

# The Bloomfield Times.

FRANK MORTIMER,  
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## The Bloomfield Times.

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## The Wag Family.

A CHRISTMAS STORY.

IN a town which we will call Middletown, because it was of the middle size, dwelt a worthy shopkeeper, bearing the odd name of Jeremiah Wag. By dealing in all sorts of commodities, and steady attention to his business, he managed to keep up his respectability, and doubtless would have considerably increased his store, but for the gradual increase of his family. For several years after his marriage a little Wag was ushered annually into the world; and though there had latterly been somewhat less of regularity, as many as ten small heads might be counted every evening in his back parlor. Jerry, the eldest boy, was, however, almost fourteen years of age, and therefore began to "make himself useful," by carrying out small parcels and assisting behind the counter. All the rest were, to use their parents' phrase, "dead stock," and were "eating their heads off;" for sooth to say, they were a jolly little set, and blessed with most excellent appetites. Such was the state of family matters at the time when our narrative commences.

Now, on the opposite side of the street, exactly facing the modest board on which Jeremiah's name was painted, with the usual announcement of certain commodities in which he dealt, was another board of a very different description. On it were emblazoned the arms of her majesty, with the supporters, a lion, and a unicorn, as the country folks said, "a fighting for the crown."

The establishment indicated by this display was upheld by a very different class of customers to that which patronized the shop. Two or three times in each day some private carriage of postchaise would stop to change horses at the King's Arms, and occasionally a "family" took up their quarters there for the night; but the latter was a piece of good luck not often to be expected, as there were no lions to be seen in Middletown save the red rampart guardian on the signboard.

It was haymaking time, and business was very "slack" with the worthy Jeremiah; but he said he didn't care much about it, as the country folks were earning money, part of which he trusted would find its way into his till in due course. So, after rummaging about among his stock to see if he was "out of anything," he took his stand at the door, just to breathe a mouthful of fresh air. Titus Twist, the landlord, made his appearance at the same moment in his own gateway, apparently with the same salubrious intent, and immediately beckoned to his neighbor just to step across.

"Well, how are you, Master Wag?" said he, when they met. "Did you observe that fine green chariot that is standing down in the yard there, and came in over an hour ago?" Jeremiah answered in the negative. "Well, continued mine host, 'it belongs to one of the oddest, rummiest little old gentlemen I ever clapped my eyes on. He's been asking me all sorts of questions, and seems mightily tickled with your name above all things. I think he's

cracked. Howsomever, he's ordered dinner; but hush! here he comes."

The little gentleman in question seemed between sixty and seventy; but, excepting a certain sallowness of complexion, carried his years well, his motion being lively, and wearing a good-humored smile, as though habitual, on his countenance. His dress was plain but good, and altogether becoming his apparent rank.

"I shall be back in a quarter of an hour," said he to the landlord; "I'm only going over the way to the shop to buy something." And away he went, and, of course, was followed by Jeremiah, who, immediately on entering his own house, skipped nimbly behind the counter to wait upon his new customer.

After trying on some gloves, and purchasing two pairs, the little strange gentleman looked round the shop, as though examining its contents to find something he wanted.

"Any thing else I can do for you, sir?" asked Jeremiah.

"You sell almost every thing, I see, Mr. Wag," observed the old gentleman. "Mr. Wag? Your name is Wag, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir," replied the shopkeeper, dryly. "Wag, Wag, Wag!" repeated the stranger, briskly. "Funny name, eh?"

"It was my father's before me," observed Jeremiah, scarcely knowing what to think of the matter.

"Very good name!" continued the little gentleman; "like it very much. Got any children? Any little Wags, eh? Like to see 'em. Fond of children—little Wags, in particular—he, he, he!"

"Much obliged to ye for inquiring, sir," replied the senior Wag; "I've got just half a score, sorted sizes. That's the eldest!" And he pointed to young Jerry, whose lanky limbs were at the moment displayed, spreading fashion against the shelves, from the topmost of which he was reaching down some commodity for a customer.

"That's all right. Bring 'em up to industry," said the little gentleman. "Well, I can't stay now, because my dinner is ready; but I see you sell Irish linen, and I want a piece for shirts; so, perhaps, you'll be so good as to look me out a good one, and bring it over to me."

"You may rely," commenced Mr. Wag, but his new customer cut him short by adding: "I know that well enough," and briskly made his exit.

The industrious shopkeeper forthwith selected certain of his primest articles, folded them in a wrapper, and, at the appointed time carried the whole across to King's Arms.

He was immediately ushered into the presence of the eccentric elderly gentleman, who was seated alone behind a bottle of white and a bottle of red. "Suppose you have dined, Master Wag," said he; "so come! No ceremony, sit down and take a glass of wine."

"I'm very much obliged to you, I'm sure, sir," replied Jeremiah, "but I have just brought half a dozen pieces of Irish for you to look at and choose."

"Phoo, phoo!" quoth the small stranger, "I don't want to see them. I know nothing about 'em. Leave all to you. Only meant to have had a piece; but as you've brought half a dozen, I may as well take 'em. 'Store is no sore,' they say. There's a fifty pound note! Reckon 'em up and see if there's any change."

Jeremiah stared at this unusual wholesale way of dealing, stammered his thanks, and observed that the goods would not amount to half the money.

"So much the worse," said the little gentleman. "Must see if I can't buy something else in your line presently; but sit down now, that's a good fellow! I want to have some talk with you."

The bashful shopkeeper hereupon perched himself on the extreme front edge of a chair, at a respectable distance from the table; but was told to draw up closer by his

hospitable entertainer. Then they took three or four glasses of wine together, and gradually Jeremiah found himself more at home, and scrupled not to reply to the odd stranger's questions respecting his family and occupations. And so they went on chatting till they appeared as two very old and intimate friends; for Mr. Wag was of an open unsuspecting disposition, and talked as though he had no objection that all the world should know all about his affairs.

"Well, but my dear Wag," said the stranger, "can't you tell what part of the country your father came from?"

"No, sir, I can't," replied Jeremiah; "he died when I was about eight years old, and the London merchant to whom he was clerk put me to school, and after that apprenticed me to old Hicks, who lived over the way where I do now. Well, there I served my time, and then married his daughter, and so came in for the business when he died; but I've increased it a pretty deal; and if I'd more capital could make a snug thing of it by going into the wholesale, and serving shops with grocery, and so on."

"Why don't you try it?" asked the little gentleman.

"It won't do unless one has got the ready knowledge; and then one must be able to give credit, and ought to keep one's own wagon to carry out goods. No, no, it won't do. Many a man has made bad worse by getting out of his depth; and as it is, thank God, I can live. The only thing that puzzles me now and then is what I shall do with all the children."

"Harkye, my worthy Wag," said the odd stranger, "I have not got any children, so if you'll let me pick among the lot I do not care if I take two or three off your hands."

"Sir!" exclaimed the astonished shopkeeper.

"I mean what I say," replied the old gentleman, demurely. "Take me with you. Introduce me to your wife and family and let us all have a friendly cup of tea together in your back parlor. Don't stare, my good Wag, but fill your glass. I don't want to buy your little Wags, but I happen to have more of the ready, as you call it, than I want, so I'll put them to school or what you like. What say you?"

Jeremiah rubbed his eyes as though doubtful if he were awake, and then uttered his thanks for such extraordinary kindness in the best way he was able, and about an hour after the whimsical little old rich gentleman was sitting by the side of Mrs. Wag, with a little curly-headed Wag on each knee, while the rest were playing round or gazing open mouthed at the stranger with childish wonder.

By degrees all stiffness wore off, and, before the evening concluded, nothing could exceed the merriment of the whole party.—The eccentric elderly gentleman had learned to call all the Wags by their names, and he played and frolicked, and rolled upon the floor with the little people, in a style that made the parents suspect, with the landlord, that he must be "cracked."

However, at parting, he became more serious, and invited Jeremiah to come and breakfast with him in the morning, and to bring with him a copy of the names and birthdays of his children, as entered in the family Bible.

Mr. and Mrs. Wag, of course, lay awake for an hour that night, talking over the strange incidents of the day, and perhaps building a few castles in the air, after the style of affectionate parents for their children.

On the following morning Jeremiah dressed himself in his Sunday suit, and repaired to fulfill his engagement. His new old friend received him in the most cordial manner, and they breakfasted together, chatting over family concerns as on the preceding day. When their repast was ended, the little gentleman read over the list of the young Wags, and smilingly observed:

"A jolly set of them. We must contrive to make them all good and happy Wags, if we can, eh? Eldest, Jerry, almost fourteen—useful to you in business. That's right, leave him there, eh? Then three girls running, Mary, Anne and Fanny. Pack them off to a good school too. Never mind. Then comes William, eight and Stephen seven. Think I know where to place them. Just the right age. Perhaps can't do it at once, though. That's all I can take at present. The other three, Sarah, Henry and Phillip, too young. Well, my worthy Wag, you will hear what I mean to do with them before long, and a friend of mine will call upon you some day to consult about the best way of increasing your business. Settle all in time. No more to say now, but good-by—eh? Carriage is at the door said the landlord.

"That's right!" exclaimed the extraordinary elderly gentleman. "Good by, my worthy Wag! Remember me to Mrs. Wag, and give my love to all the little Wags. Ten besides yourselves! A dozen Wags in one family! Never expected to see such a sight! Never expected to see such a sight as that! He, he, he! See it again, though, hope. Wag together, all of you, like a bundle of sticks, hope!" And, laughing and uttering similar incoherent sentences alternately, he walked briskly along the passage to his carriage, into which he forthwith jumped, and, having repeated his valediction to the astounded shopkeeper, ordered the postillion to drive on.

Thus Jeremiah was prevented from expressing his grateful feelings for such wonderful promises, and so stood gaping in silence till the carriage was out of sight.

"Why, you seem regularly 'mazed, neighbor!" exclaimed the landlord.

"Enough to make me," replied Mr. Wag. "If one half what I've heard this morning should come true, I shall be a lucky fellow, that's all!"

"The old fellow's cracked," observed Titus Twist. "He's a gentleman, however, every inch of him, that I will say for him. Didn't make a word about nothing. All right. Used to good living, no doubt. More's the pity, as he's cracked. He certainly ought not to be allowed to travel without a servant, as he does."

"Well," observed Jeremiah, "I don't know what to say or what to think about it; but, if he is cracked—humph! I don't know. It may be so. However, there's no harm done yet!"

"So he's been cramming you, eh?" said mine host. "Made you a present of the moon, perhaps? They do fancy strange things, and think themselves kings, and very rich in particular."

The truth of this latter assertion made an impression upon our worthy shopkeeper, who communicated it to his wife; but she had taken a great fancy to the odd old gentleman, and was not to be shaken in her conviction that he would really be "as good as his word."

"Well," observed her husband, "time will show; and, at all events, it was no bad thing to sell six pieces of fine linen at once. We don't have such customers every day.—However, the best thing we can do is to keep our own secret; for, if the neighbors were to hear of it, they would laugh at us."

Mrs. Wag agreed in the propriety of her spouse's suggestion, but, nevertheless, was unable to refrain from dropping hints to sundry gossips concerning her anticipations of coming good fortune; and the vagueness and mysterious importance of her manner created a sensation and caused many strange surmises. Some decided that the Wags had been so imprudent as to purchase a whole lottery ticket, and blamed them accordingly, while others shook their heads, and hinted that, with so large a family, it would be a very fortunate circumstance if Jeremiah could manage so as not to go back in the world; and, for their parts they never liked to hear folks talk mysteriously about good luck; so, for some

time, the stranger's visit appeared to have produced results the reverse of beneficial; but at the end of a month, an elderly gentleman dressed in black, entered the shop, and requested a private interview with Mr. Wag; and as the back parlor was full of little Wags, then undergoing the ceremonies of ablation, combing, etc., he proposed that they should adjourn to the King's Arms.

When they were seated there, the stranger very deliberately proceeded to arrange a variety of papers upon the table in a business-like manner; and when his task was completed, apparently to his satisfaction, he smiled, rubbed his hands, and thus addressed the wondering shopkeeper:

"My name is Stephen Goodfellow. I am an attorney, living in London; and there (handing a card) is my address. You will probably guess who my client is, but my instructions are to conceal his name. Well he has consulted me as to the best mode of carrying your intention of increasing your business into effect, and I have, consequently, had interviews with certain commercial gentlemen, and, ahem! the result is, that as the thing must be done gradually, I have to present you, in the first place, with this order for a thousand pounds.—You will then be so good as to sign this document, by reading which you will perceive that you cannot be called upon for repayment before the expiration of three years. Ahem! don't interrupt me. That will do to begin with; but, after a little while, as you must give credit, and some of your commodities, particularly grocery, amount to considerable sums, you may want more, so—ahem!—yes, this is the paper. You are to put your usual signature here; and, mark me, in precisely six months from this day, an account will be opened in your name with the London bankers, whose check-book I now present you with. They will have assets in their hands, and instructions to honor your drafts for any sum or sums not exceeding four thousand pounds. You understand?"

"I hear what you say, sir," stammered Jeremiah, "but, really, I'm so astonished that—"

"Well, well," observed Mr. Goodfellow, smiling, "it certainly is not an every day transaction, but my respected client is a little eccentric, and so we must allow him to do things in his own way. He has taken a fancy to you, that's clear, and when he takes anything in hand he doesn't mind trifles."

"But so much!" exclaimed Mr. Wag.—"One thousand—four thousand—five thousand pounds! It is like a dream! Surely, sir," and he hesitated; "surely the gentleman can't be in—ahem!—in his right senses?"

"Sound as a bell," replied the lawyer.—"I hope you may have as clear a head to carry on your new business. At present you are a little bewildered, that's plain enough, but no great marvel. However, my time is precious, so just let me have your signature, and I'm off."

He then placed the papers before Jeremiah, who, after a little more demur, and a great deal of trepidation, wrote his name twice, and received the money order and the banker's check-book. Mr. Goodfellow then ordered a chaise, and chatted familiarly till it was ready, when he shook Mr. Wag by the hand, wished him good luck, and departed.

"I told you so!" exclaimed Mrs. Wag, when her spouse related the morning's adventure. "He seemed so fond of the children. I knew how it would be. But you should have asked his name. I wonder who he can be! Some great lord, no doubt! Well, bless him, whoever he is. O Jerry! my dear Jerry Wag! I feel as if I was going to cry. How foolish! Well, I can't help it, and that's the truth." And the good housewife wiped her eyes, and then threw her arms round the neck of her dearly beloved Wag, who, albeit that he was unused to the melting mood, found his eyes suddenly grow dim, and so they performed a weeping duet together.

Much marveling, of course, there was in the town and neighborhood at the steady increase in Mr. Wag's "concern," in spite