AFTER TWENTY YEARS

By O. Henry

The policeman on the beat moved up the avenue impressively. The impressiveness was habitual not for show, for spectators were few. The time was barely 10 o’clock at night, but chilly gusts of wind with a taste of rain in them had well-nigh de-peopled the streets.

Trying doors as he went twirling his club with many intricate and artful movement, turning now and then to cast his watchful eye adown the pacific thoroughfare, the officer, with his stalwart form and slight swagger, made a fine picture of a guardian of the peace. The vicinity was one that kept early hours. Now and then you might see the lights of a cigar store or of an all-night lunch counter; but the majority of the doors belonged to business places that had long since been closed.

When about middle way of a certain block the policeman suddenly slowed his walk. In the doorway of a darkened hardware store a man leaned, with an unlighted cigar in his mouth. As the policeman walked up to him the man spoke up quickly.

“It is all right, officer,” he said reassuringly. “I’m just waiting for a friend. It’s an appointment made twenty years ago. Sounds a little funny to you, doesn’t it? Well I’ll explain if you’d like to make certain. It’s all straight. About that long ago there used to be a restaurant where this store stands--‘Big Joe’ Brady’s restaurant.”

“Until five years ago,” said the policeman. “It was torn down then.”

The man in the doorway struck a match and lit his cigar. The light showed a pale, square-jawed face with keen eyes, and a little white scar near his right eyebrow. His scarfpin was a large diamond, oddly set.

“Twenty years ago to-night,” said the man, “I dined here at ‘Big joe’ Brandy’s with Jimmy Wells, my best chum, and the finest chap in the world. He and I were raised there in New York just like two brothers, together. I was eighteen and Jimmy was twenty. The next morning I was to start to west to make my fortune. You couldn’t have dragged Jimmy out of New York; he thought it was only place on earth. Well, we agreed that night that we would meet here again exactly twenty years from that date and time, no matter what our condition might be or from what distance we might have to come. We figured that in twenty years each of us ought to have our destiny worked out, and our fortunes made, whatever they were going to be.”

“It sounds pretty interesting,” said the policeman. “Rather a long time between meets, though, it seems to me. Have you heard from your friend since you left?”

“Well, yes, for a time we corresponded,” said the other. “But after a year or two we lost track of each other. You see, the West is a pretty big proposition, and I kept hustling around over it pretty lively. But I know Jimmy will me here if he’s alive, for he was the trust, stanchest old chap in the world. He’ll never forget. I came a thousand miles to stand in the door to-night, and it’s worth it if my old partner turns up.”

The waiting man pulled out a handsome watch, the lids of it set with small diamonds.

“Three minutes to ten,” he announced. “It was exactly ten o’clock when I parted here at the restaurants door.”

“Did pretty well out West, didn’t you?” ask the policeman.

“You bet, I hope Jimmy has done half as well. He was a kind of plodder, though, good fellow as he was. I’ve had to compete with some of the sharpest wits going to get my pile. A man gets in a groove in New York. It takes the West to put a razor-edge on him.”

The policeman twirled his club and took a step or two.

“I’ll be on my way. Hope your friend comes around all right. Going to call time on him sharp?”

“I should say not!” said the other. “I’ll give him half an hour at least. If Jimmy is alive on earth, he’ll be here by the time. So long, officer.”

“Good night, sir,” said the policeman, passing on along his beat, trying doors as he went.

There was now a fine, cold drizzle falling, and the wind had risen from it uncertain puffs to a steady blow. The few foot passengers astir in that quarter hurried dismally and silently with coat collar turned high and pocketed hands. And in the door of the hardware store the man who had come thousand miles to fill an appointment, uncertain almost to absurdity, with the friends of youth, smoked his cigar and waited.

About twenty minutes he waited, and then a tall man in a long overcoat, with collar turned up to his ears, hurried across from from the opposite side of the street. He went directly to the waiting man.

“Is that you, Bob?” he asked, doubtfully

“Is that you, Jimmy Wells?” cried the man in the door.

“Bless my heart!” exclaimed the new arrival, grasping both the other’s hands with his own.

“It’s Bob, sure as fate. I’d find you here if you were still existence. Well, well, well! -- twenty years is a long time. The old restaurant gone. Bob; I wish it had lasted, so we could have had another dinner there. How has the West treated you, old man?”

“Bully; it has given me everything I ask it for. You’ve changed lots. I never thought you were so tall by two or three inches.”

“Oh, I grew a bit after I was twenty.”

“Doing well in New York, Jimmy?”

“Moderately. I have a position in one of the city departments. Come on, Bob; We’ll go around to a place I know of, and have a good long talk about old times.”

The two men started up the street, arm in arm. The man from the West, his egotism enlarged by success, was beginning to outline the history of his career. The other, submerged in his coat, listened with interest.

At the corner stood a drug store, brilliant with electric lights. When they came into this glare each of them turned simultaneously to gaze upon the other’s face.

The man from West stopped suddenly and release his arm.

“You are not Jimmy Wells,” he snapped. “Twenty years is a long time, but not long enough to change a man’s nose from a Roman to a pug.”

“It sometimes changes a good man into a bad one.” Said the tall man. “You were under arrest for ten minutes, ‘silk’ Bob. Chicago thinks you may dropped over our way and wires us she wants to have a chat with you. Going quietly are you? That’s sensible. Now, before we going to the station here’s a note I was asked to hand to you. You may read it here at the window. It from Patrolman Wells.”

The man from West unfolded the little piece of paper handed him. His hand was steady when he began to read, but trembled a little by the time he had finished. The note was rather short.

Bob: I was at the appointed place on time. When you struck the match to light your cigar I saw It was the face of the man wanted in Chicago. Somehow I couldn’t do it myself, so I went around and got a plain cloth man to do the job.

Jimmy