

Plum Punch: Crime and the Courts

P. G. WODEHOUSE

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CRIME AND THE EYESIGHT

"There is," observed the novelist gravely, "a bad time coming for writers of fiction. A very bad time."

I replied that what with publishers reckoning thirteen copies as twelve, and editors regretting their so-called lack of space (sic), things were, for my humble needs, bad enough already. After which I asked for details.

"I have been reading a book," said he, "by a DR. GEORGE M GOULD. It is called *Biographic Clinics*, and it deals with the subject of the eyes, and their influence on the mind, character, and general health. I could quote extensively from the volume, but I will not." (Here I thanked him.) "Suffice it that the author asserts that, if it were not for defective eyesight, there would be no crime in the world. All the crimes that were ever committed are to be traced directly to the absence of spectacles."

"And yet," I said musingly, "bread and spectacles were the ruin of Rome."

"If the Romans had thought less of their bread and more of their spectacles, they would have declined to fall as they did. Take NERO. Did he wear glasses? Not he. Not even a monocle. And look at his record of convictions. Same with them all. TIBERIUS, CALIGULA, every one of them. Utter scoundrels. And they might have been as good as GOULD if they had only taken ordinary care of themselves."

"True," I said, "there is something very pathetic in the idea. Roman history ought to be rewritten. It is not fair on the poor fellows. After all, it was not their fault. Why, NERO must turn in his grave like a teetotum at the things that are said of him every day at our universities and public schools. Somebody ought to put him right with the world. As gentle and well-meaning a man as ever breathed, hounded into a life of crime by the neglect of the imperial oculist. It is pure pathos, with the maker's name on the label."

"Precisely," said the Novelist. "By the way, in passing, why is Mr. CHAMBERLAIN greater than WILLIAM PITT?"

"Because he wears an eye-glass."

"Why is IBSEN superior to SHAKESPEARE?"

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"Because he wears spectacles."

"Exactly. Thank you very much. To return to the subject of crime, our whole method of dealing with our criminal classes is wrong. Why, when the coster's finished jumping on his mother "

"On his mother?"

"What do we do? Why, we jump on *him*. His plea that he had mislaid his pince-nez at the moment passes unregarded. I have known a poor fellow, manifestly suffering from astigmatism of the left eye, spoken to very sharply for assaulting a policeman. The policeman said that he had had a glass too much. Of course what he had really had was a pair of glasses too little. It was a most painful case."

"But one moment," I said at this juncture, "you seem to me to have strayed from the point. You have not yet explained your remark about the bad time which is to arrive for writers of fiction. Why is there a bad time coming?"

"Why, surely," he said, "it is perfectly obvious. In a few years everyone will be wearing spectacles, and how are you to write a novel of a hundred thousand words, full of strong human interest, when crime has been utterly eliminated? Will the public read a book that is wholly good? I can't imagine myself writing a book that is "

"Wholly good'? Ah, but that's your modesty. Even with glasses we can never see ourselves as others see us."

THE POLITE PILFERER

MR. PUNCH, SIR, If you have an eye to spare from the other affairs of the world, will you kindly run it over the following extract from the *Express*:

"A boy who wanted apples and stole them had an interesting theory propounded for him at Brentford. 'Why,' said the magistrate, 'didn't you go to the owner and say, "I have an idea of getting into your orchard during the night. I don't want to do so. I like the look of your apples. Give me two or three!" You would probably have been successful. Now you have to pay 5s.'"

I see an opening here for a work I have long contemplated, "Every Criminal's Guide to Courtesy," with the sub-title, "Tips for Thieves and Department for Desperados." The book will be made up of specimen conversations to suit every occasion. The criminal who buys the volume need never fear those awkward pauses which so frequently occur when one is caught in the act of a burglary or murder.

I append a sample. We will suppose, for instance, that a burglar wishes to abstract some plate from a house. He enters the owner's bedroom-window and the following dialogue takes place:

Burglar. (Coughs.)

Owner. Wha's matter? A' right. Leave it on the mat.

[Burglar coughs again. Owner sits up.]

Burglar (insinuatingly). A thousand apologies, my dear Sir, for having broken in upon that sleep which, as the poet happily remarks, knits up the ravelled sleeve of care. But business is business, and in these days of hustle and American competition it behoves a man to be first in the field. Thus, knowing that "BLINKY BILL" SMITH (a professional rival of mine) has his eye on your plate, I hastened to call on you before he could do so.

Owner. Help! Thieves! Murder!

Burglar. I hate to talk shop, but I feel it my duty to tell you that this revolver is loaded. Shall we allow it to remain so? Precisely. To proceed, then. The fame of your plate, my dear Sir, has rung through London. Every burglar in the profession is after it. When I tell you that I have had to bring myself to enter the bedroom of a perfect stranger through the window, I need scarcely add further evidence of my eagerness to possess the treasure I have mentioned. You can spare a little of it? A silver spoon? A fork, perhaps? A salver, maybe? Come, this is niggardly, my dear Sir. I need it far more than you. To you it is a luxury. To me it is a necessity. I have my living to earn. How do you suppose I could keep my wife in the style to which she has been accustomed, if everybody were as unreasonable as you? Now, some people keep their plate-basket under the No? In the chest of drawers? Foiled again. Now, my very dear Sir, joking apart, where *is* it? Did I mention that this revolver was loaded? Thank you. Thank you. Under the dressing-table? A thousand thanks. *May* I trouble you to make a small selection for me and put it up in a neat parcel? One million thanks. Good-night, Sir, good-night, good-night. [Exit through window.]

This is but one specimen. The rest of the book will be of equal merit, for I shall spare no pains. If after next publishing season there remains one criminal who is not the Perfect Gentleman, it will be because he is too impecunious or too stingy to spend two and sixpence (net) on the work prepared for his benefit by Yours,
HENRY WILLIAM-JONES

THE HERO AND HIS PRICE

[The *Globe* suggests that, owing to the inconvenience caused by the difficulty of hitting upon a suitable reward for one's rescuer when one is saved from death or accident, there should be a scale of payment for heroes.]

In Mr. Justice MOTLEY'S court yesterday, JOHN SMITH, describing himself as a hero, claimed the sum of fifteen shillings from THOMAS BROWN as payment for services rendered on the 16th ult. Mr. ROBINSON, K.C., counsel for the plaintiff, briefly set forth the facts of the case. On the afternoon of the day in question the plaintiff, who was a well-known rescuer, was walking by the River Thames near Henley, when he observed defendant struggling in the water. He proceeded to dive in and bring him safely to shore. On plaintiff's demanding the usual fee (fifteen shillings and a cigarette) defendant had refused to admit his claim. It was more in the interest of his profession than for personal reasons that plaintiff, who was a wealthy man, had brought the action. If rescued men were allowed to evade their obligations in this manner, the profession of rescuing could not continue, and hundreds of deserving workers would be thrown into the ranks of the unemployed.

Examined by Mr. JONES, K.C., counsel for the defence, Mr. JOHN SMITH said that it was quite true that he was a wealthy man. He had been a hero for some years.

Mr. Jones. And it is a well-paid profession?

The Plaintiff. Not ill-paid. For an ordinary rescue that is to say, if the rescuer is in his ordinary clothes fifteen shillings is the reward. If he is in his Sunday clothes, the fee is higher. Thus, if he dives in to save a man with his frock-coat on and wearing patent-leather boots he receives a guinea and an invitation to High Tea, naming his own day. But if he happens to be wearing brown boots with his frock-coat, the invitation to High Tea is not enforced. In the eyes of the law, patent-leathers are more costly than brown boots.

Mr. Justice Motley. What boots it?

[Hysterics in Court. Officer X 45 becomes limp with laughter.]

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Mr. Jones. On this occasion how were you dressed?

The Plaintiff. In my ordinary clothes.

Mr. Jones. How was your attention first attracted to the defendant's position?

The Plaintiff. I am always on the look-out. It is my profession.

Mr. Justice Motley. In fact, with you it is a case of look out and hook out, eh?

[Paroxysms of laughter.]

Mr. Jones. You are not the JOHN SMITH who pushed a little boy into the Pond in 1899 in order to earn the fee for rescuing him?

The Plaintiff. I am not. I never rescue boys. It is not worth a busy man's while. Amateur heroes do it, I believe; but while the rate of payment is only seventeen-and-six per half-dozen no professional will touch them.

The defendant then entered the box.

Mr. Jones. Is it true, Mr. BROWN, that on the afternoon of the 16th of last month the plaintiff pulled you out of the river?

The Defendant. Yes, confound him!

Mr. Justice Motley. *He found you.*

[Prolonged mirth.]

Mr. Jones. Why are you annoyed?

The Defendant. Well, I was just beginning a bathe. I'd been looking forward to it all day. And no sooner had I got in than this fellow drags me out, making me swallow pints of water on the way.

Mr. Jones. You did not need his services?

The Defendant. Not a bit.

Mr. Jones. The plaintiff asserts that you were in obvious distress. He says you were splashing violently.

The Defendant. I was practising the Trudgeon stroke.

Mr. Jones. You were not sinking?

The Defendant. Not a bit of it.

Mr. Justice Motley. You can take a man to water, but you can't make him sink.

[Loud laughter, during which Mr. Punch's Representative was carried out in a state of collapse.]

CHATTY METHODS ON THE BENCH

["How silly you chaps are to get into debt with moneylenders," said Judge BACON to a batch of railway clerks, who were sued at the Bloomsbury County Court. *Daily Express*.]

From a daily paper of the week after next:

Before Mr. Justice JONES, JAMES MICHAEL PEABODY (19), and EDWARD PENNEFATHER (21), were accused of stealing goods to the value of eighteenpence from a fruiterer's stall in the Commercial Road. Constable X 15 deposed that, when arrested, accused endeavoured to conceal the stolen goods by swallowing them. (His Honour: "Rotters!"). The owner of the stall, on entering the witness-box to give evidence, appeared nervous.

His Honour (encouragingly). Come along, old son, pull yourself together and get it off your chest. Now, what's all this about these two chaps bagging your fruit?

Witness. It's this way, your Honour. One of them threw snuff in my face and, while I was sneezing, off they ran with my fruit.

His Honour (to prisoners). I say, you fellows, what! Hardly the game, that, was it? I call that a pretty thick sort of thing to do.

[Applause in court, which was instantly suppressed when it showed signs of stopping.]

In defence the prisoners said they were sorry, and would not do it again.

His Honour then summed up: While, he said, it was a bit off if fellows were allowed to rot about and play the goat all over the shop, yet, in consideration of the fact that this was a first offence, he was inclined to allow justice to be tempered with mercy. (Applause.) The prisoners must jolly well get it into their fat heads that, if ever they were caught at that sort of game again, they would get it pretty hot. The law was not to be trifled with. It was merciful within limits, but when chaps asked for it, they got it in the neck. (Cheers.) And he was prepared to give the prisoners his solemn word that gaol was not all beer and skittles. If they didn't believe him, let them jolly well try and see. In the present case, taking everything into account, he would merely require them to shell out two quid apiece. If they declined to brass up, then they'd find themselves in Chokey before they could say Jack Robinson. And, if they wanted his candid opinion, they were a pair of crocks who ought to be ashamed of themselves; and he hoped they would never be such utter footlers as to let themselves be lugged into his Court again.

The prisoners, having paid their fine and thanked his Honour, then left the Court.