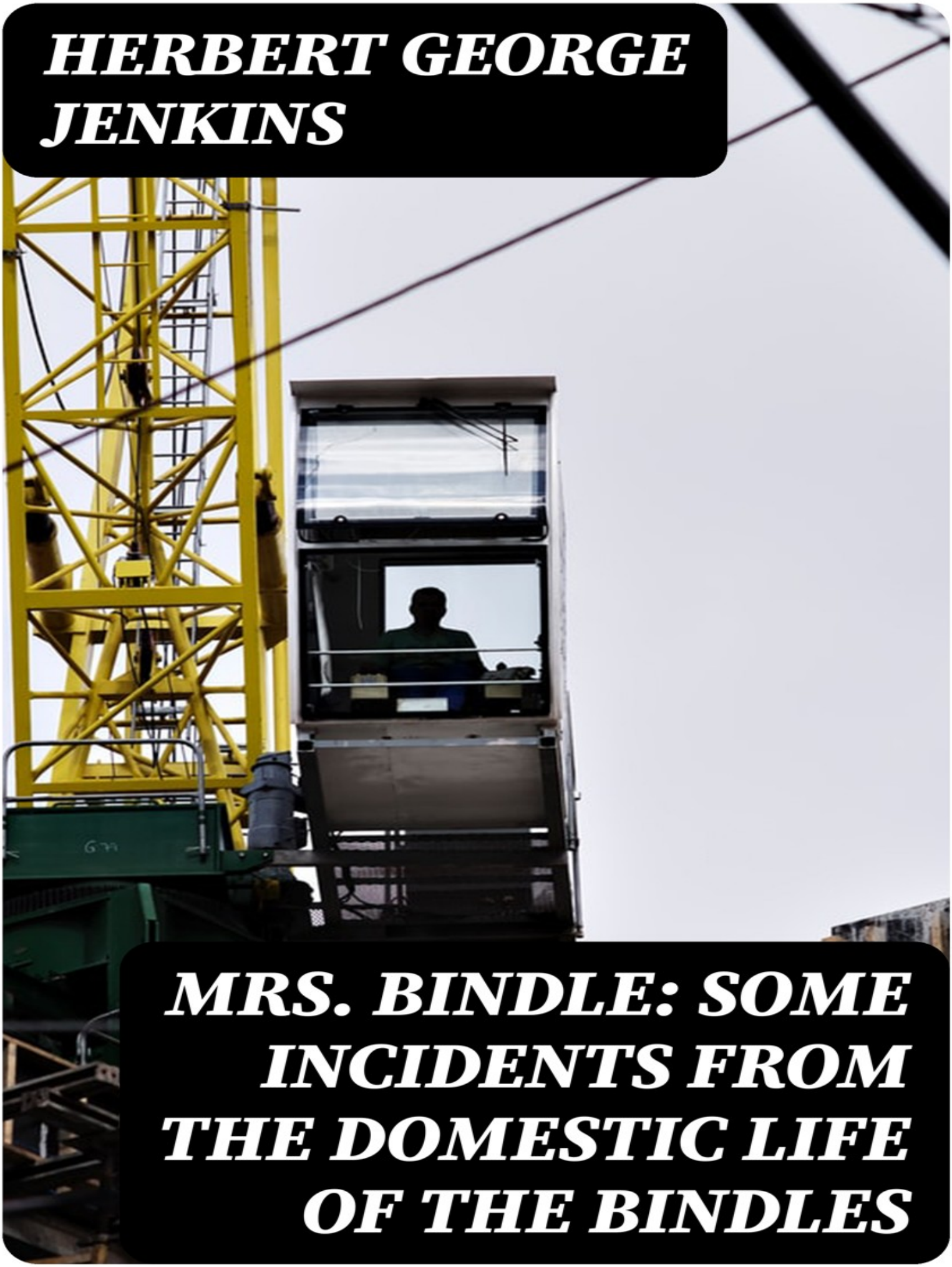
HERBERT GEORGE JENKINS



MRS. BINDLE: SOME INCIDENTS FROM THE DOMESTIC LIFE OF THE BINDLES

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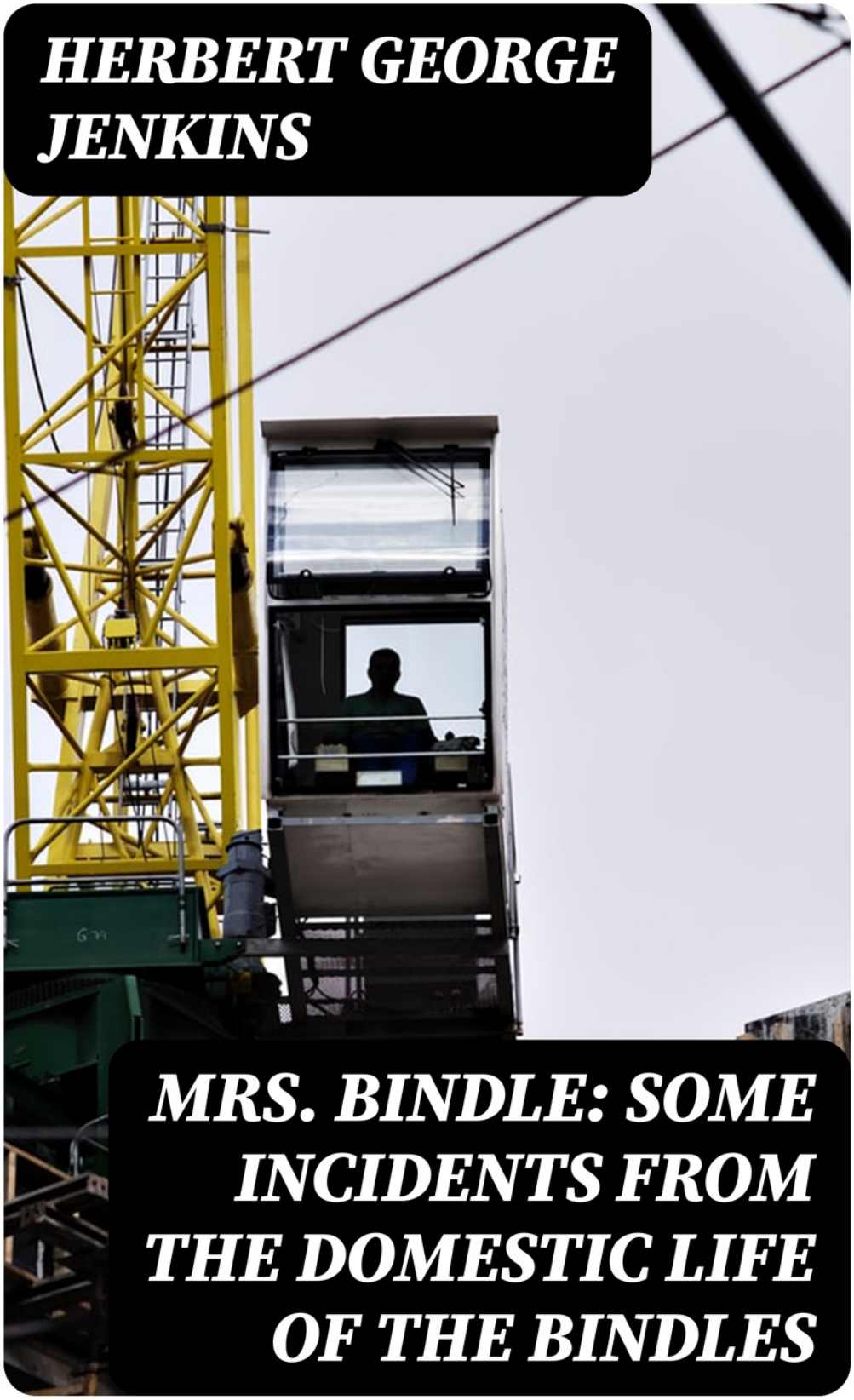

MRS. BINDLE: SOME INCIDENTS FROM THE DOMESTIC LIFE OF THE BINDLES

Herbert George Jenkins

Mrs. Bindle: Some Incidents from the Domestic Life of the Bindles

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I

"Well! What's the matter now? Lorst your job?"

With one hand resting upon the edge of the pail beside which she was kneeling, Mrs. Bindle looked up, challenge in her eyes. Bindle's unexpected appearance while she was washing the kitchen oilcloth filled her with foreboding.

"There's a strike on at the yard," he replied in a tone which, in spite of his endeavour to render it casual, sounded like a confession of guilt. He knew Mrs. Bindle; he knew also her views on strikes.

"A what?" she cried, rising to her feet and wiping her hands upon the coarse canvas apron that covered the skirt carefully festooned about her hips. "A what?"

"A strike," repeated Bindle. "They give Walter 'Odson the sack, so we all come out."

"Oh! you have, have you?" she cried, her thin lips disappearing ominously. "And when are you going back, I'd like to know?" She regarded him with an eye that he knew meant war.

"Can't say," he replied, as he proceeded to fill his pipe from a tin tobacco-box. "Depends on the Union," he added.

"The Union!" she cried with rising wrath. "I wish I had them here. I'd give them Union, throwing men out of work,

with food the price it is. What's going to 'appen to us? Can you tell me that?" she demanded, her diction becoming a little frayed at the edges, owing to the intensity of her feelings.

Bindle remained silent. He realised that he was faced by a crisis.

"Nice thing you coming 'ome at eleven o'clock in the morning calmly saying you've struck," she continued angrily. "You're a lazy, good-for-nothing set of loafers, the whole lot of you, that's what you are. When you're tired of work and want a 'oliday you strike, and spend your time in public-'ouses, betting and drinking and swearing, and us women slaving morning, noon and night to keep you. Suppose I was to strike, what then?"

She undid her canvas apron, and with short, jerky movements proceeded to fold and place it in the dresser-drawer. She then let down the festoons into which her skirt had been gathered about her inconspicuous hips.

Mrs. Bindle was a sharp, hatchet-faced woman, with eyes too closely set together to satisfy an artist.

The narrowness of her head was emphasised by the way in which her thin, sandy hair was drawn behind each ear and screwed tightly into a knot at the back.

Her lips were thin and slightly marked, and when she was annoyed they had a tendency to disappear altogether.

"How are we going to live?" she demanded. "Answer me that! You and your strikes!"

Bindle struck a match and became absorbed in lighting his pipe.

"What are you going to do for food?" She was not to be denied.

"We're a-goin' to get strike pay," he countered, seizing the opening.

"Strike pay!" she cried scornfully. "A fat lot of good that'll do. A pound a week, I suppose, and you eating like a—like a ——" she paused for a satisfactory simile. "Eating me out of 'ouse and 'ome," she amended. "'Strike pay!' I'd give 'em strike pay if I had my way."

"It'll 'elp," suggested Bindle.

"Help! Yes, it'll help you to find out how hungry you can get," she retorted grimly. "I'd like to have that man Smillie here, I'd give him a bit of my mind."

"But 'e ain't done it," protested Bindle, a sense of fair play prompting him to defend the absent leader. "'E's a miner. We don't belong to 'is Union."

"They're all tarred with the same brush," cried Mrs. Bindle, "a good-for-nothing, lazy lot. They turn you round their little fingers, and then laugh at you up their sleeves. I know them," she added darkly.

Bindle edged towards the door. He had not been in favour of the strike; now it was even less popular with him.

"I suppose you're going round to your low public-house, to drink and smoke and tell each other how clever you've been," she continued. "Then you'll come back expecting to find your dinner ready to put in your mouth."

Mrs. Bindle's words were prophetic. Bindle *was* going round to The Yellow Ostrich to meet his mates, and discuss the latest strike-news.

"You wouldn't 'ave me a blackleg, Lizzie, would you?" he asked.

"Don't talk to me about such things," she retorted. "I'm a hardworking woman, I am, inchin' and pinchin' to keep the home respectable, while you and your low companions refuse to work. I wish I had them all here, I'd give them strikes." Her voice shook with suppressed passion.

Realising that the fates were against him, Bindle beat a gloomy retreat, and turned his steps in the direction of The Yellow Ostrich.

At one o'clock he returned to Fenton Street, a little doubtful; but very hungry.

He closed the gate quietly, Mrs. Bindle hated the banging of gates. Suddenly he caught sight of a piece of white paper pinned to the front door. A moment later he was reading the dumbfounding announcement:

> "I have struck too.
> "E. Bindle."

The words, which were written on the back of a coal-merchant's advertisement, seemed to dance before his eyes.

He was conscious that at the front window on either side a face was watching him intently. In Fenton Street drama was the common property of all.

With a puzzled expression in his eyes, Bindle stood staring at the piece of paper and its ominous message, his right hand scratching his head through the blue and white cricket cap he habitually wore.

"Well, I'm blowed," he muttered, as Mrs. Grimps, who lived at No. 5, came to her door and stood regarding him not unsympathetically.

At the sight of her neighbour, Mrs. Sawney, who occupied No. 9, also appeared, her hands rolled up in her apron and her arms steaming. She had been engaged in the scullery when "'Arriet," who had been set to watch events, rushed in from the front room with the news that Mr. Bindle was coming.

"Serves you right, it does," said Mrs. Sawney. "You men," she added, as if to remove from her words any suggestion that they were intended as personal. Bindle was very popular with his neighbours.

"Strikes you does, when you ain't feeling like work," chorused Mrs. Grimps, "I know you."

Bindle looked from one to the other. For once he felt there was nothing to say.

"Then there's the kids," said a slatternly-looking woman with a hard mouth and dusty hair, who had just drifted up from two doors away. "A lot you cares. It's us wot 'as to suffer."

There was a murmur from the other women, who had been reinforced by two neighbours from the opposite side of the street.

"She 'as my sympathy," said Mrs. Sawney, "although I can't say I likes 'er as a friend."

During these remarks, Bindle had been searching for his latch-key, which he now drew forth and inserted in the lock; but, although the latch responded, the door did not give. It was bolted on the inside.

"Well, I'm blowed!" he muttered again, too surprised at this new phase of the situation to be more than dimly conscious of the remarks of those about him.

"My sister's man struck three months ago," said one of the new arrivals, "and 'er expectin' 'er fifth. Crool I calls it. They ought to 'ave 'em theirselves is wot I say. That'ud learn 'em to strike."

A murmur of approval broke from the others at this enigmatical utterance.

"It's all very well for them," cried Mrs. Sawney; "but it's us wot 'as to suffer, us and the pore kids, bless 'em. 'Arriet, you let me catch you swingin' on that gate again, my beauty, and I'll skin you."

The last remark was directed at the little girl, who had seized the moment of her mother's pre-occupation to indulge herself in an illicit joy.

Without a word, Bindle turned and walked down the flagged path to the gate, and along Fenton Street in the direction of The Yellow Ostrich, leaving behind him a group of interested women, who would find in his tragedy material for a week's gossip.

His customary cheeriness had forsaken him. He realised that he was faced by a domestic crisis that frankly puzzled him—and he was hungry.

As he pushed open the hospitable swing-door of The Yellow Ostrich, he was greeted by a new and even more bewildering phase of the situation.

"'Ere, Bindle," cried an angry voice, "wot the blinkin' 'ell's your missis up to?"

"You may search me," was Bindle's lugubrious reply, as he moved across to the bar and ordered a pint of beer, some bread, and "a bit o' the cheese wot works the lift."

"You was agin us chaps striking," continued the speaker who had greeted Bindle on his entrance, a man with a criminal forehead, a loose mouth, and a dirty neck-cloth.

"Wot's your complaint, mate?" enquired Bindle indifferently, as he lifted his pewter from the counter, and took a pull that half emptied it of its contents.

"Wot's your ruddy missis been up to?" demanded the man aggressively.

"Look 'ere, 'Enery, ole sport," said Bindle quietly, as he wiped his lips with the back of his hand, "you ain't pretty, an' you ain't good; but try an' keep yer mouth clean when you speaks of Mrs. B. See?"

A murmur of approval rose from the other men, with whom Bindle was popular and Henry Gilkes was not.

"Wot's she mean a-goin' round to my missis an' gettin' 'er to bolt me out?"

"Bolt you out!" cried Bindle, with a puzzled expression. "Wotjer talkin' about?"

"When I goes 'ome to dinner," was the angry retort, "there's a ticket on the blinkin' door sayin' my missis 'as struck. I'll strike 'er!" he added malevolently. "The lady next door tells me that it's your missis wot done it."

For a moment Bindle gazed at his fellow-sufferer, then he smacked his thigh with the air of a man who has just seen a great joke, which for some time has evaded him.

"'Enery," he grinned, "she's done it to me too."

"Done wot?" enquired Henry, who, as a Father of the Chapel, felt he was a man of some importance.

"Locked me out, back *and* front," explained Bindle, enjoying his mate's bewilderment. "Wot about the solidarity of labour now, ole sport?" he enquired.

Henry Gilkes had one topic of conversation—"the solidarity of labour." Those who worked with him found it wearisome listening to his views on the bloated capitalist, and how he was to be overcome. They preferred discussing their own betting ventures, and the prospects of the Chelsea and Fulham football teams.

"Done it to you!" repeated Gilkes dully. "Wot she done?"

"I jest nipped round to get a bit o' dinner," explained Bindle, "and there was both doors bolted, an' a note a-sayin' that Mrs. B. 'ad struck. Personally, myself, I calls it a lock-out," he added with a grin.

Several of his hearers began to manifest signs of uneasiness. They had not been home since early morning.

"I'll break 'er stutterin' jaw if my missis locks me out," growled a heavily-bearded man, known as "Ruddy Bill" on account of the intensity of his language.

"Jest the sort o' thing you would do," said Bindle genially. "You got a sweet nature, Bill, in spite of them whiskers."

Ruddy Bill growled something in his beard, while several of the other men drained their pewters and slipped out, intent on discovering whether or no their own domestic bliss were threatened by this new and unexpected danger.

From then on, the public bar of The Yellow Ostrich hummed with angry talk and threats of what would happen

if the lords, who there gloried and drank deep, should return to their hearths and find manifestations of rebellion.

Two of the men, who had gone to investigate the state of their own domestic barometers, were back in half an hour with the news that they too had been locked out from home and beauty.

About three o'clock, Ruddy Bill returned, streams of profanity flowing from his lips. Finding himself bolted out, he had broken open the door; but no one was there. Now he was faced with a threat of ejectment from the landlord, who had heard of the wilful damage to his property, plus the cost of a new door.

Several times that afternoon the landlord of The Yellow Ostrich, himself regarded as an epicure in the matter of "language," found it necessary to utter the stereotyped phrase, "Now gents, if *you* please," which, with him, meant that the talk was becoming unfit for the fo'c'sle of a tramp steamer.

II

Left to herself by the departure of Bindle for The Yellow Ostrich, Mrs. Bindle had, for some time, stood by the dresser deep in thought. She had then wrung-out the house-flannel, emptied the pail, placed them under the sink and once more returned to the dresser. Five minutes' meditation was followed by swift action.

First she took her bonnet from the dresser-drawer, then unhooking a dark brown mackintosh from behind the door, she proceeded to make her outdoor toilet in front of the looking-glass on the mantelpiece.

She then sought out ink-bottle and pen, and wrote her defiance with an ink-eaten nib. This accomplished, she bolted the front-door on the inside, first attaching her strike-notice. Leaving the house by the door giving access to the scullery, she locked it, taking the key with her.

Her face was grim and her walk was determined, as she made her way to the yard at which Bindle was employed. There she demanded to see the manager and, after some difficulty, was admitted.

She began by reproaching him and ordering him to stop the strike. When, however, he had explained that the strike was entirely due to the action of the men, she ended by telling him of her own drastic action, and her determination to continue her strike until the men went back.

The manager surprised her by leaning back in his chair and laughing uproariously.

"Mrs. Bindle," he cried at length, as he wiped the tears from his eyes, "you're a genius; but I'm sorry for Bindle. Now, do you want to end the strike in a few hours?"

Mrs. Bindle looked at him suspiciously; but, conscious of the very obvious admiration with which he regarded her act, she relented sufficiently to listen to what he had to say.

Ten minutes later she left the office with a list of the names and addresses of the strikers, including that of the branch organising secretary of the Union. She had decided upon a counter-offensive.

Her first call was upon Mrs. Gilkes, a quiet little woman who had been subdued to meekness by the "solidarity of labour." Here she had to admit failure.

"I know what you mean, my dear," said Mrs. Gilkes; "but you see, Mr. Gilkes wouldn't like it." There was a tremor of fear in her voice.

"Wouldn't like it!" echoed Mrs. Bindle. "Of course he wouldn't like it. Bindle won't like it when he knows," her jaws met grimly and her lips disappeared. "You're afraid," she added accusingly.

"That's it, my dear, I am," was the disconcerting reply. "I never 'ad no 'eart for a fight, that's why Mr. Gilkes 'as come it over me like 'e 'as. My sister, Mary, was sayin' only last Toosday—no it wasn't, it was We'n'sday, I remember because it was the day we 'ad sausages wot Mr. Gilkes said wasn't fresh. 'Amelia,' she says, 'you ain't got the 'eart of a rabbit, or else you wouldn't stand wot you do,'" and, looking up into Mrs. Bindle's face, she added, "It's true, Mrs. Gimble, although I didn't own it to Mary, 'er bein' my sister an' so uppish in 'er ways."

"Well, you'll be sorry," was Mrs. Bindle's comment, as she turned towards the door. "I'll be no man's slave."

"You see, I 'aven't the 'eart, Mrs. Gimber."

"Bindle!" snapped Mrs. Bindle over her shoulder.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Spindle, my mistake."

Mrs. Bindle stalked along the passage, through the front door and out of the gate, leaving Mrs. Gilkes murmuring deprecatingly that she "'adn't no 'eart for a fight."

Although she would not own it, Mrs. Bindle was discouraged by the failure of her first attempt at strike-breaking. But for her good-fortune in encountering Mrs. Hopton at her second venture, she might even have

relinquished the part of Lysistrata and have returned home to prepare Bindle's dinner.

It was with something like misgiving that she knocked at No. 32 Wessels Street. This feeling was accentuated when the door was opened with great suddenness by an enormously big woman with a square chin, fighting eyes, and very little hair.

With arms akimbo, one elbow touching either side of the passage, as if imbued with the sentiments of Horatius Cocles, Mrs. Hopton stood with tightly-shut mouth regarding her caller. As soon as Mrs. Bindle had made her mission known, however, Mrs. Hopton's manner underwent an entire change. Her hands dropped from her hips, her fixed expression relaxed, and she stood invitingly aside.

"I'm your woman," she cried. "You come in, Mrs.——"

"Bindle!" prompted Mrs. Bindle.

"You come in, Mrs. Bindle, you got the woman you want in Martha 'Opton. Us women 'ave stood this sort of thing long enough. I've always said so."

She led the way into an airless little parlour, in which a case of wax-fruit, a dusty stuffed dog and a clothes-horse hung with the familiarities of Mrs. Hopton's laundry, first struck the eye.

"I've always said," continued Mrs. Hopton, "that us women was too meek and mild by half in the way we takes things. My man's a fool," she added with conviction. "'E's that easily led by them arbitrators, that's wot I call 'em, that they makes 'im do just wotever they wants, dirty, lazy set o' tykes. Never done a day's work in their lives, they 'aven't, not one of 'em."

"That's what I say," cried Mrs. Bindle, for once in her life finding a congenial spirit outside the walls of the Alton Road Chapel. "I've locked up my house," she continued, "and put a note on the door that I've struck too."

The effect of these words upon Mrs. Hopton was startling. Her head went back like that of a chicken drinking, her hands rose once more to her hips, and her huge frame shook and pulsated as if it contained a high-power motor-engine. Mrs. Bindle gazed at her with widened eyes.

"Her-her-her!" came in deep, liquid gutturals from Mrs. Hopton's lips. "Her-her-her!" Then her head came down again, and Mrs. Bindle saw that the grim lips were parted, displaying some very yellow, unprepossessing teeth. Mrs. Hopton was manifesting amusement.

Without further comment, Mrs. Hopton left the room. In her absence, Mrs. Bindle proceeded to sum-up her character from the evidence that her home contained. The result was unfavourable. She had just decided that her hostess was dirty and untidy, without sense of decency or religion, when Mrs. Hopton re-entered. In one hand she carried a piece of paper, in the other a small ink-bottle, out of which an orange-coloured pen-holder reared its fluted length.

Clearing a space on the untidy table, she bent down and, with squared elbows and cramped fingers, proceeded to scrawl the words: "I have struck too. M. Hopton."

Then, straightening herself, she once more threw back her head, and another stream of "Her-her-her's" gushed towards the ceiling.

"Now I'll come with you," she said at length. Without waiting to don cloak or bonnet, she proceeded to pin the

notice on the front door, which she bolted on the inside. She then left by the scullery door, locking it, just as Mrs. Bindle had done, and carrying with her the key.

Although Mrs. Bindle felt that she suffered socially from being seen with the lumbering, untidy Mrs. Hopton, she regarded it as a sacrifice to a just cause. It was not long, however, before she discovered that she had recruited, not a lieutenant, but a leader.

Seizing the list of names and addresses from her companion's hand, Mrs. Hopton glanced at it and turned in the direction of the street in which lived the timid Mrs. Gilkes. As they walked, Mrs. Bindle told the story of Mrs. Gilkes's cowardice, drawing from the Amazon-like Mrs. Hopton the significant words "Leave 'er to me."

"Now then, none of this," was her greeting to Mrs. Gilkes as she opened her front door. "Out you comes and joins the strike-breakers. None o' your nonsense or——" she paused significantly.

Mrs. Gilkes protested her cowardice, she grovelled, she dragged in her sister, Mary, and the wrathful Gilkes; but without avail. Almost before she knew what had happened, she was walking between Mrs. Hopton and Mrs. Bindle, the back-door key clasped in one hand, striving to tie the strings of her bonnet beneath a chin that was obviously too shallow for the purpose. In her heart was a great terror; yet she was conscious of a strange and not unpleasant thrill at the thought of her own daring. She comforted herself with Mrs. Hopton's promise of protection against her lord's anger.

The overpowering personality of Mrs. Hopton was too much for the other wives. The one or two who made a

valiant endeavour to stand out were overwhelmed by her ponderous ridicule, which bordered upon intimidation.

"'Ere, get a pen an' ink," she would cry and, before the reluctant housewife knew what had happened, she had announced that she too had struck, and Mrs. Hopton's army had been swelled by another recruit.

At one house they found the husband about to sit down to an early dinner. That gave Mrs. Hopton her chance.

"You lazy, guzzling, good-for-nothing son of a God-damn loafer!" she shouted, her deep voice throbbing with passion. "Call yourself a man? Fine sort of man you are, letting your wife work and slave while you strike and fill your belly with beef and beer. I've seen better things than you thrown down the sink, that I 'ave."

At the first attack, the man had risen from the table in bewilderment. As Mrs. Hopton emptied upon him the vials of her anger, he had slowly retreated towards the scullery door. She made a sudden movement in his direction; he turned—wrenched open the door, and fled.

"I'm sorry to interrupt you, Mrs.——"

"Bolton," said the neat little woman.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Bolton," said Mrs. Hopton; "but we're going to break this 'ere strike, me and Mrs. Bindle and all these other ladies." She waved her hand to indicate the army she had already collected.

Then she went on to explain; but Mrs. Bolton was adamant against all her invitations to join the emancipationists.

"I suppose we got to fight your battle," Mrs. Hopton cried, and proceeded to drench her victim with ridicule; but Mrs.

Bolton stood fast, and the strike-breakers had to acknowledge defeat.

It was Mrs. Bindle's idea that they should hold a meeting outside the organising secretary's house. The suggestion was acclaimed with enthusiasm.

"Let's get a tidy few, first," counselled Mrs. Hopton. "It'll make 'im think 'arder."

At the end of an hour, even Mrs. Hopton was satisfied with the number of her supporters, and she gave the word for the opening of hostilities.

That afternoon, just as he was rising from an excellent meal, Mr. James Cunham was surprised to find that his neatly-kept front-garden was filled with women, while more women seemed to occupy the street. Neighbours came out, errand-boys called to friends, that they might not miss the episode, children paused on their way to school; all seemed to realise the dramatic possibilities of the situation.

Mrs. Hopton played a fugue upon Mr. Cunham's knocker, bringing him to the door in person.

"Well, monkey-face," she boomed. There was a scream of laughter from her followers.

Mr. Cunham started back as if he had been struck.

"Want to starve us, do you?" continued Mrs. Hopton.

"What's all this about?" he enquired, recovering himself. He was a man accustomed to handling crowds, even unfriendly crowds; but never had he encountered anything like the cataract of wrathful contumely that now poured from Mrs. Hopton's lips.

"Just 'ad a good dinner, I suppose," she cried scornfully. "Been enjoyin' it, eh? Cut from the joint and two vegs,

puddin' to follow, with a glass of stout to wash it down. That the meenyou, eh? What does it cost you when our men strike? Do you 'ave to keep 'alf a dozen bellies full on a pound a week?"

There was a murmur from the women behind her, a murmur that Mr. Cunham did not like.

"Nice little 'ouse you got 'ere," continued Mrs. Hopton critically, as she peered into the neat and well-furnished hall. "All got out o' strikes," she added over her shoulder to her companions. "All got on the do-nothin'-at-all-easy-purchase-system."

This time there was no mistaking the menace in the murmur from the women behind her.

"You're a beauty, you are," continued Mrs. Hopton. "Not much sweat about your lily brow, Mr. Funny Cunham."

Mr. Cunham felt that the time had come for action.

"What's the meaning of this?" he demanded. "Why have you come here, and who are you?"

"Who are we?" cried Mrs. Hopton scornfully. "He asks who we are," she threw over her shoulder.

Again there was an angry murmur from the rank and file.

"We're the silly fools wot married the men you brought out on strike," said Mrs. Hopton, looking the organising secretary up and down as if he were on show. "Creases in 'is trousers, too," she cried. "You ain't 'alf a swell. Well, we just come to tell you that the strike's orf, because we've struck. Get me, Steve?"

"We've declared a lock-out," broke in Mrs. Bindle with inspiration.

Back went Mrs. Hopton's head, up went her hands to her hips, and deep-throated "Her-her-her's" poured from her parted lips.

"A lock-out!" she cried. "Her-her-her, a lock-out! That's the stuff to give 'em!" and the rank and file took up the cry and, out of the plenitude of his experience, Mr. Cunham recognised that the crowd was hopelessly out of hand.

"Are we down-hearted?" cried a voice, and the shrieks of "No!" that followed confirmed Mr. Cunham in his opinion that the situation was not without its serious aspect.

He was not a coward and he stood his ground, listening to Mrs. Hopton's inspiring oratory of denunciation. It was three o'clock before he saw his garden again—a trampled waste; an offering to the Moloch of strikes.

"Damn the woman!" he cried, as, shutting the door, he returned to the room he used as an office, there to deliberate upon this new phase of the situation. "Curse her!"

III

It was nearly half-past ten that night when Bindle tip-toed up the tiled-path leading to the front door of No. 7 Fenton Street.

Softly he inserted his key in the lock and turned it; but the door refused to give. He stepped back to gaze up at the bedroom window; there was no sign of a light.

It suddenly struck him that the piece of paper on the door was not the same in shape as that he had seen at dinner-time. It was too dark to see if there was anything written on it. Taking a box of matches from his pocket, he

struck a light, shielding it carefully so that it should shine only on the paper.

His astonishment at what he read caused him to forget the lighted match, which burnt his fingers.

"Well, I'm blowed!" he muttered. "If this ain't it," and once more he read the sinister notice:

> "You have struck. We women have declared a lock-out.
>
> "E. Bindle."

After a few minutes' cogitation, he tip-toed down the path and round to the back of the house; but the scullery door was inflexible in its inhospitality.

He next examined the windows. Each was securely fastened.

"Where'm I goin' to sleep?" he muttered, as once more he tip-toed up the path.

After a further long deliberation, he lifted the knocker, gave three gentle taps—and waited. As nothing happened, he tried four taps of greater strength. These, in turn, produced no response. Then he gave a knock suggestive of a telegraph boy, or a registered letter. At each fresh effort he stepped back to get a view of the bedroom window.

He fancied that the postman-cum-telegraph-boy's knock had produced a slight fluttering of the curtain. He followed it up with something that might have been the police, or a fire.

As he stepped back, the bedroom-window was thrown up, and Mrs. Bindle's head appeared.

"What's the matter?" she cried.

"I can't get in," said Bindle.

"I know you can't," was the uncompromising response, "and I don't mean you shall."

"But where'm I goin' to sleep?" he demanded, anxiety in his voice.

"That's for you to settle."

"'Ere, Lizzie, come down an' let me in," he cried, falling to cajolery.

For answer Mrs. Bindle banged-to the window. He waited expectantly for the door to be opened.

At the end of five minutes he realised that Mrs. Bindle had probably gone back to bed.

"Well, I can't stay 'ere all the bloomin' night, me with various veins in my legs," he muttered, conscious that from several windows interested heads were thrust.

Fully convinced that Mrs. Bindle was not on her way down to admit him, he once more fell back upon the knocker, awakening the echoes of Fenton Street.

At the sound of the window-sash being raised, he stepped back and looked up eagerly.

"'Ere, wot the ——!"

Something seemed to flash through the night, and he received the contents of the ewer full in the face.

"That'll teach you to come waking me up at this time of night," came the voice of Mrs. Bindle, who, a moment later, retreated into the room. Bindle, rightly conjecturing that she had gone for more water, retired out of reach.

"You soaked me through to the skin," he cried, when she re-appeared.

"And serve you right, too, you and your strikes."

"But ain't you goin' to let me in?"

"When the strike's off the lock-out'll cease," was the oracular retort.

"But I didn't want to strike," protested Bindle.

"Then you should have been a man and said so, instead of letting that little rat make you do everything he wants, him sitting down to a good dinner every day, all paid for out of strikes."

There were sympathetic murmurs from the surrounding darkness.

"But——" began Bindle.

"Don't let me 'ear anything more of you to-night, Joe Bindle," came Mrs. Bindle's uncompromising voice, "or next time I'll throw the jug an' all at you," and with that she banged-to the window in a way that convinced Bindle it was useless to parley further.

"Catch my death o' cold," he grumbled, as he turned on a reluctant heel in the direction of Fulham High Street, with the intention of claiming hospitality from his sister-in-law, Mrs. Hearty. "Wot am I goin' to do for duds," he added. "Funny ole bird I should look in one of 'Earty's frock-coats."

IV

The next morning at nine o'clock, the wives of the strikers met by arrangement outside the organising secretary's house; but the strikers themselves were before them, and Mr. Cunham found himself faced with the ugliest situation he had ever encountered.

At the sight of the groups of strikers, the women raised shrill cries. The men, too, lifted their voices, not in derision

or criticism of their helpmates; but at the organising secretary.

The previous night the same drama that had been enacted between Bindle and Mrs. Bindle had taken place outside the houses of many of the other strikers, with the result that they had become "fed up to the blinkin' neck with the whole ruddy business."

"Well!" cried Mrs. Hopton as, at the head of her legion of Amazons, she reached the first group of men. "How jer like it?"

The men turned aside, grumbling in their throats.

"Her-her-her!" she laughed. "Boot's on the other foot now, my pretty canaries, ain't it? Nobody mustn't do anythink to upset you; but you can do what you streamin' well like, you lot o' silly mugs!

"Wotjer let that little rat-faced sniveller turn you round 'is little finger for? You ain't men, you're just Unionists wot 'ave got to do wot 'e tells you. I see 'im yesterday," she continued after a slight pause, "'aving a rare ole guzzle wot you pays for by striking. 'Ow much does it cost 'im? That's wot I want to know, the rat-faced little stinker!"

At that moment "the rat-faced little stinker" himself appeared, hat on head and light overcoat thrown over his arm. He smiled wearily, he was not favourably impressed by the look of things.

His appearance was the signal for shrill shouts from the women, and a grumbling murmur from the men.

"'Ere's Kayser Cunham," shouted one woman, and then individual cries were drowned in the angry murmur of protest and recrimination.

Mr. Cunham found himself faced by the same men who, the day before, had greeted his words with cheers. Now they made it manifest that if he did not find a way out of the strike difficulty, there would be trouble.

"Take that!" roared Mrs. Hopton hoarsely, as she snatched something from a paper-bag she was carrying, and hurled it with all her might at the leader. Her aim was bad, and a small man, standing at right angles to the Union secretary, received a large and painfully ripe tomato full on the chin.

Mrs. Hopton's cry was a signal to the other women. From beneath cloaks and capes they produced every conceivable missile, including a number of eggs far gone towards chickenhood. With more zeal than accuracy of aim, they hurled them at the unfortunate Mr. Cunham. For a full minute he stood his ground valiantly, then, an egg catching him between the eyes brought swift oblivion.

The strikers, however, did not manifest the courage of their leader. Although intended for the organising secretary, most of the missiles found a way into their ranks. They wavered and, a moment after, turned and fled.

Approaching nearer, the women concentrated upon him whom they regarded as responsible for the strike, and their aim improved. Some of their shots took effect on his person, but most of them on the front of the house. Three windows were broken, and it was not until Mrs. Cunham came and dragged her egg-bespattered lord into the passage, banging-to the street door behind her, that the storm began to die down.