

**The Timid Mr. Bunn**

"Evenin', Gabby," boomed the policeman condescendingly, almost mockingly.

"Ah—good evening—sir," returned plump little Gabriel Bunn. "It—it's a fine night, isn't it, sir?"

"Have a good day, Gabby?" continued the bantering voice.

"Oh, yes, thank you, sir."

During this very interesting colloquy, Gabriel was mentally kicking himself for being the biggest coward on two feet. Afraid to address a policeman on equal terms! What is more, a policeman who had greeted him thus on the same spot, at the same time—ten minutes past ten—six nights of every week for the past three years! The first few evenings, Gabriel recalled, the officer had spoken respectfully, as he would to any harmless citizen; but there was something in the little man's replies, some quality of subservience, of over-anxiousness to please, that roused in the big policeman the feeling of a cat towards a mouse.

Yes, Gabriel had read about inferiority complexes, and had thought at the time that a victim of one deserved no pity. Just a little effort, he conjectured (recalling, for he was a reader of Dickens, Louisa's advice to Mrs. Dombey) and all would be well. For months he had been trying to make the effort, to speak like a man; yet every night the same thing occurred. Lately the policeman had brought forth a variation of the usual formula, an addition that meant untold mental torture. Would he use it tonight? Gabriel was already several steps beyond him, and had hopes of escaping. But he noticed across the narrow street a couple approaching, and realized why the policeman had held back this third remark so long. When the couple were immediately opposite, the officer turned and directed towards the back of the little man the solicitous inquiry,

"And how is momma's iddle boy this fine evening?"

Gabriel Bunn, forty-two, experienced hosiery salesman, taxpayer, slunk into the darkness like an escaped convict, pursued by the policeman's chuckle and a titter from across the street.

It was about a week later that the thing happened. Shortly past ten the salesman, tired after a long day of coo-

ing in dulcet tones, 'Now this, madam, is of excellent material, and priced very low,' was scurrying home. There was a threat of rain in the air and the night was black as ink. Gabriel was brooding over his trouble, as, indeed, he had been doing almost continually of late. Only two more blocks, and he must meet his enemy again, and again undergo the usual humiliating experience. Could he screw up his courage to vary the nightly sentences by even so much as one word? He knew the answer only too well, and sighed in self-pity.

When, at the mouth of the alley, a hard object was jabbed deep into his midriff, almost before he had heard the velvety voice whisper "If you please!", Gabriel's soft white hands were trembling at his shoulders. He would have licked his lips, which felt hot and dry, but his tongue refused to move. The voice continued at once: "Down here, ahead of me. Quickly."

Gabriel with an effort moved his frozen joints and trotted blindly into the darkness, the hard object prodding his liver suggestively. There was a crook in the alley not far away, and just beyond this, out of sight of passers-by, he was bidden to stop. He could see nothing, except a greyish blur which he took to be a face.

"I am holding you up," came a murmur, somewhat unnecessarily, "and I want everything of value you have on you. Fork over, please."

The victim did so with pathetic eagerness. The result was meager: a necktie pin, a dollar bill, some small change, and a fairly good watch. The robber, who surely must have possessed the eyes of an owl, clicked his tongue in disappointment.

"Mmmm, is that all?" he inquired slowly, with a hint of impending violence.

The little man racked his brain in desperation. A vast wave of relief surged over him, and he babbled,

"Oh, oh, no. Ten dollar bill—ten dollar bill I keep for emer—emer—." Funny, he couldn't get his tongue around the word. But his shaking fingers did manage to extract the bill from a pocket inside his vest. It was snatched from his hand, and the smooth, maddening voice drawled,

"Better, much better. That is all, you may go now. You are a good iddle momma's boy."

Momma's boy! Gabriel's brain was filled with a

white, searing light; the events of the next few seconds he witnessed as if a mere spectator. He was conscious of no effort, yet he saw a hand—his own, he noted with a mild interest—shoot out in a flash and grasp the gunman's wrist. A jerk, a whinny of pain, and the thud of a gun hitting the ground.

A face looked up at him, a white blotch of a face that strove frantically to avoid the blows of—why, they were his own arms, and he was kneeling on the shoulders of the robber! The light again hid everything, he knew only one thing: that he was filled with an over-powering lust to kill. Then he was on his feet, the other man was lurching down the alley in a queer mixture of a trot and a hobble.

The reaction set in, and Gabriel leaned against the wall. It must have been a dream, he told himself. He, a petty clerk, be held up, overpower the robber, beat him almost unconscious? It couldn't really be true.

And yet the proofs were painfully evident. Both his hands felt stiff and swollen, his jaw hurt when he moved it, his clothes were dishevelled. This much he knew, even in the almost total darkness of the alley, but when he reached the street and stopped beneath a lamp, he was appalled at his condition. Buttons missing, clothes covered with ashes, coat and vest torn half off, and down his chin a steady trickle of blood—all this he discovered in a few seconds.

He couldn't go home! He couldn't even walk along the street in this terrible state. Fear stirred in him, the fear of an individual marked off from the crowd. People would laugh at him, would jeer, he might even be arrested!

Suddenly he didn't care, he wasn't afraid of any of 'em, he didn't give a hoot. Coward, was he? A mere constable's butt? Again he saw the subdued robber hurrying away into the night, oblivious of the loot and gun he had dropped, holding his right wrist, whimpering. And the small, rumpled figure standing beneath the light on the deserted street snapped his thumb and finger defiantly, and set off home.

"Momma's boy!"

In the distance appeared the policeman, ambling along his beat. Gabriel's eyes narrowed. A copper, ho, indeed! Something forced the little man's head down

and forward, and knotted his hands into two quivering white balls at his sides.

On, on, on . . . straight for those huge shoulders, on a level with his eyes, strode Gabriel. The customary smile had started to appear on the officer's face, but an instant later it was wiped off. The big form stepped back ! One pace, two, three . . . Then, through his puffed and bleeding lips, in a voice that snapped the policeman to attention like a shot, timid Gabriel Bunn barked,

"Evenin', cop !"

"Er—ah—g-good evening, sir !"—Anon.



Ill fares the land, to hastening ills a prey,  
Where wealth accumulates, and men decay.  
Princes and lords may flourish, or may fade,  
A breath can make them as a breath has made;  
But a bold peasantry, their country's pride,  
When once destroyed, can never be supplied.

—Goldsmith

Accuse not Nature, she hath done her part;  
Do thou but thine.

—Milton

