

# The Soul of a Policeman

By Richard Middleton

## I

Outside, above the uneasy din of the traffic, the sky was glorious with the far peace of a fine summer evening. Through the upper pane of the station window Police-constable Bennett, who felt that his senses at the moment were abnormally keen, recognised with a sinking heart such reds and yellows as bedecked the best patchwork quilt at home. By contrast the lights of the superintendent's office were subdued, so that within the walls of the police-station sounds seemed of greater importance. Somewhere a drunkard, deprived of his boots, was drumming his criticism of authority on the walls of his cell. From the next room, where the men off duty were amusing themselves, there came a steady clicking of billiard-balls and dominoes, broken now and again by gruff bursts of laughter. And at his very elbow the superintendent was speaking in that suave voice that reminded Bennett of grey velvet.

"You see, Bennett, how matters stand. I have nothing at all against your conduct. You are steady and punctual, and I have no doubt that you are trying to do your duty. But it's very unfortunate that as far as results go you have nothing to show for your efforts. During the last three weeks you have not brought in a charge of any description, and during the same period I find that your colleagues on the beat have been exceptionally busy. I repeat that I do not accuse you of neglecting your duty, but these things tell with the magistrates and convey a general suggestion of slackness."

Bennett looked down at his brightly polished boots. His fingers were sandy and there was soft felt beneath his feet.

"I have been afraid of this for some time, sir," he said, "very much afraid."

The superintendent looked at him questioningly.

"You have nothing to say?" he said.

"I have always tried to do my duty, sir."

"I know, I know. But you must see that a certain number of charges, if not of convictions, is the mark of a smart officer."

"Surely you would not have me arrest innocent persons?"

"That is a most improper observation," said the superintendent severely. "I will say no more to you now. But I hope you will take what I have said as a warning. You must bustle along, Bennett, bustle along."

Outside in the street, Police-constable Bennett was free to reflect on his unpleasant interview. The superintendent was ambitious and therefore pompous; he, himself, was unambitious and therefore modest. Left to himself he might have been content to triumph in the reflection that he had failed to say a number of foolish things, but the welfare of his wife and children bound him, tiresomely enough for a dreamer, tightly to the practical. It was clear that if he did not forthwith produce signs of his efficiency as a promoter of the peace that welfare would be imperilled. Yet he did not condemn the chance that had made him a policeman or even the mischance that brought no guilty persons to his hands. Rather he looked with a gentle curiosity into the faces of the people who passed him, and wondered why he could not detect traces of the generally assumed wickedness of the neighbourhood. These unkempt men and women were thieves and

even murderers, it appeared; but to him they shone as happy youths and maidens, joyous victims of love's tyranny.

As he drew near the street in which he lived this sense of universal love quickened in his blood and stirred him strangely. It did not escape his eyes that to the general his uniform was an unfriendly thing. Men and women paused in their animated chattering till he had passed, and even the children faltered in their games to watch him with doubtful eyes. And yet his heart was warm for them; he knew that he wished them well.

Nevertheless, when he saw his house shining in a row of similar houses, he realised that their attitude was wiser than his. If he was to be a success as a breadwinner he must wage a sterner war against these happy, lovable people. It was easy, he had been long enough in the force to know how easy, to get cases. An intolerant manner, a little provocative harshness, and the thing was done. Yet with all his heart he admired the poor for their resentful independence of spirit. To him this had always been the supreme quality of the English character; how could he make use of it to fill English gaols?

He opened the door of his house, with a sigh on his lips. There came forth the merry shouting of his children.

## II

Above the telephone wires the stars dipped at anchor in the cloudless sky. Down below, in one of the dark, empty streets, Police-constable Bennett turned the handles of doors and tested the fastenings of windows, with a complete scepticism as to the value of his labours. Gradually, he was coming to see that he was not one of the few who are born to rule—to control—their simple neighbours, ambitious only for breath. Where, if he had possessed this mission, he would have been eager to punish, he now felt no more than a sympathy that charged him with some responsibility for the sins of others. He shared the uneasy conviction of the multitude that human justice, as interpreted by the inspired minority, is more than a little unjust. The very unpopularity with which his uniform endowed him seemed to him to express a severe criticism of the system of which he was an unwilling supporter. He wished these people to regard him as a kind of official friend, to advise and settle differences; yet, shrewder than he, they considered him as an enemy, who lived on their mistakes and the collapse of their social relationships.

There remained his duty to his wife and children, and this rendered the problem infinitely perplexing.

Why should he punish others because of his love for his children; or, again, why should his children suffer for his scruples? Yet it was clear that, unless fortune permitted him to accomplish some notable yet honourable arrest, he would either have to cheat and tyrannise with his colleagues or leave the force. And what employment is available for a discharged policeman?

As he went systematically from house to house the consideration of these things marred the normal progress of his dreams. Conscious as he was of the stars and the great widths of heaven that made the world so small, he nevertheless felt that his love for his family and the wider love that determined his honour were somehow intimately connected with this greatness of the universe rather than with the world of little streets and little motives, and so were not lightly to be put aside. Yet, how can one measure one love against another when all are true?

When the door of Gurneys', the moneylenders, opened to his touch, and drew him abruptly from his speculations, his first emotion was a quick irritation that chance should interfere with his thoughts. But when his lantern showed him that the lock had been tampered with, his

annoyance changed to a thrill of hopeful excitement. What if this were the way out? What if fate had granted him compromise, the opportunity of pitting his official virtue against official crime, those shadowy forces in the existence of which he did not believe, but which lay on his life like clouds?

He was not a physical coward, and it seemed quite simple to him to creep quietly through the open door into the silent office without waiting for possible reinforcements. He knew that the safe, which would be the natural goal of the presumed burglars, was in Mr. Gurney's private office beyond, and while he stood listening intently he seemed to hear dim sounds coming from the direction of that room. For a moment he paused, frowning slightly as a man does when he is trying to catalogue an impression. When he achieved perception, it came oddly mingled with recollections of the little tragedies of his children at home. For some one was crying like a child in the little room where Mr. Gurney browbeat recalcitrant borrowers. Dangerous burglars do not weep, and Bennett hesitated no longer, but stepped past the open flaps of the counter, and threw open the door of the inner office.

The electric light had been switched on, and at the table there sat a slight young man with his face buried in his hands, crying bitterly. Behind him the safe stood open and empty, and the grate was filled with smouldering embers of burnt paper. Bennett went up to the young man and placed his hand on his shoulder. But the young man wept on and did not move.

Try as he might Bennett could not help relaxing the grip of outraged law, and patting the young man's shoulder soothingly as it rose and fell. He had no fit weapons of roughness and oppression with which to oppose this child-like grief; he could only fight tears with tears.

"Come," he said gently, "you must pull yourself together."

At the sound of his voice the young man gave a great sob and then was silent, shivering a little.

"That's better," said Bennett encouragingly, "much better."

"I have burnt everything," the young man said suddenly, "and now the place is empty. I was nearly sick just now."

Bennett looked at him sympathetically, as one dreamer may look at another, who is sad with action dreamed too often for scatheless accomplishment. "I'm afraid you'll get into serious trouble," he said.

"I know," replied the young man, "but that blackguard Gurney—" His voice rose to a shrill scream and choked him for a moment. Then he went on quietly, "But it's all over now. Finished! Done with!"

"I suppose you owed him money?"

The young man nodded. "He lives on fools like me. But he threatened to tell my father, and now I've just about ruined him. Pah! Swine!"

"This won't be much better for your father," said Bennett gravely.

"No, it's worse; but perhaps it will help some of the others. He kept on threatening and I couldn't wait any longer. Can't you see?"

Over the young man's shoulder the stars beamed and nodded to Bennett through the blindless window.

"I see," he said; "I see."

"So now you can take me."

Bennett looked doubtfully at the outstretched wrists. "You are only a fool," he said, "a dreaming fool like me, and they will give you years for this. I don't see why they should give a man years for being a fool."

The young man looked up, taken with a sudden hope. "You will let me go?" he said, in astonishment. "I know I was an ass just now. I suppose I was a bit shaken. But you will let me go?"

"I wish to God I had never seen you!" said Bennett simply. "You have your father, and I have a wife and three little children. Who shall judge between us?"

"My father is an old man."

"And my children are little. You had better go before I make up my mind."

Without another word the young man crept out of the room, and Bennett followed him slowly into the street. This gallant criminal, whose capture would have been honourable, had dwindled to a hysterical foolish boy; and aided by his own strange impulse this boy had ruined him. The burglary had taken place on his beat; there would be an inquiry; it did not need that to secure his expulsion from the force. Once in the street he looked up hopefully to the heavens; but now the stars seemed unspeakably remote, though as he passed along his beat his wife and his three little children were walking by his side.

### III

Bennett had developed mentally without realising the logical result of his development until it smote him with calamity. Of his betrayal of trust as a guardian of property he thought nothing; of the possibility of poverty for his family he thought a great deal—all the more that his dreamer's mind was little accustomed to gripping the practical. It was strange, he thought, that his final declaration of war against his position should have been a little lacking in dignity. He had not taken the decisive step through any deep compassion of utter poverty bravely borne. His had been no more than trivial pity of a young man's folly; and this was a frail thing on which to make so great a sacrifice. Yet he regretted nothing. His task of moral guardian of men and women had become impossible to him, and sooner or later he must have given it up. And there was also his family. "I must come to some decision," he said to himself firmly.

And then the great scream fell upon his ears and echoed through his brain for ever and ever. It came from the house before which he was standing, and he expected the whole street to wake aghast with the horror of it. But there followed a silence that seemed to emphasise the ugliness of the sound. Far away an engine screamed as if in mocking imitation; and that was all. Bennett had counted up to a hundred and seventy before the door of the house opened, and a man came out on to the steps.

"Oh, constable," he said coolly, "come inside, will you? I have something to show you."

Bennett mounted the steps doubtfully "There was a scream," he said.

The man looked at him quickly. "So you heard it," he said. "It was not pretty."

"No, it was not," replied Bennett.

The man led him down the dim passage into the back sitting-room. The body of a man lay on the sofa; it was curled like a dry leaf.

"That is my brother," said the man, with a little emphatic nod; "I have killed him. He was my enemy."

Bennett stared dully at the body, without believing it to be really there.

"Dead!" he said mechanically.

"And anything I say will be used against me in evidence! As if you could compress my hatred into one little lying notebook."

“I don’t care a damn about your hatred,” said Bennett, with heat. “An hour ago, perhaps, I might have arrested you; now I only find you uninteresting.”

The man gave a long, low whistle of surprise.

“A philosopher in uniform,” he said, “God! sir, you have my sympathy.”

“And you have my pity. You have stolen your ideas from cheap melodrama, and you make tragedy ridiculous. Were I a policeman, I would lock you up with pleasure. Were I a man, I should thrash you joyfully. As it is I can only share your infamy. I too, I suppose, am a murderer.”

“You are in a low, nervous state,” said the man; “and you are doing me some injustice. It is true that I am a poor murderer; but it appears to me that you are a worse policeman.”

“I shall wear the uniform no more from to-night.”

“I think you are wise, and I shall mar my philosophy with no more murders. If, indeed, I have killed him; for I assure you that beyond administering the poison to his wretched body I have done nothing. Perhaps he is not dead. Can you hear his heart beating?”

“I can hear the spoons of my children beating on their empty platters!”

“Is it like that with you? Poor devil! Oh, poor, poor devil! Philosophers should have no wives, no children, no homes, and no hearts.”

Bennett turned from the man with unspeakable loathing.

“I hate you and such as you!” he cried weakly. “You justify the existence of the police. You make me despise myself because I realise that your crimes are no less mine than yours. I do not ask you to defend the deadness of that thing lying there. I shall stir no finger to have you hanged, for the thought of suicide repels me, and I cannot separate your blood and mine. We are common children of a noble mother, and for our mother’s sake I say farewell.”

And without waiting for the man’s answer he passed from the house to the street.

#### IV

Haggard and with rebellious limbs, Police-constable Bennett staggered into the superintendent’s office in the early morning.

“I have paid careful attention to your advice,” he said to the superintendent, “and I have passed across the city in search of crime. In its place I have found but folly—such folly as you have, such folly as I have myself—the common heritage of our blood. It seems that in some way I have bound myself to bring criminals to justice. I have passed across the city, and I have found no man worse than myself. Do what you will with me.”

The superintendent cleared his throat. “There have been too many complaints concerning the conduct of the police,” he said; “it is time that an example was made. You will be charged with being drunk and disorderly while on duty.”

“I have a wife and three little children,” said Bennett softly—“and three pretty little children.” And he covered his tired face with his hands.