

The Same is a Thief and Robber

By John Cleveland

THE Gillings had been Friends for quite two hundred years. The family represented Quakerism in the absolute. Their pedigree was without one stain, no Gilling having ever been known to marry out of the sect. In the whole Society there was no family of purer descent. Two centuries of rigid discipline, self-restraint, and godly life had evolved something as near perfection as fallen humanity can hope to reach.

Two members of the family, Richenda and Gulielma, were maiden ladies of mature age. Although they were not twins, they resembled each other so closely that their intimate friends were often puzzled to know which was which. They dressed exactly alike, and only their blood relations could appreciate any difference in their voices. Richenda was the elder by a year. She had a tiny mole on her left temple by which a close observer could identify her; but when she wore the deep Friend's bonnet, you did not get the benefit of even that clue.

I can well remember their coming

into the meeting-house together—no one ever saw them apart—and rustling down upon the air-cushions, which were always placed ready for them on a certain bench. Once seated, the frost of silence held them fast, their rich silk dresses gave forth no more rustlings till the meeting broke up. Which was Richenda and which was Gulielma? On First Day no one could be certain of their identity, which was as completely lost as if they had been veiled nuns. When the long ordeal was over, the sexes co-mingled on the smooth turf of the burial ground. Here you might go up to one of the sisters, and say, with outstretched hand, "How art thou?" The dear Friend would understand why you paused. "Gulielma," she would say kindly to relieve you from embarrassment, if it happened to be she.

"I am very well, thank thee. How art thou?"

"Oh, that's Gulielma," you would say to yourself. "I shall know next time." But you didn't.

Both ladies were flaxen-haired, and

had a row of little natural curls along the forehead, and both had eyes of the palest blue. Their voices were cooing, caressing, not capable of a shrill or harsh note. If you were ill or in trouble, they would come to see you, and show themselves so full of sympathy that you would feel better at once. If they undertook to read to you, you would be lulled to sleep in less than five minutes.

Richenda and Gulielma Gilling lived in a substantial old red-brick house at Plaistow, which was a very different place forty years ago from what it is now. They drew a large income from Government securities, and gave quite half of it away in charity. The moiety they retained for their own use was sufficient to maintain them in refined luxury, as you would have found out had you been fortunate enough to be invited to tea at Pennington Lodge. Their well-tended hot-house furnished them with rare fruit, and their beehives provided honey of the best.

Into the quietest and simplest lives stirring events will sometimes intrude. These kindly, sweet-souled women had lived for more than fifty years, with only one terrible memory to trouble them. They were soon to have yet another dreadful experience, but of a very different character. Richenda and Gulielma were incapable of cherishing animosity, against any living creature. They had not one enemy in the whole

world. Some of the frivolous young people of Plaistow called the sisters the two dormice, or the grey doves, and referred to Pennington Lodge as "the dove-cote;" but there was not a trace of malice in these nicknames. Not even the coarsest minded inhabitant of Plaistow would have dreamed of offering rudeness to the sisters.

I have such sincere respect and affection for these dear ladies that I hardly like to say what their terrible experience was; it seems like offering them an affront even to refer to it in passing. But they have both been laid to rest these many years; they have no surviving relatives, and indeed, the incident, which they would have willingly died rather than mention, was not discredit-able to them in any way, so no one can be charmed or embarrassed by the disclosure. I used to notice that when by any chance the town of Lewes was mentioned at the Gillings' table, a curious effect was produced. A faint, a very faint tinge of pink would suffuse both the smooth, kindly faces. The sisters would fold their hands, and the pale blue eyes would be cast down. They would not regain their normal composure for quite thirty seconds. Why this phenomena? What could bring a blush to their faces? What could have happened at the sleepy town of Lewes to make them ashamed? I did not discover the truth till long after they had entered into rest, leaving behind them a sweet and fragrant memory.

Richenda and Gulielma were born in Sussex, and resided at their father's farm, situated midway between Lewes and Brighton. They would in all human probability have remained there until the death of old Josiah Gilling, which sad event occurred in the year 1856, had it not been for this incident—a horrid landmark in their lives—which made the neighborhood of the whole southern seaboard distasteful to them. They therefore migrated to Plaistow in Essex, and sought amid fresh scenes to efface the frightful recollection.

It was the period of railroad construction. The old era was passing away, the new England was coming into being. The somnolent southern counties were invaded by an army of rude and stalwart navvies from Lancashire and Yorkshire.

The Friends of the south had hitherto had a monopoly of the archaic form of speech, or "the plain language," as they called it. They were therefore shocked beyond measure to hear these fierce sons of toil "speak in the plain language," as they phrased it. Their fondest prejudices were outraged; brutal threats uttered in Quaker language seemed sacrilegious.

One summer evening Richenda and Gulielma walked along the high-road towards their home. They had taken tea with Martha Barrington, a recorded minister, who was well stricken in years, and in need of cheerful companionship. Her residence was not very far from Lewes. They walked briskly along the old coach road, their serene faces warmed by the sunset light. They were in a calm and happy mood, fearing no evil, for who would be cruel enough to harm such dove-like creatures? A turn of the road brought them face to face with two gigantic navvies—men of vast strength, wearing enormous boots, and smoking short, blackened clay pipes. The men's native ruffianism was tempered with a primitive species of humour, of the strictly practical kind. They would not wantonly abuse their great strength by gratuitous assaults upon the weak; but given occasion, they would fight with the savagery of the old-time Picts, and they were capable of indulging their sense of humour without fear of consequences. They regarded the Quaker ladies with ferocious amusement, and stretching out their mighty arms, barred the way.

"Thou wilt please let us pass on our way," said Richenda, with icy composure, to the man in front of her.

"Wilt thou kindly stand aside?" cooed Gulielma.

These mild, appealing words only seemed to increase the unholy joy of the navvies, who began cutting uncouth capers in the dusty road. An evil thought entered the head of the elder man. "Say, laad," he said, didst ever kiss a Quaker?"

"Noa; I dare thee to do it," replied his companion.

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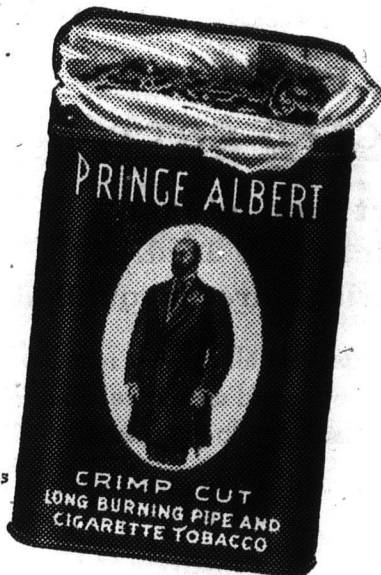
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