

ДЖОН ГОЛСУЪРТИ VIRTUE

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Harold Mellesch, minor clerk in an accident assurance society, having occasion to be present at a certain police court to give evidence in the matter of a smashed car, stood riveted by manifestations of the law entirely new to him. His eyes, blue and rather like those of a baby, were opened very widely, his ingenuous forehead wrinkled, his curly hair was moving on his scalp, his fists involuntarily clenching his straw hat. He had seen four ladies of the town dealt with—three ‘jugged,’ and one fined—before his sensations reached their climax. Perhaps she was prettier than the others, certainly younger, and she was crying.

“First time you’ve been here—two pounds, and ten shillings costs.”

“But I haven’t any money, sir.”

“Very well—fourteen days.”

Tears streaking the remains of powder; a queer little sound—the sensations within young Mellesch simmered like a kettle coming to the boil. He touched a dark blue sleeve in front of him.

“Here,” he said, “I’ll pay her fine.”

He felt the glance of the policeman running over him like a chilly insect.

“Friend of yours?”

“No.”

“I shouldn’t, then. She’ll be here again within the month.”

The girl was passing, he saw the swallowing movement of her throat and said with desperation:

“I don’t care. I’ll pay it.”

The blue man’s glance crept about him clammily.

“Come with me, then.”

Young Mellesch followed him out.

“Here,” said his policeman to the one in charge of the girl, “this gentleman’ll pay the fine.”

Conscious of a confusion of glances, of his own cheeks reddening furiously, young Mellesch brought out his money—just two pounds fifteen; and, handing over the two pounds ten, he thought, ‘My hat! What would Alice say?’

He heard the girl’s gasped out “Ow! Thank you!” his policeman’s muttered “Waste o’ money!” and passed out into the street. Now that his feelings had given off that two pound ten’s worth of steam he felt chilly and dazed, as if virtue had gone out of him. A voice behind him said:

“Thank you ever so much—it was kind of you.”

Raising his straw hat he stood uncomfortably, to let her pass.

She pushed a card into his hand. “Any time you’re passing, I’ll be glad to see you; I’m very grateful.”

“Not at all!” With a smile, confused like her own, he turned off towards his office.

All day, among his accidents, he felt uncertain. Had he been a fool; had he been a hero? Sometimes he thought: ‘What brutes they are to those girls!’ and sometimes: ‘Don’t know; suppose they must do something about it.’ And he avoided considering how to explain the absence of two pounds ten shillings on which Alice had been reckoning. His soul was simple like the expressions on his face.

He reached home at the usual hour—six-thirty. His home was grey and small and had a little bit of green up Chalk Farm way, where the Tube made all things possible.

His wife, who had just put their baby daughter to bed, was sitting in the parlour darning his socks. She looked up—surely her forehead was rather like a knee!

“You wear your socks properly, Harold,” she said; “it’s all I can do to mend this pair.” Her eyes were china-blue, round like saucers; her voice had the monotony of one brought up to minimise emotion. A farmer’s daughter, young Mellesh had become engaged to her during a holiday in Somerset. Pale himself, from office and the heat, he thought how pale she looked.

“The heat’s dreadful, isn’t it?” she said. “Sometimes I wish we’d never had baby. It does tie you in the evenings. I am looking forward to Whitsuntide, that I am.”

Young Mellesh, tall and straggly, bent over and kissed her forehead. How on earth to let her know that he had ‘blewed’ their holiday? He was realising that he had done an awful thing. Perhaps—oh! surely—she would understand how he couldn’t sit and see that girl ‘jugged’ before his eyes for want of it! But not until the end of their small supper did he say abruptly:

“I got quite upset this morning, Alice. Had to go down to the police court about that car smash I told you of, and afterwards I saw them run in a lot of those Piccadilly girls. It fair sickened me to see the way they treat them.”

His wife looked up; her face was childlike.

“Why, what do they do to them?”

“Quod them for speakin’ to men in the street.”

“I s’pose they’re up to no good.”

Irritated by the matter-of-factness in her voice, he went on:

“They speak to ’em as if they were dirt.”

“Well, aren’t they?”

“They may be a loose lot, but so are the men.”

“Men wouldn’t be so loose if they weren’t there.”

“I suppose it’s what you call a vicious circle;” and, pleased with his play on words, he added: “One or two of them were pretty.”

Mis wife smiled; her smile had a natural teasing quality.

“They treat them better, I suppose?”

That was jolly cynical! and he blurted out:

“One, quite young, never there before, they gave her a fortnight just because she hadn’t any money—I couldn’t stick it; I paid her fine.”

There was sweat on his forehead. His wife’s face had gone quite pink.

“You paid? How much?”

He was on the point of saying: ‘Ten shillings.’ But something in his soul revolted. “Regular pill—two pound ten;” and he thought glumly: ‘Oh! what a fool I’ve been!’

He did wish Alice wouldn’t open her mouth like that, when nothing was coming out—made her look so silly! Her face puckered suddenly, then became quite blank; he was moved as if he had hit or pinched her.

“Awfully sorry, Alice,” he muttered, “never meant to—she—she cried.”

“Course she cried! You fool, Harold!”

He got up, very much disturbed.

“Well, and what would *you* have done?”

“Me? Let her stew in her own juice, of course. It wasn’t your affair.”

She too had risen. He thrust his fingers through his hair. The girl’s face, tear-streaked, confusedly pretty, had come up before him, her soft common grateful voice tickled his ears again. His wife turned her back. So! he was in for a fit of sulks. Well! No doubt he had deserved it.

“I dare say I *was* a fool,” he muttered, “but I did think you’d understand how I felt when I saw her cry. Suppose it had been you!” From the toss of her head, he knew he had said something pretty fatal.

“Oh! So that’s what you think of me!”

He grasped her shoulder.

“Of course I don’t, Alice; don’t be so silly!”

She shook off his hand.

“Whose money was it? Now baby and me’ll get no holiday. And all because you see a slut crying.”

Before he could answer she was gone. He had an awful sense of having outraged justice. Given away her holiday—given his wife’s holiday to a girl of the streets! Still, it was his own holiday, too; besides, he earned the money! He’d never wanted to give it to the girl; hadn’t got anything for it! Suppose he’d put it into the offertory bag, would Alice have been in such a temper even if it was their holiday? He didn’t see much difference. He sat down with knees apart, and elbows planted on them, staring at the peonies on the Brussels carpet paid for on the hire system. And all those feelings that rise in people living together, when they don’t agree, swirled in his curly head, and troubled his candid eyes. If only the girl hadn’t cried! She hadn’t meant to cry; he could tell that by the sound of it. And who was the magistrate—he didn’t look too like a saint; who was any man to treat her like that? Alice oughtn’t—No! But suddenly, he saw Alice again bending over his socks—pale and tired with the heat—doing things for him or baby—and he had given away her holiday! No denying that! Compunction flooded him. He must go up and find her and try and make his peace—he would pawn his bicycle—she should have her holiday—she should!

He opened the door and listened. The little house was ominously quiet—only the outside evening sounds from buses passing in the main road, from children playing on the doorsteps of the side street, from a man with a barrow of bananas. She must be up in the bedroom with baby! He mounted the steep whitewashed stairway. It wanted a carpet, and fresh paint; ah! and a lot of other things Alice wanted—you couldn’t have everything at once on four pound ten a week—with the price of living what it was. But she ought to have remembered there were things he wanted too—yes, precious bad, and never thought of getting. The door of their bedroom was locked; he rattled the handle. She opened suddenly, and stood facing him on the little landing.

“I don’t want you up here.”

“Look here, Alice—this is rotten.”

She closed the door behind her.

“It is! You go down again, I don’t want you. Think I believe that about crying? I’d be ashamed, if I were you!”

Ashamed! He might have been too soft, but why ashamed?

“Think I don’t know what men are like? You can just go to your street girl, if she’s so pretty!” She stood hard and stiff against the door, with red spots in her cheeks. She almost made him feel a villain—such conviction in her body.

“Alice! Good Lord! You must be crazy! I’ve done nothing!”

“But you’d like to. Go along! I don’t want you!”

The stabbing stare of her blue eyes, the muffled energy of her voice, the bitterness about her mouth all made a fellow feel—well, that he knew nothing about anything—coming from one’s wife like that! He leaned back against the wall.

“Well, I’m damned!” was all he could get out.

“D’you mean to say she didn’t ask you?”

The insides of his hands grew wet. The girl’s card in his pocket!

“Well, if you like to be a cat I can’t help it. What d’you take me for?”

“Giving your own child’s money to a dirty slut! You owed it—that’s what it was—or will be. Go on with you; don’t stand there!”

He had a nasty longing to smite her on the mouth—it looked so bitter. “Well,” he said slowly, “now I understand.”

Yes, that was it—she was all of a piece with something, with that police court, with the tone of the men’s voices, with something unsparing, hard and righteous, which came down sharp on people.

“I thought—I think you might—” he stammered.

“Ugh!” The sound exasperated him so, that he turned to go downstairs.

“You whited sepulchre!”

The door clicked before he could answer the odd insult; he heard the key turned. Idiotic! The little landing seemed too small to hold his feelings. Would he ever have been such an ass as to say a word to Alice, if he had done it? Why! He had never even thought of doing anything!

Giddy from chagrin he ran downstairs, and, clawing his straw hat from the rack, went out. The streets were malodorous from London fug—fried fish, petrol, hot dirty people; he strode along troubled, his eyes very rueful. So this was what he was really married to—this—this! It was like being married to that police court! It wasn’t human—no, it wasn’t—to be so suspicious and virtuous as all that! What was the use of being decent and

straight, if this was all you got for it? Someone touched him on the shoulder.

“Mister, you’ve been standing against something; you’re all white behind—let me give you a brush.”

He stood confused, while a stout fair man smote his back up and down with a large flat hand. Whited sepulchre! A bubble of rage rose to his lips. All right! She should see! He felt for the girl’s card, and was suddenly amazed to find that he had no need to look at it—he remembered the address! Not far off, on the other side of the Euston Road! That was funny—had he been looking at it without realising? They said you had a subconscious mind. Well, what about it? No, it was his conscious mind that was going to serve Alice out! He had reached the Euston Road. Crossing it, he began to feel a queer pleasurable weakness in the legs. By this he knew that he was going to do wrong. He was not going to visit the girl just to serve his wife out, but because the prospect was—! That was bad—bad; it would put Alice in the right! He stood still at the corner of a narrow square, with a strip of garden, and railings round it. He leaned against those railings, his eyes searching the trees. He had always been quite straight with his wife—it was she who had put the idea into his head. And yet his legs being pleausurably weak seemed in an odd way to excuse her. It was like his doubt whether they hadn’t to do something about it at the police court. Barring Alice—barring the police court—where would he—would any man be? Without virtue, entirely without virtue. A pigeon in the garden cooed. “Any time you’re passing, I’ll be glad to see you.” It had sounded genuine—really grateful. And the girl had looked—not worse than anybody else! If Alice had been sympathetic about it he would never have thought of her again; that is—well—! The doubt set his legs in motion. He was a married man, and that was all about it! But he looked across at the numbers on the houses. Twenty-seven! Yes, there it was! A bloom of lilac brushed his face. The scent jerked him suddenly back to the farm in Somerset, and he and Alice courting. Alice—not the Alice on the landing! He scrutinised the shabby house, and suddenly went hot all over. Suppose he went in there—what would that girl think? That he had paid her fine because—! But that wasn’t it at all—oh! no—he wasn’t a squirt like that! He turned his face away, and walked on fast and far.

The signs were lit above the theatres; traffic was scanty, the streets a long dawdle of what vehicles and humans were about. He came to Leicester

Square and sat down on a bench. The lights all round him brightened slowly under the dusk—theatre lights, street lamps. And the pity of things smote him, sitting there. So much of everything; and one got so little of anything! Adding figures up all day, going home to Alice—that was life! Well, it wasn't so bad when Alice was nice to him. But—crikey!—what one missed! That book about the South Sea Islands—places, peoples, sights, sounds, scents, all over the world! Four pound ten a week, a wife, a baby! Well, you couldn't have things both ways—but had he got them either way? Not with the Alice on the landing!

Ah! Well! Poor Alice; jolly hard on her to miss her holiday! But she might have given him the chance to tell her that he would pawn his bicycle. Or was it all a bad dream? Had he ever really been in the police court, seen them herding those girls to prison—girls who did what they did because—well, like himself, they had missed too much. They'd catch a fresh lot tonight. What a fool he'd been to pay that fine!

'Glad I didn't go into that girl's house, anyway,' he thought. 'I would have felt a scum!' The only decent thing about it all had been her look when she said: "Ow! thank you!" That gave him a little feeling of warmth even now; and then—it, too, chilled away. Nothing for it! When he had done sitting there, he must go home! If Alice had thought him a wrong-un before, what would she think when he returned? Well, there it was! The milk was spilt! But he did wish she hadn't got such a virtue on her.

The sky deepened and darkened, the lights stared white; the square garden with its flower-beds seemed all cut out and stiff—like scenery on a stage. Must go back and 'stick' it! No good to worry!

He got up from the bench, and gave himself a shake. His eyes, turned towards the lights of the Alhambra, were round, candid, decent, like the eyes of a baby.

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