

Four Pigeons

By

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FOUR PIGEONS

The old man took up his mug and shifted along the bench until he was in the shade of the elms that stood before the Cauliflower. The action also had the advantage of bringing him opposite the two strangers who were refreshing themselves after the toils of a long walk in the sun.

"My hearing ain't wot it used to be," he said, tremulously. "When you asked me to have a mug o' ale I 'ardly heard you; and if you was to ask me to 'ave another, I mightn't hear you at all."

One of the men nodded.

"Not over there," piped the old man. "That's why I come over here," he added, after a pause. "It 'ud be rude like to take no notice; if you was to ask me."

He looked round as the landlord approached, and pushed his mug gently in his direction. The landlord, obeying a nod from the second stranger, filled it.

"It puts life into me," said the old man, raising it to his lips and bowing. "It makes me talk."

"Time we were moving, Jack," said the first traveller. The second, assenting to this as an abstract proposition, expressed, however, a determination to finish his pipe first.

I heard you saying something about shooting, continued the old man, and that reminds me of some shooting we 'ad here once in Claybury. We've always 'ad a lot o' game in these parts, and if it wasn't for a low, poaching fellow named Bob Pretty – Claybury's disgrace I call 'im – we'd 'ave a lot more.

It happened in this way. Squire Rockett was going abroad to foreign parts for a year, and he let the Hall to a gentleman from London named Sutton. A real gentleman 'e was, open-'anded and free, and just about October he 'ad a lot of 'is friends come down from London to 'elp 'im kill the pheasants.

The first day they frightened more than they killed, but they enjoyed theirselves all right until one gentleman, who 'adn't shot a single thing all day, shot pore Bill Chambers wot was beating with about a dozen more.

Bill got most of it in the shoulder and a little in the cheek, but the row he see fit to make you'd ha' thought he'd been killed. He laid on the ground groaning with 'is eyes shut, and everybody thought 'e was dying till Henery Walker stooped down and asked 'im whether 'e was hurt.

It took four men to carry Bill 'ome, and he was that particular you wouldn't believe. They 'ad to talk in whispers, and when Peter Gubbins forgot 'imself and began to whistle he asked him where his 'art was. When they walked fast he said they jolted 'im, and when they walked slow 'e asked 'em whether they'd gone to sleep or wot.

Bill was in bed for nearly a week, but the gentleman was very nice about it and said that it was his fault. He was a very pleasant-spoken gentleman, and, arter sending Dr. Green to him and saying he'd pay the bill, 'e gave Bill Chambers ten pounds to make up for 'is sufferings.

Bill 'ad intended to lay up for another week, and the doctor, wot 'ad been calling twice a day, said he wouldn't be responsible for 'is life if he didn't; but the ten pounds was too much for 'im, and one evening, just a week arter the accident, he turned up at this Cauliflower public-'ouse and began to spend 'is money.

His face was bandaged up, and when 'e come in he walked feeble-like and spoke in a faint sort o' voice. Smith, the landlord, got 'im a easy-chair and a couple of pillers out o' the parlour, and Bill sat there like a king, telling us all his sufferings and wot it felt like to be shot.

I always have said wot a good thing beer is, and it done Bill more good than doctor's medicine. When he came in he could 'ardly crawl, and at nine o'clock 'e was out of the easy-chair and dancing on the table as well as possible. He smashed three mugs and upset about two pints o' beer, but he just put his 'and in his pocket and paid for 'em without a word.

"There's plenty more where that came from," he ses, pulling out a handful o' money.

Peter Gubbins looked at it, 'ardly able to speak. "It's worth while being shot to 'ave all that money," he ses, at last.

"Don't you worry yourself, Peter," ses Bob Pretty; "there's plenty more of you as'll be shot afore them gentlemen at the Hall 'as finished. Bill's the fust, but 'e won't be the last – not by a long chalk."

"They're more careful now," ses Dicky Weed, the tailor.

"All right; 'ave it your own way," ses Bob, nasty-like. "I don't know much about shooting, being on'y a pore labourin' man. All I know is I shouldn't like to go beating for them. I'm too fond o' my wife and family."

"There won't be no more shot," ses Sam Jones.

"We're too careful," ses Peter Gubbins.

"Bob Pretty don't know everything," ses Dicky Weed.

"I'll bet you what you like there'll be some more of you shot," ses Bob Pretty, in a temper. "Now, then."

"Ow much'll you bet, Bob," ses Sam Jones, with a wink at the others. "I can see you winking, Sam Jones," ses Bob Pretty, "but I'll do more than bet. The last bet I won is still owing to me. Now, look 'ere; I'll pay you sixpence a week all the time you're beating if you promise to give me arf of wot you get if you're shot. I can't say fairer than that."

"Will you give me sixpence a week, too?" ses Henery Walker, jumping up.

"I will," ses Bob; "and anybody else that likes. And wot's more, I'll pay in advance. Fust sixpences now."

Claybury men 'ave never been backward when there's been money to be made easy, and they all wanted to join Bob Pretty's club, as he called it. But fust of all 'e asked for a pen and ink, and then he got Smith, the land-lord, being a scholar, to write out a paper for them to sign. Henery Walker was the fust to write 'is name, and then Sam Jones, Peter Gubbins, Ralph Thomson, Jem Hall, and Walter Bell wrote theirs. Bob stopped 'em then, and said six 'ud be enough to go on with; and then 'e paid up the sixpences and wished 'em luck.

Wot they liked a'most as well as the sixpences was the idea o' getting the better o' Bob Pretty. As I said afore, he was a poacher, and that artful that up to that time nobody 'ad ever got the better of 'im.

They made so much fun of 'im the next night that Bob turned sulky and went off 'ome, and for two or three nights he 'ardly showed his face; and the next shoot they 'ad he went off to Wickham and nobody saw 'im all day.

That very day Henery Walker was shot. Several gentlemen fired at a rabbit that was started, and the next thing they knew Henery Walker was lying on the ground calling out that 'is leg 'ad been shot off.

He made more fuss than Bill Chambers a'most, 'specially when they dropped 'im off a hurdle carrying him 'ome, and the things he said to Dr. Green for rubbing his 'ands as he came into the bedroom was disgraceful.

The fust Bob Pretty 'eard of it was up at the Cauliflower at eight o'clock that evening, and he set down 'is beer and set off to see Henery as fast as 'is legs could carry 'im. Henery was asleep when 'e got there, and, do all he could, Bob Pretty couldn't wake 'im till he sat down gentle on 'is bad leg.

"It's on'y me, old pal," he ses, smiling at 'im as Henery woke up and shouted at 'im to get up.

Henery Walker was going to say something bad, but 'e thought better of it, and he lay there arf busting with rage, and watching Bob out of the corner of one eye.

"I quite forgot you was on my club till Smith reminded me of it," ses Bob. "Don't you take a farthing less than ten pounds, Henery."

Henery Walker shut his eyes again. "I forgot to tell you I made up my mind this morning not to belong to your club any more, Bob," he ses.

"Why didn't you come and tell me, Henery, instead of leaving it till it was too late?" ses Bob, shaking his 'ead at 'im.

"I shall want all that money," ses Henery in a weak voice. "I might 'ave to have a wooden leg, Bob."

"Don't meet troubles arf way, Henery," ses Bob, in a kind voice. "I've no doubt Mr. Sutton'll throw in a wooden leg if you want it, and look here, if he does, I won't trouble you for my arf of it."

He said good-night to Henery and went off, and when Mrs. Walker went up to see 'ow Henery was getting on he was carrying on that alarming that she couldn't do nothing with 'im.

He was laid up for over a week, though it's my opinion he wasn't much hurt, and the trouble was that nobody knew which gentleman 'ad shot 'im. Mr. Sutton talked it over with them, and at last, arter a good deal o' trouble, and Henery pulling up 'is trousers and showing them 'is leg till they was fair sick of the sight of it, they paid 'im ten pounds, the same as they 'ad Bill.

It took Bob Pretty two days to get his arf, but he kept very quiet about it, not wishing to make a fuss in the village for fear Mr. Sutton should get to hear of the club. At last he told Henery Walker that 'e was going to Wickham to see 'is lawyer about it, and arter Smith the landlord 'ad read the paper to Henery and explained 'ow he'd very likely 'ave to pay more than the whole ten pounds then, 'e gave Bob his arf and said he never wanted to see 'im again as long as he lived.

Bob stood treat up at the Cauliflower that night, and said 'ow bad he'd been treated. The tears stood in 'is eyes a'most, and at last 'e said that if 'e thought there was going to be any more fuss of that kind he'd wind up the club.

"It's the best thing you can do," ses Sam Jones; "I'm not going to belong to it any longer, so I give you notice. If so be as I get shot I want the money for myself."

"Me, too," ses Peter Gubbins; "it 'ud fair break my 'art to give Bob Pretty five pounds. I'd sooner give it to my wife."

All the other chaps said the same thing, but Bob pointed out to them that they 'ad taken their sixpences on'y the night afore, and they must stay in for the week. He said that was the law. Some of 'em talked about giving 'im 'is sixpences back, but Bob said if they did they must pay up all the

sixpences they had 'ad for three weeks. The end of it was they said they'd stay in for that week and not a moment longer.

The next day Sam Jones and Peter Gubbins altered their minds. Sam found a couple o' shillings that his wife 'ad hidden in her Sunday bonnet, and Peter Gubbins opened 'is boy's money-box to see 'ow much there was in it. They came up to the Cauliflower to pay Bob their eighteen-pences, but he wasn't there, and when they went to his 'ouse Mrs. Pretty said as 'ow he'd gone off to Wickham and wouldn't be back till Saturday. So they 'ad to spend the money on beer instead.

That was on Tuesday, and things went on all right till Friday, when Mr. Sutton 'ad another shoot. The birds was getting scarce and the gentlemen that anxious to shoot them there was no 'olding them. Once or twice the keepers spoke to 'em about carefulness, and said wot large families they'd got, but it wasn't much good. They went on blazing away, and just at the corner of the wood Sam Jones and Peter Gubbins was both hit; Sam in the leg and Peter in the arm.

The noise that was made was awful—everybody shouting that they 'adn't done it, and all speaking at once, and Mr. Sutton was dancing about a'most beside 'imself with rage. Pore Sam and Peter was 'elped along by the others; Sam being carried and Peter led, and both of 'em with the idea of getting all they could out of it, making such 'orrible noises that Mr. Sutton couldn't hear 'imself calling his friends names.

"There seems to be wounded men calling out all over the place," he ses, in a temper.

"I think there is another one over there, sir," ses one o' the keepers, pointing.

Sam Jones and Peter Gubbins both left off to listen, and then they all heard it distinctly. A dreadful noise it was, and when Mr. Sutton and one or two more follered it up they found poor Walter Bell lying on 'is face in a bramble.

"Wot's the matter?" ses Mr. Sutton, shouting at 'im.

"I've been shot from behind," ses Walter. "I'd got something in my boot, and I was just stooping down to fasten it up agin when I got it.

"But there oughtn't to be anybody 'ere," ses Mr. Sutton to one of the keepers.

"They get all over the place, sir," ses the 'keeper, scratching his 'ead. "I fancied I 'eard a gun go off here a minute or two arter the others was shot."

"I believe he's done it 'imself," says Mr. Sutton, stamping his foot.

"I don't see 'ow he could, sir," ses the keeper, touching his cap and looking at Walter as was still lying with 'is face on 'is arms.

They carried Walter 'ome that way on a hurdle, and Dr. Green spent all the rest o' that day picking shots out o' them three men and telling 'em to keep still. He 'ad to do Sam Jones by candle-light, with Mrs. Jones 'olding the candle with one hand and crying with the other. Twice the doctor told her to keep it steady, and poor Sam 'ad only just passed the remark, "How 'ot it was for October," when they discovered that the bed was on fire. The doctor said that Sam was no trouble. He got off of the bed by 'imself, and, when it was all over and the fire put out, the doctor found him sitting on the stairs with the leg of a broken chair in 'is hand calling for 'is wife.

Of course, there was a terrible to-do about it in Claybury, and up at the Hall, too. All of the gentlemen said as 'ow they hadn't done it, and Mr. Sutton was arf crazy with rage. He said that they 'ad made 'im the laughing-stock of the neighbourhood, and that they oughtn't to shoot with anything but pop-guns. They got to such high words over it that two of the gentlemen went off 'ome that very night.

There was a lot of talk up at the Cauliflower, too, and more than one pointed out 'ow lucky Bob Pretty was in getting four men out of the six in his club. As I said afore, Bob was away at the time, but he came back the next night and we 'ad the biggest row here you could wish for to see.

Henery Walker began it. "I s'pose you've 'eard the dreadful news, Bob Pretty?" he ses, looking at 'im.

"I 'ave," ses Bob; "and my 'art bled for 'em. I told you wot those gentlemen was like, didn't I? But none of you would believe me. Now you can see as I was right."

"It's very strange," ses Henery Walker, looking round; "it's very strange that all of us wot's been shot belonged to Bob Pretty's precious club."

"It's my luck, Henery," ses Bob, "always was lucky from a child."

"And I s'pose you think you're going to 'ave arf of the money they get?" ses Henery Walker.

"Don't talk about money while them pore chaps is suffering," ses Bob. "I'm surprised at you, Henery."

"You won't 'ave a farthing of it," ses Henery Walker; "and wot's more, Bob Pretty, I'm going to 'ave my five pounds back."

"Don't you believe it, Henery," ses Bob, smiling at 'im.

"I'm going to 'ave my five pounds back," ses Henery, "and you know why. I know wot your club was for now, and we was all a pack o' silly fools not to see it afore."

"Speak for yourself, Henery," ses John Biggs, who thought Henery was looking at 'im.

"I've been putting two and two together," ses Henery, looking round, "and it's as plain as the nose on your face. Bob Pretty hid up in the wood and shot us all himself!"

For a moment you might 'ave heard a pin drop, and then there was such a noise nobody could hear theirselves speak. Everybody was shouting his 'ardest, and the on'y quiet one there was Bob Pretty 'imself.

"Poor Henery; he's gorn mad," he ses, shaking his 'ead.

"You're a murderer," ses Ralph Thomson, shaking 'is fist at him.

"Henery Walker's gorn mad," ses Bob agin. "Why, I ain't been near the place. There's a dozen men'll swear that I was at Wickham each time these misfortunate accidents 'appened."

"Men like you, they'd swear anything for a pot o' beer," ses Henery. "But I'm not going to waste time talking to you, Bob Pretty. I'm going straight off to tell Mr. Sutton."

"I shouldn't do that if I was you, Henery," ses Bob.

"I dessay," ses Henery Walker; "but then you see I am."

"I thought you'd gorn mad, Henery," ses Bob, taking a drink o' beer that somebody 'ad left on the table by mistake, "and now I'm sure of it. Why, if you tell Mr. Sutton that it wasn't his friends that shot them pore fellers he won't pay them anything. 'Tain't likely 'e would, is it?"

Henery Walker, wot 'ad been standing up looking fierce at 'im, sat down agin, struck all of a heap.

"And he might want your ten pounds back, Henery," said Bob in a soft voice. "And seeing as 'ow you was kind enough to give five to me, and spent most of the other, it 'ud come 'ard on you, wouldn't it? Always think afore you speak, Henery. I always do."

Henery Walker got up and tried to speak, but 'e couldn't, and he didn't get 'is breath back till Bob said it was plain to see that he 'adn't got a word to say for 'imself. Then he shook 'is fist at Bob and called 'im a low, thieving, poaching murderer.

"You're not yourself, Henery," ses Bob. "When you come round you'll be sorry for trying to take away the character of a pore labourin' man with a ailing wife and a large family. But if you take my advice you won't say anything more about your wicked ideas; if you do, these pore fellers won't get a farthing. And you'd better keep quiet about the club mates for their sakes. Other people might get the same crazy ideas in their silly 'eads as Henery. Keepers especially."

That was on'y common sense; but, as John Biggs said, it did seem 'ard to think as 'ow Bob Pretty should be allowed to get off scot-free, and with Henery Walker's five pounds too. "There's one thing," he ses to Bob; "you won't 'ave any of these other pore chaps money; and, if they're men, they ought to make it up to Henery Walker for the money he 'as saved 'em by finding you out."

"They've got to pay me fust," ses Bob. "I'm a pore man, but I'll stick up for my rights. As for me shooting 'em, they'd ha' been 'urt a good deal more if I'd done it – especially Mr. Henery Walker. Why, they're hardly 'urt at all."

"Don't answer 'im, Henery," ses John Biggs. "You save your breath to go and tell Sam Jones and the others about it. It'll cheer 'em up."

"And tell 'em about my arf, in case they get too cheerful and go overdoing it," ses Bob Pretty, stopping at the door. "Good-night all."

Nobody answered 'im; and arter waiting a little bit Henery Walker set off to see Sam Jones and the others. John Biggs was quite right about its making 'em cheerful, but they see as plain as Bob 'imself that it 'ad got to be kept quiet. "Till we've spent the money, at any rate," ses Walter Bell; "then p'r'aps Mr. Sutton might get Bob locked up for it."

Mr. Sutton went down to see 'em all a day or two afterwards. The shooting-party was broken up and gone 'ome, but they left some money behind 'em. Ten pounds each they was to 'ave, same as the others, but Mr. Sutton said that he 'ad heard 'ow the other money was wasted at the Cauliflower, and 'e was going to give it out to 'em ten shillings a week until the money was gorn. He 'ad to say it over and over agin afore they understood 'im, and Walter Bell 'ad to stuff the bedclo'es in 'is mouth to keep civil.

Peter Gubbins, with 'is arm tied up in a sling, was the fust one to turn up at the Cauliflower, and he was that down-'arted about it we couldn't do nothing with 'im. He 'ad expected to be able to pull out ten golden sovereigns, and the disapp'intment was too much for 'im.

"I wonder 'ow they heard about it," ses Dicky Weed.

"I can tell you," ses Bob Pretty, wot 'ad been sitting up in a corner by himself, nodding and smiling at Peter, wot wouldn't look at 'im. "A friend o' mine at Wickham wrote to him about it. He was so disgusted at the way Bill Chambers and Henery Walker come up 'ere wasting their 'ard-earned money, that he sent 'im a letter, signed 'A Friend of the Working Man,' telling 'im about it and advising 'im what to do."

"A friend o' yours?" ses John Biggs, staring at 'im. "What for?"

"I don't know," ses Bob; "he's a wunnerful good scholar, and he likes writin' letters. He's going to write another to-morrer, unless I go over and stop 'im."

"Another?" ses Peter, who 'ad been tellin' everybody that 'e wouldn't speak to 'im agin as long as he lived. "Wot about?"

"About the idea that I shot you all," ses Bob. "I want my character cleared. O' course, they can't prove anything against me—I've got my witnesses. But, taking one thing with another, I see now that it does look suspicious, and I don't suppose any of you'll get any more of your money. Mr. Sutton is so sick o' being laughed at, he'll jump at anything."

"You dursn't do it, Bob," ses Peter, all of a tremble.

"It ain't me, Peter, old pal," ses Bob, "it's my friend. But I don't mind stopping 'im for the sake of old times if I get my arf. He'd listen to me, I feel sure."

At fust Peter said he wouldn't get a farthing out of 'im if his friend wrote letters till Dooms-day; but by-and-by he thought better of it, and asked Bob to stay there while he went down to see Sam and Walter about it. When 'e came back he'd got the fust week's money for Bob Pretty; but he said he left Walter Bell carrying on like a madman, and, as for Sam Jones, he was that upset 'e didn't believe he'd last out the night.