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POOR DOCUMENT

Two Blooming Bay Trees.

The Adventures of Two Criminals.

BY DOUGLAS WINTON.

"I have seen the wicked . . . spreading himself like a green bay-tree."—Psl. xxvii. v. 35.

(Continued.)

CHAPTER XVIII.

Two Old Friends to the Rescue.

Old Mr. Van Coortvelt was chuckling grimly. Poor old gentleman, he had been so henpecked and daughter-driven these latter years of his life, that who could grudge him the satisfaction of anticipating a little fun "on his own" for once? And he was going to have it. With the help of Inspector Mackay he was going to enjoy the pleasure of getting even with a man who had buncoed him; and he chuckled in anticipation as he read the following telegram, which had just arrived:—

"All arranged. Will send a man to bring you to Vauxhall Viaduct by back entrance. Expect him at ten o'clock tonight.

"Inspector MACKAY."

And now let us go back a day and see how this telegram came to be sent.

Piggy having ordered and paid for the provisions, books, charts, and so on, and made certain that they would duly go on board the Sea Queen at the time stated, was pacing the streets of Whitechapel—he had ordered the provisions at a big East End ship chandler's—puzzling his brains as to how he was going to set about getting hold of the person of Van Coortvelt. He knew his plans, or rather the Inspector's plans the trap of the advertisement and the house in Vauxhall Viaduct, and they did not know that he knew. That, as he had remarked to Jack, was one point; also, he had in his pocket a duplicate of Van Coortvelt's latchkey—that was another. Yet, somehow, plan as he would, he did not seem able to hit on any workable scheme for successfully spiriting the little millionaire from Park Lane, and getting him on board the Sea Queen at Gravesend. A dozen at least he had turned over in his mind, only to cast them aside as impracticable.

Piggy, the man of many changes, was at present, as at Southampton, in outward appearance a prosperous yachtsman—an appearance which, though useful enough for the purpose of giving a wholesale sea stores order, was a little out of keeping with an East London crowd at night time. Though wide enough awake generally, he had, like all thinkers, at times a way of forgetting his surroundings in his thoughts. He was doing so now, but was suddenly brought back to the actuality of things by feeling a brisk tug at his watch-chain. Instinct rather than reasoned movement—for to be seen at a police-court even as prosecutor, was no part of his game—sent him pushing through the crowd at top speed after the thief. The latter doubled, ran up a side street, then up another, and finally dodged into a court, Piggy always at his heels. A reserve of caution had kept him from more than following; he had not given tongue, he had not called, "Stop thief!" Thus no one had taken up the chase; he and the robber were alone in a cul de-sac. The latter made another attempt to double, was cleverly tripped by Piggy, and came heavily down on the cobble stones with which the court was paved. When he opened his eyes, he saw a stoutish gentleman standing over him, readjusting his watchchain and regarding him intently. Piggy was, in fact, asking himself, "Now, where the devil have I seen that fellow before?"

Had there been any passers by, Mr. Albert Peachey would not have lost heart, for the party of Law and Order was generally in a big minority thereabouts; but his clever run for safety had recoiled on himself; they were absolutely alone. He wondered what the swell was going to do—give him a hiding (he looked as if he could), tie him up and fetch the police, or what? But the swell seemed in no hurry to make up his mind; meanwhile surveyed him gravely. Presently he spoke as follows:—

"It is sad, my poor erring friend!" and that was all. When Piggy had got so far, he stopped short, fairly amazed at the marvellous impression, which these first words of a speech of good counsel and brotherly love seemed to have on the individual before him.

The latter raised himself abruptly on his elbow and stared at Piggy as if galvanized; then, subsiding again weekly on to the cobbles, said resignedly—

"Go on, guv'oor. I knows th' tale. You're th' Reverend John 'Awtree, 'it us over th' boko viv a hiron jemmy, gif us some licker, turn-us-raound-like-away-th'-number-yer-first-thought-of-an'-where-aw-yer? kind o' gime it is, an' I fair booked for ter ply it. Oh! I knows, yer can't kid me. I see Bill Womsley in quod, I did, 'im what yer put away. Go on, guv'nor, I'm in th' presence o' a superior hintelligence, an' I reggersnize th' fac'. Gaw hon! I'm resigned!"

On Piggy, a great light was breaking. He could hardly keep from laughing; but, after a minute, managing to discipline his voice to a proper degree of severity, he thundered—

"Get up!"

It seemed to Piggy that he might find a use for Mr. Albert Peachery.

"Now, my friend," he said, as sternly as ever, as the latter came limply to attention, "I want a little private conversation with you. Where can we have it?"

"Why, 'ere, guv'nor."

"No, I intend you to do some thing for me, and at present you don't look as if you were capable of undertaking much hard work for anyone. I want to feed you first, then I'll tell you what you've got to do. You've got to be a man for twenty-four hours or so, and you shall earn—twenty pounds."

"Mr. Peachey's eyes glistened.

"S'elp me bob, sir, but you're right about that there food an' drink," he whinned, looking indeed a sufficiently miserable object, as he stood there in his dirt and rags. "Ain't tasted bite nor sup since yesterday mornin', I ain't; I'm fair starved, I am. It's that what druv me to——"

"Shut up! and lead the way to a respectable coffee-house."

By the way in which Mr. Albert Peachey stowed away ham and eggs and bread and butter, it was evident that his hunger, at all events, was not assumed. When he had consumed provisions to the extent of eighteenpence, for which Piggy, whom the waitress took for a benevolent gentleman doing a little slumming, paid they went on to a small public, where Piggy, finding an empty corner, installed himself and friend over a quart pot of beer. When the latter had had a swig or two, he produced a dirty clay pipe and looked at it wistfully. Piggy understood; but it was not his intention that Mr Peachey should settle down just yet to an evening's enjoyment. Putting his hand into his pocket he produced some silver.

"Is that a doss-house over the way?" he said, pointing to a big doorway, with a knot of evil-looking men lounging about it.

"Why, yes, guv'nor," Mr. Peachey replied; "good beds, fourpence and sixpence; but them's sooperior, them tanner bed is; I mind the time—"

"Keep your reminiscences till I ask for them."

Piggy reached over and took his companion's battered hat.

"'Ere guv'nor, what the—"

"Silence, you brute!" said Piggy savagely

He had decided that taming by kindness was no way to deal with Mr. Peachey.

"Here is ten shillings. Go over, bareheaded, as you are, and find some man willing to sell a hat and an overcoat, not too ragged, but ragged enough. We are about of a size; so if it fits you, it will fit me. You are not to go in. Do your bargaining at the door, and remember that I can see you. When you have got them, come straight back here. Then there will be some more beer for you, with gin in it, and some tobacco.

Thus commanded, Mr. Peachey crossed the street, and Piggy could see him talking to the men at the big doorway, one of whom soon disappeared into the house, to return shortly with a hat and coat, which, after trying, Mr. Peachey accepted, handing some money to the vendor; but Piggy, who watched closely, saw that, after the conclusion of the bargain, his hand again sought his pocket.

"Well, how much did they cost?" Piggy asked, sharply, as Mr. Peachey entered the public.

"Ten bod, guv'nor, weren't that what you tol' me?"

Piggy plunged his hand into the other's pocket and drew out two shillings.

"Don't you know better than to play the fool with me?" he said. "Now, then, outside."

"But what erbaout the ale, wiv gin in it, an' the bacca? Surlie a noble genelman like you wouldn't go for to—"

"Don't answer me, you beast!" said Piggy. "You are going to have them, but not here. Give me that hat; here is yours. Outside now!"

In the entrance to the first dark passage they came to, Piggy put on the coat that the other had bought thrusting the smart yachting cap into the pocket, having done which he carefully muddied his boots, Then, with the coat, which was a regular long tramp's overcoat, buttoned up to his chin, and the battered hat on his head, he looked no longer too respectable to be seen with his companion. On the other hand, he had only to throw away the hat and coat, reassume his cap and have his boots blacked, to become at once a swell yachtsman again. As for his gold-headed cane, he threw it away.

By Piggy's command, Mr. Peachey climbed on to the top of a Chelsea 'bus, Piggy after him. The latter handed the conductor eightpence for two full distance fares.

This last move was one of the soundest pieces of strategy that Piggy ever carried out. He wanted to use Mr. Peachey, but not that night; and he wished to keep him both submissive and quiet until the time to utilize his services. Now he knew from reading what Jack could have told him from actual experiences, that criminals of that low type are very local in their habits. Had he kept him in Whitechapel and got him a bed in an East End doss-house, he would have been amongst his intimates, would probably have got talking, perhaps with bolder spirits than himself; then might have come mutiny, trouble, and complications. So he was taking him right across London to a district where he would be as much a stranger and an outlaw amongst his own type as a street dog of Constantinople that 'has strayed into another ward.

It was getting on for nine o'clock when they dismounted, and Piggy looked about for a low public which did not seem to be too crowded. When he had found one to his liking, he entered, his companion after him. And now Piggy's manner altered a little. Without ceasing to be arbitrary, it ceased to be savage, was hardly even stern; became patronizing and kind, almost genial.

"Here, my friend," he said, handing him a pewter, "is yours."

Piggy had ordered two pints of ale and two glasses of gin, but unseen by Mr. Peachey, he had put both measures of spirit into the latter's pot.

"Here we are; you see I keep my promise—half ounce of shag, please, miss—and here is the tobacco. Now, as you are not going to do the piece of work I spoke of till tomorrow, I want you to have a good time tonight. The reason that I did not give you much liquor before was that I wished you to digest your supper."

Although that deception had no longer to be kept up, he was gradually re-assuming the bland tones that went with the character of the Rev. John Hawtree.

"A good solid meal first, then, perhaps—a-hem—in reason, a little harmless dissipation."

Mr. Peachey regarded him as one in a trance.

"Has a fawther careth for his kiddywiddies! Gorblimey! I wonder 'oo an' wot yer hare. Yer a fair knockout, 'ooever yer hare! Well, heres luck, capting."

Apparently Piggy's notion of a little harmless dissipation did not stop at one, nor two, not yet at three pewters; though he himself gave his own gin to his companion every time besides slily pouring a good part of his beer into the spittoon. About the end of the second pot, Mr. Peachey, whose tongue was now getting unloosed, said suddenly—

"By boss, d'yer know 'oo's livin' at that there doss-'ouse where I got yer th' coat an' :at?"

"No, how should I?" Piggy replied kindly.

"Oh! then yer don't know heverything! yer ain't quite a bloomin' gawd! Though yer hare a—hic—fair knockout. What'd yer say If I tol' yer that dossin' there—seen 'im myself several times, I dosses there when I got th' needful, I do-is that there selfsime bloke Childs-Gordon, what hus, that is you—oh! I dunno! oo's crib in Virgor Square we was all on for crackin' that there night o' blessed memory?"

He stoped, apparently waiting for Piggy to speak; but Piggy, though more than interested, judged it better not to risk a remark, as a person of Mr. Peachey's kind and present state of maudliness, is often liable to have the current of his thoughts suddenly diverted by the sound of the human voice. So he waited, in the hope that he would run on a himself, which he presently did:

"'Ee did a bunk too, since as th' likes o' me might, did Childs-Gordon but, bless yer! a toff! 'ee didn't know. Wented hoff, an' blewed heverythink at this yer Monte Carlo, or somewhere, an' now 'ee's back in th' smoke, on 'is uppers—hic—'oldin' kebs."

Once more he paused, looking for some remark from Piggy, but the latter still remaining silent, he went on:

(To be continued.)

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