

KILLING NO MURDER;

OR THE FORTUNATE DEATH OF MR. JOHN PARR.

By H. STUART DOIG



MORROW had descended upon the office of the Dulltown *Evening Buster*. To be explicit, the resources of the establishment had run out, and the bailiffs had come in. It was the culminating episode in a long series of bitter tribulations, and the staff, who were all in arrears of salary, felt the blood chill in their veins. To them the *Buster* was a sacred thing, dear to their hearts as the ship to the master mariner, as the regimental flag to the soldier. For many weary months they had fought the good fight, the hope that the old *Buster* would yet turn the corner still springing eternal in their breasts. But with the bailiffs in, the enemy within their gates, it was evident that the game was up. Only a miracle could save them, and the age of miracles, like the age of chivalry, had departed. Chivalry and bailiffs: the combination was unthinkable.

The battle had been a hard one indeed. Expenses had been cut down until there was nothing more to cut. The compositors, whose interests were in the paternal care of a father of the chapel—with a Typographical Society in the background—were the only members of the staff who were paid in full; the literary and commercial staff were largely paid with I.O.U.'s. It stimulated them to greater efforts—and greater economies. Such of them as had wives and families to support, and for whom I.O.U.'s buttered no parsnips, had gradually drifted away. Only those remained who were single and had other means of subsistence. It was a staff, not indeed of "lusty bachelors," but of shabby, careworn, and harassed men, a saddened collection of journalistic amphibians.

The editor eked out a precarious existence by canvassing for insurance policies. The chief reporter played the trombone in the local music-hall. The manager, who clung to his post in the hope of being appointed Official Receiver, supplemented the spasmodic emoluments of his office by "farming" and advertising space on the programme of the Dulltown Theatre Royal, and by drafting what are known as "display" and "reason-why" advertisements for local advertisers. The reporters, who were mostly vegetarians, lived chiefly on hope and on the proceeds of "penny-a-lining," or acting as district correspondents for the news supply agencies, and for newspapers in other cities. When there was an epidemic of fires, murders, or suicides they flourished. When the unexpected refused to happen, they tightened their belts—and waited. How the sub-editor lived, heaven alone knew. In the office it was vaguely understood that he subsisted on the proceeds of selling "exchanges" for waste-paper.

The bailiffs took up their quarters in the machine room. In the technical phrase they "sat on" the Victory printing press; and never, if there be any sense of tears in mortal things, could that superannuated cheater of the scrap heap have felt less victorious. They were very much in the way of old Greaser, the dour Scots machineman, who, when he saw them sitting by the boiler fire for once forgot to be apprehensive lest the boiler might burst. But at least they were out of the sight of the public, and that was the essential thing. Had they been less tactfully handled they might have insisted on sitting in the front office, with disastrous results. For your advertiser is a shy bird and a suspicious; and your bailiff a figure undisguisable.

Now there was some peril of such an untoward development. For the editor, riven with the pangs of hunger, was indiscreet enough to approach these minions of the law with the tempting offer of a cheap accident policy. It was a suggestion not unnaturally regarded by them as deliberate insolence and veiled threatening, to be rebutted with the fearful and wonderful language familiar in their mouths as household words.

Happily the manager, who was a person of tact, came timely to the rescue, and making a levy on the staff sent out for refreshments. Funds were low, and the proceeds only permitted him to rise to a small tin of Bovril, which anybody less desperate might well have hesitated to offer to altercationing bailiffs. Luckily it was an exceedingly cold day, and the Bovril could be heated in the boiler-room,

whither these menacing characters were ultimately decoyed. In a fine glow of exultation the manager went back to his office, and drew up an alluring advertisement on "Bovril for Bailiffs," which he hoped to sell to the local agent for at least half-a-crown.

Upstairs in the reporters' room the gloom which had settled on the office of the *Buster* seemed to have thickened. The floor was littered with papers; an unglazed pane in the window was inadequately stuffed with back numbers; and the draught menaced two flickering candles, stuck in empty beer bottles. It was a place redolent with the delicate flavour of mild decay. There was no fire in the rusty iron stove, but Jack Parr and Tim Blacker, the only occupants of the room, sat in front of the cheerless grate from force of habits contracted in better days. It was Parr who broke the depressing silence with a mirthless laugh.

"And so, Tim," he said, "it's all over but the shouting. All things come to him who waits. I've got the sack, and the *Buster* has got to the end of its bag of tricks."

And he pulled a letter from his pocket and read it again, for the tenth time. It was his letter of dismissal. Parr had been unfortunate enough to offend a big advertiser, and Nemesis had taken the shape of a fortnight's notice.

"How was I to know that the wretched man was a 'standing ad'?" he went on. "He doesn't even trade under his own name."

Blacker expressed his sympathy. Parr's was indeed a hard case. Sent to review a local picture-show, he had unhappily "slated" the one picture that prudence would have made immune.

"I praised all the rotten daubs of the local daubers," he grumbled, "and I got no thanks. When I came to that unspeakable 'Study of a Billiard Room' it was the last straw. I thought it a duty to point out that the little fat man in the shirt-sleeves, who was apparently the marker, was about to pot his opponent's ball, and that was not playing the game."

"Sound billiards, anyhow," said Blacker.

"No, the biggest break I ever made. The little fat man was a portrait study of our friend 'Pale Pills for Pink People.' The *Buster* lost the ad., and I lost my billet. I go at the end of the month. Thank goodness I'm still correspondent for the *Blanktown Herald*."

"You're better off than I am," said Blacker. "The Ubiquitous News Agency has given me the knock." "They're the people who have put in the bailiffs, aren't they?"

"Same crew," said Blacker, and he threw a letter across the table.

Misfortunes were coming to the staff of the *Buster*, not in single spies, but in battalions. The letter was brief and unequivocal:

"THE UBIQUITOUS NEWS AGENCY,
Fleet Street, London.

"Dear Sir:—We regret to inform you that we have been compelled to take proceedings to recover the amount of our long overdue account from the Dulltown *Evening Buster*. In the circumstances, we consider it undesirable that our Dulltown correspondence should emanate from the *Buster* office, and we shall therefore not require your services after the end of the present month. Yours truly,

"JOHN MARSHALL, Manager."

"Now I know," muttered Blacker, as he threw the offending document into the desolate fireplace, "why Marshall is known in Fleet Street as 'Marshall Saxe.'"

* * * * *

The two reporters met again in the evening, and took council of despair with one another. The outlook was depressing indeed, and the more they looked at it the worse it seemed.

"I wish to heaven," said Parr, gloomily, "that I could raise a fiver for a steerage ticket to Canada. And I've nothing portable left to sell, except myself."

"Why not sell that?" suggested Blacker. His own prospects were so gloomy that slavery looked comparatively attractive.

"I suppose that the College of Surgeons is still open," Parr went on. "But in the first place, I don't fancy that they would give me a fiver for post-mortem rights over this battered and debilitated frame. In the second, I don't like the idea of being

worth more dead than alive. It's a direct incentive to suicide."

"There are worse things than suicide," Blacker retorted. "Starvation, for example. I don't want to go about with an obituary notice written in my face. Wouldn't you rather let your friends write it and turn an honest half-crown for themselves?"

"I suppose you would write me up well?" Parr suggested.

"Of course I would," was the reply. "One good turn deserves another."

And he took a pencil from his pocket, and rapidly sketched a sample obituary telegram:

"Blacker, Dulltown, to Ubiquitous News Agency, London.

"Shocking occurrence Dulltown to-day. Jack Parr, well-known Dulltown journalist, member reporting staff Dulltown *Evening Buster*, having been ejected from lodgings for non-payment of rent, committed suicide by shooting himself through head. Death instantaneous. Sum of threepence halfpenny found in deceased's pockets, so no immediate motive can be assigned for rash act."

"Gad," said Parr, as Blacker threw the suggested despatch across to him, "you turn me off like a professional executioner. I feel as though someone were walking over my grave."

"I suppose we never would be missed," quoted Blacker. "But I'm depressed enough already, I think I'll go and drink tea; it's cheaper than hemlock, and easier to get."

Parr worked on alone for awhile, writing out a despatch for the *Blanktown Herald*. It was his only remaining prospect of income, and he laboured to pad out his story—an account of the annual meeting of the Society for Providing Nightshirts for Niggers in Nicaragua. The difficulty was to find polysyllables enough. Polysyllables occupy space, and at a penny a line every syllable tells. Dr. Johnson (he thought as he scribbled away) would have made a triumphant penny-a-liner. Was it not the immortal Doctor who observed of someone's poem that it had not life enough to keep it sweet. "No," he added, with the true instinct of the penny-a-liner, "it possesses insufficient vitality to preserve it from putrefaction."

Parr was just finishing his message when Tommy, the office boy, looked in.

"You're wanted at the telephone, sir," he said, "in the sub-editor's room."

"Right you are, Tommy," he replied, as he wound up his despatch with "The proceedings then terminated." The phrase is scarcely new; indeed, it clamours for cremation. But it's repeated use cost Parr never a pang of compunction. He was expert at making barren commonplaces burst into full and kindly blossom—at the usual rates.

He was detained for quite a while at the telephone, taking down in shorthand a biographical sketch of the Principal Boy at the local pantomime. She had ordered a hundred copies, and that elevated the transaction into rare and welcome importance.

"Tommy," he said to the office boy, as he opened the door of the telephone box, "run upstairs and get my message for the *Blanktown Herald*. You'll find it on the table. And shin off to the post office with it as fast as you can. It's late enough already."

Tommy ran upstairs. On the table he found the message, "Parr to *Blanktown Herald*," and, lying cheek-by-jowl with it, another message, "Blacker to Ubiquitous News Agency," containing Blacker's morbid and entirely imaginary account of Parr's dramatic suicide. Now, Tommy lived by gratuities which the reporters gave him for carrying their telegraphic messages to the post office, and to him two messages were better than one. He went to the drawer where the signed telegraphic passes were kept, the printed slips which authorise the post office to forward a press message and charge it to the recipient's account. Pinning a pass to each, and taking no further interest in either, he hurried to the post office, and in a few minutes both messages were speeding over the wires, a long and safe one to the *Blanktown Herald*, a short but hopelessly mendacious one to London, where it was in due course sent out again by the Ubiquitous News Agency to the hundred or so newspapers up and down the country that subscribed for its news services.

"Give a piece of bad news a start," someone has