

# **Ingrates at Bagshaw's**

## **Divers Vanities**

**by Arthur Morrison, 1863-1945**

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THOUGH it was not in the main road Bagshaw's was a place as well known as the parish church. It was, indeed, in a by-street, but hard by the end that joined the chief market of the neighbourhood. Bagshaw was a chemist and druggist, and his shop, once filling no more than the space of one room in a six-roomed house, had grown into the houses on each side and up toward their roofs, till, like a great flaming cancer, it had assimilated and transformed the whole triple structure, and, with shop, storerooms, and what not, left but one old room at the first-floor

back that was unused by way of trade. It was in this room that old Nye and his wife bestowed themselves at night.

Well it was for them, said many, that they had fallen into the hands of such a man as Mr. Bagshaw: else the workhouse had been their portion long since. Old Nye had been a soldier, but all that now remained of his soldering was a Crimean medal that was never seen. He was a grey, neutral sort of old man, a docile fulfiller of orders, prompted through the world by his wife, and aimless away from her. She grew old, unsteady, and peevish, as, indeed, did he. They snarled at each other by fits, but they were never far apart. To all who would see they stood a monument of Mr. Bagshaw's zeal in good deeds. For twelve years and more had they enjoyed of his charity the shelter of the top back room, such cast-off clothes as could not be sold, and a not infrequent shilling. On their part they

Scrubbed the floors,  
Cleaned the windows and the paint,  
Polished the brass plates,  
Washed the bottles,  
Swept,  
Dusted,  
Carried coals,  
Cleaned stoves,  
Washed towels and dusters,  
Ran on errands,  
Licked labels,

and when Mr. Bagshaw was too busy to go home at midday they cooked chops and washed plates. When it was muddy, too, old Nye cleaned Mr. Bagshaw's boots, and when it was dry summer he refreshed the shop-front with new paint. What the old couple did with their leisure was not known; some feared they wasted it in idleness. Others held it ill that comfortable berths should exist for them that had pensions, though most knew that old Nye had none. He was not an interesting old soldier; he told no stories, and even his limp, he said, he got from falling off a ladder. When first he came under Mr. Bagshaw's protection he would have liked to wear his medal on his waistcoat, as he had done aforetime; but Mr. Bagshaw taught him that he should rather be ashamed of having once given himself to the trade of murder, and the medal was hidden shamefacedly away.

For Mr. Bagshaw was a man of influence among the meaner minds about him: an elevating force through all Bow. Not a chapel revival meeting but was the goodlier and the juicier for his fervid exhortings—even for his presence: not a prayer-meeting but gained in desert by his copious invocations. He had become stout and round-faced in his prosperity, but the face was pale, smooth, and flat, and bore no trace of any bodily indulgence that was not respectable. He walked in the street with his head thrown back, the cape of his Inverness cloak flung wide over his shoulders, black silk lining outward, and his expression that of joyous piety. Altogether a man of great popular account. He was a guardian of the poor, and in that capacity had long maintained a dignified struggle against oakum picking in the casual ward: a task dishonouring to the workers, a thing destructive of the dignity of labour and an insult to the higher humanity. More, he was a vestryman: and the navvies found him a ready champion in their protest against

the use of pauper labour on the roads. So that his virtues were not unregarded of the people, and, indeed, he had his reward, even in business. In his shop, withal, his excellence shone undimmed. He had no medical or surgical qualifications, yet he freely gave the best advice he could to the suffering poor who came for drugs, and not one was sent empty away, so long as he had some money to offer, however little, for medicine. For, once the sum available were ascertained, it were hard indeed if something could not be made up that should come within the price, and moreover, leave the shade of profit that was Mr. Bagshaw's just due. But some payment there must be, for then was the beneficiary's self-respect and independence maintained; and there was no credit, for debt destroyed the moral fibre. It is the duty of a philanthropist to consider such things for his ignorant neighbours.

And so Mr. Bagshaw, diligent in his business, prospered in well-doing. Even his maintenance of Old Nye and his wife was not all loss. In addition to the services their natural gratitude prompted them to render, there came two several five-pound notes from an officer of Nye's old regiment whose servant the old man had been, and these went some way toward repayment for their lodging and expenses, which, indeed, were not over-large after all. Moreover, there was no necessity for a boy, nor for a charwoman. Still, there were vexations. The Nyes grew old and ineffectual. Their admiration of their patron's discourses and invocations led them to his chapel in clothes that were disgraceful to a respectable place of worship, and reflected discredit on himself; to these intrusions, however, he put an end. Then it was found that Nye had pawned his old silver watch—had gone straight from Mr. Bagshaw's establishment into a low pawnshop, and had probably been seen. True, he was penitent, when taxed with the fault, but the thing was done.

But chiefly, the old couple aged fast. There came a time when old Nye was unsafe on the steps as he cleaned the windows, and when, in fact, the windows were very ill cleaned. His sight was bad, too, and he knocked down jars. He grew slow on errands, and forgot them half-way. Once he broke a window as he staggered by with a shutter; he could not carry a scuttle without dropping a trail of coal, and bottles, in the washing, slipped from his shaking hands and smashed. The mild young shop assistant helped him, but he had work of his own, and there was no concealing the old man's growing uselessness. He felt it himself, and strove to hide it in a show of alacrity and nimbleness that made things worse. As for the old woman, though her wits remained the clearer, she failed otherwise worse than he. She would drop in a heap from her chronic rheumatism, and her share of the chafing would fall to be done by Old Nye, unequal to his own. Old Nye and his missis were worn out.

Clearly, the thing could not go on thus. Bagshaw's with smeared windows, half-polished brass, dirty floors—it would never do. Somebody else must be found to do the work. Certainly it would come more expensive, but it could not be helped; and by the favour of providence the business could well afford it. The question was how to get rid of old Nye and his wife. Popular as Mr. Bagshaw was, a little thing might destroy the general remembrance of his years of patient benignity. Fortunately a way presented itself.

Not far from Bagshaw's was a public-house where forms and trestle-tables still stood in front as they had done when Bow was a green village. Old Nye was

passing this place on some dimly-remembered errand, when a greengrocer's man said to three soldiers with whom he sat: "Look at that; 'e's a old soldier—Crimea. Ain't very bloomin', is 'e, not to look at?" Old Nye heard himself hailed, and one of the soldiers, reaching out, seized him by the arm. "Souse me, sergeant, you're going past the canteen. Come—don't be proud, if we are on'y young 'uns." And he drew old Nye to the seat beside him.

The old man would not stay long, for he had his errand, and must not seem slow. He was dull and preoccupied, and only answered, "Thank ye kindly," and replied to whatever was said with doubtful stammers and mumblings. But the beer comforted him, and presently he went his way with firmer steps.

Few of her neighbours' faults escaped the eyes and ears of Mrs. Webster, moralist. Indeed, she had observed the whole circumstances of old Nye's detention, from the door of the adjoining greengrocer's. Determined that Mr. Bagshaw should at least know how his forbearance was abused, she hastened at once to that philanthropist with a full report. Was it right that his dependant should thus openly disgrace him, carousing with common soldiers before a public-house?

Deeply pained as Mr. Bagshaw was, he saw his duty clearly. The Nyes must go. If all his years of patient effort had failed to arouse in them the proper moral sense, then the attempt was futile. Sorrowfully, but with unmistakable firmness, he announced his determination to old Nye. The old man stared and gulped, and clutched at the counter with the nearer hand. His gaze wandered round the shop and he mumbled dismally, but he said nothing. Having discharged a painful duty with a proper observance, Mr. Bagshaw retired behind the shop.

It was at least an hour ere old Nye came to Mr. Bagshaw, and, feebly and with a trembling dryness of the mouth, besought a reconsideration—at least a respite.

His wife was bad just then (she was, indeed, in bed at the moment) but would be better soon. They separated man and wife in the workhouse; and, perhaps, in a little while he could find another place. He was truly sorry; it should not occur again; and so forth. But Mr. Bagshaw's resolve was not to be shaken by mere words. This much he conceded nevertheless: that the pair should stay till the end of the week. For he reflected that he was not yet prepared with anyone to succeed them.

Old Nye did his futile best with the duties of both till Friday, when the old woman appeared again and went about her work as she had not done for months; so that Mr. Bagshaw half thought of the possibility of keeping her without her husband. In the dinner-hour, while Mr. Bagshaw was away, she talked to the mild assistant with deferential flattery, offered to clean down his shelves behind the dispensing screen, and asked a respectful question or two about the drugs she found there. At closing-time that night as the assistant reached his coat he heard old Nye say in the back scullery:

"There'll be the brass to clean fust thing in the mornin'; I'll go down the yard an' mix the ile and brick-dust ready."

"Not to-night," answered the old woman. "Rest now, Tom."

The mild assistant had never heard old Nye's Christian name before.



