

Old Joe

By Thomas Burke

Mr. Peter Punditt nipped out of his little newsagent's and tobacconist's shop in West India Dock Road, carrying in his hand a large, damp sheet, smelling strongly of the press. This he carefully pasted over a demurely complacent contents bill of *The Telegraph*, and then stepped back to look at it in the grey incertitude of the Limehouse twilight. It read:

Punditt's One-Horse Snip
One Penny Daily
Is Away from Everything
Who Gave
PAINTED LADY
Gold Cup?

It was to be noted that Mr. Punditt, from motives of modesty or wariness, refrained from throwing any light on his part in this dubious transaction.

With cocked head and silently whistling lips he contemplated his work, recognising, with some satisfaction, how much more arresting was his bill than that of *Gale's Monday Night Special*, by whose side it stood. He was just about to nip in again, when he heard a weak, erratic step behind him, and, turning, beheld a youth of about twenty, with sallow, pimply face, slack-mouthed and furtive. An unlit Woodbine dropped from his lips.

Little Peter Punditt, the smartest bookie in Limehouse, Poplar and Blackwall, turned swiftly about. "Well?"

"Er—look 'ere, Punditt, o' man, I'm—I'm 'fraid I sha'n't be able to manage anything. Y'see—"

"Oh!" Punditt regarded the weed in front of him with an airy tolerance. "Oh! Yeh can't manage anything, can't yeh? Ye're *afraid*, are yeh? . . . Look 'ere, that kind o' talk is twos into one wiv me. See?"

"Twos into—"

"Yerss. It won't go. It's Punditt what's talking to yeh. Yeh know Punditt's way wiv bilkers, doncher? Before I've finished wiv a bilker he's wishing he'd collected stamps instead."

"Yes, but . . . I mean . . . I . . . It was your tips what I followed. You let me down every time. Every time. You said this last was a cert., and I put me shirt on it, and—"

"An' if I did? Who th'ell arst yeh to back 'orses at all? Eh? Did I arst yeh to buy Punditt's One-Horse Snip? Eh? Yeh lose yer money, then yeh come whinin' rahnd 'ere wiv a face abaht as cheerful as cold boiled potatoes on a foggy night. Did I arst ye to put yer money on—eh?" His tone changed. "Look 'ere—don't get gay wiv me, me boy. Cos gettin' gay wiv me's about as 'ealthy as monkeying wiv a buzzsaw. See? You just got to settle up. I gave y'an extra fortnight, and it's up to-day. Lessee . . . Monday, ain't it? Tell yeh what I'll do— an' I don't go as far wiv most people—I'll give yeh two days more. If yeh don't brass up by Wednesday night—then I'll see that yeh get it where the bottle got the cork. That plain enough for yeh?"

He wagged a minatory finger wearing a thick band of mourning in the nail. "Y'know what I can do to you, doncher, sonny? A dozen words out of my mouth, and . . . Wow-wow. You be good, and don't make me do it."

The boy spluttered, with vociferant hands. "No but, Punditt, o' man, how can I? How can I get it? There ain't no way. I mean—"

"Don't matter a shake of a nannygoat's tail to me where yeh git it or 'ow yeh get it. Yeh got to get it by Wednesday—that's all. Else. . ." He threw his arms to the street, lifted both hands, thumbs protruding upwards. With dramatic pantomime he reversed his hands, thumbs pointing fatefully downwards. "Fumbs up, Punditt. Fumbs down, Perce Sleep. Three quid by Wednesday, mind. Get a sudden rush of brains to the 'ead and perduce it; otherwise . . ." he lingered on the word, "otherwise—I shall behave in a very varicose vein, I can tell yeh."

"No, but, Punditt, I—"

"Suffish. Make a noise like a hoop and roll away!"

From his pallid face the boy expressed the bitter essence of contempt which the weak have for all that is pitiless and strong. His mouth made rude noises. His fingers interpreted them. He went away grieved, for he had no possessions. He slouched away, his feet seeming not in complete accord with his knees. A lurid sunset turned a last sickly smile upon him before it died.

It was Peter Punditt who had spoken, and he knew it was the last word. He knew what Peter could do for him. He knew what Peter knew about a certain affair in Amoy Place. His floury face, flecked with pimples, slacked some degrees further, and he went miserably down the road. He hated the look of it. He had quarrels with God and man and all creeping things, and his legs loathed the pavement. He was smitten and afflicted. He thought he would like to creep away and die. He thought comfortably upon death, and was rather sorry he had not told Peter that he would throw himself in the river that night. Yes; he could die and leave a note that would put the fair khybosh on old Peter Punditt. Mentally, he wrote the note, showing up old Punditt.

But three quid. . . . Was there as much money anywhere in the world? If only he'd been in regular work now—when he kept the petty cash at the warehouse.

Oh, blast it. It didn't bear thinking about. Blast everybody. He hated the world. He hated the sky. He hated his home and all that was in it. No good going home. No good mooning about the streets. No good in anything, so far as one could see. He stopped near the bridge of the Isle of Dogs and glowered upon the river and upon smokestack, rigging and, sail.

The evening was at once heartsome and subdued. On the deck of a Nippon the dear, drunken devils of yellow seamen were making soft music on Chinese guitars. A steady frost had settled and, with complete darkness, the usually lowering streets of, the Asiatic quarter seemed strangely wide and frank. A fat-faced moon was slowly rising. The waters were swift and limpid, sprinkled with timid stars, and seemed to promise a very blessed time to the weary. On the corner by the dock gates the Blue Lantern shone sharp, like a cut gem. He lounged over the side of the bridge, and, so still was the night, he could almost hear a goods train shunt. It was still enough to bring from a narrow street, flanked by two tremendous walls, a curious sound of *sup-sup, sup-sup*.

Perce Sleep heard it. "Bloody Chinks!" he growled. The next moment the *sup-sup* came from behind him, and a hand fell on his shoulder. A yellow face peered at him. It was old, flabby, steamy.

"Ullo, li'l Perce!" The words came so musically that one would have said they were sung.

"Ullo, Chopstick. Gointer buy us a beer?"

"Les. Co'long Shaik Yip. Have plerty beer."

“Aw right. Look ’ere, Chinky, I’m in a mess. You’re all right for the ready, everyone says. Got a pot o’ the dibs, I reckon. Now look ’ere would you . . . I mean . . . will yeh be a sport, and—”

“Ao.” Shaik Yip smiled a meaningless Oriental smile. “Perce want money. Ao. Perce and Shaik Yip talk business. Co’long. Co’long.”

And they entered the Blue Lantern and ordered two Gipsy’s Warnings and some of the Nearer-my-God-to-Thee sandwiches.

The Sleep *ménage* was not such as one would turn to happily, when weary, for repose. Perce lived with his stepfather, a paralytic, and the old man’s daughter, a “softie.” The old man, a mass of helpless flesh, lived in a chair by the fireside. He had been a stevedore in his time, and his great shaggy head, his rolling shoulders, and the long, thick arms, all now as white and motionless as death, told a tale of superb strength in youth. There he sat now, and there he was fed and tended and washed. The only life that had been left him was his voice, and of this there only remained a thin piping, so that he was known locally as Old Joe, after that Fleet Street notability who, every morning at ten-thirty in the Fourth Edition, gives the world his famous treble.

His daughter, a slip of a girl, was the mother of the house. Her face had that arresting beauty sometimes seen in the faces of the vacant-minded. There was nothing of the idiot about her, save in her talk and her simple character. She managed the house, and she managed Old Joe, and she strove hard to manage the waster, Perce.

“Wis’ful,” someone had said. “Wis’ful—that’s ’ow she looks. Like as if she was wanting to catch ’old of something that ain’t there.”

As for Perce, he only ate and drank and slept at the house, and had little to do with Fanny, save to borrow coppers from her.

“A wicked boy,” piped Old Joe. “That’s what ’e is. Never tries to get work. Got one job, and got sacked from that, and ain’t done a stroke since. ’Anging about pubs and mixin’ wiv wasters. Grr! ’E’ll end in gaol, mark what I say. Blast ’im. Arr. . . . Fanny’s the good girl. Where’d we all be if it wasn’t for Fanny? Looks after us and keeps us all going. Does anything to keep the ’ome together, doncher, me gel? Goes out charing, or does needlework. Clever wiv ’er needle, she is. But that blasted Perce. Grr! I’d spit on ’im. I’d turn ’im out the ’ouse if I could. But ’e won’t go. Cos ’e knows I’m ’elpless and can’t do nothink. Not if ’e’s struck me I couldn’t do nothink. An’ ’e’s nearly done it, once’r twice. The blasted drunken little waster. Gawd—if I’d a-got my strength back—I’d learn ’im. You dunno—nobody dunno—what I’ve ’ad to put up wiv from ’im—all cos I can’t move—an’ ’e knows it. Things ’e’s said to me. Things ’e’s done. Gawd. Dunno what I’ve a-done that I should ’ave to put up . . .

Whereupon he would collapse and weep cold tears down his huge white face, and Fanny would run in from her daily work, or drop her sewing, and paw him and talk baby-talk to him.

He was right about Perce, though. Perce was the boy for fancy waistcoats and the private bar. Perce was the boy for the athletic saloon—as an onlooker. Perce was the boy for hanging on the fringe of those who lead the impetuous life. But Perce was never the boy for a fight or an adventure or a woman, or for any indulgence that called for quality. Perce was the complete rotter.

Perce was the boy to glower upon the helpless giant and tell him off. “Oh, shut up,” he’d snarl. “You ought to be in a work’ouse, you did. Or else in a play. Cut yer blasted yap, cancher, yer rotten old nuisance!”

And the old man would return, shrilly and tearfully: "I'm sorry, Perce, me boy. But I'm an old man y'know, and queer. And I sits 'ere all day and all night, and I can't 'elp *feeling* things. I know ye're a good boy, really, though yeh do speak sharp sometimes. . . . Arr if only Gawd'd give me back my strength, I could work for all of us. Me, strongest man in London Docks, and now a-sitting 'ere day and night, day and night, day and night."

On the Monday night he did not come home, and Old Joe was wondering where he might be, and hoping to Christ he'd tumbled in the river; and Fanny, too, on Tuesday night, was wondering and laying the supper, and hoping nothing had happened, and assuring Old Joe that Perce was a nice, good boy.

At eight o'clock a step sounded in the cadaverous darkness of Blue-gate Lane, and Perce came in. His key rattled in the door, and words passed between him and another. He was heard to wipe his boots—a thing he had never been known to do. He seemed to be walking uncertainly, with many feet.

Then the kitchen door was snatched open by Fanny, the soft, and Perce was heard by her and Old Joe to murmur: "Tha'll be all right."

But only Perce entered the kitchen.

He sank at once into a chair, as though wearied almost to exhaustion. He stretched his legs so that fatigue might express itself in every line of his figure. He lit a Woodbine. Supper was on the table—some bread and pickles and cheese, knives, and a jug of beer. He grabbed the jug to his mouth and drank noisily from it, and angrily, as though he were at last getting his rights from the world.

"Well, old 'un," he tossed at the old man, perfunctorily, by way of salutation. He strove to put warmth and jocularity in the tone, but his face and lips remained stiff and cold. He smacked his hands together. "Ah, well," he observed to the room generally. He looked critically at his hands. "Finger nails want cutting," he remarked inconsequently. Old Joe took no notice of his greeting; did not look at him; seemed to be intent on something known only to himself.

"'Ere, Fanny-baby," called Perce, "want you a minute.

"What you want Fanny for, Perce-boy?"

"Go up t'your bedroom, will yeh, and get those scissors.

"Here's pair scissors here."

"Yes, but . . . I want th'other pair. The small ones in your room.

"Oo's that in th'ouse?" snapped Old Joe, with pistol-shot explosion. "Someone's in th'ouse. I can feel it!"

"Can't Percy-boy go'mself?" prattled Fanny.

"No—too tired. You go—there's a goo' girl. Then I'll buy you some chocolate biscuits." He looked covertly to right and left.

"Awright. Fanny go. Cho-co-late biscuits!" she sang, to no tune.

"Fanny!" Old Joe bit off the words. "You stop 'ere!"

Perce slewed round. "Whaffor, old 'un? Why can't she go?"

"'Cos I don't want 'er to. Fanny—stop. Stop 'ere!"

"Whaffor, daddie dear? Why daddie not want Fanny to go?"

"Cos I . . . I . . . want yeh. There's something . . . something going on. I . . . don't understand. I can feel it. All round, like. Perce, me boy, what you looking like that for? Eh? Whassup? You got some game on, Perce. Oo's that in th'ouse?"

Perce affected not to hear. "Go on, Fan, there's goo' girl. Up yeh go. Old man's got the fair fantods to-night."

“*Fanny!*” It was a shrill scream, strained with effort. “Don’t you go. It’s yer old dad tells yeh. For the love of God Almighty, don’t go. There’s something . . . I know. I can feel it. I can tell it by that beast’s face. What’s ’e want cutting ’is nails this time o’ night?”

Fanny ran to him, crooning. “Daddie mustn’t call Perce a beast. Percy good brother to Fanny. Going to buy Fanny chocolate biscuits.”

“Yerss,” said Perce, “don’t call me names like that else I’ll make a rough ’ouse, I tell yeh. If yeh wasn’t a blasted cripple I’d clump yeh one fer that. See?”

The great Windsor chair in which the old man was imprisoned shook with his efforts to raise his piping treble. “Fanny—Fanny—Stop! I tell yeh, stop! For the love of the Lord Jesus Christ, stay ’ere.”

“No. Fanny go get scissors. You not good, daddie. You call brother beast.” And, with a beautiful smile through which nothing could be even divined of the empty mind it clothed, she slipped through the door and disappeared up the stairs, laughing and singing, “Cho-co-late biscuits!”

The old man moaned. His head dropped and wagged. His mouth spat toads in the shape of curses at Perce. Perce moved away. His face was slate-grey. He was limp, and looked as self-controlled as a rabbit about to be slaughtered. He peered into the passage, then passed out, and the old man heard his step ascending the stair. He caught the lazy hum of voices busy in talk. He heard two words, in syrupy accents, which he understood: *Pao-pei!* He heard Fanny’s baby accents. “Can’t find scissors! Someone’s taken scissors. Can’t find candle, neether. Someone’s taken matches, too.”

He heard Perce’s voice. “Wait half-a-jiff, Fan. Can’t yeh find the matches? ’Ere . . . Fan . . . ’er. Listen. Something nice for yeh, if yeh’ll be a good girl. ’Ere . . . lots of choc’late biscuits. Look . . . no; can’t ’ave them yet. In a minute or two. ’Ere, don’t be silly. No . . . Just . . . Go on. . . No, it isn’t. . .”

A door clicked, and swiftly Perce descended the stairs, and entered the kitchen. He was breathing rapidly.

“What you go up for?” whined Old Joe. “Eh? Oh, I know there’s something . . . something going to ’appen. I can feel it.”

Perce swaggered. “You blasted invalids are alwis feeling and seeing things that ain’t there. You’ll see blue monkeys next.”

Old Joe rocked himself. From above there came a second click; moving feet. There was a moment’s silence, then, shattering it, a soft cry, a long-drawn whoosh and a muffled scream. The scream was but a single note, and thereafter came only nondescript low noises.

The old man mouthed and gibbered. He heaved himself idiotically in his chair. “Oh, my Gawd. If I’d a-got my strength. Ow. What are they doing to ’er? What you up to, yeh bleeding swine! Ow. If Gawd don’t strike you dead for this. Ow . . . hark at ’er . . . my lamb . . . my . . . O Lord Jesus Christ, save ’er!

“Oh, Perce, dear . . . go up and stop ’em. Stop their devils’ work. Fanny! Fanny! What they doing to yeh?” The great white cheeks sagged in many creases as he fought for movement. The heavy arms on each side of the chair dangled like puppets. “Oh, Gawd, if I could find out what they was doing. Oh, if I’d a-got my strength!”

“Oh, shut yeh blasted mag, for Christ’s sake!” Perce dropped into a chair and sat scared and pensive. Three long gasps came down the stairway—rhythmic, regular, punctuated by a dull noise.

“Perce! Oh, if I’d a-got my strength . . . oh, I’d squeeze yer throat. Owh. I could a-killed you wiv one ’and. Kill ’im, Gawd! Kill ’im! Strike the bleeder dead! Or give me back me arms. O-o-wh!”

And now he blubbered and whined and entreated. Big tears ran down the doughy face. He writhed. “Oh, Perce—be a good boy and stop ’em before it’s too late. I can’t bear it. It’ll drive me mad. I can’t listen to it. . . . Oh, stop yer devils’ work and bring ’er down. My bonny li’l gel. . . . Owh. I’d learn ’em to put their slimy ’ands on ’er. If I’d a-got my strength, I’d—”

“Well, you ’aven’t. So shut yeh silly face.” Perce got up and lit another Woodbine. He looked down uneasily at Old Joe, yet confident of security in the utter helplessness of the living corpse. “Yeh wasting yeh breath, that’s what yeh doing. There’s nothing to make a fuss about. Nothing. She ain’t being murdered. And they ain’t doing the other thing, what you think. It’s on’y a bit o’ fun. Yeh needn’t worry. I take me oath she ain’t being . . . you know, or anything. She’ll ’ave forgotten all about it five minutes after. On’y a bit o’ sport, that’s all. I got *some* principles, though you think I ain’t, y’old perisher. All yer swearing don’t do no good, and yer fists can’t. And yer making a blasted fuss about nothing at all. Nothing at all. So—”

He broke off. For a moment he wondered why. He had stopped instinctively because something else had stopped: the little cries and gasps.

A door clicked. A step sounded. Someone came downstairs. The old man rolled from side to side, slobbering and dribbling. He had the appearance of one very drunk. Round the half-shut door slid a large, stooping Chinky, flashily dressed in East End ready-mades. Under the yellow skin was a slow flush. His eyes sparkled. His thin, black hair was disordered.

He moved towards Perce. Three coins jingled from his hand to the stretched hand of Perce. Old Joe wobbled. He saw them; they were gold. He jerked his head forward and let out—so suddenly that both men jumped—a high-pitched shout, louder and stronger than any he had before been able to produce.

“Yeh damn devils! Wotter yeh done to ’er? Oh, Gawd, if I’d a-got—”

The Chink turned about and shuffled amiably to the door. Over his shoulder he looked at Perce and made a leering remark, accompanied by a licking of the lips. They nodded heads together.

Curious noises came from the chair at the fire; noises like the low sucking of a wolf. The old man’s jaw had fallen fully open and disclosed yellow teeth. His head rolled no longer; it moved in jerks, which grew shorter and shorter.

“My—little—gel . . .” snarled the lips. “O Lord Jesus Christ, ’elp a man!”

“Blasted o’ fool,” said Perce explanatorily. “Alwis’ ’aving chats wiv Gawd about something.” He took another Woodbine, lit it, and strove to appear casual. His lips were white and his grubby hand shook.

A violent tremor spread along the flabby body of Old Joe. His head was motionless and was turned towards the table. Something seemed to be calling him in that direction; and, as they nodded and whispered, suddenly the Chink, looking across Perce’s shoulder, gave a sharp cry and his immobile face was lit with horror.

“Dekko!”

Perce obeyed sharply. And he saw the giant corpse standing on its feet, towering above him, one huge arm stretched to his own white gills, the other, in the joy of returned strength, clutching the long, lean knife from the supper-table.