

ADVENTURES OF A STOCK BROKER'S CLERK.

BY A. CONAN DOYLE.

My friend, Sherlock Holmes, the detective, came to me one morning after breakfast and said he had a particularly interesting case which he thought I would like to follow with him.

"What is the case?" I asked. "You shall hear it all in the train. My client is outside in a four wheeler. Can you come at once?"

In an instant I joined Holmes upon the doorstep.

This gentleman in the cab is my client, Mr. Hall Pycroft, said he. "Allow me to introduce you to him. Whip your horse up, cabby, for we have only just time to catch our train."

It was not until we were in a first class carriage, and well started upon our journey to Birmingham, that I was able to learn what the trouble was which had driven him to Sherlock Holmes.

"We have a clear run here of seventy minutes," Holmes remarked. "I want you, Mr. Hall Pycroft, to tell my friend your very interesting experience exactly as you have told it to me, or with more detail, if possible."

Our young companion looked at me with a twinkle in his eye. "The worst of the story is," said he, "that I show myself up as such a confounded fool."

"I used to have a billot at Coxon & Woodhouse of Drapers' Gardens, but there were let in early in the spring through the Venezuelan loan, and as no doubt you remember, and came a nasty cropper. I had been with them five years, and old Coxon gave me a ripping good testimonial when the smash came; but, of course, we clerks were all turned adrift, the twenty-seven of us. I came here and tried there, but there were many other chaps on the same lay as myself and it was a perfect frost for a long time."

"At last I saw a vacancy at Mawson & Williams, the great stock broking firm in Lombard street. I brook say E. C. is not much in your line, but I can tell you that is about the richest house in London. The advertisement was to be answered by letter only. I sent in my testimonial and application, but without the least hope of getting it. Back came an answer by return saying that if I would appear next Monday I might take over my new duties at once, provided that my appearance was satisfactory."

"And now I come to the queer part of the business. I was in diggings out Hempstead way—No. 17 Potter's terrace was the address. Well, I was sitting doing a smoke that very evening after I had been promised the appointment, when up came my lady with a card, which had Arthur Pinner, financial agent, printed upon it. I had never heard the name before and could not imagine what he wanted with me, but of course I asked her to show him up. In he walked—a middle aged, dark-haired, dark-eyed, black-bearded man. He had a brisk kind of way with him and spoke sharply, like a man who knows the value of time."

"Mr. Hall Pycroft, I believe?" said he.

"Yes, sir," I answered, and pushed a chair towards him.

"Lately engaged at Coxon & Woodhouse's?"

"Yes, sir."

"And now on the staff of Mawson's?"

"Quite so."

"Well, said he, 'the fact is that I have heard some really extraordinary stories about your financial ability. You remember Packer who used to be Coxon's manager? He can never say enough about it. You are very much too good to be a clerk at Mawson's."

"This outburst rather astonished me, as you can think. 'Well,' said I, 'other people don't think quite so much of me as you seem to do, Mr. Pinner. I had a hard fight to get this berth, and I am very glad to have it.'

"Pooh, man, you should soar above it. You are not in your true sphere. Now I'll tell you how it stands with me. What I have to offer is little enough when measured by your ability, but when compared with Mawson's it is light as dark. Let me see! When do you go to Mawson's?"

"On Monday."

"Hal ha! I think I would risk a little sporting flutter that you don't go there at all."

"Not go to Mawson's?"

"No, sir. By that day you will be the business manager of the Franco-Midland Hardware Company, Limited, with 184 branches in the towns and villages of France, not counting one in Brussels and one in San Remo."

"This took my breath away. 'I never heard of it,' said I.

"Very likely not. It has been kept very quiet, for the capital was all privately subscribed, and it is too good a thing to let the public into. My brother, Harry Pinner, is promoter, and joins the board after allotment as managing director. He knew that I

was in the swim down here, and he asked me to pick up a good man cheap—a young, pushing man, with plenty of snap about him. Parker spoke of you, and that brought me here to-night. We can only offer you a boggy £500 to start with."

"Five hundred pounds a year!" I shouted.

"Only that at the beginning, but you are to have an overriding commission of 1 per cent. on all business done by your agents, and you may take my word for it that this will come to more than your salary."

"But I know nothing about hardware."

"Tut, my boy, you know about figures."

"My head buzzed, and I could hardly sit still in my chair. But suddenly a little chill of doubt came over me."

"I must be frank with you," said I. "Mawson only gives me £200, but Mawson is safe. Now, really, I know so little about your company that—"

"Ah, smart, smart!" he cried in a kind of ecstasy of delight. "You are the very man for us. You are not to be talked over, and quite right too. Now, here's a note for £100, and if you think that we can do business you may just slip it in your pocket as an advance upon your salary."

"That is very handsome," said I. "When should I take over my new duties?"

"Be in Birmingham tomorrow at 11," said he. "I have a note in my pocket here which you will take to my brother. You will find him at 126B, Corporation street, where the temporary offices of the company are situated. Of course he must confirm your engagement, but between ourselves it will be all right."

"Really, I hardly know how to express my gratitude, Mr. Pinner," said I.

"Not at all, my boy. You have only got your deserts. There are one or two small things—more formalities—which I must arrange with you. You have a bit of paper beside you there. Kindly write upon it, 'I am perfectly willing to act as the business manager to the Franco-Midland Hardware Company, Limited, at a minimum salary of £500.'"

"I did as he asked, and he put the paper in his pocket."

"There is one other detail," said he. "What do you intend to do about Mawson's. I had forgotten all about Mawson's in my joy."

"I'll write and resign," said I.

"Precisely what I don't want you to do. I had a row over you with Mawson's manager. I had gone up to ask him about you and he was very offensive—accused me of coaxing you away from the service of the firm, and that sort of thing. At last I fairly lost my temper. 'If you want good men you should pay them a good price,' said I. 'He would rather have our small price than your big one,' said he. 'I'll lay you a liver,' said I, 'that when you has my offer you will never so much as hear from him again.' 'Done!' said he. 'We picked him out of the gutter, and he won't leave us so easily.' Those were his very last words."

"The impudent scoundrel!" I cried. "I've never so much as seen him in my life. Why should I consider him in any way? I shall certainly not write if you would rather that I didn't."

"Good! that's a promise!" said he, rising from his chair. Well, I am delighted to have got so good a man for my brother. Here is your advance of £100 and here is the letter. Make a note of the address, 126B Corporation street, and remember that 1 o'clock tomorrow is your appointment. Good night, and may you have all the fortune that you deserve."

"That's just about all that passed between us as near as I can remember it. You can imagine, Mr. Watson, how pleased I was at such an extraordinary bit of good fortune. I sat up half the night lugging myself over it, and the next day I was off to Birmingham in a train that would take me in plenty of time for my appointment. I took my things to a hotel in New street, and then I made my way to the address which had been given me."

"It was a quarter of an hour before my time, but I thought that would make no difference. One hundred and twenty-six B was a passage between two large shops, which led to a winding stone stair, from which there were many flats set as offices to companies of professional men. The names of the occupants were painted up at the bottom of the wall, but there was no such name as the Franco-Midland Hardware Company, Limited. I stood for a few minutes with my heart in my boots, wondering whether the whole thing was an elaborate hoax or not, when up came a man and addressed me. He was very like the chap I had seen the night before, the same figure and voice, but he was clean shaven, and his hair was lighter."

"Are you Mr. Hall Pycroft?" he asked.

"Yes," said I.

"Ah! I was expecting you, but you are a trifle before your time. I had a note from my brother this morning, in which he sang your praises very loudly."

"I was just looking for the offices when you came."

"We had not got our name up yet, for we only secured these temporary

premises last week. Come up with me and we will talk the matter over."

"I followed him up to the top of a very lofty staircase, and there, eight under the stairs, were a couple of empty and dusty little rooms, uncarpeted and uncurtained, into which he led me. I had thought of a great office with shining tables and rows of desks such as I was used to, and I dare say I stared rather straight at the two deal chairs and one little table which, with a ledger and a waste paper basket, make up the whole furniture."

"Don't be disheartened, Mr. Pycroft," said my new acquaintance, seeing the length of my face. "Home was not built in a day, and we have lots of money at our backs, though we don't do much dash yet in offices. Pray sit down and let me have your letter."

"I gave it to him and he read it over very carefully."

"You seem to have made a vast impression upon my brother Arthur," said he, and I know that he is a pretty shrewd judge. He swears by London, you know, and by Birmingham, but this time I shall follow his advice. Pray consider yourself definitely engaged."

"What are my duties?" I asked.

"You will eventually manage the great depot in Paris, which will pour a flood of English crockery into the shops of 181 agents in France. The purchase will be completed in a week, and meanwhile you will remain in Birmingham and make yours if useful."

"For answer he took a big red book out of a drawer. 'This is a directory of Paris,' he said, 'with the trades after the names of the people. I want you to take it home with you and to mark off all the hardware sellers with their addresses. It would be of the greatest use to me to have them.'

"Surely there are classified lists?" I suggested.

"Not reliable ones. Their system is different to ours. Stick at it, and let me have the lists by Monday at 12. Good day, Mr. Pycroft; if you continue to show zeal and intelligence you will find the company a good master."

"I went back to the hotel with the big book under my arm and with very conflicting feelings in my breast. On the one hand I was definitely engaged, and had a look of the office, the other, the look of the office, the absence of name on the wall, and other of the points which would strike a business man, had left a bad impression as to the position of my employers. However, come what might, I had my money, so I settled down to my task. All Sunday I was kept hard at work, and yet by Monday I had only got as far as H. I went round to my employer, found him in the same dismantled kind of room, and was told to keep at it until Wednesday and then come again. On Wednesday it was still unfinished, so I hammered away until Friday—that is, yesterday. Then I brought it round to Mr. Harry Pinner."

"Thank you very much," said he. "I fear that I underrated the difficulty of the task. This list will be of very material assistance to me."

"It took me some time," said I.

"And now, said he, 'I want you to make a list of the furniture shops, for they all sell crockery.'

"Very good."

"And you can come up to-morrow evening at 7 and let me know how you are getting on. Don't overwork yourself. A couple of hours at Day's Music Hall in the evening would do you no harm after your labors. He laughed as he spoke, and I saw with a thrill that his second tooth upon the left hand side had been very badly stuffed with gold."

Sherlock Holmes rubbed his hands with delight, and I stared in astonishment at our client.

"You may well look surprised, Dr. Watson, but it is this way," said he. "When I was speaking to the other chap in London, at the time that he laughed at my not going to Mawson's, I happened to notice that his tooth was stuffed in this very identical fashion. The glint of the gold in each case caught my eye, you see. When I put that with the voice and figure being the same, and only those things altered which might be changed by a razor or a wig, I could not doubt that it was the same man. Of course, you expect two brothers to be alike, but not that they should have the same tooth stuffed in the same way. He bowed me out and I found myself in the street, hardly knowing whether I was on my head or my heels. Back I went to my hotel, put my head in a basin of cold water and tried to think it out. Why had he sent me from London to Birmingham? why had he got there before me? and why had he written a letter from himself to himself? It was altogether too much for me, and I could make no sense of it. And then suddenly it struck me that what was dark to me might be very light to Mr. Sherlock Holmes. I had just time to get up to town by the night train to see him this morning and to bring you back with me to Birmingham."

"There was a pause after the stock broker's clerk had continued his surprising experience. Then Sherlock Holmes cocked his eye at me, leaning back on the cushions with a pleased and yet critical face, like a connoisseur who had just taken his first sip of a Comet vintage."

"Rather fine, Watson, is it not?" said he. "There are points in it which please me. I think you will agree with me that an interview with Mr. Arthur Harry Pinner in the temporary offices of the Franco-Midland Hardware Company, Limited, would be a rather interesting experience for both of us."

"But how can we do it?" I asked.

"Oh, easily enough," said Hall Pycroft cheerily. "You are two friends of mine who are in want of a billet, and what could be more natural than I should bring you round to the managing director?"

"Quite so! Of course!" said Holmes. "I should like to have a look at the gentleman and see if I can make anything of his little game. What qualities have you, my friend, which would make you services so valuable? Or is it possible that—" he began biting his nails and staring blackly out of the window, and we hardly drew another word from him until we were in New street."

"That's he walking ahead of us there."

He pointed to a smallish, blonde, well-dressed man, who was bustling along the other side of the road. As we watched him he looked across at a boy who was bawling out latest edition of the evening paper, and, running over among the cabs and buses, he bought one from him. Then, clutching it in his hand, he vanished through the doorway."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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