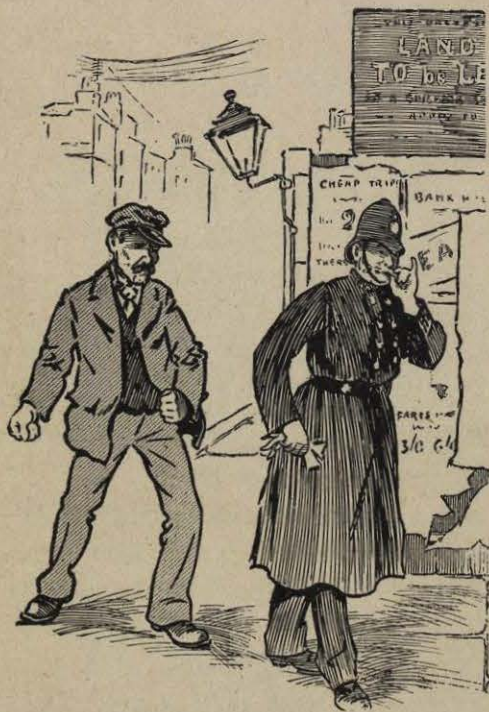


HARD LABOUR

POLICE-CONSTABLE C 49 paced slowly up Wapping High Street in the cool of the evening. The warehouses were closed, and the street almost denuded of traffic. He addressed a short and stern warning to a couple of youths struggling on the narrow pavement, and pointed out—with the toe of his boot—the undesirability of the curbstone as a seat to a small maiden of five. With his white gloves in his hand he swung slowly along, monarch of all he surveyed.

His complacency and the air with which he stroked his red moustache and side-whiskers were insufferable. Mr. Charles Pinner, ship's fireman, whose bosom friend C 49 had pinched—to use Mr. Pinner's own expressive phrase—a week before for causing a crowd to collect, eyed the exhibition with sneering wrath. The injustice of locking up Mr. Johnson, because a crowd of people whom he didn't know from Adam persisted in obstructing the pathway, had reduced Mr. Pinner to the verge of madness.



HE KEPT BEHIND C 49, AND CONTENTED HIMSELF WITH INSULTING REMARKS

For a time he kept behind C 49, and contented himself with insulting but inaudible remarks bearing upon the colour of his whiskers.

The constable turned up a little alley-way between two small pieces of waste ground, concerning the desirability and value of which as building sites a notice-board was lurid with adjectives. Mr. Pinner was still behind; he was a man who believed in taking what life could offer him at the moment, and something whispered to him that if he lived a hundred years he would never have such another chance of bonneting that red-whiskered policeman. There were two or three small houses at the end of the alley, but the only other living person in it was a boy of ten. He looked to be the sort of boy who might be trusted to smile approval on Mr. Pinner's contemplated performance.

C 49's first thought was that a chimney had fallen, and his one idea was to catch it in the act. He made a desperate grab even before pushing his helmet up, and caught Mr. Pinner by the arm.

"Leggo," said that gentleman, struggling.

"Ho," said C 49, crimson with wrath, as he pushed his helmet up. "Now you come along o' me, my lad."

Mr. Pinner, regretting the natural impulse

which had led to his undoing, wrenched himself free and staggered against the fence which surrounded the waste ground. Then he ducked sideways, and as C 49 renewed his invitation coupled with a warning concerning the futility of resistance, struck him full and square on the temple.

The constable went down as though he had been shot. His helmet rolled off as he fell, and his head struck the pavement. Mr. Pinner, his taste for bonneting policemen all gone, passed the admiring small boy at the double, and then, turning the corner rapidly, slackened his pace to something less conspicuous.

He reached his home, a small house in a narrow turning off Cable Street, safely, and, throwing himself into a chair, breathed heavily, while his wife, whose curiosity at seeing him home at that early hour would not be denied, plied him with questions.

"Spend a 'alf-hour with *me*?" she repeated, in a dazed voice. "Ain't you well, Charlie?"

"Well?" said the fireman, frowning, "o' course I'm well. But it struck me you ought to see a little of me sometimes when I'm ashore."

"That's generally what I do see," said Mrs. Pinner; "it's been a long time striking you, Charlie."

"Better late than never," murmured her husband, absently, as he listened in shuddering suspense to every footfall outside.

"Well, I'm glad you've turned over a new leaf," said Mrs. Pinner. "It ain't afore it was time, I'm sure. I'll go up and fetch the baby down."

"What for?" demanded her husband, shortly.

"So as it can see a little of you too," said his wife. "Up to the present it calls every man it sees 'farver.' It ain't its fault, pore little dear."

Mr. Pinner, still intent on footsteps, grumbled something beneath his breath, and the baby being awakened out of its first sleep and brought downstairs, they contemplated each other for some time with offensive curiosity.

Until next morning Mr. Pinner's odd reasons for his presence sufficed, but when he sat still after breakfast and showed clearly his intention to remain, his wife insisted upon others less insulting to her intelligence. Mr. Pinner, pre-facing his remarks with an allusion to a life-long abhorrence of red whiskers, made a clean breast of it.

"It served 'him right," said his wife, judicially, "but it'll be six months for you if they nab you, Charlie. You'll 'ave to make up your mind to a quiet spell indoors with me and baby till the ship sails."

Mr. Pinner looked at his son and heir disparagingly, and emitted a groan.

"He 'ad no witnesses," he remarked, "except a boy, that is, and 'e didn't look the sort to be fond o' policemen."

"You can't tell by looks," replied his wife, in whose brain a little plan to turn this escapade to good account was slowly maturing. "You mustn't get nabbed for my sake."

"I won't get nabbed for my own sake," rejoined Mr. Pinner, explicitly. "I wonder whether it's got into the papers?"

"Sure to," said his wife, shaking her head.

"Go and buy one and see," said the fireman, glancing at the baby. "I'll look after it, but don't be long."

His wife went out and got a paper, and Mr. Pinner, who was unable to read, watched her anxiously as she looked through it. It was evident, at length, that his prowess of the previous evening had escaped being immortalised in print, and his spirits rose.

"I don't s'pose he was much 'urt," he said. "I dare say he wouldn't like to tell 'em at the station he'd been knocked down. Some of 'em don't. I'll just keep my eyes open when I'm out."

"I don't think you ought to go out," said his wife.

She picked up the paper again, and regarded him furtively. Then she bent over it, and slowly scanned the pages, until a sudden horrified gasp drove the roses from Mr. Pinner's cheek and prepared him for the worst.

"Wot is it?" he stammered.

Mrs. Pinner folded the paper back and, motioning him to silence, read as follows:—

"A violent assault was committed last night on a policeman down at Wapping, who was knocked down by a seafaring man until he got concussion of the brain. The injured constable states that he can identify the man what attacked him, and has given a full description of him at the police-station, where search is now being made for 'im. The public-houses are being watched."

"Ho, are they?" commented Mr. Pinner, much annoyed. "Ho, indeed."

"That's all," said his wife, putting down the paper.

"All!" echoed the indignant fireman. "'Ow much more do you want? I'm in a nice 'ole, I don't think. Seems to me I might as well be in quod as 'ere."

"You don't know when you're well off," retorted his wife.

Mr. Pinner sighed, and moved aimlessly about

the room; then he resumed his chair, and, shaking his head slowly, lit his pipe.

"You'll be quite safe indoors," said his wife, whose plan was now perfected. "The only thing is, people'll wonder what you're staying indoors all day for."

Mr. Pinner took his pipe out of his mouth and stared at her blankly.

"Seems to me you want a reason for staying indoors," she pursued.

"Well, I've got one, ain't I?" said the injured man.

"Yes, but you can't tell them that," said his wife. "You want a reason everybody can understand and keep 'em from talking."

"Yes, all very fine for you to talk," said Mr. Pinner; "if you could think of a reason it 'ud be more sensible."

Mrs. Pinner, who had got several ready, assumed an air of deep thoughtfulness, and softly scratched her cheek with her needle.

"Whitewash the kitchen ceiling," she said, suddenly.

"'Ow long would that take?' demanded her lord, who was not fond of whitewashing.

"Then you could put a bit of paper in this room," continued Mrs. Pinner, "and put them shelves in the corner what you said you'd do. That would take some time."

"It would," agreed Mr. Pinner, eyeing her disagreeably.

"And I was thinking," said his wife, "if I got a sugar-box from the grocer's and two pairs o' wheels you could make the baby a nice little perambulator."

"Seems to me——" began the astonished Mr. Pinner.

"While you're doing those things I'll try and think of some more," interrupted his wife.

Mr. Pinner stared at her for some time in silence; finally he said "Thank'ee," in a voice slightly tinged with emotion, and fell into a sullen reverie.

"It's the safest plan," urged his wife, seriously; "there's so many things want doing that it's the most natural thing in the world for you to stay indoors doing them. Nobody'll think it strange."

She stitched on briskly and watched her husband from the corner of her eye. He smoked on for some time, and rising at last with a sigh, sent her out for the materials, and spent the day whitewashing.

He was so fatigued with the unwonted exertion that he was almost content to stay in that evening and smoke; but the following morning was so bright and inviting that his confine-

ment appeared more galling than ever. Hoping for some miracle that should rescue him from these sordid tasks, he sent out for another paper.

"It don't say much about it," said his wife.

The baby was crying, the breakfast things were not washed, and there were several other hindrances to journalistic work.

"Read it," said the fireman, sternly.

"The injured constable," read Mrs. Pinner, glibly, "is still going on satisfactory, and the public-houses are still being watched."

"They do seem fond o' them public-houses," remarked Mr. Pinner, impatiently. "I'm glad the chap's getting on all right, but I 'ope 'e won't be about afore I get to sea again."

"I shouldn't think he would," said his wife. "I'd better go out and get the wall-paper, 'adn't I? What colour would you like?"

Mr. Pinner said that all wall-papers were alike to him, and indulged in dreary speculations as to where the money was to come from. Mrs. Pinner, who knew that they were saving fast owing to his enforced seclusion, smiled at his misgivings.

He papered the room that day, after a few choice observations on the price of wall-paper, and expressed his opinion that in a properly

governed country the birth of red-whiskered policemen would be rendered an impossibility. To the compliments on his workmanship bestowed by the gratified Mrs. Pinner he turned a deaf ear.

There was nothing in the paper next morning, Mrs. Pinner's invention being somewhat fatigued, but she promptly quelled her husband's joy by suggesting that the police authorities were lying low in the hope of lulling him into a sense of false security. She drew such an amusing picture of the police searching streets and public-houses, while Mr. Pinner was blithely making a perambulator indoors, that she was fain to wipe the tears of merriment from her eyes, while Mr. Pinner sat regarding her in indignant astonishment.

It was no source of gratification to Mr. Pinner to find that the other ladies in the house were holding him up as a pattern to their husbands, and trying to incite those reluctant gentlemen to follow in his footsteps. Mrs. Smith, of the first floor, praised him in terms which made him blush with shame, and Mrs. Hawk, of the second, was so complimentary that Mr. Hawk, who had not long been married, came downstairs and gave him a pressing invitation to step out into the back yard.

By the time the perambulator was finished his patience was at an end, and he determined at all hazards to regain his liberty. Never had the street as surveyed from the small window appeared so inviting. He filled his pipe and communicated to the affrighted Mrs. Pinner his intention of going for a stroll.

"Wait till I've seen the paper," she protested.

"Wot's the good of seeing the paper?" replied Mr. Pinner. "We know as 'e's in bed, and it seems to me while 'e's in bed is my time to be out. I shall keep a look-out. Besides, I've just 'ad an idea; I'm going to shave my moustache off. I ought to ha' thought of it before."

He went upstairs, leaving his wife wringing her hands below. So far from the red policeman being in bed, she was only too well aware that he was on duty in the district, with every faculty strained to the utmost to avenge the outrage of which he had been the victim. It became necessary to save her husband at all costs, and while he was busy upstairs with the razor she slipped out and bought a paper.

He had just come down by the time she returned, and turned to confront her with a conscious grin; but at the sight of her face the smile vanished from his own, and he stood waiting nervously for ill news.

"Oh, dear," moaned his wife.

"What's the matter?" said Mr. Pinner, anxiously.

Mrs. Pinner supported herself by the table and shook her head despondently.

"'Ave they found me out?" demanded Mr. Pinner.

"Worse than that," said his wife.

"Worse than that!" said her husband, whose imagination was not of a soaring description. "How can it be?"

"He's dead," said Mrs. Pinner, solemnly.

"Dead!" repeated her husband, starting violently.

Mrs. Pinner, with a little sniff, took up the paper and read slowly, interrupted only by the broken ejaculations of her husband.

"The unfortunate policeman who was assaulted the other day down at Wapping passed away peacefully yesterday evening. Lady Verax is prostrate with grief and refuses to leave the death-chamber. Several members of the Royal family have telegraphed their——"

"Wot?" interrupted the astounded listener.

"I was reading the wrong bit," said Mrs. Pinner, who was too engrossed in her reading of the death of a well-known nobleman to remember to make all the corrections necessary

to render them suitable for a policeman. Here it is:—

"The unfortunate policeman who was assaulted the other day down at Wapping passed away peacefully yesterday evening in the arms of his wife and family. The ruffian is believed to be at sea."

"I wish 'e was," said Mr. Pinner, mournfully. "I wish 'e was anywhere but 'ere. The idea o' making a delikit man like that a policeman. Why, I 'ardly touched 'im."

"Promise me you won't go out," said his wife, tearfully.

"*Out?*" said Mr. Pinner, energetically; "*out?* D'ye think I'm mad, or wot? I'm going to stay 'ere till the ship sails, then I'm going down in a cab. Wot d'ye think I want to go out for?"

He sat in a frightened condition in the darkest corner of the room, and spoke only to his wife in terms of great bitterness concerning the extraordinary brittleness of members of the police force. "I'll never touch one on 'em agin as long as I live," he protested. "If you brought one to me asleep on a chair I wouldn't touch 'im."

"It's the drink as made you do it," said his wife.

"I'll never touch a drop agin," affirmed Mr. Pinner, shivering.

His pipe had lost its flavour, and he sat pondering in silence until the absolute necessity of finding more reasons for his continued presence in the house occurred to him. Mrs. Pinner agreed with the idea, and together they drew up a list of improvements which would occupy every minute of his spare time.

He worked so feverishly that he became a by-word in the mouths of the other lodgers, and the only moments of security and happiness he knew were when he was working in the bedroom with the door locked. Mr. Smith attributed it to disease, and for one panic-stricken hour discussed with Mr. Hawk the possibility of its being infectious.

Slowly the days passed until at length there were only two left, and he was in such a nervous and overwrought state that Mrs. Pinner was almost as anxious as he was for the day of departure. To comfort him she read a paragraph from the paper to the effect that the police had given up the search in despair. Mr. Pinner shook his head at this, and said it was a trap to get him out. He also, with a view of defeating the ends of justice, set to work upon a hood for the perambulator.

He was employed on this when his wife went out to do a little shopping. The house when she returned was quiet, and there were no signs of anything unusual having occurred; but when she entered the room she started back with a cry at the sight which met her eyes. Mr. Pinner was in a crouching attitude on the sofa, his face buried in the cushion, while one leg waved spasmodically in the air.

"Charlie," she cried; "Charlie."

There was a hollow groan from the cushion in reply.

"What's the matter?" she cried, in alarm.

"What's the matter?"

"I've seen it," said Mr. Pinner, in trembling tones. "I've seen a ghost. I was just peeping out of the window behind the blind when it went by."

"Nonsense," said his wife.

"His ghost," said Mr. Pinner, regaining a more natural attitude and shivering violently, "red whiskers, white gloves and all. It's doing a beat up and down this street. I shall go mad. It's been by twice."

"Magination," said his wife, aghast at this state of affairs.

"I'm afraid of its coming for me," said Mr. Pinner, staring wildly. "Every minnit I expect

to see it come to the door and beckon me to follow it to the station. Every minnit I expect to see it with its white face stuck up agin the window-pane staring in at me."

"You mustn't 'ave such fancies," said his wife.

"I see it as plain as I see you," persisted the trembling fireman. "It was prancing up and down in just the same stuck-up way as it did when it was alive."

"I'll draw the blind down," said his wife.

She crossed over to the window, and was about to lower the blind when she suddenly drew back with an involuntary exclamation.

"Can you see it?" cried her husband.

"No," said Mrs. Pinner, recovering herself.

"Shut your eyes."

The fireman sprang to his feet. "Keep back," said his wife, "don't look."

"I must," said her husband.

His wife threw herself upon him, but he pushed her out of the way and rushed to the window. Then his jaw dropped and he murmured incoherently, for the ghost of the red policeman was plainly visible. Its lofty carriage of the head and pendulum-like swing of the arms were gone, and it was struggling in a most fleshly manner to lead a recalcitrant costermonger to the station.

In the intervals of the wrestling bout it blew loudly upon a whistle.

"Wonderful," said Mrs. Pinner, nervously. "Lifelike, I call it."

The fireman watched the crowd pass up the road, and then he turned and regarded her.

"Would you like to hear what I call it?" he thundered.

"Not before the baby, Charlie," quavered Mrs. Pinner, drawing back.

The fireman regarded her silently, and his demeanour was so alarming that she grabbed Charles Augustus Pinner suddenly from his cradle and held him in front of her.

"You've kep' me here," said Mr. Pinner, in a voice which trembled with self-pity, "for near three weeks. For three weeks I've wasted my time, my little spare time, and my money in making perambulators, and whitewashing and papering, and all sorts of things. I've been the larfing-stock o' this house, and I've been worked like a convict. Wot 'ave you got to say for yourself?"

"Wot do you mean?" inquired Mrs. Pinner, recovering herself. "I ain't to blame for what's in the paper, am I? How was I to know that the policeman as died wasn't your policeman?"

Mr. Pinner eyed her closely, but she met his

gaze with eyes honest and clear as those of a child. Then, realising that he was wasting precious time, he picked up his cap, and as C 49 turned the corner with his prize, set off in the opposite direction to spend in the usual manner the brief remnant of the leave which remained to him.