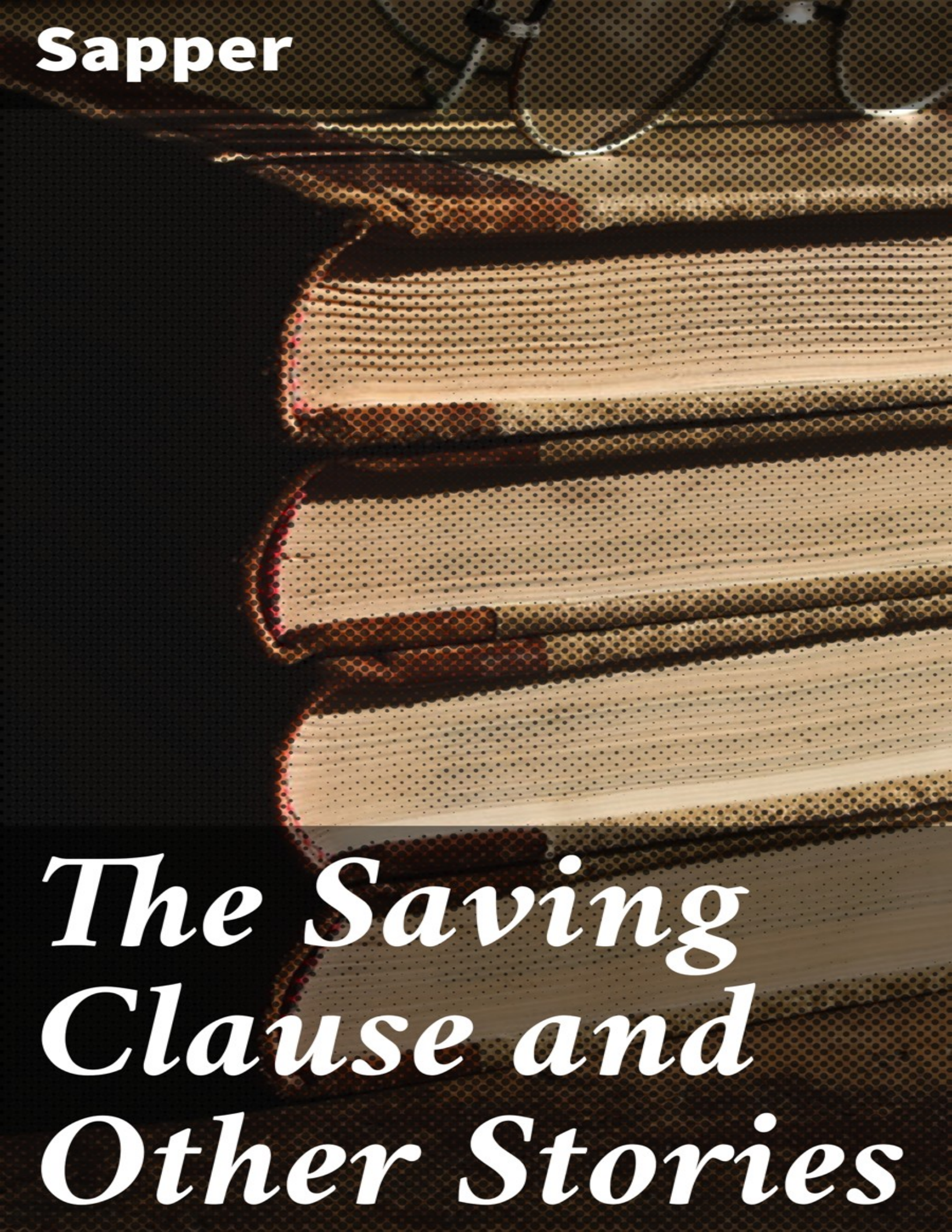
Sapper



The Saving Clause and Other Stories

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I. — THE SAVING CLAUSE

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I guess I don't hold with missionaries. I've been in most corners of this globe, and I reckon that the harm they do easily outweighs the good. Stands to reason, don't it, that we can't all have the same religion, same as we can't all have the same shaped nose? So what in thunder is the good of trying to put my nose on to your face, where it won't fit? And it sort of riles me to see these good earnest people labouring and sweating to do to others what they would only describe as damned impertinence if those others tried to do it to them. Yet, as I see it, there's no reason why the others shouldn't. 'Tisn't as if any particular bunch had a complete corner in truth, is it?

But there are exceptions, same as to most things. And for the past twenty years whenever I've said I don't hold with missionaries, I've always added a saving clause in my mind. Care to hear what that saving clause is? Right: mine's the same as before.

It was just after the Boer War that it happened. I'd come home: got a job of sorts in London. Thought a few years of the quiet life would do me good, and an old uncle of mine wangled me into the office of a pal of his. Funny old thing my boss was, with a stomach like a balloon. And I give you my word that he was the last man in London whom you'd have expected to meet at the Empire on a Saturday night. It was sheer bad luck, though I don't suppose I could have stood that job, anyway, for long.

I'd met a pal there, you see, and I suppose we'd started to hit it a bit. Anyway a darned great chucker-out came and intimated that he thought the moment had come when we'd better sample the cool night air of Leicester Square.

Well, I don't say I was right: strictly speaking, I suppose I should have accepted his remark in the spirit in which it was intended. But the fact remains that I didn't like his face or his frock coat—and we had words. And finally the chucker-out sampled the cool night air—not me. The only trouble was that just as he went down the stairs, my boss was coming up with wife and family complete. And that chucker-out was a big man: I guess it was rather like being bit by a steam roller. Anyway the whole blessed family turned head over heels, and landed on the pavement simultaneously with the chucker-out on top.

Again strictly speaking, I suppose I should have gone and picked them up with suitable words of regret. But I just couldn't do it: I was laughing too much. In fact I didn't stop laughing till I began to run—the police were heaving in sight. Still you boys know what the Empire was like in those days: so I'll pass on to Monday morning.

Not that there's much to say about Monday morning, except that it dosed my connection with the firm. The old man had a black eye where the chucker-out had trodden on his face, and the hell of a liver. And he utterly failed to see the humorous side of the episode. As far as I could make out his wife had smashed her false teeth in the melee, and was as wild as a civet cat; and only the fact that his own firm would be involved had prevented him giving my name to the police. My own private opinion was that it wasn't so

much the firm he was worrying about as himself. Still, that's neither here nor there: all that matters is that my job in London terminated that morning.

Maybe you're wondering what the dickens all this has to do with missionaries and my saving clause, but I'm coming to that part soon. And I want you to realize the frame of mind I was in when I found myself propping up the Criterion bar just before lunch on that Monday. It may seem strange to you that a bloke like me could ever have stomached quill driving in a City office, but the fact remains that at the time I was almighty sick with myself at having got the sack. And as luck would have it, I hadn't been in t hat bar more than five minutes when a bunch of four of the boys blew in, whom I'd last seen in South Africa. They were the lads all right, I give you my word: four of the toughest propositions you're ever likely to meet in your life. There was Bill Merton who had graduated in the Kimberley diamond rush: Andy Fraser who had left Australia hurriedly, and it didn't lo to ask why: Tom Jerrold with a five-inch scar on his face that he'd picked up in Chicago: and last but not least Pete O'Farrell.

Gad I he was a character, was Pete. A great big hulking fellow of about six feet three, with muscles like an ox, and a pair of blue eyes that went clean through you and came out the other side. I once saw him tackle four policemen in Sydney, and get away with it. So did one policeman who ran for his life: the other three went to hospital.

As soon as they saw me Pete let out a bellow like a bull, and led the charge.

"If it isn't old Mac," he shouted. "Gee—boy, but it's great to see you, even if your face is like a wet street. What's

stung you?"

"I've lost my job, Pete," I said. "Upset the boss and all his belongings into Leicester Square on Saturday night and got the boot."

"You mean you're at a loose-end," he said, and he looked at the other three. "What about it, boys?"

"Sure thing," said Andy, "if he'll come."

"Of course he'll come," cried Pete. "Bring your poison into this corner, Mac, and we'll put you wise."

So we went and sat down in a corner, and they told me the scheme. It doesn't much matter what it was: it's got nothing to do with the yarn. But it appeared they were sailing for South America the following Friday, and they wanted to know if I'd go with them. Something to do with a revolution in some bally little state, and Pete swore we'd all make our fortunes.

Well, I guess if I hadn't been feeling so sick with myself I shouldn't have gone. I ain't no lizard hunger myself, but from past experience I knew that hunting with that bunch meant a pretty fast pace. Particularly Pete. He was a darned good fellow, but if he got a bit of liquor inside him, it was well not to contradict him. I will say, to do him justice, it took more than a bottle of whisky to get him into that condition, but whisky was only four bob in those days.

At any rate I did go. And on Friday morning we sailed in a tin-can sort of effect from Liverpool. She was really a cargo boat that took a few passengers, and she just suited our pockets. Moreover she was going to call at some obscure spot, where none of the big lines touched, and which,

according to Pete, was the exact place from which we could best start our operations.

We ran into bad weather right away, and by Jove! that old tub could roll.

Mercifully we were all good sailors, and it wasn't until we went below for dinner that we realized there was another passenger. She only accommodated six, and up till then we had thought we were one short. But there were six places laid at the table, with a seat at the end for the skipper, who was on the bridge and had sent down word for us to start without him.

The cabins led off the dining-saloon, and suddenly Tiring a slight lull in the ship's movement, Pete began to laugh.

"Holy Smoke! boys," he cried, "listen. Steward, who is the occupant of the sixth seat, whom I hear enjoying himself in his cabin?"

The steward grinned.

"Gent by the name of Todmarsh, sir," he answered. "Ain't never been to sea before. 'E's in a hawful condition."

"Well, I hope he doesn't make that row all night," said Pete. "I'm in the next cabin. Good-evening, skipper. We've taken you at your word and started."

"Quite right," said the captain, hanging up his oilskin. "We're in for a bad forty-eight hours, I'm afraid."

"You've got the brass band all complete, anyway," grinned Andy. "Who is Mr. Todmarsh, skipper?"

For a moment or two he didn't answer. From under a pair of great bushy eyebrows he took us all in: then he chuckled.

"Well, gentlemen," he said, "I've had some pretty strangely assorted bunches in this saloon during my time