

THE BEGUILING OF WILLIAM JOHN.

-----By Winifred Patton-----

_____THE BEGUILING OF WILLIAM_____

JOHN.

_____By Winifred Patton._____

Police-sergeant Thomas Brett scowled as he stood in the barrack doorway, looking down the village street. There was nothing in the scene before him to explain his ill-humour. The village was the prettiest place imaginable, and showed its most charming aspect from the spot where he stood. Yet Sergeant Brett stood in the doorway and scowled.

He was a stranger in the land- a man of alien blood and sympathies. He was a little man- vain, pompous, and filled with self-importance. On his arrival he had looked for tokens of deep respect from the ignorant natives, respect for his position and authority; but, alas, he had looked in vain. Where he demanded deference he met derision; he found defiance where his lordly soul craved meek submission. Even the ragged little urchins who ran at his coming had many a merry gibe to fling behind them as they fled. So the heart of Sergeant Brett was black within him, and he found no solace in the glory of sky or the beauty of earth. His only desire was vengeance, ample and sweet, on the people who mocked him.

Suddenly into the sleepy silence came the sound of hurrying footsteps, and the angry barking of dogs. The unkempt, ungainly creature who stumbled into view lingered a moment to throw some stones at his canine tormentors, then flung himself for protection within the open doorway. The sergeant's opportunity had found him in the form of

William John.

William John's surname was lost in the mists of antiquity, together with other interesting details of his birth and early history. He was what is called a "natural"- a poor, witless creature, who wandered from place to place, living on the ^{alms}~~arms~~ of the charitable. There were people who said that William John was not so simple as he looked, that his wits were not wool-gathering when it suited him to use them. In spite of these unkind opinions, he was as popular as he was widely known round all the country side. He was harmless and amiable, ran errands and carried gossip, and on his amusing eccentricities a fool's pardon was freely bestowed. If it is true that "fools rush in where angels fear to tread," it is equally certain that fools are often admitted where angels might knock in vain. Nobody troubled to conceal an illegal act from William John. He was familiar with the abiding- place of many an unlicensed dog, the hiding-place of many a contraband gun. It was common knowledge that he was employed by the owner of more than one "wee still" to convey the poteen to outlying clients. With all his folly and freakishness, William John had never been known to break faith with the people who trusted him; in carrying out their orders he was always safe and silent.

Into Sergeant Brett's calculations this wayward faith did not enter. In his estimation William John was simply a helpless "gomerel," sent by an obliging Providence to deliver the Sergeant's enemies into his hands.

"How are you to-day, my poor man?" the Sergeant said, with condescending kindness. "Come inside and rest yourself for a bit; you look wearied out. Have those dogs been annoying you? They are a nuisance to the neighbourhood."

"Aye, aye, a tarrible nuisance," William John mumbled, blinking at the Sergeant from under his mane of shaggy hair.

The Sergeant preceded him into the barrack kitchen, and William John sat down and made himself at home.

"Would you like something to eat?" was the next kindly inquiry.

"Aw aye, Sergeant dear, God love ye! I'm wake wi' the hunger. It's not easy thravellin' over them mountains. I thramped four hundher' mile this day."

"Did you really?" the Sergeant inquired, sympathetically. "You must be very tired indeed after all that. What great business have you been doing?"

"Aye, aye, Sergeant dear; an' luk at the poor ould brogues on me. Sure I'd be far betther on my bare feet nor wearin' them."

"Indeed they are very bad," the Sergeant agreed. "Perhaps I can find you a better pair while Mary gets ready some food."

The Sergeant soon returned with a stout pair of boots. In the meantime Mary had left the viands on the table and withdrawn, and William John was doing royal justice to her bounty. Until his hunger was satisfied he could give attention to nothing else.

With a sigh of contentment, the poor creature at last rose from the table, and the Sergeant presented him with the boots.

" God be good to ye, Sergeant dear. There's nobody to aquil ye in the counthry, no matther what they all say about ye."

"What do they say?" asked the Sergeant, bridling.

"Och, wan thing an' another. What sense have they, poor crath-urs? Aw, many's the foolish thing I've heard them say an' do; it's me knows them well."

" You must get great amusement out of them," said the Sergeant. "They won't blindfold you easily. I daresay you could tell me of many a man in the mountains who keeps a dog or a gun that we hear nothing about."

" Aye, many's the wan," said William John. "Did iver ye see such a poor ould hat? Isn't it an insult to the counthry for any man to be wearin' such a thing? I'm not fit to be in your company at all, at all."

The Sergeant went off, and returned with an old hat of his own.

"Och, Sergeant, honey, it's you's the gentleman," said William John, turning it round admiringly. "I'm the quare gran' man now. Sure, if it wasn't for my ould shute I could visit the King himself. But what does the like of me want wi' grandhur? If my ould duds sticks thegither at all, haven't I a right to be thankful?"

" There's a suit of mine I have no further use for. I'll give it to you if you'll answer me a few questions."

"As many as ye like to ax me, acushla. There's no man livin' I'd like as well to oblige. But ye mustn't fluster me, Sergeant, dear, ^{the} for memory's wake in me sometimes. It must take its own time and go

it's own way. Many's the time I have discoorsed for days to the great larned docthors in all parts o' the world, an' niver wanted a word. But when I get confused my mind is just full o' black emptiness, an' ye might growl at me a week an' get no sense out of it."

"Could you tell me who has a dog without a licence?" the Sergeant asked, wheedlingly.

William John considered for a time in silence, his head resting on his hand. "It was only this mornin' I seen a wee dog an' a big dog. Where was it now? Sure I mind the dacent man sayin' he would shoot the poor bastes sooner nor get out a licence."

"Who was it?" the Sergeant broke in, eagerly.

William John fixed him with a meditative eye.

"Was it wee John M'Gowan?" said he musingly; "or would it be Tommy Gillespie, o' the Cross Hill? I mind we talked for a long time about it. It couldn't have been wee John, for I didn't pass by that road the day."

"Then it must have been Gillespie," said the Sergeant, triumphantly, bringing out his note-book.

"But maybe it was Samuel Thompson, o' the Linn. Him an' me's the best o' friends, an' we always have a great crack when we meet. I must have passed by Thompson's early in the mornin', for the missus took me in for some breakfast."

The Sergeant began to look angry. "I think you are no better than a fool, after all," he said contemptuously.

William John continued to meditate.

" Is the shute a good warm wan"? he suddenly asked. " Would it keep the rain aff me, an' keep out the cowld in the winther? Dear love ye, Sergeant, I could talk far betther if I seen the shute before me. My memory can't keep steady wi' thinkin' about it."

The Sergeant went away, and returned with the suit. William John examined it with child's delight, and then proceeded to put it on over his rags.

The Sergeant expostulated , but his remarks passed unheeded. When his toilet was completed, William John turned to him with a bland smile. "Now we can talk betther," he said. "What was it ye were sayin', Sergeant, dear? Just ax me anything ye like this minute. There's nothin' I won't tell ye, if I mind it."

" You were trying to remember where you saw a dog without a licence this morning," said the Sergeant. "You think it was perhaps at Samuel Thompson's."

"Aw, aye; Samuel Thompson is as dacent a man as iver I met in my life. There's not a beggar passes that dure without a bite an' a kind word. 'Deed the missus has a big heart in her,too."

"What about the dog?" said the Sergeant impatiently.

"Och, Sergeant, dear, don't shout at me like that. Give me time, man, dear, till I think on it. If ye put me through other, nothin' 'll iver come into my head. Isn't it the wee dog we were talkin' about? Throth its a quare disgrace an' sin to see all them people wi' their dogs, an' their guns, an' their wee whiskey stills, an' sorra a licence iver paid for wan o' them. It's an out-an' out shame, so it is."

" That's exactly what I think," said the Sergeant, endeavouring to control his impatience, and speak as gently as possible. "I'll soon put a stop to the disgraceful business if you give ^{me} ~~us~~ some of their names. If you can oblige me in this you'll always find a friend in Sergeant Brett."

" Is it their names?" said William John. "'Deed there's not a man in the counthry that I don't know his name, an' the names of the missus an' childher, too, if he's a married man. Ye need niver be feart to ax William John for any man's name."

" But can't you tell me something definite about the dogs and the guns and the poteen stills?" said the wearily patient Sergeant. "You have told me nothing whatever yet, you know. Surely you can remember from whose still you got the ^{last} whiskey you tasted."

" Aw, man dear, some o' the whiskey they make up there you wouldn't ~~not~~ let into your mouth. It's not fit for dacent Christians. It burns the inside out of ye, an' it makes your head split wi' the pain afther it. 'Deed some of it's very good I know- many's the fine tumbler I've had of it!- but ye don't run across that soart i ivery day in your thravels. I mind well the first poteen iver I tasted. It was not in this counthry I got it, but across in Inishowen, where the people are barbarians, but very kindly meanin'. It was mild, an' sweet, an' lovely, an' I niver tasted any on this side to aquil it. They haven't the same tips of makin' it on this side at all."

" Can you tell me a man's name who makes it on this side?" pleaded the Sergeant.

"Have ye iver a dhrop of it in the house?" asked William John; "or any soart o' good dacent whiskey? My tongue can hardly move wi' the thirst that's on me from all the talkin'."

The Sergeant produced a bottle and glass, and reluctantly poured out some liquor.

William John drained the glass, and smiled seraphically. "That heartens a man," he said, cheerfully. "I don't hould at all wi' tee-totallers- they're a dour lot, all o' them. What was it we were talkin' about, Sergeant dear? Was it the new gun I seen this mornin'?"

"Yes, yes," said the Sergeant, eagerly.

William John reached for the bottle, filled his glass again, and drank it off. Then he rose to his feet.

"I think I must be goin' now, Sergeant, honey," he said; "but ye won't be lonely, for I hear the boys comin' in. Ye needn't whisper to them what I've just been tellin' ye. It's between ourselves, an' I wouldn't brathe it to another sowl but yourself. Thank ye kindly for your hospitality, an' may ye niver want bit or sup yourself, or an honest man to give ye information."

As William John shuffled out, he met the other policemen in the door, but he only grinned in response to their greeting. When they passed inside they were astonished to find the Sergeant standing in the kitchen, flinging curses far and wide.

William John must have spread the story, for from that day Sergeant Brett could never venture outside his door without being assailed with ironical queries about dogs and whiskey. At last he could bear the place no longer, and at his earnest request was trans-

ferred to a distant county, where it is to be hoped he met with more generous appreciation.

Miss D. M. Patton

91 Benolantene Road

Hampstead

N. W.