

## Filer vs. Cain.

To say that my wife's Cousin Jack was to blame for our quarrel would be unfair to him, inasmuch as he was not even present at the time. He had been, and was gone, and was by no means likely to come back for some considerable time at all events, as when he took his departure it was in a cab that was waiting for him outside our domicile, to convey him straight to the London docks, from which that same night his ship sailed for India.

It would be affectation to say that in my heart I was sorry to see the back of him. Affection among the members of a family is very well, but I cannot help thinking it is an abuse of privilege when a strapping young fellow, at least six inches taller than yourself, and what women absurdly call handsome, insists on kissing one's wife, not only when he arrives, but when he leaves as well, and with no better excuse than he is her cousin. It does not matter, perhaps, when a man has been married a dozen years or so, but it was barely six months since our wedding, and Jack Dawlish was present at it. With his sailor frankness he congratulated me on the occasion.

"You have got the nicest little woman for a wife, you happy rascal, in all London. I must have been a confounded fool—but it is all over now. You have landed the prize and there is no more to be said about it."

I was not aware until that time that there was any other feeling between them than one that was coolly and comfortably cousinly. Had he kissed Matilda then, and for the last time, it would have been all right, but as I have already mentioned he continued the practice at every opportunity.

I never mentioned it to Matilda, but I did not like it. I am ashamed to own that I am of a jealous temperament. Who ever loved a woman with all his heart and soul, and was free from jealousy?

Jack Dawlish had been on the verge of going to India half-a-dozen times since we were married. He had disappointed me so often in this respect that I began to lose faith in his ever happening, when at last he came to announce that he was actually off. He brought with him a dog, a scowling ill-looking brute of a cross breed, with spiky ears and weak eyes, bandy-legged and broad-chested. It was quite an affecting parting between Jack and Matilda. He kissed her when he came bounding in with the announcement that he was going and again while his length of absence was being discussed, and he promised to send my wife an Indian shawl, and then again—twice—when with a cousinly embrace he bade her good-bye. Maybe he would have exhibited more warmth in taking farewell of me had I given him encouragement. It was not till we were in the hall and he was standing on the door mat pulling on his gloves that he remarked:

"Well, ta-ta, Morfin, old boy. Don't cry your eyes out over this sad bereavement. Oh, by-the-way—I had nearly forgotten it—poor old Filer! You couldn't oblige me by finding a home for him? He isn't a beauty, but a jewel of a dog for anyone who could appreciate his qualities. He is good at rats, cats, burglars, any sort of vermin you set him to."

I shook my head after pretending to reflect for a few moments whether I knew any friend who would care to make such an estimable addition to his family circle. "No, I am sorry, but I really could not conscientiously undertake the little commission."

"But, why can't we keep him ourselves Tom?" my wife remarked. "Why, of course we can. It will be nice to have the dear old doggy to make a pet of, and keep us in mind of Cousin Jack."

"But, my dear, you remember how small our back garden is, and we have no kennel for him!"

"Well, if you won't have him, old chap," began Dawlish—

"But I will have him, Jack, dear, so you may make your mind happy on that score."

He would have kissed her again, I verily believe, had not the cabman just then put his head in at the door to say that there wasn't a minute to lose if he wished to catch the 8.30 train; so he had to be content with squeezing both my wife's hands and then hurried away, of course leaving Filer behind him.

I confess that my mood was the reverse of amiable, and when we returned to the parlor, and my wife after wiping her eyes remarked plaintively to the cross-bred car as she patted him:

"You and I will be friends, Filer. Your master is gone now. Heigho!"

It made me furious.

"Yes, Filer," said I, savagely, "Mrs. Morfin's precious cousin has gone, and it will be very much to my advantage if he never comes back again."

"Indeed, sir," and my wife curled her lip scornfully, "and why, pray, may I ask?"

"Because, madam, your Cousin Jack is a confoundedly impudent fellow, a swaggering conceited coxcomb. And I will tell you something else, Mrs. Morfin," I exclaimed, waxing more wrathful now she was smiling. "If your Cousin Jack had some husbands to deal with, he would be rightly punished by having his nose pulled!"

She laughed outright at that in the most aggravating way.

"Poor dear Jack! If it had not been for your height how you would have suffered! But you might have kicked his shins, Tom!"

I can account for what followed only on the assumption that her cruel sarcasm drove me raving mad. She was reclining on the couch at the time, I seized her by the shoulders and pushed her back.

"Dare to utter such another taunt, madam, and I shall be tempted to kill you!"

I dare say I pinched her, for she winced as though hurt and turned pale.

"Don't be cowardly," she remarked, with supreme scorn. "It is becoming in you, sir, to talk of daring? Would you dare act in this way if my cousin was here to protect me?"

I was blind with passion then. I seized on a broad cushion that was lying on the floor, and I smothered her with it. I flung it over her face, and I pressed it down, all the time insanely anathematizing Jack Dawlish, and declaring I would have his blood as well, if I had to go all the way to India to shed it. She struggled for a time and then was suddenly still.

An icy wave seemed to sweep through the current of my blood, from my brow to my boots, and in terror I withdrew the cushion.

She had ceased to breathe! Her face was pallid, her eyes fixed, her lips parted. I was agast with fright, and called on her frantically, and chafed her hands, and all the while the infernal Filer danced round, and wagged his stump of a tail, and barked his loudest, as though this was exactly the kind of fun that tickled him.

I was horribly frightened. As far as I could assure myself, my dear wife's pulsation had entirely ceased. She lay at full length, and with no more life in her than a stone statue. Ours was but a little house, and Matilda preferring to do her own cooking, for we had no other servant besides an occasional charwoman, so we were in the place alone. I fetched cold water and dashed her face—Filer gambolling in diabolical delight the while—I burnt brown paper close under her nostrils, but all in vain! She was dead!

Had I entertained the slightest doubt on the matter I should have hurried for a doctor, but she was so unmistakably defunct, the only result of doing so would have been to place myself in the hands of the police. Life is sweet! I loved my Matilda more than anything on earth, and would have died to have restored her to existence again, but since the latter was impossible—

Further arguments were a waste of time. I tremblingly packed a small black bag with a few necessities, and imprinting one last kiss on her cold lips, fled from the house.

It was by this time nearly midnight, and I walked rapidly on, heedless which way I went, when it suddenly seemed to me that I had done a rash thing, I had shut the dog in!

As everybody is aware it is the instinct of the canine tribe to howl on the decease of a person in the immediate neighborhood and the impish Filer was before all others the dog to do so, and immediate discovery would be the result.

I halted for a moment and there was Filer at my heels! Silent as a ghost—for he was all white except a sable dot in the middle of his back, and another that gave him the appearance of having a bad black eye—he had followed me unperceived. He was no longer possessed of an hilarious spirit however. It was as though he knew all about it, and was aware that stealth and secrecy was necessary. He did not bark, or wag his tail even, while I stood looking down on him. He silently blinked both his eyes, and sat down on his haunches as though to say:

"I have quite made up my mind on this matter. You would like to get rid of me, but you won't. When you are ready to go on I am quite ready to follow."

When I say he looked at me as though he would have said this, I mean, rather, that so I construed his unspoken sentiment when, on the spur of the moment, I attempted to drive him off. I had my umbrella with me, and I made a prod at him with the ferrule part of it, at the same time sternly bidding him "go home," on which he made such a vicious snap at that part of my trousers that covers the calf of the leg, that I actually felt his teeth scrape the skin.

He offered me no further violence, nor did he make any noise over what he did, beyond a low guttural growl. Then he withdrew his teeth, and with a vigilant eye on my umbrella, squatted down as before. Under other conditions I might have renewed the contest, but as it was there was nothing to be gained by it. And, after all, I could not say that Filer was unfriendly disposed. He had simply defended himself when I attacked him. A wiser course would have been to take no notice of the brute, when probably he would have presently slunk off. He might do so still if he found that he was unnoticed.

On I walked—on, on, out of the streets and gaslit thoroughfares, into the country roads with the one crushing consciousness oppressing me. I was a murderer! A man accused and banned—a doomed wretch, whose guilty vision, piercing the mirk of night, saw a halter dangling from each gallow-like fingerpost. For miles and miles I walked on,—but, fast or slow, Filer's unflinching footsteps were close at

my heels. If he had uttered an occasional bark it would have been something; or ran on in front, or lagged behind and come scampering up again. At least there would have been life in it. But it was dreadful to have him slogging on behind me like a dog walking in his sleep, and influenced by a bad dream of being a bloodhound on duty.

I yearned to do so, but I lacked courage to try and kill him. My mind dwelt on Sikes in a similar predicament, in "Oliver Twist." But Sike's dog was afraid of him while Filer defied me. I had a pocket handkerchief, as the slayer of poor Nancy had, and there were plenty of stones about and I had already passed several ponds, but when I pondered the possibility of drowning my hated follower, the wind seemed to blow in at the rent in my trouser leg, like a warning whisper. I did not know the brute's strength, and there could be no doubt about his ferocity. To be sure, I had the advantage of Sikes, as my dog wore a collar, and the ends of the weighted handkerchief might be securely attached to that. But the "advantage" vanished the instant it suggested itself. It was quite true that Filer wore a collar, but Cousin Jack's name was engraved on it in full—"J. Dawlish, Esq., 12, Keystone-street, W. C." This would furnish fatal evidence against me, if I slew the brute and his body was discovered.

It marred even my less desperate plans. I was on the road to Barnett, and weary and limping, would fain have availed myself of a humble bed at a wayside lodging house for travellers, in the passage of which a lamp was still burning. I dare not take the dog in there with me. A fugitive from justice I might as well hand to the boarding-house keeper my card of address as give him an opportunity of reading what was engraved on Filer's collar.

Would it be possible to get him to let me take it off? I sat down on an unpleasantly dewy bank, and all in the dark called him to me—"Good old Filer! Good old dog then!" And he came and rested his ugly head on my knees. But the moment my hand touched the brass band that encircled his throat, his eyes gleamed and he showed his teeth, and I was glad to pretend that I merely intended to pat his head.

That, with rubbing his ears, mollified him, and still with his chin on my knees, he dropped into a doze. But I soon saw that I had done a nice thing for myself. He was very tired, no doubt, and did not wish to be disturbed. Whenever I moved he uttered a low threatening growl, that so unmistakably indicated a bite to follow that I dare not stir, but sat there, on the damp grass, cramped and benumbed, until break of day, which occurred about six in the morning. Even then the hateful beast would have slept on had it not fortunately happened that a man came along with some cows, and their lowing awoke him in such ill-temper that he went for them, with a ridge of upraised hair extending from the nape of the neck to his tail. The brute was in a quarrelsome mood, and barely had he settled with the cows than he fell foul of the rural policeman who had gone to the cowman's assistance. Filer's blood was up, for the constable had dealt him a stinger over the ribs with his knobby stick, and the ferocious beast was making at him, open-mouthed, when another whack baulked his bloodthirsty intention, and brought him to his knees.

"I shall want your name and address, sir, for this," said the policeman; "you shall be summoned for being on the highway with a savage dog out of your control. Oh, never mind," he sagaciously added, "here's what I want on the dog's collar."

And he pencilled in his pocketbook—"J. Dawlish, Esq., 12, Keystone-street, W. C."

"You'll hear of this," remarked the constable, "before the end of the week."

I could make the man no reply. I felt so chokeful of emotion that the least thing would have caused me to burst into tears. It was all over now!—murder will out! Here already was another strand of the rope that was to hang me. I was in such a wretched state of mind, that as lief as not I would have given myself up for my crime there and then, but that I wished first to be revenged on the dog-fiend, who in such an incredibly short space of time, had wrought my ruin. It seemed more like a horrible nightmare than reality.

Even now it was scarce twelve hours since I was a happy and contented man, blessed with a beloved wife and a comfortable home, and now I was a branded outcast, with a tortured conscience worse even than that which afflicted Cain. And despite the thrashing the policeman had given him, the dog stuck to me with leech-like tenacity, and endorsed my every footstep with his own.

Arrived in Barnett town, I ventured into a coffee-house and ordered breakfast, not so much that I had an appetite for it as that I was anxious to see the morning newspaper. It was possible I might find something in it! It was not very likely, but Jack Dawlish might have come back to the house; his ship might have sailed without him—its start may have been postponed for a tide or two, in which case he would be pretty sure to call on us on his way to his own abode, and then discovery would be made, and I might expect to find under the large type heading, "Horrible Murder of a Young Wife;

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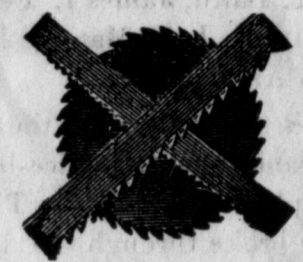
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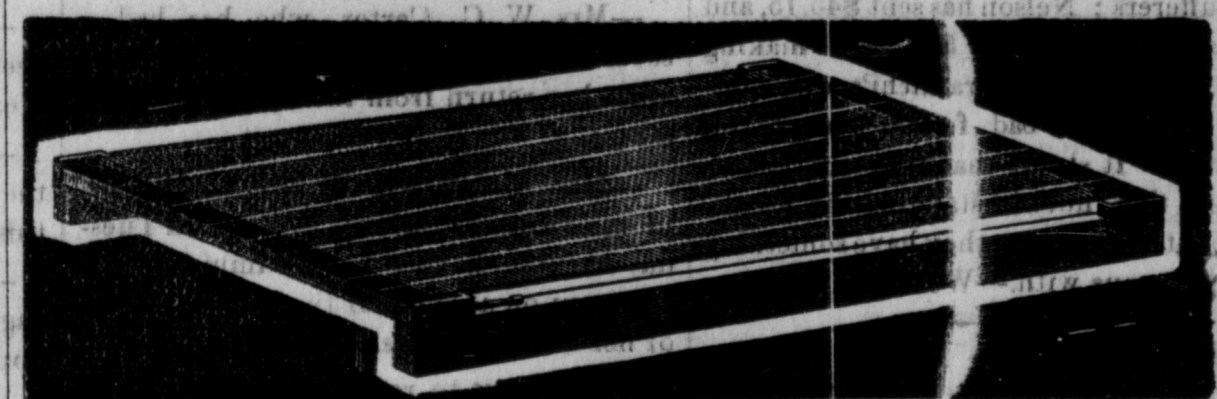
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