

“Little Jinks”
by a London Detective

I never could be harsh with any one having a real love for his mother; more, the moment that I saw that his case was a deserving one, I was ready to exert myself to the utmost to help him out of the mire. My own mother had a hard struggle to keep her harum-scarum boy in order; but sooner than cause a tear to gather in her eye, I would have chopped off my right hand. She was my idol when I used to worship in secret; and many a time when she thought me fast asleep, I have been peeping out from under the blankets, watching her sewing, and wishing that I were strong enough and big enough to work for her myself. But let me explain. I received the following note one morning as I entered the office:

“I missed my purse when I reached home, so my pocket must have been picked somewhere between the Mansion House and Finsbury Square.”

This brief communication was signed by a well-known banker, a jolly old bachelor, living in Finsbury Square. He was a little man, and inclined to be fat; but he had a large, warm heart—as I had discovered long before—and seemed to live in a kind of genial atmosphere, liked by everybody and envied by none. I even felt a momentary surprise that a thief had found it in his heart to victimize such a man.

Calling at his house, the following ensued:

“It is not so much the money that concerns me,” he said; “though the loss of that would be serious to a poor man, but in the inner pocket I had stowed away some papers and an odd memorandum which I shall miss very much. If you just get me them, you can let the poor wretch keep the money.”

This proposal was against all law and order, and he must have known it; but I had to remind him of the fact.

“Ah, yes, I know,” he said in his quick way, with a merry smile. “It’s against the law, of course, but you detectives can easily stretch a point when you have a mind to; and, beside, I only throw out the hint. Get the contents of the inner pocket—the rest also, if you can.”

“You did not feel yourself tugged or jostled anywhere on your way home?”

“No, I felt nothing, and did not miss the purse until I came here.”

After eliciting all the facts I could in connection with the matter, I returned to the office, determined to work with a will to trace his purse and its contents. But I did not even hear of it. No one among my numerous acquaintance seemed particularly flush of money; the empty purse was not picked up anywhere or brought in; and I began to fear that it had left London, and the thief with it.

In this, however, I was mistaken.

A little before ten o'clock next morning, while we were chatting away, a slim morsel of a boy made his appearance, with his eyes all red and swelled with crying, and asked if this was the detective office. We all started round and gazed at the little intruder. The strangest thing about him was his "skinnyness"—he was a mere shadow of a boy, though he had a prepossessing little face, in spite of the blearing effect of the crying.

Being answered in the affirmative, he remained a moment silent, during which I could see, by a quivering of his lip, that he was struggling hard to appear manly and firm while making his next speech; he then suddenly produced the purse of Mr. S—, the banker, and hastily got out the words:

"If you please, I'm a thief—and my mother is dead—and I've come for you to put me in jail."

He was choking and shaking all over as he got the words out, but it was no use. A blinding rush of tears came to his eyes, and the heavy purse dropped to his feet.

There was a strange silence in the room. Nobody rushed forward with a pair of handcuffs, or grasped him by the collar to hustle him off to a cell. He was so small—so forlorn and pitiful looking.

I touched him gently on the shoulder.

"What's your name?" I asked; but I was not prepared for the change the simple question produced. His face flushed up, and every tear burnt out of his eyes, as he said:

"My name is Willie Bell, but they all call me 'Little Jinks' now. That's why I ran away from the 'Home.' But I pitched into them before I left—not for that, but for something else," and the recollection seemed to afford the little man a kind of fierce pleasure.

"Oh, so you ran away from the 'Home.' I suppose your mother was pretty poor, Willie—not well off—eh?"

"That's it, sir," he cried, with sudden intelligence flashing out of his tearful eyes. "That's how she died—I'm sure of it—because she hadn't enough to eat. I tried to save her by stealing the purse after I ran away from the 'Home;' but when I got home—when I got home—she couldn't eat—and she died without knowing what I had done. Do you think they'll tell her in Heaven that I stole it?"

He appeared so anxious for a negative that I was forced to say:

"I don't think they will, Willie, because that would be sure to make her unhappy—wouldn't it?"

This brought a fresh burst of sobbing, and then he said:

“I hope I’ll be hanged. I want to die now. It’s no living without mother, and every body else is cruel. There’s nobody to put their arms round me now, and pat me on the head, and sing to me when I am hungry. I—I—I’m trying not to cry—I made it all up before I came that I wouldn’t cry—but somehow I can’t help it. It seems very hard that God should take her away, for I loved her so, and I’m such a small boy.”

I could not get out an answer, and nobody else seemed ready to speak. I picked up the purse and motioned him to follow me into another room, and there poor Willie told me his mother’s history, and a sad, sad history it was.

It was the old story—a garret, pinching want, and a hard struggle for bare life, which finally drove the mother into delicate health, and the boy into one of the “Homes” of London.

But here poor Willie’s troubles increased. The boys of the “Home” crowded round the strange little arrival, and dubbed him “Little Jinks.” No rudeness or unkindness was meant—it was their custom, and he had to give up asking them to call him Willie, for “Little Jinks” they would have him, and nothing else. The first day passed all well enough—he made one or two acquaintances—and at night, when all were asleep, and the cold moonlight stole into the dormitory, he had a good cry, keeping his head muffled in the bedclothes to stifle the sound.

But fresh griefs were in store for him. In an evil hour he had confided to some of his new acquaintances some particulars of his own life and history; and next day when he found them torturing one of their number, a mute named Johnnie, he horrified them by firing up, knocking down one of them, releasing the sufferer, and daring them to touch him again.

An excited circle instantly formed round him.

“What is it?” cried one, elbowing in.

“It’s ‘Jinks’—the beggar—the starved rat,” spitefully answered the floored boy, gathering himself up and wiping the blood from his nose. “Why couldn’t he stay in his hole, and not come in among gentlemen?”

“What’s he done?”

“Stuck up for Johnnie.”

“Oh, my! Ha! ha! ha!” and the jeering laugh ran round all.

“I don’t care what you say,” chokingly returned “Jinks,” blushing to the ears, and then turning dangerously white. “You’re a pack of cruel brutes!”

“Ha! ha! ha!” laughed the boys. “What a pity his mother isn’t here. Ho! ho! ho!”

“Don’t speak about my mother, I warn you, don’t!” said “Jinks,” with a strange flashing of the eyes.

“Ho! ho! ho! Do you hear him? His mother’s a beggar, too.”

“Of course she is. He told me so; and my uncle threw her a farthing on the street one day. Ho! ho!—”

The last speaker didn’t get his laugh out, for though he towered up tall and strong, “Jinks” had flashed through the air at his throat like a bloodhound. They fought long and fiercely, and, small as he was, “Jinks” seemed to be getting the best of it, when one of the assistant masters suddenly appeared on the scene, and put an end to the struggle.

And now “Jinks” experienced the danger of going against the majority. The small boy and himself gave the true version of the story; the other boys, one and all, gave quite a different one; and the majority carried the day.

“Jinks” and Johnnie were taken in and caned till every bone in their bodies ached, and then shut up in separate little rooms on the ground floor, with a hunch of dry bread and a mug of water each.

Poor “Jinks” thought it high time now to make his escape from a place where he was so miserable, and get back to his mother. In getting through the window of the room in which he was confined he fell to the ground, and was considerably shaken. Before he could rise to his feet his terror increased by a policeman arriving on the spot.

“Oh, sir,” he managed to gasp out, “I’m only ‘Little Jinks,’ you won’t stop me? They beat me all over for nothing. But I didn’t mind that; but they—they called my mother a beggar; and I’m running away from them. Oh, do let me go! Mother will be glad if you let me off, she will, indeed!”

The policeman looked down at the little atom, with his torn shirt and stains of blood coming through, and his pitiful face and wildly pleading eyes. He didn’t shake him or grasp him roughly. No, he took the boy up in his arms. He tried to speak to him, but for long the words stuck in his throat, and when he did get them out they were strangely husky, and not at all harsh or unkind.

“Poor little fellow!”

The unexpected words went straight to “Little Jinks”’ heart. If the man had kicked him, he would have been stone; but the kind words drew from him a convulsive sob, and must have set his brain reeling, for the next thing he was conscious of was the policeman putting a sort of fiery stuff into his mouth out of a flask, and telling him to keep up a good heart, for he wouldn’t let anybody touch him.

They were friends in a moment.

It ended, however, by the kind policeman carrying “Little Jinks” to his mother; and the poor woman, when she heard the account, received him with open arms, and there he remained with

her until the day of her death, and the day, indeed, on which he stole the purse to keep her from starving.

When he brought the stolen purse in, he found his mother dying. But the following conversation took place between them.

“Who gave it to you?” she managed to ask, and then a fearful, guilty remorse began to gnaw at “Little Jinks”’ heart.

“A woman down there,” he got out. “But could you not get up and walk about, mother? You would look better then, and perhaps you could eat.”

“No, Willie dear. I’m afraid—”

“Little Jinks” seemed to see the words that were coming, and a great wail burst from him as he placed his little hand on her mouth.

“Oh, mother, don’t say that, or I’ll die!” he wildly cried. “I’ll run for a doctor—oh, how fast I’ll go!—and you’ll be well tomorrow, won’t you?”

But she only strained him closer to her breast.

“Pray after me, Willie,” she faintly whispered; and then, choking with grief, and burning with a sense of guilt, he repeated after her a little prayer, that God would look after a poor little boy who would soon have no mother, and raise him up a great many kind friends to look after him, and be the same as a mother to him, and make him grow up to be a great and good man.

After speaking the prayer, “Little Jinks” had but one thought—how he could let his mother die without confessing his crime. Every moment it was at the tip of his tongue; but then he thought the awful news would strike her dead in his arms. He let her sleep on, while he watched her, and listened to her breathing.

Toward morning she stirred slightly, and opened her eyes.

“Kiss me, Willie,” she said.

It was only a whisper, but he heard every word.

“Now, put your arms round me—tighter, tighter.”

These were her last words. Her breathing got fainter and slower; and then, as her eyelids drooped, Willie’s screams brought in some of the neighbors.

They took him gently from the room, and were kind and good to him, poor though they were; but when they told him that his mother was away somewhere, and would not be back for a while, he

had such a wild burst of grief, that they were afraid for his slender life. But he was calm at last, and then he insisted on going out—no, he wouldn't tell where, but he would go.

He slipped out when they were in the next room, and found his way to Scotland Yard; and this ended his story.

I didn't take him away and lock him in a cell. No, I took him home to my wife, and then paid a visit to the banker. After giving him the purse and its contents entire and unbroken, I told him "Little Jinks'" story pretty much as I have now put it before the reader. As I have already indicated, he was of that derided class called soft-hearted; and long before I had finished, he was blowing his nose, wiping his eyes, and, finally, crying and sobbing like a child. But when I stopped him by asking if he wished to press the case, he started right back in his chair, and looked perfectly fierce.

"Mr. Reynolds!" he cried, "do you take me for a monster? No," he added, after a minute, "I will not press it—nor will I let you press it. Do you hear me? I am determined. I will see Willie—you'll let me see him, won't you? I think I shall like Willie, and perhaps Willie might like me. This is a big house, too; he wouldn't fill up much space in it; and, beside; he'd be somebody to talk to. Yes, I'll see Willie. But, Mr. Reynolds—here—stop! If you say another word about 'pressing the case,' as you call it, I'll—I'll kill you on the spot!"

New York Dispatch, October 29, 1876

The Cincinnati Daily Star, November 23, 1876

Colorado Banner, November 30, 1876

The Home Journal, December 7, 1876

The Herald and Mail, December 8, 1876

The Opelousas Courier, December 9, 1876

The Southern Reveille, December 15, 1876

Fayetteville Observer, December 21, 1876

Bozeman [MT] Avant Courier, October 25, 1877