then light dawned on him.

"Billings!" he gasped blankly.

"What! Do you know this man?" demanded Wilskin of him.

"He's—he's our lodger," murmured Gubbs. "He lives here."

"What has happened?" queried the inspector, letting the arm drop. "Look here, there has been a serious crime."

"There's razors," muttered Mr Gubbs, "and there's blood—"

"Razors, yes!" shrieked Billings. "Razors that I cut myself with twice. The darned things—" He went off into a harangue on razors. "Shaving. Started in here. The thing was better, and when I was shaving the razor, the darned thing slipped, and the leather and gave me a gash. I went off to find a doctor, after trying to staunch the flow with a towel."

up, as I always do, before I went to bed, cast a venomous glance at Gubbs, who was so excited I took the wrong towel, and it was twenty minutes before I got to Ryman's. He had gone out before, and when I got back here, and looking at the window, surprised at seeing these darned fools rushed out on the pavement a sadder-looking inspector left the door, and as they went out he peered to the pavement.

"Look," he said, "there's blood on the pavement. The constabulary gave him a with glare, and, with a sniff, passed on. The End.