

The Criminal Instinct

Inspector John Bryce was a hard man. His life, his daily contact with criminals of all sorts and conditions, had brought out all the stern and bitter side of his character. He had no mercy, and he showed none; and the prisoners who were brought to the Great Melbury Police Station did not, as a rule, expect any. They were a desperate lot, hardened, drink-sodden, brutal and hopeless. John Bryce looked upon them mostly as "studies." He had long ago ceased to think of them as human beings. He would examine a drunken man much as one would examine a curious insect in a museum, and I believe if he had had his way he would have shot a thief with as little compunction as he would have shot a poisonous snake. He was apparently heartless. Nevertheless, he had a soft side, and he discovered it one day when he least expected it.

It was a wretched, wet night. The rain dripped down the spouts and gurgled in the gutters, and every now and then the wind rushed up and dashed it vehemently against the window panes of the Great Melbury Street Police Station.

John Bryce raked up the coals in the grate and drew away from the dusty books on the desk nearer the fire. A fire was a blessing on a night like this, but John Bryce did not even feel thankful that he was not out in the streets like Policeman XXX., who was probably going past that very minute. He was glad of the fire, but he was glad that it was his fire and nobody else's.

As he sat staring into the red-hot coals the door of the outer office opened suddenly and let in a strong gust of rain and wind. There was a sound of footsteps crossing the wooden floor, the rustle of a mackintosh, and through his half-open door Bryce could see a stiff and burly policeman leading a crying child.

He got up slowly and yawned and stretched himself before he went out and then he pushed the door further open and stood eyeing the dripping and muddy child with an air of disgust.

"Lost?" he inquired briefly, and the policeman nodded.

"Parents a 'oliday makin', I reckon," he said. The child watched him carefully, and then turned to stare up into the big inspector's hard face as if she was wondering anxiously what the ogre would say to her. Her baby eyes were very blue—"the kind that get bleared so quickly," Bryce thought, and he snorted contemptuously.

"Well," he said, "you'd better leave her," and with a shake to his dripping mackintosh and a brief good-night, the policeman departed.

Bryce looked at the child. She was a very stunted little thing, with red hair and wonderful eyes and skin. Bryce noted none of those things. He was trying to read the common story of drink, brutality and neglect in the ragged petticoats and hopeless shoes, and with an awkward movement he pulled open the door of the inner office and gruffly bid her go in.

When she was seated before the fire, stretching out her little toes to the warmth, he caught himself looking at her interestedly. He looked at her red hair and bright eyes, and fancied he detected signs of the criminal in her little upturned nose and childish mouth.

The firelight played on her dimpled chin. John Bryce watched it and tried to imagine what it would be in years to come when it had grown coarse and bloated and ugly. For it would grow coarse and bloated and ugly. He could see the criminal in the child face already—there was cunning in her glance, deceit in the droop of her eyelids and her hair was red, that peculiar East End red that Melbury street knew so well. Just now the child was pretty enough, but John Bryce was not an artist, and he did not notice that.

He rested his chin on his hand and wondered what her mother was like. Drunk, of course; father a beast, home none to speak of—probably a low lodging house in a foul alley, with a gutter for a playground and thieves for companions. He had seen thousands of such children. He had seen them grow up, too, and would probably see many more. They all came to the same end. They all came to the Great Melbury Street Police Station in time.

He turned away to the ledgers and documents that were strewn on his desk, but somehow his thoughts

face something seemed to loosen at his throat.

"Come along," he said abruptly. "Let's see if we can't find some more goodies in the cupboard yonder."

Ten minutes later he had thrown his dignity to the air, and was cutting the tarts into pieces for her to eat.

In the midst of this edifying occupation the outer door burst open, and some one walked in, bringing with him the usual accompaniment of mud and water and gusty rain.

"I must go—just for a minute," he said to the child, and an instant later he was confronting a red-headed, bloated individual, who inquired hoarsely for a child.

"What child?" asked the inspector.

"Er's goin' on fer three year," said the man, "An'er's got golden kehrls an' blue eyes, an'er's about this 'igh," measuring with his hands.

A sudden wish came to Bryce—a wish that an hour ago he would have sneered at the thought of. After all, he reflected, how much happier the child would be with him—better in every way if he kept her and trained her and brought her up properly. Thoughts of the streets, the wet, the drunken brute before him sent him plunging headforemost into a crowd of prevarications.

"We've no such child here," he said boldly. "The only one we've had here to-night was wizened and thin, and there was no golden curls about her. She had red hair—thick red hair and freckles."

But at this instant the inner door was pushed quietly open and a little face peered out and put him to confusion.

"Why, there 'er is," shouted the father indignantly. "An' bin there all th' time! O! should like ter know who you're a-kiddin' on? Red 'eaded! I like that, I do! 'Ere you," to the child, "come on—a-givin' me a rise like this—come on now, an' don't yew get a-goin' off no more."

He began crossing the room as he spoke, and Bryce stood stupidly watching the child. Then he stooped down and slipped a shilling into her hand.

"Don't tell daddy," he whispered—it never occurred to him that he was teaching the child deceit—and then he watched them leave the station and cross the road in the wind and rain and slush.

Just as they reached the other side the child dropped her shilling, and the next minute he was dragging her back to the public house they had just passed.

John Bryce watched them disappear through the swing doors with feelings that he thought had completely died away in him.

"Criminals," he said. "Criminals, both of them. It's in the blood, and she'll grow up like the rest, and some day she'll come back here."

Six months later, for some strange reason which is inexplicable in this world of riddles, he had never succeeded in forgetting the dirty child who had eaten his jam tarts. There is a weakness in all human hearts, and John Bryce's weakness had found him out and penetrated a heart that was apparently impenetrable. He sat in his office, gruffer than ever, but all the same he was conscious of a longing and a loneliness that at times made him think that he was growing old.

One night he was out late, and he came back through some low-lying slums and alleys, where filthy houses were crowded together—human kennels filled with struggling masses of men and women and helpless children. In the daytime there were children everywhere—children on the doorsteps, children in the gutters, children rolling on the dirty pavements—"undeveloped criminals," he still called them. But to-night he sighed as he passed the places where they were huddled together.

He had turned a corner into a narrow street, when he suddenly became aware of an unusual glare in the sky. He watched it for a moment as it grew and spread, and then a fire engine dashed quickly past him. The next minute he had turned and followed it.

When he reached the scene of the fire he found a throng of excited faces staring upwards at the smoke

and sparks and angry flames. The light flickered up and down, and cast strange shadows on their faces, and a breathless suspense seemed to hold the crowd.

Apparently the fire was entirely beyond the control of the firemen, for the heavy streams of water that splashed and hissed on the horrid bricks did not seem to have the least effect. The fire roared and crackled, and shot up its yellow tongues to the sky as if it was a fiend mocking their helplessness.

The buildings were doomed, but all the inmates were safe in the street below except one, and he had rushed back suddenly without warning and had disappeared in the midst of the smoke and flame.

It was suicide, simple suicide, said the crowd, and he was a man with a child, too.

Then a sudden suspicion seized them, and there were hurried whispers that no one had seen anything of the child—that no one had seen her that night since her father had gone out to get drunk, as usual, at the "Three Crowns" round the corner.

Then, argued the crowd, the child was in the building, and that was the reason why the man had gone back in that foolhardy fashion; and they strained forward, staring up at the pitiless fire, calling hoarsely to the man to come back.

Minutes passed, the flames spread and grew; the houses seemed to shake and totter, and then at last, after what seemed an interminable time, a man appeared at a window with a bundle in his arms.

A dozen men rushed forward with a ladder. It was reared steadily against the cracking walls, and he crawled out of the window to descend.

John Bryce stood below, watching eagerly. He saw the man clutch the child in his arms; he heard him cry out suddenly, and then the fire burst out with renewed vigor, the smoke curled up, the flames licked and writhed about the ladder, and then the child fell suddenly and swiftly into Bryce's arms.

He held her tightly and shouted hoarsely to the man that the child was safe.

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When John Bryce looked down at him he wondered whether the drunken criminal was a hero, after all.

When Bryce found that the child's mother was dead, too, he tucked her under his arm and took her home. When he pulled her out of the dirty shawl which enveloped her, her eyes seemed bigger and bluer than ever, her hair just as red; but he failed to notice the possibilities for evil in her childish face. He kissed her—very foolishly—and then roused his wife, to her great indignation, from her beauty sleep. But when she saw the child she sat up in bed, and held out her arms to her.

"Oh, John," she cried, "it's our little Alice come back again."

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