

The Burglary Club

By Arthur Quiller-Couch

"Yes," said the Judge, "I ought by this time to know something of Cornish juries. They acquit oftener than other juries, to be sure; and the general notion is that they incline more towards mercy. Privately, I believe that mercy has very little to do with it."

"Stupidity," said the High Sheriff sententiously, and sipped his wine. His own obtuseness on the Bench was notorious, and had kept adding for thirty years to the Duchy's stock of harmless merriment.

"Nothing of the sort," snapped his lordship. "You can convict a man, I presume, as stupidly as you can acquit him. No: with other juries a crime is a crime, and a misdemeanour is a misdemeanour. You tell them so and they accept it. But with Cornishmen you have first to explain that the alleged offence is illegal; next, you must satisfy them that it ought to be illegal; and then, if you choose, you can proceed to prove that the prisoner committed it. They will finally discharge him on the ground that he never had the advantage of such a clear exposition of the law as they have just enjoyed."

"Well, but isn't that stupidity?" persisted the High Sheriff.

The Judge turned impatiently and addressed a grey-headed man on his left. "Did I ever tell you, Mr.--, how I once enjoyed the hospitality of a Cornish village, through the simple accident of being mistaken for a burglar?"

The grey-headed man--an eminent Q.C. and leader of the Western Circuit-- dropped an olive into his glass of sherry. He had been dozing. Two or three guests and members of the Junior Bar drew their chairs closer.

"It was in 1845," the Judge began, "just after I had taken my degree, and I had been walking through Cornwall with a knapsack--no small adventure, I can tell you, in those days. The inhabitants declined to believe that anyone could walk and carry a pack for the fun of the thing, and I left a trail of suspicion behind me. The folks were invariably

hospitable, though convinced that I was pursuing no good. You remember, Mr.--, that when Telemachus visited Gerenia he was generously entertained, and afterwards politely asked if he happened to be a pirate. My case was pretty similar, only my Cornish hosts did not ask, but took it for granted.

"In the first week of August--to be precise, on the 4th--I reached Polreen Cove, and found lodging at the small inn. The spot and the people so pleased me that I engaged my rooms for a week. At the week's end I had decided to stay for a month. I stayed for almost two months.

"Well, as luck would have it, I had not been in Polreen three nights before there happened the first burglary within the memory of its oldest inhabitant--if burglary it was. I incline to think that Mrs. Giddy, the general dealer, had left her shop-door unbolted, and that the culprit, after removing the bell--the door had two flaps, and the bell, hung on a half-coil of metal, was fitted to a socket inside the lower flap--had quietly walked in and made his choice. This choice was a peculiar one-- six bars of yellow soap, a cullender, some tallow candles, a pair of alpaca boots, a pair of braces, several boxes of matches, an uncertain amount of cheese, a dozen pocket-handkerchiefs, a coloured almanack, three of Mrs. Giddy's brass weights, and the bell. He was detected two months later at Bristol, in the act of using one of the handkerchiefs, which illustrated the descent of Moses from Mount Sinai; and four other handkerchiefs were found in his possession, together with Mrs. Giddy's brass weights. He had disposed of the rest of the booty, and proved to be a stowaway who had been turned out of a Cardiff schooner on Penzance quay, penniless and starving. Nothing further was proved against him, and it still puzzles me how he made his way through the length of Cornwall, Devon, and Somerset, on the not very nutritious spoils of Mrs. Giddy's shop.

"For the moment he got clear away. Not a soul in Polreen had set eyes on him, and as he entered the village by night so he departed.

"I know now that the excitement in the Cove was intense; that for weeks afterwards the women carried their silver teaspoons and chinaware to bed with them; and I should explain that the housewives of Polreen are inordinately proud of their teaspoons and chinaware--heirlooms which mark the only degrees of social importance recognised among the inhabitants of that happy Cove. A family there counts its teaspoons as our old nobility counted its quarterings; a girl is judged to have made a good,

bad, or indifferent match by the number of teaspoons she 'marries into'; and the extreme act of disinheritance is symbolised, not by the testamentary shilling, nor by erasing a name from the Family Bible, but by alienating the family plate-basket. In short, teaspoons are to the Covers what the salt-cellar was to the ancient Latin races.

"But at the time, though I could not help observing symptoms of suppressed excitement, the Cove behaved with an outward calm which struck me as highly creditable. To be sure, the men seemed to spend an extravagant amount of their time in the tap-room of the inn, which happened to be immediately beneath my sitting-room. Hour after hour the sound of their muffled conversation ascended to me through the planching, as I sat and studied--Dumas, I think. Low, monotonous, untiring, it lasted from breakfast-time until nine o'clock at night, when it ceased abruptly, the company dispersed, and each man went home to reassure and protect his wife. I suppose some liquor was required to start this conversation and keep it going, just as seamen use a bucketful of water to start a ship's pump; but I must admit that during my whole stay at Polreen I never saw an inhabitant who could be described as the worse for drink.

"I did not know that this assemblage in the tap-room was unusual and clean contrary to the men's habits, and therefore may be excused for not guessing its significance. Nor was I familiar enough with Polreen to note an even more frequent change in the atmosphere and routine of its daily life. When the weather is fine, down there, the men put out to sea and the women go about their work with smiles. When it blows, the women go about their work, but resignedly and in a temper, which the men avoid by ranging up shoulder to shoulder along the wall by the lifeboat house, and gazing with approval at the weather; with approval, because it relieves them of the fatigue of argument. But should the day break doubtfully, and the men incline to give themselves the benefit of the doubt, then, indeed, you will learn who are masters of the Cove. For in extreme cases the women will even invade the 'randivoo,' and shrill is the noise of battle until the weather declares unmistakably for one side or the other. Does it refuse to declare itself? Then I can promise you that half an hour will see the men routed and straggling down the beach to their boats, arching their backs and ducking their heads, may be, under the parting volley.

"But, as I say, I did not know Polreen and its ways. It awoke no wonder in me to see the bulk of its male population ranged like statues, day after

day, and from dawn till eve, against the wall by the lifeboat house, talking little (or ceasing, at any rate, to talk when I approached), smoking much, conning a serene sky, and the dimples spread on the sea by a gentle nor'-westerly breeze. At intervals one or two would leisurely fall out of the line and saunter towards the inn, leaving their places to others as leisurely sauntering from the inn. It did, indeed, occur to me to wonder how they earned their living, for during the first fortnight, beyond the occasional hauling of a crab-pot, I saw no evidence at all of labour. It was on the tip of my tongue, once or twice, to question them; but, though polite, they clearly had no wish to be communicative.

"I found great difficulty in hiring a boat and the services of its owner. I wished to be rowed along the coast; to try for pollack; to inspect some of Polreen's famous caves. The men were polite again; but one boat leaked badly, another had been pulled up for the carpenter to insert a new strake, a third was too heavy, the owner of a fourth could not leave his business--it wouldn't pay him! At length I patched up a bargain with an old fisherman named Udy--or rather Old Tom Udy, to distinguish him from his son, who was Young Tom. He owned the most ramshackle old boat in the Cove: if the others were out of repair, his was manifestly beyond it. I took my life in my hands and struck the bargain.

"When do 'ee want her?"

"Now, at once," said I; "or as soon as you have had your dinner."

"He went back to the company by the lifeboat house. He reminded me of some ancient king consulting a company of stone gods. They looked at him, and he looked at them. I suppose a word or two was said; half a dozen of them spat reflectively; nobody moved. Old Tom Udy came down the beach again; we embarked and pushed off, and the row of expressionless faces watched us from the shore.

"In silence we visited the famous caverns. As we emerged from the last of these I essayed some casual talk. To tell the truth, I was beginning to feel the want of it, and of course I began on the first topic of local interest--the burglary.

"The odd thing to me," said I, "is that you seem to have no particular suspicions."

"I'd rather you didn' talk of it,' said Old Tom Udy. 'I got my living to get, and 'tis a day's journey to Bodmin. Tho' you musn' think,' he added, 'that we bear any gridge.'

"It seems to me that you men in the Cove treat the whole affair very lightly.'

"Iss, tha's of it,' he assented. 'Mind you, tish' _right_, Seemin' to me 'tis a terrible thought. Here you be, for the sake of argument, a Christian man, and in beauty next door to the angels, and the only use you make of it is to steal groceries. You don't think I'm putting it too strong?'

" Not a bit.'

"Well, I'm glad o' that, because, since you ask me, as a professing Christian, I cudn' say any less. But you musn' think we bear any gridge.'

"I'm sure I wonder you don't. And the police still have no clue?'

"The police? You mean Sammy Crego, the constable? Why, I've knawed en from a boy--pretty thing if any person in Polreen listened to he! No: us han't failed so low yet as to mind anything the constable says.'

"Then the whole affair is as much a mystery as ever?'

"Now, look 'ee here; I don't want to tell nothin' more about it. A still tongue makes a wise head; an' there's a pollack on the end of your line.'

"The wind stuck in the north-west, and day after day the regal summer weather continued. I grew tired of hauling in pollack, and determined to have a try for the more exciting conger. The fun of this, as you know, does not begin till night-fall, and it was seven o'clock in the evening, or thereabouts, when we pushed off from the beach. By eight we had reached the best grounds and begun operations. An hour passed, or a little more, and then Old Tom Udy asked when I thought of returning.

"Why, bless the man,' said I, 'we've not had a bite yet!'

"He glanced at me furtively while he lit a pipe. 'I reckoned, maybe, you might have business ashore, so to speak.'

"What earthly business should I have in Polreen at this hour?"

"Aw, well . . . you know best . . . no affair o' mine. 'Tis a dark night, too.'

"All the better for conger, eh?"

"So 'tis.' He seemed about to say more, but at that moment I felt a long pull on the line, and for an hour or two the conger kept us busy.

"It must have been a week later, at least (for the moon was drawing to the full), that I pulled up the blind of my sitting-room a little before midnight, and, ravished by the beauty of the scene (for, I tell you, Polreen can be beautiful by moonlight), determined to stroll down to the beach and smoke my last pipe there before going to bed. The door of the inn was locked, no doubt; but, the house standing on the steep slope of the main street, I could step easily on to the edge of the water-barrel beneath my window and lower myself to the ground.

"I did so. Just as I touched solid earth I heard footsteps. They paused suddenly, and, glancing up the moonlit road, I descried the gigantic figure of Wesley Truscott, the coxswain of the lifeboat. He must have seen me, for the light on the whitewashed front of the inn was almost as brilliant as day. But, whatever his business, he had no wish to meet me, for he dodged aside into the shadow of a porch, and after a few seconds I heard him tip-toeing up the hill again.

"I began to have my doubts about Polreen's primitive virtues. Certainly the village, as it lay bathed in moonlight, its whitewashed terraces and glimmering roofs embowered in dark clusters of fuchsia and tamarisk, seemed to harbour nothing but peace and sleeping innocence. An ebbing tide lapped the pebbles on the beach, each pebble distinct and glistening as the water left it. Far in the quiet offing the lights of a fishing-fleet twinkled like a line of jewels through the haze.

"Half-way down the beach I turned for a backward look at the village.

"Now the wall by the lifeboat house looks on the Cove. Its front is turned from the village and the village street, and can only be seen from the beach. You may imagine my surprise, then, as I turned and found myself face to face with a dozen tall men, standing there upright and silent.

"Good Heavens!" I cried, 'what is the matter? What brings you all here at this time of night?'

"If I was surprised, they were obviously embarrassed. They drew together a little, as if to avoid observation. But the moon shone full on the wall, affording them not a scrap of shadow.

"For a moment no one answered. Then I heard mutterings, and, as I stepped up, one of the elder men, Archelaus Warne by name, was pushed forward.

"'We wasn' expectin' of you down here,' he stammered, after clearing his throat.

"'No reason why you should,' said I.

"'We done our best to keep out o' your way--never thinkin' you'd be after the boats,'--he nodded towards the boats drawn up on the beach at our feet.

"'I'm afraid I don't understand you in the least.'

"'Well, you see, 'tis a kind o' club.'

"'Indeed?' said I, not in the least enlightened.

"'Iss;' he turned to his companions. 'I s'pose I'd better tell en?' They nodded gravely, and he resumed. 'You see, 'tis this way: ever since that burglary there's no resting for the women. My poor back is blue all over with the cloam my missus takes to bed. And ha'f a dozen times a night 'tis, ' _Arch'laus, I'm sartin I hear some person movin'-- Arch'laus, fit an' take a light and have a look downstairs, that's a dear!_' An' these fellows'll tell 'ee 'tis every bit so bad with they. 'Tis right enough in the daytime, so long as the women got us 'ithin hail, but by night there's no peace nor rest.'

"One or two husbands corroborated.

"'Well, now--I think 'twas the third night after this affair happened-- I crep' downstairs for the fifth time or so just to ease the old woman's mind, and opens the door, when what do I see but Billy Polkinghorne

here, sittin' on his own doorstep like a lost dog. 'Aw,' says I, 'so thee'rt feelin' of it, too!' 'Feelin' of it!' says he, 'durned if this isn' the awnly place I can get a wink o' sleep!' 'Come'st way long to Wall-end and tetch pipe,' says I. Tha's how it began. An' now, ever since Billy thought 'pon the plan of settin' someone, turn an' turn, to watch your window, there's nothin' to hurry us. Why, only just as you came along, Billy was saying, 'Burglary!' he says, 'why, I han't been so happy in mind since the _Indian Queen_ came ashore!'"

"'Watch my window? Why the--' And then, as light broke on me, 'Look here,' I said, 'you don't mean to tell me you've been suspecting _me_ of the burglary all this time!'"

"'You musn' think,' said Archelaus Warne, 'that we bear any gridge.'"

"Well," the Judge concluded, "as I told you, the thief was apprehended a week or two later, and my innocence established. But, oddly enough, some thirty years after I had to try a case at the Assizes here, in which Archelaus Warne (very old and infirm) appeared as a witness, I recognised him at once, and, when I sent for him afterwards and inquired after my friends at Polreen, his first words were, 'There now--I wasn' so far wrong, after all! I knawed you must be mixed up with these things, wan way or 'nother.'"