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THE MISADVENTURES OF JOHN NICHOLSON

BY ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON.

INTERNATIONAL PRESS ASSOCIATION.

CHAPTER VIII.

IN front of Donald-son's Hospital, John counted it good fortune to perceive a cab a great way off, and by much shouting and waving of his arm to catch the notice of the driver. He counted it good fortune, for the time was long to him till he should have done forever with the Lodge; and the further he must go to find a cab, the greater the chance that the inevitable discovery had taken place, and that he should return to find the garded full of angry neighbors. Yet when the vehicle drew up he was seriously chagrined to recognize the port-wine cabman of the night before. "Here," he could not but reflect, "there is another link in the Judicial Error."

The driver, on the other hand, was pleased to drop again upon so liberal a fare; and as he was a man—the reader must already have perceived—of easy, not to say familiar, manners, he dropped at once into a vein of friendly talk, commenting on the weather, on the sacred season, which struck him chiefly in the light of a day of liberal gratuities, on the chance which had reunited him to a pleasing customer, and on the fact that John had been (as he was pleased to call it visibly "on the randan" the night before.

"And ye look dreidful bad—to-day, if I must say that," he continued. "There's nothing like a dram for ye—if ye'll take my advice of it: and bein' as it's Christmas, I'm no saying," he added, with a fatherly smile, "but what I would join ye myself."

John had listened with a sick heart. "I'll give you a dram when we've got through," said he, affecting a sprightliness which sat on him most unhandsomely, "and not a drop till then. Business first, and pleasure afterward."

With this promise the jarvey was prevailed upon to clamber to his place and drive, with hideous deliberation, to the door of the Lodge. There was no signs as yet of any public emotion; only, two men stood not far off in talk, and their presence, seen from afar, set John's pulses bugging. He might have spared himself his fright, for the pair were lost in some dispute of a theological complexion, and with lengthened upper lip and enumerating fingers, pursued the matter of their difference, and paid no heed to John.

But the cabman proved a thorn in the flesh. Nothing would keep him on his perch; he must clamber down, comment upon the pebble in the door (which he regarded as an ingenious but unsafe device), help John with the portmanteau, and enliven matters with a flow of speech, and with oddity of questions, which I thus condense:

"Hell! no be here himsel', will he? No? Well, he's an eccentric mag—a fair oddity—if ye ken the expression, dear; trouble with his tenants, they tell me. I've driven the family for years. I drove a cab at his father's waddin'. What'll your name be?—I should ken your face. Baigrey, ye say? There were Baigreys about Gilmerton; ye'll be one of that lot? Then this'll be a friend's portmantie, like? Why? Because the name upon it's Nicholson; Oh, if ye're in a hurry, that's another job. Waverley Brig? // Are ye for away?"

So the friendly toper prated and questioned and kept John's heart in a flutter. But to this also, as to other evils under the sun, there came a period; and the victim of circumstances began at last to fumble toward the railway terminus at Waverly Bridge. During the transit, he sat with raised glasses in the frosty chill and darkness of his chariot, and glanced out sidelong on the holiday face of things, the shuttered shop, and the crowds along the pavement, such as the rider in the Tyburn cart may have observed the concourse gathering to his execution.

At the station his spirits rose again; another stage of his escape was fortunately ended—he began to spy blue water. He called a railway porter; and bade him carry the portmanteau to the cloak-room; not that he had any notion of delay; flight, instant flight was his design, no matter whither; but he had determined to dismiss the cabman ere he named, or even chose, his destination, this possibly balking the Judicial Error of another link. This was his cunning aim and now with one foot on the roadway, and one still on the coach-step, he made haste to put the thing in practice, and plunged his hand into his trousers pocket.

There was nothing there!

Oh, yes; this time he was to blame. He should have remembered, and when he described his blood-stained pantaloons, he should not have deserted along with them his purse. Make the most of his error, and then compare it with the punishment! Conceive his new position, for I lack words to picture it; conceive him condemned to return to that house, from the very thought of which his soul revolted, and once more to expose himself to capture on the very scene of his misdeed; conceive him linked to the moldy cab and a familiar cabman. John cursed the cabman silently, and then it occurred to him that he must stop the incarceration of his portmanteau; that, at least, he must keep close at hand, and be turned to recall the porter. But his reflections, brief as they had appeared, must have occupied him longer than he supposed, and there was the man already returning with the receipt.

Well, that was settled; he had lost his portmanteau also; for the sixpence with which he had paid the Murrayfield toll was one that had strayed alone into his waistcoat pocket, and unless he once more successfully achieved the adventure of the house of crime, his portmanteau lay in the cloak-room in eternal pawn, for lack of a penny fee. And then he remembered the porter, who stood suggestively attentive, words of gratitude hanging on his lips. John hunted right and left; he found a coin—prayed God that it was a sovereign—drew it out, beheld a half-penny, and offered it to the porter.

The man's jaw dropped.

"It's only a half-penny!" he said, startled out of railway decency.

"I know that," said John piteously.

And here the porter recovered the dignity of a man.

"Thank you, sir," said he, and would have returned the base gratuity. But John, too, would none of it; and as they struggled, who must join in but the cabman.

"Hoots, Mr. Baigrey," said he, "you surely forget what day it is!"

"I tell you I have no change," cried John.

"Well," said the driver, "and what then? I would rather give a man a shillin' on a day like this than put him off with a derision like a bawbee. I'm surprised at the like of you, Mr. Baigrey."

"My name is not Baigrey!" broke out John, in mere childish temper and distress.

"I'll told me it was yourself," said the cabman.

"I know I did; and what the devil right had you to ask?" cried the unhappy one.

"Eh, very well," said the driver. "I know my place, if you know yours—if you know yours!" he repeated, as one who should imply grave doubt; and muttered inarticulate thunders, in which the grand old name of gentleman was taken seemingly in vain.

Oh, to have been able to discharge this monster, whom John now perceived with tardy clear-sightedness, to have begun betimes the festivities of Christmas! But far from any such joy or consolation visiting the lost, he stood bare of help and helpers, his portmanteau sequestered in one place, his money deserted in another and guarded by a corpse; himself, so jealous of privacy, the cynosure of all men's eyes about the station; and, as if these were not enough mischances, he was now fallen in ill-blood with the beast to whom his poverty had linked him! In ill-blood, as he reflected dismally, with the witness who perhaps might have power to save him! There was no time to be lost; he durst not linger any longer in that public spot; and whether he had recourse to dignity or to conciliation, the remedy must be applied at once. Some happily surviving element of manhood moved him to the former.

"Let us have no more of this," said he, his foot once more upon the step. "Go back to where we came from."

He had avoided the name of any destination, for there was now quite a little band of railway folk about the cab, and he still kept an eye upon the court of justice, and labored to avoid concentric evidence. But here again the fatal jarvey outmanoeuvered him.

"Back to the Lodge?" cried he, in shrill tones of protest.

"Drive on at once!" roared John, and slammed the door behind him, so that the crazy chariot rocked and jingled.

Forth trundled the cab into the Christmas streets, the fare within plunged in the blackness of despair that neighborned on unconsciousness, the driver on the box digesting his rebuke and his customer's duplicity. I would fain be thought to put the pair in competition; John's case was out of all parallel. But the cabman, too, is worth the sympathy of the judicious; for he was a fellow of genuine kindliness and a high sense of personal dignity incensed by drink, and his advances had been cruelly and publicly rebuffed. As he drove, therefore, he counted his wrongs, and clutched for sympathy and drink. Now, it must be said, he had a friend, a publican, in Queensferry street, from whom, in view of the sparseness of the occasion, he thought he might extract a dram. Queensferry street lies something off the direct road to Murrayfield. But then there is the hilly cross-road that passes by the valley of the Leith and the Dean Cemetery; and Queensferry street is on the way to that. What was to hinder the cabman, since his horse was dumb, from choosing the cross-road, and calling on his friend in passing? So, it was decided; and the charioteer, already somewhat mollified, turned aside his horse to the right.

CHAPTER IX.

JOHN, meanwhile, sat collapsed, his chin sunk upon his chest, his mind in abeyance. The smell of the cab was still faintly present to his senses, and a certain leaden chill about his whole self else had disappeared in one vast oppression of calamity and physical faintness. It was drawing on to noon—two-and-twenty hours since he had broken bread; in the interval, he had suffered tortures of sorrow and alarm, and been partly tipsy; and though it was impossible to say he slept, yet when the cab stopped, and the cabman thrust his head into the window, his attention had to be recalled from depths of vacancy.

"If you'll no' stand me a dram," said the driver, with a well-merited severity of tone and manner, "I dare say ye'll have no objection to my taking one myself?"

"Yes—no—do what you like," returned John; and then, as he watched his tormentor mount the stairs and enter the whisky shop, there floated into his mind a sense as of something long ago familiar. At that he started up fully awake, and stared at the shop-front. Yes, he knew them, but when? and how? Long since, he thought; and then, casting his eye through the fanglass, which had been recently occluded by the figure of the jarvey, he beheld the tree-tops of the rookery in Randolph Crescent. He was close to home—home, where he had thought an hour, to be sitting in the well-remembered drawing-room in friendly converse; and, instead—

It was his first impulse to drop into the bottom of the cab; his next, to cover his face with his hands. So he sat, while the cabman toasted the publican, and the publican toasted the cabman, and both reviewed the affairs of the nation; so he still sat, when his master condescended to return, and drive off at last down hill, along the curve of Lynedoch Place; but even so sitting, as he passed the end of his father's street, he took one glance from between shielding fingers, and beheld a doctor's carriage at the door.

"Well, just so," thought he; "I'll have killed my father! And this is Christmas-day!"

If Mr. Nicholson died, it was down this same road he must journey to the grave; and down this road, on the same errand, his wife had preceded him years before; and many other leading citizens, with the proper trappings and attendance of the end. And, now, in that frosty, ill-smelling, straw-carpeted, and ragged-cushioned cab, with his breath congealing on the glasses, where else was John himself advancing to?

The thought stirred his imagination, which began to manufacture many thousand pictures, bright and fleeting, like the shapes in a kaleidoscope; and now he saw himself, ruddy and comfortered, sliding in the gutter; and, again, a little, woe-begone, bored urchin trickled forth in drops and rivulets, descending this same hill at the foot's-pace of mourning coaches, his mother's body just preceding him; and yet, anon, he fancied, running far in front, shoved him, by destination—now standing solitary in the low sunshine, with the sparrows hopping on the threshold and the dead man within starting up the road now, with a sudden plange, thronged now, with white-faced, hand-uplifting neighbors, and doctor bursting through their midst and fixing his stethoscope as he went, the policeman shaking a sagacious head beside the body. It was to this he feared that he was driving; in the midst of this he saw himself arrive heard himself stammer faint explanations, and felt the hand of the constable upon his shoulder. Heavens! how he wished he had played the manlier part; how he despised himself that he had not that fatal neighborhood when all was quiet, and he should now be (amely traveling back when it was thronging with avengers!

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

TRAINED ALLIGATOR.

Col. Ben Carson Talks About His Training of Pet Alligators.

"Do you know," said Col. Ben Carson, leaning back in his chair and talking to a New Orleans Times-Democrat man, "that alligators are the most affectionate creatures on earth? It's a fact. And the sense they have! They're wonders. They've got more sense than a dog. How do I know? Haven't I educated 'em? Didn't there an alligator 110 years old in Des Allemand bayou that would work his tail to the bone for me if I asked him so? Say—you make me tired. What are you laughing at? You get a gallon of molasses and a long-necked bottle and I'll show you how to tame alligators. It's the easiest thing on earth. They're so affectionate. 'On June 23, 1885, I went to Des Allemand bayou fishing. A negro named Baptiste Fortier had just caught an alligator 100 years old. I could tell by the rings around him. You can't train a young alligator. That's fungy, ain't it? I asked Baptiste to sell him to me. I paid him $4.95 and Jim—that's the alligator's name—was mine. I put a chain around his neck. Then I got me a long-necked bottle, filled it with molasses and walked up to him. He opened his jaws to nab me. That was my chance. I shoved the neck of the bottle in his mouth. Just back of his ears, where an alligator has no teeth. I tilted the bottle up. Jim tasted the molasses and began wagging his tail. He broke Baptiste's leg, but that was an accident. He was as good as a setter dog from the minute he tasted the molasses. I taught him a lot of pretty tricks—how to catch flies, how to stand on his tail, how to carry tobacco. Finally I harnessed him up to a boat. He looked around at me to see what I wanted. I reached over the side of the boat and pushed him a little. Then he understood. Off he went. When I pulled on the rope I had around his neck he was nonplussed for a minute but he soon caught on, and now when I go to Des Allemand I never have to hire anybody to paddle my canoe. Jim attends to carrying me anywhere I want to go.'

"Say, do you know Jim is as glad to see me whenever I pass that way as if he were a relative of mine? What's that? Of course it's the truth. Ask Baptiste. He takes care of Jim for me while I am in New Orleans."

MOCKING BIRDS AS DANCERS.

Queer Performances They Sometimes Go Through in the Woods.

The power of the mocking bird to amuse folks is not confined to its abilities as a rich-voiced singer. The more birds are studied the more the students wonder what they can't do. Birds with some marked characteristics are sometimes neglected in other respects than their peculiarity, and so it happens that the mocking bird is better known as an imitative singer than as an original one. The mocking birds dance methodically like woodmen in a square dance, rather than with the wild gyrations of a darkey hoe-down. They keep their bodies stiff with head and tails erect, their wings drooping and feathers flattened out, something like the English sparrow when hopping about before its sweetheart; but the sparrow's feathers are puffed out unusually instead of being flattened against the body.

Two of the mocking birds make a set and they bound along, jumping rather high but not far, going from one end of the playground to the other, one behind the other, about a foot, and each one at the end of the playground turns in a circle slowly and with dignity, and goes back again. Sometimes they stop and look at some distant object, day dreaming, apparently, when away they go again.

Mr. Blake tells about a hen that was disturbed by the actions of a pair of mocking birds in their dance, whereupon she left her brood of chickens and charged the couple with clucks and fluttering feathers. Up went the mocking birds with their mocking bird talk, scolding and sputtering at the hen until they fairly drove her away.—Popular Science Monthly.

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