

DICKENS
CHARLES

THE TRIAL OF
WILLIAM
TINKLING

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The Trial of William Tinkling

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Содержание

FOREWORD	5
THE TRIAL OF WILLIAM TINKLING	6

Charles Dickens
The Trial of William Tinkling Written
by Himself at the Age of 8 Years

FOREWORD

The story contained herein was written by Charles Dickens in 1867. It is the first of four stories entitled "Holiday Romance" and was published originally in a children's magazine in America. It purports to be written by a child aged eight. It was republished in England in "All the Year Round" in 1868. For this and four other Christmas pieces Dickens received £1,000.

"Holiday Romance" was published in book form by Messrs Chapman & Hall in 1874, with "Edwin Drood" and other stories.

For this reprint the text of the story as it appeared in "All the Year Round" has been followed.

THE TRIAL OF WILLIAM TINKLING

This beginning-part is not made out of anybody's head, you know. It's real. You must believe this beginning-part more than what comes after, else you won't understand how what comes after came to be written. You must believe it all, but you must believe this most, please. I am the Editor of it. Bob Redforth (he's my cousin, and shaking the table on purpose) wanted to be the Editor of it, but I said he shouldn't because he couldn't. *He* has no idea of being an editor.

Nettie Ashford is my Bride. We were married in the right-hand closet in the corner of the dancing-school where first we met, with a ring (a green one) from Wilkingwater's toy-shop. *I* owed for it out of my pocket-money. When the rapturous ceremony was over, we all four went up the lane and let off a cannon (brought loaded in Bob Redforth's waistcoat-pocket) to announce our nuptials. It flew right up when it went off, and turned over. Next day, Lieutenant-Colonel Robin Redforth was united, with similar ceremonies, to Alice Rainbird. This time the cannon bust with a most terrific explosion, and made a puppy bark.

My peerless Bride was, at the period of which we now treat, in captivity at Miss Grimmer's. Drowvey and Grimmer is the partnership, and opinion is divided which is the greatest Beast. The lovely bride of the Colonel was also immured in the Dungeons of the same establishment. A vow was entered into between the Colonel and myself that we would cut them out on the following Wednesday, when walking two and two.

Under the desperate circumstances of the case, the active brain of the Colonel, combining with his lawless pursuit (he is a Pirate), suggested an attack with fireworks. This however, from motives of humanity, was abandoned as too expensive.

Lightly armed with a paper-knife buttoned up under his jacket, and waving the dreaded black flag at the end of a cane, the Colonel took command of me at 2 P.M. on the eventful and appointed day. He had drawn out the plan of attack on a piece of paper which was rolled up round a hoop-stick. He showed it to me. My position and my full-length portrait (but my real ears don't stick out horizontal) was behind a corner-lamp-post, with written orders to remain there till I should see Miss Drowvey fall. The Drowvey who was to fall was the one in spectacles, not the one with the large lavender bonnet. At that signal I was to rush forth, seize my Bride, and fight my way to the lane. There, a junction would be effected between myself and the Colonel; and putting our Brides behind us, between ourselves and the palings, we were to conquer or die.

The enemy appeared – approached. Waving his black flag, the Colonel attacked. Confusion ensued. Anxiously I awaited my signal, but my signal came not. So far from falling, the hated Drowvey in spectacles appeared to me to have muffled the Colonel's head in his outlawed banner, and to be pitching into him with a parasol. The one in the lavender bonnet also performed prodigies of valour with her fists on his back. Seeing that all was for the moment lost, I fought my desperate way hand to hand to the lane. Through taking the back road, I was so fortunate as to meet nobody, and arrived there uninterrupted.

It seemed an age, ere the Colonel joined me. He had been to the jobbing-tailor's to be sewn up in several places, and attributed our defeat to the refusal of the detested Drowvey to fall. Finding her so obstinate he had said to her in a loud voice, "Die, recreant!" but had found her no more open to reason on that point than the other.

My blooming Bride appeared, accompanied by the Colonel's Bride, at the Dancing-School next day. What? Was her face averted from me? Hah! Even so. With a look of scorn she put into my hand a bit of paper, and took another partner. On the paper was pencilled, "Heavens! Can I write the word! Is my husband a Cow?"

In the first bewilderment of my heated brain I tried to think what slanderer could have traced my family to the ignoble animal mentioned above. Vain were my endeavours. At the end of that dance I whispered the Colonel to come into the cloak-room, and I showed him the note.

"There is a syllable wanting," said he, with a gloomy brow.

"Hah! What syllable?" was my inquiry.

"She asks, Can she write the word? And no; you see she couldn't," said the Colonel, pointing out the passage.

"And the word was?" said I.

"Cow – cow – coward," hissed the Pirate-Colonel in my ear, and gave me back the note.

Feeling that I must for ever tread the earth a branded boy – person I mean – or that I must clear up my honour, I demanded to be tried by a Court-Martial. The Colonel admitted my right to be tried. Some difficulty was found in composing the court, on account of the Emperor of France's aunt refusing to let him come out. He was to be the President. 'Ere yet we had appointed a substitute, he made his escape over the back wall, and stood among us, a free monarch.

The court was held on the grass by the pond. I recognised in a certain Admiral among my judges my deadliest foe. A cocoa-nut had given rise to language that I could not brook. But confiding in my innocence, and also in the knowledge that the President of the United States (who sat next him) owed me a knife, I braced myself for the ordeal.

It was a solemn spectacle, that court. Two executioners with pinafores reversed, led me in. Under the shade of an umbrella, I perceived my Bride, supported by the Bride of the Pirate-Colonel. The President (having reproved a little female ensign for tittering, on a matter of Life or Death) called upon me to plead, "Coward or no Coward, Guilty or not Guilty?" I pleaded in a firm tone, "No Coward and Not Guilty." (The little female ensign being again reproved by the President for misconduct, mutinied, left the court, and threw stones.)

My implacable enemy, the Admiral, conducted the case against me. The Colonel's Bride was called to prove that I had remained behind the corner-lamp-post during the engagement. I might have been spared the anguish of my own Bride's being also made a witness to the same point, but the Admiral knew where to wound me. Be still my soul, no matter. The Colonel was then brought forward with his evidence.

It was for this point that I had saved myself up, as the turning-point of my case. Shaking myself free of my guards – who had no business to hold me, the stupids! unless I was found guilty – I asked the Colonel what he considered the first duty of a soldier? 'Ere he could reply, the President of the United States rose and informed the court that my foe the Admiral had suggested "Bravery," and that prompting a witness wasn't fair. The President of the Court immediately ordered the Admiral's mouth to be filled with leaves, and tied up with string. I had the satisfaction of seeing the sentence carried into effect, before the proceedings went further.

I then took a paper from my trousers-pocket, and asked: "What do you consider, Colonel Redforth, the first duty of a soldier? Is it obedience?"

"It is," said the Colonel.

"Is that paper – please to look at it – in your hand?"

"It is," said the Colonel.

"Is it a military sketch?"

"It is," said the Colonel.

"Of an engagement?"

"Quite so," said the Colonel.

"Of the late engagement?"

"Of the late engagement."

"Please to describe it, and then hand it to the President of the Court."

From that triumphant moment my sufferings and my dangers were at an end. The court rose up and jumped, on discovering that I had strictly obeyed orders. My foe, the Admiral, who though muzzled was malignant yet, contrived to suggest that I was dishonoured by having quitted the field. But the Colonel himself had done as much, and gave his opinion, upon his word and honour as a Pirate, that when all was lost the field might be quitted without disgrace. I was going to be found "No Coward and Not Guilty," and my blooming Bride was going to be publicly restored to my arms in a procession, when an unlooked-for event disturbed the general rejoicing. This was no other than the Emperor of France's aunt catching hold of his hair. The proceedings abruptly terminated, and the court tumultuously dissolved.

It was when the shades of the next evening but one were beginning to fall, 'ere yet the silver beams of Luna touched the earth, that four forms might have been descried slowly advancing towards the weeping willow on the borders of the pond, the now deserted scene of the day before yesterday's agonies and triumphs. On a nearer approach, and by a practised eye, these might have been identified as the forms of the Pirate-Colonel with his Bride, and of the day before yesterday's gallant prisoner with *his* Bride.

On the beauteous faces of the Nymphs, dejection sat enthroned. All four reclined under the willow for some minutes without speaking, till at length the bride of the Colonel poutingly observed, "It's of no use pretending any more, and we had better give it up."

"Hah!" exclaimed the Pirate. "Pretending?"

"Don't go on like that; you worry me," returned his Bride.

The lovely Bride of Tinkling echoed the incredible declaration. The two warriors exchanged stoney glances.

"If," said the Bride of the Pirate-Colonel, "grown-up people WON'T do what they ought to do, and WILL put us out, what comes of our pretending?"

"We only get into scrapes," said the Bride of Tinkling.

"You know very well," pursued the Colonel's Bride, "that Miss Drowvey wouldn't fall. You complained of it yourself. And you know how disgracefully the court-martial ended. As to our marriage; would my people acknowledge it at home?"

"Or would my people acknowledge ours?" said the Bride of Tinkling.

Again the two warriors exchanged stoney glances.

"If you knocked at the door and claimed me, after you were told to go away," said the Colonel's Bride, "you would only have your hair pulled, or your ears, or your nose."

"If you persisted in ringing at the bell and claiming Me," said the Bride of Tinkling to that gentleman, "you would have things dropped on your head from the window over the handle, or you would be played upon by the garden-engine."

"And at your own homes," resumed the Bride of the Colonel, "it would be just as bad. You would be sent to bed, or something equally undignified. Again: how would you support us?"

The Pirate-Colonel replied, in a courageous voice, "By rapine!" But his Bride retorted, suppose the grown-up people wouldn't be rapined? Then, said the Colonel, they should pay the penalty in Blood. But suppose they should object, retorted his bride, and wouldn't pay the penalty in Blood or anything else?

A mournful silence ensued.

"Then do you no longer love me, Alice?" asked the Colonel.

"Redforth! I am ever thine," returned his Bride.

"Then do you no longer love me, Nettie?" asked the present writer.

"Tinkling! I am ever thine," returned my Bride.

We all four embraced. Let me not be misunderstood by the giddy. The Colonel embraced his own Bride, and I embraced mine. But two times two make four.

"Nettie and I," said Alice, mournfully, "have been considering our position. The grown-up people are too strong for us. They make us ridiculous. Besides, they have changed the times. William Tinkling's baby-brother was christened yesterday. What took place? Was any king present? Answer, William."

I said No, unless disguised as great-uncle Chopper.

"Any queen?"

There had been no queen that I knew of at our house. There might have been one in the kitchen; but I didn't think so, or the servants would have mentioned it.

"Any fairies?"

None that were visible.

"We had an idea among us, I think," said Alice, with a melancholy smile, "we four, that Miss Grimmer would prove to be the wicked fairy, and would come in at the christening with her crutch-stick, and give the child a bad gift? Was there anything of that sort? Answer, William."

I said that Ma had said afterwards (and so she had), that great-uncle Chopper's gift was a shabby one; but she hadn't said a bad one. She had called it shabby, electrotyped, second-hand, and below his income.

"It must be the grown-up people who have changed all this," said Alice. "We couldn't have changed it, if we had been so inclined, and we never should have been. Or perhaps Miss Grimmer *is* a wicked fairy, after all, and won't act up to it, because the grown-up people have persuaded her not to. Either way, they would make us ridiculous if we told them what we expected."

"Tyrants!" muttered the Pirate-Colonel.

"Nay, my Redforth," said Alice, "say not so. Call not names, my Redforth, or they will apply to Pa."

"Let 'em," said the Colonel. "I don't care. Who's he?"

Tinkling here undertook the perilous task of remonstrating with his lawless friend, who consented to withdraw the moody expressions above quoted.

"What remains for us to do?" Alice went on in her mild wise way. "We must educate, we must pretend in a new manner, we must wait."

The Colonel clenched his teeth – four out in front, and a piece off another, and he had been twice dragged to the door of a dentist-despot, but had escaped from his guards. "How educate? How pretend in a new manner? How wait?"

"Educate the grown-up people," replied Alice. "We part to-night. Yes, Redforth," – for the Colonel tucked up his cuffs, – "part to-night! Let us in these next Holidays, now going to begin, throw our thoughts into something educational for the grown-up people, hinting to them how things ought to be. Let us veil our meaning under a mask of romance;¹ you, I, and Nettie. William Tinkling being the plainest and quickest writer, shall copy out. Is it agreed?"

The Colonel answered, sulkily, "I don't mind." He then asked, "How about pretending?"

"We will pretend," said Alice, "that we are children; not that we are those grown-up people who won't help us out as they ought, and who understand us so badly."

The Colonel, still much dissatisfied, growled, "How about waiting?"

"We will wait," answered little Alice, taking Nettie's hand in hers, and looking up to the sky, "we will wait – ever constant and true – till the times have got so changed as that everything helps us out, and nothing makes us ridiculous, and the fairies have come back. We will wait – ever constant and true – till we are eighty, ninety, or one hundred. And then the fairies will send *us* children, and we will help them out, poor pretty little creatures, if they pretend ever so much."

¹ The titles of the romances by which Alice Rainbird, Nettie Ashford and the Pirate-Colonel sought to veil their meanings will be found on page 31.

"So we will, dear," said Nettie Ashford, taking her round the waist with both arms and kissing her. "And now if my Husband will go and buy some cherries for us, I have got some money."

In the friendliest manner I invited the Colonel to go with me; but he so far forgot himself as to acknowledge the invitation by kicking out behind, and then lying down on his stomach on the grass, pulling it up and chewing it. When I came back, however, Alice had nearly brought him out of his vexation, and was soothing him by telling him how soon we should all be ninety.

As we sat under the willow-tree and ate the cherries (fair, for Alice shared them out), we played at being ninety. Nettie complained that she had a bone in her old back and it made her hobble, and Alice sang a song in an old woman's way, but it was very pretty, and we were all merry. At least I don't know about merry exactly, but all comfortable.

There was a most tremendous lot of cherries and Alice always had with her some neat little bag or box or case, to hold things. In it, that night, was a tiny wine-glass. So Alice and Nettie said they would make some cherry-wine to drink our love at parting.

Each of us had a glassful, and it was delicious, and each of us drank the toast, "Our love at parting." The Colonel drank his wine last, and it got into my head directly that it got into his directly. Anyhow his eyes rolled immediately after he had turned the glass upside down, and he took me on one side and proposed in a hoarse whisper that we should "Cut 'em out still."

"How did he mean?" I asked my lawless friend.

"Cut our Brides out," said the Colonel, "and then cut our way, without going down a single turning, Bang to the Spanish Main!"

We might have tried it, though I didn't think it would answer; only we looked round and saw that there was nothing but moonlight under the willow-tree, and that our pretty, pretty wives were gone. We burst out crying. The Colonel gave in second, and came to first; but he gave in strong.

We were ashamed of our red eyes, and hung about for half an hour to whiten them. Likewise a piece of chalk round the rims, I doing the Colonel's, and he mine, but afterwards found in the bedroom looking-glass not natural, besides inflammation. Our conversation turned on being ninety. The Colonel told me he had a pair of boots that wanted soleing and heeling but he thought it hardly worth while to mention it to his father, as he himself should so soon be ninety, when he thought shoes would be more convenient. The Colonel also told me with his hand upon his hip that he felt himself already getting on in life, and turning rheumatic. And I told him the same. And when they said at our house at supper (they are always bothering about something) that I stooped, I felt so glad!

This is the end of the beginning-part that you were to believe most.

THE END