

The Miscreants

By Archie Hill

Two-Ton Tummy was a big man and he was a bully. He stood six feet four if he stood an inch and weighed 17 stones, and despite the fact that he could do the work of six men, no gaffers ever wanted him on their pay-roll, because before the day was out he'd 've picked a quarrel with at least a dozen other men, and sent them home limping, and they'd be off work for a week licking their wounds.

Old timers reckoned that in his prime the gaffers who did employ him had to have special shovels made for him, and a special wheelbarrow; the standard tools were like toys in the hands of a giant. They reckoned he could lift a hundred-weight of sand on his special shovel at one go, and that his flat-loading barrow could carry two tons, which Two-ton Tummy wheeled around as easy as a woman with a shopping basket. But he was a bully, and there was no getting away from it. If he was walking alongside the cut, the canal, and met up with some other bloke coming from the opposite direction, he'd make the bloke back up and give way. He just wouldn't let him pass. If the feller argued, then Two-ton Tummy just picked him up and slung him straight into the middle of the canal.

Turning The Tables

"Get out of that lot," he'd say, "and doh get in my way next time." Alright, he was a big 'un and a strong 'un and he was cock-o'-the-walk — until he met Blue Billy and my dad along the outside.

"Back up", Two-ton Tummy said, "turn round and goo the other way. You'm not going to get past me."

"Not on yoh're bloody life, Two-ton," Blue Billy answered, "yoh'll either let we past, else it's yoh who'll turn back." Two-ton Tummy grinned down at them from a giant's height and reached out two hands the size of number-nine shovels to grab the pair of them.

Between them, quick and slippery as ferrets, Blue Billy and my dad chucked Two-ton in the cut. Then they wouldn't let him come out. They broke sticks from nearby trees, and every time Two-ton tried to scabble out they pushed him back in.

"Ah can't swim," Two-ton pleaded.

"Nor can we," dad said cheerfully, "but we'm not a worrying about it, am we? And yoh'm tall enough to stond up straight and the water 'ull only come up to yoh're nose. If yoh bends yoh're head back a bit, yoh can still breathe."

A Serious Charge

I went to court to listen to the case against Blue Billy and my dad. Both policemen who'd been concerned in what happened after Two-ton had been tipped into the cut looked less big and burly with their helmets off. The one sporting a black eye and a cut lip looked a bit more human than the other, half of whose

what ah wants, fiddles for it, or fights for it. Ah never pleads."

Assaulting The Law

The constable with the cut lip and black eye went into the witness box, took the oath, and gave his evidence.

"At 3 o'clock in the afternoon of Friday last, January 12, I was proceeding in accordance with my duties in a North Easterly direction and when I reached the intersection of Womley Road and the canal which passes under it in a West to East direction, that is to say if you approach from a North Easterly direction — which is not the same as approaching from a South Westerly direction which would mean that the canal would flow from West to East. On the other hand —"

straightening up smartly, hands behind his back.

"There was a man in the canal," he said, "and the two accused were trying to keep him in the water with long willow sticks they'd broken off a tree. The man in the water was blue with cold. He complained that he'd walked almost a mile in the water, which just reached his chin, and the two accused wouldn't let him get out."

The magistrate was mystified.

"Why did they do that?", he asked.

The policeman shrugged. "There's some funny people about," he said darkly, looking at Dad and Blue Billy.

"Yoh for one," Blue Billy retorted, "and that mate of you'n for another. And we wort trying to push that feller into the water, we was trying to get him out."

"With that language you was using at him?", the policeman asked sarcastically, "ah suppose that was just to help him keep his spirits up."

"The language we used at

reinforcements. Eventually, three of my colleagues arrived."

"Are they in Court?", asked the magistrate.

"One is," answered the policeman, indicating his mate, "but the other two are on special duties."

"At wum, more like," Blue Billy muttered, "with their feet in bowls of hot water and sneezing their yeds off."

The magistrate thought about it.

"Am I to understand, he said at last, "that two of the officers fell in the canal?"

The policeman shook his head, visibly moved. He pointed a finger at Blue Billy and dad.

"These two pushed 'em in," he said.

"That's a lie," Blue Billy denied, "they slipped and fell in. Your honour, the holes along that tow-path am a foot high. Anybody could trip over 'em, like the two coppers did. We tried to pull 'em out with our sticks."

The policeman in the witness box yelped at him.

"You bloody liar," he said, "yoh was trying to keep 'em under. I distinctly heard you say to yoh're mate 'this is how we drownen kittens, ain't it, Will.' Then when my mate here and me tried to stop you, you thumped us."

Dad denied it. "Yoh got in the way of our sticks," he said, "as we was trying to help the other three to climb out of the water. And the water was that cold, as well."

Blue Billy grinned at the memory of it.

"Yoh'm mekkin' it all up just to get we into trouble," he said to the policeman, "blokes like we need police protection from blokes like yoe."

Thirty Days Inside

The magistrate sighed wearily.

"You'd best take the oath and give your version," he said, "let's try and get a bit of sanity into things." The Usher held the Bible and oath-card for Blue Billy to read.

"Do you swear —" the usher began, but Blue Billy interrupted like a flash.

"Frequently," he said, "but never in mixed company." It was the nearest thing to pure eloquence I'd ever heard fall from his lips. The magistrate had had enough.

"I find the defendants guilty," he said, "and fine them ten pounds each, or thirty days in default."

Blue Billy leaned towards the magistrate hopefully and confidentially. The hump on his back reminded me of Charles Laughton in that Notre Dame film.

"If it's alright with yoh, your honour," Blue Billy murmured, "We'd rather have the ten pounds apiece. We'm a bit short at the moment, what with being on the dole, and the money would come in handy."



The magistrate banged a fist upon his desk.

"The case," he said loudly, "Let us get on with the case. And officer — PLEASE keep it simple."

The policeman nodded respectfully.

"A woman comes up to me," he said, "and tells me there's a couple of fellers down the outside trying to drown another. So ah went and looked, and there was them two in the dock doing like what this woman said." Billy was mournful.

"He doh talk posh any more," he said to dad. "He talks just like me. He says"

the time." Blue Billy said with dignity, the slight hump on his back more pronounced than ever, "was based on what they callen psychology, wot me and my mate here am students on in our spare time. By cussing and swearing at the feller in the water like we did, it med him that angry as he swelled with rage and kept him afloat."

"Yoh used the same language at me and my mates," the policeman said, "and we weren't even in the bloody water." The magistrate banged his fist

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A Serious Charge

I went to court to listen to the case against Blue Billy and my dad. Both policemen who'd been concerned in what happened after Two-ton had been tipped into the cut looked less big and burly with their helmets off. The one sporting a black eye and a cut lip looked a bit more human than the other, half of whose face was covered in surgical dressings. Blue Billy and dad stood in the dock, looking serene as cherubs; only their hands, resting on the dock rail, showed the bark missing from their knuckles.

"Very serious charge," said the magistrate, "assaulting two police officers."

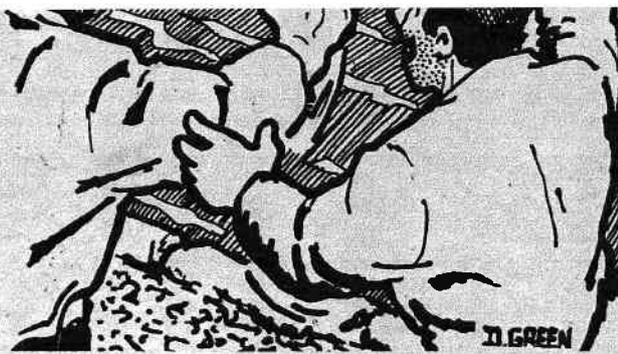
"Four, my dad interrupted, "There was four on 'em. But only two seem to have turned up". The magistrate looked at the papers in front of him.

"The charge-sheet says two," he said, "it says you assaulted two police officers."

"The other two got fritt an' run away," Blue Billy claimed, "and they'm too ashamed to come to court and admit it."

"You admit the offence?", the magistrate asked, "you plead guilty?"

"Ah pleads for nothin'," Blue Billy told him, "Ah'm me own gaffer. Ah werks for



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Billy was mournful.

"He doh talk posh any more," he said to dad, "He talks just like we lot done."

"He talks TOO bloody much, if yoh asks me," dad answered. "It's my opinion he's trying to get we two into trouble."

The magistrate peered at them over his glasses.

"Just let me know when you're ready to proceed," he murmured.

"Ar, alright, dad said.

"We'll do that," Blue Billy answered.

"SHUT UP, THE PAIR OF YOU," snarled the Clerk of the Court, "else you'll be taken down and remanded in custody for a week for contempt of court."

"Nasty," dad said.

"Cruel," Blue Billy agreed.

"PLEASE proceed," the magistrate said to the policeman, "and DO let us try and stay with the facts."

Psychology

The policeman did a Gilbert and Sullivan, bending at the knees and then

the time," Blue Billy said with dignity, the slight hump on his back more pronounced than ever, "was based on what they callen psychology, wot me and my mate here am students on in our spare time. By cussing and swearing at the feller in the water like we did, it med him that angry as he swelled with rage and kept him afloat."

"Yoh used the same language at me and my mates," the policeman said, "and we weren't even in the bloody water." The magistrate banged his fist again.

"Do you feel that we might drop the private conversations AND GET ON WITH THE CASE?" he shouted.

"A bloke who shouts and loses his temper just like you've done," dad warned the magistrate, "has already lost the argument. Yoh wants a drop of cascara to settle yoh're nerves."

"Chewing tobacco's better than cascara," Blue Billy contradicted, "ah remember this dog I had once —"

"LET'S GET ON WITH THE CASE," roared the Magistrates Clerk, "AND CUT ALL THIS NONSENSE OUT. Officer — proceed."

"Like ah said," said the policeman, "they'd tipped this feller into the cut and kep' trying to push him under with the sticks. I tried to stop them, but as fast as I stopped one the other started doing it again. In the meantime, I asked a passer by to phone my station for

wearily.

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"Thirty days," the magistrate declared, "in Winson Green. Take them down."

I watched the policemen take Blue Billy and my dad down the steps to the dungeon under the court house, and then I went home.

"Wheer's yoh're dad?", my mam asked when I'd got inside.

"Doing thirty days in Winson Green," I answered, "with Blue Billy."

Mam shrugged philosophically. "Might as well teck his dinner off the hob, then," she said, "he wote be needin' it for a while. Yoh might as well have it for yoh're supper, 'cos ah'm damned sure it wote stop fresh for thirty days."

"Men," she sniffed, "they'm all the same. Yoh stop as yoh am, young 'un and never grow up. Not yoh'll ever amount to nothin' with a dad like that."