

THE DEPARTMENT FOR CHILDREN WHICH HAS USUALLY FILLED THIS PAGE IS TRANSFERRED TO PART II.

"Honor Among Thieves."

BY EDWIN PUGH.

Mr. Bunny Price and his friend, William Withers, lounged in the saloon bar of the Old Moon, drinking sociably together. They were two gentlemen well known to the police, and each had passed the major portion of his career within the walls of one or other of his majesty's prisons. They measured time by the length of the various sentences they had undergone, in reminiscent moods speaking of events as happening "just afore I did that stretch for petter-claiming," or "soon after I got that there sixer for a measly madam." They were both middle aged men; Bunny Price, whose specialty was card sharpening, but who dabbled in most other forms of illicit enterprise, was a stoutly built little man, well dressed and well spoken; William Withers was a small man, too, but of a more wizened exterior, and lacking the easy carriage and ready address of his companion. He was, so to express it, merely a journeyman criminal, and had no administrative genius whatever. By the shortness of Mr. Bunny's hair and his smoothly shaven face, it was plain to see that he had not long come out of prison; William Withers, on the other hand, showed a plentiful crop of grizzled locks under his greasy batbrim, and he had a full set of whiskers.

"And so that's the last bit of silver you possess?" said Mr. Price, with a sigh.

William Withers, pushing a half-crown piece across the counter toward the barmaid, remarked: "That's the last bit o' wedge," and he ordered two bitters, with a dash of melancholy, and Burton.

They drank as if they were performing a painful duty.

"Can't you think o' nothing?" asked William Withers, at last.

"That's what I'm thinking of," replied Mr. Price. "My head's a fair aching void with thinking of it."

"Well, we can't afford to go on bein' honest much longer," said William Withers.

"I know that as well as you do," said Mr. Price, irritably. "Why don't you say something helpful?"

"Now you're askin' me a question," William Withers rejoined.

They were silent for a space. Then the swinging door of the bar was suddenly pushed open, and a man lurched in upon them. He was big and burly, had a fat, inflamed face, and wore a suit of raucous checks. At sight of him William Withers uttered an involuntary cry of joy, and Mr. Bunny Price, in a transport, muttered: "It's like an answer to prayer!"

The newcomer, without looking at them, walked unsteadily to the bar. Mr. Price winked at William Withers, and, moving over to the stranger's side, touched him on the shoulder.

"How do, Mister—?" he was beginning, in a soft voice.

But the other wheeled round swiftly, and checked him. "Keep off my name, can't you?" he whispered fiercely, scanning them both with keen eyes. "Oh, it's you, is it?" he added, scowling. "Well?"

"You'll shake hands, Mr. Jones?" said Mr. Bunny Price, ingratiatingly.

The stranger looked puzzled for an instant; then he grinned. "With pleasure, Mr. Smith," said he; "and"—turning to William Withers—"how is Mr. Brown, eh?" The grin broadened into a laugh. "What'll you have?" he cried. "Here! throw that muck away you're drinkin', and have a brandy and soda w' me, old friends. Both of you. Come on, now. Three brandies and a large soda between, miss!" he shouted, flinging down a sovereign.

William Withers looked at the money greedily; but Mr. Bunny Price continued to smile and regard Mr. Jones with great good humor. "And how are you getting on in the world, Mr. Jones?" he asked.

"Wouldn't call the Queen my aunt," said Mr. Jones. "Here's luck! Fill 'em up agin, miss. And how are you two doin', eh?"

Mr. Bunny Price sighed. "A little short of ready cash just at present, but very rich in ideas."

"Ideas is three a penny nowadays—three a penny!" said Mr. Jones, scornfully. "Ideas!" He spat. "Here, look at this." He pulled out a big handful of mixed coins, gold and silver. "Better than ideas, eh?"

"You've struck lucky, that's what you done," said William Withers, with conviction.

Mr. Jones rived the air with his triumphant laughter. He was at the boastful stage of drunkenness, and avowed that he was made for life. "Made for life and don't you forget it! Where do you think I'm living now? Here, you come along w' me and I'll show you something." They had one more brandy and soda in the Old Moon, and then sallied out. Mr. Jones called a cab and directed the cabman to drive to Muswell Hill. The journey was punctuated by frequent stoppages at public houses, and by the time the party reached their destination Mr. Jones was in a state of uproarious excitement. He confided to Price and Withers that he had just come back from America, where he had made a big haul of jewels. "Loose stones, my beauties; none o' your melting pot stuff. Why, I got a tarara, belonging to Mrs. Vernon K"—

"Tiara," murmured Mr. Bunny Price.

"Here, I'll show it you," said Mr. Jones, "when I get home. I've took a house all to my own check—ready furnished and everythink, and

standing in its own grounds. Took it for a quarter, I have, and paid the rent in advance. I'm a Yankee gent, I am, connected w' Wall Street, over here for fun. And I ain't got no fust class references. Not hardly! . . . Sto—op!"

The cab drew up abruptly at a small iron gate set in a high brick wall. They alighted, and, having overpaid the cabman, Mr. Jones drew a formidable bunch of keys from his pocket and opened the gate.

"There's a lock on that gate 'd defy the best cracksmen in the world," said Mr. Jones.

Mr. Bunny Price examined it carefully. "It's a good lock," he said.

Mr. Jones led them by devious gravel paths between beds of flowers toward a small, compactly built house. "Here's another lock for you," he said, when they got to the door.

And Mr. Bunny Price said again, after carefully examining it: "Yes, it's a good lock!"

They went in. The house was amply furnished, and Mr. Jones chuckled gleefully over its splendors. "Woman comes in every morning to clean up and cook for me. Calls me 'sir' and bobs like anythink. It's as good as a play! Why, the passon hisself called yisterday, and hoped he'd 'ave the pleasure o' seeing me nex' Sunday in church."

"Ain't it a bit risky?" asked William Withers.

"My boy," said Mr. Jones, impressively, "if you see a bloke hiding up in a doorway what do you naturally think? He's a wrong 'un. But if he comes sailin' down the middle o' the pavement two sizes larger than life you never suspect him o' nothink. I know my business. I'm a bit cannoned now, perhaps, but there's times when I can count up to five with any one."

"I'd like to have a peep at that diamond tarara," said William Withers.

"Tiara," murmured Mr. Bunny Price.

"Anybody 'd think this was a spellin' bee!" grumbled William Withers.

"And so you shall look at it," said Mr. Jones.

"I know I'm among pals as wouldn't do nothink dirty, even if they wasn't afraid to."

He led them into the kitchen. "Never put things where other people might expect to find 'em," said he; "and then you needn't expect to lose 'em." He opened a meat safe with an intricate little key, and, lifting a dish cover, revealed a small box of wood, clasped with brass. This he opened with another intricate little key. He lifted the lid gently. Price and Withers craned their heads forward. The light flowed into the box, and showed them a tumbled mass of mixed gems: diamonds, rubies, emeralds, sapphires, gleaming and flashing like the reflection of a rainbow in a mountain burn. "How's that?" said Mr. Jones, and banged down the old lid again quickly and locked the box. He closed the meat safe and herded them back into the parlor. "Call me a liar," he said. They looked at him with awed faces, and shook their heads. "Now you can screw your nut," said he, with an easy lack of formality, and conducted them personally to the outer gate. He blessed them at parting, facetiously, and gave them some money with which to drink his health. Then he shut them out, and they heard him lumber back to the house along the gravel path.

"I'm asleep and dreaming," said William Withers confidently.

Mr. Bunny Price remarked absently: "They are good locks!"

II.

"Drink," said Mr. Bunny Price, "is a curse to them that drink it, and a blessing to them that don't."

"Hear! hear!" cried William Withers.

"To think of him!" exclaimed Mr. Bunny Price. "One of the smartest all round gonophers in the world."

"Goin' and treatin' us like that," said William Withers. "Us!"

Mr. Bunny Price regarded him somewhat sternly. "Though, mind you," he said, "honor among thieves."

"Oh, cert'nly," said William Withers.

They walked back to their lodgings in Camden Town in a mood of thoughtfulness, eying one another furtively from time to time, to their mutual embarrassment.

"I don't feel like indoors," said Mr. Bunny Price suddenly. "I think I'll go for a little walk by myself."

"Good idea! I'll come with you," said William Withers.

"I said, 'by myself,'" remarked Mr. Bunny Price.

"And I said," William Withers added, "I said, 'I'll come with you.'"

"Oh, all right," said Mr. Bunny Price.

They walked about aimlessly for an hour, shoulder to shoulder.

"You don't trust me," said Mr. Bunny Price at last.

"Yuss, I do," said William Withers, "as fur as I can see you."

It was growing late. Mr. Bunny Price said that he was sick of prossing about in that way, and entered a public house. His faithful friend plunged in after him. In a little while Mr. Bunny Price started up, and, remarking that he would not be long, went out hurriedly. William Withers followed on his heels. They passed the evening in close communion togeth-

er, and at closing time they were not divided. It was their habit to sleep in the same bed, for economical reasons, and all that night they lay clasped in each other's arms. They slept but ill, and the morning found them red eyed and heavy headed. They rose soon after daybreak, and crawled out to revive themselves with a morning dram. In the street, immediately outside their door, Mr. Jones was awaiting them.

"Hullo!" he said, rather shamefacedly, and came and shook hands with them with great heartiness. "Made rather a cast iron fool o' myself yesterday, didn't I?" he asked feverishly. "Took you home to my place, didn't I?"

"Certainly, you were kind enough to take us home to your place," said Mr. Bunny Price, "and a very nice place it is. But what was there in that?"

"Warn't I talking out o' my hat a lot?"

"You were conversational—distinctly conversational."

"Indistinctly, more like—I was drunk," said Mr. Jones. "Blind, roaring drunk."

"Well, I don't know," said Mr. Bunny Price judicially, "as I'd go as far as that. Let us say you were rather pleased with yourself."

"More'n I am this morning," said Mr. Jones. He rubbed his chin with a dirty, jewelled hand.

"Here, I don't mind tellin' you the truth for once, even if it fractures my jaw," he went on. "I can't remember what happened—that's the fact o' the matter—and I want to know. What did I say? What did I do?"

"Just the ordinary things," replied Mr. Bunny Price serenely. "You talked and laughed, and were very pleasant, and you took us up to your place and showed us round."

"Was that all I showed you? Here, Willy Withers, you answer me. You ain't quite as good a rogue as you'd like to be. Perhaps you'll tell me straight. Was that all I showed you?"

"Was that what?" stammered William Withers.

"Was that all I showed you?" William Withers hesitated. "I didn't show you my—my new meat safe, I suppose?" demanded Mr. Jones.

"I never saw no meat safe," answered William Withers.

And Mr. Bunny Price asked: "Would anybody ever think of showing anybody a meat safe?"

Mr. Jones regarded them with grave suspicion.

"Oh, well," said he sullenly, "I s'pose the only thing to do is to have a drink. And, I tell you, I can do with one or twelve."

He left them in the public house after a while, on the plea of an engagement with a lady, and drove off in a cab.

III.

It was not until late in the evening that Mr. Bunny Price contrived to escape from his attached friend. A disturbance at a street corner was the providential means to his end. William Withers was severed from him by the press, and he seized the opportunity to double swiftly down a narrow byway. His loss was deeply felt. William Withers ran about frantically seeking him in all likely and unlikely places for two hours. At last he gave up the quest and began to debate on his next proceeding. Obviously, reasoned William Withers, Mr. Bunny Price would act at once; it was his way. But what were his plans? Did he intend to turn nark?—that is, betray Mr. Jones to the police; or, did he intend to burgle Mr. Jones's house? "He'll try the burgling wheeze first, at any rate," William Withers concluded. "Jones dare not give him into custody, even if he caught him. And supposing Bunny don't manage to lay his hands on the sparks, after all, he can still turn back if he likes. I'll follow him to Muswell Hill," William Withers declared decisively.

He hurried back to their lodgings. As he expected, their bag of housebreaking implements, common property, was gone. He sped away to the house of a friend and succeeded in borrowing another set of tools; but all this delayed him greatly, and it was long past midnight when he reached Muswell Hill at last.

It was a bright, moonlit night, and William Withers had to observe much caution. He was not a master of the burgling craft, his ways being rather the ways of a slinking, sneaking area thief and cadger. He stood in the shadow of some trees fifty yards from Mr. Jones's house and waited for a policeman to pass that way. He waited for nearly half an hour, trembling like a leaf in the wind and racked with suspense. The policeman came, saw him not, and passed on out of sight. Then William Withers knew that he was safe from interruption for half an hour at least, and made at once for Mr. Jones's house. It was impossible to scale the high wall without assistance; and dangerous, in any case, because of the spikes which surmounted it. William Withers resolved to try the gate. He pulled out his "twirls" and selected a likely key.

But in the moment that he fitted it into the keyhole he discovered that the lock had already been forced.

Mr. Bunny Price had been there before him, and William Withers cursed the name of Mr. Bunny Price with a fine comprehensiveness, all the more heartily because he had to curse in a rumbling whisper. "But I might have expected it," he said, "Oh, what a ready feller he is!" he pondered. "There's just a chance as he's inside there now," he thought. "I'll wait a bit." And he scudded away to the friendly shadow of the trees.

But soon he grew tired of waiting, and returned to the gate, resolved to make a little exploration on his own account. He entered the

garden. The house was dark and silent. He crept stealthily toward it. He passed from window to window of the rooms in the basement, but all were barred, and none of the bars had been tampered with. Then he tried the front door. It was ajar. He examined it by the light of his dark lantern, and saw that the lock had been neatly forced just as the lock of the outer gate had been. He could not withhold a purr of admiration at this new evidence of Mr. Bunny Price's skill. "And the rate he must ha' worked at!" William Withers went into the house. He peered about cautiously and suspended his breath to listen. There were no disturbing sights or sounds. He groped on, feeling his way along the wall, every now and then throwing a sudden ray to guide his steps. It was as he had expected. Every obstacle in the way of his progress had been skillfully removed. He got to the kitchen at last. The meat safe was in its old place; it had been forced, and the little wooden box, with the brass clasps, was gone. William Withers expressed his chagrin in a few adequate phrases; and, as there was nothing to be gained but much to be lost by lingering on that dangerous spot, made his way out of the house.

He stood outside the iron gate at last, and turned his face toward Camden Town.

"I'll dog him though—if it's right round the world," he told himself as he strode along. "The slider!"

IV.

But when he reached their lodging, tired and dispirited, he found that Mr. Bunny Price had arrived there before him, and was gone to bed. He was simulating sleep. William Withers lit a candle and sat down and looked at the recumbent form outlined under the bed clothes. He could not understand this new phase of affairs. Why had not Bunny made off with his booty? Obviously that was the course for him to pursue in the circumstances; it was the only course that William Withers would have thought of taking. His head sang with perplexity. But he was ever ready to confess his mental inferiority to his colleague, and so at last he came to the conclusion that Bunny had possibly some sound, although incomprehensible, reason for his strange conduct. He only wondered what it could be. He resolved to meet cunning with cunning. He shook the shammer violently.

"Want all the bed?" he asked.

"Hullo!" yawned Mr. Bunny Price. "Where you been?"

"Nowhere," said William Withers.

"Got delayed coming back, didn't you?"

"Question is, Where you been?" remarked William Withers.

"I've been looking for you, of course," said Mr. Bunny Price.

"With a dark lantern?" asked William Withers pertinently.

But Mr. Bunny Price rolled over on his side and shut his eyes.

It was their second successive sleepless night, and they were both very peevish in the morning. William Withers was made all the more peevish by having to affect a rabid fondness for his companion's society. For, come what might, he swore that he would not again lose sight of Mr. Bunny Price if he could help it. He felt sure now that Mr. Bunny Price had hidden the swag somewhere, and he felt equally sure that Mr. Bunny Price would not attempt to decamp without it.

The day passed drearily. Mr. Bunny Price was careful to betray no desire to escape from his constant friend; that was to lull the constant friend's suspicions; but he was plainly very ill at ease, and once or twice seemed on the point of opening his heart to William Withers. The night came, and the two men lay haggardly side by side, all their energies consumed in their efforts to keep awake. At last, toward the dawn, Mr. Bunny Price broke silence.

"It's no good," said he. "If I don't have some sleep I shall go mad. Come now, Willy Withers, out with it."

"Out with what?" asked William Withers, starting frenziedly from a doze.

"How did you do it?"

"Do what?"

"Don't play the goat. How did you get 'em?"

"It's want o' sleep. You 'ave gone mad," said William Withers, sitting up in bed and looking at his companion anxiously.

Mr. Bunny Price sat up also.

"If I'd taken them," he said, "I'd have shared with you like an honest man."

"Now, look 'ere, young feller, me lad," cried William Withers, "let's chuck this 'ere bogey. You know very well you've got the stuff somewhere."

Mr. Bunny Price regarded him earnestly.

"If I didn't know you were such an all-gone fool," he said, "I should think you were playing the deepest game on me I ever heard of. Do you mean to tell me you didn't go to Muswell Hill last night and break into Jones's and collar the stones? And made a neat job of it, too, by gummy?"

"I did go up there," William Withers confessed; "but it was already broke into and the stones was gone!"

Mr. Bunny Price fell back flat, with the remark:

"We've been done to the wide world!"

"There was somebody else in the same game then?" queried the dazed William Withers.

"Only a bit too previous for us. That it, you think?"

"You're a little wronger than usual, Willy, but somebody was too previous for us. And I can give you his name. I thought," he added after a pause, "I thought the job was a sight too neat for you."

"Who was it, then, as done it?"

Mr. Bunny Price smiled wryly. "Yes, you are a fool," he said critically. "Why, don't you rokker? It was Jones hisself, of course."

"Jones!" gasped William Withers. "What for?"

"Oh, it's as clear as mud," said Mr. Bunny Price. "He guessed what we would be up to after his giving himself away like that. He saw that the only thing to do was to clear out. He only kidded us he'd forgotten all he told us the night before. Then he went back home, forced those locks in that artistic way, and bolted off with the stuff. He read us like books. And pretty trash we are! Look at the start he's got. Oh!" Mr. Bunny Price pummelled his own head severely. "We shall never see him again for a million pound. Oh! Call me something suitable."

From out of the depths of his troubled mind William Withers brought up one pearl of thought. "One thing about bein' a fool," he said; "you never need feel lonely."—(The King.