

Adventure of Captain Potts

I was fishing the V—— one cold day in March. To stand up to one's hips in water on such a day, wielding one's rod with benumbed fingers, shows on an enthusiastic lover of the gentle art. And such I was, and for once had got hold of a good time. The water was just the right height and color; the wind was cold, but not too cold for the trout, and blowing down the stream, raising a nice curl on the water, but not strong enough to prevent my throwing my fly right in the teeth of it. I was fishing up the river from Gladwy, and at every other cast I rose a good fish, and generally brought him to basket. After three o'clock they rose no more, and whip as I would I could not stir a fin. I was not sorry then, when the next reach of the river brought me in view of the handsome stone bridge which spanned with V——, and which I knew carried the high road which led to the market town of [Llanywm.] Thereupon I emerged on to dry land, and, taking off my wading boots and flinging them over my shoulder, lit my pipe and started at a smart pace on my way to [Llanywm.] I was very tired, but very happy, for I had a good basket of fish, and my opportunities of fishing being rare, I appreciated my luck accordingly. After walking about a mile, the gloom of evening drawing on and the hills seeming to close in upon me in mysterious shadows, I heard behind me the beat of hoofs and the rattle of wheels, and presently overtook me a spanking mare, drawing a dog cart, wherein was seated a jolly-looking man, with broad, good humored face, wearing a brown great-coat. He pulled the mare up sharp, and shouted out, "If you are going to Llanywm, I'll give you a lift!" Nothing loth, I scrambled into the dog-cart, while the mare executed a *pas seul* on her hind legs, and away we went. We were soon at Llanywm, a neutral-tinted Welsh village, consisting of a long straggling street of hovels, a big hotel, the Prince Llewellyn, jutting cut into the middle thereof, a rugged little church, a dozen public houses, and a half dozen dissenting chapels. At the Prince Llewellyn my friend pulled up. "Come and have some beer? The home-brewed is capital." "*Dau glassiaa da cwrw*, Annie, darling," to the pretty Cambrian waitress. The beer really was good; we drank to our respective healths after the kindly Celtic fashion, and struck up a friendship cemented by other two glasses of "cwrw." We agreed to dine together at six; and while my friend, whose name I found was Roberts, went to transact his business, I took a stroll round the town and called upon the local flymaker, fisherman and barber, to talk over the fishing and lay in a stock of flies. I found myself at six with an excellent appetite at Prince Llewellyn. Mr. Roberts was punctual, and we did justice to the broiled trout, saddle of Welsh mutton and grilled chicken, which formed our repast, washed down by famous home-brewed ale. Dinner finished, there being no other guests in the coffee-room, we lit our pipes, brewed some whiskey punch, and began to talk of fish over the fire.

Roberts, I found, was a thorough fisherman and naturalist, and keep sportsman. We discussed the merits of "all the streams which flow in Wales, of all the flies which cock their tails," till we finished sundry tumblers of punch.

"Do you know," said Roberts, "you remind me of a friend of mine so much, I really thought you were the very man when I came up to you on the road. Potts his name was—Captain Potts; he was a London man; perhaps you know him?"

"No, I didn't know him."

“Ah! he was one of the Pottses who smashed so awfully some years ago,” said my friend, indulging himself with a loud guffaw at his joke. “You remember the great failure of Potts, Pumpkins & Cope, the bankers, of course? Well, this Potts was a nephew of Potts—Sir Tin Potts, you know. I knew nothing of this though when I first met young Potts. I met him on the river fishing. He was a good fisherman; but you Englishmen don’t often do much on our rivers, and then you go home and say there are no fish in them. Well, I gave him some wrinkles, which he profited by and we got to be fast friends. We’ve nothing to do; so draw up to the fire, and I’ll tell you a story about Potts and myself. I call it the merciful dealing of Providence with Roberts. You shall hear:

“I lived in this town some ten years ago, I had just married, and had lately commenced practice as a Solicitor. I had been articled here, spending the last year of my time in London with Fudge & Frizzleum, of Lincoln’s Inn—a great chancery and agency firm, as I dare say you know. My old master, John Jones, was just dead, and I thought there was a good opening here. But I didn’t find business come in fast. You see there isn’t much litigation in these parts. The big swells are in the hands of their London lawyers; and if a poor freeholder wants a bit of money, he’ll borrow it on a note of hand from a neighbor, without a regular mortgage deed, and it isn’t often that any land changes hands; and then I was the only lawyer in the place, and that was against me. Still I had all there was to be got. I was clerk to the magistrate, clerk to the highway, clerk to the commissioner of this or that; but these things, although they sound large, don’t bring in much. Well, what with furnishing my house and office, and so on, I’d spent the little money I had, and had to borrow some; still I knew I should come right in time, and my wife, though young, was a capital manager, and would make a crown go as far as a pound.

“However, I was very much pleased when my eighteenth cousin, Watkins Williams Watkins, a man who had always been very friendly to me in a haughty, distant sort of way, commanded my attendance at Wyddyllum Castle. He told me that her Majesty had insisted on his accepting the onerous but dignified post of High Sheriff of the county, and that he, W. W. W., had graciously determined to appoint me under Sheriff. He was also pleased to invite me to luncheon, and among the distinguished party at the castle I found an acquaintance, Captain Potts, who, with Lady Laura Potts, his wife, was on a visit there. Potts was not one of those fellows who are devilish friendly by the river-side, and deuced cold in society. He came forward at once to claim my acquaintance, and introduced me to Lady Laura, a delightful little woman, a regular little fairy, with such tiny hands and feet, a little *nez retroussé*, and sparkling eyes, and such a smile. She made a slave of me at once (of course subject to my allegiance to my Mary Jane). I went home much pleased at my reception and at the appointment I had received; not that it was worth very much in itself, but it gave one a sort of standing, and was an opening. My relative didn’t, however, forget to call upon me to find two sureties in a thousand pounds each, to indemnify him in any action that might be brought against him. It was the usual thing. One of my sureties was my poor old father, who was then living in a little cottage near Llandolwen. He hadn’t much more than fifty pounds a year to live upon, so you may judge that the loss of a thousand pounds would have made a pretty good hole in his income. The other surety was an old gentleman who had always been very kind to me, and who had accumulated a little money in a long life of thrift and industry; he’d traveled for Jones & Brown, of Manchester, for thirty years. I never dreamed of such a thing as their being called on to pay anything for me—never. It was a mere form, I thought, and so I told them. I had not much to do as Under-Sheriff for some time. There were

only a few levies, which were paid out, and which put a few pounds in my pocket; but I was in great force at the assizes. I was in much request among the ladies to get them places in court, and when the Judge, whom I recollected as a leading Q.C., when I was finishing in London, and whom I had met at consultations sometimes, condescended to have a chat with me, and asked to be presented to Mary Jane, I felt as if I had attained to a considerable elevation. After the Spring assizes, I had a little leisure. It was one of the best fishing seasons I ever remember, and I used to be on the river every day, and every day I would meet Potts. We became great friends, and Potts would often come up to my house, and have a smoke and a glass of grog. I was much annoyed then, when one Tuesday morning's post brought down a *ca sa.* from my agents, endorsed by the firm of Moses & Mosheim, commanding me to take the body of one Bellingham Billingsgate Potts, and bring him before her Majesty's Court of Exchequer. And I was to have met Potts this very afternoon. Duty is duty, and I couldn't think of giving poor Potts any warning of the danger that threatened him. I sent for the two bumbailiffs who did the few jobs that occurred in our part of the country. I explained to them what they had to do, and they seemed pleased with the work. Had it been one of their own countrymen who was in the mess, they would have undertaken the business with reluctance; but the victim being an Englishman, they seemed to like it. I felt like a despicable scoundrel as I sent these men out to track and make a prisoner of a man whom I had come to look upon as a friend. To my horror, five minutes after I had dismissed the men, Potts himself put his head through my office doorway.

“[‘]Hullo, Roberts,[’] he cried, ‘busy as usual, old fellow! May I come in? [’]

“My presence of mind forsook me: I could only gasp for breath, and point to the door. Potts came in, alarmed—‘What on earth is the matter?’ Just then the two bums, who had traced Potts to my office, bounced in and seized Potts, one on each side very roughly, almost tearing the coat off his back. But Potts was as nimble as an eel. He drove his elbow into the long man's stomach, and doubled him up in an instant, and he let fly his right into the face of little Jones, sending him spinning across the room. There were two doors opening into my office; one led to the outer or clerk's office; one led to the outer or clerk's office; the other opposite opened into a little back street. This latter was usually kept locked and the key hung on a nail close to my desk. By this door Potts and I had often made our way to the Prince Llewellyn for our morning beer. Potts consequently knew well where they key was to be found, and saw in a moment the way of escape. The same idea flashed into my mind at the same instant. Ought I to have remained passive, and let him escape? Shouldn't I have acted negligently in my office had I done so? I don't know now what I ought to have done; and, though the pros and cons darted through my brain with Potts took a single step across the room, yet I don't think it was from any conscious sense of right or wrong, but from a sort of professional instinct, a kind of spiderish feeling, that I seized the key and put it in my pocket. Potts gave me a look of scorn and reproach, and then, putting his hands into his pockets, leaned back against the mantle-shelf and laughed.

“‘Are you all gone mad? What's the meaning of this?’

“‘It means, Captain Potts,’ said I, feeling smaller than I had ever done in my life before, ‘that these men have a warrant for your apprehension for a debt of—how much?—a hundred and twenty pounds and costs.’

“‘Why didn’t you say so before,’ said the Captain, ‘instead of setting your dogs on me? It would have saved your red-headed friend a pain in his inside. Well, of course, it’s your business to do such dirty work. I’m sorry, though, I’ve hurt these men of yours. Here! take half a crown a-piece, you fellows!’

“‘Well, indeed![]’ said Jones, ‘I like you very much![]’

“Williams ceased to rub his damaged bread-basket, looked [suspiciously] at the coin and then pocketed it with a grunt.

“‘So it’s Moses & Mosheim who’ve put me in this hole! Well, I haven’t the money, and I don’t know how to get it; how long can you give me?’”

“[‘]Well, you can stop at the Prince Llewellyn tonight; you’d better go on there now with these men, and I will come up and talk matters over by-and-by.’

“Potts went out, attended by his keepers, and he had hardly left the office, before I received a card: ‘Mr. Brabham, Moses & Mosheim.’ A sallow [young] man, much bejeweled, and with very dirty hands, was shown in to me. He had come up by the night mail to Chester, and posted on. I fancy he came to see that the *ca. sa.* was properly executed. He ascertained that the capture had been made, and lodged detainers to the amount of fifteen hundred and twenty pounds eighteen shillings and sixpence. I recollect the figures well; never shall I forget them. I sent the brute off, and had scarcely got rid of him before Lady Laura Potts was announced. Poor little thing! how lovely she looked! But in such distress! She’d brought all her jewels, bracelets, rings, gold watch, diamond necklace, lots of things, worth two or three hundred pounds, I dare say.

“‘Oh! Mr. Roberts,’ she said, ‘can’t you take these things as security and let my dear husband go?’

“‘Lady Laura,’ I said, ‘if it were only for a few hundred pounds, I’d take this undertaking for it in a minute, and arrange for his release, but I’m sorry to say here are detainers for fifteen hundred pounds or more.’

[“]Then, poor lady, she began to cry.

“‘Couldn’t I enter into some compromise? she’d £150 a year of her own; wouldn’t I take the money in fifteen year instalments of £100!

“I explained to her that I had no power to make any arrangement—she must go to the creditors; but I advised her strongly not to alienate or dissipate her own property in any way, but to let her husband ‘take the benefit of the Act.’

“She was a sensible woman, and saw that my advice was good; she dried her eyes, packed up her jewels, and I was just opening the door for her when I was almost knocked down by John Jones, who rushed into the office looking like a ghost.

“‘He’s gone,’ he cried, in Welsh. We’ve lost him.’

“Leaving her ladyship to find her own way out, I ran bare-headed into the street and on to the Prince Llewellyn. The bird had flown indeed. Red-headed William stood at the door, gaping and staring at the roof as if he thought Potts were a bird. The men had left in his own room for a minute, mounting guard with the door half open, and when they entered it again he was gone. The window was open, and there was an iron water pipe running down the wall close by. He must have slid down this and got away. No one had seen him; not a trace of him, not a vestige, not a fragment of a clue could we find. I set the police to work. They had no business to interfere, of course, as it wasn’t a criminal case; but I was clerk to the magistrates, and in the country the powers of the police as elastic. Potts had lodged in a cottage near the river half a mile from the town; he might have found his way there. I set a man to watch the house at a distance, sent off a policeman on horseback to the station, some six miles off, to watch every train[.] But I had little hope of finding him again. He knew the country well, had a good start, and would probably strike across the mountains to Wigwillem, in the adjoining county, where he might laugh at my beard. No sooner did this thought strike me than I determined to follow that track myself, and I started off at the rate of about six miles an hour. It was a hot, breezeless May day, the first day of Summer; what with the heat and the turbulence of mind in which I was, I arrived at the top of the pass, some 1,500 feet above the sea-level, quite exhausted. I flung myself down on the top of a rock, the highest point overhanging the foot-path below, and followed with my eye on the track, which I could trace for miles, to where it crossed the border of the county. There wasn’t a living soul upon it. In the great hush and hum of that sultry Summer afternoon, as I lay among the heather, my soul cried out with the bitterness of death upon it. I was ruined, root and branch. For every penny of those sixteen hundred odd pounds I was personally liable. No matter that Potts wasn’t worth a penny, and that he had only been captured as a means of extorting money from his friends; that made no difference in the eye of the law. I had done no wrong, had hardly been imprudent, and yet I was ruined, and all my people. My poor old father would, probably, end his days in the workhouse. My friend, who had lent me his name, would have to take the road again for bare subsistence. I might become bankrupt and get a clerkship afterwards, but had I the heart to begin life again with such a load upon me? Wouldn’t it be better for me to end my misery and perplexity by rolling off this sloping bank into the great chasm below?

“Then I thought of Mary Jane, and how she would wait and wait, and how gradually, from impatience, she would come from uneasiness to terror; and how she would spend the night in sorrow, and the morning would bring no joy; and how the whisper would go round the town, ‘They’ve found the body!’ and, Oh! how hard on the poor creature, only six months, a wife, and in a way to become a mother!

“No, I could never be such a coward! God knows I couldn’t have done it, but in great trouble strange thoughts surge in your brain.

“I felt better after a while, and a gentle breeze sprung up and cooled my burning temples, and I heard the bleating of the lambs, and the bark of the shepherd’s dog, and the call of his master far away on the hill-side. At all events, I hadn’t to pay the sixteen hundred pounds that night; I would crawl home, and perhaps I could think of some plan for staving off ruin to-morrow.

“Well, I got home, and remember that Mary Jane pitched into me awfully because I was an hour late for [dinner,] and everything was spoilt, she said. I took a couple of glasses of brandy after dinner, and that steadied my nerves, and I could think.

“I would go up to [London] to-morrow, and try to compromise with *my* creditors. I could, perhaps, by the sale of all I had, and by borrowing on my life police, make up £500.

“I could offer this, and as it was five hundred times as much as they would have got out of Potts, surely they would take it and cry quits?

“Of course, Mary Jane had heard of Pott’s escape, and she made me very savage by expressing her delight at the event. She didn’t know how nearly it concerned her, poor thing! and I didn’t tell her. I only said I had business in London next day, and asked her to pack my traveling bag. I went up by the night train, and a wretched journey I had. Next morning I went to find Moses & Mosheim, who had chambers somewhere up a little court or square out of Bishopsgate street. ‘Mr. Moses wasn’t it,’ the clerk said. ‘Didn’t know if Mr. Mosheim were; would take my card and see. Yes, he was in, and would see me by and by.’ I sat down and waited in the dingy office, feeling the indignity of my position in having to wait at all for such a man. Professional pride made me look upon Mosheim with the feeling a Brahmin might have for a Pariah. There are lawyers and lawyers, you know. I had graduated with a highcaste firm. Fudge would never have acknowledged the existence of such a firm as Moses & Co. Frizzleum, who would sometimes have to meet such creatures on behalf of some of his great clients’ sons or relatives, would treat them with the coldest insolence of which he was capable.

“There I was, however, a suppliant before these Shylocks!

“Mosheim was a dark, rather gentlemanly man, very neatly dressed. But for his curly hair and bug nose you’d have thought him a Christian. He pretended to be busy writing when I entered, and looked up and motioned me with the butt end of his pen to a chair, but I walked up to the fire-place and stood there.

“‘Mr. Mosheim?’

“‘That is my name.[.]’

“‘Mine is Roberts, and I’m Under-Sheriff of Caerleonshire.’

“‘Happy to have the opportunity to making the acquaintance of Mr. Under-Sheriff,’ said Mosheim, showing his white teeth.

“‘I don’t come to make your acquaintance, Mr. Mosheim, but to make some arrangements with you as to an unfortunate accident which has happened to me in my official capacity.’

“Mosheim bowed grimly.

“You are, I believe, acting on behalf of the creditors of Captain Potts?”

“Certain clients of mine have claims against that gentleman. Well?”

“A *ca. sa.* taken out by your firm has been with me for execution.”

“Precisely.[’]

“Well, Potts has escaped.”

“What an excessively disagreeable incident *for you!*’ And again he white teeth gleamed.

“Now, what I propose to do is this: I undertake to pay you five hundred pounds in a week, if you will give me a full release.”

“I think, Mr.—Jones did you say? that the total of the detainers is rather more than that. You know the exact figure, perhaps.”

“*You* know the figure as well as I do, Mr. Mosheim. Six shillings in the pound, or thereabouts, my offer would give your clients. You wouldn’t have got sixpence in the pound out of Potts.”

“You appear to know more of Mr. Potts than I do. In reply to your proposal, we decline it. Your sheriff is good for the whole amount.”

“You absolutely decline it?”

“Decidedly.”

“As I walked down Bishopsgate street I felt more comfortable. I knew the worst. After all, ruin is not so bad in reality as it is in anticipation. I had plenty of money in my pocket, and it didn’t matter now how I spent it. I would stay in town that night, and go to hear Robson, who was then in great force; he might make me forget my troubles. In the meantime I would go and get a steak at a place I knew in Fleet street, where I used to dine when I was serving out my time in London. As I walked through the city I changed my mind again; I would get home as speedily as possible—home among the quiet hills, and hide my troubles. But as I passed the narrow court in Fleet street, accustomed but long forgotten habit—or was it the hand of Providence which turned me?—drew me up the court and into the well-known precincts of the Stilton. I went into a box, and order a rump steak and pint of stout.

“You know the old-fashioned room, I dare say—it’s sanded floor and wooden benches, its great fire-places and immense kettle? One side of the room is divided into boxes. In the corner of the farthest box from the door, where I was invisible, except to a person standing by the fire-place, I took my seat, and sitting there waiting for my steak, I heard a number of men enter the room. They made much more clatter and noise than the quiet legal men who formed the rest of the company, who talked mysteriously in half whispers as thought within the scared precincts of the Court of Chancery. The voices of the new comers rose in loud and cheery tones above all the

noises of the chophouse. I guessed that the two loudest talkers were military men, probably just returned from India and the Mutiny War just ended. The third, who spoke with a milder drawl I judged to be a Templar. The two heroes were asking about lots of friends, but I didn't pay any attention to their conversation till I heard the name of Potts. Then, indeed, I listened with bated breath, every nerve on the stretch.

“Where's Billy Potts now? I hear he came to grief.’

“Oh! Billy's down in Wales, hard up, as usual. I have just heard from him. ‘Such fun! The Jews found him out. He was at Clan-something, a nice little secluded Welsh town. A *ca. sa.* was issued, and poor Billy was nobbled, and the bums took him to an hotel. You know what a nimble—’

“Here the waiter slammed down my dishes and tankard with a tremendous clatter, drowning the mellifluous voice of the Templar. I ground my teeth in despair; ‘*trap-door* was the only word I could catch, and the next moment a loud guffaw from the military told me the story was ended.

“Capital! capital! and he's in the same house still?’

“Yes; but he'll slip away as soon as the coast is clear.’

“Devilish good! Jove! Billy's a match for Moses or Taffy.’

“I had heard enough. I had the clue. I remembered that there was a trap-door in the room at the Prince Llewellyn, opening probably into a loft. It was too high for any ordinary man to reach without assistance; but, of course, Potts was in the highest favor with all the lassies at the hotel. Nothing would be easier than to open the trap from above and let down a rope or ladder, and he might be there still! I looked at the clock; it was 2:30. I had barely time to catch the 3 express from Paddington, but it might be done. I left my steak and stout untasted—unpaid for, had not the vigilant head-waiter intercepted me. I flung down half a crown, and without waiting for change bolted into Fleet street. A hansom was passing; I jumped in, telling the driver he should have a sovereign if he got me in time for the train. Fortune favored me; fortune do I say? Let me humbly and gratefully thank a kind Providence for saving me and mine from ruin. As we reached Paddington Station the clock was on the stroke of three.

One of the big doors had been slammed to, and the porter was closing the second. With a howl that frightened the stolid porter, I threw myself against the closing door. I dashed through the ticket office on to the platform. The guard had just blown his whistle; the train was gliding gently away. Policemen and porters barred my way in vain. ‘Life or death!’ I hoarsely roared; grasping a passing handle, I flung myself into a first-class carriage. The cabman, unpaid, was running along the platform after his receding fare. I threw him a sovereign, where he caught, and his face assumed a beatific expression as Paddington Station passed from my gaze.

“By one o'clock in the morning I had reached Llanywm. The moon was shining brightly, and Llanywm was in quiet repose. I stopped the car just outside the town, and walked to the police station. I roused inspector Williams, and asked him to send two constables to watch the Prince

Llewellyn, and also to wake the two bailiffs and set them on guard. I walked to the Prince Llewellyn, and took my stand on the door-step till my reinforcements should arrive. I had hardly reached the top of the flight of steps when I saw a light over the fan light, and heard the door chain-rattle. Presently the door opened cautiously, and emerged into the moonlight—Captain Potts.

“He had closed the door before he saw me, and we stood together on the topmost step of the high stone flight, glaring at each other. A fight seemed imminent; we were well matched. I was the taller and heavier, but Potts was more nimble on his pins. At running, however, I could beat him hollow, and Potts knew it; and knew, therefore, that flight would be useless, unless he could previously disable me. But he was a man of presence of mind, and preferred to negotiate before fighting.

“‘Look here,’ he said, rapidly; ‘I’m in an awful hole! We’ve always been good friends, and I don’t see that it can harm you to keep your eyes shut for a minute while I get away.’

“I had taken him by the arm as the spoke, and held him with a grip so firm that he didn’t need an answer. He drew himself together for a dash at me, but waited for an instant as I spoke:

“‘Potts,’ I said, your escape would be my ruin; and I will not let you go till I’m dead.’

“Potts looked at me amazed.

“‘What are the odds to you, if I get out of the clutches of a lot of Jew swindlers?’

“‘Simply I should have to pay your debts and be sold out stick and branch.

“‘On your honor is it so?’

“‘On my honor, it is.[’]

“‘Roberts, I had no idea of this. I’ll cave in. Don’t hold me so tight. I give you my word I’ll not bolt.’

“I took his word, and we walked up and down the street for half an hour, talking over his affairs. Presently the car arrived, and the bailiffs, and I saw him safely started for the county jail.

“Next day I resigned my office.

“After that I acted as Potts’ solicitor, and had the pleasure of offering Moses & Mosheim sixpence in the pound, which they accepted and released Potts. I don’t think they lost by him either; they had plucked him pretty well before. He’s coming down this week for fishing; if you’re here, you’ll be glad to know him, for you don’t often come across a better fellow or a better fisherman than Captain Potts.”

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