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Recollections of a Police-Officer
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The Twins

by William Russell

The records of police courts afford but imperfect evidence of the business really affected by the officers attached to them. The machinery of English criminal law is, in practice, so subservient to the caprice of individual prosecutors, that instances are constantly occurring in which flagrant violations of natural justice are, from various motives, corrupt and otherwise, withdrawn not only from the cognizance of judicial authority, but from the reprobation of public opinion. Compromises are usually effected between the apprehension of the inculpated parties and the public examination before a magistrate. The object of prosecution has been perhaps obtained by the preliminary step of arrest, or a criminal understanding has been arrived at in the interval; and it is then found utterly hopeless to proceed, however manifest may have appeared the guilt of the prisoner. If you adopt the expedient of compelling the attendance of the accused, it is in nine cases out of ten more trouble and time thrown away.—The utter forgetfulness of memory, the loose recollection of facts so vividly remembered but a few hours before, the delicately scrupulous hesitation to depose confidently to the clearest verities evinced by the reluctant prosecutor, render a conviction almost impossible; so that, except in cases of flagrant and startling crimes, which are of course earnestly prosecuted by the crown lawyers, offences against “our sovereign lady the Queen, her crown and dignity,” no criminal indictments run, if no aggrieved subject voluntarily appears to challenge justice in behalf of his liege lady, remains unchastened, and not unfrequently unexposed. From several examples of this prevalent abuse which have come within my own knowledge, I select the following instance, merely changing the names of the parties.—

My services, the superintendent late one afternoon informed me, were required in a perplexed and entangled affair, which would probably occupy me for some time past, as orders had been given to investigate the matter thoroughly. “There,” he added, “is a Mr. Repton, a highly respectable country solicitor’s card. He is from Lancashire, and is staying at Webb’s Hotel, Piccadilly. You are to see him at once. He will put you in possession of all the facts—surmises rather, I should say, for the facts, to my apprehension, are scant enough—connected with the case, and you will then use all possible diligence to ascertain first if the alleged crime has really been committed, and if so, of course to bring the criminal or criminals to justice.”

I found Mr. Repton, a stout, bald-headed, gentlemanly person, apparently of 60 years, just in the act of going out. “I have a pressing engagement for this evening, Mr. Waters,” he said, after glancing at the introductory note I had brought, “and cannot possibly go into the business with the attention and minuteness it requires til the morning.—But I’ll tell you what: one of the parties concerned, and the one, too, with whom you will have especially to deal, is, I know, to be at Covent Garden theatre this evening. It is of course necessary that you should be acquainted with his person; and if you will go with me in

the cab that is waiting outside, I will step with you into the theatre, and point him out." I assented, and upon entering Covent Garden pit, Mr. Repton, who kept behind to avoid observation, directed my attention to a group of persons occupying the front seats of the third box in the lower tier from the stage, on the right-hand side of the house. They were—a gentleman of about thirty years of age, his wife, a very elegant person, a year or two younger, and three children; the eldest of whom, a boy, could not have been more than six years old. This done, Mr. Repton left the theatre, and about two hours afterwards I did the same.

The next morning I breakfasted with the Lancashire solicitor by appointment. As soon as it was concluded, business was at once entered upon.

"You closely observed Sir Charles Malvern yesterday evening, I presume?" said Mr. Repton.

"I paid great attention to the gentleman you pointed out to me," I answered, "if he be Sir Charles Malvern."

"He is at least—. But of that presently. First, let me inform you that Malvern, a few months ago, was a beggared gamester, or nearly so, to speak with precision. He is now in good bodily health, has a charming wife, and a family to whom he is much attached, an unencumbered estate of about twelve thousand a year, and has not gambled since he came into possession of the property. This premised, is there, think you, anything very remarkable in Sir Charles' demeanor?"

"Singularly so. My impression was that he was laboring under a terrible depression of spirits, caused, I imagined, by pecuniary difficulties. His manner was reckless, abstracted. He paid no attention to anything going on on the stage, except when his wife or one of the children especially challenged his attention; and then a brief answer returned, he relapsed into the same restless unobservance as before. He was very nervous, too. The box door was suddenly opened once or twice, and I noticed his sudden start each time."

"You have exactly described him. Well, that perturbed, unquiet, feverishness of manner has constantly distinguished him since his ascension to the Redwood estates, and only since then. It strengthens me and one or two others in possibly an unfounded suspicion, which—. But I had better, if I wish to render myself intelligible, relate matters in due sequence.

"Sir Thomas Redwood, whose property in Lancashire is chiefly in the neighborhood of Liverpool, met his death, as did his only son, Mr. Archibald Redwood, about six months ago, in a very shocking manner. They were trying a splendid mare for the first time in harness, which Sir Thomas had lately purchased at a very high price. Two grooms on horseback were in attendance to render assistance if required, for the animal was a very powerful, high-spirited one. All went very well till they arrived in front of Mr. Meredith's place, Oak Villa. This gentleman has a passion for firing off a number of brass cannon on

the anniversary of such events as he deems worthy of the honor. This happened, unfortunately, to be one of Mr. Meredith's gunpowder days; and as Sir Thomas and his son were passing, a stream of light flashed directly in the eyes of the mare, followed by the roar of artillery at no more than ten paces off. The terrified animal instantly became unmanageable, got the bit between her teeth, and darted off at the wildest speed. The road is a curved and rugged one; and after tearing along for about half a mile, the off wheel of the gig came, at an abrupt turn, full against a milestone. The tremendous shock hurled the two unfortunate gentlemen upon the road with frightful violence, tore the vehicle asunder, and so injured the mare, that she died the next day. The grooms, who had not only been unable to render assistance, but even to keep up with the terrified mare, found Mr. Archibald Redwood quite dead. The spine had been broken close to the nape of the neck; his head, in fact, was doubled up, so to speak, under the body. Sir Thomas still breathed, and was conveyed to Redwood Manor house. Surgical aid was promptly obtained; but the internal injuries were so great, that the excellent old gentleman expired a few hours after he had reached his home. I was hastily sent for; and when I arrived Sir Thomas was still fully conscious. He imparted to me matters of great moment, to which he requested I would direct, after his decease, my best care and attention. His son, I was aware, had just returned from a tour on the continent, where he had been absent for nearly a twelvemonth; but I was not aware, neither was his father till the day before his death, that Mr. Archibald Redwood had not only secretly espoused a Miss Ashton—of a reduced family, but belonging to our best gentry—but he had returned home, not solely for the purpose of soliciting Sir Thomas' forgiveness of his unauthorized espousals, but that the probable heir of Redwood might be born within the walls of the ancient manor house. After the first burst of passion and surprise, Sir Thomas, who was one of the best-hearted in the universe, cordially forgave his son's disobedience—partly, and quite rightly, imputing it to his own foolish urgency in pressing a union with one of the Lacy family with which the baronet was very intimate, and whose estate joined his.

“Well, this lady, now a widow, had been left by her husband at Chester, whilst he came on to seek an explanation with his father. Mr. Archibald Redwood was to have set out the next morning in one of Sir Thomas' carriages to bring home his wife; and the baronet, with his dying breath, bade me assure her of his entire forgiveness, and his earnest hope and trust that through her offspring the race of the Redwoods might be continued in a direct line. The family estates, I should tell you, being strictly entailed on heirs-male, devolved, if no son of Mr. Archibald Redwood should bar his claim, upon Charles Malvern, the son of a cousin of the late Sir Thomas Redwood. The baronet had always felt partially toward Malvern, and had assisted him pecuniarily a hundred times. Sir Thomas also directed me to draw as quickly as I could a short will bequeathing Mr. Charles Malvern twenty thousand pounds out of the personals. I wrote as quickly as I could, but by the time the paper was ready for his signature, Sir Thomas was no longer conscious. I placed the pen in his hand, and I fancied he understood the purpose, for his fingers closed faintly upon it but the power to guide was utterly gone, and only a slight scrambling stroke marked the paper as the pen slid across it in the direction of the falling arm.

“Mr. Malvern arrived at the manor house about an hour after Sir Thomas breathed his last. It was clearly apparent through all his sorrow, partly real, I have no doubt, as well as partly assumed, that joy, the joy of riches, splendor, station, was dancing at his ear, and in spite of all his efforts to subdue or conceal it, sparkling in his eyes. I briefly, but as gently as I could, acquainted him with the true position of affairs. The revulsion of feeling which ensued, entirely unmanned him; and it was not till an hour afterwards that he recovered his self-possession sufficiently to converse reasonably and coolly upon his position. At last he became apparently reconciled to the sudden overclouding of his imaginatively brilliant prospects, and it was agreed that as he was a relative of the widow, he should at once set off to break the sad news to her. Well, a few days after his departure, I received a letter from him, stating that Lady Redwood—I don’t think, by the way, that, as her husband died before succeeding to the baronetcy, she is entitled to that appellation of honor; we, however, call her so out of courtesy—that Lady Redwood, though prematurely confined in consequence of her husband’s untimely death, had given birth to a female child, and that both mother and daughter were as well as could be expected. This you will agree, seemed perfectly satisfactory?”

“Entirely so.”

“So I thought. Mr. Malvern was now unquestionably, whether Sir Charles Malvern or not, the proprietor of the Redwood estates, burthened as with a charge, in accordance with the conditions of the entails, of a thousand pounds life annuity to the late Mr. Redwood’s infant daughter.

“Sir Charles returned to Redwood Manor house, where his wife and family soon afterwards arrived. Lady Redwood had been joined, I understand, by her mother, Mrs. Ashton, and would, when able to undertake the journey, return to her maternal home. It was about two months after Sir Thomas Redwood’s death that I determined to pay Lady Redwood a visit, in order to the winding up of the personal estate, which it was desirable to accomplish as speedily as possible; and then a new and terrible light flashed upon me.”

“What in heaven’s name!” I exclaimed, for the first time breaking silence—“What could there be to reveal?”

“Only,” rejoined Mr. Repton, “that, ill and delirious as Lady Redwood admitted herself to have been, it was her intimate, unconquerable conviction *that she had given birth to twins!*”

“Good God! And you suspect”—

“We don’t know what to suspect.—Should the lady’s confident belief be correct, the missing child might have been a boy. You understand?”

“I do. But is there any tangible evidence to justify this horrible suspicion?”

“Yes; the surgeon-apothecary and his wife, a Mr. and Mrs. Williams, who attended the Lady Redwood, have suddenly disappeared from Chester; and, from no explainable motive, having left or abandoned a fair business there.”

“That has certainly an ugly look.”

“True; and a few days ago I received information that Williams had been seen in Birmingham. He was well dressed, and not apparently in any business.”

“There certainly appears some ground for suspicion. What plan of operation do you propose?”

“That,” replied Mr. Repton, “I must leave to your more practiced sagacity. I can only undertake that no means shall be lacking that may be required.”

“It will be better, perhaps,” I suggested, after an interval of reflection, “that I should proceed to Birmingham at once. You have of course an accurate description of the persons of Williams and his wife ready?”

“I have; and very accurate pen and ink sketches I am told they are. Besides these, I have also here,” continued Mr. Repton, taking from his pocketbook a sheet of carefully folded satin paper, “a full description of the female child, drawn up by its mother, under the impression that twins always—I believe they generally do—closely resemble each other. ‘Light hair, blue eyes, dimpled chin,’ and so on. The lady—a very charming person, I assure you, and meek and gentle as a fawn—is chiefly anxious to recover her child. You and I, should our suspicions be confirmed, have other duties to perform.”

This was pretty near all that passed, and the next day I was in Birmingham.

The search, as I was compelled to be cautious in my inquiries, was tedious, but finally successful. Mr. and Mrs. Williams I discovered living in a pretty house, with neat grounds attached, about two miles out of Birmingham, on the coach road to Wolverhampton. Their assumed name was Burrige, and I ascertained from the servant girl who fetched their dinner and supper, and occasionally wine and spirits, from a neighboring tavern, that they had one child, a boy a few months old, of which neither mother nor father seemed very fond. By dint of much perseverance, I at length got upon pretty familiar terms with Mr. Burrige, *alias* Williams. He spent his evenings regularly in a tavern; but with all the painstaking, indefatigable ingenuity I employed, the chief knowledge I acquired during these weeks of assiduous endeavor, was that my friend Burrige intended, immediately after a visit he expected shortly to receive from a rich and influential relative in London, to emigrate to America, at all events to go abroad. This, however, was very significant and precious information; and very rarely indeed, was he, after I had obtained it, out of my sight or observation. At length perseverance obtained its reward. One morning I discerned my friend much more sprucely attired than ordinarily, make his way to the railway station, and there question with eager looks every passenger that alighted from the first-class carriages. At last a gentleman, whom I

instantly recognized, spite of his shawl and other wrappings, arrived by the express train from London. Williams instantly accosted him, a cab was called, and away they drove. I followed in another, and saw them both alight at a hotel in New St. I also alighted and was mentally debating how to proceed, when Williams came out the tavern, and proceeded in the direction of his home. I followed, overtook him, and soon contrived to ascertain that he and his wife had important business to transact in Birmingham the next morning, which would render it impossible he should meet me, as I proposed, till two or three o'clock in the afternoon at the earliest; and the next morning, my esteemed friend informed me that they would probably leave the place forever. An hour after this interesting information, I, accompanied by the chief of the Birmingham police, was closeted with the landlord of the Hotel in New Street, a highly respectable person, who promised us every assistance in his power. Sir Charles Malvern had, we found, engaged a private room for the transaction of important business with some persons he expected in the morning, and our plans were soon fully matured and agreed upon.

I slept little that night, and immediately after breakfast hastened with my Birmingham colleague to the hotel.—The apartment assigned for Sir Charles Malvern's use had been a bedroom, and a large wardrobe with a high wing at each end, still remained in it. We tried if it would hold us, and with very little stooping and squeezing found it would do very well. The landlord soon gave us the signal to be on the alert, and in we jammed ourselves, locking the wing doors on the inside. A minute or two afterwards, Sir Charles and Mr. and Mrs. Williams, entered, and papers, pens and ink having been brought, business commenced in right earnest.

Their conversation it is needless to detail. It will suffice to observe, that it was manifest that Sir Charles by a heavy bribe, had induced the acoucher and his wife to conceal the birth of the male child, which, as I suspected, was that which Williams and his spouse were bringing up as their own. I must do the fictitious baronet the justice to say that he had manifested the utmost anxiety that no harm should befall the infant. It was now insisted, by the woman more especially, that the agreement for the large annual payment to be made by Sir Charles should be fairly written out and signed in plain "black and white," to use Mrs. Williams' expression, in order that no future misunderstandings might arise.

A silence of some minutes followed, broken only by the scratching of the pen on the paper. The time to me seemed an age, squeezed, crooked, and stifled as I was in that narrow box, and so I afterwards learned it did to my fellow sufferer. At length Mr. Malvern said in the same cautious whisper in which they had hitherto spoken, "This will do, I think;" and read what he had written. Mr. and Mrs. Williams signified their approval; and as matters were fairly ripe, I gently turned the key and very softly pushed open the door. The backs of the amiable trio were towards me, and as my boots were off, and the apartment was thickly carpeted, I approached unperceived, and to the inexpressible horror and astonishment of the parties concerned, whose heads were bent eagerly over the important document, a hand which belonged to neither of them was thrust silently and swiftly forward and grasped the precious document.

A fierce exclamation from Mr. Malvern as he started from his seat, and a convulsive scream from Mrs. Williams followed; and to add to the animation of the tableau, my friend at the opposite wing emerged at the same moment from his hiding place.

Mr. Malvern comprehended at a glance the situation of affairs and made a furious dash at the paper. I was quicker as well as stronger than he and he failed in his object. Resistance was, of course, out of the question; and in less than two hours we were speeding on the rail towards London, accompanied by the child, whom we intrusted to Williams' servant maid.

Mrs. Repton was still in town, and Mrs. Ashton, Lady Redwood and her unmarried sister, in their impatience of intelligence, had arrived several days before. I had the pleasure of accompanying Mrs. Repton with the child and his temporary nurse to Osborne's hotel in the Adelphi; and I really at first feared for the excited mother's reason, or that she would do the infant mischief, so tumultuous, so frenzied, was her rapturous joy at the recovery of her lost treasure. When placed in the cot beside the infant, the resemblance of the one to the other was certainly almost perfect. I never saw before nor since so complete a likeness. This was enough for the mother; but fortunately, we had much more satisfactory evidence, legally viewed, to establish the identity of the child in a court of law, should the necessity arise for doing so.

Here, as far as I am concerned, all positive knowledge of this curious piece of family history ends. Of subsequent transactions between the parties I had no personal cognizance. I only know there was a failure of justice, and I can pretty well guess from what motives. The parties I arrested in Birmingham were kept in strict custody for several days; but no inducement, no threats could induce the institutors of the inquiry to appear against the detected criminals.

Mr. and Mrs. Ashton, Lady Redwood and her children, left town the next day for Redwood Manor; and Mr. Repton coolly told the angry superintendent that he had no instructions to prosecute. He, too, was speedily off; and the prisoners were necessarily discharged out of custody.

I saw about three weeks afterwards in a morning paper that Mr. Malvern, "whom the birth of a posthumous heir in a direct line necessarily deprived of all chance of succession to the Redwood estates, and the baronetcy, which the newspapers had so absurdly conferred on him, was, with his amiable lady and family, about to leave England for Italy, where they intend to remain for some time." The expressed but uncompleted will of the deceased baronet, Sir Thomas Redwood was carried into effect, and the legacy intended for Mr. Malvern paid over to him. The Williamses never, to my knowledge, attained to the dignity of a notice in the newspapers; but I believe they pursued their original intention of passing over to America.

Thus not only "offence's gilded hand" but some of the best feelings of our nature, not unfrequently "shove by justice," and place a concealing gloss over deeds which, in other circumstances, would have infallibly consigned the perpetrators to a prison, or perhaps

the hulks. Whether, however, any enactment could effectually grapple with an abuse so natural and amiable, is a question which I must leave to wiser heads than mine to determine.

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Prior to the British publication of this volume, a pirated collection of the stories—titled *Recollections of a Policeman by Thomas Waters, An Inspector in the London Detective Corps*—was published in America (New York: Cornish and Lamport, 1852).