

THE PROVING OF FINERTY

By W. FERGUSON.

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WHEN John Finerty had passed his civil service examination and the other necessary yards of red tape, he was assigned to the West Sixty-eighth Street station. His detail took in Sixty-first and Sixty-second Streets, between Amsterdam and West End Avenues. There are worse beats in the city but not many.

Finerty's beat was in the heart of San Juan Hill, that sharp declivity running from Columbus Avenue to the Hudson River and extending from Fifty-ninth Street to Sixty-fifth. When the Irish inhabited the district it was called Skinnerville, but when the negroes drove the former out in their march northward the name changed to Nigger Hill. Then came race riots and its present historic title.

It is a recognized fact in San Juan Hill that the negative colors, black and white, do not blend well and never will. At all events the district is known in police circles as "dangerous," a good place for a peaceful citizen to forget.

The police commissioner knew his business and Captain Hogan his duty when Finerty was assigned his beat. Finerty was only a raw hand, but he was far from being a boy. God has seldom made such a man. Six feet four he stood in the buff and moved the scales at 220 pounds. You could not have pinched a thumbful of fat on an ounce of those pounds. Forty-eight inches would not span his chest, but the official measurer lapped his middle with a thirty-inch line. Finerty was built for trouble.

The first day he stripped to the waist, upstairs in the dormitories, to wash, he caused a great deal of discussion and no little bad feeling. Plimmer was sitting on a cot, a bull's wool sock with the usual hole in the toe, in his hand. Plimmer was the minimum height and weight exhibit of the force—a tight-faced, acid-tongued cockney, "the top spit of Whitechapel," as he himself said with great vulgarity and pride. He was a former welter-weight champion of the Metropolitan police, London. Despite his birth he was a good man, and his fellow patrolmen did not hold his accent against him, though it was as villainous as his face, for Plimmer could hit like the kick of a sledge gun and run like a Filipino general. As a rule he was not enthusiastic, but when he saw Finerty's naked shoulders and chest, eloquence caught him by the throat.

"My eye!" he exclaimed, excitedly wiping his face with the bull's wool sock. "Blime me, if 'e ain't tremendous. 'E looks like Cleopatra's Needle. Wot a bloomin' 'eavy 'e'd make. 'Ere, let me feel o' your arm." He sprang off the cot and laid experienced fingers on Finerty's huge biceps. At the command, Finerty grudgingly flexed his muscles. He did not look gracious.

"'E ain't muscle-bound," cried Plimmer, as if his mother-in-law had died unexpectedly. "Selp me what a show he'll make of the records at Sulzer's Park next month. 'E's the very man we wants."

"Yeh," nodded Craig approvingly. "At th' hammer an' th' fifty-six pound weight. He'll fill a long empty hole. We never had a man good enough f'r them."

"I threw the weight twenty-nine feet three and one-half inches, yes," reminded "Handsome" Schmidt from his corner. "It was last year."

"Ho, yuss, and come in a bloomin' third," scoffed Plimmer. "We remember. But 'ere," and he tapped Finerty's wide chest, "we 'ave the genuine article. If this precinct don't win the championship may I die a bloom' Dutchman!" and he looked at Schmidt.

Finerty spoke for the first time. His eyes were on the floor.

"I'm goin' in no games," he said doggedly. Plimmer's eyes opened and his mouth shut. The men stared. "No trainin' an' no records f'r mine," finished Finerty heavily.

Craig was the first to recover. "Yer th' fittest man," he said sourly. "I thing yer oughter f'r the honor of th' house. It ain't fair to have such a build an' give us the go-by. On m' sacred Sam it ain't."

"On me bloomin' sacred Sam it ain't," improved Plimmer. "Wot 'ave you got against it? That's no way to do. Ain't you got no sportin' blood? Are you goin' to see your precinct licked by a lot of tykes?"

No, f'r I won't be at no games," said Finerty sullenly. His voice was determined.

"My eye," was all Plimmer could find to say. The rest of the men disgustedly read the decision in Finerty's sullen face. Plimmer was plausibly thunderstruck. "My eye, with all your bloomin' strength—"

"Blow m' bloomin' strength," growled Finerty reaching for his coat.

"My eye," said Plimmer again.

That was the beginning of John Finerty's unpopularity, and a month later when Smith's "twenty-nine feet three and one-half inches" in the weight throw at the Athletic carnival was repeated and his precinct made a very poor showing, Finerty's unpopularity increased.

"'E's a bloomin' tyke," said Plimmer in reference to Finerty. "We won the 'igh jump and the two-twenty, and if we'd 'ad 'im at the weights we'd 'ave made a show of the field. But 'e 'asn't any sand. Not a grain. 'E's a fine one to 'ave the beat 'e 'as."

"He aint made an arrest yet," said Brown meditatively. "I've had my eye on him."

"Ho, yuss," said Plimmer, "so 'ave I. Yesterday was my day off, and I 'appened to be on Finerty's beat. There came a fine chance for a fight, but before I could mix in Finerty had settled it. And 'ow? Why, argifyin'. Argifyin' like a bloomin' woman. Two niggers lickin' a white man and 'im argifyin' instead of beltin' their heads off like a gentleman. Ho, yuss," and Plimmer spat on the floor.

some hopefully, some sneeringly. But Finerty only made a mild remark regarding the weather. No one answered but Plimmer—and in a most unexpected way.

"We were discussin' politics," he said slowly, looking directly at Finerty, "and I said: 'T'ell with the Irish'."

"Yes?" said Finerty quietly.

"Yes," said Plimmer loudly. "And I said they were nothing but a lot of white-livered cowards."

Finerty's face slowly paled and his eyebrows met. The men were eyeing him narrowly. But Finerty remained silent, his huge hands slowly opening and closing. His wide chest heaved and his lips twitched, but the hand that pointed to his audience was steady.

"An' ye said all thot wid thim prisint?" he said, his brogue asserting itself. "All thim?" and he counted off the tally on his big fingers. "Mulligan, McGonigal, Brady, Collins, Murphy. 'Tis throe ye said all thot?"

But Plimmer was not to be caught.



"THERE WAS FINERTY SHOVING ONE OF THEM WHEEL CHAIRS BEFORE 'IM."

"What?" growled Brown, and Craig and Schmidt drew nearer.

"Selp me," said Plimmer virtuously. "And when he saw the fight comin' his way he got as white as a clay pipe. And when I asked him why 'e didn't mix in, 'e said 'e never would if he could 'elp it. 'E said the niggers were in the right that time. My eye, wot a cop! I tell you he's nothin' but a coward. Yuss." And again Plimmer spat on the floor, which was criminally wrong, for there were spittoons and explicit directions concerning trajectory.

"An' him such a great figure of a man," said Brown regretfully and from between his teeth.

"It's a shame," agreed Plimmer. "Such a 'eavy thrown away. But it ain't a man's weight wot tells, it's 'is sand. I've seen a bantam belt the wind out of a welterweight, all because 'e 'ad the sand the other chap 'adn't."

"If Finerty's a coward," said Craig, voicing the sentiment of the men, "the sooner he gets transferred the better for him. This precinct's a bad place for a coward. I suppose if there had been two white men and one nigger he'd have taken the part of his own color."

"There's only one way to find out," said Brown, "and that's to try him. He'll have to prove himself."

"'E's a coward," said Plimmer with conviction, "and I'll tell him so to his face." He glanced up quickly. Finerty, looking very large, was standing in the doorway. He paused for a moment, then came slowly into the room. The men were silent. Finerty was not ignorant of his own standing with his fellow patrolmen but now, if he had heard Plimmer's words, his hard face gave no sign. The men thought he had, that he could not help but hear them and they waited for his resentment,

"Ho yus," he said, unblushingly, leaning forward on the cot, his hands on his knees. "And they ses, 'Wait til Finerty comes in from patrol, 'E'll dress you down, my man. 'E's the one to show you the kind of kiddies they breed in Ireland. We'll give 'im fust chance at your bloomin' ead before we take a crack at it.' That's wot they ses."

"Sure chorused the men with a grunt. It was fun to see the mammoth baited by a bull terrier. Finerty considered a minute, a strange light in his eyes.

"Well," he said finally, "I don't foight f'r no man that don't foight for his country. He ain't worth it."

The five impeached patriots growled. There were not afraid of Finerty now. He had shown good digestive powers for unlovely words.

"An' mebbe there's another reason," sneered McGonigal.

"Oh, no, he ain't afraid," added Brady approvingly.

"And if you won't fight for them, will you fight for yourself?" said Plimmer truculently, jumping off the cot and doubling his fists.

"Sic him, Towser," said Brown through his teeth.

"Foight—you?" said Finerty with a laugh. "Back to yer crib. What I'd do to ye is to lay ye across m' knee and belt the seat of your trousers off."

"Go on and do it! Go on and do it!" implored Plimmer, dancing about and making intimidating motions with his experienced fists. "You're afraid. You're afraid in your bloomin' eart."

"Yes, I'm afraid," said Finerty measuredly, his face twitching. "An' whether this is a put-up job or not, foight I won't. Afraid I am, an' Gawd hilt the man, or the two men, or the three men, that makes me forgit that I am afraid. An' so I'm tellin' yese." And he stalked through the doorway unmindful of following threats.

"Selp me," said Plimmer, "and such a coward was made in the British Isles! 'E's a disgrace. 'E won't fight. You cawn't make 'im fight."

"If yeh think we're of that breed," spoke up McGonigal, mouthpiece of the five impeached patriots. "'Yeh come along down to the back room of McKewen's place an' any one of us will give yeh all the fight yeh can carry." His glance included Craig, Schmidt, and even Brown. "Just come on—all of yeh," he pleaded savagely, for his fellow countryman's exhibition had made him flaming for the honor of the crown and the harp.

"Rats," said Brown inelegantly but wisely. "We all know your records. There's no hard feelings. There's a black bean in every sack, and it seems we've got it." Brown had service stripes on his arm, and his words had weight as had his hand.

"'E oughter be showed up to the Old Man," said Plimmer. "I'm 'avin' the beat 'e 'as, and 'im as 'igh spirited as an old grandmother."

"There'll be no talkin' to the captain nor the sergeant," said Brown looking at Plimmer. "We ain't kids, we're men. If Finerty's a coward he'll be shown up all right, for there's always trouble sooner or later down there." (The Hill is always called "down there.") "But there'll be no squealin', and the man that does will catch the best beltin' he ever got in his life."

"I 'ope some colored gentleman 'll knock 'is bloomin' head off," said Plimmer with great sincerity.

But Plimmer's hope did not materialize. The Hill was unusually quiet and orderly. Some said it was only taking Finerty's measure as it took every new patrolman's, and that the lull was the deadly lull before the storm. But Finerty went stolidly about his duties as if nothing had ever happened or would happen. He met his fellow patrolmen's cold glances with indifference, and he never appeared to notice Plimmer's sotto voce remarks. Plimmer of all the men was the only one to show an active and personal resentment against Finerty's cowardice. Brute strength was his god, and to see it misused as Finerty had misused it was unpardonable.

"Guess 'ow Finerty spends 'is days off," he said one evening some weeks after his first unsuccessful baiting of the Irishman. "You know 'ow he flocks by 'imself. Well, to-day when I was on beat who did I see coming down the line but Finerty. And, say, 'e was shoving one of them wheel chairs before 'im like any bloomin' nussey maid. Ho, ho, it was a sight. There was a chap in the chair who looked as if a traction engine had run all over 'im. 'E was all twisted out of shape. 'E was a horrible sight."

"I know," put in Craig. "I live in his neighborhood. Finerty and him rooms together. They're pals. They say Finerty waits on him hand and foot. There's something the matter with the lad's spine."

"Well, Finerty makes a fine nuss," laughed Plimmer. "When I saw 'im I ses: 'Lift your petticoats, Lizzie when you skip the gutter.'"

"An' what did he say?" chorused the men, grinning.

Plimmer suddenly looked vindictive.

"'E told me to go to a place where they don't use thermometers," he said slowly. "The coward. 'E knew I couldn't hit 'im on patrol. But I'll 'it 'im. 'E cawn't tell me to go there. Ho, yuss, when 'e's off duty I'll just make 'im come to McKewen's place and I'll bingle the 'ead off 'im. I'll show 'im up for the coward 'e is."

The men laughed disbelievingly. You can't make a man fight—at least not a coward like Finerty. But Plimmer, a grim smile on his lips, held to the contrary and said so. He would "bingle" Finerty's head.

But the proving of John Finerty was not to be left to a Cockney-American patrolman nor the back room of McKewen's saloon. Fate decreed many actors and a large stage. On the following night a very good imitation of undiluted hades broke out on San Juan Hill. No one could say how it started. No one ever can—or will. But Finerty, on the night shift, saw a man leaning against the lamp-post that stands on the corner of Sixty-second Street and Amsterdam Avenue. That in itself is strange in that neighborhood, for the corner saloon is the recognized prop. "Drunk," thought Finerty, as the man wobbled uncertainly. But the Hill holds its drink and this man didn't. He commenced to cough slowly, thickly. The speckled flare of the lamp threw a fan of light into the gutter. And Finerty saw dark spots that were not shadows. It was one o'clock. The avenue was deserted.

The man straightened up in jerks, wiped a hand vaguely across his lips, then, as Finerty laid hold of him, eased himself slowly through the official arms to the pavement. He twitched there in the circle of light. Finerty knew him for a leader of the "white trash" roustabouts.

"S'll right," gulped the man with a laugh that strangled in its birth. "I guess I've got mine. Been layin' f'r me. They carved me good and proper. 'S'll right, though. Th' boys 'll square dis, you bet."

"Who did this?" said Finerty quickly.

The man waved a blood-smeard hand vaguely to the west.

"Down there, of course. That big coon—Williams—"

He was going fast. Finerty swung his nightstick against the pavement and the hollow raps of the locust went echoing down the avenue. Then he ran across the street to the nearest call box and sent in a hurry call to Roosevelt. Half a dozen men, spewed from the corner saloon, were now cursing loudly about the dying man. They had been attracted by the raps of the nightstick. They scattered as Finerty and two patrolmen from the adjoining beats butted through them. The scuffle and clang of the ambulance from Fifty-eighth Street came faintly from down the avenue.

"I'm going down there before that nigger gets away. You can see him aboard. I guess it's the morgue for his," said Finerty, motioning to the huddled heap on the sidewalk.

There was something in his voice that caused the two patrolmen to glance at him curiously. Finerty's eyes had a starved look. He seemed to be fighting with some terrible emotion or passion—choking it back.

"All right. I'll go with yeh," said Brady, one of the men, as the ambulance rattled up and the white-coated doctor hopped off.

The two made their way down the dark, silent Hill. Finerty, in his unostentatious way, had learned every square inch of his beat. He knew where Williams lived. A scattered trail of blood straggled here and there on the sidewalk.

Finerty, his jaws set, ascended the steps of an evil-looking flat-house. The door was shut, and no answer was given to his repeated ringing. Finerty used his nightstick. The Hill had been unusually quiet, but now a vague hum came from Amsterdam Avenue. The hum increased, windows were flung up and doorways emitted figures of both sexes and every age. A shot sounded somewhere in the night. The whites were out for revenge.

As Finerty continued to rap on the door something suddenly flashed between him and Brady and crashed on the steps. It was a brick from the roof. A window went up over the way and a revolver commenced to spit spitefully, its bullets humming about the heads of the bluecoats. The street suddenly seemed to be alive. A storm of white toughs came sweeping down from the avenue, and doorway, roof and window had each their welcome. Down on West End Avenue and the side streets, separate and private engagements were the rule. A hurry call had been sent in for the reserves, but a man might as well try to stem the flood tide as to bring peace and order to that turbulent sea of fighting humanity. Captain Hogan summed up the situation instantly and telephoned to neighboring precincts for all their available men.

Meanwhile, Finerty, with one heave of his huge shoulder, had sent the hall door crashing from its hinges.

"Don't yeh mix in there, it's a deathtrap," said Brady, hurriedly laying a hand on Finerty's arm. "They'll be waiting f'r yeh at the stop of th' stairs. Don't go in. Wait f'r th' reserves."

"Yeh can wait. I'm goin' in," said Finerty savagely, wiping away the blood where a bullet had grazed his cheek. "I'm goin' in," he said again. Even in the excitement Brady noticed the curiously tense tone of the voice and the steely glitter in the eyes.

"Yer a fool," snarled Brady, as Finerty sprang into the dark narrow hall. Another moment and Brady was swinging his nightstick, holding the stoop against the oncoming enemy. Then from the hall came crash on crash and oath on oath. Once he heard a laugh—a laugh that set his teeth on edge. It was Finerty's.

The room was not pretty. There was much dirt and very much blood. Much broken furniture and dishes and humanity. A fat negress huddled in a corner was sobbing hysterically. A half-starved geranium stood stiffly in a cracked jam pot on the window sill. A wheezy gas jet was flaring. On the floor lay three men—all big men. One lay still, but the other two twisted this way and that, groaning unpleasantly. On a lounge sat Finerty, hands on knees, staring fixedly at the three figures on the floor. The reserves found him thus. A razor scientifically wielded, an excellent flesh-cutting instrument, and Finerty had suffered.

"One dead and two most unconscious and not one shot," said the battered Brady in a hushed voice. "I can't believe it. I never seen such stren'th an'—an'—"

"An' blood lust! Say it, say it," cried Finerty fiercely, his voice breaking, stretching out his raw-or-barked hands. "Say it, an' yeh'll have the truth." He rocked back and forth and the bluecoats watched him with white strained faces. It's been m' curse," panted Finerty thickly, clenching his hands above his head. "Gawd's curse on m' stren'th. Gawd's curse on the devil that's in me. An' ye called me coward." He laughed—the laugh Brady had heard. "Yeh didn't know me. Yeh didn't know me. I could 'ave killed th' crowd of yeh with m' naked hands! Yes, I was afraid. Afraid of m' stren'th and th' devil. I tried to fight it back. Yeh'll never know how I tried. But to-night when I tasted th' blood on m' cheek and the sting of pain, th' devil rose in my throat and choked me—choked me. An' so—an' so—" His eyes returned as if fascinated, to the figures on the floor. His face whitened beneath the blood smears. "I thought I'd had a lesson," he whispered, his eyes wide and staring. He was talking to himself. "Once an enemy of mine called me a liar and struck me in the face. An' with m' naked hand I broke his spine and twisted him into a tangle of knots. But I'm no murderer for he lived an' I've tried to square it—" Finerty suddenly put his battered face in his big hands and commenced to sob as only a strong man can sob.

"He means the twisted man he's supportin'," whispered Craig.

The men looked at each other, then Brown slowly arose and, going over, laid a hand on Finerty's heaving shoulder.

"Yeh only done yer duty to-night, Jawn," he said. "It was your life or theirs. An' yeh mixed in where every cop in this precinct would have been afraid to go. It's all right, Jawn!"

Plimmer, one eye completely closed, was sitting on the remains of a chair. His unharmed eye was fastened in fascination on what had once been the negro murderer, Williams.

"And I called 'im a coward," he was saying dreamily to himself. "And I was going to bingle 'is head. Ho, yuss, I was going to bingle 'is bloomin' 'ead—me!"

THE END.

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