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A TRUE STORY.

"WHEN THE VICAR LIED."

The Rev John Stewart, the vicar of one of the poorest parishes in the East End of London, was, without doubt, the best loved man in the whole of the district, and it would have been amazing had this not been so, for his life was made up of one constant endeavour to relieve the sufferings of his less fortunate fellow-beings.

He practised the Christianity he preached; and his duties within the church presented only a small part of his week's work.

During the time when England had been plunged in warfare his duties had been doubled, ay, trebled, for he had been untiring in his efforts to start funds for the relief of those who had been affected, and he had spared himself neither time, money nor work in order to ensure the prompt service he walked briskly along towards

One evening after the usual week-day and proper administration of the funds, his home, feeling at peace with all the world, for now that so many of his parishioners had been demobilised, and had returned to the bosoms of their families, his duties had lightened considerably.

Reaching the vicarage at the end of the road, John Stewart passed in through the gate and up the steps. The house was in darkness, for the vicar lived alone and employed only a charwoman who came daily to attend to his wants.

John Stewart opened the front door and stepped inside. Just pausing to light the hall gas, he passed into the small dining-room, where his supper had been set out. He turned up the gas and was upon the point of sitting down, when he paused suddenly and stood staring across the room with a puzzled frown.

The object which had attracted his attention was a man's foot, and it was just visible beneath the heavy curtains which were drawn across the window. In no way disturbed by the possibility that a desperate man might be lurking behind the hanging, John Stewart walked swiftly across the carpeted floor and with a sweep of his arm, pulled the curtain aside.

Behind the curtain stood a man! He was shabbily clad and his face, which bore a beard of several days' growth, looked white and drawn. His general attitude when the clergyman discovered him was clearly intended to be one of defiance but there was a look of hopelessness in his eyes which could not be mistaken.

With a shrug of his thin shoulders he stepped forward from his hiding-place, and there he stood gazing down with unseeing eyes at the ground.

It was quite apparent that he intended to make no bid for freedom. He was a beaten man—beaten in the fight for life.

"Hav'n't you better send for the police, guv'nor," he said at last. "I've got no fight left in me, and I'll give you no trouble."

The vicar moved nearer to the man and regarded him intently.

"You came here to steal?" he said quietly.

"I did," confessed the stranger; "but somehow I don't think I should have done very well out of the job. I've had a good look around and have come to the conclusion that I should have had to content myself with a bit of grub and that gold watch in the stand, on the mantelpiece. There doesn't seem to be much else worth having."

"You're right," agreed the vicar, with a smile. "I have very little of any value at all, and I should not have minded your taking a meal, but I should have been deeply grieved by the loss of the watch. It was bought by a number of my poorest parishioners; it has a great sentimental value to me and I prize it before any other possession."

The man glanced up and grinned. The vicar's ingenuous manner apparently amused him.

"I suppose this is not the first time you have done anything of this sort?" asked John Stewart after a while, regarding the other steadily.

"It is the first time since I came out of quod after serving a sentence of seven years for housebreaking."

"Shocking!" ejaculated the clergyman, with a pained sigh. "But surely you realise that if you don't try and mend your

ways, there can be only one end to such a life?"

"I realise only one thing, guv'nor," answered the man bitterly, "and that is there is no end worse than that of starvation, and a man will risk almost anything to avoid that. But you don't understand. You are a clergyman, and a good man, but if you are really all that you are supposed to be, perhaps before you send for the police you will give me a bite of something to eat, I haven't had a meal of any sort for two days, and I feel ravenous."

Instantly all the sympathy in the vicar's nature was aroused.

"Sit down, my poor fellow," he said, indicating a chair. "There is plenty of food here, and you are welcome to all you need. I will join you, and we can then perhaps decide what is best to be done."

With a bewildered glance at the vicar, the man took his seat and then hastened to avail himself of what he considered an amazing offer.

John Stewart took his seat and the meal was proceeded with in silence. The burglar was the last to finish, and when done so, he sat back in his chair and looked at the vicar.

"I cannot thank you sufficiently for that, sir," he said gratefully. "And I am quite ready to be given in charge, the moment you say. After all, my visit here to-night has not been in vain, even if it means another long stretch!"

"It need mean nothing of the kind," returned John Stewart. "From the law's point of view, it was wrong of you to break into the house to-night, but I can understand your desperate condition. From your manner I should imagine that you have received a very good education, and that makes it harder for me to understand you."

The man gave vent to a bitter laugh.

"I received a 'Varsity education," he said. "But I was never any good in anything save sport. All my time was spent in achieving fame on the field, instead of paying attention to the serious things of life. There I made my mistake, for when my father died, leaving me a heritage of debt, I was beaten. The only things I excelled in were of no use to me and so I quickly went wrong."

"You are still a young man and there is yet a chance to live down the past!" declared the vicar emphatically.

"It's too late now, retorted the man. "A chap who has spent seven years in prison stands no chance of earning an honest living—there is no place in the world for a gaolbird."

"That is only your idea," said John Stewart, with a faint smile. "But I am going to try and persuade you that you are wrong. Where did you sleep last night?"

"On the Embankment. That's where I have slept for the past week."

The vicar rose to his feet.

"To-night then, you will stay here with me," he said. "There is a spare room upstairs, and in the morning we can have a chat."

The burglar stared in amazement at the clergyman. He was quite convinced that a man, especially a clergyman, who would invite a burglar to spend the night in his house, must have taken leave of his senses.

"I mean what I say," went on the vicar, noticing his visitor's bewilderment. "You are welcome to the shelter of my house for the night. If you are ready, I will show you to the spare room."

The man rose to his feet, and without a word, followed John Stewart upstairs.

When John Stewart knocked upon the door of the spare room the following morning, he received no answer. Several times he rapped, then under the impression that his visitor was still in profound slumber he turned the handle, and peered into the room.

The room was empty! Of the man, whom he had conducted there, there was no sign.

With a pained and puzzled expression upon his face, John Stewart made his way to the dining-room, and looked about him. Then he glanced in the direction of the clock, to make sure of the hour.

One glance was sufficient to tell him what had happened.

The gold watch was missing from the stand!

The vicar sank down into a chair, and with a low moan, buried his face in his hands.

II.

John Stewart was not to be given a chance of forgetting the matter, for less than half an hour later the woman who acted as his servant ushered three men into his room.

The first he recognised immediately as Thomas Hobbs who carried on a business of jeweller and pawnbroker in the district. He was followed by a policeman who led a shabbily dressed individual into the room.

The third man was the vicar's unbidden guest of the night before.

"I'm extremely sorry to trouble you, sir," began Hobbs awkwardly. "But I have come about a rather serious matter. About half an hour ago this man came to pawn something at my shop, and as I thought I recognised it as your property, I took the liberty of coming along to see you before I did anything in the matter."

He advanced towards the vicar.

"It was the gold watch which was presented to you by the parishioners some little time ago," he explained, and drawing the watch from his pocket, he placed it on the table.

John Stewart gazed down at the watch, and then into the drawn, hopeless face of the thief. The watch was, without doubt, his most treasured possession, and he had been bitterly grieved when he had discovered the loss of it. But on the other hand, the burglar's immediate future rested upon the vicar's answer, and that was a serious matter.

The haggard-faced man waited for what seemed the inevitable and he was resigned to it. He seemed almost to have lost interest.

John Stewart looked at Thomas Hobbs and shook his head slowly; then, picking up the watch, he handed it to the burglar.

"You have made a mistake!" he remarked abruptly. "This man is not a thief; I gave him the watch!"

It would be difficult to say which of the men was the most surprised—Hobbs, the policeman, or the thief; At all events, the officer was the first to recover, and he released his hold upon the burglar.

With a long puzzled glance at the clergyman, the jeweller turned to the policeman, and together they passed from the room.

For some moments after they had gone the burglar stood in silence, clearly unable to speak. Then, holding out the watch, he said brokenly:

"For Heaven's sake, take it back, sir, and let me get away!"

"No. I have said that it is yours and you may keep it," answered the vicar gently.

"But I couldn't—I couldn't after that!" stammered the man brokenly, placing the watch upon the table. Then, without another word, he staggered from the room and out of the house.

The vicar watched him go and a smile of wondrous kindness came to his face.

"May Heaven forgive me for that lie," he said simply. "But I truly believe that the telling of it has saved that man's soul!"

III.

On the occasion of the children's Sunday School treat, the Rev. John Stewart, with a band of workers, took the youngsters to Marley Lock, one of the quiet up-river resorts not too far from London.

The day began happily, and during the afternoon, the senior members of the party hired rowing boats and took the younger ones on the river. John Stewart, from the bank, watched the eager, happy faces of the children, to whom the outing was a day of undreamed joy and complete happiness.

But it was when everything seemed happiest that the grim shadow of tragedy stalked in among the party.

Suddenly from above the sounds of happy laughter of the youngsters, a shrill scream sounded from somewhere over the water. The vicar sprang to his feet and glanced about him.

Some distance down the stream, he saw two rowing boats collide violently. A moment later one of the boats, in which a boy of about sixteen years old and three tiny youngsters had been seated, turned on to its side and completely capsized.

Screams of horror rent the air, as the children were flung into the water and almost immediately disappeared beneath the surface.

The other boat containing a young girl school-teacher and three little boys, was only a few feet away, and as the boy clasping one of the little ones rose to the surface, the girl leaned over and helped the pair into the boat. Of the two other children there was no sign.

John Stewart, though unable to swim, ran quickly towards the scene to render what aid he could in the face of the awful catastrophe.

Frantic at his own helplessness he looked about in search of a boat. At the same moment he noticed a man, about twenty yards away, in the act of flinging off his coat and shoes.

With a murmured prayer of thankfulness, the vicar hurried towards him, but before he could reach the spot, the newcomer ran to the water's edge, and a moment later, sprang from the bank and struck out for the place where the children had disappeared. As the swimmer passed the boat he shouted to the frightened girl to stand by, and then plunged down into the water.

Fifteen seconds passed and then he reappeared and handed up the tiny form of one of the children. A cheer of encouragement rang out from the onlookers as the man dived again. It seemed an interminable period before he rose to the surface, and it was to find himself some distance away from the spot where he had taken the plunge.

His mission had been successful for he was supporting the second child. He struck out boldly for the boat, but the current was running swiftly, and it was apparent to the onlookers that he was being swept rapidly away from the small craft.

The swimmer seemed to realise this, too, for, ignoring the boat, he turned his head towards the bank, and struck out desperately for the shore.

He was a powerful swimmer, but with every yard he progressed he was carried yards down the stream. For fully ten minutes he struggled fiercely until he was able to make no headway at all against the strong current.

His strength was failing fast, while his burden hampered his movements considerably. Still he fought on, and despite all his efforts, he was unable to prevent himself from being carried swiftly away down the river.

Just when he was giving up hope, he became conscious of a boat being rowed rapidly in his direction. It was manned by John Stewart, and the clergyman was steering the boat directly in the course of the helpless swimmer.

As a prayer of thankfulness escaped the unfortunate man's lips, an ominous sound from behind him caused the muttered words to die on his lips.

It was the sound of rushing waters.

He half turned his head, and his blood-shot eyes fell upon a large board standing out of the water about twenty yards away. It bore the word "Danger."

The spot was a famous one, and on the instant, the man recognised it as Marley weir.

A thrill of horror ran through his frame and clutching the senseless form still closer, he looked back at the boat.

It was still some distance away, and he knew that long before the boat could reach him, he would be swept over the weir.

For the sake of the child he made one last desperate attempt to strike for the bank, but his efforts, though amazingly courageous were futile. And so, at length with no fight left in him, his eyes closed as all other sounds were drowned in the roar of the rushing torrent.

A moment later, still clasping the child firmly in his arms, he was carried to the edge of the weir, and flung bodily down over the seething foam into the rushing waters below.

Some hours later, in a cottage within a short distance of Marley weir, a man was lying unconscious. It was the swimmer who had risked his all to save the children from the river. And this man who proved himself capable of the greatest love was also the man who had broken into the vicar's house and abused the good man's kindness and trust by stealing his highly prized gold watch!

By the bedside of the dying man the Rev. John Stewart knelt praying for the soul of a brave man. At length the man opened his eyes and half turned his head in the vicar's direction. A faint light of recognition caused a wan smile to appear on his face.

"Funny meeting again like this, sir," he murmured weakly.

"An act of Providence, my dear sir," answered the vicar gently, bending over the bed.

The dying man spoke again.

"Where is the little one?"

"Thanks to you she is quite safe and in a few days will be none the worse for the accident."

The man on the bed smiled faintly after a pause.

"Not the end," answered John Stewart gently; "only the beginning—the beginning of a great and lasting peace."

The man on the bed smiled a smile of supreme happiness.

(Continued on page 4.)