Misunderstood

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The profession of Mr. James ("Spider") Buffin was pocket-picking. His hobby was revenge. James had no objection to letting the sun go down on his wrath. Indeed, it was after dark that he corrected his numerous enemies most satisfactorily. It was on a dark night, while he was settling a small score against one Kelly, a mere acquaintance, that he first fell foul of Constable Keating, whose beat took him through the regions which James most frequented.

James, having "laid for" Mr. Kelly, met him in a murky side-street down Clerkenwell way, and attended to his needs with a sand-bag.

It was here that Constable Keating first came prominently into his life. Just as James, with the satisfying feeling that his duty had been done, was preparing to depart, Officer Keating, who had been a distant spectator of the affair, charged up and seized him.

It was intolerable that he should interfere in a purely private falling-out between one gentleman and another, but there was nothing to be done. The policeman weighed close upon fourteen stone, and could have eaten Mr. Buffin. The latter, inwardly seething, went quietly, and in due season was stowed away at the Government's expense for the space of sixty days.

Physically, there is no doubt that his detention did him good. The regular hours and the substitution of bread and water for his wonted diet improved his health thirty per cent. It was mentally that he suffered. His was one of those just-as-good cheap-substitute minds, incapable of harbouring more than one idea at a time, and during those sixty days of quiet seclusion it was filled with an ever-growing resentment against Officer Keating. Every day, as he moved about his appointed tasks, he brooded on his wrongs. Every night was to him but the end of another day that kept him from settling down to the serious business of Revenge. To be haled to prison for correcting a private enemy with a sand-bag--that was what stung. In the privacy of his cell he dwelt unceasingly on the necessity for revenge. The thing began to take on to him the aspect almost of a Holy Mission, a sort of Crusade.

The days slipped by, bringing winter to Clerkenwell, and with it Mr. Buffin. He returned to his old haunts one Friday night, thin but in excellent condition. One of the first acquaintances he met was Officer Keating. The policeman, who had a good memory for faces, recognised him, and stopped.

"So you're out, young feller?" he said genially. When not in the active discharge of his

professional duties the policeman was a kindly man. He bore Mr. Buffin no grudge.

“Um,” said Mr. Buffin.

“Feeling fine, eh?”

“Um.”

“Goin’ round to see some of the chaps and pass them the time of day, I shouldn’t wonder?”

“Um.”

“Well, you keep clear of that lot down in Frith Street, young feller. They’re no good. And if you get mixed up with them, first thing you know, you’ll be in trouble again. And you want to keep out of that now.”

“Um.”

“If you never get into trouble,” said the policeman sententiously, “you’ll never have to get out of it.”

“Um,” said Mr. Buffin. If he had a fault as a conversationalist, it was a certain tendency to monotony, a certain lack of sparkle and variety in his small-talk.

Constable Keating, with a dignified but friendly wave of the hand, as one should say, “You have our leave to depart,” went on his way; while Mr. Buffin, raging, shuffled off in the opposite direction, thinking as hard as his limited mental equipment would allow him.

His thoughts, which were many and confused, finally composed themselves into some order. He arrived at a definite conclusion, which was that if the great settlement was to be carried through successfully it must be done when the policeman was off duty. Till then he had pictured himself catching Officer Keating in an unguarded moment on his beat. This, he now saw, was out of the question. On his beat the policeman had no unguarded moments. There was a quiet alertness in his poise, a danger-signal in itself.

There was only one thing for Mr. Buffin to do. Greatly as it would go against the grain, he must foregather with the man, win his confidence, put himself in a position where he would be able to find out what he did with himself when off duty.

The policeman offered no obstacle to the move. A supreme self-confidence was his leading characteristic. Few London policemen are diffident, and Mr. Keating was no exception. It never occurred to him that there could be an ulterior motive behind Mr. Buffin’s advances.

He regarded Mr. Buffin much as one regards a dog which one has had to chastise. One does not expect the dog to lie in wait and bite. Officer Keating did not expect Mr. Buffin to lie in wait and bite.

So every day, as he strolled on his beat, there sidled up to him the meagre form of Spider Buffin. Every day there greeted him the Spider's "Good-morning, Mr. Keating," till the sight of Officer Keating walking solidly along the pavement with Spider Buffin shuffling along at his side, listening with rapt interest to his views on Life and his hints on Deportment, became a familiar spectacle in Clerkenwell.

Mr. Buffin played his part well. In fact, too well. It was on the seventh day that, sidling along in the direction of his favourite place of refreshment, he found himself tapped on the shoulder. At the same moment an arm, linking itself in his, brought him gently to a halt. Beside him were standing two of the most eminent of the great Frith Street Gang, Otto the Sausage and Rabbit Butler. It was the finger of the Rabbit that had tapped his shoulder. The arm tucked in his was the arm of Otto the Sausage.

"Hi, Spider," said Mr. Butler, "Sid wants to see you a minute."

The Spider's legs felt boneless. There was nothing in the words to alarm a man, but his practised ear had seemed to detect a certain unpleasant dryness in the speaker's tone. Sid Marks, the all-powerful leader of the Frith Street Gang, was a youth whose company the Spider had always avoided with some care.

The great Sid, seated in state at a neighbouring hostelry, fixed his visitor with a cold and questioning eye. Mr. Buffin looked nervous and interrogative. Mr. Marks spoke.

"Your pal Keating pinched Porky Binns this mornin'," said Sid.

The Spider's heart turned to water.

"You and that slop," observed Sid dreamily, "have been bloomin' thick these days."

Mr. Buffin did not affect to misunderstand. Sid Marks was looking at him in that nasty way. Otto the Sausage was looking at him in that nasty way. Rabbit Butler was looking at him in that nasty way. This was an occasion where manly frankness was the quality most to be aimed at. To be misunderstood in the circles in which Mr. Buffin moved meant something more than the mere risk of being treated with cold displeasure.

He began to explain with feverish eagerness.

"Strike me, Sid," he stammered, "it ain't like that. It's all right. Blimey, you don't fink I'm a nark?"

Mr. Marks chewed a straw in silence.

"I'm layin' for him, Sid," babbled Mr. Buffin. "That's true. Strike me if it ain't. I'm just tryin' to find out where he goes when he's off duty. He pinched me, so I'm layin' for him."

Mr. Marks perpended. Rabbit Butler respectfully gave it as his opinion that it would be well to put Mr. Buffin through it. There was nothing like being on the safe side. By putting Mr. Buffin through it, argued Rabbit Butler, they would stand to win either way. If he had "smitched" to Officer Keating about Porky Binns he would deserve it. If he had not--well, it would prevent him doing so on some future occasion. Play for safety, was Mr. Butler's advice, seconded by Otto the Sausage. Mr. Buffin, pale to the lips, thought he had never met two more unpleasant persons.

The Great Sid, having chewed his straw for a while in silence, delivered judgment. The prisoner should have the benefit of the doubt this time. His story, however unplausible, might possibly be true. Officer Keating undoubtedly had pinched him. That was in his favour.

"You can hop it this time," he said, "but if you ever do start smitchin', Spider, yer knows what'll happen."

Mr. Buffin withdrew, quaking.

Matters had now come to a head. Unless he very speedily gave proof of his pure and noble intentions, life would become extremely unsafe for him. He must act at once. The thought of what would happen should another of the Frith Streeters be pinched before he, Mr. Buffin, could prove himself innocent of the crime of friendliness with Officer Keating, turned him cold.

Fate played into his hands. On the very next morning Mr. Keating, all unsuspecting, asked him to go to his home with a message for his wife.

"Tell her," said Mr. Keating, "a newspaper gent has given me seats for the play to-night, and I'll be home at a quarter to seven."

Mr. Buffin felt as Cromwell must have felt at Dunbar when the Scots left their stronghold on the hills and came down to the open plain.

The winter had set in with some severity that year, and Mr. Buffin's toes, as he stood in the shadows close to the entrance of the villa where Officer Keating lived when off duty, were soon thoroughly frozen. He did not dare to stamp his feet, for at any moment now the victim might arrive. And when the victim weighs fourteen stone, against the high priest's eight and a half, it behooves the latter to be circumspect, if the sacrifice is to be anything like a success. So Mr. Buffin waited and froze in silence. It was a painful process, and he added it to the black score which already stood against Officer Keating. Never had his thirst for revenge been more tormenting. It is doubtful if a strictly logical and impartial judge would have held Mr. Keating to blame for the fact that Sid Marks' suspicions (and all that those suspicions entailed) had fallen upon Mr. Buffin; but the Spider did so. He felt fiercely resentful against the policeman for placing him in such an unpleasant and dangerous position. As his thoughts ran on the matter, he twisted his fingers tighter round his stick.

As he did so there came from down the road the brisk tramp of feet and a cheerful whistling of "The Wearing of the Green." It is a lugubrious song as a rule, but, as rendered by Officer Keating returning home with theatre tickets, it had all the joyousness of a march-tune.

Every muscle in Mr. Buffin's body stiffened. He gripped his stick and waited. The road was deserted. In another moment....

And then, from nowhere, dark indistinct forms darted out like rats. The whistling stopped in the middle of a bar. A deep-chested oath rang out, and then a confused medley of sound, the rasping of feet, a growling almost canine, a sharp yelp, gasps, and over all the vast voice of Officer Keating threatening slaughter.

For a moment Mr. Buffin stood incapable of motion. The thing had been so sudden, so unexpected. And then, as he realised what was happening, there swept over him in a wave a sense of intolerable injustice. It is not easy to describe his emotions, but they resembled most nearly those of an inventor whose patent has been infringed, or an author whose idea has been stolen. For weeks--and weeks that had seemed like years--he had marked down Officer Keating for his prey. For weeks he had tortured a mind all unused to thinking into providing him with schemes for accomplishing his end. He had outraged his nature by being civil to a policeman. He had risked his life by incurring the suspicions of Sid Marks. He had bought a stick. And he had waited in the cold till his face was blue and his feet blocks of ice. And now ... now ... after all this ... a crowd of irresponsible strangers, with no rights in the man whatsoever probably, if the truth were known, filled with mere ignoble desire for his small change, had dared to rush in and jump his claim before his very eyes.

With one passionate cry, Mr. Buffin, forgetting his frozen feet, lifted his stick, and galloped

down the road to protect his property....

"That's the stuff," said a voice. "Pour some more into him, Jerry."

Mr. Buffin opened his eyes. A familiar taste was in his mouth. Somebody of liberal ideas seemed to be pouring whisky down his throat. Could this be Heaven? He raised his head, and a sharp pain shot through it. And with the pain came recollection. He remembered now, dimly, as if it had all happened in another life, the mad rush down the road, the momentary pause in the conflict, and then its noisy renewal on a more impressive scale. He remembered striking out left and right with his stick. He remembered the cries of the wounded, the pain of his frozen feet, and finally the crash of something hard and heavy on his head.

He sat up, and found himself the centre of a little crowd. There was Officer Keating, dishevelled but intact; three other policemen, one of whom was kneeling by his side with a small bottle in his hand; and, in the grip of the two were standing two youths.

One was Otto the Sausage; the other was Rabbit Butler.

The kneeling policeman was proffering the bottle once more. Mr. Buffin snatched at it. He felt that it was just what at that moment he needed most.

He did what he could. The magistrate asked for his evidence. He said he had none. He said he thought there must be some mistake. With a twisted smile in the direction of the prisoners, he said that he did not remember having seen either of them at the combat. He didn't believe they were there at all. He didn't believe they were capable of such a thing. If there was one man who was less likely to assault a policeman than Otto the Sausage, it was Rabbit Butler. The Bench reminded him that both these innocents had actually been discovered in Officer Keating's grasp. Mr. Buffin smiled a harassed smile, and wiped a drop of perspiration from his brow.

Officer Keating was enthusiastic. He described the affair from start to finish. But for Mr. Buffin he would have been killed. But for Mr. Buffin there would have been no prisoners in court that day. The world was full of men with more or less golden hearts, but there was only one Mr. Buffin. Might he shake hands with Mr. Buffin?

The magistrate ruled that he might. More, he would shake hands with him himself. Summoning Mr. Buffin behind his desk, he proceeded to do so. If there were more men like Mr. Buffin, London would be a better place. It was the occasional discovery in our midst of ethereal natures like that of Mr. Buffin which made one so confident for the future of the

race.

The paragon shuffled out. It was bright and sunny in the street, but in Mr. Buffin's heart there was no sunlight. He was not a quick thinker, but he had come quite swiftly to the conclusion that London was no longer the place for him. Sid Marks had been in court chewing a straw and listening with grave attention to the evidence, and for one moment Mr. Buffin had happened to catch his eye. No medical testimony as to the unhealthiness of London could have moved him more.

Once round the corner, he ran. It hurt his head to run, but there were things behind him that could hurt his head more than running.

At the entrance to the Tube he stopped. To leave the locality he must have money. He felt in his pockets. Slowly, one by one, he pulled forth his little valuables. His knife ... his revolver ... the magistrate's gold watch ... He inspected them sadly. They must all go.

He went into a pawnbroker's shop at the corner of the street. A few moments later, with money in his pockets, he dived into the Tube.