

Old Purvis

It is now a good many years ago—I think a quarter of a century—since I read for the law, and lodged in Margaret street.

I had rooms on the ground floor, a front parlor and a bedroom behind.

I was then young, sanguine and bumptious. I am none of these now. I have been elbowed out of the way, and cold-shouldered enough to have the confidence and conceit taken out of me.

At the time I was in lodgings in Margaret street I knew a good many people in town—people, I mean, in society—and I went out as often as I cared.

My landlady put candlesticks and matches on the bench in the hall, and left the front door unbolted. If I came in late, with my latchkey, I looked to see how many candles stood on the bench, and if mine alone were there, then I bolted the front door. It was an understood thing that the last who came in from the theatre or a dinner party, should secure the door.

There were several lodgers in the house. I knew them by sight—but was not on speaking terms with any. They were not of my sort—not to be cultivated.

One night, after returning from dinner, I resolved to do a couple of hours' reading before going to bed. I had been remiss and an examination was approaching.

So I drew out my books, took off my stock, unbuttoned my shirt collar, turned up the reading-lamp, lighted my pipe and opened my case of spirits, that I might take a little weak brandy and water, to relieve the dryness of legal study. I had been reading for three-quarters of an hour, with a wet towel about my head, when my attention was attracted from my work by slight noise at the front door. I gave it no particular attention at first, but it continued, and thus forced notice on me.

"Hah!" said I to myself, "one of the lodgers has been dining out and has had a drop too much. He cannot get the key into the latch-hole." I shut my ears and tried to concentrate my thoughts on my book, but when I drew my fingers from my ears I was aware that the fumbling continued.

"Humph," said I, "that is what it is. Serve him right if he does not get in. Let him grope as much as he will, I'll not help him. A man ought to know when he has had enough and have the resolution to stop at that point."

I now listened with a grim satisfaction to the attempts made at the door, always ineffectually.

"The police will be down on him soon," said I.

Then I could hear that the person without pulled the bell. That rang downstairs in the kitchen and landlady's premises that were deserted at night.

"Much that will avail," muttered I. "Go on, ring—ring—no one will hear you."

But I did hear distinctly the tinkle of the bell below—like the voice of the ghost in "Hamlet" underground. Then pressure was applied to the door, but it did not yield. Again the bell was sounded and then again and again.

"Ring away, you fool," sneered I. "The landlady and servant live in the attic at night, and below the surface only by day."

"Once again the fumbling began at the lock. It seemed to me as though I heard the click of the latch. He had got the key into place and yet could not open the door."

"This had gone on I think a quarter of an hour, when all at once an idea shot through my brain that brought me to my feet with a jump.

"Good heavens! I bolted the door!" I ran out into the passage grandiloquently called "the hall," and there, on the bench, was a candlestick. I had not noticed it. Taking it for certain that I was, as usual, the last in, I had made the front door fast.

"You shall have a hot jorum," said I. "Pray draw your chair to the fire." This fellow-lodger had a hesitating, timid manner. I looked at him attentively now, as I removed the shade from the lamp. He was broad-shouldered with a stoop, his hair was thick and gray, and he had thick and gray whiskers and beard; no mustache—that appendage was not worn at the time, save by military men.

He had a pleasant, honest face, rough and burned with the sun; and his hands and feet were large and uncouth. The finger-nails were coarse and untrimmed. He wore ready-made clothes that did not fit him, and his movements were awkward. Even as he sat his position was uneasy at the edge of the chair. He was not a gentleman; indeed, he made no pretence to be one; but that he was a good, true and kindly man was what impressed itself on me immediately.

"You are quite sure, sir, I am not intruding?" "Not at all. Now look here, Mr. —. I beg pardon, I do not know your name."

"Purvis." "Mr. Purvis, this will not do. Draw nearer to the fire. Stand at it and warm yourself thoroughly. I can see by your trembling hands you have been chilled."

He obeyed and stood facing the fire. To stand with his back to it, his coat-tails expanded, would be a temerity and a familiarity of which he was incapable on a first acquaintance.

As he thus stood facing the fire and the looking-glass above it, his eye was caught by a card— "Sir William Marldon, Harley street."

"Oh!" he suddenly exclaimed, "do you know him?" "I have been dining at Lady Marldon's to-night."

"Din—ing at Lady Marldon's!" His face flushed, a light came into his eyes and he put his hand, his great, coarse, freckled hand, up to his mouth.

"Yes—why not?" "Oh, nothing—nothing. And you know Lady Marldon and the Barrow Knight?"

"Well," said I; "I could hardly have dined there had I not, could I? Then, as to his title—he is not a baronet."

"But, sir—you'll excuse my presumption—what is he, then? He's a sir, ain't he?" "Oh, yes, he's a sir. But then, every Jack and Tom who is knighted is a sir."

"But he has been knighted?" asked Mr. Purvis dubiously. "Certainly. But a knight is nothing. There are plenty of knights you could not meet in society. When they turn brewers and civil engineers into peers, they must go very low, indeed, for a mere knight."

I repeat that I was inordinately bumptious at this period of my existence and thought it chic to disparage and depreciate.

"Oh, he is only a mere knight," said Mr. Purvis meditatively and with a fall in his features. "Sir, with your good leave, I will sit down."

He took a chair and, leaning forward, passed one great palm over the back of his other hand. "Then, what is my lady?"

"You have been in the colonies," said I, "and you do not understand our social scale and our titles of honor. Of course, there are knights and knights. A knighthood in the army is one thing; a knighthood given to a tradesman who has been a mayor in a pokey little town is another thing. You look up to the first and down on the other."

"In—deed. But this Sir William Marldon?" "Oh! his knighthood is something different. He is in the law and that ranks with the army."

"Then he is something?" He looked up questioningly and with a curious entreaty in his eyes for a satisfactory answer.

don's Christian name was. However, I said no more on the topic and poured him out a still glass of rum and water.

"It looks towards you, sir, and I wish you all good things," said he, and raised the glass.

When he had done, he stood up, hesitatingly, and said, after a little effort with himself to overcome his shyness, "I hope, sir, I am not taking a liberty, but if I might just now and then—of an evening, when not intruding, and taking up your valuable time, if I might sir, have a little talk—I should take it kindly, sir, vastly kind, sir."

"By all means, Mr. Purvis, whenever suits your convenience. I am dull alone and shall be pleased to have a chat. There is your chair and here is the case—whiskey, rum or brandy, as you choose."

"Thank you, sir, thank you. You are very kind. I wouldn't interrupt if you was at all busy."

"I will be frank with you, Mr. Purvis. If I am engaged I will say so."

"Thank you, sir, thank you. I again wish you a good night."

So he withdrew.

This was the beginning of an acquaintance. I liked the man. I could not help liking him, and it flattered my youthful conceit to feel that I was patronizing this gray-haired man and that he was looking up to me.

He was singularly innocent of almost everything that concerns the etiquette and less convenances of society. But he was not a bore. I felt, though I did not at the time realize it, that in ever fibre of his mind and heart, old Purvis was the gentleman.

His spirit was singularly modest and shrinking, sensitive to a touch; but of the forms of social life he was totally ignorant. I would have trusted that man absolutely if he passed his word to me about any matter confidential to him; yet I should have been ashamed to the soles of my feet to have been seen walking with him in Regent street, because he walked with his shoulders like a boor, wore no gloves, was ill-dressed and looked the boor.

After this I saw a good deal of old Purvis in the evenings. I was affable, gracious to him, and he never presumed, and seemed humbly obliged to me for enduring his presence. He often turned the conversation upon the Marldons and inquired about Sir William and the lady, and whether I considered they were happy together, whether she were much regarded, and what society they kept. I could not understand this interest; I put it down to uncouthness. He knew they were acquaintances of mine, and thought he was obliging me by speaking of them.

But one day when I was at the Marldon's house in Harley street, lunching, Sir William drew me into the window and said—there was no one else present—"I want you very much to tell me something about a man of the name of Purvis, who lives in the same lodgings where you are."

"Seeing me looking surprised, he added: 'It is a curious thing, but we are pestered with him. I cannot say that I have met with annoyance personally from him; but I learn that he hangs about the street, watches our door, tries to get in with our servants, asks questions about my wife and me, and lately contrived to fall into conversation with our nurse, and made much of our children, and gave them sweetstuffs—in the park. Now, this is a thing I will not stand. I will not have my children's stomachs upset with lollipops, the constitution of which I do not know. We should not have heard of it had not one of the children let slip concerning it. The whole conduct of this fellow is perplexing. It may mean great unpleasantness. Who is he? What is he? And what does he want, pottering and prying about this house? We were dining out at Lord Delmore's last week, and as I learned from the coachman, that man was lurking about, watching the carriage and the door till we came out. What does it all mean? I set the police to find out, and all they have done is to run him to the ground in Margaret street, and to ascertain that his name is Purvis. They have nothing against him, they say. But if he does not mean mischief what does he mean?"

"There is no harm in the man," I answered. "He is a fellow who has been in South Africa, and has made a little money there—diamonds, I think."

"But what can make him dodge us as he does?" "I can only put it down to stupid inquisitiveness," said I; "he may have heard me speak of you. But I will do this: I will tell him how very annoying this conduct is and request him to desist. It is a little awkward, but I will certainly do it."

I was vastly annoyed. I thought that because there was a title this colonial fellow was curious to see the bearers of the title, not in the least knowing the relative value of titles, and that, being a clumsy, blundering old fool, he had given annoyance by his persistency in his efforts to see and learn something about the ways of the only titled people concerning whom he had a chance of obtaining information.

It was with great irritation in my mind and manner that I addressed Purvis the next time he came into my room. I thought that I had been unintentionally the cause of this vexation to the Marldons, who had been very kind to me. I blurted out what I had to say without any gentle approach to the subject. I did not mention that the police had been set to watch him, but I let Purvis under-

stand that the annoyance must stop. It had been carried too far, and carried on too long. It was no joke to the Marldons nor to me.

The old man sat listening, with his head bowed, rubbing one hand over the other and then putting a trembling finger to his mouth. Presently he said: "Very well, I will go back to South Africa. I will not come to England again."

"There is really no need for that. Only desist from haunting Halsey street."

"I cannot help it," he said in a despondent tone, and as he turned away I saw a long tear run down his cheek.

"Good gracious, Mr. Purvis!" I said, "what is the matter?" "Nothing, nothing," he answered. "I'll go back again now."

"There must be something. There is a mystery in this. There is some hidden reason, something I do not understand."

Then, after a good deal of hesitation, he told me his story; but it was only after I had promised him solemnly not to tell any one, above all not to allow an inkling of it to reach the Marldons. Old Purvis had been a laboring man in a country village. He had lost his wife, who had left him an only child, a daughter, who was to him as the apple of his eye. This child was intelligent, sweet of disposition, and had been noticed by the young ladies of the paragonage, who had persuaded the father and induced the squire to contribute to get the girl educated at a training school to become a schoolmistress.

When sufficiently old she had obtained a school, and during her holidays had been with her father, whose heart swelled with pride at his refined and accomplished daughter.

At the hall of the place where she was schoolmistress, there had been trouble about the governess, and the mistress had been called in to give lessons to the children there, and thence had passed into the house as governess, and had given up the school.

Now, it had come about that a kinsman of the squire, a Mr. Marldon, at the bar, was a good deal there, and had taken notice of the young teacher, had been moved by her sweetness, modesty and pleasant face and manner, and after some little struggle with himself, had proposed.

"Well, sir," said old Purvis, putting his hand over his mouth, then taking it away again, "I don't mean but to say I was proud, and when they were married I took and turned it all over in my head. They were very good to me. My Mary wanted me to go and stay with her, and the gentleman also was most kind. But it wouldn't do. I knew it wouldn't. What would the servants have said to me? They'd have turned up their saucy noses at me. I knew well enough, and I ate and I talked and I dressed other from gentlefolks, and the more I thought the more I saw as I'd be a difficulty to my Mary. So I sed an advertisement in the paper as how a gentleman was going to settle in Natal, and he wanted a laboring man to go out with him from England to act as his hind. Well, sir, I answered that advertisement, and I went, but I left no address, and made much of our children, and gave them sweetstuffs—in the park. Now, this is a thing I will not stand. I will not have my children's stomachs upset with lollipops, the constitution of which I do not know. We should not have heard of it had not one of the children let slip concerning it. The whole conduct of this fellow is perplexing. It may mean great unpleasantness. Who is he? What is he? And what does he want, pottering and prying about this house? We were dining out at Lord Delmore's last week, and as I learned from the coachman, that man was lurking about, watching the carriage and the door till we came out. What does it all mean? I set the police to find out, and all they have done is to run him to the ground in Margaret street, and to ascertain that his name is Purvis. They have nothing against him, they say. But if he does not mean mischief what does he mean?"

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