

Richard Bruce - Burglar

An Episode

by Edgar Wallace, 1875-1932

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UNSET in Angel Gardens! If there could be a sunset where the sun had never risen. At all events, it was the time when the sun usually sets everywhere else but at Angel Gardens—since, except for a few hours daily when, by eluding a forest of chimney stacks and dodging the obstruction caused by an immense and ugly structure which in ghastly satire had been named Palace Mansions, the sun, as an Angel Gardener put it, „hadn't a look in.“

If there were few palatial tendencies in the Mansions, there was certainly nothing either Arcadian or „angelic“ about the Gardens.

A long, narrow street, with the regulation allowance of street lamps; the usual general shop on one side, and the invariable beer shop at the corner; the houses, bearing a dreary resemblance to each other; the groups of children playing in various stages of dirtiness, happy in the blissful ignorance of their

abject poverty; above their cries, the coarse laughter of the many bare-armed women, who seemed to spend one half of their time hanging out of their windows or sitting on their doorsteps, and the other half making pilgrimages to the ever-handly beer shop. To the lively strains of a street-organ, a couple of slatternly girl-women with frowsy, unkempt locks and heavy fringes were dancing, their fishy eyes sparkling from their unwonted exertions. Everywhere the same signs of misery and want.

From the oft-opened door of the »Cow and Meadow« (even in naming their public houses they sought the pastoral) came discordant snatches of tuneless songs, mingled with the din caused by half-a-dozen people speaking at once.

No. 14 differed in very little respect from the remainder of the Gardens. If possible, it was just a trifle more dirty. Such windows as remained intact still bore the marks of the glazier's thumb, even though they had been in for over a year. Where glass was not, a small piece of brown paper made an excellent substitute!

The fastidious were not tolerated in Angel Gardens. The Gardeners' motto was „Keep your nose out of other people's business.” Not that I would dare for one moment to assert that the Gardeners were at all reticent concerning their family histories; as a matter of fact, everybody knew everybody, and even an outsider might hear for the asking the pedigrees as far as they were known of anyone from No. 1 up to the little shop at the corner (which, owing to its being a supplementary addition, was numbered 41a). But to ask a woman what her husband did for a living, or a man where he worked, was neither policy or sense, and was likely to get the enquiring one into serious trouble. And quite right, too. What did it matter to anybody if Mr. Jigger disappeared for periods of six, nine, and twelve months at a stretch, re-appearing at the end of that time with a generally run-down look and wearing his hair cut suspiciously close? Whose business was it if Mr. Boozy (better known as Ginger) never left home till dusk and always carried his tools in ingeniously designed pockets?

A periodical house-to-house search by the police, if inconvenient, was seldom resented, although the virtuous wrath of the „lady of the house” when the missing criminal remained undiscovered, or her pretended amazement and whining protestations of innocence and ignorance when the sought one was found underneath a bed or hiding in a convenient cupboard, was a sore trial for the patience and tempers of the „X” Division!

Mr. Richard Bruce, who was responsible to the owners of No. 14 for the rent, rates, and taxes, and who paid the same when he had the money and owed it when he hadn't, was not at all fastidious, and as he sat in the first floor front of No. 14, in front of a fire that was trying hard to die a natural death, he had not the look of a person who would go into ecstasies over the drape of a mantle or the symmetry of a Grecian vase. He was by no means a handsome man, and yet there was a strength about the square-cut chin and broad forehead that made him anything but repulsive, and his clean-shaven face and shaggy eyebrows gave him an air of distinction

Dick Bruce was, in his way, a celebrity. His photograph occupied a prominent position in the Rogues' Gallery, he was known to the police as a man to be knocked on the head first and argued with afterwards, and the head of the C.I.D. himself had condescended to study him, and had written a long analysis of the man's character, for the benefit of a scientific man who was preparing a book on »Crime and Criminals«.

Dick paid very little attention to the state of the fire: the poverty of his surroundings did not seem to affect him much. A man who had spent a third of his life in prison could afford to overlook such trifles.

His head was sunk on his breast, and a worried, hunted look was on his face.

To be hunted or „wanted” was quite an ordinary state of affairs, but to be worried was for a man of his temperament an unusual thing. The turning of the door-handle made him start and look round. The newcomer was a little girl scarcely eight years old, yet wearing on her small, sharp face that look so common to children, old in worldly wisdom; the average observer would have called her unusually plain, but to Dick’s eye she was all that was clever and beautiful. For a child of eight to be so far advanced as to read and write was to him nothing short of marvellous, and Aggie’s accomplishments were continually being „trotted out” for the benefit of admiring friends. The child closed the door after her, and then, seeing that the ricketty box that served for a table still bore the remains of the evening meal, she asked, „Ave you ‘ad your tea, daddy?”

Dick, who had resumed his former attitude of abstraction, made no reply, and the question was repeated. He raised his head and, answering in the affirmative, resumed his study of the fire. After hanging her tattered cloak up, the girl drew a little stool up to her father’s feet, and getting as close as possible to the feeble fire, began warming her hands. Rousing himself with an effort he asked, „’Ow did you get on at school to-day?”

„Pretty well,” was the reply. „Miss Boyd says I shall soon be put in a ’igher standard.”

„That’s right,” said Dick in a tone of approval. „That’s right, matey, make ’ay while the sun shines, I only wish I’d a ’ad your chance when I was a boy, but I ’ad to pick up my learning in the streets.”

„I was thinkin’, daddy,” said the girl thoughtfully, „’Ow ard it must be not to be able to read and write, ’specially when you ’ave to go away in the train to work—like you did last week—an’ p’r’aps don’t know the stations.”

Dick nodded acquiescence. It was very awkward when he went away to „work” not to be able to tell whether he was breaking into the house of a parson or a banker, when a mere glance at the door-plate would have put him in possession of the necessary information had he been able to read it.

Talking of work brought a new train of thought into the child’s mind, and she added, „But you wasn’t away very long last time, was you, daddy, wasn’t there any bells to hang?”

(Dick was usually described on the charge-sheet as a plumber, although his tools were used for a less legitimate purpose than for mending broken pipes).

„No,” was his somewhat gruff reply.

„I always think of you,” she went on, „when you are away an’ I pray, same as they do at school, for my daddy who is away workin’ for me.”

Dick’s lips tightened as she spoke, and in the ash-strangled fire he could all but see the scene of his recent labours. The old oak-pannelled hall, with the moonbeams tinted in their passage through the stained glass, bathing in their mellow light the stately mail-clad figures that formed a lifeless guard; he lived again the awful moment when he had heard that faint footfall behind him and had turned with uplifted „jimmy” to silence the intruder. Again he seemed to see, as he had seen, not once, but a thousand times since, the silent motionless figure lying on the polished floor, the moonlight playing round the silver hair of

the old servant who had been faithful unto death. He had told himself again and again that he had to do it. To have been caught red-handed meant a „lifer” for him, and better the gallows than an eternal prison. For life! He shuddered, then meeting the girl’s wondering eyes, and thinking some explanation was due to her—for after her reference to his work he had subsided into a morose reverie, he said not unkindly, „You mustn’t talk about my work; you see, matey, I ain’t a union man—an’—an’—the plumbers are on strike an’ I ain’t supposed to work, they might call me a blackleg, and you wouldn’t like your father to be called that, would you, matey?”

„Not tell anyone,” faltered Aggie, disregarding the question. „Not tell anyone about your work! Oh daddy, I didn’t know you wanted it kept quiet, an’—an’—”

„An’ what?” he asked roughly. „You ’avn’t been blabbing about what I’ve been doin’, ’ave yer?” Then seeing the tears that had risen to her eyes, he added in a kindlier tone, „There, there, matey, I didn’t mean to frighten yer, but who was it yer told?”

„A gentleman,” was the tearful answer.

„A gentleman!” repeated Dick, his face darkening again.

„Yes,” she went on, trying hard to stop a sob. „’E said ’e wanted a plumber to do a bit o’ work, an’ ’e asked me if you did much, an’ whether you’d care to go into the country to do some work; an’ I said you wouldn’t mind goin’ ’cos only last week you went down to do a job at Hazley——”

Dick started up with an oath, his face an ashen grey, his eyes blazing with the terror of death. „Who told, you?” he said hoarsely. „Who said I was at Hazley?”

„I found the railway ticket on the floor,” cried the child, beginning to whimper again.

Dick remembered seeking to evade observation at the station. He had dropped on to the metals as the train slowed up before reaching the terminus.

There was a silence outside, a drunken loafer homeward-bound was warbling a doleful ditty; and the cries of a couple of beldames engaged in a slanging match rose shrilly above the shouts of an encouraging crowd.

Composing himself with a mighty effort, Dick asked quietly, „What sort of a gentleman was ’e?”

The little one was now thoroughly frightened; child though she was she knew that this cross-examination was for no idle purpose, and between her sobs she answered, „He was a nice gentleman with a dark moustache and a red mark on ’is cheek.”

Dick nodded, he knew the man, it was Fowler of Scotland Yard, the cutest „tec” in the force, they were old acquaintances. The red mark referred to was Dick’s handiwork, for which that worthy had retired for five years. Yes, the evil had been done! Fowler, he knew would strain every nerve to bring him to grief. The man pondered for a little while and then asked, „How long ago was it?”

„Just before I came in,” was the reply. „He stopped me at the corner of the Mansions and asked me if I was Mr. Bruce’s little girl.”

„The sneakin’ cur,” Dick muttered. „To make the kid give me away,” and then leaning forward, and with a touch of tenderness that seemed foreign to him, he drew the child gently towards him, and laying her head upon his shoulder, he commenced to gently stroke her hair. „You ain’t got no mother,” he said huskily, „an’ I—well I ain’t been as good as I might a’ been—but there’s pals o’

mine who are on the straight who'll look arter you for Dick Bruce's sake—'cos—I—I'm goin' away."

„Goin' away!" cried the child. „Oh no daddy, not goin' to leave me?"

„Yes, matey, yes," and a lump stood in his throat; „I've remembered a job that's to be done—there, there! don't cry little 'un. 'Ere," putting his hand in his pocket, „Take this quid to Mrs. Brown in Commercial Road an' say ‚For old time's sake Dick Bruce sent me.‘ I saved her kid's life once, an' now she can save mine."

There was a sound of heavy footsteps on the stairs and a vigorous protestation on the part of somebody below, and putting the child gently from him, Dick said, „'Ere comes the gentlemen as I'm goin' away with—to work for; now stay 'ere while I go out an' see 'em.' He paused at the door and hesitated, for the words seemed to stick in his throat, „Be a good girl," he said with a quaver in his voice, „an' may Gawd bless yer an' keep yer."

Through the half-opened door she heard her father conversing in a low tone with the men outside. Somebody said something that sounded like „Wilful murder." There was a snap of steel, and Dick Bruce and his „friends" went down the stairs together. The girl was sobbing bitterly, but obedient to her father's command she remained on the stool before the dead fire, her head resting on her arms, still clutching in her hand the gold for which Dick Bruce had sold his soul.

