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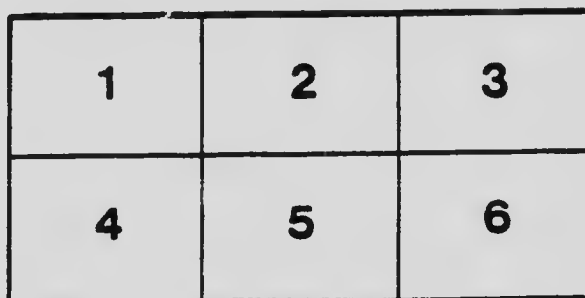
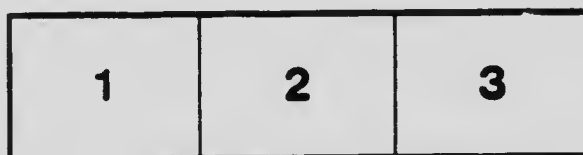
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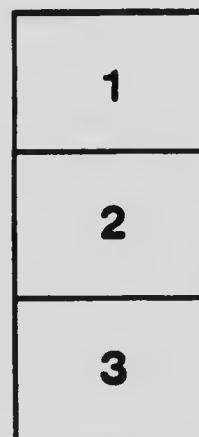
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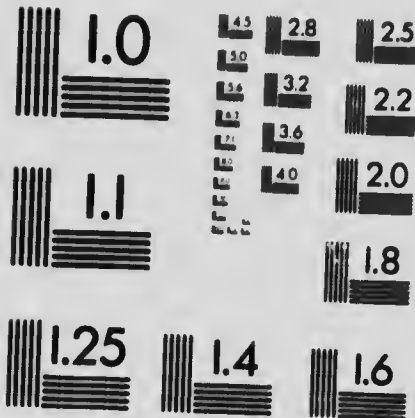
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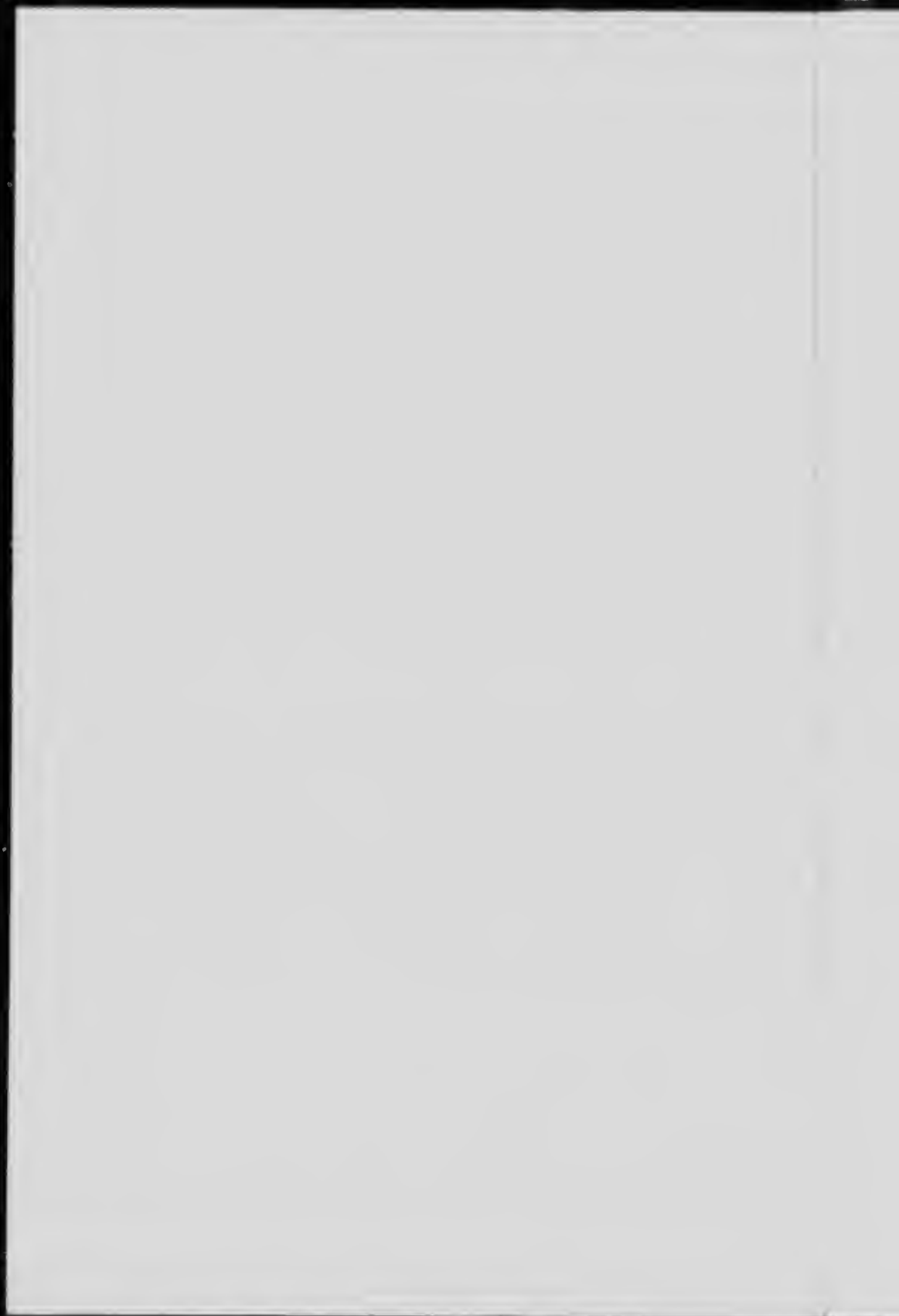


The Curious Quest

E. Phillips Oppenheim

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THE CURIOUS QUEST



Miss Maisie Linden reappeared, followed this time by a short, very dark young man with shiny black hair, olive complexion and narrow black eyes. *Frontispiece.*

THE CURIOUS QUEST

BY

E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

WITH FRONTISPIECE BY

F. VAUX WILSON

TORONTO
McCLELLAND AND STEWART
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THE CURIOUS QUEST



THE CURIOUS QUEST

CHAPTER I

MR. ERNEST BLISS descended from the eighty-horse-power motor-car which had been the pride of a recent exhibition and languidly rang the bell of a large house in Harley Street, which was the professional residence of Sir James Aldroyd, M.D. He was admitted almost at once by a solemn-visaged butler, and was escorted into the writing room in which three other people were already seated. He turned to the servant with a frown.

"I wrote to Sir James for an appointment at eleven o'clock," he said. "My name is Bliss — Mr. Ernest Bliss. Please let Sir James know I am here."

"I am sorry, sir, but Sir James sees his patients strictly in the order of their arrival," the man replied regretfully. "I don't think that he will be very long this morning."

"Do you mean that I have to wait my turn?"

"I am afraid there is no other way of seeing Sir James," the servant confessed.

Bliss seated himself absolutely in an easy-chair and resigned himself to wait with an ill grace which he took no particular pains to conceal. He was a very spoilt young man, and he was inclined to resent this treatment from a physician whom he was proposing to honour by his patronage. Each time the butler

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entered the room he half rose, expecting to hear his name called — and each time he was disappointed. It was not until his turn arrived that he was shown into the presence of the physician.

Sir James Aldroyd was seated before the writing table, making some notes in a diary concerning the patient who had just left him. Bliss crossed the room and, without waiting for an invitation, sank into the chair which he rightly conceived to be the resting place of the doctor's patients.

"My name is Bliss," he began. "I wrote you —"

"Wait just a moment, please," the physician interrupted brusquely.

Bliss stared at him with his mouth still open. He was not in the habit of giving way to his emotions, but he was beginning to be conscious of a distinct sense of annoyance. He made no protest, however; the physician's personality was, in its way, overpowering. He sat still and waited. Presently Sir James finished writing in his diary and drew an open letter towards him. He glanced it through without any marked indication of interest. His new patient's symptoms apparently failed to move him.

"Mr. Ernest Bliss?" he remarked, swinging round on his chair and taking up a stethoscope. "You wish me to examine you? Very well. Stand up and take off your coat and waistcoat, please."

Bliss obeyed at once and submitted himself to the usual routine. Ten minutes later, he sank back into his chair with ruffled hair and a general sense of having been subjected to many personal ignominies. He slowly buttoned up his waistcoat and watched the physician's face.

"What made you come to me?" the latter asked.

"Can't say, exactly," was the listless reply. "Felt out of sorts and thought I had better see some one. I heard Dicky Senn talking about you one day."

"Are you alluding to Mr. Richard Senn of the Shaftesbury Theatre?"

"Chap who does the ragtime dance in the second act," the young man assented. "He was cracking you up all over the shop. Said you were the only doctor in England who combined a certain amount of skill in his profession with a reasonable leaven of common sense. Not trying to butter you up, you know, but these were Dicky's own words, and Dicky knows things."

Sir James Aldroyd laid down his stethoscope and, leaning back in his chair, looked steadfastly at his visitor. His hard, clean-cut face, with its massive forehead and strenuous lips, was not in any way an expressive one, but it was obvious that he was regarding his new patient with a certain amount of disfavour. His eyes were cold and critical, his tone distant.

"Let me see, what did you say your name was?" he asked.

"Ernest Bliss."

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-five."

"What is your profession?"

"Profession? I haven't one," the young man replied.

"Your occupation, then," the physician continued impatiently. "You do something, I suppose?"

Bliss shook his head and glanced toward his ques-

tioner, as though doubtful concerning the effect of his next words.

"No necessity," he replied. "My father was Bliss, the ship owner. He left me three quarters of a million. Since then, my uncle has left me best part of another million."

Sir James played with his pencil for a moment and looked down at the table. As a matter of self-discipline, he was anxious to keep a certain expression from his face.

"So you do nothing because you are wealthy?" he remarked. "What are your tastes? Are you a sportsman?"

"I don't know whether I can exactly call myself that," the young man replied; "I have done the usual grind, of course. I have eight thousand acres of shooting in Norfolk, and a grouse moor in Scotland. Then I went out to Abyssinia last year with some fellows after big game. I've a hunting box at Melton Mowbray. Can't say I'm very keen about it."

"Not one of these -- er -- occupations affords you any particular interest at the present moment, then?"

Mr. Ernest Bliss shook his head.

"Fed up with them all," he declared. "I do a bit of motoring, but I'm off that at present."

"Married?"

"No."

"You keep late hours?"

"Always. It doesn't seem worth while getting up till dinner time. Every one's grumpy till the evening, and there isn't a thing to do in the daytime."

"And you have no appetite, you say?"

"None at all," the patient assented. "I seem to

have lost all taste for ordinary food. To keep myself going at all, I have to hunt around for something outrageous. My breakfast yesterday was caviare and a brandy and soda. I dined off bacon and eggs at the Ritz, and had a kippered herring for supper at the Savoy."

The physician leaned a little further back in his chair and regarded his visitor thoughtfully. The young man's appearance was not altogether unimpressive. He was short — if anything below medium height, and inclined to be thin. His fashionable clothes concealed his shoulders if he had any. His carriage was indifferent, and although his head was not ill shaped, his features were marred by a certain vagueness of outline and expression. His complexion was grey and unwholesome; the hand which rested upon the table was trembling slightly. His eyes, however, were good, and there was some suggestion of undeveloped humour about the lines of his mouth.

"You are suffering," the physician pronounced quietly, "from dyspepsia, nervous indigestion, and from what my fashionable friend in the next street would call neurasthenia. You are suffering in the same way, from an entirely different cause, as the man who comes to me broken down with work. Of the two, yours is the more difficult case to deal with. So much for the medical side."

"Just so," the young man murmured. "Now for the common sense. What am I to do?"

"Your cure," Sir James said, "is in your own hands. No one else can help you. If you wish to enjoy good health, you must completely change your manner of living for a time, and wear the sackcloth and ashes

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of the sanitary penitent. You have had unlimited opportunities of gratifying every whim in life, and you have used — or rather misused — them. Now you have got to pay."

Mr. Ernest Bliss sat a little more erect in his chair. Something in his companion's tone, perfectly controlled though it was, seemed to have roused him.

"There is nothing really the matter with me, then? I have told you what I feel like; nervous, giddy, absolutely faint sometimes in the morning. Seemed to me my heart must be dicky."

"There's nothing whatever the matter with your heart," the doctor assured him. "You have a fair constitution which you are doing your best to ruin at the present moment. You are sound enough. You will have good health or not for the rest of your life according to how you treat yourself. Go on living in your present manner, and you will be a poor sort of creature in ten years' time. Strike out a new line — drink beer instead of champagne, and water instead of beer occasionally; take real exercise, do some honest work, and you will soon lose those symptoms you were speaking of."

"Is that all the advice you can give me?"

"I can give you a prescription, but the medicine won't do you any good," the physician replied. "Drugs are no good to people in your condition except to drag them down a little sooner."

"It's all very well," Bliss remarked discontentedly, "but I hoped you might be able to give me more definite advice. There's no work I can do, and beer disagrees with me horribly. I might ride in the morning, but I'm not keen on the idea. You can't imagine,

Sir James, how bored I really am with life. Not a soul I care about, not a thing I could take any interest in doing. When I wake in the morning, I feel as though I'd just as soon be going to bed. Rotten, isn't it?"

"Very," Sir James replied drily. "You want more definite advice, did you say?"

"That's what I'm here for," Bliss admitted.

"You shall have it, then," Sir James continued. "You say there is not a single thing in your present life which you find attractive. I gather that you have no real friends, that there is no one with whom you care to spend your time. Break away from it, then. Disappear. Let it be known amongst your acquaintances that you have gone abroad for a time. Get into the City or some country town and earn your own living. Earn a pound a week, if you can find any one who thinks you worth as much, and live on it. A very interesting experiment and one which would certainly better your physical condition."

Mr. Ernest Bliss rose slowly to his feet.

"So that is your common sense, is it, Doctor?" he remarked.

"It is the soundest common sense you ever heard in your life," the physician answered briskly. "Of course you won't appreciate it. You are the fourth or fifth young man who has been to see me during the last few days, practically in your condition."

Bliss held out his hand.

"Not at all sure," he remarked languidly, "that I won't take your advice some day. Good morning."

Sir James was in a rather irritable mood, and he had conceived a most unprofessional dislike for his patient. It was seldom he gave way to his prejudices. For

once in his life, he did. He looked at Bliss' hand and, taking up his notebook, ignored it.

"Good morning," he said shortly.

The young man's cheeks were suddenly flushed. His outstretched hand fell back to his side. It was the first time in his life he had met with such treatment. Nevertheless, he stood his ground.

"You don't seem to like me, Doctor," he remarked.

"To be perfectly frank with you, I do not," Sir James answered brusquely. "I will go a little further and tell you that you are not the sort of patient I care to encourage or waste my time over."

"Why not?" Bliss demanded.

"Because the world is full of genuine suffering," the physician replied, "of men and women who drift into ill health through no fault of their own, sometimes from overwork, sometimes from want of the necessities of life, sometimes from their too great devotion to others. These are the sort of patients I desire to cultivate, to whose relief I like to dedicate my skill. As for you," he continued, a note of contempt creeping into his voice, "you have no moral stamina. You might practise self-denial for a week — that would be about your limit. Young men of your type have not learned how to persevere. They make a half-hearted effort to do something and relapse before they know where they are into their old ways. — Will you shut the door after you as you go out, please?"

Bliss remained motionless. His lips had come together in a manner which seemed to give a new expression to his face.

"So that is what you think about me, is it?" he said, with a curious new virility in his tone. "Very

well, then. Now that you have had your say, perhaps you will listen to me. Dicky Senn tells me that you used to be a bit of a sportsman at Oxford. I'll make a bet with you. You are the boss at St. James' Hospital, aren't you?"

"I am chairman of the governing board of that institution," Sir James replied stiffly.

"It was your name I saw at the bottom of a circular the other day," Bliss continued. "You're endg-ing for a new wing and general laboratory, aren't you? It's twenty-five thousand pounds you want, isn't it? Now listen to me. I'll lay that twenty-five thousand to a shake of the hand and an honest apology from you that I start out to-day with a five-pound note and live for a year on what I earn. Do you hear that?"

"I hear it," the physician remarked, with unmoved face. "A very interesting suggestion."

"Don't you believe I am in earnest?" Bliss demanded.

"You may possibly be," was the calm reply. "Your name and : alth are probably well known in certain circles. I can imagine that your bookmaker, or your wine merchant, or even your tobacconist would be very glad indeed to make use of your valuable services for twelve months at a suitable remuneration."

The young man was thoroughly angry, and it was a state which seemed to agree with him. His eyes had lost their leaden look, and there was a distinct flush of colour in his cheeks.

"I am not such a rotter as you seem to think me," he said excitedly. "I undertake that I will not derive the slightest benefit from my wealth, my name, or my present position, and that if, during that time, I draw

a cheque or touch my own money, it shall be one of the conditions that I personally, directly or indirectly, shall not profit by it. Don't let's have any mistake about this. I'll take no post except as Bliss, the out-of-work. If my identity is discovered or even suspected while I am in any one's employ, I will leave immediately. If I touch my own money at all any time during the next twelve months, for my own advantage, the bet is lost. Are you on?"

Sir James bowed a little sarcastically. His interest in his patient remained almost negligible.

"Certainly the hospital could do with twenty-five thousand pounds very nicely," he murmured.

"You understand the terms of the bet?"

"Perfectly."

Bliss, as he prepared to depart, produced an envelope from his pocket. Sir James pushed it away a little wearily.

"I cannot take money for such advice as I have given you," he said.

"Why not?"

"Because my advice is valueless. The odds are about a thousand to one against your taking it."

"So much the better for you if I don't," Bliss reminded him. "You'll get the twenty-five thousand for your hospital."

The physician rose to his feet impatiently and struck a bell by his side. He turned towards his visitor with an almost discourteous gesture of dismissal. For once he dropped the mask. The expression on his face was one of contemptuous disbelief.

"Perhaps," he said.

Bliss found himself filled to the brim now with un-

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II

expected and unusual emotions. The anger which the physician's attitude had kindled in him kept him for a moment silent. Then he clenched his fist and struck the table with what, for a weakling, was a very creditable blow.

"Thirty seconds ago," he declared, "it was just possible that your hospital stood a very fair chance of getting the money. Now I'm damned if you will ever see a penny of it."

"The bet, then, is off?" the physician enquired with a cynical smile.

"The bet is on," Bliss replied vigorously, "and I am going to win it."

CHAPTER II

THE metamorphosed Ernest Bliss stepped out on to the pavement with a very grim look upon his face. He managed to outstrip the butler in the hall by a few yards and deliberately slammed the door, a fact which seemed to afford him a queer sense of satisfaction. He turned out the chauffeur from his seat and, to the man's intense surprise, took the wheel himself and drove the car very skillfully through the difficult thoroughfares, until he arrived at a gloomy suite of lawyers' offices in Lincoln's Inn Fields.

"One of those cylinders is inclined to miss fire, Hayes," he said to the chauffeur as he descended. "I shall be here for about five minutes; just have a look at it."

"Certainly, sir," the man replied. "It's a drop of oil on one of the plugs. I'll have it all right, sir, by the time you come out."

The mention of his name to a youthful representative of the firm of Crawley and Crawley, Solicitors, procured for Bliss at once a very different reception from the one he had just encountered at the physician's, and should have done much to reestablish his self-esteem. The office boy was superseded by the managing clerk, who conducted him without delay, in a manner almost obsequious, to the august presence of Mr. William Crawley, senior partner of the firm, whose

smile of welcome and cheery greeting were of the order reserved for his most distinguished clients.

"My dear Mr. Bliss," he exclaimed, rising to his feet and holding out his hand, "this is indeed a pleasure! Take that easy-chair, won't you, and shall I send for some cigarettes? Do, please, make yourself comfortable."

"That's all right," Bliss replied, dragging up a high-backed chair to the lawyer's table. "I don't want an easy-chair, thanks, and I won't smoke. I have come on a very important matter of business."

"Dear me!" Mr. Crawley murmured. "The Hanover Street mortgages, perhaps. I have received an advice this morning —"

"Bother the Hanover Street mortgages," Bliss interrupted. "You know very well that I don't interfere in the matter of my investments. For the next twelve months they aren't going to interest me very much."

The lawyer adopted a waiting attitude. He leaned back in his chair with the tips of his fingers pressed very lightly together.

"Look here," Bliss continued. "What is it you fellows do when a client hops it out to Africa or somewhere for a year, and can't be heard of? He signs some document or other and you run the whole show."

"A power of attorney?" Mr. Crawley suggested gently.

"That's it," Bliss agreed. "Just draft me one out at once, will you?"

Mr. Crawley had the air of one who is being hurried along a little too fast. He coughed and leaned a little forward.

"Mr. Bliss," he said, "have you any idea as to the immense significance of such a document?"

"What I take it to mean," Bliss replied, "is that you will be able to sign cheques and transfers, and manage my affairs for me until I revoke it."

"Precisely," Mr. Crawley assented. "The responsibilities connected with such powers are enormous. In your case, Mr. Bliss, they would be stupendous. It would mean entire control of a fortune which to-day exceeds the sum of a million and a quarter sterling."

"Well, that's your job, isn't it, to take on responsibilities?" Bliss remarked coolly. "I should like to sign that power of attorney before I leave this office."

Mr. Crawley rose from his seat, rang the bell, and gave a few instructions to the clerk who answered the summons. Then he returned to his seat and once more addressed his client.

"Do I understand, then, Mr. Bliss, that you are thinking of going abroad?" he asked.

"It is very doubtful," Bliss replied, "whether I shall leave London."

"But then why —" Mr. Crawley began.

Bliss leaned a little forward and tapped the table firmly. There was a new directness in his manner, and a new ring in his tone.

"Look here, Mr. Crawley," he interrupted, "you're a sound lawyer, I know. You understand, I am sure, the first principles of your profession."

"My dear Mr. Bliss!" the lawyer murmured reproachfully.

"At six o'clock this evening, perhaps," Bliss went on, "I am going to disappear for exactly a year."

"To — er — disappear?"

"Precisely. You are not to ask me why; you are not to ask me for any further explanation. You need not know whether I am in London, on the continent, or in another hemisphere. Wipe me off the map for twelve months from to-day. You will probably hear from me now and then," Bliss continued, looking the lawyer straight in the face. "You may, or you may not. But if you want to keep my business, understand this; whatever may happen, I forbid you to make the slightest effort, under any circumstances, to ascertain my whereabouts."

Mr. Crawley had lost that *ave* yet firm composure which he flattered himself that nothing was able to disturb. His eyes, likewise his mouth, were very wide open. His expression, as he gazed at his client, was one of simple and unaffected astonishment.

"You take my breath away," he confessed. "Surely you don't realise the magnitude of your financial affairs. The Scotch mortgages will all be paid off during the next few months, and nothing has been settled yet about the reinvestment."

"What on earth do I know about reinvestments? I should leave it to you and the stock brokers, anyhow. Can't you understand this? You must treat me as though I were a ward in Chancery, and you a trustee fixed by the court to deal with my investments according to the best of your judgment. You understand?"

"The responsibility will be a very grave one, but since you insist, I must, of course, assume it."

"Then, that's all right," Bliss declared with a sigh of relief, as he rose to his feet and took up his hat.

"One moment, Mr. Bliss," the lawyer begged. "There is the power of attorney to sign."

Bliss laid down his hat again and waited while Mr. Crawley telephoned through to the clerk's office. In a few minutes the documents were spread out before him. With his finger upon the seal, Bliss took up a pen and signed his name. The lawyer glanced at the signature with fascinated eyes.

"Mr. Bliss," he said, his tone shaking with something suspiciously like emotion, "do you realise that you have made over to the control of one man, a million pounds' worth of stocks and shares and negotiable property?"

"You won't play skittles with it," Bliss asserted confidently.

"I have not sought this responsibility, but since you have forced it upon me, I can assure you that I shall use my very best efforts on your behalf. At the risk of offending you, however, I should be shirking my duty if I did not beg of you once more, before you leave this office, to give me some idea of the nature of this enterprise upon which you are about to enter."

"Can't be done," Bliss replied firmly. "It's nothing dangerous, I can assure you of that, nothing where I am likely to come to any harm."

"But what am I to reply to the enquiries I shall receive?"

"Nothing," Bliss insisted. "You have no information to give. That is all you need say, and it is the truth. I shall post you a list of the salaries you will have to pay, and, with luck," he added, glancing at the calendar which hung upon the wall, "we shall meet again in twelve months from to-day."

Bliss departed from Lincoln's Inn Fields leaving, with both Mr. Crawley and those others with whom he had spoken, an impression of something altogether strange. Once more he took the wheel of his car, and turning westward, arrived in about a quarter of an hour before a handsome grey-stone block of flats in Arleton Street. Before alighting, he stopped the engine and turned to the chauffeur who was seated by his side.

"Hayes," he asked, "how long have you been in my service?"

"Two years, sir," the man replied, a little startled.

"I'm not going to send you away," Bliss reassured him, "but I am going to give you a pretty tough job."

"If it is anything in the driving line, sir," the man began hopefully, —

"It is not," Bliss interrupted. "You have got to do nothing for twelve months, that's all."

The man grinned.

"I am thirty-one years old, sir, and I started work when I was eight. Never had a day's holiday to speak of. Think I could do with a year's rest, all right."

"All the same, I don't think you'll like it," Bliss warned him. "Listen. You need not call for orders till you receive word from Mr. Crawley. You can go to his office for your wages every Saturday. You will take the tyres off the cars and sling them up. If you like to get a job at one of the garages, I shall not object. That's your own affair."

The man looked distinctly puzzled.

"If I might take the liberty, sir," he began, —

"If you ask a single question," Bliss interrupted, "I shall sack you. Make the most of your year's rest."

"I shall work you hard enough when I come back. Here's good luck to you."

Bliss descended from the car, leaving the man with a five-pound note in his hand and a general expression of stupefaction upon his visage. He entered the lift and, ascending to the third floor, let himself into his own very handsome suite of apartments. His valet came hurrying into the hall to take his hat.

"Clowes," Bliss directed, "put me out a plain blue serge suit and a flannel shirt and collar. Then pack me a bag with some changes of linen and underclothes; no evening clothes, or anything of that sort."

The man preserved with an obvious effort his accustomed immutability of expression.

"You are changing at once, sir?" he asked.

"At once," Bliss replied. "You had better help me off with these things first."

In half an hour's time the bag was packed, and Bliss surveyed himself in the glass with qualified approval. For once, he had found his wardrobe inadequate to the demands made upon it. There were clothes for every sporting or social function which he might be called upon to attend. Its limitations, however, seemed reached by Bliss' present requirements. He had attired himself as simply as possible. His tie was inconspicuous, his shoes thicker than usual, and he had never made a habit of wearing a flannel collar when in town. Nevertheless, there was still an air of diletantism about his appearance.

"Best job I can make of it, anyway," he muttered to himself as he turned away. "Now then, Clowes —"

The man hurried forward. He was beginning to feel a little disturbed. His master's unusual attitude,

as well as his sartorial requirements, struck him as eccentric, and eccentricity was not a quality of which he approved.

"Nothing further I can do, sir?" he asked deferentially. "It's past one o'clock. May I make you an *apéritif*?"

"Ah, you may do that," Bliss assented. "and in the mean time, listen to me."

The man moved towards the sideboard and busied himself with several bottles and a silver shaker. Bliss puffed at a cigarette as he watched him.

"Clowes," he said, as he finally accepted the frosted glass, "I am going away this morning, and I am going to leave you a hard task."

"Yes, sir?" the man asked eagerly. "Would you like a shade more of the bitters?"

Bliss shook his head.

"Excellent," he pronounced. "Now listen carefully. People say that the hardest task in the whole world for a man used to regular employment is to do nothing. That is the job you've got to tackle. I am leaving here in a minute or two for twelve months."

The man started. He looked with almost horror at the suit-case which he had just packed.

"But you haven't any clothes, sir!" he protested. "Am I to pack your trunks and send them on?"

"I have all that I require," Bliss told him firmly. "So far as you are concerned, all that you will have to do is to take the letters each morning to Mr. Crawley, keep the place aired and comfortable, and ask no questions and answer none. All bills, taxes, and charges of any sort will be paid by Mr. Crawley on presentation, and of the rest you know nothing. I may be in Tim-

buctoo, or I may be in the next street. It is not your business to know, and you don't know. Get that well into your head."

"I understand perfectly sir," the man replied, looking more puzzled than ever. "You will forgive my mentioning it, but you are scarcely used to travelling without a servant. I hope you will reconsider the question of leaving me behind."

"There is no reconsideration possible," Bliss assured him. "I shall not require a servant. All that you have to do is to sit tight and wait for my return. I am sure that I can place every trust in you. You will be paid your full salary, and I hope you will use your spare time sensibly and not get into bad habits or anything of that sort. Look for me back again twelve months from to-day."

The man was, for a moment, incapable of speech. Bliss was busy going over all his pockets and collecting his money. When he had finished, there was a little pile of gold and notes upon the table.

"Thirty-four pounds, seven and ninepence," he announced, counting it out. "Now, Clowes, you dressed me, you are my witness that I have no more money in any of my pockets."

"Certainly not, sir," the man admitted.

"Take that five-pound note," Bliss went on, "fold it up, and place it in my pocket. I have no more money upon me, have I?"

The man's expression was almost pathetic. Insanity seemed to be the only possible explanation of his master's conduct.

"No, sir, no more money, certainly not."

"Very well then," Bliss said. "You can take what's

left for yourself, Christmas boxes, tips, and that sort of thing. Now carry my bag down-stairs, and put it on a taxi."

The man obeyed. He had the air, as he followed his master into the lift and down the court, of a man walking in a dream. Bliss, on the contrary, was more alert than he had been for many days. He carried himself almost briskly. A curious, untroubled thrill stirred him as he awaited the taxi.

"Where to, sir?" Clowe asked, as he deposited the dressing-case by the side of the driver and turned towards his master.

The question took Bliss a little aback. He hesitated for a moment. Then an inspiration seized him.

"Towards the City," he ordered firmly.

CHAPTER III

"So you're after the job, eh?" Mr. Masters asked, tilting his office chair back to a dangerous angle and eyeing his visitor keenly. "Dash my buttons! I thought you were a customer when you came in."

Mr. Ernest Bliss also leaned back in his chair, which, by-the-by, he had taken uninvited. He was still wearing the exceedingly well-cut blue serge suit in which he had started out upon his pilgrimage. The trousers were, however, mud-splashed, and his boots already showed signs of wear. His expensive malacca cane reposed across his knees. He was slowly withdrawing his reindeer gloves from his fingers.

"Sorry if I disappointed you," he observed. "I have called in answer to your advertisement. I wish to sell — er — the Alpha Cooking Stoves, I believe you call them."

Mr. Masters looked his visitor up and down and failed to recognise the type.

"Want to sell our stoves," he murmured dubiously.

"I read your advertisement in *The Daily Telegraph* in the public library this morning," Bliss continued. "You say that you want a man, young, able, and pushing. I possess all three of these qualities."

"Ever been on the road?" Mr. Masters enquired.

The young man hesitated. The technicality of the question for a moment defeated him. He temporised.

"What I may lack in experience," he ventured, "I

certainly make up in the quality you call push, and in sheer undoubted ability."

The young lady who was typing in a corner of the room looked up at these words and surveyed him curiously. A broad grin spread itself over the round, good-natured features of the stove manufacturer.

"A trifle modest, eh?" he remarked.

"Not now," Bliss replied. "I started that way when I began to look for a job a fortnight ago. At present I am trying to realise my own worth. It seems to be the only way to impress it upon other people."

Mr. Masters' expression changed. A prodigious frown spread over his features. This time, not the flicker of a smile escaped him. He was a very formidable person indeed.

"Don't believe you ever sold a soap dish in your life," he growled.

"Who ha?" his visitor asked blandly. "What have soap dishes to do with the subject of our conversation? You, I take it, are the manufacturer of the Alpha Cooking Stove. I am the man whom Providence has selected for you to sell that particular article at, I think you said, two pounds a week salary, all out of pocket expenses and five per cent. commission on sales."

Mr. Masters brought his chair forward with a bang.

"Steady, young fellow. I haven't engaged you yet," he interrupted.

"But you will," Bliss declared confidently. "I'm sure you will, and I should be awfully obliged if you would hurry up and settle it. I want to begin work."

Mr. Masters stared at this somewhat unusual ap-

plicant. He was a large man, with broad features and a ruddy complexion. He had the anxious look and the wandering eyes of an inventor. It seemed to be his continual aim in life to be regarded as a man of forbidding appearance, an aspiration with which his own kind heart was continually contending.

"Well, I'm blowed!" he exclaimed vigorously. "Here, Miss Clayton."

The young lady, a plainly dressed, brown-haired girl of quiet but attractive appearance, ceased her performance upon a typewriter and turned round.

"Yes, Mr. Masters?"

"Just bring me the applications for the job, will you?" he ordered. "You'll find them all on top of the safe."

The young lady promptly disappeared. Bliss pulled up his trousers a little higher, displaying an alluring vision of Bond Street socks.

"Waste of time going through those, rather, isn't it?" he suggested pleasantly. "There are always crowds of people out of a job who answer any advertisement. Now I," he added slowly and emphatically, "have never before been out of a job in my life."

Mr. Masters, although he made an effort to conceal the fact, was visibly impressed.

"You've been jolly lucky, then," he declared. "Jolly lucky, young man. I couldn't have said the same at your age. Never out of a job, eh?"

"Not once," Bliss assured him.

The young lady, who had just returned with a pile of letters in her hand, looked him up and down. There was a vague disfavour in her eyes.

"Have you ever had one?" she asked sarcastically.

Bliss was speechless. The suddenness of the attack had unnerved him. Mr. Masters, however, saved the situation.

"What do you think of that, my young sir?" he exclaimed triumphantly as he pointed to the stack of letters. "One hundred and twenty applications from commercial travellers of experience, — men who know their job and simply want the privilege of selling the Alpha Cooking Stove. Will you tell me exactly why you expect I am going to chuck all these in your favour? Eh?"

Bliss looked at his questioner steadfastly. Mr. Masters' bushy eyebrows were drawn together in what was meant to be a terrifying frown, but underneath his blue eyes were shining with furtive kindliness.

"Because this is my thirteenth application for a job, Mr. Masters, and thirteen is my lucky number. If you want another reason, here it is. I am done to the world, and if I don't get it, I shall either have to starve, or go back to — er — what I was doing before."

"And what might that be?" Mr. Masters demanded suspiciously.

"Nothing dishonest," Bliss declared, "but nothing very reputable. I want to raise myself, not sink back. You are a good-natured fellow, Mr. Masters; you don't want to see a man —"

The stove manufacturer struck the desk with his fist.

"Stop," he thundered.

Bliss obeyed promptly. Mr. Masters was frowning more ponderously than ever. The brown-haired typist too had ceased rattling the keys of her machine, and was looking up.

"Don't get giving yourself away, young man," Mr. Masters expostulated. "There are some things it is better to keep to yourself. Now answer me one question. Is this reference of yours from these lawyer chaps bona fide, or isn't it?"

"It is absolutely bona fide," Bliss declared fervently.

Mr. Masters moved towards the door.

"We'll go and have a look at the stove, anyway," he said. "A child could sell it, but you may as well look it over. Wait here one moment."

He passed hastily out into the warehouse to interview a loiterer who was gazing at the model of the stove. Bliss was left alone with the brown-haired typist.

"Do you think I'm going to get this job?" he asked her.

She raised her head for a moment and looked at him. He perceived then that he had underrated her attractions. She was tall and a little thin. Her eyes were large and soft, her complexion clear, and her mouth showed character. Bliss recognised in her from that first moment some quality which placed her in another world from all the women with whom he had been used to associate.

"I am afraid you are," she replied.

"Afraid?" he repeated, a little staggered.

She nodded.

"'Afraid' is the word I used. Mr. Masters is far too kind-hearted. He can't say no to any one. That is why I added to the advertisement that all applications must be made in writing. You are the first one who has disregarded it."

"But tell me why you don't want me to have the

job?" he begged. "I don't see why I shouldn't be able to sell stoves as well as anybody else."

She looked him over critically. There was the suspicion of a smile upon her lips which vaguely irritated him. Her eyes rested for a moment on his cane.

"Are you going to take that about with you?" she asked.

He coloured a little.

"Of course not," he answered. "The fact is, I brought it out with me to take to the pawnshop, but when I started walking, I got so frightfully keen on coming here that I couldn't spare the time."

She turned back to her work.

"Well, it isn't my business," she sighed. "Sometimes I almost wish it were. Mr. Masters is a clever inventor, but he hasn't the least idea how to make money or organise things. If he had happened to hit upon a really first-class traveller who took an interest in the stove and knew how to place it on the market, it might have been our salvation, that's all."

Bliss rose slowly to his feet. He was conscious of a feeling of almost absurd disappointment. The memory of the past fortnight rose up like a nightmare before him.

"Very well, then," he decided a little doggedly, "I'll go."

He moved towards the door. She stopped him.

"Come back," she ordered. "That's very nice of you if you mean it, but it's too late. Mr. Masters is one of the most obstinate men in the world. That is why I said nothing. Now that he has made up his mind to engage you, you must be engaged."

"I'll go away if you say so," he persisted.

"No use! He would never rest until he had found you again."

"You wish me luck, anyhow," he begged.

Her lips relaxed a little.

"I wish you luck with your sales," she said. "We need orders badly."

"You shall have them," he promised.

"What's that? What's that?" Mr. Masters demanded, as he pushed his noisy way through the door.

"I have just been assuring this young lady," Bliss explained, "that if I get the job, I am going to bring you plenty of orders."

Mr. Masters patted him on the shoulder.

"Then get to work, young man," he said. "The job is yours."

CHAPTER IV

BLISS, in his first unsuccessful efforts to sell the Alpha Cooking Stove, wore out a pair of shoes and spent twenty-six of the most miserable days of his life. He, who had been the spoilt darling of servile commissionaires, of theatrical door-keepers, restaurant pages, and obsequious *maitres d'hôtel*, was snubbed vigorously by small boys who looked at him through half-opened wicket holes and kept waiting for hours in draughty passages by inattentive clerks, only to have his card brought back from the buyer of some furnishing department, with a message more or less covertly insolent. He was at divers times informed, when he got a hearing at all, that his particular stove was the worst, the dearest, and the most out-of-date of all stoves that ever cumbered the ground. His face grew a little harder day by day. Distaste of this new career upon which he had entered, half in a spirit of bravado and half with a real though fleeting enthusiasm, deepened with his lack of success. His knees began to tremble, no longer from nervousness, but from actual weakness. He slept in a cheap lodging on the topmost floor of a house in a dingy neighbourhood, and he ate cheap food. He lived on his weekly two pounds, which he accepted after his fruitless labours with a groan; and each evening when he returned to the little warehouse in Fore Street to make his report, he went through a sort of purgatory. The moment his foot crossed the threshold, it began. The warehouseman, who was

generally engaged in polishing the model stove, stopped his work and looked at him expectantly. Mr. Masters always met him at the office door. His stereotyped question was delivered with an eagerness which it had become daily more hard to conceal.

"Any luck to-day, Bliss?"

The brown-haired girl, too, ceased her work and looked at him. Each time he had to make the same answer. It was becoming unbearable. On the twenty-sixth day he limped painfully in to face his ordeal. He had walked from Islington and was giddy. He spoke even before he could open the door, spoke with half-closed eyes. He felt that to-day he was bringing with him the culminating disappointment. He had been to keep an appointment upon which Mr. Masters had placed great hopes.

"No luck," he announced. "Not the ghost of an order! Benbers wouldn't even see me. Their clerk told me that they had placed a large contract for an American stove five per cent. cheaper than ours."

The girl's face was suddenly averted. Mr. Masters, with a muttered word, rose and went out into the warehouse. Bliss sank into his vacant chair and covered his face with his hands. The girl looked across the room at him and sighed.

"You seem tired," she said. "Shall I make some tea?"

The note of compassion in her voice was the most pleasant thing he had heard that day. He looked up at her gratefully.

"If you would," he replied. "I do feel pretty well done. I suppose I am a mug," he went on bitterly, "but I don't believe the Archangel Gabriel could sell those stoves."

"I am afraid," he sighed, as she crossed the floor with a cup of tea in her hand, "that the broker's man will have to."

He looked up at her quickly.

"What do you mean?" he asked. "I thought that we could not get them fast enough; that they were all being shipped for export."

"Bluff," she assured him. "All bluff! I don't suppose there's any harm in telling you now. Mr. Masters bought the whole bankrupt stock of an iron-founder in Sheffield. It was a great speculation for him, but you know how sanguine he is. He has nearly five hundred stoves made and not twenty sold. The first bill for the material was paid last week, and the next is due on Tuesday. We cannot meet it. We can only just pay the wages on Saturday. By next Tuesday we shall have five hundred stoves in stock, and not a penny in the bank."

Bliss could say nothing. He only sat and stared.

"I feel so sorry for Mr. Masters," she went on softly. "He was only a working man, and he saved the few hundred pounds he started with, week by week. He is so proud of his name and character. I think that it will break his heart if he has to fail, and there is no help for it that I can see."

"Five hundred stoves in stock," Bliss murmured, "at fourteen guineas. Why doesn't he sell some at a little less, just enough to pay this bill?"

She nodded.

"He has tried to do that, although he hated it because he did not think it was fair business. He offered two hundred to-day at actual cost to a firm, just to

pay next week's bill. They declined. He is almost desperate about it."

"Great Cæsar!" Bliss muttered. "And I have been kicking myself because I couldn't sell them at fourteen."

"That's a different thing altogether. You have been calling mostly upon retail people, and fourteen guineas is a very fair price. To tell you the truth, I am surprised that you haven't sold any," she added, a little unfeelingly. "You seemed so very confident when you started."

He set his teeth. There was a look in his face which would have astonished Sir James Aldroyd.

"There are two days left," he reminded her grimly.

The door was thrown open, and Mr. Masters bustled in with his accustomed air of exuberant energy. He was humming a tune to himself, but his affected cheerfulness was a little overdone. "Ah! there you are, Bliss," he exclaimed. "Afraid I must remind you that your time is up on Saturday. A month's trial, that was it, wasn't it?"

Bliss rose heavily to his feet.

"Sorry I've been such a failure, sir," he said slowly. "I have got two more days, however, and it's occurred to me — well, I have had an idea as I sat here. Perhaps it isn't worth much, but I want to make one more effort to-morrow."

Mr. Masters was mildly curious.

"Going to try a new district?" he enquired. "You've got the whole field to yourself, you know, and the finest stove in the world to sell. It's just a question of getting at the right people."

"That's exactly what I feel myself, sir," Bliss as-

sented thoughtfully. "By-the-by, if I wanted a stove to show a customer —"

"There's one in the packing case outside," Mr. Masters interrupted eagerly. "Tim hasn't gone yet. He can take it wherever you like. He hasn't had a stroke of work to do all day. Shall I tell him to put it on a truck?"

Bliss burnt his boats.

"If you please," he answered valiantly.

Mr. Masters hurried out, shouting for the warehouseman. Already his step was more buoyant. The girl looked at Bliss almost reproachfully.

"Do you think it's quite fair to give him false hopes like that?" she demanded.

"There's no false hope about it," Bliss replied, taking up his hat. "I'm going to sell that stove and a dozen more like it before this time to-morrow night."

She looked at him searchingly. She was forced to admit that the Ernest Bliss of to-day was somehow a very different being from the young man who had sat in that chair a month ago, and in whom, at that time, she had felt no confidence whatever. There was a new ring in his voice. His mouth seemed to have become tenser, and his manner more determined. A little thrill of hope crept into her reply.

"Oh, if you only can!"

Her eyes glowed. He was suddenly conscious of the birth of new powers within him. He felt like a Samson.

"I shall," he asserted. "And what then?"

It was amazing to him that he had not realised her charm before. She flashed a wonderful smile upon him and sat down before her machine.

"Well, we'll see!"

CHAPTER V

BLISS, committed to an enterprise only the barest details of which he had as yet conceived, went off down the street with Tim and the packing case following close behind. He walked rapidly at first, and without any precise idea of his destination. Tim, who had grown used to inactivity, was beginning to feel somewhat aggrieved.

"How far might you be going, sir?" he cried out presently, pausing to wipe the perspiration from his forehead.

Bliss stopped short upon the pavement.

"Sorry, I'd forgotten all about you," he said. "I have one or two calls to pay before I want the stove. No need for you to come with me. Look here! Do you know St. James' Street?"

"Do you mean St. James' Street right up the West End?" Tim demanded ruefully.

"That's the one. Can you find your way there without me? You can take your own time and wait for me outside Number Thirty-seven — name of Broadbent, house agents. I shall be there in less than an hour."

Tim wiped his forehead, and with a surprising lack of delicacy referred to the impossibility of getting to St. James' Street without refreshment. With a sigh Bliss thrust his hand into his trousers pocket and glanced at the contents. He was possessed of two

shillings and ninepence halfpenny, with nothing more to come until Saturday morning. He handed the ninepence halfpenny to the porter.

"Mind you're there," he enjoined. "It's important."

From the first, Bliss proceeded on his new campaign with a total and almost contemptuous disregard of difficulties. When he arrived at his banker's an hour after closing time, he simply rang the bell at the side door until he was admitted. The mention of his name made the rest easy. When the young man at the estate agents in St. James' Street scoffed at the idea of letting an empty shop in Regent Street for anything under a term of years, Bliss brushed him out of the way, and, with a handful of bank notes, arranged the matter promptly with the head of the firm. A few minutes later, accompanied by the clerk carrying the keys, and followed by Tim wheeling the truck, he made his way to the lower part of Regent Street and took temporary possession of the new premises he had selected. The packing case was deposited on the boarded space in front of the plate-glass window. The young man, after showing them the whereabouts of the electric lights and other small details, departed. Bliss closed the door after him and returned to Tim.

"Look here, Tim, you understand these stoves, don't you?" he asked.

"I understand them all right," Tim replied, "but what the mischief's our little game here?"

"You'll see fast enough to-morrow morning," Bliss told him. "What I want you to do now is to unpack the cooking stove, fix it well in front of the window, and get ready to start it going at eight o'clock to-morrow morning. You leave the rest to me."

Tim scratched his head dubiously.

"There's a bit of fuel and some oil and polishing needed," he remarked, "to do it justice."

From his right-hand pocket Bliss produced a couple of sovereigns.

"Take these, Tim," he directed, "and buy anything you want to keep the thing going. And listen! I don't want you to return to the City until I give the word. We'll see if we can make this a go first. I shall be here at eight o'clock in the morning, too."

Tim departed wonderingly, and Bliss followed him a few moments later. In his right-hand pocket he had three hundred and fifty pounds in bank notes, and a little loose gold, the property of Ernest Bliss, Esquire, millionaire; in his left-hand pocket he had exactly two shillings, the sum which represented every penny in the world possessed by Mr. Ernest Bliss, town traveller to the firm of Musters and Company, Cooking-stove Patentees and Manufacturers. It was just the hour when the streets of the great city are most attractive, both to the foreigner and to the born Londoner of Bliss' type and habits. Around him flared the soft lights which he had once found so irresistible. The subtle charm of the West End, which no human being has yet exactly defined, with its restaurants de luxe, its music, its gaily dressed women, stole into his blood. He was full of poignant reminiscences. Six weeks' privations were suddenly forgotten. He stood between the entrances of two famous restaurants. After all, just one dinner might go down to the expenses of launching the Alpha Cooking Stove. It was foolish to be so quixotic. And even then, while he hesitated, he was suddenly clutched by the arm. He was con-

scious of the perfume of violets and the soft touch of furs, the flash of a pair of dark eyes close to his, and a very familiar voice.

"If it isn't Ernest — Ernest Bliss! You little wretch! Where have you been to for the last month? Hilda, just look here!"

The two girls who had just alighted from a taxi almost held him captive.

"Not once at the theatre," the little lady who had spoken to him first continued reprooffully, "not once in the café at the Milan, not once, even, have you sent the car for us. Come and have some dinner at Oddy's and tell us what has happened."

For a moment he hesitated. They were almost upon the threshold of the restaurant. The commissionaire, who had already recognised him, was standing bare-headed. He felt hungry for the warmth, the lights, the delicate food and wine, all the luxuries which he had so strenuously denied himself during the last six weeks. The girl who had taken possession of him was leaning on his arm.

"You can't get away," she laughed. "Come in and tell us all about it, and why you are wearing such queer clothes."

There was one more fateful moment of hesitation. Then a working girl, with pale cheeks and a tired walk, passed them with her head turned towards the skies. Bliss was suddenly conscious of a wave of reminiscence, an added strength of purpose; something which rang in his tone and gave his voice a new quality.

"Sorry, girls," he said firmly, "but all those things are off for me at the present moment. Look here, we are old friends. You won't be offended, Kitty, I know."

He thrust two or three notes from his right-hand trousers pocket into the girl's hand.

"There," he concluded. "Run along and have your dinner and buy yourselves some flowers. I've some business I must look after."

The girl looked at him wonderingly. She had known a somewhat dissipated boy, she was suddenly conscious that she was talking to a man.

"Come and have dinner with us, at least," she begged. "You can run away afterwards."

He shook his head. He had already drawn himself free.

"I am dining elsewhere," he declared with a grim smile, as he thought of the two shillings which reposed in his left-hand pocket. "So long, girls!"

He hurried off, breathing quickly like a man who has had a merciful escape from some misfortune. He dined for tenpence in Soho, and a little later he let himself into his flat in Arleton Street, with a curious sense of unfamiliarity in his surroundings. Clowes came forward at the sound of the key and saluted his master without the least sign of surprise.

"Have you dined, sir?" was his only question.

Bliss nodded.

"Come into my dressing room at once," he directed. "I want to change into some morning clothes."

"There are three baskets full of letters that I have not known what to do with, sir, which Mr. Crawley has sent back here. Private letters and invitations."

"They must wait," Bliss replied shortly. "I am not ready to deal with them yet."

Half an hour later he left the flat with an only half-stifled sigh of regret as he passed out from its warm,

luxurious comfort into the drizzling rain of the streets. He slept that night in the hard little bed in his attic, and at eight o'clock the next morning he let Tim into the shop in Regent Street. By ten o'clock a good many of his notes had gone, but the stove was burning and a white-clad chef was busy cooking upon it. An enormous stock of provisions was there in reserve, a carpet was upon the floor, and Bliss himself was seated before a Derby desk, in tail coat, dark grey trousers, and a silk hat, sucking a large cigar in full view of the passers-by. In the window was a huge, hastily printed placard :

FREE MEALS FOR THE HUNGRY

COOKED UPON

THE FAMOUS

ALPHA COOKING STOVE

In less than an hour's time, a commissioner had to be engaged to look after the door, and two policemen were on duty outside regulating the crowd. The chef had to be relieved by an assistant. Constant streams of provisions were arriving, and the long table set out at the back of the shop by a furnishing firm was occupied all the time by a strange-looking crowd of wayfarers. Bliss sat at his desk busily writing, apparently up to his eyes in affairs, but secretly a little uneasy. So far, not a single bona-fide enquiry had been made with regard to the stove. Towards three o'clock, however, a young man who had driven up in a taxi touched him on the shoulder.

"Are you in charge here?" he asked.

"I am," Bliss admitted.

"What's the price of your stove wholesale?" the young man enquired.

Bliss glanced at the card which the former handed to him. The name printed upon it was that of Ellermans Limited, the largest wholesale stores in the country.

"The price to you, wholesale, is thirteen and a half guineas," Bliss said, "but I am not sure how far we can book orders. We get a good deal more from the retail people, and metal's going up, as you know, to say nothing of the chances of a strike."

"We'll stock a score at thirteen and a half, ten off," the representative of Ellermans Limited suggested.

Bliss sighed as he wrote out the order and received it back signed.

"We are not here for this sort of business," he remarked. "This was just an idea of ours to strengthen the hands of our retail customers. We are not in a position exactly to look for fresh business until our new works are finished."

The buyer looked at him curiously.

"Pretty enterprising firm, yours!"

Bliss shrugged his shoulders.

"This sort of thing pays, nowadays. You will excuse me, won't you? There are one or two other buyers waiting, although I'm sure I don't know what I can say to them."

His visitor promptly buttonholed him.

"Wait a moment," he insisted. "Let's look over this stove together. Try one of these cigars."

The young man went down on his knees and spent

the next five minutes in a minute examination of the stove. When he had finished he shook the dust from his trousers and took Bliss by the arm.

"Look here," he said, "you know my people. A man's no use to us, anyway. Is it any good my bringing my managing director down here to see you?" Bliss shook his head doubtfully.

"The fact is," he said, "you're too big for us. We don't want to sell too many wholesale. Thirteen and a half guineas is a cut price."

"There's no object," the young man continued firmly, "in your dividing up this business amongst half a dozen firms. We pay prompt cash, and I think we can handle your stoves. There's a little patent arrangement at the back — Masters' Patent, it's called, I believe — which I like. Make us an offer of a thousand."

"You bring your managing director down, and we'll see," Bliss replied, pinching his leg with the hand that was inside his trouser pocket, to make sure that he was awake.

"I'll make the present order for a hundred if you like, in the meantime," the young man suggested.

Bliss altered the figures with a sigh.

"I don't think we shall be able to go much farther than that at the price," he declared.

"See you later, anyhow," Ellermans' young man replied.

Bliss closed his desk and took a taxi down to the City. There was a new smile upon his face, a new sense of pleasure in his pulse, a new alacrity in his manner as he entered the dingy little warehouse. Mr. Masters, at the sound of the opening door, jumped up from his

seat and looked anxiously out of the office window. Miss Clayton, after her first hopeful glance, stared at his attire in amazement. Bliss gave them no time to ask questions.

"I want you both to come along with me," he exclaimed. "I have a taxicab waiting."

Mr. Masters clapped on his hat and made for the door, his coat tails flying behind him. Frances lingered only for a moment to arrange her hat before a looking-glass. They drove up West and all the time they bombarded him with questions. Bliss, however, was like a child with a surprise in store.

"Just a little idea of mine," he kept on repeating. "Kind of 'last hope' affair. It's coming off trumps, too!"

"Have you sold any stoves?" Frances asked, with practical directness.

"You'll know all about it in a minute or two," he promised.

They descended in Regent Street. Bliss paid for the taxi out of his right-hand trousers pocket. The crowd in front of the shop was larger than ever. Mr. Masters stood with his hat on the back of his head, and with his mouth wide open, gazing at the stove, gazing at the busy chef, gazing at the advertisement in the window. He was speechless. It seemed as though he were being told for the first time in his life that the Alpha Cooking Stove was the best in the world.

"Come inside," Bliss directed, "and I'll tell you all about it."

They pushed their way in. Bliss made Frances sit in his chair. Mr. Masters was standing with his mouth still open, and his legs wide apart, his eyes glued upon the stove and the two perspiring cooks.

"Just a little advertisement idea of mine," Bliss explained. "Nothing like it in these days. They are talking about the Alpha Cooking Stove all over London. Some of the papers are going to give us a free ad. Ellerimans' man has been here, and he has placed an order for a hundred at thirteen and a half prompt cash, and they want a contract for a thousand. Here's the order, look at it!"

"But where on earth," Mr. Masters demanded at last, as he held the slip of paper between his shaking fingers, "did you get the coin from to run a show like this? I've had some such thought in my mind for ages, but I could never get hold of the money."

"I borrowed it from a silly ass I know who has more money than is good for him," Bliss answered. "I borrowed five hundred. Here is the balance."

He emptied the contents of his right-hand trousers pocket, a handful of notes and gold, into Mr. Masters' hand.

"You'll have to repay him the amount and the interest," Bliss continued. "But he's in no hurry for it, and he'll send you the bill. By-the-by, allow me!"

He took two pounds from the heap of money and thrust it into his pocket.

"My to-morrow's salary," he explained. "I'm a trifle short. Here's Ellerimans' man. He's brought his managing director along with him. Good luck, and good-by."

Mr. Masters looked more astonished than ever. Frances, who had been listening, rose quickly to her feet. He turned to both of them. There were tears almost in his eyes.

"I'm sorry," he said, "but I must go at once. I

can't take my commission on the stoves. All that I can accept is that two pounds which isn't really due until to-morrow, and I've got to leave you without notice."

"You'll stay as my partner, you young idiot!" Mr. Masters thundered. "Go, indeed! What do you think I'm made of? You've saved me from ruin. God bless you!"

Bliss was conscious of a curious and most exhilarating sense of pleasure. It was an absolutely new and extremely pleasant sensation. He held out one hand to Mr. Masters and one to the girl. She, also, was looking at him appealingly.

"You won't really leave us?" she begged. "Please don't."

"It isn't my choice," he assured them earnestly. "It's just a hard necessity. It's part of a bargain I made and must keep; but I shan't forget, — I shan't ever forget."

He wrenched his hand free. Mr. Masters turned after him. A portly gentleman, however, blocked the way.

"Mr. Masters, I believe? My name is Burrell, managing director of Ellermans Limited. I should like to have a business talk with you about the stoves."

Mr. Masters drew a long breath. He was only human, and fortune was knocking at his door.

"Take a seat, Mr. Burrell," he said. "Glad to meet you, sir."

Their heads grew close together as they talked, and Frances moved away towards the window. Heedless of the crowds in front of the shop, she was gazing with

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dim eyes along the pavement. Bliss, with his old clothes in a brown paper parcel under his arm, a new dignity in his carriage, and two pounds and fourpence in his left-hand trousers pocket, was walking steadily away eastwards.

CHAPTER VI

BLISS stood before the window of his attic, gazing down upon one of the busy streets in the neighbourhood of St. Pancras. Behind him, his landlady was busy clearing away his meagre breakfast. Below, the rain-soaked streets were thronged with an ever increasing stream of people and a tangled chaos of uninspiring-looking vehicles. A stunted row of smoke-blackened trees stood like dreary sentinels before a medley of dejected-looking tenement houses. The horizon was grey and murky. Perhaps, for the first time in his life, Bliss realised the intense depression that comes from the contemplation of sheer ugliness.

"You'll excuse my reminding you, sir, but it's gone eight o'clock."

Bliss turned suddenly round. His landlady was standing with the tray in her hands, preparing to leave the room. She was a small, thin woman. Her face was sharpened with the stress of many anxieties. Her grey hair was brushed uncompromisingly back from her forehead. Nevertheless, there was kindness in her tone, kindness even in her sad eyes and tired mouth. She looked at her lodger as though she almost dreaded to hear his reply.

"No hurry for me this morning, Mrs. Heath," Bliss said. "I have had to leave that first job of mine."

She sighed as she rested the tray for a moment on the edge of the table.

"It's bad luck, sir," she said simply.

"Rotten," Bliss agreed.

"It's a wretched morning to go out looking for work," she went on. "You haven't any idea of a post, I suppose?"

Bliss shook his head grimly.

"To tell you the truth, Mrs. Heath," he said, "it isn't very often I've found myself in this position, and I am not sure that I go about the business the right way. What do your lodgers do as a rule when they want a job?"

"They try either a Labour Bureau or a Registry Office," Mrs. Heath told him, "according to their means and the sort of job they want."

"I've a week's salary in my pocket, and I don't owe you anything, do I, Mrs. Heath?"

"You know I'm not thinking about that, sir," she declared reproachfully.

"Anyway, I think it will run to a Registry Office," he decided. "Tell me a good one, Mrs. Heath."

She paused for a moment to reflect.

"It depends a little on the sort of post you're looking for," she said. "Now, what you want, sir, is something light and gentlemanly; any one can see you weren't made for hard work. Besides, there is something about your appearance. Why, when your clothes are brushed up, and you've got a clean collar on, any one might take you for a gentleman. I should try for something light, sir."

"If it comes," Bliss remarked thoughtfully, "to a contest between brain and muscle, I am not really sure, in my case, which would win. Let me give myself the benefit of the doubt and say brain."

"Then you try Smithson's, corner of Endell Street," Mrs. Heath advised. "I know a young fellow got a job there, twenty-four shillings a week, and kept it for two years."

Bliss took up his hat.

"Smithson's it shall be," he declared, "and here's luck, Mrs. Heath."

The luck came slowly. For four successive mornings Bliss spent the greater part of his day either waiting about Smithson's, or making long and purposeless tramps in search of a situation. On the fifth day the crush at the office was greater than usual. He stood for half an hour in a queue of men of all ages and conditions. Every now and then he moved a few steps forward. In the end his turn came. He leaned across the counter of the enquiry office and was confronted by an anæmic-looking young man who wore spectacles and a general air of distraction.

"You back again?" he exclaimed, as he recognised Bliss. "Why, I have given you a dozen names in the last four days."

"Done my best," Bliss answered promptly. "I was five minutes too late for the last job."

The young man scribbled a name on a piece of paper, and handed it across the counter.

"Look here," he said. "If you can't bring that off, you'd better try another office. You've had your value out of this one."

"I've tried for every job you've given me," Bliss protested. "I've good references, and I'm not particular about wages. It isn't my fault if they are all filled up before I get there."

"Well, hop it now," the young man advised. "Don't

show yourself here unless you're prepared to plank down another fee."

Bliss marched out into the street, glanced at the piece of paper in his hand, and set off steadily westwards. In something less than half an hour he arrived at his destination. He paused outside a block of buildings in King Street, and entering, mounted steadily to the topmost flight of stairs. From the luxury of the first three floors he passed by slow stages to a bare simplicity. The final stairs were uncarpeted, the walls unpapered. The lift itself reached its terminus on the floor below. A small brass plate adorned the panel of the only door upon the landing, a brass plate upon which was inscribed the name which Bliss bore upon the slip of paper he was carrying:

MR. W. COCKERILL

Bliss paused for a moment to recover his breath, then knocked at the door. He turned the handle and entered. A shrill voice greeted him.

"Oh, you bad young man! Bad young man!"

Bliss dropped his hat and forgot to pick it up. Exactly opposite to him, perched upon the mantelpiece, was a grey parrot, with its head on one side and a knob of sugar in its claw. Five canaries shared a cage which hung before one window, and two bullfinches a smaller one suspended from the ceiling. A third bullfinch was hopping about the top of a Derby desk, at which was seated an elderly gentleman, grey-haired, with pink and white complexion, gold-rimmed spectacles, and a type of countenance almost Cheeryble-like in its benevolence.

"Come in, sir, come in," Mr. Cockerill invited. "Don't mind my birds. They're a little noisy, but they're very companionable."

"Now what can I do for you to-day?"

Bliss recovered his composure to some extent. He picked up his hat and stood before the desk.

"I had your name from Smithsonian's Registry Office," he announced. "I called about the situation of light porter."

Mr. Cockerill shook his head at once.

"Not a bit of good, my young friend," he declared, pleasantly but firmly.

"Not a bit of good," the parrot screeched from the mantelpiece.

Bliss turned towards the door.

"Well, of course, if you both think so --" he began, with an angry glance towards the bird.

"Stop a moment," Mr. Cockerill exclaimed. "A sense of humour, I perceive. Most unusual. Come here and let me look at you — round this side of the desk."

Bliss obeyed promptly. His blue serge suit was now showing considerable signs of wear. His Bond Street socks were no longer in evidence. His patent shoes, the triumph of a fashionable maker, had been replaced by heavy ready-made boots. His cheeks were a little sunken, although his eyes were bright. He wore a flannel collar, and his tie was still neat. Mr. Cockerill looked him up and down and shook his head again slowly.

"No physique," he declared. "No physique at all. Not what I am looking for, young man. Very sorry. Here's a shilling for your trouble."

"It isn't a shilling I want," Bliss replied desperately; "it's a job. Why won't I do? They told me at the office you wanted a light porter. Is there any heavy work?"

Mr. Cockerill stroked his chin.

"Not exactly heavy work," he admitted. "The duties would be to clean out and feed the birds every morning — 'Tommy, by-the-by, is very particular about his cold bath,' he added, pointing to the bullfinch, which was still hopping about on the top of the desk — "announce the visitors to me, and go on errands."

"Well, you don't want a Sandow for that job," Bliss protested.

Mr. Cockerill sighed.

"My young friend," he said, "I will make a confession. I am an exceedingly nervous person. As you may perceive from my surroundings, I am a man of peace. I have never been trained in the art of self-defence. My muscles are flabby. I have absolutely no physical strength. I am a nervous man. Up here, I am, as it were, cut off from the rest of the world. I sit here at my labours, and I am at the mercy of any chance caller who might enter these rooms with burglarious or personally vindictive feelings."

"I don't quite understand," Bliss confessed, a little puzzled. "Do you get many visitors?"

"Not many," Mr. Cockerill replied. "But still, visitors do find their way here. I have business which brings me callers, and I am reputed to be wealthy. Another confession, young man," he added, dropping his voice a little, "I read the Police News, and it always seems to me that I am an ideal subject for a

brutal assault. That is one reason why I desire the services of a light porter. He sits outside, and if I have an undesirable visitor, I summon him. He enters and protects me. There you are."

"Why, I could do that," Bliss insisted. "I may not be very strong, but I am no coward."

Mr. Cockerill rose to his feet. He was exceedingly well dressed in a morning coat and dark grey trousers, broad-toed shoes wonderfully polished, with white linen gaiters. A black ribbon fob hung from his waist-coat, and from his neat tie sparkled a diamond pin.

"Even I," he remarked regretfully, "am taller than you. How could you stop me if I tried to rush from the room?"

"Would you like me to show you?" Bliss asked.

"You couldn't do it."

Bliss stretched out his arm, twisted a little on one side, and bent his left knee. Mr. Cockerill struggled up from the carpet to a sitting posture, and readjusted his spectacles. He was not in the least angry, but he seemed very much impressed.

"How the devil did you do that?" he demanded.

"Jujitsu," Bliss answered.

"Jujitsu," the parrot screamed, thrusting its head forward. "Oh, lord!"

"I know several more," Bliss continued. "Had some lessons once from a Jap. There's one —"

"Never mind about the others," Mr. Cockerill interrupted, hastily brushing the dust from his coat sleeve. "You are engaged. I'll give you twenty-five shillings a week, half a dozen linen collars to start with, and a respectable hat. Here's a book on

birds. Go and sit outside and read it. If I want anything, I'll call you. You understand?"

"Perfectly, sir, thank you."

"Read the article on bullfinches' diet," Mr. Cockerill concluded. "You'll then be able to look out for the oddments they like."

Bliss sat down in his chair, laid his hat on the floor at his side, and opened the book on birds. He was feeling a little dazed. On the other side of the closed door he could hear the slow ticking of the typewriter which stood on Mr. Cockerill's desk. The canaries were singing vigorously, but the parrot had relapsed into silence. Every now and then he could hear the rattle of the lift, and the hum of traffic from Piccadilly was just audible. So passed the first half-hour in his new situation. At one o'clock precisely a neatly dressed waiter climbed the stone stairs, bearing luncheon on a tray. He stared at Bliss, and Bliss stared at him.

"Who's that for?" Bliss asked.

"Your guv'nor," the waiter replied. "Is he there?"

Bliss knocked at the door and thrust in his head.

"A waiter is here with luncheon, sir," he announced.

"He can enter," Mr. Cockerill directed.

The man arranged the tray upon a table at the side of the desk with the air of one accustomed to the task.

"You can order from this young man," Mr. Cockerill said, "a chop or steak or cut from the joint, with cheese and half a pint of beer, not more. You must eat it in your chair outside, and you may not smoke."

Bliss gave his order promptly, ate his luncheon with astounding appetite, and sat back in his chair afterwards with folded arms. He was beginning to realise

that this task of doing nothing was not, after all, so easy. He read the chapter on the peculiar habits and dietetic predilections of bullfinches with great care. He also laid in a store of knowledge as to the domestic habits of canaries and the ailments likely to attack a parrot. After which he became a little bored. He heard with positive relief, at about four o'clock, the stoppage of the lift on the floor below, and the sound of light footsteps ascending the final flight of stairs.

The visitor was a lady, young, slim, and as far as one could tell under her unusually thick veil, good-looking.

"You wish to see Mr. Cockerill, Madam?" Bliss enquired in his best manner.

"At once, please," she assented.

"What name shall I say, Madam?"

"Mr. Cockerill is expecting me," she replied hastily.

Bliss knocked at the door and announced the visitor. Afterwards he relapsed into his chair and dozed. It was, perhaps, twenty minutes before the door reopened and the young lady passed out. He rose to his feet. It was in his mind to precede her down the stairs and ring for the lift. But she gave him no chance of carrying out his intention. For one thing, she passed out far too quickly, and for another, he caught a gleam of something in her eyes which held him for the moment spellbound. She had seemed nervous when she had arrived; she seemed to depart in a dream of terror. Bliss sank slowly back into his chair and pinched himself to make sure that he was really awake. At half-past five precisely Mr. Cockerill opened the door.

"I shall now," he said, "show you exactly how I like the cages cleaned. Tommy, as you will discover, is very particular about sand, and my little canary

there, Jenny I call her, absolutely refuses to sleep in the dark. We have to leave the curtain just a little open. Bring in some water from the tap there."

For a quarter of an hour, Bliss was instructed in the art of looking after the birds. At the end of that time, Mr. Cockerill took up an immaculately brushed silk hat, and closing his desk, came out and locked the door of his room.

"To-morrow morning," he announced, "we meet here at nine o'clock. If I choose to be a little late, you will sit in your chair and wait for me. You will find *The Times* on the mat, which you will kindly not touch, as I prefer to open it myself. Here is a sovereign. Buy yourself some linen collars and a respectable hat, and account to me for the change, or if it is any convenience to you, you can deduct it from your first week's salary. I wish you good evening."

Bliss followed his employer down the stairs, a little bewildered. He purchased the collars and the hat, and, after some hesitation, he treated himself to a packet of cigarettes. Then he made his way homewards. Mrs. Heath, whom he passed climbing the many stairs that led to his room, looked at him a little anxiously.

"Any luck, sir?" she asked.

"It's all right, Mrs. Heath," he declared cheerily. "I've got a job again. Light porter at twenty-five shillings a week. Smithson's came out all right in the long run. I shall be able to pay my rent on Saturday."

"You know it wasn't the money I was thinking of so much, Mr. Bliss," she said, with a pathetic smile, "but any one can see you have not been used to these

privations, and the breakfasts you've eaten these last few mornings haven't been enough to keep a child alive, much less a young man who is tramping about looking for work all day."

"Never was much of a breakfast eater," Bliss declared. "Don't you worry about me, Mrs. Heath. I've had a jolly good dinner in the middle of the day given in with the job. If you would send me up some tea, I'm going to bed early."

"Tea you shall have this moment," Mrs. Heath promised.

Bliss climbed up to his attic and, almost against his will, found himself drawn towards the window. The roar of the city was in his ears. There was a dull red glow in the smoke-stained sky where the sun had gone down. Already the lights were throwing their strange, artificial halo over the western part of the city. In the streets below the people still moved by in a ceaseless stream on their way from work, white-faced, with shoulders a little bent, each with the air of having some destination to reach in the shortest possible way and in the shortest possible manner. He looked down at them and away again westwards towards his own land. Already he was beginning to wonder.

CHAPTER VII

FOR three weeks Bliss held his post to his own content and to the apparent satisfaction of his employer. He made friends with the birds, and on rare occasions, Tommy, the itinerant bullfinch, would consent to come and sit on the arm of his chair and share his luncheon. All the time his curiosity concerning Mr. Cockerill's avocation, awakened on the first day, became greater and greater. He summoned up his courage at last and asked him a question.

"If it's not taking a liberty, sir, might I ask what your profession is?"

There was a moment's silence. Mr. Cockerill, who seemed in no way offended, was, nevertheless, regarding his employé with a new expression on his face.

"Curious, eh, Bliss?"

"I'm afraid I am, sir. Bad habit, I know."

"Bad habit!" the parrot screamed, looking round from the bottom of the wicker-paper basket, where it was engaged in destroying some envelopes.

"Curiosity is one of the failings," Mr. Cockerill said benignly, "from which you, Bliss, or any one who serves me, must be free. Nevertheless, since you have asked me this question like a man, and have abstained from all prying about and endeavours to satisfy your thirst for information by illicit means, I will pander to some extent to your weakness. Look here."

He touched with his forefinger a pile of typewritten sheets.

"I am writing a book connected with various phases of ornithology," Mr. Cockerill continued. "I advertise in the papers for any original anecdotes regarding certain species of birds. All manner of men and women bring me their stories. If they are of value, I pay for them. If they are not, I don't."

"If your visitors here all come upon such harmless errands, why are you so afraid, then, of being assaulted, or of burglars?" Bliss asked.

Mr. Cockerill smiled. He took off his spectacles and rubbed the glasses with his silk handkerchief.

"Most of the people who come here want money," he explained, "and no person who wants money is altogether harmless. Besides, I'm afraid I must confess I am a man of nervous temperament. Have I satisfied your curiosity, Bliss?"

"Quite, sir, thank you."

For two days after that there were no visitors. On the third evening, Bliss, on his way out, was accosted by a cheerful, red-faced little man, who was standing on the ground floor, smoking a big cigar and studying the register on the wall.

"Good evening," he said.

"Good evening," Bliss replied.

The little man produced a cigar case.

"Have one?" he invited.

Bliss, who, a few months ago, had smoked nothing less expensive than Murias or Coronas at a hundred and eighty shillings a hundred, accepted a very dubious-looking cigar with gratitude. He paused to light it, standing in the doorway.

"Queer fish, your guv'nor."

Bliss blew out the match and threw it away.

"Queerest I ever met," he admitted. "Good night."

The little man strolled along with him.

"What might his profession be?" he asked curiously.

Bliss hesitated for a moment.

"No secret about it that I know of. He's a bird fancier."

"A what?"

"A bird fancier," Bliss repeated. "He's got a parrot, several canaries, and three bullfinches in his room, and he's writing a book on birds."

The little man looked sideways at his companion. Bliss, however, was walking along quite unconsciously.

"Gets a good many visitors at times, doesn't he?"

"He pays for stories about birds," Bliss explained.

"People are all the time bringing him anecdotes. If he can make use of them in his book, he pays for them."

The little man's lips twitched. He laughed softly to himself for some moments, then he drew closer to his companion.

"I'm not blaming you," he declared. "I should do the same in your place, only probably not so well. What about a ten-pound note?"

"Well, what about it?" Bliss repeated, a little bewildered.

His companion thrust his hand into his waistcoat pocket, produced a ten-pound note which he displayed a little ostentatiously, and thrust it back again.

"Have a drink?" he suggested, stopping short upon the pavement opposite a public house.

"My turn!" Bliss answered, pushing open the swing door. "You stood the cigar."

"On this occasion, I am in the chair," the little man persisted. "Mine's whisky and soda. What's yours? We'll sit at this table."

"Mine's the same," Bliss replied. "You were saying something about a ten-pound note."

The little man leaned across the table.

"My name's Johnson," he announced.

"Mine's Bliss. Pleased to meet you."

"We'll cut preliminaries and get to business," Mr. Johnson continued. "I am in the employ of a private detective office. We are paying for information as to the doings of Mr. Cockerill."

Bliss pushed away his tumbler.

"The whisky and soda cost you sixpence," he said, "and the cigar, I should think, not more than threepence. You have made a bad debt of ninepence. Good evening."

Bliss marched out of the place and made his way homewards. He saw no more of the little man, but the affair, however, spoilt his night's rest. The next morning he went to Mr. Cockerill.

"Can you spare a moment, sir?"

Mr. Cockerill looked up quickly. His first glance was towards the birds.

"Anything wrong with Tommy?" he demanded.

"He seemed languid all yesterday."

"The birds are quite all right," Bliss replied.

"Tommy is on my chair outside."

"What is it, then?"

"Fellow stopped me last night," Bliss went on. "Stood me a whisky and soda, and a rotten bad

cigar. Turned out he was a private detective, and he wanted to know what your business was. Offered me a ten-pound note for information."

Mr. Cockerill nodded benevolently. Nevertheless, from the corners of his eyes and lips, little straight lines appeared which altered his expression in a marvellous manner. He no longer resembled Mr. Cheeryble.

"What did you say?"

"I told him about the birds."

"Well?"

"He thought I was kidding. It was after that he offered me the ten-pound note."

"And you?"

"I wished him good evening and came away."

Mr. Cockerill sat for several minutes without moving. He was surrounded by sheets of manuscript, and a volume of "The Birds' Encyclopædia" was propped up before him. He leaned back in his chair.

"Thank you, Bliss," he said at last. "Anything else?"

"Nothing, sir."

"You're the servant I've been looking for," Mr. Cockerill declared. "I shall raise your wages five shillings a week. Get along outside now, please. I want to finish this chapter."

Mr. Cockerill was doomed that morning, however, to interruptions. In half an hour, the first one arrived. A tall, rather good-looking man came hastening up the steps two at a time. Bliss rose from his seat. There was something rather ominous about the appearance of this visitor.

"Mr. Cockerill in?" the young man demanded.

"He is, sir," Bliss admitted. "What name?"

"Mr. Verner -- Harry Verner. I want to see him at once," was the impetuous reply.

Bliss opened the door and announced the young man by name. Mr. Cockerill rose from his chair with his fingers still upon the keys of his typewriter.

"I will not see Mr. Verner," he decided.

"Won't you?" the young man exclaimed fiercely.

He strode past Bliss into the room. Mr. Cockerill regarded him through his gold-rimmed spectacles with mild indignation.

"Bliss," he said, "you heard my orders? I do not wish to see this young man. Turn him out."

Bliss did his best. He picked himself up, a moment or two later, from a spot on the landing about four yards from the door, and returned valiantly to the charge. Mr. Cockerill, however, held up his hand. He was sitting in his accustomed attitude, and the young man, although he seemed to be angry, was silent.

"Never mind, Bliss," his employer said resignedly. "Since this young man is here, I will listen to what he has to say. You can wait outside."

"Shall I fetch a policeman, sir?" Bliss suggested. Mr. Cockerill shook his head.

"Thank you, Bliss, it will not be necessary. I have decided to grant this young man an interview."

Bliss retired at once and closed the door. It was about a quarter of an hour before the unwelcome visitor reappeared. He walked by Bliss with unseeing eyes, like a man in a dream. All the truculence had gone out of his manner. He had not in the least the look of a man who has been telling anecdotes

about birds. From inside the room came the slow ticking of Mr. Cockerill's typewriter as he continued his chapter. Bliss began to feel uncomfortable. He was more than ever conscious that there was something mysterious, sinister, even, about his surroundings. The appearance of this last visitor had altogether disturbed him.

"Anyhow, the money's good," he muttered to himself, "and I'm in my third month."

CHAPTER VIII

THAT night something happened to Bliss which he had anticipated many times in his dreams since the day when he had marched out of the shop in Regent Street with his working clothes in a parcel under his arm, and a queer and most unaccountable lump in his throat. He had taken his usual respectful adieu of his employer and was walking rather aimlessly down King Street, when he came face to face with two girls. The one nearest to him was the young lady who had visited Mr. Cockerill on the first afternoon of his engagement. The other he recognised with a thrill of pleasure — a pleasure that came to him almost as a shock. It was Frances Clayton.

"Mr. Bliss!" she exclaimed, stopping abruptly on the pavement before him. "Why, whatever — How delightful to see you again!" she broke off with quick tact.

He shook hands silently with an amazing sense of content. She was very well dressed and an entirely different person from the rather sad-eyed young woman who had resented his appointment as traveller to the firm of Masters and Company. He was ridiculously glad to see her.

"Why did you behave so unkindly?" she went on reproachfully.

"Couldn't be helped," he assured her. "Tell me about the cooking stoves. How are they going?"

"Going?" she repeated beamingly. "I wouldn't dare to tell you how many thousands we have sold. Mr. Masters is down in the country now negotiating for a new factory. And you — you ought to be there with him."

Bliss sighed.

"It was great sport selling those stoves," he remarked evasively.

She kept her hands in her muff, but she leaned a little towards him. Her eyes challenged his.

"Before you move," she insisted, "you've got to tell me absolutely why you behaved in such an extraordinary manner."

"Extraordinary manner?" he echoed feebly.

"You know quite well what I mean," she continued. "You saved Mr. Masters from ruin. He has started upon a new lease of life. You laid the foundations of his fortune, then, instead of taking a thing for yourself, you disappeared."

"I couldn't help it," he protested.

His answer was baffling or evasive. She looked him over. His clothes were respectable, but no more.

"What are you doing now?" she asked.

"I have a situation in this street," he answered.

The other girl, who had been standing a little way off, suddenly gave a cry. He knew then that he was recognised.

"Why, you are the young man who let me in to Mr. Cockerill's rooms the other day!" she exclaimed. "Frances, come here a moment."

The two girls talked together earnestly. Presently they returned.

"Mr. Bliss," Frances said, "this is Miss Morrison, a friend of mine. She has been telling me some rather extraordinary things about your employer, Mr. Cockerill. How long have you been with him?"

"Just over three weeks."

Miss Morrison leaned a little forward and intervened. She lowered her voice.

"Did you know anything about him before you went there?" she asked.

"Not a thing," he answered. "I just heard of the job through a Registry Office. One does not require a reference from an employer when one wants work."

"Where are you going now?" Frances broke in a little abruptly.

"Nowhere particular," Bliss replied. "I've just left work."

"Will you come and have some tea with us?" Miss Morrison begged. "I want to talk to you for a few minutes, and I'm quite sure Frances does too. She told me all about you long ago."

"With pleasure," Bliss agreed promptly. "Where shall we go? Rumpelmayer's?"

They stared at him for a moment. Then Frances laughed.

"Absurd! We'll go to a little place I know. It isn't far, and we can talk in peace. This way."

They found a little tea-shop not far from Piccadilly Circus. There were very few people in the place, and no one within half a dozen yards of their corner table. Yet Miss Morrison lowered her voice when she spoke. She leaned forward across the table with her head supported upon her hands.

"Do you mean to tell me, Mr. Bliss, that you have

been with Mr. Cockerill for nearly a month, and you haven't seen through that bird business yet?"

"Seen through it?" Bliss repeated.

"He's a fraud, that's what the man is," she declared tremulously. "He cares no more for birds than you or I. It's all a blind."

The girl pushed back her veil, and in the light of the incandescent gas her face was almost ghastly in its earnestness.

"Frances swears that you are to be trusted, so I want you to listen, and I will tell you all I know of him," she continued. "A month or so ago, I received a letter from him asking me to call at his office in King Street. The letter hinted quite vaguely at a certain episode in my life which I had not imagined that any one save my lawyer and myself, and one other person who is dead, knew anything of. I hesitated for some time. Then I went. I had no idea why. I just wanted to ask for an explanation of his letter. I can remember those awful minutes even now. The birds were singing, that wretched parrot was sitting on his shoulder. He leaned back in his chair, and he calmly reproduced the whole story before me, detail by detail. He sat there with that good-natured smile upon his lips, and he just — watched. When he had finished, he asked me questions, and all the time I struggled to answer them, he still watched. Then he told me word for word the contents of a letter I had once written, a letter I would have given my life to have recalled. Do you know that after I left his office I did not sleep for three nights."

"Do you mean to suggest that he is a blackmailer?" Bliss asked bluntly.

"Of course he is," the girl replied chokingly. "As yet, he hasn't given himself away, simply because he wants to find out how much money I can raise. He has made me go there three times on some pretext or other; and each time he just talks that hideous affair over and watches me."

"He has just written to Miss Morrison asking her to go and see him again next Monday," Frances intervened.

"And when I go," the girl faltered, "I know precisely what will happen. He will make me tell my story all over again."

"And in the end he will want money," Frances broke in. "Any one can see that."

"And I haven't got a penny," Miss Morrison exclaimed hopelessly. "I haven't a penny."

Bliss sat back a little grimly in his chair. In a way, the girl's story had been a shock to him.

"Tell me exactly what I can do in the matter?" he asked.

"Search his rooms," Frances answered promptly. "Spy upon him. Get some evidence to prove that he is really a blackmailer."

Bliss sighed. Both the girls were almost hanging over him in their excitement.

"Well, we'll see," he promised. "I will do what I can."

He paid for the tea bravely. No one would have guessed from his manner that it was his last half-sovereign which he handed over the counter for change. Frances scribbled upon a piece of paper and gave it to him.

"There's my address," she said. "When will you come and see me?"

He hesitated.

"I will answer my own question," she continued firmly. "You will come on Sunday afternoon to tea."

He accepted cheerfully. Sunday had been, perhaps, the most miserable of all those purgatorial days.

"About four o'clock I will be there," he promised.

CHAPTER IX

MR. COCKERILL, when he arrived at his office next morning, appeared to be in an unusually good humour. He wore a bunch of violets in his buttonhole, and his air of mediæval distinction had never been more noticeable. He nodded kindly to Bliss.

"I am a few minutes before my time," he remarked. "To tell you the truth, I was a little anxious about Tommy last night. He refused his seed."

Mr. Cockerill produced his key, and they entered the little room together. There was the usual outburst of welcome from the birds. Tommy, the bullfinch, alone was silent, and Tommy was obviously not well. Mr. Cockerill hung up his hat hastily. His fingers trembled as he withdrew his kid gloves.

"I shall want a little warm water and some warm milk, Bliss," he announced. "You had better light the fire at once before you clean out and feed the other birds."

"What a beastly shame!" the parrot screamed, ruffling its feathers.

Mr. Cockerill took no notice. He was busy arranging a little flannel-lined basket for the bullfinch. For the rest of the day, he sat with the bird by his side, continually pausing in his work to whistle and talk to it. At five o'clock he reluctantly prepared to depart. He called Bliss in.

"I'm afraid," he said, "that Tommy is no better. His condition, in short, makes me very anxious."

Bliss looked at his employer curiously. There was not the slightest doubt that he was telling the truth.

"I dare not take him away with me," the latter continued. "I am afraid of the cold air. To-morrow, as you know, is Sunday. Can I trouble you, Bliss, to attend here in the morning, see how he is, and come and let me know? I will hand you the key of my room on my departure."

"I will come with pleasure," Bliss replied. "Where shall I find you, sir?"

"I live at the Acropolis Club, Pall Mall," Mr. Cockerill told him, drawing a card from his pocket and scribbling a line on the back of it. "If you present that, you will be allowed to come up to my room. Kindly arrange to be there about ten o'clock in the morning."

Bliss spent that night with the key of the office under his pillow. Long before eight o'clock the next morning he climbed the stairs of the building in King Street, and let himself into Mr. Cockerill's little apartment. There was the usual shriek from the parrot and twitter from the birds. He pulled up the blind. Tommy had left his basket and was hopping about the mantelpiece. Bliss closed the door. He was now face to face with a problem which had been before him all the night, a problem which was rendered more acute by the fact that the Derby desk at which Mr. Cockerill spent his days stood open. He considered the character and the number of the callers. He recalled the agitation of Miss Morrison and one or two others. In the end he set his teeth. He was justified. He started with the desk and turned over a great pile of manuscript which

lay there. From beginning to end, it was exactly what it purported to be. He opened each drawer and examined its contents. Every memorandum he found referred to birds. Every scrap of paper he touched referred to birds. He found photographs of birds; letters from learned men about birds, in many languages. In the whole of the desk he did not find a single line of writing which did not refer, directly or indirectly, to birds. He left the desk exactly as it was, and he examined every inch of the room. There was not a box nor a drawer nor any possible receptacle there which he did not search. When he had finished, his cheeks were scarlet. He almost kicked himself as he went out. Nevertheless, he carried through his whole intention. He cut a small knot-hole in the wall, which would allow him from the outside to see into the room.

At ten o'clock precisely, he presented himself at the portals of the great Club in Pall Mall and encountered Mr. Cockerill in the hall. He made his report, which his employer received with a sigh of deep relief. Then he turned to go.

"You don't seem very well yourself this morning, Bliss," Mr. Cockerill remarked kindly. "You must allow me, if you please, to offer you a little trifle for this incursion into your day of rest. We will look upon it as a thank-offering for Tommy's recovery."

Bliss waved the half-sovereign away a little incoherently.

"You'll forgive me, sir," he begged, "I couldn't possibly take it — couldn't possibly. I'll be there in good time in the morning."

He hurried off and passed outside the club with an air of relief. He wandered about the Park for a while, ate a very modest dinner at his lodgings, and at four o'clock he travelled out to Hamstead and rang the bell of a pleasant-looking little house in a neighbourhood which was quite strange to him. Frances herself opened the door.

"Well?" she asked eagerly, as she showed him into a little sitting room.

Bliss put down his hat.

"Look here," he began, "don't think me unreasonable, but I feel inclined to say confound your Miss Morrison! I've made a beast of myself, Miss Clayton. I have been through the whole of Mr. Cockerill's papers. My fingers itch with it. I have been kicking myself ever since."

"Well?" she repeated.

"There wasn't a scrap of writing anywhere," he declared, "which hadn't to do with birds. I went through the manuscript of his book, even. There was enough work there, recent work too, to have kept him busy every moment of his time. There wasn't the slightest sign of any other occupation or interest in life."

Frances had tact, and she contented herself with a little grimace.

"Never mind," she said. "You did what you thought was right, and motive is everything. Now let us have some tea and talk."

Bliss spent an exceedingly pleasant although very unusual two hours. Frances had improved with prosperity. In the daintily furnished little room, and at tea while she ministered to his wants, she seemed very graceful and very attractive to him. Her voice

was low, her sense of humour abundant. They laughed together many times at the memory of those nuxious weeks when Bliss was trying to sell stoves. Only once he made a remark which seemed to cause her some embarrassment.

"Your room is almost like a conservatory," he declared, glancing at the grent bowl of violets in the middle of the table.

She changed colour a little.

"Mr. Masters sends me all these flowers," she explained. "Sometimes I really wish he wouldn't."

"Is Mr. Masters married?" Bliss asked quickly.

"He is a widower," she replied. "He has been a widower for ten years."

"How old is he?"

"Fifty next birthday. Sometimes I think he looks older than that, and sometimes younger. He has such wonderful spirits, such boundless optimism. He is opening up agencies now for the Alpha Stove all over the world."

Bliss was silent for a little time. Somehow or other, his keen sense of enjoyment seemed to have gone. He kept on reminding himself that he was a light porter earning thirty shillings a week. Nevertheless, the question pumped itself out.

"Does Mr. Masters want you to marry him?"

She looked at him gravely. They were both standing now, for he had been on the point of saying good-by.

"I think he does," she admitted. "Why do you ask?"

"Are you going to say 'Yes'?"

"I do not know. Tell me, what would you advise me to do?"

"My advice," he declared, a little hoarsely, "might not be quite disinterested."

"Still, won't you give it?"

He set his teeth firmly together.

"I can't," he said. "You must decide for yourself."

She followed him out to the door. No other word passed between them till their hands met, yet, somehow or other, he fancied that she had understood.

"Will you come and see me next Sunday?" she asked.

"Thank you," he answered. "Of course I will."

He walked down the hill towards where the myriad lights of London flamed up to the sky. A crowd of curious thoughts seemed to have taken possession of him. He was conscious of a new, incomprehensible exhilaration. How was it that in the old life there had never been time to think? That the stars and the lights and the wind had meant so little? That the world had seemed so humdrum a place? He laughed at himself as he felt in his pockets to see whether he could afford a 'bus, and thought of the bread and cheese which would be spread out on the table before him when he returned to his lodgings. They would be dining at the Savoy and the Carlton in an hour or so; crowds of his late friends: little ladies of musical comedy so charmed to have him sit by their side and whisper in their ear; so delighted to make up a party afterwards at one of their flats, and sing, or dance, or flirt. There was his French chef idle; his bathroom and wardrobe untouched; his motor-cars; a hundred expedients of wealth waiting for a word from him. Already he was beginning to find it hard to realise that other life. The friends of

whom he thought, who would welcome him back to-night, seemed to belong to such a banal, such an artificial side of existence; something built up with false lines and painted with crude colours. He discovered an extra penny in his trousers pocket, and whistled with joy as he clambered up to his seat on the top of an omnibus.

On the next morning things happened. A caller presented himself at the little office in King Street at about eleven o'clock, whom Bliss recognised with a little start of surprise as a very distinguished solicitor, and whom he had met more than once in the old days. He, too, had the same strained look upon his face as he presented his card and asked to see Mr. Cockerill.

"Mr. Cockerill is in, sir," Bliss admitted. "I will let him know that you are here."

Bliss took in the card, which Mr. Cockerill glanced at and sighed. It was obvious that he did not contemplate any pleasure from the forthcoming interview.

"You can show the gentleman in, Bliss," he said resignedly. "I am very busy this morning, though. I can only give him a few minutes."

The newcomer was already in the room, and Bliss had time, before he departed, to notice that the greeting between the two men was strained. Bliss closed the door and stood for a moment hesitating. Then he clenched his fists and applied his ear to the knot-hole.

"Pleased though I am at any time to see you, my dear Fenwick," Mr. Cockerill was saying, "I look upon your present visit as indiscreet. I receive here only my bird friends and two or three people who, thanks

to you, my dear fellow, help to make my life interesting."

There was a moment's pause. Then the visitor spoke. His voice was shaking with passion.

"Cockerill," he said, "it's about those people I have come. You have got to give it up. Indeed, believe me, it can't go on. Miss Morrison, Harry Verner, Lady Marthinghoe, have all been to me. They swear that I have been their only confidant. You don't seem to understand the risk. There are rumours flying about already of some great blackmailing scheme, which is kept on its legs by leakages from the office of a famous firm of solicitors. We have not had a new client for the last three weeks."

Mr. Cockerill tapped with his pencil upon the desk.

"Gently, gently, my friend," he exclaimed irritably. "That is a hateful word, to which I much object. There is no blackmailing in it."

"There is," was the angry retort. "It may not be money you exact, but it's money's kind; it is torture, sheer and purposeless brutality."

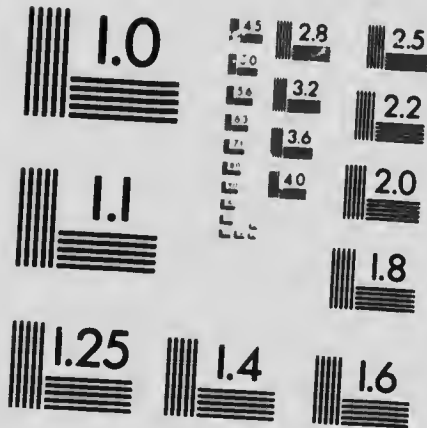
Mr. Cockerill sighed.

"How unreasonable you are this morning, my dear Fenwick! It is really very unkind of you to come here in this frame of mind. You know very well that I have only two interests in life: my birds, and the strange, indescribable, but extraordinarily subtle pleasure I feel," Mr. Cockerill went on, his voice growing more earnest, his eyes shining, "in having people sit in that chair — just where you are sitting now, my dear Fenwick — and watching their terror when they realise that a light is streaming in upon some dark secret chamber of their lives, that they are face to face



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with one who has a power over them, which is as the power of life and death."

Something was flashing out of Mr. Cockerill's eyes which Bliss had never seen there before. His tone, too, quivered as though with ecstasy.

"Pleasure or no pleasure," the other declared firmly, "I have come to tell you it's finished. You can go to my partners to-morrow and tell them the truth. Out with it whenever you like; from the house tops, or in my clerk's office. Tell them all that I robbed the firm of a few hundred pounds in the days when I was an articled clerk. You found it out, and you've held it over me all these years. I've finished now! Not another word do you get out of me. And, as for those unfortunate clients whom you keep on tenterhooks, I am going to tell them the truth, and they will understand how little they have to fear."

"Thoroughly unreasonable this morning, I see, my friend," Mr. Cockerill sighed. "What with dear Tommy's indisposition and your unreasonableness, I perceive I shall end the day with a bad headache."

"I don't care if you end it in hell!" Mr. Fenwick declared fiercely. "I am here for one purpose, and for one purpose only. I am going to have those documents you robbed me of and return them to my clients, or wring your neck."

Mr. Cockerill sat back in his chair.

"No violence, if you please," he begged. "Help yourself, my dear friend. The office and all it contains is at your disposal."

Fenwick commenced at once to search the place, opening drawers, throwing around him the typewritten

sheets of that wonderful treatise on birds, glancing closely at every scrap of paper.

Mr. Cockerill sighed once more.

"Thoroughly unreasonable, I regret to see," he repeated. "You are making a shocking mess!"

Mr. Fenwick resumed his seat.

"Until you hand over those documents," he said, "I shall stop here."

"In which case," Mr. Cockerill replied, drawing his typewriter towards him, "I shall go on with my work."

Bliss stole down the stairs, called a taxi, and drove to the Acropolis Club. He presented Mr. Cockerill's card, of which he had retained possession, and was at once allowed access to his room. He was back again in his place at the knot-hole within a quarter of an hour. He peered into the room. Mr. Cockerill was banging away at his machine. Mr. Fenwick was sitting a few yards off with folded arms. Then he slipped from his place, knocked at the door, and entered the room with a despatch box in his hand.

"You were enquiring about some documents," he said to Mr. Fenwick. "I think you will find them in here."

Mr. Cockerill, for once, was discomposed. He stared blankly at Bliss. Mr. Fenwick was speechless.

"You're a thief!" Mr. Cockerill gasped at last.

"You have been to my rooms — you have robbed me."

Bliss set down the box by Mr. Fenwick's side.

"A thief, perhaps," he assented, turning to his employer, "and you are a blackmailer."

There was a moment's breathless silence. Mr. Cockerill was very white.

"If you want to give me in charge," Bliss went on

slowly, "you can. I told the hall porter as I came up that there might be a little trouble, and that if I rang the lift bell, it would be for a policeman."

"I'll give the pair of you in charge!" Mr. Cockerill blustered, rising to his feet. "That box contains my personal securities."

"I don't like to have to speak so plainly," Bliss replied, "but I believe you are a liar. Anyway, you will have to trust Mr. Fenwick to return them to you. — There is just one more little matter."

He held out his hand and pointed to the empty space in the window, and the empty space over the mantelpiece. Mr. Cockerill seemed, if possible, more agitated than ever.

"What have you done with the birds?" he cried quickly.

"They are out on the leads enjoying the sunshine," Bliss replied. "If you are going to take this matter reasonably, they will be back again in a few minutes; if you don't, I will wring their necks one by one, and throw them out into the street."

Mr. Cockerill rose to his feet, reached for his silk hat, set it firmly upon his head, and took his gloves and umbrella from the corner.

"I will accompany you to the office, Fenwick," he said meekly. "You can go through the box and destroy anything you think fit. What I have there that is personal property, you can restore to me."

"Is that satisfactory to you, sir?" Bliss asked of Mr. Fenwick.

"My God, yes!" the latter replied.

Bliss handed him the despatch box and ushered the two men out of the room.

"You will look after the birds before you go?" Mr. Cockerill begged humbly.

"I will bring them in at once, sir," Bliss promised.

"And, afterwards, you will come and see me," Mr. Fenwick invited, holding out a card. "Here is my address."

"Thank you, sir," Bliss answered.

The two men left the place. Bliss brought in the birds, swept out the offices, locked them behind him, and took the key round to the Acropolis Club. Then he strolled into the Park and seated himself upon one of the benches. He took out a calendar from his pocket and made a little calculation. He was once more out of a job, and there remained nine months, two weeks and a day of his great adventure.

CHAPTER X

MRS. HEATH looked at the little array of coins set out upon her lodger's breakfast tray and took them almost reluctantly into her fingers.

"That's right, isn't it, Mrs. Heath?" Bliss asked, with an attempt at cheerfulness, — "nineteen and sevenpence, and little enough for all you've done for me."

She looked at him doubtfully.

"The amount's quite correct, sir," she said, "but, if you'll pardon my making the remark, what about yourself? That ain't left you much in your pocket for your dinner or such like!"

Bliss jingled three pennies and two halfpennies in his trousers pocket with great effect.

"I've got enough for dinner, at any rate," he assured her, "and I've a sort of feeling that I shall get a job to-day."

Mrs. Heath sighed as she took up the tray.

"If you'd like to leave a shilling or two out of the rent, sir —" she began.

"Not on your life," Bliss interrupted. "It's Monday to-day, Mrs. Heath, and Monday was always my lucky day."

"Shall you go round to Smithson's again, sir?" Mrs. Heath enquired.

Bliss left off jingling his money. The lowest fee payable at Smithson's was half a crown.

"I'm not quite sure," he answered dubiously. "They send one off on a lot of useless errands. I rather thought of strolling round and chancing my luck."

"Never thought of trying one of them Labour Bureaus, I suppose, sir?" Mrs. Heath enquired.

"Jolly good idea," Bliss replied, taking up his hat. "I'm sick of Smithson's, anyway."

He went down the stairs whistling, though his footsteps dragged a little as he turned into the street. It seemed to him that he had lived through an eternity of ugly, cheerless days. His environment depressed him continually. Curiously enough, much of his nervousness had departed, but it had given place at times to a genuine weakness. The thought of that long chain of days to come seemed sometimes intolerable. He presented himself at the nearest labour bureau and started away from it, a few minutes later, with an address upon a piece of paper and a rival applicant in hot pursuit. The latter, however, became associated with a street broil on the way and was delayed by the subsequent festivities. Bliss, therefore, reached the small greengrocer's shop alone and was interviewed by a bold, untidy looking female, the remnants of whose good looks were painfully affected by the meagreness of her habiliments. She paused in her task of opening a sack of potatoes as Bliss entered, a little out of breath.

"Wot cher want?" she demanded.

"Are you Mrs. Mott?" Bliss asked eagerly. "I've come from the Labour Bureau about the job."

The woman stood upright and, with her arms akimbo, eyed him up and down.

"I'm Mrs. Mott right enough," she admitted, "but

"I dunno as you'd suit. You don't look as though you could lift a sack of feathers, much more a sack of potatoes."

"I can lift as much as most men of my size and weight," Bliss assured her. "I can drive a cart, too, which I understand is one of the considerations."

The woman scrutinised him curiously. It was only a few days since he had left the employ of Mr. Cockerill, and the attire which would have amazed his friends in Piccadilly was distinctly neat in Poplar.

"Don't seem to me as though you'd be able to tackle the job," she grumbled. "There's more to do than driving round to folks' houses and flirting with the servants."

"I am afraid," Bliss confessed, "I cannot say I have held a similar position, but if you will tell me what to do, I'll do my best. I can promise you that I will not waste my time in the — er — manner you suggest."

"Where was you lust?" the lady asked, turning a little away and completing the buttoning of her gown with an affectation of unconcern.

"I was light porter in the employ of a gentleman named Cockerill," Bliss replied.

"Well, there's not much light portering about this job," Mrs. Mott assured him. "Twice a week you've got to be with the cart in Covent Garden at four o'clock in the morning."

"I have often been up at that hour," Bliss murmured, "even in Covent Garden."

She looked at him thoughtfully, struggling all the time to conceal her marked predisposition in his favour.

"P'raps you might do," she said doubtfully. "You

see, I'm in a bit of a 'ole. My man's left me sudden like — gone off without a word, the beast! And 'ere am I with the business on my 'ands, and no one to feed the pony nor nothing."

"You must allow me to do that for you, whether you engage me or not," Bliss ventured.

"What sort of wages might you be wanting?" the woman enquired. Bliss hesitated.

"What did you think of giving?" he asked.

"You get a bed in the loft at the back," she explained. "It's nothing much of a place, but if the weather comes on colder, I dunno as you couldn't sleep in the 'ouse. And yer dinner in the middle of the day. I don't promise nothing else, but if there's a bit of a meal going in the evening, and yer round, why yer welcome. And fifteen bob a week."

"I'll try it if you please," Bliss decided promptly, glancing over his shoulder to be sure that his rival was not approaching. "It's a new sort of job to me, but I'll do my best."

Mrs. Mott nodded.

"If you'll come this way," she said shortly, lifting the flap of the counter, "I'll take you through to the back of the shed. Then you can feed the pony. There's a load of these 'ere taters to take down to the Mile End Road as soon as I've finished sorting 'em."

Bliss passed through a hideously untidy sitting room, on the table of which were the remnants of a long-completed meal and a jug of beer three parts empty. The woman hesitated.

"'Ave a sup?" she asked.

"Thank you very much," Bliss replied.

She divided the remainder of the beer into two glasses

and was obviously much impressed by the manner in which Bliss drank her health.

"I dunno," she said despondently, "as this job'll suit yer! They're mostly a rough lot down here, and if yer don't get on with 'em up at Covent Garden, they knocks yer about something frightful. I'm fair sick of the rough doings, and I'm not saying us it isn't a treat to 'ave some one round who don't look as though he'd be snipping beer and wanting to fight all day long. My old man was a fair terror right up to the end. This way."

She led him past an appalling looking kitchen into a tiny back yard, at the further end of which was a tumbledown shed.

"You'll find the pony there, and the food," she told him, "also the harness and the trolley. If you'll just feed him I'll get on with the sortin'."

Bliss spent the next half-hour feeding and grooming a dejected looking pony. At the end of that time, he glanced round to find his employer leaning in a conversational manner over the back door.

"'Andier at yer work than I expected," she admitted tolerantly. "You'll make the beast vain if you get combing 'im about like that!"

Bliss desisted from his labours.

"Wot cher looking for now?" she asked.

"I was looking for a tap and a bit of soap," Bliss replied, "any place where I could get a wash."

"Wot cher want to wash in the middle of the day for?" she demanded suspiciously.

Bliss remained speechless. The question seemed unanswerable. She drew a little way from the door.

"There's a tap in the back kitchen," she said with

mild sarcasm. "Come on; I'll show it to yer. Be careful yer don't get your boots muddy in the yard. Want to brush yer 'air too?"

Bliss laughed good-humouredly.

"I'll harness up the pony first," he decided. "After all, it doesn't matter much, only, you see, the last job I was in, my employer was rather particular."

"Makes a body feel quite uncomfortable," Mrs. Mott declared, feeling about for any more stray buttons. "Bring your round the pony to the front, and I'll help you load up."

Bliss obeyed her instructions. In about half an hour's time they had the cart loaded. Mrs. Mott, a little breathless with her exertions, stepped back upon the pavement and produced from some mysterious portion of her attire a small leather purse.

"You'll get Bill Simons to sign the receipt you've got with you for them taters, and you'll hve to stand 'im a pint afterwards," she explained, counting out four coppers and handing them to Bliss. "Only one pint, mind. Don't stay about, 'cos there's another job or two to be done 'ere afore dark."

Bliss raised his hat politely.

"I will be back promptly, madam," he promised as he drove off, leaving her staring after him open-mouthed.

Bliss carried out his instructions, and delivered the potatoes at an establishment of similar character to Mrs. Mott's, but smaller. When the last sack had been emptied and weighed, he was promptly conducted to an adjacent public house by a malodorous individual, who, in the intervals of assuaging his thirst, stared at his companion and muttered incoherent expressions

under his breath. On the return to the scene of his labours, Bliss found Mrs. Mott entertaining a small company of neighbours, to whom she was explaining the circumstances connected with Mr. Mott's hurried disappearance. She introduced Bliss with a slightly self-conscious air.

"This is the new young man," she announced. "I've 'ad to get in some one, for I couldn't go up to market myself, or drive the pony round."

"Not to be thought of, my dear," murmured one of her sympathisers.

"Came to me from the Labour Bureau," Mrs. Mott continued a little truculently, affecting not to notice a sly wink from her next-door neighbour, "and a very civil-spoken and well-meaning young man he seems to be. Anyway, I'm going to give 'im a trial."

Bliss, aware that he was the subject of some mirthful conversation, hurried off into the yard. Mrs. Mott sought him out presently.

"They've got over me," she declared. "I'm going to change my things, take a fish supper, and do a picture palace with them. It's not every night as I makes so free, but it's lonesome sitting by one's self. If you'd care," she went on, a little hesitatingly, "to come along —"

"If I am to be at Covent Garden at four o'clock with the notes you have given me," he interrupted, "I'd like, if I may, to get a little sleep early to-night. Besides, I shall have to go as far as St. Pancras and explain to my landlady there that I shall not want the room any longer."

"And I'm not sure you ain't right," Mrs. Mott agreed. "We'll have an evening to ourselves, if you're so minded,

later on in the week. "There's yer room in the back there, and if you're cold or uncomfortable, why, you shall come into the 'ouse, and that's all there is to say about it."

She gave him a few more instructions with regard to the morning and left him. Bliss made the best of his way back to his lodgings and set out Mrs. Heath.

"Got a job," he announced triumphantly.

A rare smile lit up her wan face.

"I'm glad," she said simply.

"I've got to live in," Bliss explained, "but of course, I'll pay you a full week's rent instead of notice. But I wanted to know whether I could take my things away and bring you the money next Saturday or Sunday."

"There's no week's rent for you to pay, nor nothing of the sort," Mrs. Heath declared warmly. "I can let your room in five minutes, although — I'm sorry you're going, Mr. Bliss. Can I help you put your things together, sir?"

"It isn't five minutes' job," Bliss assured her, holding out his hand. "Good-by, Mrs. Heath. You've been quite a friend to me. I shan't forget! Very likely I shall be back again before long."

"There's always your room, sir, when it's convenient," she promised.

Bliss packed his few belongings and returned to Poplar. The house and shop were still in darkness. He climbed up into the loft where he was supposed to sleep, and by the light of a candle looked around him. The uninviting-looking bed, the absence of any washing utensils, the torn and filthy piece of linoleum upon the floor, its only covering, sickened him. He

turned out again into the streets. For an hour or so he wandered aimlessly about. He seemed just for that one evening, at any rate, to have lost all consciousness of his own identity; to have become, indeed, one of the waifs and toilers with whom he rubbed shoulders all the time. He felt the attraction of the gaily lit public houses, with their suggestion of warmth within. The boisterous chaff and shrill laughter of the hooligan girls he met, walking arm in arm past the picture palaces, even stirred in him some faint desire for adventure. He lost himself in the crowded thoroughfares where he hardly heard a word of English; where sallow-faced, stooping men passed by like yoke-bearing animals, talking Yiddish or Russian; where the women leered at him from dark, mysterious side streets, grimly fascinating in their suggestion of crime and mystery. He felt the thrall of alien London; something of the terror of it crept into his blood. He seemed to be amongst a race beaten in a futile struggle towards humanity, beaten back into the semblance of the animal. Even his miserable stable seemed like a refuge, when at last he crept back to it and munched the food which he had bought. That night he found no consolation, even, in the thought of the freedom which must some day be his.

Overanxious not to be late, it was only a little after three o'clock when Bliss, after that long drive through the emptying streets of London, took up his appointed place in Covent Garden market. The darkness was unbroken; the lamps of the city were still throwing their lights on to the low-hanging clouds. Only once had Bliss smiled since the wretched moment when he

had struggled into his clothes and with blue fingers harnessed the pony, and that was when, seated upon the trolley, he had driven his strange-looking equipage down Gracechurch Street, past the premises of his stock brokers, whose strong coffers were laden with his securities; past the office of his solicitors, where black box after black box, with his name upon it, lined the shelves. The depression of last night, however, still lingered. The sense of adventure which had sustained him at first had become curiously dormant. The sordidness of poverty had caught him, for the nonce, in its toils.

He fastened the pony to a weight by one of the reins, and, crossing the street, drank a cup of coffee at a stall. The coffee was hot and strong and marvellously refreshing. Something like new life crept through his frozen veins. He stopped to listen. From afar came the sound of music.

"There'll be some of them swells round presently," the stall keeper remarked. "There's one or two of 'em never misses, ball nights, coming to 'ave a cup of my corfee."

"Is it a fancy dress ball to-night?" Bliss asked.

The man nodded.

"They've been going up by yonder in streams," he declared. "All at a guinea a time, too. My word! There's money about if only one could get 'old of it."

Bliss wandered back to his stand. Some vans were unloading round his trolley. One of the men, who recognised the pony, spoke to him.

"You'll be from old man Mott's," he remarked. "What's the good of coming here at this hour?"

"Am I too early?" Bliss asked.

"Aye, a full hour," the man replied. "We ain't got the stuff off yet."

Bliss strolled away once more. He filled his latest purchase, a shilling pipe, with the remnants of a pouch of tobacco, and, lighting it, wandered through the shadowy streets and mysterious alleys, a region which seemed always full of strange possibilities. With time on his hands, and no money for amusements, it was amazing how his powers of observation and general sensitiveness had developed. From under a tarpaulin-covered cart he caught suddenly a delicious wave of perfume, and he drew a little nearer to find it heaped with clusters of pinky-mauve and white lilac. A little farther on, across the garbage of the streets, from the recesses of the covered market, came the sweet but almost overpowering odour of violets, an odour which reminded him for the moment of a violet farm he had once seen at Hyères. Then a drunken man, whipping a tired horse, made the place hideous with his string of oaths. Two hooligans, pelting each other with onions, closed abruptly in a fiercer struggle. Bliss passed on into one of the quieter by-ways and stood there, listening to the far-away tumult, watching the fading glow pass away from the clouds. Suddenly he gave a little start. Round the corner of the street a dark figure had come into sight, the figure, apparently, of a youth, running with his head thrown back, his face ghastly white under the lamp as he passed. His knees seemed to be shaking. He threw up his arms as though about to fall. Then, with a final effort, he zigzagged across the street and crept in under a pile of tarpaulin covers which had been left near one of the stalls. He

disappeared there, barely a dozen yards away from the spot where Bliss was standing. The tarpaulin was still quivering, indeed, when his pursuers raced into sight. They came down the street, fleet-footed, still fresh and strong. They pulled up short by Bliss. One was dressed in the uniform of a commissioner. The other two were in evening dress, and with a little start Bliss recognised them both. One was a man about town, an acquaintance of a short time ago, a man who had the reputation of being an adventurer, but against whom nothing definite was known; his companion, a wealthy brewer's son from the provinces, a frequenter of the West-end bars and restaurants.

"Any one passed this way?" the commissioner asked breathlessly.

Bliss shook his head.

"I have only just come round the corner myself."

"Which corner?"

Bliss pointed. They dashed across the street in the opposite direction. He heard them shouting as they turned into the broader thoroughfare, heard a growing tumult of voices, and the blowing of a police whistle. The street was now empty. He crossed the road, and made his way towards the pile of tarpaulin. As he approached, it quivered slightly. He looked around to be sure that no one was watching. Then he pulled it on one side.

"Get up," he said. "I have sent them the other way. Tell me, what is it all about?"

His first impressions were only of the face, delicate and oval, ghastly in its whiteness, and a pair of great brown eyes, staring, terrified, terrifying. Then the figure slowly scrambled to its feet.

"My God!" Bliss exclaimed. "You're — you're a woman!"

She clutched at his hand. Although she was still crouching, he could see that she was dressed in the black velvet doublet and black silk stockings of a page. She had apparently been wearing a cloak, the silver fastenings of which hung from her shoulders.

"Save me," she faltered.

"What have you done?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"Save me," she begged. "You will?"

He looked at her costume, absurdly conspicuous, but the frozen terror in her face checked his further questioning.

"I'll do what I can," he replied shortly. "You can't move from here as you are. Get underneath that tarpaulin again; there'll be no one round these stalls until four o'clock. I'll go back and fetch my overcoat."

She crept back into her shelter. At the last moment she cast a timid glance at him.

"You'll come back?" she moaned.

"Yes, I'll come back," he assured her.

He made his way to where his trolley was standing. It was still too early for business, and the place was almost deserted. Every one seemed to have followed a little crowd of people who had collected at the corner of Bow Street.

"What's up?" he asked one of the porters who was unloading.

"Dunno," the man answered. "There were three chaps came past here, bellowing as hard as they could. Quarrel up at the ball, I reckon. They eats too much,

them folks, and they drinks too much, and then they quarrels. Serve 'em blooming well right."

Bliss took the nose-bag from his pony and mounted the seat of his trolley.

"You orf?" the porter asked.

"I'm only going to drive round for a bit," he replied.

He walked the pony up the hill, and, by a round-about way, reached the heap of tarpaulin. One or two people were passing, so he waited for a moment under pretext of lighting his pipe. Then he slipped softly to the ground.

"Come," he said, "there's no one looking."

She crept out, and he threw his coat over her. Taking his cap from his head he handed it to her.

"Throw that hat of yours away," he directed, "and pull this well over your eyes. There's only one thing I can do for you. You can sit by my side here in that overcoat, and I'll drive you anywhere you like that won't take me more than twenty minutes. That's the best I can promise you. I've got my job here to see to."

Her icy cold fingers clutched his hand.

"It won't take longer than that," she gasped. "Quickly, please."

Bliss took his place upon the driver's seat and helped her up. She was trembling all over. He buttoned the overcoat up to her throat and pulled the cap over her forehead.

"Which way?" he asked.

"Along the Strand," she begged.

He whipped up the unwilling pony and threaded his way through the maze of farm wagons which were

now arriving every few moments, down at last into the Strand. She gave a little gulp of relief when they were clear of the labyrinth.

"Straight on," she faltered.

She sat there, leaning a little forward, the overcoat buttoned up to her throat, the cap pulled over her eyes, her face shrouded and invisible. She motioned with her hand along Pall Mall and directed him up St. James' Street. They crossed Piccadilly and turned into Berkeley Square. Still she motioned him onwards.

"If it's much further," he remarked, "I'm afraid I shall be getting into trouble."

They were at the corner of Grosvenor Square when she stopped him.

"Let me get down by that lamp-post," she directed. "You see?"

In the middle of the Square a little procession of motor-cars was waiting. The lights were flashing from the house towards which she pointed, and a striped canopy ran down to the edge of the pavement.

"Tell me your name," she whispered hoarsely. "Your name?"

"Bliss," he answered, "Ernest Bliss."

"And your address?" she continued quickly. "I shall remember it. Tell me."

He hesitated for a moment.

"168, Crummo Street, Poplar."

She nodded. Suddenly she gripped his hands.

"Good-by," she faltered, "but — thank you, oh, thank you!"

CHAPTER XI

THERE was a pink glow in the sky just at the back of St. Paul's Cathedral when Bliss drove once more up the hill into Covent Garden. He found the place which his trolley had occupied taken, and he had hard work to push his way to the front. One by one, however, he somehow or other managed to deliver his notes and collect his fruit and vegetables.

"Where's old Mott?" the first man asked him.

"Don't know," Bliss replied. "I was engaged by Mrs. Mott. I heard that Mr. Mott had gone off."

"Gone off," the dealer muttered doubtfully. "The money's all right, I suppose."

"I know nothing about that," Bliss answered. "I am a porter."

"We'll 'ave a pint, any'ow," the man invited.

Bliss followed him into a low, crowded room where men were drinking in the dim light.

"Fair old tartar, Mott," Bliss' new friend declared. "Never was such a chap for spreeing round. Wonder 'is missis stands it. She's got the brass, too. 'Ow long 'ave you been at this job, young man?"

"Not very long. This is my first visit here, at any rate."

"Ought to 'ave been 'ere about 'arf-'our ago," his companion remarked, as he set down his tankard empty. "There's been reg'lar game of 'ide-and-seek

all round the stalls. Some young chap got into trouble at the bull yonder."

"Was any one seriously hurt?" Bliss asked.

"They've taken a bloke to the 'orspital — saw 'im go by in the ambulance," the man replied carelessly. "Just you tell Mrs. Mott, young man, that I'd be jolly glad of a cheque on Thursday. Accounts to meet — you know."

He slipped a shilling into Bliss' hand and lurches off. Bliss drove back to Poplar. It was now broad daylight, and the pavements were crowded with men and women making their silent way to the scene of their daily toil. Bliss was feeling sick and tired. It was all he could do to guide the pony. He looked forward to his return to Cruemo Street and its squalid surroundings with absolute loathing. A subtle wave of memory assailed him. Only a short distance away were his warmed, luxurious rooms; his large, comfortable bed; his servant waiting to prepare his bath; the cheerful crackle of his fire; the delicious smell of hot coffee. He set his teeth hard. For some reason or other, it was one of his weakest moments. The vista of the months before him had never seemed so hopeless. Then, amidst that cloud of memories, he suddenly saw the face of the physician — the cold, contemptuous curl of his lips; the steely, unsympathetic glitter of his eyes. He forgot his giddiness and sat more squarely upon his seat.

A few minutes later he pulled up at the door of the shop. As he slowly descended, a little stiff from the cold, Mrs. Mott's face appeared from an up-stairs window. She was evidently not yet fully attired, a fact which seemed to afford her no concern whatever.

"I've 'ad Mrs. Simpson's boy in to clean the shop," she called out. "You just leave the cart where it is, take the pony into the stable, and come round to the back room, and we'll 'ave some breakfast. We'll unload the stuff later."

Bliss obeyed, and in due course made his way to the back room. Mrs. Mott was already there, wearing a pink flannel dressing gown tied loosely around her. Her hair was in curl papers. The rest of her attire was negligible.

"You sit down 'ere and 'ave your bit o' breakfast along o' me," she declared cordially. "They ain't been knocking you about, then?"

"On the contrary," Bliss replied, his fascinated eyes fixed upon her coiffure, "one large man who sent his regards to you and said he should like a cheque next Thursday, stood me a pint of beer and gave me a shilling."

"You've no call to tell me about the shilling," she remarked. "And as for Jim Avery's money, he'll get it all right, and that he knows. You can begin, while I run up-stairs for a minute."

Bliss found himself eating with an appetite. Presently Mrs. Mott reappeared. The curl papers had vanished, and a heavy fringe ornamented her forehead. She was almost embarrassed as she sat down.

"Don't often do much prinking before later in the day," she explained casually, "but you seem such a pertickler kind. 'Ave some more bacon, do. It'll be a bit o' work to bring the stuff in. I 'ope they 'aven't been passing off any old truck on you."

"I hope not," Bliss replied. "I did my best to watch everything that was put on."

"They're rare thieves up there," Mrs. Mott continued. "Want watching all the time. There's no two ways about it. A woman who is left with a nice little business like this needs a smart young man to see that she ain't robbed all the time."

Bliss caught the flash of her bold eyes across the table and set down his cup hurriedly.

"My! but you are shy," she declared, moving her chair a little closer to his. "And what's happened to yer coat and hat this morning? I seen you drive 'ome all shivering."

"I lost them both up there," Bliss replied. "Laid them down for a moment, and when I looked up again, they were gone."

"Yer not fit to be trusted amongst a pack o' thieves like that," Mrs. Mott exclaimed, half-angrily, half-tenderly. "What you need, young man, is some one to look after you."

The shop bell rang. Mrs. Mott rose, grumbling, to her feet.

"A thing I can't abear," she declared, "is them customers who come and want their greengroceries afore you've 'ad yer breakfast or tidied up. Don't you disturb yerself, Mr. Bliss. I'll be back in a jiffy."

Bliss hastily swallowed his coffee and stole softly to the back door. Mrs. Mott's shrill voice, however, checked his retreat.

"Here's a gent brought back yer overcoat," she called out. "Wants a word with yer."

Bliss turned towards the shop. He passed Mrs. Mott on her way back to her unfinished breakfast.

"What the likes of 'im was doing in Covent Garden I dunno," remarked. "Looks like a toff."

Bliss passed through into the shop. In the midst of the untidy desolation a young man was standing who amply justified Mrs. Mott's description. He was holding Bliss' overcoat upon his left arm. A motor-car was waiting at the door.

"Is your name Bliss?" he enquired. "I believe this is your overcoat."

Bliss nodded.

"I hope," he asked, dropping his voice a little, "that the lady got home safely?"

The young man felt in his waistcoat pocket. He drew out a piece of paper.

"We want you," he said quietly, "to just forget that hour altogether, if you will. The young lady is awfully obliged to you and all that. Here's a trifle she sent you."

Bliss threw the coat on a pile of onions and thrust his hands into his pockets. The boy's tone had been kind, even pleasant, but he had spoken from his world, which was a very exalted one indeed, to a greengrocer's assistant.

"I am very much obliged," Bliss replied, "but I do not require payment."

The young man was, for a moment, speechless.

"My good fellow," he exclaimed, "you had to leave your work for quite some time, and the young lady is most anxious that you should be rewarded. You don't know, perhaps — it's a little matter of fifty pounds."

Bliss, who had given that much as a tip to a favourite maître d'hôtel before now, remained unmoved.

"It was not a service," he reiterated quietly, "for which I require or could accept payment. As a matter

of fact, I was there too early for my work, and I was delighted to be of assistance."

The boy thrust the note slowly back into his pocket. He stared at Bliss from head to foot.

"There's no mistake, is there?" he asked. "Forgive me, but it is a little hard to understand any one in your position refusing a fifty-pound note. Perhaps you're afraid?" he went on quickly. "You needn't be. There won't be any trouble about that little affair. You're never likely to hear of it again."

"I'm not afraid of that," Bliss replied. "All the same, I require no payment, nor shall I accept any. I am glad to hear that the young lady is safely back with her friends."

The boy seemed to become suddenly older and a person of greater understanding. He held out his hand.

"I still don't understand," he declared frankly, "why any one like you is working as a grocer's porter. Will you let me do something for you? I can find you, without doubt, a more suitable post."

Bliss shook his head.

"Thank you, I am quite satisfied."

The boy looked around him, still bewildered.

"There must be something —" he began.

"It would afford me some satisfaction," Bliss said quietly, "to be assured that the matter in which I intervened was not —"

"I'll tell you all about it," the boy interrupted. "I'll tell you all about it, with pleasure. My sister and I live in Grosvenor Square. She is Lady Margaret Braydon, and I am Geoffrey Braydon. The mater was giving a fancy-dress ball, and we were both bored to death. I'd wanted to go to a Covent Garden

ball and told Meg so, and she bothered me into taking one of the motors and going there just for an hour. She wanted to see what it was like. It was a mad thing to do, of course. While we were there, three or four men followed Meg about, and directly I noticed it, we made up our minds to leave. Just then there was an awful hubbub. Some thief had stolen a bracelet from a woman near. She caught hold of Meg's arm and accused her of having taken it. The bracelet was on the floor, close to where Meg was standing, and it seemed to me we were in for trouble. Two of the men laid hold of Meg. They were going to keep her till a policeman arrived. I knocked one down and tripped the other, and Meg bolted. We both got clear, but she went a different way, and I lost her. Thanks to you, she got home, or there'd have been a devil of a row, for one of those fellows half recognised her, I'm sure, and they say he's a bit of a blackmailer, a regular wrong 'un. I hunted around for Meg for over an hour, but I had to be jolly careful myself, for the man I knocked down caught his head upon the railing and had to be taken to the hospital. Then I telephoned home to one of the servants I could trust, and found that Meg had been home for some time and gone to bed; so I followed. That's the story. I saw her when I got home, and she told me what you'd done for her. We'll both be thankful to you all our lives, Mr. Bliss."

"That's all right," Bliss replied. "You won't mind if I say good-by now, will you? I've a lot of work to do, and my mistress is a little impatient."

"It's all silly rot," Lord Geoffrey declared. "You've got to come along and let us help you out of this."

I can get you a job down on our Wiltshire estate, or —"

Bliss shook his head gently and pushed him towards the door.

"I'll see you again some day," he promised. "I'll know where to come if I need a leg up. Good-by!"

"And a nice long time the young man was, too, leaving yer coat," Mrs. Mott grumbled, as Bliss stepped back into the sitting room. "There's everything cold here, but I've warmed up the last bit of bacon."

"Thank you, I've had plenty," Bliss assured her.

"You'll just sit where you are," Mrs. Mott insisted, "and you'll eat that bit o' bacon —" thrusting it upon his plate — "and drink this cup o' coffee. Then you and I together 'll see about bringing the stuff in the shop, and I'll show you 'ow to do the sortin'. I don't see," she went on, dropping an extra knob of sugar into his cup, "why we shouldn't get one o' them louts as are always 'angin' round to do the rough work outside, and you might 'elp me more in the shop. It's not a bad little business, you know, Mr. Bliss, properly looked after," she continued, dropping her voice a little, "and it don't mean late hours neither. We can generally be finished in time for a bit o' supper at seven o'clock, and feel one's earned a bit, too, to spend. I'm all for a bit of enjoyment after the day's work's done," she confided, "and to tell yer the truth, I feel a lot more like it now I've got rid o' that man o' mine. Always 'alf drunk, 'e was," she went on, "and if any woman came along and smiled at 'im, even though she was as ugly as a barn door, so long as it wasn't 'is own wife, 'e'd make a perfect fool of

'isself about 'er. A good riddance, I say," she concluded firmly, "and if I takes a fancy — Drat that shop bell!"

This time, however, there was no need for her to disturb herself. They heard the sound of heavy footsteps crossing the shop, and the communicating door was suddenly opened. Mrs. Mott sank back in her chair. A blank expression spread itself over her face. A heavy, sheepish-looking man stood in the doorway, with a straw in his mouth and a half-awakened expression in his eyes. He looked from his wife to Bliss.

"Oos this?" he demanded truculently, indicating the latter with a movement of his head.

Mrs. Mott rose to her feet.

"And where 'ave you been, if you please, sir?" she enquired with ominous civility.

"I've 'ad a few days 'orliday," Mr. Mott replied, loosening his neckcloth a little, "and if any one says I 'aven't the right to a few days' 'orliday, then let 'em come outside and settle it with me."

"'Orliday, you lout!" Mrs. Mott cried, shaking with anger. "Yer can just take yerself orf 'orliday-making. This is my shop and my business, and I don't want no more o' you. 'I'm orf for good' was yer last words, and I'll trouble yer to aet up to 'em."

Mr. Mott scratched his chin for a moment and gazed towards Bliss.

"Fried bacon for breakfast," he murmured, "'ot corfee, and in the sitting room and all. Cold bacon and a glass o' water out in the stable was enough for the last boy."

"You 'old yer tongue, man," Mrs. Mott declared, breathing heavily. "If once I starts on you —"

"Yer can save yer breath," Mr. Mott interrupted. "I'm back 'ere, and I'm goin' to stay, even if it is your bit o' money as runs the business, and even if you does do most of the work. The laws of this country recognise that it's the man that's master, so let's 'ear no more o' yer rubbish. And, as to that young man," he went on slowly, "'im and me'll 'ave a little chat."

Mrs. Mott stepped between them. Her suppressed wrath broke bounds at last. With her arms akimbo, and her feet firmly planted upon the ground, she commenced to justify, actually and magnificently, her reputation. Mr. Mott, dazed by the flow of words, remained doggedly still. Bliss slipped quietly out by the back door. In the yard, and even in the stable where he collected his few belongings, he could still hear the voice of his late employer, ever rising in a shriller and more triumphant crescendo. But when at last she emerged, flushed with the joy of a transient victory, and looked around for Bliss, he had disappeared. With his little bundle under his arm, fortified by a very good breakfast, with very little money indeed in his pocket, but filled with a vague sense of relief, he was trudging cheerfully along towards the nearest labour bureau.

CHAPTER XII

"GET out of the way, stupid! Can't you see I'm wanted in the front?"

Bliss, with a rope in one hand, flattened himself against a wall of canvas scenery whilst Miss Maisie Linden, after an angry glance at him, tripped on to the stage to take a none too enthusiastic recall. She came off, if possible, in a worse temper than ever, and stood talking for several moments to a gentleman in dress clothes and with a silk hat on the back of his head, who was loitering in the wings. With sinking heart, Bliss noticed that she pointed him out. When the curtain fell, the person in authority crossed the stage and beckoned to him.

"How long have you been on here?" he asked curtly.

"I'm on for a week's trial at half pay, sir," was the reply.

"You needn't turn up to-morrow," the manager said shortly. "You can get what's owing to you at my office."

Bliss turned away a little wearily. It was a fortnight since he had taken his abrupt leave of Mrs. Mott, and this was the first regular job that had come in his way. Somehow or other, he had been unable to feel any disappointment whatever at the strange termination of his career as assistant in the green-

grocer's establishment in Crummo Street. He had welcomed Mr. Mott's inopportune return, in fact, with something very much like relief, and as soon as he had deposited his things with Mrs. Heath, who had welcomed him back cordially, he had sallied cheerfully out in search of another situation.

Day by day, however, the luck had been against him. He had earned a few shillings, but not nearly enough to pay Mrs. Heath's modest bill. Only yesterday he had seen the notice, "Stage hands wanted", posted outside the Frivolity Theatre, and had taken his place in a line of applicants. For once, his luck had seemed to be in. He was the last man engaged, and the twenty-five shillings he was offered seemed almost wealth. And now, on the first night, this tragedy! Dismissed! Even in the midst of his despair, however, the irony of the situation brought a grim smile to his lips. It was only a few months since it had given Miss Maisie Linden great pleasure to be one of his guests at a supper party at the Savoy. He could even recall her impressive looks and whispered asides, her obvious efforts to please him. He remembered, too, how much he had admired her that night. "The sweetest little thing in London," some one had declared enthusiastically. It was quite a different young woman who had just vented her spite upon a scene shifter.

Bliss made his way with a heavy heart to the back of the stage to be ready for the resumption of his work. On the way he passed three or four young ladies of the chorus, one of whom looked at him curiously. He recognised her at once. She was a young lady who, although her dramatic aspirations were limited, was

very well known in Bohemian London. The recognition was obviously mutual. She detached herself from the others and came over to his side.

"Why, it's Ernie," she exclaimed. "It's Ernie Bliss."

He glanced around, frowning.

"Don't give me away," he begged quickly.

"But what are you doing here?" she demanded.

"What does it mean?"

"I was a scene shifter here until three minutes ago," he told her. "I've just got the sack. Miss Maisie Linden complained of my getting in her way."

The girl seemed still half stupefied.

"But I don't understand," she protested. "They told me that you were so immensely we"

"So I was," he replied grimly, "once."

"Are you really broke, then?" she persisted.

"Look at me," he answered, touching the place where his collar should have been, and pointing to the ragged ends of his trousers.

"Then all I can say," she declared indignantly, her eyes becoming suspiciously bright, "is that your friends have behaved disgracefully. Look here, we shall be called in a moment — we're in the opening chorus. I have a friend whom they say is very clever, something in the City; Mr. James Fancourt, his name is. He has chambers in Gerrard Street — Number 7. Will you go and see him? I'll write and ask him to find you a job."

"Does he know anything about me?" Bliss enquired.

"Not that I know of."

"Will you promise not to tell him my real name? I don't want to appeal for any one's sympathy. I

only want a job if I can earn the money. Indeed, I won't accept it unless it is offered to me as a discharged scene shifter from the Frivolity Theatre."

"I shan't tell him a word," she promised hastily. "Mind you go and see him. I'll write to-night. I will say your name is Johnson."

She tripped away, and Bliss was tapped on the shoulder by his foreman.

"Here's your money," he was told curtly, "less two fines, eight and fourpence. You can hook it straight away. We don't pay you to stand about and talk to the ladies."

Bliss went out into the night, and, with his overcoat buttoned up to his ears, paused at the corner of the Strand, shivering. Once more, for a few minutes, he weakened. He was so near the one restaurant in London where his word was law. He could imagine the zest with which they would serve him, if he were only to stop a taxi, drive to his rooms, and change. He could almost hear the little chorus of welcome, feel the pleasant warmth of the place, smell the appetising odours. It seemed impossible to believe that a few months ago he had found it hard to select anything to tempt his appetite; had glanced indifferently at the long list of vintage champagnes; had found his food tasteless and the attentions of a host of friends boring. And above it all, as he stood there, he seemed to hunger for a really kind word, for the look of some one who was really glad to see him. Curiously enough, it was not one of that army of fair women and well-placed young men who suddenly held his thoughts, suddenly strengthened his wavering. He was looking northwards instead of westwards.

"Next Sunday," he determined, "I will go and see her if I have to go in rags."

The moment of weakness had passed. He bought his supper at a cook-shop and drank a glass of beer without the slightest fear of indigestion. Then he went back to his room and slept.

The next two days he spent in tramping about, making countless applications for jobs, always with the same result. On the third day, he made the best toilet he could and presented himself at the rooms of Mr. James Fancourt. A man servant showed him into an apartment furnished half as a study, half as an office. He recognised Mr. James Fancourt with a start as an habitu   of most of the fashionable rendezvous about town. Mr. Fancourt, however, showed no signs of sharing the recognition. He was a distinguished-looking young man, with black, shiny hair slightly waved in front, a long, clean-shaven face, and features good if somewhat expressionless. His attire was perfection. He scrutinised Bliss through an eyeglass with a certain kindly toleration.

"Your name's Johnson, isn't it?" he remarked.

"Ernest Johnson," Bliss assented.

For a moment James Fancourt looked at him, and during that moment, Bliss felt as though a searchlight was being turned upon himself and his past.

"Sorry to hear you're down on your luck," the former continued smoothly. "I don't want to know the particulars, of course, but were you at a public school?"

"Eton," Bliss replied.

"'Varsity?"

"Magdalen. Need we talk about that?"

"Certainly not," Mr. Fancourt replied. "I only want to have some sort of idea of the person I have to deal with. Miss Forrest tells me that you want a job."

"I want one badly; I am willing to do almost anything," Bliss asserted.

Mr. Fancourt extracted a cigarette from the open box in front of him, and passed them on to Bliss.

"Have a smoke?"

Bliss accepted the offer without hesitation. As he lit the cigarette, for a moment his eyes were half closed. It was his own special Turkish tobacco, the tobacco he had always declared to be the finest in London. He blew out a little whiff of the smoke with keen appreciation. Lately he had been smoking shag. Mr. Fancourt smiled sympathetically.

"Sit down," he invited. "Now, Mr. Johnson, I am willing to help you if I can. You want to earn a living. I can put you in the way of earning one. The question is — are you particular how you earn it?"

Bliss looked at his cigarette and then up at the speaker.

"In a general way, Mr. Fancourt, I should say no," he replied slowly. "My last job was scene shifting at the Frivolity Theatre. Before that I drove a greengrocer's cart. I have also filled the post of light porter and messenger boy. I have travelled in cooking stoves."

"A varied, but no doubt interesting career," Mr. Fancourt admitted. "There is, however, to my way of thinking," he added, flicking the ash from the end of his cigarette, "a certain sameness about all these occupations."

"I can assure you —" Bliss began.

"Do not misunderstand me," Mr. Fancourt interrupted. "I mean a sameness in one respect only. They were all of them unsuitable for a man in your position. They were all, I presume, in the nature of honest toil. What I propose to you isn't."

Bliss stared at him. Mr. Fancourt had the air of a kindly man who is just a trifle bored by having to enter into tedious explanations.

"If, Mr. Johnson," he continued, "you adhere to the very delightful standards of life advocated by what is known as the respectable part of the community, I am afraid that you and I will find very little in common, and that my assistance would be valueless to you. If, on the other hand, you recognise the only real philosophy of life, the philosophy that teaches us that, in accordance with the laws of nature, the strong man must take from the weak, the clever must strip the fool; that the man with brains and wit has a right to what he can take from those less amply equipped; if, as I say, Mr. Johnson, you can bring yourself into line with this modern train of thought, then it is possible that you have reached the end of your troubles."

Bliss, for the life of him, could think of nothing to say. The man's splendid reasonableness was unsailable.

"If I might venture to point this out without hurting your feelings, my young friend," Mr. Fancourt went on, "might I suggest to you that, in this eternal warfare, you, up to now, have been on the side of the sheep? Let me propose to you that having served your apprenticeship in one camp, you come over to the other? Permit me to offer you another cigarette."

Bliss helped himself silently. He was feeling the curious fascination of being addressed once more as an equal by a man whose personal charm of manner was undeniable.

"I was once," Mr. Fancourt continued, "almost in your position. I am now able to live in a civilised manner, to afford myself the luxuries of life which, to men of our class and upbringing, are practically necessities. The people who contribute towards my support are the sheep."

"And how," Bliss enquired, "is the fleecing done?" Mr. Fancourt smiled ever so slightly.

"My young friend," he said, "to-day we are what one might call laying foundation stones. The whole scheme of my profession, which in its way is, I think, unique, is a thing which you will only be able to grasp month by month, perhaps year by year. The immediate question is how to make use of you."

"It's up to you to point the finger," Bliss remarked cheerfully. "I'm on for pretty nearly anything."

"Just so," Mr. Fancourt murmured. "At the same time, you can understand that your admission into the little circle of, shall I say, my disciples, must naturally be an affair conducted by degrees. We have to place you, first of all, upon — er — probation. Now tell me, are there any of the ordinary pleasure haunts of London which you feel you could frequent without embarrassment?"

Bliss ruminated for a moment.

"I would particularly recommend, if possible," Mr. Fancourt suggested gently, "the promenades at the popular music halls."

"Quite all right for me," Bliss declared.

Mr. Fancourt smiled.

"You were, I perceive," he remarked, "in touch with the modern idea prevalent amongst young men of fashion."

Bliss nodded.

"Rotten form to be seen in the promenade of any of these places," he admitted.

"Exactly," Mr. Fancourt agreed. "Now, as you are doubtless aware, it is in these places that the sheep are gathered together. It is the young men from the provinces we want. Their white waistcoats are appalling, and their ties uncertain, but their money is good. They are usually attracted, too, by the real article as the moth by a candle. One of my little enterprises," Mr. Fancourt continued, leaning back in his chair, "is a mixed bridge club. It opens at ten o'clock and provides a little harmless diversion for these young men who are on the lookout to see life."

"Let us," Bliss suggested, "cut the cackle."

Mr. Fancourt nodded affably. He was scribbling a line or two on a sheet of paper by his side.

"You can take this to Poulet's, tailors in Southampton Row," he said. "They will fit you out for the evening and the morning. Your hunting ground for the present will be the promenade at the Empire. Here," he added, "are a few pounds for incidental expenses. As regards the rest, you can entertain any acquaintances you may find at Galer's restaurant and sign the bill 'Fancourt', with two dots afterwards. The chief maître d'hôtel there, Henri, shall have instructions from me to-day. Your ultimate object will be to bring your acquaintances on to Sidley's Bridge Club, Number 17, Folkestone Street."

"These sort of men don't all play bridge," Bliss remarked.

"Quite so," Mr. Fancourt assented drily. "I will not say exactly where, but baccarat can be arranged for quite close at hand. Then you must remember that it is a mixed bridge club of the highest standing. The ordinary provincial has read about these places, but has never visited one. You will find it easy to arouse a little curiosity."

"Am I to play?" Bliss asked.

"Not at present," Mr. Fancourt replied. "You will simply bring your acquaintance in, order a drink for him, and introduce him either to me or to Mrs. Fortescue, the secretary."

"Mrs. Fortescue?" Bliss objected. "I do not know the lady."

"She will know you," Fancourt assured him. "Shall we say in reply for the present?"

Bliss rose to his feet.

"I am starting you with the bridge club," Mr. Fancourt continued, "but let me assure you that this institution is only the outside edge of the enterprises in which I am concerned. I shall give you four pounds a week to commence with, but if you prove trustworthy, you will shortly be put in the way of earning any income you please, according to your skill and courage. I am surrounded by young men in your position," Mr. Fancourt concluded, after a slight hesitation, "but to tell you the truth, they are most of them rotters or else too well known. They are simply anxious to indulge their vices and keep their pockets full. They have neither brains nor grit. I need a man who has a fair share of both.

It is possible that you and I may get on together, Mr. Johnson."

Bliss made his way out into the street, a little dazed. Only one thing was perfectly clear to him. Un-savoury and dangerous though the encircling atmosphere might be, Mr. Fancourt was standing with both feet in the land of adventures. Bliss, despite the sordidness of his own proposed share in them, felt the thrill of coming events. To certain lengths, at any rate, he was prepared to follow his new star.

CHAPTER XIII

MRS. HEATH almost dropped the tray which she was carrying.

"If I hadn't always believed, at the back of my head, that you was a gent!" she exclaimed. "Real evening clothes and all, and you look as though you'd been born in them."

Bliss turned round from the looking glass in which he had been studying the arrangement of his tie.

"You reassure me, Mrs. Heath," he said, smiling. "To tell you the truth, I was not altogether happy about the set of this waistcoat. No cutter who had any artistic instincts could have designed that curve."

Mrs. Heath set down the tray again. An expression of anxiety clouded her face.

"You are feeling all right, sir?" she faltered. "A bit of luck hasn't turned your brain, or nothing of that sort?"

Bliss laughed cheerfully.

"Not it," he replied. "As a matter of fact, Mrs. Heath, I am not so sure about the luck. These aren't clothes I've got on; it's a livery."

"Got a job as a waiter, eh?" Mrs. Heath suggested hopefully. "I had a young fellow here once, used to earn his two pounds a week regular at Gatti's—Lawks!"

Bliss had produced a silk hat and a white muffler and was drawing on a pair of white gloves.

"Where might you be going, sir, like that?" she asked.

"To look for adventures, Mrs. Heath," Bliss replied. "I'm going to wander a little way into a world I know nothing about."

"Well, I wish you luck in the new job, sir, whatever it may be," Mrs. Heath declared, finally preparing to depart. "If I'd known you'd been going out like that, I'd have brought you something better than bread and butter for your tea."

"If I have any luck, Mrs. Heath," Bliss told her, as he accompanied her to the head of the stairs, "I am expecting to get a supper out of the job."

Bliss found a motor omnibus which deposited him in the neighbourhood of Leicester Square, and at a few minutes before nine o'clock he sauntered into the promenade at the Empire. The place was fairly well filled, and he found himself studying the faces of the passers-by with an entirely new interest. He amused himself trying to classify them — sheep, goats, and neutrals. Of the former, there was only one young man he found himself able to accept without hesitation. He was tall, with a round face and a high colour; a badly brushed silk hat; a shirt from which one stud kept continually disappearing; a made-up black tie, and a dress coat. He had red hands, and he wore no gloves. He carried himself badly, and he was smoking Virginian cigarettes. Bliss tracked him down to the cigar stall, where he found him negotiating the purchase of a shilling cigar. Curiously enough, Fate made things easy. The young man was, without doubt, clumsy, and in turning a little abruptly, he broke his cigar upon Bliss' elbow.

"My fault entirely," Bliss declared. "You must let me replace that."

"Couldn't think of it," the young man protested.

"I must insist," Bliss continued, selecting one himself from the box. "Unless you have any special favourite, I think you will like these. Rather a dull ballet, isn't it?"

The young man was shy at first and seemed on the point of sheering off after a few more amenities. Suddenly, however, he changed his mind.

"Like to sit down?" he asked. "I took a couple of stalls, but my friend was not able to come."

Bliss accepted the invitation promptly. The young man produced a card and became confidential. His name was Sturgess; his father was a hosiery manufacturer in the Midlands; he had come up to London on business and stayed to see the football match at the Crystal Palace. He knew nothing about London, but was eager to learn. He accepted Bliss' invitation to supper without hesitation and talked throughout that meal with the noisy high spirits of young men of his class. He became dejected, however, when the lights were lowered.

"Rotten place, London," he remarked. "Nothing to do after half-past twelve. Have you ever been to Paris?"

"Once or twice," Bliss told him. "It's well enough, but London's only dull if you don't know your way about."

"How the mischief is any one who only comes up once a month to find their way about?" the young man whose name was Sturgess grumbled.

"Well, what would you like to do?" Bliss asked.

"Would you like to go to a mixed bridge club and see some beautiful ladies play bridge? We can have a drink there, at any rate, even if you don't play cards."

"Rather," the young man declared enthusiastically. "I've heard of those places."

"Too easy," Bliss sighed, under his breath.

The bridge club was a surprise even to Bliss. A highly respectable commissionaire received them at the door. A still more respectable major domo, who, curiously enough, welcomed Bliss with all the respect of an old acquaintance, insisted upon his companion's full name being written in the visitors' book. The card room was quietly but handsomely furnished. There were four tables of bridge going. A very elegant-looking woman, dressed in severe black and wearing a big hat, held out her hand as Bliss approached.

"Come and sit down and talk to me, dear Mr. Johnson," she said. "You may introduce your friend."

Bliss, divining this was Mrs. Fortescue, did as he was told. Mr. Sturgess was shy at first, but was very soon put at his ease. The lady was particularly gracious to him.

"Would you like a rubber of bridge?" Bliss asked his new friend.

"I'm on for anything," Sturgess replied. "What about you?" he asked the lady gallantly.

She smiled at him.

"I don't think I'm very keen to-night," she confessed. "I've been racing, and Sandown always gives me a headache. Don't let me stop you, though, if you really do want to play."

"Don't care what I do," the young man declared. "I'm all on for a gamble."

"We don't play for high stakes here," the lady said with an amiable smile, "and unless you're a remarkably good player, Mr. Sturgess, I shouldn't advise you to play for anything more than the club points. The people here are pretty good, and they all know one another's methods perfectly."

Mr. Sturgess was a trifle dashed. He seemed, also, somewhat perplexed.

"I have been telling our friend, Mr. Johnson," he explained to the lady, "that I don't know anything about the runs up here. I come from Leicestershire. What I should really like, if such a thing were to be had, would be a little mild gamble. All the papers tell us there's plenty of it going on, but the difficulty for an outsider is to find it."

The lady yawned slightly.

"I fancy that sort of thing," she said, "exists chiefly in the imagination of the journalist. — Good evening, Jimmy, are you going to make up a rubber?"

Mr. Fancourt, who had just strolled in, paused and nodded to Bliss.

"I'm not keen," he replied, glancing at Sturgess. "I'll make up if you want me."

Bliss promptly introduced his friend from Leicestershire. Mr. Fancourt was only moderately affable.

"I can't interest Mr. Sturgess very much in bridge," Bliss remarked. "He wants a gamble."

Mr. Fancourt smiled.

"I expect your friend has been reading the trash in the dailies about baccarat clubs and that sort of thing. Personally, I don't believe there is such a thing in London. I think I go about as much as most men, and I never seem to hear of them. There is one at Brighton,

they say. If your friend would like a rubber at auction — halfpenny points —”

“Good idea,” Mr. Sturgess interrupted eagerly. “Anything to break the monotony.”

† They took possession of a vacant table. Bliss cut with Mr. Fancourt, and they lost a small rubber. They played one more and won. Mr. Sturgess, who played his cards moderately well, seemed uneasy. He continually glanced around the room.

“Don’t any of these people play for higher stakes?” he asked.

Mr. Fancourt shook his head.

“A penny’s about our limit,” he replied. “We’re none of us wealthy.”

“A little game of poker?” Sturgess suggested. “Eh?”

Mr. Fancourt shook his head firmly.

“Couldn’t be done; dead against the rules. Besides, I hate poker.”

Mr. Sturgess relapsed into silence. Half an hour later he received three and sixpence, the balance of his winnings, and prepared to depart. Bliss, at a sign from Mr. Fancourt, remained.

“See you again sometime, I hope,” Mr. Sturgess said. “If you’re ever down our way —”

“I’ll look you up,” Bliss promised.

The door swung to, and Mr. Sturgess departed. Bliss strolled back to where Mrs. Fortescue and Fancourt were seated side by side. Mr. Fancourt motioned him to sit down on the settee.

“I’m not blaming you in the least, Ben,” he said, — “you won’t mind my calling you Ben instead of Johnson, I’m sure — and I do hope that you will not

be discouraged, but your first young man from the country was just a little mistake."

Bliss was puzzled.

"He was a boulder, of course —"

"Most detectives are," Mr. Fancourt interrupted. "His real name is Richard Hales, and he is part of the Scotland Yard crusade against modern gambling hells."

Bliss was staggered.

"I am so sorry," he muttered. "I don't see how I could possibly tell."

"I don't see how you could," Fancourt agreed soothingly. "The only weak point about his get-up was that it was a trifle overdone. The ill-fitting shirt was all right, but the heavy boots and the made-up tie were exaggerations. The man we are looking for is struggling all the time to conform to type, and only fails through innate clumsiness. Hallo!" he added under his breath. "What vision of beauty is this?"

The door had suddenly opened. A young lady clad in superb sables was coming quickly towards them, followed by the surprised major-domo.

"Maisie Linden, by Jove!" Fancourt ejaculated. "I wonder — my dear young lady!" he continued, "what an agreeable surprise!"

Mrs. Fortescue raised her tortoise-shell monocle and regarded the newcomer with that slight air of surprise which, in the hands of an expert, is the last word in aristocratic impertinence. Maisie, however, took no notice of her. She gripped Mr. Fancourt by the arm.

"Jim," she whispered, drawing him a little to one side, "I've got him."

"The nigger?" Fancourt asked quickly.

She nodded.

"He's in my car outside. Give me my hundred pounds, and I'll bring him in."

Mr. Fancourt, from a crumpled heap of bank notes which he drew from his trousers pocket, handed her five, which she counted carefully and placed in the bag she was carrying.

"I'll fetch him up at once," she promised, turning away.

Fancourt remained standing. He had the air of a man who, after long waiting, sees close at hand the accomplishment of his desires. His face was expressionless, but there was a curious alertness about his bearing. His forehead was a little wrinkled. He seemed to be thinking.

"She means the Prince of Hindore?" Mrs. Fortescue asked.

Fancourt nodded.

"I've tried for him hard," he said softly, "but that confounded Englishman the Government told off to look after him had his knife in me. He's given him the slip somehow, I suppose. They say he won eighty thousand pounds in Monte Carlo, and lost most of it in one night at baccarat in Paris without turning a hair. Who is there here to-night, Esther?"

She mentioned a few names. Bliss rose to his feet.

"Am I to stay?"

Fancourt nodded.

"Don't leave until I see you," he ordered. "I shall want every one with their wits about them, to-night."

The door swung open, and Miss Maisie Linden reappeared, followed this time by a short, very dark young man, with shiny black hair, olive complexion, and narrow black eyes.

"Hallo, Jim," Miss Maisie cried cheerfully. "We want a drink, and the Prince wants to see a mixed bridge club. My friend, Mr. James Fancourt — the Prince of Hindore."

"Delighted to meet you, Prince," Mr. Fancourt exclaimed, holding out his hand. "I'm afraid it's rather a dull evening here — only two tables going."

The Prince nodded affably.

"That does not matter," he said. "I like to see the ladies gamble. I like to play myself. I am a great gambler. At Monte Carlo I broke two banks. I find it very dull in London. Why is there not roulette or baccarat?"

Mr. Fancourt smiled.

"There is plenty of baccarat."

"Where?" the young man demanded. "Where? I will play."

"Here," Mr. Fancourt answered boldly.

"Then let us play at once," the Prince suggested. "Let us make what you call a night of it. I am very glad to have met you, Mr. Fancourt. I think that we shall be friends."

"I am afraid," Mr. Fancourt said, "that our gambling will seem on a very small scale to you, but I will give orders to have the room prepared, and see if I can make up a little party."

Mr. Fancourt whispered for a few moments to the major-domo and afterwards disappeared into the card room. When he came back, he was followed by two women and three men, whom, with some ceremony, he presented to the Prince. He then opened the door of a room nearly opposite to them, on which was written, "SECRETARY'S OFFICE."

"If you will come this way," he invited, bowing to the Prince, "I think we can get up a mild game, at any rate."

Mrs. Fortescue took the Prince with her. Mr. Fancourt held open the door until they had all passed through. Then he turned to Bliss.

"Wait here until you hear from me," he ordered.

Bliss strolled to the door of the bridge room and looked through the glass top. There was still one table of bridge going, the four players at which appeared to him almost like performers in some dumb show. They played their cards mechanically and with little change of countenance. Not a word seemed to pass between them. Only once, as the door was opened to allow a waiter to enter, Bliss heard one of the women speak.

"Jimmy was a perfect beast not to let me play Oomsie," she sighed.

The man opposite her, swarthy and heavy-lidded, raised his head for a moment.

"I don't mind being left out of the Oomsie," he muttered, "but I do mind being kept here just to give tone to the show."

Then the door closed. Bliss resumed his seat upon the settee. A moment or two later, the door in front of him was opened suddenly and Fancourt appeared. He came at once to Bliss.

"Johnson," he said, "you see that easy-chair just by the door?"

Bliss nodded.

"Come there with me quickly."

Bliss followed him down the corridor. Fancourt moved the chair a little farther back and laid his

finger upon a little protuberance underneath the carpet.

"You see that? Now I want you to occupy that chair and to keep your heel upon that little lump. What I am afraid of to-night is a semi-private police raid. Remember you're sitting here waiting for your car, which you've telephoned for. Order us many drinks as you like, and us many cigarettes, but keep on the alert. If any one presents himself through that door who is a stranger, and Parkins there stops to enquire their name, — anybody who seems to you in the least suspicious, — just press with your heel. You'll get your cue from Parkins. You understand?"

"I understand," Bliss assured him.

Mr. Fancourt turned away.

"It will be an all-night job," he warned Bliss, "but it will pay."

Once more Mr. Fancourt disappeared through the door. Bliss ordered a large whisky and soda, a box of cigarettes, and the evening paper. Then he composed himself to wait. One young man entered the club, who was received with much respect by the major-domo, and who sauntered into the bridge room and there remained. Then, about four o'clock, the swing door was suddenly opened, and two men entered. They were correctly dressed in evening clothes, but their official air was unmistakable. The major-domo stepped quickly towards them, and Bliss' heel dug into the carpet.

"Whom do you wish to see, sir?" Parkins asked.

"Your manager," one of the men answered.

"There is no manager," the servant explained.

"Mrs. Fortescue, the secretary, is in the club, if you

wish to speak to her. 'The strangers' room is this way, please.'

The man whom he had addressed pushed him on one side.

"We'll find the secretary for ourselves, thank you," he said. "Stay where you are."

Parkins, however, still stood his ground.

"Strangers are not permitted in the club," he protested. "I cannot allow you to pass."

The taller of the two newcomers laid his hand upon the servant's shoulder.

"Look here," he declared. "We don't want any trouble. We are from Scotland Yard, and we are here in the execution of our duty. If you attempt to communicate with any one in the club, you will be arrested."

They passed on then along the corridor, after a glance at Bliss, who sat all this time with his heel upon the bell. Parkins turned towards him.

"Can't think what they've got in their heads, sir," he remarked audibly. "There's a police officer outside. I'm sure there's nothing wrong goes on here."

Bliss rose and followed the two officers. They looked into the card room, where the four people were still playing bridge. They examined the other and smaller card room, which was empty. Then they opened the door of the secretary's office, which was also empty. They stood for a moment, whispering together.

"There must be a room beyond this," Bliss heard one of them say. "You see where the wall ends."

They made their way to the further end of the apartment. The room was in darkness, and they could see very little.

"Why don't you turn on the electric lights, Harrison?" the inspector demanded.

"I've tried, sir," his subordinate replied, fingering the switch.

"The electric lights in this room are out of order, sir," Parkins announced stiffly.

The inspector drew a little electric torch from his pocket. Immediately on his left was a door shielded by a curtain. He drew back the latter and turned the handle of the door, which opened at once. They all stood upon the threshold, gazing in. The Prince, Mrs. Fortescue, Mr. Fancourt, and one other of the ladies were seated at a table, apparently playing bridge. Two of the men were lounging against the mantelpiece, talking to another lady. Miss Maisie was sitting on the arm of the Prince's chair. The inspector came a little further into the room, his eyes glued upon the bridge table. The dummy's hand was upon the table, the scoring blocks were filled with figures, the hand was apparently half-played. Mr. Fancourt stared at the intruders.

"May I ask what this means?" he demanded.

The inspector was completing a tour of the room. There was nothing whatever to indicate that the game of bridge which was now proceeding had not been occupying the sole attention of the players.

"I am here in the execution of my duty, sir," the man replied. "I am police inspector Stanhard. We have had certain information that baccarat is being played in this club."

Mr. Fancourt shook his head sorrowfully.

"Oh, that certain information!" he sighed. "I think that the same thing has been said about every

bridge club in London where the stakes are over half a crown a hundred. Never mind, Mr. Inspector, if you will ask the waiter for a drink, I am sure he will be delighted to furnish whatever you may require. You will excuse me if I finish this hand?"

The inspector turned away with stiff dignity. Once more he made a somewhat protracted tour of the room. Then he moved towards the door.

"Sorry to have disturbed you, ladies and gentlemen," he said curtly. "Good night."

The two men left the room. Bliss remained behind. They heard the door of the outer room close. The Prince threw down his cards pettishly.

"Let us make ready again," he suggested.

Mr. Fancourt shook his head.

"You must excuse us, Prince," he said. "I don't think we dare risk it. You shall have your revenge another night."

The Prince sat there, frowning heavily.

"And they call this a free country," he muttered, as he drew his cheque-book from his pocket.

Bliss, who had, on the whole, rather enjoyed his evening, presented himself at Mr. Fancourt's rooms the next morning with a somewhat dejected air. The latter stared at him in mild surprise. His new disciple had resumed the somewhat tattered habiliments in which he had made his first appearance there.

"I am sorry," Bliss announced bluntly, "but I have made a discovery."

"A discovery?" Mr. Fancourt murmured.

Bliss nodded.

"I can't argue the matter out," he declared, "be-

cause, so far as last night was concerned, at any rate, my sympathies were altogether on the side of the goats. All the same, I can't stiek it."

"Conscience, eh?"

Bliss assented.

"Hopelessly out of date, and all that," he admitted, "but it's kept me awake all night. I've packed up the clothes and delivered them at Poulet's. The money you gave me I think I earned."

"You certainly did," Mr. Fancourt agreed.

"I'm beastly sorry!"

Mr. Fancourt sighed.

"I presume," he continued, "that we can at least rely on your discretion?"

"Absolutely," Bliss promised.

Mr. Fancourt nodded amiably. He thrust his hand into his box of cigarettes and filled Bliss' pockets.

"Conscience," he remarked, "survives most things — except hunger. Come back again when you need me more."

CHAPTER XIV

MRS. HEATH, in a kindly sort of way, was beginning to lose patience with her lodger. She took him up some breakfast which he had not ordered and set it down firmly before him.

"I only wanted a cup of tea, Mrs. Heath," Bliss reminded her, looking wistfully at the bacon.

"Never mind what you wanted, sir," she replied. "What I've brought you, you've got to eat, and there's an end of it. Going out all day looking for work with nothing solid inside you; indeed! You know," she went on, in a manner more conversational than usual, "you do puzzle me, sir. I can reckon up most of my lodgers, but there are times when you fair take the wind out of my sails. Three or four days ago, there you were dressed up to the nines and looking as near like a gent as can be. Now you have not got a rag of those clothes left; not a sixpence in your pocket, and, so as not to run into debt, there you are trying to live on nothing. Such nonsense! You're a young man of the build that needs nourishment, you are! Sit you down and get on with your breakfast."

Bliss obeyed without further hesitation.

"It's very good of you, Mrs. Heath," he declared, as he helped himself hungrily to the bacon. "Some day —"

"Don't make any rash promises, young man," Mrs. Heath interrupted. "You will do what you can, I

know, but it's clear to see that you're not brought up to earn your own living, and it's none too easy a job for them as has to start unexpected like. There's a young man down-stairs," she went on, "just got a job at one of the motor places. I shouldn't wonder if that wasn't worth trying, what with all these taxicabs and such like running about the streets."

"Good idea, Mrs. Heath," Bliss cried. "I'll go round Long Acre way first thing."

"And here's luck to you, sir," Mrs. Heath exclaimed heartily.

Bliss presented himself about an hour later at one of the large motor establishments in Long Acre. The immaculate young gentleman to whom he made his application, who was lounging about with a cigarette drooping from his lips, and his hands in his trousers pockets, shook his head decisively.

"No vacancy at all," he declared. "We've more cleaners than we want, and the office is full up. The only men we are looking for are drivers."

Bliss had already turned away when a startling recollection came to him — he himself was a competent driver. He swung around.

"I can drive a car, sir," he announced. "Could you give me a job as chauffeur?"

"Whom have you driven for?"

"Myself," Bliss answered humbly. "I owned a car once."

The young gentleman looked Bliss over from head to foot. Then he pointed to a landaulette which stood in the centre of the immense garage on the threshold of which they were standing.

"Start up the engine of that car," he directed, "and

back her into number seven space — between the omnibus and the big Napier there."

Bliss accomplished the feat somewhat to his own satisfaction. The young gentleman blew a whistle. A foreman came hurrying out.

"Take this chap out and see if he can drive," he continued. "If he can, arrange about his licence and put him on the staff."

The manager strolled nonchalantly away. Bliss, who had been struggling with a sense of reminiscence, suddenly remembered the morning when he had bought a thousand-pound car in the same place from this same young gentleman.

"Whom have you driven for?" the foreman asked.

"No one lately," Bliss answered cautiously. "I think I can manage all right, though. What are we going out on?"

The foreman, who was a tall, loosely built person with high cheek bones and small, narrow eyes, selected a small landaulette and handed Bliss a tin of petrol.

"Fill her up," he ordered, "have a look at the plugs, test the sparking, and I'll be with you in ten minutes."

Bliss did as he was told. Presently the foreman reappeared, wearing a coat and muffler.

"Climb up and take her out," he yawned. "We'll go down to Shepherd's Bush. You know the way?"

Bliss nodded. He drove off, rather nervously at first, but still without mishaps. At Shepherd's Bush, his passenger left him for a few moments while he paid a call on his family. As they neared the garage on their return journey, the foreman stroked his chin.

"What's this job worth to you, young man?" he asked.

Bliss was puzzled.

"It's worth a good deal to me," he replied. "I've been out of work for some time, and I've scarcely a bob left."

"You'll get thirty shillings a week," the foreman continued. "Will you agree to give me five shillings a week for a month, if I make a favourable report? It's the usual thing."

Bliss sighed.

"If that's so," he consented, "I'll do it."

"Then just pull up at the pub yonder and we'll wet it," the foreman declared. "You handle the car all right. A little more confidence is all you want."

"I've not enough money," Bliss announced desperately, "for two drinks."

The foreman scratched his chin reflectively.

"That's a pity," he said. "Never mind, I'll lend you a shilling. You can add it to the five shillings for the first week."

He produced the coin from a wash-leather bag. Bliss pocketed it with a short laugh.

"Are you Welsh, Scotch, or Semitic?" he enquired, as they entered the public house.

The foreman shook his head.

"I don't know whether you're getting at me, young man, but I'll take sixpenn'orth of gin cold."

Bliss entered on his new occupation the same afternoon, and the first ten days passed not unpleasantly. The livery provided for him when he was sent out to drive kept him warm, and although he had one or two narrow escapes, he managed to get through his first few jobs without misadventures. He even received with gratitude a tip of half a crown from a physician whom he took on his rounds; a shilling from a spinster

lady whom he took from Hyde Park Square to a meeting at Richmond, and back again; and five shillings from a young man of his acquaintance who engaged him for the evening and kept him waiting for two hours outside his own favourite restaurant. His new position provided him, beyond a doubt, with more time for reflection than any of his previous essays into industrial life. For hours together he watched the great human tide of London sweep along her pavements. He saw the people who comprised it, from their own point of view. Faces into which before he would never have glanced for a moment awakened in him now a peculiar and real sympathy. He felt himself curiously out of touch with the world he had quitted. Though there were times when he longed almost hysterically for the luxuries and comforts which he had left behind him, there were also times when he thought with aversion of the daily routine of his past life. On his evenings off, he turned deliberately towards the East End for his amusement. He patronised the huge music halls in the outlying districts of London. Often he walked the streets and open spaces where the throngs were greatest. He made a few promiseous acquaintances, none of which, however, survived the first half-hour or so of conversation. Yet all the time he was very lonely. One night, in Drury Lane, he came face to face with Frances.

"At last!" he cried almost exultantly.

She gave him her hand.

"That's all very well," she said frankly, "but why haven't you been to see me?"

"I came last Sunday," he replied. "The house was closed."

She nodded.

"You happened to come just when there was no one there, then," she remarked. "I'd left my address for you. Where are you going to now?"

He realized with a sudden start that she was paler and not so well dressed.

"It's my evening off," he declared. "I was just going to have something to eat and try for the gallery at the Lyceum afterwards. What about you?"

"I've just left work," she told him. "I was just going back to my new rooms."

"Come with me and have some dinner," he begged.

She shook her head doubtfully.

"There's a little place in the next street where we can dine for tenpence," he went on eagerly. "Let's go along there, and we can have a talk. I can manage the theatre too, if you like; anyhow we can go to a picture palace."

"If I may pay for my own dinner —" she stipulated.

He laughed, and they turned away together. He led her to the little place he knew of — a tiny eating house in a back street, where, for some reason or other, everything was clean and a window was sometimes opened. They found a corner table and ordered their little repast with great care.

"You see," she explained, setting down the menu, "I've left Mr. Masters, and I didn't find another place till last week."

"You've left Mr. Masters?" he gasped.

She nodded.

"I couldn't help it," she said. "Perhaps I'll tell you all about it one day."

They were both hungry, and they frankly aban-

doned conversation while they ate their soup. Bliss was counting the coins in his trousers pocket with the fingers of his right hand.

"Your dinner," he announced, "will cost you one and a penny. I have reckoned it all out. I'll let you pay that, but I'm going to stand a bottle of wine."

She shook her head at him.

"You are the most improvident person," she declared. "What do we want wine for?"

Nevertheless he had his way. They sipped the *Médoc*, a bottle of which cost eighteenpence, almost reverently.

"Mind, I consider it wickedly extravagant," she protested.

Caught by a wave of reminiscence, he laughed and closed his eyes. She looked at him disapprovingly.

"I mean it," she insisted. "Now tell me, please, where are you employed, and what are you earning?"

"I am supposed to be getting thirty shillings a week at the Sun Motor Company," he informed her, "but a beast of a foreman there is deducting five shillings for the first month, because he got me the job. Fellow who gets four pounds ten a week himself, too."

"Pig!"

"However," he continued, "it's something to have a job at all, and a roof over one's head."

"I wonder how it is that life is so difficult for some of us," she sighed. "Sometimes it seems absolutely terrifying. There is so little between one's daily wage and utter destitution. Do you know, I had seven shillings in the world when I found this place?"

"But tell me why you left Mr. Masters?"

"He had made up his mind to marry me," she answered, "and I — I couldn't."

"Why?" he asked hoarsely.

She turned her head, and their eyes met. A moment afterwards, under the coarse tablecloth, their hands met too. The little eating house seemed suddenly transformed. All the warmth and splendour of life were there. It was, as a matter of fact, a very Bohemian little spot indeed. A man who had finished his dinner at an adjoining table had taken a mandolin from its case, and, leaning back, was making tinkling music. The people by whom they were surrounded were nearly all snatching only a few moments from their work — musicians, many of them on their way to take their place in various orchestras; attendants at theatres; one of Bliss' own fellow chauffeurs. There was none of the abandon of the diner-out. The day was still strenuous with these people. Yet Bliss and Frances, with their hands linked hidden under the tablecloth, looked out upon the little room and found no fault with it.

"So you are a chauffeur now?" she exclaimed, suddenly leaning forward as the waiter brought their next course. "I'm afraid you are a very rolling stone — a commercial traveller, light porter to that shocking old gentleman, Mr. Cockerill — what else have you been, I wonder?"

"Greengrocer's assistant," he answered promptly. "Jolly well I was doing at it, too, if only the man whose place I was taking hadn't turned up unexpectedly."

She sighed.

"It seems to me that you are a very unpractical person!"

"Up to now," he admitted, "perhaps that is true. From this moment, however, I'm going to turn over a new leaf."

"A young man of your education," she said severely, "should be doing something better than occupying the position of a chauffeur at thirty shillings a week."

"With tips," he reminded her hopefully. "I've made six shillings in tips already this week."

"I don't consider," she declared, "that tips are dignified."

He was crestfallen for a moment.

"Quite a recognised thing in our profession," he assured her. "Kind of thank-offering from my passengers, I think, for having reached the end of their journey safely."

She laughed softly. Without any spoken word between them, they seemed to have drifted into a closer intimacy and understanding.

"I want you," she said presently, "to tell me truthfully why, after you had done that splendid stroke of business for Mr. Masters, you refused to stay on with him. You could have had any post you liked and — and," she added disconsolately, "everything would have been so different."

He leaned a little closer towards her.

"I will tell you the truth. I borrowed the money to carry out that coup from the greatest enemy I have in life, and his one proviso was that I should not benefit from it in any shape myself."

"You borrowed it from your greatest enemy?" she repeated. "Why on ear — he lend it to you?"

"He was under certain obligations to me," Bliss declared, "which he could not evade. I can assure you that the five hundred pounds was no more to him than a snap of the fingers. He could have given it as a tip to a waiter and never missed it."

"Sometimes," she said, looking steadfastly into his eyes, "I think you are a little mad."

"Generally," he replied, "I am sure of it. To-night, for instance, here in this wretched little eating house, with a few shillings in my pocket, nothing in the bank, and not a spare suit of clothes to my name, I feel as though Paradise were close at hand. — What's that?"

He turned sharply around. A young man in soiled overalls had approached their table unseen. He leaned over and made his announcement in a hoarse but confidential whisper.

"Guv'nor's very sorry, but two of the chaps are away ill, and George here had to take a car up to Yorkshire. He wants you — an order that's just come in."

Bliss nodded.

"I'll be there in five minutes," he promised.

The man departed with a grin which was meant to be sympathetic.

"I'll have to go," Bliss grumbled. "It's my evening off, but they don't take any notice of that."

"Of course you must go," she agreed, drawing on her gloves.

"For one moment, please," he begged, "sit where you are. I want to look at you."

The man who had been playing on the mandolin had gone, but another of a company of musicians had drawn a violin from its case and was making soft music at the other end of the room. The place was

full. The odour of many dinners hung heavily upon the smoke-laden air. It was in this setting that Bliss looked for the first time appraisingly upon the woman who had taught him a new emotion. Her dark grey, ready-made costume was cut on prim lines and fitted her only moderately well, but the grace of her young figure triumphed over its imperfections. Her neck was soft and white; a stray wisp of hair had escaped from the thickly braided coils. She was a little pale, perhaps, but her courageous mouth seemed to defy the suggestion of ill health. Her eyes were very soft and sweet. Even as she turned and met his searching gaze, little lines spread from them and she laughed.

"How dare you look at me like that?" she protested.

"One moment longer," he pleaded.

His eyes rested on her hat — a plain black felt with a drooping brim, decorated with a rather tired-looking little bunch of violets. He glanced down at her many times mended gloves, which she had just succeeded in buttoning. He even looked at the thick boots, one of which was shamelessly patched. Her lips were parted now. Miss Maisie Linden would have envied her her teeth.

"I won't sit here for another moment," she declared, rising.

He followed her example, rewarding the waiter with a sixpenny tip, although he was conscious of the rank extravagance of the action.

"Forgive me," he begged. "I just wanted a little mind-picture of you, something that couldn't easily be displaced."

CHAPTER XV

... same long-limbed and elegant young man who at first engaged Bliss was waiting for him in the car when he arrived. He merely glanced up to give an order.

"Take the six-cylinder 'Sun' and go to Number 7, Harley Street," he ordered.

"Is it an all-night job?" Bliss asked.

"Can't tell," the young man replied. "It's to take a doctor out into the country somewhere."

Bliss looked over the car, which, so far as he could see, was in perfect order, and a few minutes later started on his errand. He was all the time oppressed with a vague sense of familiarity about the address. When he turned into Harley Street and glanced at the numbers, his vague suspicions were suddenly confirmed.

He came to a standstill before Sir James Aldroyd's house. With a grim smile he descended and rang the doorbell. The same man servant who had admitted him on his previous visit opened the door.

"Brought a car from the Sun Motor Company," Bliss announced.

"Quite right, my man," the butler replied condescendingly. "Sir James will be out in a moment. You needn't stop your engine. He's in rather a hurry."

Bliss resumed his place in the driving seat, and pulled his cap well over his eyes. A moment or two

later Sir James appeared, carrying a small black bag. With his fingers upon the handle of the door, he turned towards Bliss.

"Drive me to Walton-on-Thames," he ordered. "Go as quickly as you can without taking any risks. You understand?"

"Perfectly, sir," Bliss answered, bending over his wheel.

The doctor took his place in the car, and they started off. In an hour's time, they were entering Walton. In accordance with instructions which he received through the speaking-tube, Bliss turned in at the avenue of a large house standing in its own grounds and drew up before the front door. Every window was flaring with light. The door was opened before they stopped.

"I shall probably be an hour," Sir James remarked, as he disappeared.

Bliss leaned back in his seat and waited. Once or twice he looked up at the windows and shivered. Without a doubt, his sympathies had become keener during these last few months. The sickness and sorrows of other people had scarcely touched him in the days of his splendid prosperity. Now he found himself wondering who the patient might be, hoping and praying that the skill of the great physician might triumph, sympathising with the people who must be waiting in such cruel anxiety. Presently the door was opened softly, and a servant stepped out.

"Will you take anything?" he asked Bliss.

Bliss accepted a whisky and soda and a handful of cigarettes.

"Who is ill here?" he inquired.

"The mistress. Your governor's operating now."

The man's hand was shaking. Bliss smiled at him reassuringly, as he handed the tumbler back.

"Sir James is an exceedingly clever surgeon," he said. "He has saved a great many lives."

The time passed on. It was about an hour and a half before one or two of the lights were extinguished. Then the door was opened. The doctor reappeared. A tall, thin man came out with him. Bliss gave almost a start as he heard Sir James talk. His tone was kind, his manner sympathetic and earnest.

"I am only too happy to be able to assure you," he was saying, "that your wife's condition is most favourable. I do not think there is the slightest chance of any trouble whatever. I have never felt more confident after an operation. You may sleep quite easily, Mr. Langdale."

Bliss saw the tears in the man's eyes as he wrung the doctor's hand, and he was conscious of a thrill of sympathy as they turned back towards London. Precisely at one o'clock they drew up before Number 7, Harley Street. Sir James descended and turned towards Bliss.

"You can tell your people that everything was quite satisfactory," he remarked. "Here is something for yourself."

Bliss removed his cap, looked at the half-sovereign, and placed it carefully in his waistcoat pocket.

"Much obliged to you, Sir James," he said. "Hope you're getting your hand in training for that shake."

Sir James, who had been turning towards the house, stared at him blankly. Bliss slipped in his first speed.

"I'm doing very well, thank you," he continued.
"Ah! I can see you recognise me now."

"It is my young friend with the millions!" Sir James gasped.

Bliss held up his hand.

"Hush!" he whispered. "Don't give me away. I am Bliss, a chauffeur at the Sun Motor Works — thirty shillings a week and tips. Much obliged to you for this half-sovereign, Sir James. I'll drink your health. And good night!"

The car glided off, leaving the physician standing in the middle of the pavement. Bliss paused at the corner of the street to light a cigarette.

"The evening of my life," he murmured, as he started off again. "First Francées, and then this old buffer. And now —"

He clapped on the brake and stopped the car. A man was standing in the middle of the road with his arms outstretched, a man who seemed to have appeared from nowhere, in evening dress, but without any hat or overcoat.

"Hullo?" Bliss asked. "What's wrong?"

The man came round to the side of the car. He had the appearance of a foreigner. His face was freckled but perfectly pallid, so that the freckles looked like brown spots. The hand which gripped the front of the car was shaking. He spoke to Bliss quickly, almost feverishly.

"Pull up here," he directed. "Pull up! I want to get in."

Bliss leaned a little over the side.

"Are you under the impression," he asked, "that this is your private motor?"

The man, who had already wrenched the door open, stopped short.

"Are you not a taxicab?" he exclaimed.

"I am not!" Bliss assured him.

"But are you for hire?" the other continued eagerly.

"I will pay you double — treble price for one half-hour only. Come! I will give you five pounds."

"The car is for hire in the ordinary way —" Bliss admitted.

"Then it is settled," the man interrupted. "You drive me quickly to Number 9, Adam Street."

Bliss did as he was directed. The streets were almost empty now, and the drive took only a few minutes. The house before which they stopped was tall, smoke-begrimed, and gloomy. There was a light only in the topmost window. The man jumped out quickly.

"You wait," he ordered.

He produced a latchkey and disappeared inside the building. Bliss, glancing round a moment after his departure, noticed that the small electric light inside the car had been turned out. He descended from his seat, opened the door, and then for a moment stood paralysed. His hand, in feeling for the switch, had fallen upon something soft, something that felt like fur. He turned on the light quickly. A woman was leaning back in the corner of the car remote from the pavement, a woman wrapped in a long fur coat and wearing a heavy veil. He could form no idea of her age or looks. Her voice was soft but passionate.

"Turn out that light," she begged. "Oh, turn it out!"

"Look here," Bliss exclaimed, "how long have you been in the car?"

"Barely thirty seconds," she answered. "I was waiting on the other side of the road there, in the passage. I slipped in just now."

"Any connection with the gentleman who's just gone in there?" Bliss asked, with a jerk of the head.

A little foreign exclamation broke from her lips, at the nature of which Bliss could only guess.

"He was going without me," she whispered. "Leave me here, please. Get back to your place."

Bliss stared at the woman and then back at the house, from the topmost window of which the light had now been extinguished.

"This is all very well," he grumbled, "but I have no business to go mixing myself in elopements, or anything of that sort. I shall get the sack."

"This is not an elopement," she murmured. "Wait! Ah, see," she added swiftly, "the light has gone. He will be here directly. Go quickly."

Bliss climbed back to his driving seat reluctantly. Almost immediately the door of the house was opened. The man who came out stepped quickly towards Bliss.

"Listen to me —" he began.

Bliss stared at him in amazement.

"Hullo!" he exclaimed. "Who are you?"

The newcomer frowned impatiently.

"I am the man you took up in Harley Street," he answered sharply. "You must recognise me. My face was splashed with mud then."

Bliss stared at him. Not only were the brown freckles gone from his face, but the man's appearance was in every way changed. He wore a soft black hat which came forward over his eyes. There was a sug-

gestion of a black moustache upon his upper lip, and black lines under his eyes.

"I am an actor, you idiot!" he proceeded. "What business is it of yours? Do as you are bidden faithfully, and you are going to get a five-pound note for yourself to-night. Is that not worth while?"

"Rather!" Bliss replied. "You mean as well as the five pounds for the hire of the car?"

"Of course," the man assented. "Five pounds for the car, and five pounds for your *pourboire*."

"Righto!" Bliss said. "Where to?"

"You will drive me," the man directed, "to the far corner of the High Street, Houndsditch. You will leave me there, and you will forget all about me. For taking me there — this!" he continued, handing a note to Bliss. "For forgetting me — this!"

Bliss pocketed the two notes, a little dazed. The man turned away and opened the door of the car. Bliss heard something like the growl of a wild beast; then the woman's softer voice, pleading. The door was slammed.

"Go on," the man called out.

Bliss drove slowly up the Strand. He turned eastward, but almost at once he made a sudden turn to the left and climbed the hill leading to Bow Street. The man rattled upon the window, but Bliss took no notice. He drove straight to the door of the police station and beckoned to the constable who stood in the doorway. As it chanced, he was talking to an inspector, who also obeyed Bliss' summons.

"Look here," Bliss said, leaning towards them "I may be making a fool of myself, but I don't quite understand my fares inside. I took the man up

without a hat or coat in Harley Street. He thought I was driving a taxi, and offered me five pounds for half an hour's job. I drove him to Adam Street, and while he was at the top of a building there, a woman sneaked in behind. When the man came down, he was disguised; wants me to drive him to Houndsditch."

The inspector turned towards the door of the car. Bliss also dismounted. As he glanced in, he gave a little cry of surprise. Its only occupant was the woman. The inspector looked at Bliss questioningly.

"He was there a second ago," Bliss declared.

The woman remained silent. The official addressed her.

"Madam," he said, "the driver here tells me —"

He was interrupted by her little laugh.

"My dear friend —" she began.

The inspector took an electric torch from his pocket and flashed it into her face. Almost immediately he blew a whistle. Two or three policemen came running out.

"Search this neighbourhood at once," he ordered. "A man has escaped from this car within the last few seconds. He is probably Peter Crazen. Quick, driver, how was he dressed?"

Bliss explained as well as he could, and the policemen started off. Then, in obedience to the inspector's commanding gesture, he followed the lady into the building. The former led them past the charge room to a small office.

"I come, Mr. Inspector," the woman said indifferently, "because I am always so pleased to do as you ask. You have no charge against me, I think?"

"None," the official replied. "Have you anything to say to me? It will make things easier for you some day."

She laughed.

"Not a word."

The inspector took down Bliss' story, commended him for his action, and dismissed him. Bliss returned to the garage, left his car, and as there was no one there in authority to whom he could make a report, went back to his room and to bed.

On the following morning, Bliss was sent for from the manager's office. The same elaborate young man was there, seated upon the table, the usual cigarette in the corner of his mouth, a brown canvas duster over his otherwise irreproachable attire.

"You wanted to speak to me, sir?" Bliss inquired.

The young man folded up the newspaper he was reading and laid it down.

"You were out with the six-cylinder car last night, weren't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"You took Sir James Aldroyd to Wulton and back?"

"Yes, sir."

"What did you do after your return?"

"Had quite an adventure, sir," Bliss answered. "I took a man up in Hurley Street who offered me five pounds for half an hour's job. Then —"

"Don't you know?" the young man interrupted, "that it is against the rules for you to accept fares in that way? As soon as your errand was completed, you should have returned here at once."

"I didn't think there was any harm in accepting a good job," Bliss protested.

"There was a great deal of harm," the deputy manager replied coolly. "You were made use of by a notorious thief and burglar. We do not care to have our names mentioned in such a connection. Besides, you have broken one of our first rules in taking up a promiscuous fare. They will pay you your money in the office, Bliss. We shall not require your services any longer. And, by-the-by —"

"Yes, sir?"

"If you should happen to have any more of those notes like the one you handed in this morning for the car hire, take my advice and burn them."

"You mean that they are bad?" Bliss gasped.

"Very bad, indeed," was the grim reply. "Take my advice, my good fellow, and don't attempt to pass them. You'll get your money in the office."

The young gentleman resumed the study of his newspaper. Bliss went slowly out into the garage, changed his clothes, and drew his salary. With thirty-five shillings and a bad five-pound note in his pocket, he walked slowly away down Long Acre, to join, once more, the ranks of the unemployed.

CHAPTER XVI

"I HAVE come to the conclusion," Frances declared, "that you are an unlucky person."

"Just at present," Bliss replied with a smile, "I am not prepared to admit anything of the sort."

They were seated side by side, a few evenings later, in the little restaurant near Drury Lane. Frances frowned upon her companion severely.

"I don't see how you can deny it," she insisted. "You could have had a partnership with Mr. Masters but for your silly rich friend who would only help you under such absurd conditions. Then you went and engaged yourself to that cranky old lunatic, Mr. Cockerill, who, of course, sent you away when you interfered with his amusements. Afterwards, you admit yourself that you could have stayed on with the greengrocer lady down in Poplar only that her husband came back unexpectedly. That's three places, isn't it? And now you find another position with the Sun Motor Company, which really ought to suit you, and you lose it, as I think, most unjustly. I am going to give you one more chance."

She unfastened a little black pig from her bracelet and pushed it across the table cloth towards him.

"There," she said. "Keep that in some place where you can't lose it."

He stowed it away in his waistcoat pocket.

"That's enough about my affairs," he remarked.

"It seems to me that yours want looking into. You admit that you are not very comfortable in your present situation, and you were treated like a queen at Mr. Masters'."

"We all have our troubles, I suppose," she sighed. "No, I will not take coffee to-night, thank you. You know very well that neither you nor I can afford it."

He paid the bill resignedly, and they left the place.

"This," she declared, "is to be our last extravagant evening. Until you get a post, I will not have you spend another penny upon me."

"The bill for our two dinners," he protested, "was two and fourpence."

"That isn't the point. How much have you left, exactly?"

He counted out his money as they strolled along.

"Eleven and a penny and my room is paid for up to next Saturday."

"Up to next Saturday, indeed!" she repeated indignantly. "Do you imagine that you are going to walk into a situation just when you want it? I think it is positively wicked of you never to have saved anything. Tell me why you haven't?"

"I—I really don't know," he admitted. "I—you see I never had any incentive."

"Under the circumstances," she said, "I don't think that we ought to take that 'bus ride."

"Well, we are going to, anyway," he insisted. "You promised that when you wouldn't let me order the bottle of Médoc for dinner. Along Piccadilly, I think, where we can see the smart people; and a horse 'bus—we shall get more for our money. Come along, we can get on the front seat of this one."

They climbed on to the top of an omnibus that was making its way westward along the Strand. A late spring had suddenly transformed the city, whose streets, only the week before, seemed to have been the meeting place of winds from all quarters of the globe, winds which brought with them long spells of cold and gusty rain. Now everything was changed. The sky above was blue, flower sellers were at every street corner. Light frocks and flower-adorned millinery, even a few straw hats among the men, were like a presage of the coming summer. The air was soft, almost languid. Down by the Park the trees seemed already to have put forth their fullest and deepest green. Every now and then a little wave of perfume came to them from the flower boxes. And above their heads the stars were creeping into the sky. Frances' eyes were fixed a little sadly upon the constant stream of vehicles, filled with men and women in evening dress. They passed a brilliantly lit restaurant, where they caught a momentary vista of little parties of men and women dining together, surrounded by all the soft splendour of the modern restaurant de luxe. She gripped suddenly at her companion's arm. Her face had hardened.

"What have they done, these people, to deserve a life like that?" she demanded almost fiercely.

The question took him a little aback. He looked at her curiously. It was so seldom that she betrayed any such feelings.

"I suppose the women," he replied, "have married the right men, and the men have chosen their fathers wisely, have bought the right stocks, or backed the right horses. It is rather a lottery, life, isn't it?"

"It's worse than a lottery — it's a gamble!" she ex-

claimed passionately. "The whole thing isn't fair. There isn't any justice about it. Look at me!"

He nodded appreciatively.

"I like to," he assured her. "I don't believe there is any one better worth looking at in all that restaurant."

Even the compliment failed to touch her. It seemed, indeed, to have aroused a momentary indignation.

"You are absurd," she protested. "My clothes are ready-made and shoddy. I trimmed my hat myself with cheap artificial flowers. My boots are ugly. I have scarcely ever worn silk stockings in my life, and I love them. I love all pretty things. I can't afford to feel nice or to look nice, and yet I have worked hard all my life. And I have been good. Just fancy, only one life and never able to do more than peer over the fence into that world of luxury!"

"One can never tell," he declared cheerfully. "Strange things happen."

She smiled at him a little whimsically. The mood had passed.

"Please invent something," she begged, "something that will bring in a great deal of money. I don't believe you are a bit practical, though."

"I wonder," he murmured. "It seems to me that I have changed in many ways lately."

"There is one thing I do envy you," she sighed, — "your disposition."

"In what respect?"

"You can look on at all this luxury, all this easy living, and you never seem to feel a single pang. Yet I should think that you were better off, once, weren't you?"

"A great deal," he confessed. "I don't know, though, that I was ever happier."

His hand had fallen upon hers. She made a little grimace.

"You are going to talk nonsense, I am sure," she exclaimed, smiling.

"I am going to tell you that you are the dearest girl I ever met in my life, if that is nonsense!"

Bliss slept soundly that night, and he had scarcely finished his frugal breakfast next morning before a note was brought up to him in Frances' handwriting. He tore it open and read:

If you really want a place as chauffeur, I have just typed an advertisement for one from my employer here. I hate to think of your taking the place, but eleven shillings won't last long, will it? His name is Mr. Montague. The offices are at 17 Norfolk Street. Perhaps you had better call around and see him.

Bliss made a careful toilet and presented himself at the address given a little before ten o'clock. In the outer office was a pert-looking boy.

"Mr. Montague is engaged with his secretary," he announced. "I expect he'll be busy for some time. What's your name and business?"

Bliss wrote both on the back of a card and waited. The place was hung around with play bills and theatrical notices. From various announcements, he gathered that Messrs. Montague and Flibbert were dramatic agents. They placed plays and sketches, and engaged artists for vaudeville, pantomime, or the drama. Bliss saw a good many familiar names there,

and somehow or other conceived a dislike for Mr. Montague. Suddenly the door was opened.

"Step this way, young man," the small boy directed.

Bliss looked down at him for a moment, then he sighed.

"Certainly, sir."

The office boy glanced at him suspiciously, but Bliss' face was immovable.

"I can't have all my appointments for the morning upset," the small boy continued in a peremptory manner. "I have several important clients coming within the next half-hour. Whatever your business with Mr. Montague is, just rush it, there's a good fellow. This way."

He threw open the door and retreated. Bliss found himself in the presence of his prospective employer, and noted with some disapproval that Frances was seated by the side of his desk with a copy of the ebook in her hand. Mr. Montague conferred with her. He was fresh-coloured, with black hair and dark brows, and unmistakably Semitic. He spoke French with great splendour and amazing accuracy.

"So this is the young man, eh?" he asked curiously, when Bliss entered.

Frances looked up and nodded to Bliss in friendly fashion.

"Mr. Bliss is the friend of whom I spoke to you," she assented, a little stiffly.

Mr. Montague smiled and somehow seemed to show all his white teeth.

"A recommendation from Miss Clayton goes a long way, a very long way indeed," he declared. "Still, there are other things. You think you can drive a car properly, young man?"

"I have been in the habit of driving one," Bliss replied.

Mr. Montague composed himself in his chair.

"To my mind," he pronounced, "the chief enjoyment about motoring is to go the greatest number of miles at the smallest cost. I shall engage you on trial, Bliss, because of Miss Clayton's recommendation. You will find me a good master, and your wages will be liberal. I shall give you two pounds a week, but—remember this, I expect your accounts kept down to a halfpenny. I know exactly what it should cost to run a hundred miles, and it is always interesting to me to try and do it a little cheaper. Here is my card," he went on, scribbling on the back. "Go to Elliman's garage in Ensdehl Street, look over my car, and have it round here at one o'clock. I shall not order you any livery at present, until I see whether you suit. That's all right, eh, Miss Clayton?"

She smiled at Bliss and rose to her feet. Mr. Montague, however, detained her.

"That will do now, young man," he said to Bliss. "You can occupy your spare time until one o'clock by a little polishing. I like everything about the car to shine."

He flicked a speck of dust from his patent boots with the corner of his silk handkerchief.

"Don't leave, Miss Clayton," he added. "I have another letter for you yet. And, Bliss, just remember, will you, that I am an exceedingly punctual person. I like every one about me to be on time. Better have your dinner before you bring the car round. You will take me out to luncheon, and wait for me. One o'clock sharp, remember."

CHAPTER XVII

BLISS entered upon his new job and hated it. He was, furthermore, afflicted by an entirely new sensation. Mr. Montague, a little surfeited, perhaps, by the flamboyant charms of the multitude of his lady friends, was obviously disposed to admire his typist, and seemed quite unable to comprehend her avoidance of him. On one of his evenings off, Bliss talked to Frances seriously.

"Look here, you know," he said, "when I came in this morning for orders, that chap was trying to hold your hand."

She frowned.

"Girls who have to earn their own living," she remarked bitterly, "get used to that sort of thing. We can see when it's coming. It's generally easy enough to deal with."

She sighed, and Bliss' expression became more and more forbidding.

"Fellow's making a nuisance of himself, I'm sure of it," he muttered.

"He is persistent," Frances admitted, with a little gesture, half of amusement, half of despair. "All my usual methods for keeping such a person in his place seem wasted upon him. He has the skin of a rhinoceros."

"That's the reason these sort of chaps make money,"

Bliss declared. "I'll tell you what, Frances, we shall have to chuck it."

"That's all very well," she protested, "but there are a dozen girls applying for every post in the city where one can earn enough to live on, and remember, you weren't finding it too easy to get a place yourself."

"Then I'll stay without one and starve," Bliss retorted. "But I'm not going to stick that fellow trying to make love to you under my nose. What was that about Brighton on Sunday?"

"Oh! He's asked me to go to Brighton every Sunday since I first came," she replied evasively.

"Brighton, indeed!" Bliss grunted. "You might start, but you'd never reach there if I were driving. What about a picture palace?"

She shook her head.

"You can't afford it. Neither can I. With your moderate salary, and no money saved at all, you ought to put by at least half of it, until you have something in the bank. We'll go and sit in the Park."

They found a sheltered corner, for although it was now the end of May, the weather had changed again, and the wind was chilly. They looked out upon a little lake bordered with beds of hyacinths, sweet smelling but withered with the east wind. Before them was Park Lane. Bliss closed his eyes. For a moment he saw into the interior of that wonderfully incongruous medley of houses. A reminiscence wave of luxury set him longing. The seat was not very comfortable, they were neither of them very warm, there was nothing very interesting upon which to feast their eyes. Yet when that wave of memory carried him back to the old days, he felt suddenly content. There

was something new here with him. He took Frances' hand and held it tightly. There were many people passing back and forth. A little way in the distance, excited men were shouting time-worn doctrines to wooden-faced groups of auditors. There were many others in similar circumstances to themselves — servants and their young men; shop girls and their beaux; a world which, a few months ago, Bliss would have regarded without interest, almost with contempt. He looked at his companion's worn clothes and tired face. He thought for a moment of those theatrical young ladies of his acquaintance whom he had honoured with his attentions, and the contrast was almost ludicrous. Yet he admitted to himself with immense satisfaction that the answering pressure of her fingers upon his stirred a feeling in him which he had never before experienced, a feeling sweeter, more wonderful than anything he had ever known.

"It's an odd world," he said abruptly.

"It's a cruel one," she replied.

"Why?"

"Everything's so hopeless," she sighed. "I came to London hoping to do something for my sisters, but I can't, you know."

"Tell me about them," he begged. "I have never heard you talk of them. What are their names?"

Her eyes were very soft.

"I can't talk about them very much," she said. "It all seems so sad. When my mother died, there was about a pound a week between the three of us. Ruth, she's the youngest, has a really wonderful voice, but we can't afford to have it trained. If only she could go to Dresden for one year — but there, it's

no use talking about that. She earns a little singing at concerts and giving lessons. Elsie is delicate and can't do anything. We tried living together for a little time, but there was so little I could do down there that I left them to do the best they could, with the little money there was. I wanted to do so much for them. I can't save money, though; it's impossible. Sometimes I think I was a fool to have left Mr. Masters."

"Don't you believe it," he asserted cheerfully. "Very decent sort of chap, but no husband for you."

She laughed bitterly.

"Perhaps you'd like to point out the sort of husband I might indulge in?"

"Me," he replied boldly. "Anyway I'm the only one you ever will have."

She was silent then. For a moment, perhaps, the wind seemed to have lost its chilly touch, the perfume of the flowers to have become stronger. The hubbub of the distant streets had softened into music. There was the faintest smile upon her sad lips.

"What an optimist!" she murmured.

"Not a bit of it," he protested firmly. "Before this time next year we shall be married and doing all sorts of things for your sisters."

"Cooking stoves or chauffeuring?" she asked.

"You wait!"

She shrugged her shoulders and smiled at him a little wearily.

"Yes," she sighed. "I suppose I shall wait, like the rest of my foolish sex -- wait and see life go by me."

As they said good-by later on that evening, Frances broke a silence which had lasted a long time.

"Mr. Bliss —" she began.

"Ernest," he corrected her.

"Well, Ernest, then. I have promised to go motor-ing with Mr. Montague next Sunday."

He said nothing for a moment.

"I am not going to Brighton," she continued, "I hate having to go anywhere. If I refuse altogether, however, I know quite well what will happen. I shall lose my place. I don't want to lose it. I said that I would start after luncheon and go into the coun-try for tea."

"Very well," Bliss groaned. "I shall be there to look after you, anyway. And Mr. Montague," he added belligerently, "had better not try any tricks!"

CHAPTER XVIII

At half-past two on the following Sunday afternoon, Bliss, according to orders, picked up Mr. Montague at Prince's Restaurant. Mr. Montague, having escaped with difficulty from the reproaches of the two ladies with whom he appeared to have been lunching, settled himself in the corner of the car. He had a large cigar in the corner of his mouth, a tissue paper parcel in his hand, and a smile of anticipation, which Bliss hated, upon his face.

"Drive," he directed, "to the corner of Wellington Street and the Strand."

They found Frances waiting there. As they drove off again, Bliss heard Mr. Montague's somewhat shocked remonstrances.

"But, my dear girl! Have you no better clothes than these — the clothes you come to the office in every day?"

"I'm sorry, but just at present I haven't," Frances confessed. "You see, I was out of a post for a little while. If you think I am not smart enough to go out with you —"

"Hush, hush!" Mr. Montague interrupted. "Not a word of that, my dear. Only we must see. Something must be done about it. A nice tailor gown, eh? — something of that sort. Meanwhile, some flowers?"

He unwrapped the parcel he was carrying and disclosed a vision of wired roses and maidenhair fern.

Then he drew down the front of the glass, and Bliss heard no more. The car was a four-cylinder Napier, fairly old, but, as a rule, trustworthy. Nevertheless, when they were forty or fifty miles from London, Bliss began to have difficulty. Four times he made readjustments before he hit upon the real trouble — a defect in the wiring. They were then at a small inn in the heart of the New Forest, and it was past seven o'clock. Just as he had, at last, set things to rights, Mr. Montague came strolling out from the bar, with a freshly lit cigarette in his mouth.

"How are things looking now, Bliss?" he inquired.

"The trouble is over, sir," Bliss assured him. "I have just found out a defect in the wiring and repaired it. She'll go like anything now. Get you back to town in a couple of hours."

Mr. Montague did not seem as elated as he should have been. He glanced around and drew Bliss a little way out into the deserted street.

"Look here, young man, do you want to earn a sovereign?"

Bliss' face expressed, or was meant to express, immense rapture. A sovereign! An unheard-of sum! Mr. Montague nodded.

"It's a very large present," he continued with a sigh, "and very easily earned. I want you not to be able to start the car again."

Bliss looked, for a moment, as he felt — puzzled. Mr. Montague solemnly winked at him.

"The nearest station," he explained, dropping his voice into a hoarse whisper, "is three miles away, and the last train goes in half an hour. There isn't a car to be hired in the village. Go on with your work, or

seem to be going on with it, for another hour. Then come in and tell me that you are very sorry you can't start off again without a spare part, which you'll have to wire to London for."

Then Bliss understood. He looked away from Mr. Montague on to the ground. He was shivering just a little, fighting hard for self-control. Mr. Montague drew a gold coin from his sovereign purse.

"It's the easiest earned money," he went on, "you were ever offered. Just attend carefully to what I say. In about an hour, come in and knock at the door of the sitting room and bring your report. Meanwhile, I shall go and order some dinner here, in case," he added, with a portentous wink, "we should find ourselves unable to start."

He departed, and Bliss sat down to cool for a few minutes. Then, while Mr. Montague was engaged on the other side with the landlady, he slipped into the sitting room.

"Frances," he said firmly, "come out at once."

There was a new ring in his tone, and she obeyed without questioning. She even, at his bidding, climbed up into the car by his side. He started the engine and sprang to his place. They were gliding out of the yard before Mr. Montague caught sight of them. He came tearing out, his coat tails flying behind him.

"Hie!" he spluttered. "Hullo! What are you doing, Bliss? Bring back that car, you young black-guard, do you hear?"

Bliss looked over his shoulder.

"You stay there and eat your dinner," he shouted, "or, if you run, you may catch the last train from Woodford."

An incoherent stream of language only reached them in snatches. They had turned into the London road now. Frances began to get frightened.

"Ernest!" she exclaimed. "What is it? Do you know what you are doing?"

"Quite well," he answered. "There are no trains away from here, and the brute offered me a sovereign to hang up the car for the night. Serves me right for letting you come with such a beast."

She drew a little breath. She was paler even than ever. Then her head drooped forward. He held the wheel with his right hand and passed his left arm round her waist.

"Little lady," he begged, "cheer up! Life isn't going to stop for us altogether, even if we have to look for new posts. You came out for a motor ride and some fresh air. Let's enjoy it."

The ring of his voice was inspiring. Something of her old bravery came back to her. She laughed and settled herself down comfortably.

"I wonder," she murmured, "whether Mr. Montague will enjoy his dinner."

They sped on through the pearly twilight and through the soft darkness, until the glow in the sky and the great carpet of twinkling lights warned them that they were nearing London. He withdrew his arm then and slackened speed a little. She shivered.

"Silly girl!" he whispered. "What is there about London to terrify you?"

"I don't know," she answered, "and yet, it does terrify me. It's so hard and cruel and stony. It seems all the time to be crying out for more victims; to be grudgingly doling out our daily bread with one

hand and holding up all the joy of life just out of our reach with the other."

"Then," Bliss declared confidently, "we must learn to climb."

They drove to the garage, where Bliss left a brief note for Mr. Montague and enclosed the sovereign. Then they turned out into the street.

"I have my week's wages in my pocket," Bliss announced, "an immense confidence, and an unconquerable appetite. Let me have my own way for once. We have just time for dinner and a bottle of Médoc."

She laughed half happily, half in desperation. They turned towards Drury Lane.

CHAPTER XIX

THE lank young man, wearing a long brown linen coat over his untidy clothes, his fingers smeared with grease, his hair considerably ruffled, stood on the threshold of the little restaurant in Drury Lane, looking around, obviously in search of some one. He nodded to Bliss patronisingly.

"Chap from the Sun Motor Works," the latter remarked to his companion. "Come to look for one of their drivers, I suppose."

"Hateful people!" Frances declared vigorously. "I should like to tell their manager exactly what I think of him."

"You would take a message, no doubt," Bliss suggested with a smile.

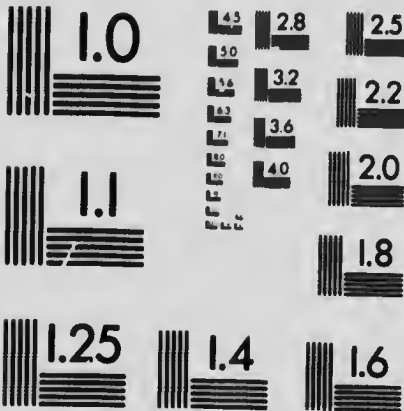
"And I should like to hear it delivered," Frances continued firmly. "I should like to deliver it myself. I wonder sometimes whether these beasts who give a man or girl the sack for no just cause at all, but simply because they are in a bad humour and feel like it, understand what they are doing — whether they know what it means to be out of work. They don't seem to feel any sense of responsibility towards other people. It's self, self, self all the time!"

Bliss' hand rested for a moment upon hers. There was the look in her eyes which had first made him understand the tragedy of such happenings. He had



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seen plenty of suffering and plenty of privation during the last few months, but these things found their way home to him with a new significance when they became associated with Frances.

"Don't you begin to worry, dear," he begged earnestly. "You'll get another post easily enough."

"Perhaps," she assented drearily. "And yet — it has all got to start over again to-morrow morning — and I hate it so. I shall go about all day with a lump in my throat, and I shall feel a queer pain every time some beast of a man shakes his head. I am like a beggar pleading for work. I'll have to pretend not to notice if a man shows that he thinks I am nice looking. I'll have to be looked at critically — and — sometimes I can read the thought in a man's mind as he looks at me with my testimonials in his hand. Yes, I might do. And am I married, or have I a sweetheart — and so on. What right have they to ask such questions? Ernest, I loathe men! When to-morrow is over, I shall probably loathe myself."

"Look here," Bliss said firmly, "you've got to get out of this frame of mind, Frances. You're undervaluing yourself. You are clever enough, you have the full value to give for your wretched thirty shillings a week or whatever it is, without smiling at any employer in the world. You're not asking favours."

She sighed.

"That's what I tell myself, but if you only saw the stream of girls outside every office where there is a vacancy!"

The lank young man, returning from his tour of the restaurant, paused in front of their table.

"Got a job yet, Bliss?" he inquired.

Bliss shook his head.

"I've had one, but it's no good. Chucked it this evening."

The young man adopted a more confidential attitude. He stretched his hands upon the table and leaned over towards Bliss.

"Look here," he continued, "we're fairly stuck for a driver at the yard. The guv'nor has just hired out the old Wolseley racer to a young lady who's paid cash down for it, and who's standing there now, waiting to take the thing away, and we haven't a driver who can be spared. I've been to all the pubs and two or three other places, but I couldn't find a soul except Sam Johnson, and he's as drunk as a lord. You take my tip and hurry round, and I shouldn't wonder if you didn't get the job."

Bliss rose briskly to his feet, called the waiter and paid the bill.

"If I am not back in a quarter of an hour, Frances," he said, "you won't mind going home alone, will you?"

She pressed his fingers.

"Of course not! Good luck to you!"

Bliss found the same elaborate young man standing in the garage of the Sun Motor Company. By his side was a woman, of whose appearance all that he could gather was that she was tall, dressed in a brown tweed ulster, a motor bonnet, and a very thick veil. Words were passing between the two, and the young man was apparently getting the worst of it. He looked up almost eagerly as Bliss approached. The lady was obviously annoyed.

"What is the use of showing me the car and telling

me that it will be ready to leave the garage in five minutes? You know I can't drive it. Find me a chauffeur or give me back my money. I can't stand about any longer."

The manager stepped on one side.

"Want a job?" he asked Bliss under his breath.

Bliss' monosyllable was sufficient. The young man breathed a sigh of relief.

"Here's your driver," he announced.

"And about time too," the lady declared, wheeling round and facing Bliss. "Is he used to the car?"

"Certainly, madam," the young man assured her. "He has had it out often, and he is one of our most expert drivers."

She climbed into the low seat and leaned back.

"Bring enough petrol with you for two hundred miles," she ordered.

Bliss was a little taken aback.

"Are we driving all night, madam?" he asked.

"We may be," his passenger replied. "I want to get to Newmarket as fast as I can to start with, anyhow."

Bliss saw some tins of petrol handed into the back of the car and clambered to his seat. A mechanic seized the starting handle.

"Stop," the young woman commanded. "Where's your overcoat, chauffeur?"

"I haven't one," Bliss explained. "I wasn't expecting to drive to-night."

"Find him an overcoat," she directed, turning to the manager imperiously. "The idea of letting your men go out to be frozen to death!"

The young man plunged into his office and re-

turned with a heavy motor coat which he handed to Bliss.

"What are my orders exactly, sir?" the latter enquired. "I don't want to make another mistake."

"You are at the entire disposal of the young lady," was the curt reply. "Same wages as last. The lady will pay all expenses on the road."

"You wish to go to Newmarket, madam?" Bliss asked as he slipped in his clutch.

"Yes, yes," she replied impatiently.

They reached Newmarket at one o'clock in the morning. Bliss slackened down with a sigh of relief. It had been a long day for him, and the car was not an easy one to drive.

"This is Newmarket, madam," he announced.

"Go on to Swaffham," she ordered.

The night was grey-black, with tangled masses of vaporous clouds spread like a network across the lowering sky. Every now and then, during the last two hours, a drizzling rain had fallen, and in place the road was soft. Swaffham was thirty-two miles further on, and Bliss was by no means sure of the way. He sank a little further back in his seat.

"To Swaffham, madam? Certainly!"

For the first time the woman turned her head and looked at him.

"Do you think you can keep awake so long?"

"I hope so," Bliss answered. "For both our sakes, it would be as well."

"Have you enough petrol and oil and things?"

"Just about."

They went on for a mile or two in silence. Then she turned once more towards him.

"Couldn't you go faster?" she demanded impatiently.

"I could," Bliss admitted, "but I don't intend to. It wouldn't be safe on these roads."

"Never mind whether it is safe or not," she retorted. "I insist upon it that you drive faster."

Bliss made no reply. They had passed the outskirts of Newmarket now, and were plunging once more into the dark world.

"Did you hear me?" she asked imperiously.

Bliss' eyes were fixed on the road ahead.

"I am driving quite as fast as is safe," he told her, "and I should be very much obliged if you would not talk to me. I have the car and my own safety to think of, and it is as much as I can do to keep her on the road."

"Stop at once," she ordered.

Without undue haste he obeyed. She raised her veil and sat up in her seat, leaning a little towards him. Her face, unnaturally pale though she seemed in the ghostly light, still surprised him. She was good-looking, even handsome, notwithstanding the discontented turn of the lips. She looked at Bliss steadily.

"How long have you been a chauffeur?" she inquired.

"In my present situation," Bliss replied, "from the moment you saw me enter the garage."

"The 'Sun' people engaged you, then, just to drive me?"

"Precisely," Bliss agreed. "I have been in their employ before, however, but I did not give satisfaction."

She laughed.

"What were you dismissed for? Bad manners?"

"Bad judgment."

She nodded.

"You have plenty of both, no doubt," she observed. "You can go on now. I wanted to have a look at you. You are the first man who has spoken to me like that for a long time. Start up, please. If it interests you to know it, we are not going to Swaffham at all. We are, in fact, very near the end of our journey."

Bliss obeyed without another word. Presently they climbed on to a long plateau, across which the road stretched in a perfectly straight line. The country was wild and open, mostly heath, but in one spot on the right, which they were rapidly approaching, it was black with trees.

"Slow down," she ordered.

Bliss obeyed.

"Now stop."

Bliss brought the car to a standstill within a few feet of the place which she had indicated. The young lady rose to her feet.

"You will wait for me here," she directed.

Bliss looked at her in some surprise. On the left-hand side of the road were rolling columns of grey, phantomalike mist; on the other, the impenetrable blackness of the clustering trees. There was no sign of any human habitation. The woman, in fact, seemed to take a couple of steps and be swallowed up in the darkness. Suddenly, however, from the spot where she had vanished, he heard the soft opening of a gate, heard the latch lifted by cautious fingers. He realised then that somewhere back amongst the belt of trees

was a house. He stopped his engine and leaned back against the cushions of the car. His lights were burning, and he was on his proper side of the road. Such curiosity as he felt became subordinate to an intense sleepiness. His eyelids were hot. The faint sighing of the wind lulled his tired senses, and in a few minutes he was asleep.

CHAPTER XX

HE was awakened by the flash of a lantern on his face, and sat up, blinking. A man to whom, even in those few moments of half-dazed awakening, he took an instinctive dislike, was standing by the side of the car. He was clean-shaven, with round face, small eyes, bull-necked, and, notwithstanding the lateness of the hour, he was still wearing riding clothes. His whole appearance was curiously reminiscent of the race course. In his hand he held a large tumbler filled with whisky and soda.

"Wake up, young fellow," he enjoined. "You'll get rheumatism, sleeping there a damp night like this."

"For me?" Bliss asked, stretching out his hand towards the glass.

"Whisky and soda," the man replied. "You look as though you could do with it."

Bliss took a long drink, then he sat up in his seat.

"What about my young lady?"

"Going to spend the night here," the man said. "She sent you this," the man added, producing a sovereign, "and you're to go on to Crawley, — that's ten miles as straight as you can drive, — and put up there at the Bull's Head."

"And what then?"

"She'll come on to-morrow afternoon — or rather this afternoon. Her brother will drive her in, most likely."

"Does her brother live here?" Bliss enquired.

"He does," the other replied, "although I don't know what business it is of yours."

Bliss rose in his place and stretched himself. Then he descended, turned the handle of the car and re-seated himself. His fingers were upon the change gear, his foot upon the clutch. It had not occurred to him to doubt the authenticity of his instructions. Then, just as he was about to start off, he happened to glance towards his companion to wish him good night, and a new and most disturbing thought flashed into his mind. The man's expression was astounding. The narrow eyes seemed to have drawn closer together. His parted lips, disclosing two rows of yellow, ill-shaped teeth, gave him the appearance of a criminal gloating over some anticipated success. Bliss, thoroughly awake now, sat for a moment in his seat hesitatingly. Finally, he thrust in his clutch.

"Good night," he said.

"Good night," the other replied. "Don't forget — the Bull's Head at Crawley."

Bliss traveled for a mile along the level road. Then he turned back and as silently as possible returned to his original position. He extinguished the lights, and, descending, made his way to the gate, opened it softly, and, taking care to keep on the grass border, cautiously approached the house, which appeared to be about fifty yards away, a low, unpretentious building, with a long line of outhouses in the rear, which at first sight puzzled him. There was a single light burning in one of the down-stairs windows, and towards this he made his way. As he drew nearer, he could see the shadows of three persons. The window was uncurtained and

unshuttered. The house itself, he was beginning to realise, had a deserted, almost a forsaken appearance. He crossed a weed-grown drive, stepped upon an empty flower bed, and peered into the room. The young lady was there, standing in the middle of the hearthrug, with one hand resting upon the chimney-piece. The man who had brought him the whisky and soda was listening to what she was saying, with a scowl upon his unpleasant face. Lounging in an easy-chair a little further away was a younger and darker man. Notwithstanding his dissipated appearance and weak mouth, Bliss recognised at once his likeness to the girl whom he had brought down. The young man raised his head and began to speak. Bliss found, to his surprise, that every word was audible. He looked up and discovered that the window was open at the top.

"What I should like to know is what you are doing here, anyhow, Kate," the former exclaimed peevishly. "You leave me with scarcely a word of excuse, without any sufficient reason —"

"Stop," the girl interrupted. "I had every reason. I left you because I dislike your partner, Sam Brownley. There need be no concealment about it. Our father trained horses here and made a name for himself. That name, Jack, you might have kept. I could have done if you had been content to run straight."

"And who says I'm not running straight?" the young man demanded.

"I say so," the girl replied boldly. "I say that if you had meant to run straight, you would never have taken a partner like that."

She turned her back upon the other man in contemptuous disregard for his voluble and profane remonstrances.

Her brother sprang to his feet.

"Look here, Kate," he expostulated, "I am sorry you and Brownley don't hit it, but it's my business, and Brownley's the man I have chosen to help me in it. Now will you kindly explain what the dickens you mean by coming down here in the middle of the night? Cut it short and tell us what you want, anyhow."

"I want to know," she announced firmly, "why you are running 'Mr. Pontifex' for the Newmarket Cup to-morrow, and why you have both backed him for more money than you have ever owned in your lives?"

There was a moment's silence. Brownley spoke up now. His voice was hoarse, almost savage.

"Where did you get hold of this cock and bull story?" he demanded.

"Never mind how I heard it," the girl replied. "I know very well that you've backed the horse for as much as you dared through the usual channels, and you've backed it for a great deal more outside. You've brought the price from a hundred to one, to a hundred to eight, and yet, on paper, any one who knows anything about racing knows that the horse cannot possibly have a chance."

"So you've come down here in the middle of the night to ask me this?" her brother observed uneasily. "Well, my reply is simple enough. It isn't your money I've backed the horse with, and it isn't your business."

"It's my business," the girl insisted, "to see that

you keep straight, Jack, and there's something on my mind that I have got to get rid of. I've come down here not only to ask this question, but I'm going to see 'Mr. Pontifex.'"

"What the mischief do you want to see the horse for?" the young man asked quickly.

"Never mind why I wish to see it. I am going to, so you may as well make up your mind to it."

The two men exchanged glances.

"Better stay the night, and you can go round to the stables in the morning," her brother suggested.

"Thank you," she answered, "nothing would induce me to spend a night under this roof. You seem to forget the circumstances under which I left it."

She threw a glance at Brownley, who laughed brutally.

"I don't want to lose my temper, Jack," she went on: "you are my brother, and I mustn't forget it, although you seem to when you let that brute insult me. However, are you going to show me 'Mr. Pontifex' or not?"

The younger man rose to his feet, frowning. He drew Brownley on one side. The girl watched them suspiciously. Then Brownley left the room, and the brother and sister lowered their voices. Bliss moved a little further back into the avenue. He was puzzled. The girl had distinctly said that she had no idea of spending the night there. Yet his orders had been to leave her. While he hesitated, he saw the three of them emerge from the house by the side door, cross the strip of lawn together, and pass through a gate into the courtyard in front of the long line of stables. Almost immediately afterwards, he saw an electric

light flash out. He stood and watched. They disappeared into one of the stalls and were absent for nearly twenty minutes. He heard Brownley's hoarse voice as they passed near the bushes behind which he stood.

"For God's sake, muzzle the d—d fool!" he exclaimed excitedly. "I tell you, Jack, if any one hears the rubbish she's talking, we're ruined, man!"

"Ruined you most certainly will be," the girl said firmly, "if you try on a game like this."

"Don't be a fool," her brother answered. "There isn't a living person except you who can say that that horse you've just seen is not 'Mr. Pontifex.' There isn't a soul who doesn't believe that 'Prince George' was shot. We had it done here, a vet was present, and it was in all the papers. Why, even the vet, even Jecks, the stable lad, couldn't have told the two horses apart, and they were the same age to a week. Don't be an idiot, Kate. It's a clear thirty thousand pounds for us, and five for you if you keep your mouth shut."

They passed into the house, all talking together. Bliss, with a little shrug of the shoulders, turned back down the avenue and mounted once more into the car. He had stumbled on to a conspiracy of some sort, and there were certain features about it which made him a little uneasy. His own weariness, however, made him almost callous as to what was happening. Once more he dozed off. He awoke with a start. The morning was breaking, and it seemed to him that it was colder than ever. Close at hand, down the avenue he heard the girl's flying footsteps. Behind he could distinguish the voice of her brother.

"Don't be a fool, Brownley. Keep your hands off her. She'll come back when she finds the car gone."

"If she gets away," Brownley exclaimed, "we're done, I tell you! We must keep her here, locked up. D—n it, I'll take care of her myself. I'll see she tells no tales."

She suddenly turned the corner and gave a little cry of relief when she saw Bliss, who was already starting the engine. She leapt into the car.

"Drive off," she begged. "Drive off! They told me that you had gone. Thank God that you are here!"

Bliss sprang past her into his seat and they glided off. Just then the two men appeared at the gate. They heard Brownley's roar of anger.

"That d—d chauffeur's come back!" he thundered. "They're off. You fool, Jack! Why didn't you look after her?"

"Kate, Kate!" her brother shouted. "Come back! We'll talk it over with you."

They were out of hearing almost directly, rushing across the heath. The girl had lowered her veil. Bliss had an idea that she was crying. He drove steadily on until he came to a turning to the left. Then he drew up.

"Why are you stopping?" she asked.

He looked straight before him.

"I thought perhaps you would like to go back to Newmarket," he suggested, "by the lower road."

She raised her veil.

"Why?"

"I have been playing the spy," he explained. "It was really in your interests, though. The man Brown-

ley, who I presume is your brother's partner, came out with a whisky and soda for me and ordered me to go to Crawley. Said that you wouldn't want me again. Something about the fellow made me suspicious, I don't know why. I pretended to drive off, and I returned."

She leaned a little forward. Her face was no longer hard, and her eyes were full of gratitude.

"Thank heaven!" she murmured. "Go on, please."

"When I got back," he continued, "I didn't know what to do, so I came up towards the house. I saw a light in that back room, and I crept quite close. The window was open at the top, and I heard a great deal. I heard you talk as you came back from the stable yard."

"How much do you know?" she asked.

"Well, I gathered," he went on, "that they've got a horse there supposed to be worthless, but which really is 'Prince George.' 'Prince George' was reported to have gone dead lame, and to have been shot last February. It's a clever dodge. I remember it was tried some six years ago, before my time. 'Prince George' is entered for the race to-morrow as 'Mr. Pontifex', and of course he'll win."

"You've got the whole story," she admitted in a low tone. "Only when I tried to plead with my brother, — he isn't really bad, but he has been led away by that man, — he was more brutal than I could have believed. The thought of the money has turned his brain. He left me alone with Brownley. The man is a beast. I got frightened. He tried to lock me up. Then I ran away."

"And here we are," Bliss remarked.

She nodded.

"What are you going to do?" he enquired.

"I don't know," she replied. "I was so relieved at getting away. That man — I am not a coward, but I was frightened to death. Jack had gone and —"

Her hands suddenly went to her face. Bliss, though he was cold and weary, felt a thrill of fierce anger.

"The blackguard!" he muttered.

She cried for a moment or two, quietly.

"I'll tell you what I should suggest," Bliss said. "We'd better go back to Newmarket by this lower road. You'll be quite safe at the hotel there. You can send a note up to your brother and say that you are going to be at the races. Tell him that if 'Prince George' runs, you'll report the matter to the stewards."

"It will ruin Jack," she sighed, "but I shall have to do it. Will you go back to Newmarket, then, please?"

Her tone was almost humble, her manner had completely changed. Bliss turned into the by-road, and they drove into Newmarket about five o'clock.

"Good night, and thank you so much," she said, as she turned to follow a chambermaid to her room. "I shall write that note before I go to bed. The night porter will take you to your quarters. I hope you will sleep well."

"What time shall you require me again, madam?" Bliss asked.

She hesitated.

"Will you be ready to take me up to the course, please, in time for the first race?"

"Certainly, madam!"

At ten minutes to two on the following afternoon, Bliss and the young lady who had become his temporary

employer stood up side by side in the car, with their eyes fixed upon the number board. There was a great crowd, although for a moment a curious silence reigned. It seemed as though every one were waiting for the hoisting of the numbers.

"They're going up," Bliss muttered.

Slowly the great black board with its white lettering was hoisted into position. His companion gripped Bliss' arm.

"Number eight!" she gasped. "Number eight! Look for number eight."

"It isn't there," Bliss assured her. "It isn't. You can see for yourself."

There was a murmur of voices, and then came the roar from the bookmakers' enclosure. She suddenly sat down. A man who had been standing by their side lowered his glasses.

"'Mr. Pontifex' isn't running, after all, I see," he remarked to a bystander. "What the dickens he was ever backed for, I can't imagine. He never had an earthly."

The girl glanced towards Bliss, and he understood. He turned the car around, and they left the race course.

"Where to, madam?" he asked.

"I don't know," she answered, leaning back. "Somewhere into the country — somewhere a long way from here. I'll stop you presently."

CHAPTER XXI

BLISS, with some difficulty, disentangled the car from the crowd of surrounding vehicles, and drove out on to the Newmarket Road. Then he brought the car slowly to a standstill.

"If you could just give me an idea of where you would like to go —" he ventured.

"I can't think yet. Suggest somewhere yourself!"

"Well, madam, there's Newmarket straight ahead, London behind us, and Cambridge, I suppose, round to the left," Bliss said.

His passenger raised her veil and looked at him.

"You can decide," she announced.

Bliss was somewhat taken aback.

"Were you thinking of an hour or two's run?" he enquired.

"Don't be absurd! I am going to tour about the country for a week or two."

Bliss was dumbfounded.

"Am I coming?"

"Of course you are! Who do you suppose is going to drive the car?"

Bliss looked disconsolably at the large steamer trunk strapped on behind.

"I am not wishing to complain, madam, but I think some one might have told me. I have no change of clothes and only an overcoat owing to your thoughtfulness."

"Of course they ought to have told you," she admitted. "They didn't, and I am afraid you must make the best of it. Are you married?"

"Not at present," Bliss confessed politely.

"Then you had better send a telegram to your home or lodgings for some clothes, or if you need to buy anything, I will pay for it. In the meantime, where shall we go? Why don't you smoke? I thought all chauffeurs smoked."

"Not as a rule whilst they drive their employers, madam," Bliss explained. "But if I have your permission —"

He produced a packet of cigarettes and lit one. The girl sat and watched him.

"Well," she asked, "aren't you going to suggest anywhere?"

Bliss considered the problem gravely.

"I believe it is quite a pleasant run to Norwich," he said. "Fine old cathedral city, good hotel —"

"Why couldn't you say so at first?" she interrupted. "We will go to Norwich."

Bliss drove the car back through Newmarket and took the Norwich road. She proposed stopping at a telegraph office on his account, but Bliss shook his head.

"To tell you the truth, madam," he said, "I have so few clothes that it is not worth while sending for them. If you would kindly advance me a portion of my week's salary, I will buy a few necessities when we reach Norwich."

"Just as you like, of course," she replied, eyeing him curiously. "Do you mind if I talk?"

"Not so long as the roads are good," Bliss assured her.

"You must forgive me if I seemed rude last night. You were a little peremptory, and I was all worked up. I am sorry! Tell me, what is your name, and how long have you been with the Sun Motor Company?"

"My name is Ernest Bliss," he told her. "I had a job with the 'Sun' people some months ago, and they turned me off, as I told you. I took up a fare in the street, and he gave me a bad five-pound note for the job. Then they couldn't find a driver last night —"

"Well, you are a very good one," she observed. "Have you been a chauffeur long?"

"No. I used to drive myself — I mean, I was always interested in motor-cars," he replied.

"We'll stop here for luncheon," she ordered suddenly.

Bliss swung in under the low archway of an old-fashioned inn.

"Order what you like, please," she said, as she descended from the car. "I shall be ready to start again in an hour."

Bliss lunched in the kitchen with an exceedingly good appetite, wrote a letter to Frances, and spent a few minutes going over the car. Punctually at the expiration of the hour the young lady reappeared, and they started off almost at once.

"Get your lunch all right?" she enquired.

"Quite all right, madam, thank you," Bliss answered.

"Where did you have it?"

"In the kitchen," Bliss told her, with a twinkle in his eye.

She leaned a little forward and looked into his face.

"Are you used to having your meals in the kitchen?"

"Get them wherever I can," Bliss replied cheer-

fully. "It really doesn't matter if one is hungry. The great thing is to have the appetite."

"Are you one of those foolish young men," she asked, "who lose their money racing and gambling, and then have to earn their own living?"

"Something like that," Bliss admitted. "Anyhow, it was betting that placed me in my present position."

"Then you ought to be ashamed of yourself," she said.

"Well, I'm not so sure," Bliss protested, with a smile at the corners of his lips. "You see, you don't know the whole story."

"And I don't want to," the young lady replied. "You can smoke if you care to. I'm going to sleep."

She kept her word, and they were almost at Norwich before she awoke. Bliss drove to the "Maid's Head Hotel."

"Shall you require the car again to-day, madam?" he asked.

"Certainly not," she said. "Come for orders at half-past ten in the morning. Here is some money for anything you may want." She handed him two pounds which Bliss, after a moment's hesitation, accepted.

"Thank you very much, madam," he said. "I will be round at ten-thirty sharp."

Bliss strolled out into the city, bought a few necessities, went to bed early, and took a long night's rest. Next morning, he was shown into the coffee room where the young lady was finishing her breakfast. She glanced at the clock as he entered. It was exactly half-past ten.

"You are very punctual," she said. "My box is

packed, and I am quite ready to start. You can bring the car round at once."

Bliss did as he was ordered, and a few moments later they glided out of the courtyard of the inn.

"Where to now, madam?" Bliss asked.

"I wish you would think of somewhere! I have no plans," she answered.

"Do you like the sea?" he enquired, "or do you prefer another cathedral city? There are Ely and Peterborough not so very far away, or if you care for a seaside place, there's Cromer."

"We'll go to Cromer."

"Only an hour's run," Bliss remarked.

"Well, we can see what the place is like," she said, "and if I like it, I will stay for a day or two. I hated Norwich."

"I am sorry, madam," Bliss regretted politely.

They were silent for some little time, then she turned abruptly towards him.

"I will tell you why I hated it," she explained. "I suppose people don't understand a girl travelling about alone. Look at me! Do I look as though I wanted adventures?"

Bliss turned his head. For the first time, he realised that his employer was really a very handsome young woman. Her figure was good, her features were strong although a little masculine. She had dark eyes inclined to be a little narrow, but distinctly attractive. Bliss had a curious feeling that she was trying to look her best.

"Not in the least," he assured her politely.

"I suppose people don't understand a woman going about unprotected," she repeated. "I dress as quietly

as possible, I look at no one, but the same thing happens everywhere. At Norwich it was perfectly hateful. Two men stared at me in the coffee room all the time and followed me out into the street. Another enterprising person actually invited me to go to a picture palace with him."

Bliss nodded sympathetically, not quite understanding the drift of her remarks. He felt there was nothing he could say.

"I am sorry to intrude upon your spare time," she went on, "but I should be glad if you would have dinner with me this evening, wherever we may stay."

Bliss started.

"But, madam," he protested, "I have no evening clothes!"

"Wear what you have on," she replied.

Bliss looked down at himself doubtfully.

"If you think it suitable, madam --"

"The most suitable thing is to obey my orders," she declared tartly.

CHAPTER XXII

They reached Cromer about twelve o'clock. Bliss drove up to one of the hotels near the sea, and they lunched together in the coffee room. Afterwards, at her invitation, Bliss escorted his employer along the cliffs until they came to a sheltered seat.

"Will you sit down, please?" she said. "I want to talk to you."

Bliss did so, although he was conscious of a growing feeling of discomfort. There was something about his companion, her manner of life, her unusual attitude towards him, and the general vagueness of their proceedings, which he found it difficult to comprehend.

"I am going to talk about myself," she announced abruptly. "You seem sympathetic. Perhaps you are not. Do you mind listening?"

"I am honoured, madam," he replied.

"I was born at that house at Newmarket," she began. "My father made a great deal of money. Every one knew he was going to leave the business to my brother and most of the money to me. Frankly, do you think I am good-looking?"

Bliss fell into her mood and looked at her critically.

"Yes," he said, as though he had given the matter the most careful consideration, "I should say you are most certainly good-looking."

"So all the men who came there used to think," she went on. "I came back from boarding school

when I was eighteen years old. There were always men about my home; trainers, jockeys, owners — they all seemed the same to me, all about the same type. I hated them all. I thought them simply a lot of brutes. And the greatest brute of all, the man who has made me hate his sex more than any one, is my brother's partner, Sam Brownley, the man you saw. He has spoilt my brother, ruined him. I cannot live there because he makes it impossible for me."

"That seems too bad," Bliss murmured sympathetically.

"I don't know where to live," she continued. "I have sixty thousand pounds, and I don't know what to do with it. I have tried living with an old aunt down at Salisbury. I suppose we shall end up our tour there. It's hatefully dull. Nothing to do and not a soul to speak to. I haven't a girl friend, and I should feel a perfect idiot if I took a paid chaperon about with me. I have told you all this because I don't want you to think I am quite mad. Do you mind my being a little unusual — my making a rather unusual proposal — "

She stopped abruptly. The hardness had gone from her face, and her tone had become more appealing. Bliss became more and more embarrassed.

"What I would like," she went on rather hurriedly, "is for you to allow me to buy you whatever you want, and you to have your dinner with me every evening and come out with me afterwards. I want a watchdog. I'm sorry if you don't like the idea. It is quite unusual, but then, the circumstances are unusual. Motoring is the only thing I care about, and I love touring. You are the only person I have seen for a

long time whom I feel I could trust, who wouldn't be likely to misunderstand."

Bliss turned round and faced her.

"I am so sorry," he said rather regretfully, "but I could not let you buy me clothes. If you wouldn't mind stopping at the smaller places sometimes, I should be delighted to have dinner with you — and take you where you wish afterwards."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Very well, then, we will try that," she assented, a little ungraciously.

For the next few weeks, life became almost a holiday. Bliss, recalling some of the hardships of his recent situations, enjoyed himself thoroughly. They toured around the country, stopping mostly at small places, and gradually the slight hardness and restraint wore away from his companion's manner. Quite easily, they drifted into a pleasant intimacy. By degrees, however, Bliss became conscious of a growing feeling of uneasiness. His employer had become more light-hearted, and, notwithstanding an entire absence of self-conceit, he could not help perceiving that she was deriving a great deal of pleasure from the expedition itself and from his companionship. She took his arm one night when they stood on the bridge at Tewkesbury, and the next morning he brought her a telegram sent by himself to himself.

"I'm so sorry," he announced, "I shall have to leave you this evening."

She had been in the act of stepping into the car. For a moment or two she stood quite still. The colour went out of her cheeks, the hand which grasped the rail trembled a little.

"Leave me?" she repeated. "What about the car? What can I do without you?"

"I will telephone to the Sun Motor Company," he suggested, "and ask them to send another driver down to wherever we stop to-night. Then I can go back by train."

"Couldn't you stay one more day?" she begged. "Then you can leave me at Salisbury and take the car back."

He hesitated. Perhaps he was deceived by the apparent carelessness of her tone.

"I daresay I could manage that," he said, "if it would be more convenient."

She stepped into the car then, and during the whole of the morning she scarcely spoke a word. That evening, however, she seemed to recover her spirits, although she was much quieter than usual. Bliss escaped from the dining room early, and when she came out, prepared for their usual walk, she found him dressed in overalls and with the bonnet of the car off. She came over and stood by his side. Her manner had altogether lost its note of masculinity. She seemed even a little nervous.

"Couldn't you do that in the morning?" she asked, without looking at him. "They have just told me of such a pretty walk."

He shook his head, his eyes fixed upon the revealed machinery of the car.

"It's almost half a day's job," he told her. "I shall have to work hard all the evening to get her right as it is."

She still lingered by his side, although for a few moments she remained silent. Bliss grasped an oil

rag in his hand, and was suddenly immensely interested in the float of the carburetor.

"We could start a little later in the morning," she said softly.

Bliss shook his head again.

"I must stick at it now I've begun it, and a job of this sort wants doing straight away, or it gets worse."

She turned abruptly on her heel and left him. Bliss waited until she was out of sight. Then he sat down on the step of the car and wiped the perspiration from his forehead.

"Time I got baek," he muttered. "Too bad to pull the poor old thing about when she's going so well, but here goes!"

He worked upon some imaginary defect in the wiring and saw no more of his employer until he brought the car round to the inn at nine o'clock the following morning.

"To Salisbury, I suppose?" he asked. "I've looked up the route. Quite good roads all the way."

She took her seat by his side without replying. She was more closely veiled than usual, and she leaned back in her place as though tired. They lunched together in the middle of the day almost in silence. Bliss, as they reached their journey's end, became conscious of an immense sense of relief.

"Expect I was making a fool of myself," he reflected, glancing towards his companion. Perhaps, after all, she was simply thinking him ungrateful. He turned to talk to her, but she answered him only in monosyllables. Then at last he pointed to where the spire of Salisbury Cathedral was dimly visible in the far distance.

"The end of our journey!" he exclaimed. "We shall be there in half an hour."

"Stop," she ordered.

He pulled up the car at once. They were at the top of a hill, with a long stretch of road, empty of any traffic, before them.

She deliberately raised her veil and looked at him.

"So this is the end of our little expedition," she said.

"I have enjoyed it very much," Bliss declared. "I shall never forget your kindness."

"It has not been a matter of kindness at all," she assured him. "For the first time since I was left alone, I have known what it is like not to feel lonely. I am afraid — I hate to think it is all over."

"It has been ripping," Bliss admitted, looking steadfastly along the road. "A real holiday for me, I can assure you!"

She leaned forward in her place and forced him to look at her.

"Need we finish?" she asked.

"I am afraid we must," he answered gravely. "The girl I am engaged to will be getting impatient for me to return — and I want to see her, too."

She looked at him for a moment without flinching. Then she leaned back once more, and her fingers trembled with her veil.

"Drive on, please," she said.

CHAPTER XXIII

At about five o'clock on the following afternoon, Bliss drove the car into the garage of the Sun Motor Company. He was covered with dust and a little tired after his long ride from Salisbury. Otherwise, he was in excellent spirits. It was a month nearer to the end of his great experiment, he had four weeks' wages to draw, and with reasonable luck, he felt almost certain of being taken on again as a regular chauffeur. He drove the car into a vacant space and stopped to look about him. The garage seemed unusually empty, and there was an absence of any stir or sign of business pressure. He made his way to the office. The youthful manager was sitting there, smoking a cigarette and reading a newspaper. Two strangers were engaged upon the books at a neighbouring desk.

"Brought the Wolseley back, sir," Bliss announced.

The manager nodded.

"We had a cheque for the balance of the hire this morning," he remarked. "The young lady," he added condescendingly, "seems very pleased with your services."

"I did my best, sir," Bliss replied. "The car went very well all the time. I am hoping you will give me a regular job now — for a matter of six months, at any rate."

The young man shook his head.

"Bad luck, Bliss. Can't promise anything at the

moment. Fact is," he glanced towards the two men at the other end of the room, "the governor's been speculating. We're in liquidation."

Bliss' heart sank. He had twopence in his pocket, and he was exceedingly thirsty.

"Shall I get the balance of my four weeks' salary?" he enquired anxiously.

"Yes, we'll see to that," the manager promised, rising and making his way towards one of the men at the desk. "It's about all we can do for you, though."

"Can't even give me a week's job while I look round, I suppose?" Bliss asked wistfully.

"Can't be done," the other declared. "You weren't one of our regulars, you know. Leave your address. If things go right, we'll do what we can for you."

So Bliss left the place, once more one of the unemployed. He carried his few belongings round to his old lodgings, arranged with Mrs. Heath, who was genuinely glad to see him, to take his old room again, and afterwards he hurried round to Frances' apartment. He met her on the doorstep, and his heart sank as she turned to greet him. Even to the mended gloves, she was wearing exactly the same clothes as when he had left her last. Her mouth was a little harder. There were hollows in her cheeks. Nevertheless, for the moment, her smile was transfiguring. She held out both her hands.

"Ernest!" she exclaimed. "Oh, it is good to see you again!"

He gripped her hands and forgot to let them go.

"You had my letters?" he asked.

She nodded.

"I loved having them!" she admitted. "I didn't

write to you as often as I meant to, but it was so hard. There seemed to be nothing to say, and I didn't want to depress you. When did you get back?"

"This afternoon," Bliss told her, "about half an hour ago. I have four weeks' money in my pocket, less a small advance. I have been kept all the time, and I've been saving like anything."

"I am not at all sure that I approve of your touring round the country with a single young woman," Frances said.

Bliss laughed.

"Quite compromising, wasn't it? However, — there was always you! We had one adventure up at Newmarket I must tell you about. The rest of the time was pretty uneventful, but such a rest. I left the lady down at Salisbury this m. with some relations and brought the car back to the garage. Come and have some dinner."

She hesitated for a moment. Then she yielded. He had a horrible suspicion that she was faint with hunger. They started off towards Drury Lane.

"I suppose the 'Sun' people will keep you on now?" she asked.

"That's the dickens of it," he sighed. "I've got a fine testimonial, but they've gone into liquidation."

She laughed bitterly.

"Our luck isn't in, is it?" she remarked. "Do you know, that brute Montague wouldn't give me a reference?"

"The hound!" Bliss muttered.

"I have others, of course," Frances went on, "but every one seems so suspicious. They all want to know why I left my last place. I — I've had nearly enough

of it, Ernest. I've almost made up my mind to go back to Mr. Masters."

"Why not?" Bliss agreed, after a moment's thought. "He was a good chap. He'd sooner you went back —"

"If I go back to Mr. Masters, I shall marry him," she interrupted. "I have almost decided to. I was only waiting till you came back to tell you."

"Marry him you never will," Bliss declared firmly. "Now let's chuck it for a time. We are going to have dinner and enjoy ourselves, and we are just going to remember that we are both young, with the future before us, and that you are the girl who is going to be my wife, and whom I am going to make very happy indeed. Only believe in me and have a little more confidence."

"You're a brave dear," she sighed, "but facts are like hunger — stubborn, stubborn as they can be."

"There's nothing stubborn about my hunger, anyway," Bliss assured her, as they turned in at the little restaurant and took their places at a table close to the wall. "I am going to make it yield, and yield quickly. I feel, somehow or other, that we are nearer to fortune to-night than we ever were."

He ordered dinner under her careful supervision and told her of his adventures while they ate. By degrees she became interested. Her manner became more animated, and the colour returned gradually to her cheeks.

"It's delightful to have you here again," she said. "I seem to lose that lonely feeling that makes London so horrid. Do you know, I think I shall sleep to-night?"

"Well, you're going to have a try, and that very soon," he answered. "I shall take you to your rooms as soon as we have finished dinner, but you've got to promise me one thing."

"I think I'll promise you anything," she murmured.

"You've got to promise me that you won't return to Mr. Masters without letting me know."

She nodded.

"I'll promise that, but, Ernest — you may as well know the truth, I haven't done a day's work since you went away, and — and I'm pretty nearly penniless. I haven't sent anything to the girls for five weeks, and I am beginning to owe my landlady money. No — not that!" she cried sharply, as she saw Bliss' hand steal towards his pocket. "I won't borrow from you. I won't!"

"Why not?" he pleaded. "No one else has the right to lend you money, Frances. Besides, putting everything else on one side, aren't we pals together, dear? Just at this moment you're a little harder up than I am. It may be the other way in a few months' time. Be sensible, dear! I've four golden sovereigns in my pocket, and I don't owe a copper. Halves, please."

She pushed his hand gently away, but she sat for a moment in silence, her eyes fixed upon the opposite wall.

"Please, Frances!" he begged. "I'm sure to get another job soon, and two pounds will last me for a long time. Don't make me absolutely miserable by refusing!"

He saw her lips tremble. It was one of the bitterest moments of her life.

"I will take a sovereign, Ernest," she whispered. "It will keep my landlady quiet."

He slipped it into her hand. Her fingers, as she took it, shivered.

"The other," he said, "I will keep for you. Now, if you are ready, we will go."

They walked slowly back to her rooms, and parted on the doorstep. Bliss, too, went to bed early. He had a long day before him on the morrow. More than ever he realised the necessity of finding work, and finding it quickly.

CHAPTER XXIV

AT ten o'clock on the following morning, Bliss was ushered without announcement, — it cost him half a crown, — into Mr. Montague's private office. Mr. Montague glanced up, and when he recognised his visitor, showed his teeth.

"What do you want here?" he enquired.

Bliss produced a heavy leather whip from his inner pocket. That also had cost him half a crown.

"Take up your pen and write what I tell you," he ordered.

"What the devil do you mean, coming into a gentleman's office and —"

Bliss struck the desk in front of him so that the papers rattled.

"Write," he insisted.

Mr. Montague took up his pen.

"Frances Chayton was in my employ —"

Mr. Montague dropped his pen, and a moment later howled with pain as the leather thong struck his knuckles. He stretched out his hand for the bell, but Bliss swiftly removed it from his reach.

"If you call for help," he said, "or touch that telephone, you'll get the thrashing you deserve. If you write what I tell you silently, you may escape it."

Mr. Montague opened his lips and closed them.

"Frances Clayton was in my employ for some months," Bliss continued, "as typist. I found her

conscientious, capable, and intelligent. She left at her own desire."

Mr. Montague wrote as he was bidden and signed his name. Bliss took the sheet of paper from him and folded it up.

"Good morning, Mr. Montague!"

"You wait till I get my hand on you, young fellow," Mr. Montague spluttered.

Bliss dangled the whip thoughtfully. He seemed to be still deliberating as to its use.

"You deserve it, you know."

Mr. Montague shrank back. His high colour seemed to have become less evident. Bliss, with a little laugh, turned away.

"It's a good whip," he remarked, "good honest leather. I won't spoil it."

He walked out, borrowed an envelope from the young gentleman in charge of the outer office, addressed the reference to Frances and posted it in the nearest letter box. Then he made his way to a neighbouring labour bureau and wrote down a list of likely places. He spent four hours making applications for the various posts, only to find them either filled, or that he himself was unsuitable. A taxicab driver, whom he met in the waiting room of a motor engineer's workshop, gave him a few useful hints.

"These labour bureaus," he explained, "are all right for odd jobs of the very roughest sort, but they're no use to us. Take my tip and go to Hollins' in Shaftesbury Avenue. Kind of a registry office, but they get nearly all the chauffeurs' places. It'll cost you a bit, but it's worth it."

Bliss thanked him and walked to Shaftesbury

Avenue. By the time he had parted with five shillings and discovered that no one wanted a chauffeur, it was nearly seven o'clock. He went to his rooms, had a wash, and started out to call for Frances. She came down the stairs, reading the testimonial from Mr. Montague.

"Whatever's the meaning of this, I wonder?" she asked.

"I got it out of the little brute," Bliss grunted.

She pressed his arm as they walked down the street.

"How did you manage it?"

He told her of his visit in a few sentences. She said very little, but her eyes glowed as she listened.

"And now about yourself?" he went on, changing the subject abruptly. "Any luck to-day?"

"I have to apply again to-morrow at ten o'clock, at Wolburn's," she announced. "There seems a chance. They're Stock Exchange people, and they're giving a girl who has been ill until to-morrow morning to come back to work. If she is not there by ten o'clock, I am going to sit right down and work — if I can bring a reference from my last employer," she added. "So you can't tell how much you have done for me. I was almost going to write to Mr. Montague."

"I wonder what's wrong here," Bliss remarked, glancing towards a motor-car drawn up to the edge of the road, and surrounded by a little crowd. "Shall we go and see?"

They pushed their way to the front. There were no signs of an accident, but something had evidently happened. The motor-car, a small grey coupé, was drawn up at the side of the road. A smartly dressed

young man who had apparently just descended was standing rather helplessly on the pavement.

"Can any of you fellows drive?" he asked. "My chauffeur's been taken ill."

The group of onlookers had gathered around the taxicab in which the chauffeur had been placed, and Bliss was almost the only one who heard the young man's enquiry.

"I'll take you anywhere you like," he offered. "Little Panhard, isn't it? I can manage that all right."

The young man gave a sigh of relief. Then he looked at Bliss for a moment in a puzzled way.

"The devil!" he murmured softly.

Bliss feared at first that he was recognised. The young man, however, made no further reference to the surprise which had evidently overtaken him.

"I wish you'd drive me to Prince's Restaurant," he said. "I am late for a dinner party there as it is."

"With pleasure, sir," Bliss assented.

"I must just find out what hospital they're taking my fellow to," the young man continued. "I don't think there's much the matter with him, but it's his first day out after an operation, and he's a bit weak."

Bliss started up the car, and in a few minutes the owner of it returned and took his place.

"Lucky I found some one quickly," he remarked as they glided off. "I can see you know all about cars. Been a chauffeur long?"

"Some little time, sir," Bliss replied. "I am just now out of a job, owing to the Sun Motor Company going into liquidation."

Once more his companion looked hard at Bliss. For

some reason or other, he seemed immensely interested in his appearance.

"Good character?" he asked.

"I have excellent references, sir," Bliss assured him.

"Would a temporary place be of any use to you?"

"As chauffeur, sir?"

"To tell you the truth — well, we'd better talk about it to-morrow. Here's five shillings, anyway, for bringing me here."

They stopped outside Princes' Restaurant. Bliss' prospective employer prepared to descend.

"Where shall I go with the car, sir?" Bliss asked.

"Just take her round to the garage, Number 14 Bulow Street."

"Would you like me to meet you later on, sir?"

The young man shook his head.

"Not to-night. You can come round and see me to-morrow."

"Certainly, sir."

"Number 27 Arleton Court, Arleton Street. Ask for Mr. Dorrington."

"What address did you say, sir?" Bliss asked, dumbfounded.

"Number 27 Arleton Court," Mr. Dorrington called over his shoulder. "Don't be later than ten o'clock. I may be able to find you a job."

Bliss pulled himself together and took the car back to the garage. He reached the restaurant in Drury Lane, where Frances was waiting for him, in less than twenty minutes. He displayed the five shillings exultantly and promptly ordered a bottle of wine.

"This is A1," he declared. "I go out and earn the price of our dinner while you sit waiting for it."

She shook her head reproachfully.

"You silly boy! That five shillings ought to be going towards your week's keep, and not our dinner."

"Rubbish!" he exclaimed gaily, as he took his place at the table. "We're both getting too serious, Frances. We must endeavour to cultivate a spirit of lighter-heartedness, a more complete bohemianism, so to speak. I have a conviction that everything is going to turn out all right for us — and to-morrow morning —"

"Well, what about to-morrow morning?"

"To-morrow morning you are going to find an excellent situation, and I am going to call upon the young gentleman who gave me the five shillings — going to call upon him at the queerest place in the world."

"Do tell me where that is?" she asked.

"Number 27 Arleton Court."

"And why is it the queerest place in the world?"

"I'll tell you that some other day," he promised.

CHAPTER XXV

At a few minutes before ten on the following morning, Bliss entered the spacious entrance hall of Arleton Court and rang the bell for the lift. He had passed in unobserved by the hall porter, and, to his immense relief, the lift man was a stranger. He ascended to the fourth floor and with a certain amount of trepidation rang the bell of his own front door. The summons was immediately answered by a strange man servant.

"Is Mr. Dorrington in?" Bliss enquired.

The servant, who was a very inferior person indeed compared with the immaculate Clowes, motioned him to a seat and disappeared. In a few minutes he returned. Bliss was leaning back in a carved oak chair which he had bought at Christie's, appreciating one of his own prints. The man regarded him with the air of one inclined to resent this familiarity on the part of a stranger.

"Mr. Dorrington will see you," he announced condescendingly. "Come this way."

Bliss followed his conductor meekly down the hall and into the room which he himself had used as a library. His friend of the night before was seated there in an easy-chair, smoking. A box of very excellent cigars stood upon the table. Bliss looked at them longingly, but his anger against Clowes increased.

They were his own Partagas, 1894 crop, and irreplaceable.

"Glad you're punctual," Mr. Dorrington observed, motioning the servant to leave the room. "Wait just one moment, will you?"

He concluded the perusal of a letter which he held in his hand, and meanwhile Bliss glanced around him. He had slept badly the night before on a particularly hard mattress, with little air in the room, and nothing but a tin sponge bath and a scanty supply of water with which to perform his ablutions. A sudden wave of longing seized him; an almost indescribable desire for those small luxuries which had once seemed a necessary and inevitable part of his life. In the background was a half-opened door, leading into the white-tiled bathroom with its sunk marble bath. The sitting room was pleasantly warmed. The pictures which he loved greeted him from the walls. His favourite books seemed to lean from the easels towards him. It was one of his worst mornings, however. His ready-made boots had been wet and were pinching his feet. His carefully brushed clothes were disfigured by a grease stain which nothing would remove. He even felt some slight return of that overtired feeling which had first taken him to the physician. His heart was weary for some of those old luxuries — the delicate food, the choice wines, the tobacco. The longing for them seemed to have swept in upon him with a curious and insistent vehemence, a longing coupled, too, with a fit of genuine indignation. Who was this man, living in his rooms, smoking his cigars, enjoying all the things of which he was deprived? Where was Clowes?

Mr. Dorrington folded the letter which he had been

reading and placed it in his pocket. He was dressed in shirt and trousers and dressing-gown only, and the remains of his breakfast were upon the table.

"Now," he began, leaning back in his chair, "I am ready to talk to you. So you are out of a place, eh?"

"I am, sir," Bliss admitted.

"What is your name?"

"Ernest Brown, sir."

"What else have you done beside drive a car?"

"I have been a light porter," Bliss replied, "green-grocer's assistant, and commercial traveller."

"Good character?"

"Pretty fair."

Mr. Dorrington looked at his visitor thoughtfully.

"Do you know," he enquired, "why I told you to call and see me this morning?"

Bliss shook his head.

"Not unless it was because you thought I might take the place of your chauffeur until he was better. The car's a very easy one to drive, and I could look after it quite well."

"That was only my excuse for getting you here," Mr. Dorrington confessed. "There is a reason why, if we could come to terms, you might be much more useful to me than any other person in similar circumstances. Puzzled, eh?"

Bliss acknowledged the fact. Mr. Dorrington smiled.

"Sit down," he ordered condescendingly.

Bliss sat with becoming modesty upon the edge of one of his own morocco chairs. Mr. Dorrington, after a moment's hesitation, pushed the cigar box towards him.

"Try one of these," he invited. "Finest tobacco I ever smoked in my life."

"They ought to be," Bliss sighed, looking a little ruefully at the half-empty box.

Mr. Dorrington stared at him.

"Ought to be?"

"I mean," Bliss explained hastily, "that I understand something about cigars. These are 1894 crop — very little of that tobacco left."

"Well, so long as I've offered you one, I am glad you can appreciate it," Mr. Dorrington remarked. "Now, listen to me attentively. I've sized you up in my mind, and I'm very seldom wrong. You're a young fellow who's just a bit too good for his job, but who hasn't had any luck. You weren't born a worker, and I should think you would be glad enough to make a bit without overmuch manual labour?"

"I find driving a car very hard work at times," Bliss admitted.

Mr. Dorrington leaned forward. He was a thin young man of gentlemanly appearance, fairly good-looking, but with eyes set a trifle too close together.

"I can put you in the way," he confided, "of coming into a little scheme of my own. There are risks in it, but if it comes off you'll make a scoop, you'll be able to do without work for a year or two. If it fails, you may find yourself in difficulties."

Bliss looked at the end of his cigar thoughtfully.

"Do you mean," he asked, "that there is anything illegal about it?"

"There is," Mr. Dorrington assented.

"Then why on earth," Bliss enquired, "if you will

excuse my asking the question, do you risk giving yourself away like this to a complete stranger?"

"Sensible question," Mr. Dorrington observed approvingly. "The reason is simple. It is because, as far as I can see, you are the one person in the world who can carry this scheme of mine through to a successful termination."

Bliss sighed.

"You'll have to explain," he suggested.

Mr. Dorrington moved towards the bathroom door and closed it. Then he came back to his place.

"I am hard up," he said. "I won't bother you with my history. I am a gentleman by birth, well educated and all that, but up against it. I can't work. The consequence is I make what I can by my wits. Now I've tumbled into a soft thing. You see these rooms? You know what sort of a cigar you're smoking?"

"I do," Bliss assented drily.

"Don't know whether you understand anything about these things," Mr. Dorrington proceeded, "but those prints upon the wall, this furniture, the china, everything about this place means money. These are the rooms of a very wealthy man. Needless to tell you they aren't my rooms. They belong to a young fellow about town who has had to disappear for a time. He had to disappear so suddenly that he had no time to make any arrangements or do more than leave his valet in possession."

"Disappear?" Bliss repeated. "What had he done, then?"

Mr. Dorrington shook his head slowly.

"Nobody knows exactly. There was a mystery about the whole affair which I suppose will be cleared

up some day. The valet was honest for a couple of months, but the thing got too much for him. He has let me the rooms for a paltry five pounds a week."

"Dear me!" Bliss murmured, looking around. "They certainly seem worth more than that."

"Not only have I got the rooms," Mr. Dorrington continued, "but I am smoking this fellow's — Bliss, his name is — smoking his cigars and drinking his wine at half price all the time."

"You seem to be lucky," Bliss remarked, with a little catch of his breath. "Is the — er — wine good?"

"There is some 1899 Veuve Clicquot and some '68 Port —"

"How much of the port have you drunk?" Bliss interrupted eagerly.

Mr. Dorrington stared at him.

"Not much," he replied. "Port doesn't agree with me. But the champagne — well, I never drank anything like it."

"There never was anything like it," Bliss murmured under his breath.

"However," Mr. Dorrington went on, "I made a few enquiries about this fellow Bliss, and I find there's not much chance of his turning up again for the moment. He must have got into some trouble or other. There are all sorts of stories about, but it seems certain that he's done something which keeps him out of the way and will do so for some time. Most of his letters seem to go to his lawyers, but every now and then one gets delivered here. The other day a packet arrived. As I, for the time, am Mr. Bliss, I opened it. I found it contained his passbook at the London and Southampton Bank. Now tell me, my young friend, what sum

do you suppose this fellow Bliss, whoever he may be, has lying to his credit on current account at that bank, eh?"

Bliss thought for a moment.

"No idea!" he replied. "A hundred and sixty thousand pounds?"

Mr. Dorrington started. He even went a little paler. He gazed at his visitor incredulously.

"A hundred and sixty — how the devil — what the dickens made you guess that?" he asked.

"Just the first amount that came into my head," Bliss assured him.

"The balance," Mr. Dorrington said impressively, "is one hundred and fifty-eight thousand, seven hundred and thirty-two pounds, not to mention a few shillings. All that money there, mind, doing nothing. What do you think of it?"

"Prodigious!" Bliss murmured.

"And mind you," Mr. Dorrington continued, "this fellow Bliss has scarcely drawn a cheque since the day he disappeared, which was in December. That money's not doing anybody any good. It — or rather a portion of it — would do me a great deal of good. A smaller portion would also help you, eh?"

"No doubt about that," Bliss sighed.

Mr. Dorrington rose to his feet, crossed the room, and returned with a photograph which he passed to Bliss.

"Anything strike you about that?" he enquired.

Bliss gazed at his own presentment.

"No, I don't know — except that it's rather like me," he added with sudden intuition.

Mr. Dorrington smiled approvingly.

"That's just what I thought when you drove me to Princes' last night," he admitted. "That is why I asked you to call this morning. That is why I am offering to make you a partner in my little scheme for relieving this absentee millionaire of a portion of his superfluous belongings."

Bliss, for a moment, half closed his eyes. A gentle smile played upon his lips. It was hard to believe that he was not dreaming.

"I have found several of his signatures," Mr. Dorrington continued, "and after a great deal of practice, I flatter myself that I can imitate it to perfection. My proposition is simple enough. A large cheque, however clever the signature, might cause comment if presented by a stranger. If presented by you in a suit of Mr. Bliss' discarded clothes — there's a whole wardrobe of them here — it would probably be paid."

Bliss paused for a few moments to collect himself.

"Do you really think," he asked, "that I am sufficiently like this Mr. Bliss?"

"There are differences, of course," Mr. Dorrington acknowledged. "You're a rougher looking chap, but you're quite near enough like him to carry this off, especially if you go in at a busy time and wrap up as though you were just recovering from an illness. My first idea was to write out a cheque for two or three thousand pounds, and trust to their paying it on the signature. Since I came across you, however, I've changed my mind. I don't see any reason why we shouldn't go for the gloves. They wouldn't pay a really big cheque to a stranger, of course, but if they believe that it's really you, asking for your own money, they

won't hesitate. What I've made up my mind to do is to draw the cheque for eighty thousand pounds, of which you shall have twenty and I sixty. If they ask you what for, say that you need it to complete the purchase of an estate."

"What is the penalty," Bliss enquired, "for forgery?"

"Anything up to fourteen years," Mr. Dorrington replied. "So far as you're concerned you'd get off with half that. The thing is, is it worth it? I don't mind telling you frankly that life isn't worth living to me unless I can live it as a gentleman. I might as well be doing penal servitude as living on the cheap; touting for a few shillings; drifting away from my friends; having to give up my clubs. I've thought this over pretty carefully, I can tell you, and I made up my mind long ago that if the chance came my way, I'd go for one big coup and have done with it. The chance has come my way. It came to me first through this fellow Clowes offering me his master's rooms, and then through coming across you last night."

"Whereabouts is he?" Bliss asked; "I mean the man Clowes?"

"Drinking."

"And Mr. Bliss? Is it certain that he is not likely to turn up again at any moment?"

"It doesn't seem likely," Mr. Dorrington answered. "They say he is in hiding in America. No one knows what it's all about, but there are all sorts of queer rumours. I have heard it said, too, that he has been seen in London, dressed like a tramp. In any case, he's got into some scrape, that's certain. He wouldn't keep out of the way for nothing, and he wouldn't keep out of the way up till now, just to come back again

the moment we try our little game. What do you say, Brown? Are you disposed to come in?"

Bliss stared hard at the carpet.

"It requires a little consideration," he said.

"If it's the risk you're thinking of —" Mr. Dorrington began.

"It isn't," Bliss interrupted. "I'm wondering —"

"Well?"

"It seems rather hard on this fellow, Bliss, doesn't it?"

"Rubbish!" Mr. Dorrington interjected. "The fellow's rolling in money. He's a millionaire, — an idle young wastrel who never did an hour's work in his life or a stroke of good to any one. It's wealth such as his that makes socialists of men."

Bliss looked hard at his hands. His nails were broken, and there were some very hard blisters on his fingers.

"I suppose you are right," he agreed. "When did you propose to try this?"

"What's the good of putting it off?" Mr. Dorrington demanded. "I've got the signature perfect now. I suppose you are ready? Why not to-day? I've made my plans for getting away. I reckon that the affair will not be discovered for some days. Anyhow, I am going to change my notes at once and leave for a place I won't even tell you the name of. You must make your own arrangements."

"Just so," Bliss murmured.

"Are you on or not?" Mr. Dorrington asked.

"I'm on," Bliss decided.

"Then we won't have any more fooling about it," Mr. Dorrington declared, a little glitter coming into

his eyes. "I'll take you into the bathroom, and you can help yourself to any of Mr. Bliss' clothes you like. I'll have the cheque ready for you when you come out. You can take a taxi to the bank, be back here by twelve o'clock, and then, by George, we'll make our bolt. It's the one chance I've been waiting for all my life, this! I've never been able to make up my mind to this sort of thing before, but a young fool who leaves a hundred and sixty thousand pounds in the bank and disappears deserves to lose it."

"I suppose you're right," Bliss sighed.

He suffered himself to be led into the bathroom and through into his own dressing room. He looked with some dismay at his greatly diminished stock of clothes. Then he opened the glass door of the wardrobe, glanced at his rows of polished boots, contemplated his immense selection of ties, and fingered one of his shirts.

"You seem handy at finding things," Mr. Dorrington remarked. Bliss nodded.

"I shouldn't mind a job as valet. I'll take a bath first, if you don't mind. There's plenty of time."

In three quarters of an hour he reappeared in the sitting room. Mr. Dorrington glanced at him, impatiently at first, but afterwards with a sort of reluctant admiration.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed. "You gave me quite a start. You do look the part, and no mistake."

"Give me the cheque," Bliss begged. "I may as well get the thing over."

Mr. Dorrington pushed it across the table. Bliss scrutinized it carefully. Then he thrust it into his waistcoat pocket.

"If anything should happen that there's trouble,"

Mr. Dorrington said, "telephone me if you can safely — 1372 Mayfair. You won't lose your nerve or anything?"

"I don't think so," Bliss answered.

"There's no mistake about it, you do look the part,"

Mr. Dorrington assured him. "You're not quite so effeminate or so much of a dandy as young Bliss, but except for that, you're as like him as two pens. I tell you they'll never hesitate. I should not be surprised if it isn't weeks before the thing's found out. Here, take this," he added, giving Bliss a handful of silver. "That's for your taxis. And remember I shall be on pins and needles until you come back."

Within a quarter of an hour Bliss walked into the bank, where his appearance created a mild sensation. The manager came hurrying from his office with outstretched hands.

"My dear Mr. Bliss!" he exclaimed. "So glad to see you. Come into the parlour for a few minutes, do."

"I can't stop," Bliss replied. "How's my balance?"

"Much too large," the manager declared. "Mr. Crawley has been in and invested for you two or three times, but the money comes in too fast. We've nearly two hundred thousand pounds here."

Bliss produced the cheque and handed it over the counter. The manager glanced at it, held it up and looked at it again.

"Handwriting hasn't changed, has it?" Bliss asked.

"Not exactly," the cashier to whom the manager passed the cheque replied hesitatingly. "All the same, I think that if this were presented by a stranger, I should want it verified."

Bliss shook the cashier by the hand, to the latter's astonishment.

"My congratulations," he said. "The cheque happens to be a forgery."

The two men looked at him dumbfounded.

"My dear Mr. Bliss," the manager gasped, "do you know what you are saying?"

"Perfectly well," Bliss assented. "It's too long a story to enter into, but the cheque's a forgery. I just wanted to see what chance it had of being passed. I congratulate you both. Bring me the book, and I'll change my signature."

The cashier obeyed him. Bliss signed his name with some slight alterations, to which he called their attention.

"I can assure you, Mr. Bliss," the manager told him fervently, "that we will use the utmost discretion in honouring your cheques, but, at the same time, I feel bound to point out to you that, in the interests of every one concerned, an attempted forgery of such a serious character should be exposed. I trust that you intend to do so."

"Just so," Bliss agreed, folding up the cheque and placing it in his waistcoat pocket. "I'll think it over."

Bliss found a taxicab outside the bank, and twenty minutes later he walked boldly into the entrance of Arleton Court, received the astonished bow of the hall porter, whom he met face to face, and ascended to his rooms. Without the ceremony of ringing, he let himself in with his own latchkey and made his way into the sitting room. Clowes was standing there, talking with some apparent excitement to Mr. Dorrington. At Bliss' entrance, they both turned around. Clowes'

face was transfigured. His jaw fell, his cheeks became ashen grey.

"My God," he faltered, "it's the guv'nor!"

Mr. Dorrington smiled.

"A compliment, that, I think," he observed, turning to Bliss. "Be off now, Clowes. I can't talk to you. Be off quickly. Well?"

Bliss stood with his hands behind his back, gazing at the speaker blankly.

"Who the devil are you, sir, ordering my servant about in my rooms?" he demanded.

"Capital!" Mr. Dorrington exclaimed. "But chuck it now, there's a good fellow. Have you got the money?"

Bliss laid his silk hat upon the table.

"Clowes," he said, turning towards the valet, "will you explain to me at once who this person is, and what he is doing in my rooms?"

Clowes collapsed. He had been drinking heavily of late, and the shock was too much for him. He went down on his knees.

"I am sorry, sir," he sobbed. "I've been mad — a perfect fool. There was nothing to do here, and day by day it got on my nerves. I began to bet a bit, and I lost. Then, to make up, I let the rooms just as they were to this gentleman. I thought he'd just keep them aired, and I meant to hand the money back to you."

"You mean that you have allowed some one else to have the run of my rooms? — Hired them out?" Bliss exclaimed, frowning. "Pull yourself together, Clowes."

"It's the truth, sir," the man confessed. "I was never so ashamed of myself in my life. I can't do more

than say I am sorry, sir! I'll make it up, sir, and I'm only praying that you've come back for good. It's too hard a job to sit still and do nothing from morning till night. You tried us all too hard, sir."

Mr. Dorrington crossed the room and stood within a few feet of Bliss. He looked at him with almost fierce intentness.

"Will you tell me who the devil you are?" he demanded.

"Who I am?" Bliss repeated wonderingly. "My servant will tell you, if you want to know. I am Ernest Bliss. I don't know that I can blame you exactly for being here, if my servant's story is true, but I shall have to ask you to turn out at once, if you please. If there's any rent owing, you can keep it in lieu of notice."

"Give me back that cheque," Mr. Dorrington gasped.

Bliss frowned, as though he failed to understand.

"You haven't been turning my rooms into a lunatic asylum by any chance, have you, Clowes?" he asked.

"Give me back that cheque," Mr. Dorrington repeated, moistening his lips with his tongue. "Can't you hear what I say? What are you going to do about it?"

Bliss was strolling around the room. He straightened an engraving here, shook his head sorrowfully at the open box of cigars, and removed some dust from a little statuette with the corner of his handkerchief. A queer silence seemed to have fallen upon the two men. Bliss looked into the bathroom and came back again.

"Really, you know," he said to Mr. Dorrington, "I don't wish to seem discourteous or unreasonable, but would you mind —"

"Listen!" Mr. Dorrington interrupted, "aren't you the man who was here an hour ago, who dressed in that room and left for the London and Southampton Bank?"

Bliss laid down his cane and felt in his waistcoat pocket.

"I am," he admitted. "Our meeting last night, Mr. Dorrington, was a lucky one for me."

He produced the cheque, tore it deliberately in two and threw the fragments upon the table.

"There!" he said. "Take these away with you and clear out."

Mr. Dorrington snatched up the scraps of paper, and his relief was obvious.

"You'd better be off as quickly as you can," Bliss concluded. "No, you needn't be flurried. I'm not taking this affair seriously. I suppose it's my own fault for being an idle millionaire. It's my money that tempts people. Perhaps I left Clowes here too hard a task when I told him to sit still and do nothing but keep honest. If you will kindly rout out that fellow who opened the door to me, and all of you precede me, I should be glad to lock up. You can go to Mr. Crawley's to-morrow, Clowes. He will give you instructions. One moment, though. Help me to change my clothes. We won't keep you, Mr. Dorrington."

Mr. Dorrington departed in great haste, accompanied by his own servant. Bliss stepped back into the dressing room, and Clowes, with trembling fingers, helped him to undress.

"You're not going to put on these miserable things again, sir?" he protested, as he held up the discarded suit and the patched boots.

Bliss made a little grimace.

"I don't like them any better than you do, Clowes," he confessed, "but they are the best I can afford. If only I dared help myself to half a dozen of those shirts!"

"Your own shirts, sir?" Clowes exclaimed, bewildered. "These are all your own clothes."

Bliss sighed. He was fully dressed now.

"Not mine, Clowes," he replied. "They belong to that other fellow."

CHAPTER XXVI

BLISS sat on a bench in the public gardens of Bermondsey, his hat on the back of his head, the perspiration streaming down his face. On his knees was a cheap little bag of shiny black leather, filled with imitation leather heels and containing an order book which he had not yet opened. In his pocket was the precise sum of three shillings and sevenpence half-penny. So far, his second essay as a commercial traveller had not been distinguished by any great success. A man who had been watching him from the opposite side of the walk got up and came over to his side.

"You theem tired, mister," he remarked.

Bliss glanced at the speaker. He was dark, corpulent and Semitic. He had an amiable smile and an oily voice. He was very dirty.

"So would you be tired," Bliss replied, "if you had been trying for three hours to sell something nobody wants to buy."

The newcomer shook his head.

"If you have anything cheap to sell, my friend," he said, "you can alwath sell it. I eethpeet you want too much money. Vat have you got in that bag?"

Bliss opened it readily.

"Heels! Do you want to buy any?"

The fat man looked at them in an interested manner.

"Now that 'th very queer!" he observed. "I am

in the boot trade. I know all about heelth. Vat are your prices, young man?"

Bliss drew out a list from his pocket.

"I'm fed up with it," he sighed. "Every heel has a gum label on with a number. Here's a list of the numbers, with the price per pound attached. Help yourself."

The fat man, with the list in one hand and the heels in the other, looked them through. Then he shook his head.

"Very dear," he pronounced. "Elevenpenth a pound. Very dear, indeed!"

"I've heard that before," Bliss remarked. "It's getting quite familiar."

"Do you know anything about this bithneth, young man?"

"Not a d—d thing," Bliss replied, feeling the better for the expletive.

"Then why did you take it up?"

"I sat next to the man for whom I'm trying to sell the beastly things in the tram coming up from Camberwell," Bliss explained. "We got talking, and I told him I was out of work. He told me his name was Morgan, and that he was a manufacturer of leather heels, and he offered me a commission on all that I could sell for him. According to him, I had only to show myself on a boot manufacturer's premises, and he would throw his arms around my neck and pray for these heels. He gave me a list of names. I have seen sixteen manufacturers this morning. Those who found the heels the right shape, found them fifty per cent. too dear. Those who found them reasonable value told me that the shape was hopelessly out of date."

His new friend handled one of the heels thoughtfully.

"You'll never make a living at thith, young man," he declared.

"I know that," Bliss agreed. "At least, I have gathered as much this morning."

"Vat are you going to do about it?"

"Take the things back and get another job," was the somewhat mournful reply.

The fat man moved along the seat a little nearer to Bliss.

"Look here," he confided, "the man who makth these heelth's been trying to take advantage of you. Now I tell you a way you and I can put our headth together and pay him out, and we make a little for ourthelveth too. I've got thome old billheads — 'J. MARCUS, LEATHER DEALER.' I write you an order for three hundredweight of these heelth. Your friend, Mr. Morgan, he won't stop to make any enquirith. He'll only be too pleathed to thell the heelth at his own prithe to any one. He'll bundle them down. I shall be out. The porter will have to call back for the money. We will thell the heelth. I know a man who will give thixpence a pound for them — threepence each, eh? — Then you hurry off and try thome other way of making a living."

Bliss packed up the heels, closed the bag with a snap, and looked at his companion.

"It's quite a scheme," he observed.

"Come along with me," the other invited, "and I'll get the billhead and write the order."

Bliss, from sheer want of anything else to do, followed the man. He led the way to a house in a little

row of miserable dwellings off Tanner Street. At the bottom of the entry there was a small shed. The fat man looked around with satisfaction.

"My warehouse," he announced. "I shall tell them to leave the thacks outside, because the plathe ith full. Now I write the order."

He wrote it out with a stump of lead pencil.

"I don't like to put more than three hundredweight," he said tentatively. "But I know a friend — he has a real shop, but he's no money to part with — he would give an order, too."

"I think one at a time," Bliss suggested.

The man sighed regretfully.

"You get thothe heclth down here this afterroon," he said, "and I'll see you at theven o'clock at the Goat's Head round the corner."

"That's all right," Bliss agreed.

Bliss made his way back to the tumble-down little factory in Finsbury. He found his friend, the manufacturer of heels, sitting in what he was pleased to call his office. Bliss banged the samples down on the desk.

"Thank you very much," he said. "I can't sell any of your beastly heels."

"Get any offers?"

Bliss produced the order.

"There's a gentleman here," he announced, "a Mr. Marcus, willing to buy three hundredweight, numbers sevens and fives, at elevenpence."

"Come, come, that's a start."

"He proposes," Bliss continued, "to dispose of them at sixpence somewhere or other, and he and I divide the proceeds. That's the only offer I've had. He's waiting down at his warehouse for the heels."

Mr. Amos Morgan grinned and regarded his new traveller with a little more interest.

"Lots of that sort about," he remarked. "I'm not one of those mugs, though, who deliver stuff without making proper enquiries."

"Anyway," Bliss concluded, "I am very much obliged to you for the opportunity, but this job's no use to me. I wish you good morning."

Mr. Amos Morgan scratched his chin for a moment. He was a large, untidy-looking man, coatless and collarless, with the sleeves of his somewhat grimy flannel shirt rolled up to his elbows. He had spent some years in the States, and betrayed traces of his transatlantic sojourn.

"Hold on a minute," he said. "Let's have a look at your list."

Bliss handed it to him. Mr. Morgan glanced it down.

"Prices a bit stiff," he remarked.

"So I gathered," Bliss agreed drily. "Rather a fool's job for me, wasn't it?" he added, thinking of his weary feet and of the mortifications of the morning.

"It's my way of testing a chap," Mr. Morgan asserted.

"I call it a beastly way," Bliss rejoined with emphasis.

"Maybe, and maybe not," was the reply. "However, if you haven't found another job and you want to stick at this, you can quote twenty per cent. off those prices, and I'll give you another list of names. Will you take it on?"

Bliss hesitated. It was nearly half-past one, about the hour when six months ago he would have taken an *apéritif* and strolled into the fashionable restaurant of

the moment in London, to be welcomed by a bowing *maitre d'hôtel* and tempted with all the delicacies which the man's ingenuity could suggest.

"If you'll advance me a shilling out of my commission to get some dinner," he proposed, "I'll have another try."

Mr. Morgan received the suggestion without enthusiasm. His hand, however, slowly dived into his trousers pocket.

"I'll be frank with you, young man," he said. "You're about at the end of your tether, and so am I. I'll advance you your shilling, but you've got to sell me some heels before Saturday. There's the wages to pay and a leather bill."

"I'll do my best," Bliss promised, "but you must remember that I've had no experience of this sort of thing. I don't know whether they're pulling my leg or not when they tell me about prices."

"You don't need to know anything," Mr. Morgan declared. "You've got your bottom prices now, and I want cash less five per cent. for the stuff. Now, if you're ready, I'll come along and take a bite with you."

Bliss sat opposite to his employer at a small table in a neighbouring restaurant. In the front window was a dejected looking ham, and a decoration of sausages on a string. The interior of the place was scarcely more inviting. The tables were nothing but boards laid crossways on trestles. The menu was written on a slate and passed from hand to hand. The tablecloth was coarse, inadequate and grimy. And yet, curiously enough, neither these things nor his unwashed companion, whose table manners were frankly non-existent, affected Bliss' appetite, a thing which had so

often been ministered to in vain by the most experienced chefs. He ate Irish stew, and he drank beer, — a beverage which a short time ago he would have declared poison, — out of a tankard. When he had finished, he made a cigarette from some fragments of tobacco, and took up his bag.

"I'll see what I can do," he promised.

"You've got to sell some of those heels," his employer grunted. "Good luck!"

Bliss spent an afternoon the memory of which in later days often made him shiver. Once more he was snapped at by small boys through wicket windows. He was obliged to wait in draughty lobbies, elbowed and pushed about by workpeople coming and going all the time. He was exposed to all manner of snubs and discourtesies from people who, from his point of view, were unmentionable. Nevertheless, he felt a thrill of real pleasure when a small manufacturer in the Bethnal Green Road, after nearly half an hour's hesitation and fierce struggles to reduce the price, at last wrote him out, with grudging fingers, a small order.

"My first order," Bliss told him as he held out his card. "Much obliged to you."

The manufacturer, whose name was Rosenthal and whose hands, notwithstanding what seemed to be a diamond ring, were very dirty, looked suspicious.

"What's the matter with the heels?" he asked quickly. "Mind, they must be up to sample. I shall look at every one before I pay."

"The heels are all right," Bliss assured him. "It's a new job to me, that's all — my first round."

Bliss met with one or two small successes and, on his return, found his employer much impressed with

his afternoon's work and the number of calls he had made.

"Say," he remarked, "you're a worker, and no mistake!"

Bliss proceeded to enlarge upon one of his difficulties.

"These fellows," he explained, "can't all pay cash. It's the prompt payment that puts a lot of them off."

Mr. Morgan shook his head and sighed.

"Every cent I've got is in those darned machines, and then there's money owing on them," he confessed. "I've got to have money to pay the wages, or else enough to draw a bill. If you can bring me in orders like this every day, I can get round the corner, but up to now I haven't found any one who could cover the ground like you do. Will you have one?"

Bliss drank a glass of beer with his employer, made his way to the Tube, and fell fast asleep on his journey homewards. He called for Frances, and they sat for a time on a bench in one of the squares. The night was hot, and the air lifeless. They neither of them felt inclined to talk much. Bliss' legs ached, and Frances was more than usually weary. She smiled now and then, however, at Bliss' account of his afternoon's labours.

"Seven shillings' worth of commission," he told her. "I never worked so hard for money in my life."

She looked at him almost pityingly.

"And yet you can talk of the future as though it were full of hope!" she sighed.

"It is," he replied firmly. "Before many months are up, something is going to happen."

She rose to her feet a few moments later. Her dejection was written in her face.

"I think," she said, "that it is hotter out of doors to-night than in. I am going to bed early. I have to be in the City at half-past eight in the morning. I daren't be a minute late, as I am still only on probation."

They walked slowly homewards along the dusty streets. The people from the boarding houses were all sitting out upon the steps or leaning out of the windows. Every one seemed to be struggling for a breath of the tired, fetid air. Bliss glanced at his companion, and his heart ached. The shabbiness of her clothes, unsuitable for the season, was becoming almost pitiful. She had grown thinner within the last month. She had even lost something of that erectness of carriage and free, swinging walk. She was being broken on the wheel of poverty.

"Frances," he begged earnestly, as they reached her door, "don't lose heart. Have a little faith in me. Do believe that our troubles won't last for ever."

She shook her head sadly.

"To-night," she confessed, "I can't believe anything that's worth believing."

"You won't do anything rash?"

She made a little gesture of acquiescence, but her farewell was listless. She passed through the door and disappeared without once glancing back towards him. Bliss turned away with a sigh.

CHAPTER XXVII

FOR nearly three months, Bliss persevered at what had seemed to him at first so impossible a task. Morning and afternoon, with his little black bag, he tramped the streets of Bethnal Green, Whitechapel and the East End of London, making his daily round. He took his midday meal in all sorts of places, and in all sorts of company. His average earnings were about thirty shillings a week, but near half of that, notwithstanding her pitiful protests, he had lent to Frances, who, through the return to work of the girl whose place she had taken, was once more out of a situation. His boots were worn through, and his clothes were shabby. He was conscious of moments of almost sickening anxiety as he waited with his pencil in his hand, hoping for an order from one of the small manufacturers upon whom he called. Night after night, somewhere about six o'clock, he returned to the little factory in Finsbury Place to make his report, and on each occasion, whether he had been fortunate or unfortunate, he was conducted by Mr. Morgan to the nearest public house and regaled to the extent of one drink. It was curious how, for the last hour of his labours, he found himself looking forward to the moment when Mr. Morgan would take up his hat from the desk and jerk his thumb towards the door. He was beginning to experience almost friendly feeling for this large, unwashed, and slaved throughout the day in a cellar, getting

as much out of his pet machine as any paid operative could, and whom he began to realise was fighting a grim battle against shortness of capital.

"We shall pull through, young fellow," he used often to say as they raised their tankards. "You're the best chap I've had at selling heels, and if I could only afford to give a bit of credit, we'd be roping it in. Here's looking at you!"

One evening, however, Bliss pushed open the door of the office and stood still upon the threshold, dumb-founded. His employer, coatless and collarless as usual, was leaning forward upon his battered deal desk, his head fallen upon his arms. By his side, her hand resting upon his shoulder, was a middle-aged woman, plainly, even shabbily clothed, with a pinched expression about the corners of her lips, which in these days Bliss had begun to recognise. She glanced around as he entered.

"Hullo!" Bliss enquired. "Anything wrong?"

Mr. Morgan raised his head. His, in its way, was a coarse face, generally covered with the beginnings of a stubby beard, which were only removed at odd times during the week. He, too, however, showed at that moment the common capacity for suffering. His lips were trembling a little. His shoulders had drooped. He seemed to have aged, to have lost something of the coarse vitality which, with him, had meant strength. He looked at Bliss dully for a moment.

"This is the young chap who sells the heels," he said to the woman. "You've heard me speak of him. My missis, Bliss."

Bliss shook hands mechanically.

"No bad news, I hope?"

"It's a scandalous bit of bad news," the woman replied, patting her husband on the shoulder, "but don't get knocked down by it, Amos. We'll go and see these people together."

Bliss removed his hat and set down his bag.

"May I know what it's all about?" he enquired.

"No harm, as I can see, nor any secret about it," Mr. Morgan declared, throwing a piece of paper towards Bliss. "You knew that the big machine wasn't paid for. It's been all I could do lately to pay cash for the leather, though I'm not saying that we're not making a nice little profit on the heels. You see what the engineers say, though — they are going to remove the machine to-morrow. I am only a fortnight behind, but I've paid forty pounds on the thing, and the brutes collar that."

"Can they do it?" Bliss asked incredulously.

Mr. Morgan nodded.

"They can," he replied. "I always knew that there was a risk if I got a bit behind. Ninety-seven pounds it is. I'm broke, Bliss. Sorry, as we were getting on so well together. I'm sorry, too, for the old woman's sake," he sighed, patting her hand. "We've had the devil's own luck, both over in the States and here, but this time it did seem as though we might have won through. Six months more of the business I'm doing, and I could have paid for the machine and put another in. There's no one understands this trade as I do, and there's money in it."

"Is it any use going to see these people?" Bliss asked.

"None," Mr. Morgan answered gloomily. "The manager brought this notice round himself."

"A beast of a man," the woman declared. "He

listened to all Amos and I had to say and just smiled. The money or the machine to-morrow at twelve o'clock! Never mind, Amos," she went on, with an attempt at cheerfulness, "you'll just have to make another start, and that's all there is about it."

He looked lifelessly down at the desk.

"I'm too old," he muttered. "This time I'm broken, Harriet."

Bliss experienced a queer sensation which had sometimes stolen into his consciousness during these last few months. Life was no longer a procession of mirrored days. He felt himself breathing a real atmosphere, his feet upon the earth, in intimate touch with the joys and sorrows of live men and women. There was a little lump in his throat, a hot feeling behind his eyes, and suddenly a wave of exquisite pleasure.

"Look here," he said, "I've got an idea, Mr. Morgan. If you'll just step along with me as usual for a minute, we'll see what can be done."

Mr. Morgan shook his head.

"I guess beer would choke me to-night."

"You come right along," his wife insisted briskly, "and if I'm not in the way, a glass of stout is just what I should like. We'll hear what the young man has to say, Amos."

Mr. Morgan rose wearily to his feet. Bliss led the way to their accustomed rendezvous. They sat before a marble-topped table in a sweltering atmosphere, impregnated with the odour of past libations. Bliss himself carried the three tankards to the table.

"Here's luck!" he said.

Mr. Morgan replied gloomily. Mrs. Morgan raised her veil and sipped from her tankard. Her red hands

were worn with toil. She watched Bliss all the time anxiously. Perhaps she recognised in his confidence some possible means of salvation.

"Look here," Bliss confided, "I know a young fellow — he's a perfect fool, but he's a relative of mine. He won't do a thing for me, — never done me anything but harm in his life, — but he's the sort of chap who's rather fond of doing other people a good turn, and he's rolling in money. I believe — in fact, I am pretty well sure," Bliss went on, "that I can get him to lend you this bit."

Mr. Morgan sighed.

"It don't sound very likely," he declared bluntly. "If you knew a mug of that description, it don't seem to me that you'd be selling heels at thirty bob a week."

"That's just where you're wrong," Bliss assured him. "You leave this matter to me and don't worry. You've found me pretty truthful, haven't you?"

"I'm not denying it," Mr. Morgan admitted.

"Then let me tell you that I wouldn't deceive you in a case like this. You say the money has to be paid by midday to-morrow. Very well. By eleven o'clock or soon after, you shall have it. You may take my word for it."

They were cheered but not wholly convinced. Bliss, however, fetched them a second tankard from the bar.

"Your husband and I," he told Mrs. Morgan, "have had a drink here every night after work, and only one. To-night, it's going to be two. I can see that neither of you quite believe me, but I am going to keep my word, so there's no use sitting there looking miser-

able. By eleven o'clock to-morrow I am bringing the money."

"Then if you do," Mrs. Morgan declared, holding out her hand, and struggling to hide the tears in her eyes, "all I can say is, we'll bless you all our lives."

At precisely ten minutes past eleven on the following morning, Bliss pushed open the door of the little office and entered. Mrs. Morgan was standing at the window, watching the street. She turned eagerly towards Bliss. He nodded, smiling.

"It's all right," he told her, producing a handful of notes. "I've got it."

She rushed to the other door which led down to the cellar.

"Amos!" she called out. "Amos! The young man's here. He's got it!"

Mr. Morgan, fresh from his machine, came up the stairs at a pace which seemed incredible. He wiped his hands upon his apron. His eyes seemed glued on Bliss' face.

"It's all right," Bliss assured him. "I've got the money. Sit down and we'll count it."

Mr. Morgan's under lip suddenly quivered.

"Got it?" he faltered. "You've got the money?" Bliss dangled the roll of notes.

"Of course I've got it," he replied. "Didn't I tell you so? Come on, sit down, and I'll hand it over."

Mr. Morgan moved towards the desk like a man in a dream. Suddenly he caught his wife's hand. Her arms went round his neck. He turned awkwardly away towards the window, and they stood there together for a moment.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" he said twice slowly.

Bliss made a great business of lighting a cigarette. When they turned around he had pulled up his chair to the side of the desk and affected not to notice them. He spoke in his most businesslike manner.

"This young fool of a chap," he went on, "was just in the right mood when I tackled him. I explained the difficulty we had in selling our heels because we had to insist upon cash, and he has made a proposition which I hope you will agree to. Here's the hundred pounds to pay for the machine outright, — Bank of England notes, you see, — and what this young ass proposes is, that he should advance you five hundred pounds, — I've got the notes here, — on your note of hand, interest to be paid at five per cent. per annum. Is that agreeable to you, Mr. Morgan?"

"Is that what?" Mr. Morgan faltered unsteadily.

"Agreeable! Will you accept the money on those terms?" Bliss asked.

Mr. Morgan made no further pretence at concealing his emotion. He leaned his head upon his arms and sobbed. His wife sat by his side and patted his shoulder.

"Don't take any notice of him for a moment, Mr. Bliss," she said. "We've had a real hard time, he and I, always struggling a little way up and always being beaten back. There never was such a worker as Amos, either. Nothing seemed to discourage him. I've seen him face ruin half a dozen times, through no fault of his own, and not take on like this. But it'll do him good. Seventeen years we've had and never more than two or three pounds a week to draw, and bad luck coming along just as things got going every time,

and I expect this is a bit too much for him. But it's there — the money's there, isn't it, young man? You're not taking it away again?"

Bliss stuffed the notes carefully into Mr. Morgan's pocket.

"All you've got to do is to sign this," he said, "and then — we've never done it in the morning before, but I think we might drop round the corner for one moment. Mr. Morgan's a bit upset. And I have had a busy morning myself."

Mr. Morgan lifted his head. He was himself again, rejuvenated, buoyant. He read through the few lines which Bliss had written and signed them joyfully. Then he transferred the notes to the inside pocket of his coat, and buttoned it up. He held out both his hands to Bliss.

"Young fellow," he declared with beaming face, "it was the luckiest day of my life when I boarded that tramcar from Camberwell. You've been the best thing that's happened into the lives of two people who've worked hard and done their best to live honest. That's all I can say. It ain't much. I'm a worker, not a talker. Mother, take his other arm, and we'll go and have that drink."

They marched down the stairs and into the street, Bliss between the two of them. It was an ugly neighbourhood, the day was sulphurously hot, the smell of the public house was more poignant than ever. Mrs. Morgan's arm was linked through his on one side, his employer was gripping him tightly on the other. Mrs. Morgan's bonnet was very much awry, one string was hanging down, and she had forgotten her gloves. They both held on to Bliss as though he were a lifelong friend.

There was not a single redeeming element in the situation. Yet Bliss walked with his head thrown back, his heart beating with pleasure. The memory of those weary months of toil and privation seemed to have fallen away from him. It was one more real draught of the elixir of life.

CHAPTER XXVIII

"By Jove, if it isn't Ernest Bliss!"

Bliss, who was crossing the Strand on his way to the nearest labour bureau, glanced up quickly. The thing which he had dreaded so long had happened at last. He recognised the speaker with a sinking heart — Dick Honerton, a very smart young man about town, one of his quondam companions, a man whom every one seemed to know and no one knew anything about. He was dressed, as usual, in the height of fashion, and, although he grasped Bliss heartily by the hand, it was obvious that he was struggling with an immense astonishment.

"My dear fellow!" he exclaimed. "Why, do you know that you are one of the mysteries of London? Where have you been to? What's happened? What's the meaning of it all?"

"I didn't know that there was any mystery about it," Bliss replied evasively. "I thought that every one had heard of my misfortunes."

The young man coughed. He had too much tact, however, to be at a complete loss.

"So it's true, is it, that you've lost all your tin, old chap?" he remarked compassionately. "No reason why you should slip away and hide, though! I'm quite certain that some of your old pals would like to have a chance of doing something for you."

"Very kind, I'm sure," Bliss muttered. "All the same, I've a feeling that now I have to earn my own living, I'd rather do it amongst a different class of people."

"It's really as bad as that, is it?" Honerton observed, with polite regret.

Bliss assented gloomily. Since the day when, in accordance with the terms of his unwritten wager, he had been obliged, to their joint and profound regret, to sever his connection with Mr. Amos Morgan, he had spent the last fortnight applying for situations an hour too late, missing others because of some trifling disqualification. He was left at that moment with less than a shilling in his pocket and the rent of his room due on the following day. His clothes, too, had suffered. He had torn his coat, and Mrs. Heath's attempts at repairing it were distinctly amateurish. There was a hole in the sole of his boot, mercifully concealed, but of which he was none the less acutely conscious. The bottoms of his trousers were frayed. The nap had worn off his clothes through too frequent brushings. The hand of poverty had him now closely in its grip. His face was a little pinched. For two mornings he had been obliged to deny himself the luxury of a shave. Worst of all, he had not dared to go near Frances for more than a week. Not all his optimism could have explained away his almost pitiful condition, and the one thing he dreaded more than anything else in life was that she should lose that little flame of hope which he had striven so desperately to keep alight. So long as they did not meet, he was safe. He had her promise that she would do nothing without giving him warning. So he contented himself with sending her cheerful

little notes and explaining that he was too busy for a few days to snatch even an hour from his work.

"It's no bad as it can be," he sighed. "I've had a job as chauffeur. I'm looking for another now."

Dick Honerton was a young man who lived by his wits, an astute person who prided himself that he had no heart and little conscience. He immediately proceeded, however, to belie himself.

"Come and have a drink, old fellow," he invited.

Bliss looked down at his clothes. They were as neat as they could be made, but they became his present station in life. He was painfully conscious again of that hole in the sole of his boot. Honerton thrust an understanding arm through his.

"Don't be a fool," he said. "We'll go across to Ransome's. You won't see a soul there you know, and if you'll forgive my saying so, you look if as a stiff whisky and soda would do you good."

"A very stiff one," Bliss admitted, "with a dry biscuit, would do me a great deal of good."

They entered a popular bar in the locality and seated themselves before a round table. Honerton at once ordered the drinks.

"You know," he declared, "this really takes the wind out of my sails, Bliss. Why, it's only six or eight months ago that I asked you to lend me a thousand pounds."

"I know," Bliss replied, "and I very nearly did it."

"As it wouldn't have made any difference to you, after all," Honerton sighed, "I must say that I wish you had. I was rather tired of doing nothing, and it would have given me a chance to buy a share in a wine merchant's business. However, it's no good worrying about that. The boot's on the other leg now,

and we must see if we can't do something for you. I haven't much 'oof, as you know, but I fancy that I have brains, and I've helped one or two fellows out of a hole. We must see about a job for you at once."

"I say, that's very kind of you," Bliss murmured.

"Chuck it," Honerton went on. "I'm not very flush, as I said, but you've stood me a good many dinners and other pleasant times in your life, and thank heaven I can still spare a fiver for a pal and never feel it," he added, his hand stealing towards his breast pocket. "So, if you'll just say the word —"

Bliss stretched out his hand and stopped him. Once more he was conscious of a strange new sensation; a queer, warm feeling at his heart; the sense of a real fellowship with others in the world, who, in the old days, had seemed like puppets. Dick Honerton, too, for whom so few people had a good word! What an amazing world it was, after all!

"It's awfully kind of you, Honerton, old chap," he said. "I know your address, and if I come really dead up against it, I'll remind you of this. But I'm not quite on my uppers yet, and I'm bound to get a job in a few days."

Honerton withdrew his hand a little reluctantly, but not without some indications of relief.

"Well, then," he continued, "we must see what we can do about that job. Seems to me that you are not looking at this matter in the proper light, Bliss. There are heaps of ways a fellow who has crowds of pals like you've had can make a bit without taking to menial work."

"I don't call driving a car menial work," Bliss objected.

Honerton shrugged his shoulders.

"Well," he remarked doubtfully, "that's how you like to look at it."

"It's honest work," Bliss persisted, "and I used to drive a car often enough for pleasure. Why shouldn't I do it for a salary, now I've got to earn my living some way or other?"

Mr. Honerton flicked a speck of dust from his patent shoes.

"Well, one thing against it," he pointed out, "is that you've got to have a master. That can't be very pleasant for you. Now, I don't see why you can't pick up a bit and keep independent. There's a chap I know in the City, — he's a Jew but an awfully good sort, — who buys up cigarettes and wine and cigars. He won't touch anything that isn't good stuff, but he gets them cheap. He's always willing to allow a big commission to any one who has a clientele and can sell them for him. Those large Cabanas I sold you, Bliss, — two hundred bob a box you gave for them, and real toppers they were, — came from him. You see, I'm not ashamed of earning a bit for myself that way, if I can."

"It's awfully kind of you," Bliss said hesitatingly. "I am not sure, though, whether I should care to show myself amongst my old pals."

"Oh! That's all bally nonsense," Mr. Honerton declared. "If you won't have the loan I spoke of, I'll see to rigging you out. What's the good of having had friends and having done them all jolly well when you had the ready, if you don't make a bit of use of them now you're up a tree?"

Bliss shook his head.

"I'd rather emigrate."

Honerton passed his cigarette case to his companion, lit one himself, and slipped the remainder of its contents into the former's pockets.

"I'd like your opinion of those," he explained hurriedly. "You can't tell what they're like from one. Now here's another idea. If you don't fancy you've got the gifts for selling, what about keeping your eyes open for some of these young fellows about town with more 'oof than they can do with, and bringing them into little Jacobs' for a quiet flutter now and then? Chemie, you know, on the Q.T. It's worth a fiver or even a tenner, any night, if you can get hold of the right sort. And Jacobs will initial your restaurant bills at two or three places in town."

Bliss shook his head more firmly than ever.

"I couldn't do it," he insisted frankly. "Don't you bother about me, Honerton. I'll have to muddle through on my own."

Honerton finished his pipe and sighed.

"Well," he observed, "it don't seem an easy chap to help!"

"I am not," Bliss replied. "Never mind! If I really get on the beam, I'll drop you a line. It's done me good to have met you this morning and to have known that you weren't ashamed to stand me a drink, and you may be sure that I shall enjoy the cigarettes. By-the-by, I suppose you missed your chance of that partnership?"

"It's still open," Honerton replied a little wistfully, "but there's no chance of my touching the 'oof. So long, Bliss. You're a queer fish, but the fiver will be there for you any time you like to send for it."

"I shan't forget," Bliss assured him heartily.

Bliss made his way down the Strand to Charing Cross Station and entered a telephone box. He parted with the twopence with a sigh and rang up his lawyer. In a few minutes, Mr. Crawley himself came to the telephone.

"Is that you, Crawley?"

"That's Mr. Bliss' voice!" the lawyer exclaimed excitedly. "For heaven's sake —"

"Dry up!" Bliss interrupted. "Just listen to me for a moment. I've got some instructions for you. There's a man named Honerton — Dick Honerton — rooms 110 Jermyn Street. You're to write him a line to-day and say that a client who desires to be nameless is prepared to advance him a thousand pounds for five years, free of interest, if he can use the money profitably. You understand?"

"Certainly, Mr. Bliss. We'll attend to the matter this morning. And now with regard to —"

"Good-by!" Bliss said pleasantly and rang off.

The labour bureau seemed more hopeless than usual. Enquiries at the more august establishment where Bliss had paid his half guinea were fruitless. He went back to his lodgings, tired out, and for the first time omitted to pay Mrs. Heath her weekly bill. He threw himself upon the bed for a few hours, and then, sometime before dawn, rose again and made his way to Covent Garden. He was stiff and tired and a little sick. Nevertheless, he made his way doggedly enough amongst the market carts, looking out always for a job at loading or unloading. At last it seemed to him that his chance had come. A dray, piled up with flowers and vegetables, was just about to start when the

driver, who had been sitting for some minutes with the reins in his hands, beckoned to him.

"Want a job as unloader?" he enquired. "I'm out Balham and Streatham way. It's worth half a crown."

"I'm on," Bliss replied readily. "Shall I climb up behind?"

The former was on the point of assenting when two unsavoury-looking men emerged from a public house a few yards away. One of them, red-faced, truculent, the very type of the loafing bully, shook his fist at the driver.

"Now you," he shouted, "chuck that! My pal Tim's coming along with you."

"All very well," the carter grumbled, "but I've just engaged another chap. I've waited for your friend Tim long enough."

"My friend Tim," the other replied, "is going to have that job, or I'll make mincemeat of you both."

The driver pointed with his whip to the broken-down, bleary-eyed loafer, who was standing on one side, with his hands in his pockets, listening to the conversation.

"Is that your pal?" he asked.

"It is," the red-faced man assented, "and if any one's anything to say against 'im, they'd better not say it in my presenee, that's all. Up you gets on the waggon, Tim!"

"I beg your pardon," Bliss intervened. "I am engaged for this job."

The red-faced man, his mouth open with a surprise which amounted to stupefaction, turned around. It took him a moment or two to grasp the situation. As

soon as he did, however, he pulled off his coat with an angry roar and threw it towards his friend.

"Now then," he wound up, after a stream of lurid abuse, "will you 'ook it or will you take a hiding?"

"I don't want to fight," Bliss replied, "but this is my job, and unless I am told to go by the man who engaged me, I shall stick to it."

The greengrocer maintained a discreet silence. The red-faced man came on. He aimed a blow at Bliss which would have killed him if the latter had not ducked. Then he over-balanced himself, recovered, and fetched Bliss a blow on the chest which nearly carried him off his feet. Bliss, who had very little idea of how to use his fists, struck out blindly, and by chance caught the other man on the cheek. The greengrocer looked around.

"Steady, young 'un," he counselled. "That's Butcher Bill you're up against. He'll kill you if you don't mind! Perhaps you'd better sheer off."

"I shan't," Bliss declared doggedly. "You offered me the job, and I want it."

"It's only half a crown," the driver reminded him, "and you'll get your head broken, and mine too, perhaps."

"Who's going to break it?" Bliss asked.

"I'll — well show you!" the man called Butcher Bill roared.

He advanced more cautiously this time, but with all manner of evil things shining out of his bleary eyes. Bliss clenched his teeth and his fists. A sudden blind rage had seized him. The job was his. No one had any right to interfere, more especially on behalf of such a loafing vagabond. By good luck he escaped his

opponent's onslaught. By good luck again, although he struck his assailant but a feeble blow, the latter slipped on a piece of orange peel and fell into the gutter. Bliss, whose head was reeling, sprang at once on to the back of the cart.

"Drive off," he begged the man. "It'll take him a minute to get up."

They drove off, and for various reasons Butcher Bill declined to leave his resting place. Bliss worked, unloading vegetables at different fruiterers' shops, until he was almost dead with fatigue. When the waggon was empty it was nine o'clock in the morning and he was out at Streatham.

"Drive you back if you like," the carter suggested.

Bliss nodded and threw himself down on the dray, and with his head on a pile of empty sacks, he slept till they reached once more the neighborhood of Covent Garden.

"You look about done," the carter remarked, as they pulled up outside a public house. "I'll stand you a pint."

Bliss, following his companion inside, was suddenly giddy. There was some hot coffee being served, which he drank almost feverishly. Soon his blood began to circulate once more. He bade his friend good morning.

"Give you a job any time I drop across you," the latter promised, as he handed him the half-crown. "If you'll take my advice, you'll keep out of Butcher Bill's way, though. He was three-parts drunk this morning, but he can use his fists above a bit, and he's a fair brute. He'd kill a man as soon as look at him. I haven't seed any one stand up to him for Lord knows

how long, and you'd have been done in all right if you hadn't been a bit dodgy on yer feet."

Bliss started wearily back towards his lodgings. A grey mist had fallen like a shroud upon the London streets, a mist which was turning all the time to moisture, wetting his clothes, chilling the life out of him. He walked slowly and with heavy footsteps. He took no interest in the passers-by. Yet, as he crossed one gloomy square, the houses of which seemed to frown down upon him like barracks, he was conscious of a girl who appeared suddenly upon the pavement only a few yards before him. She glanced back at the house from which she had issued, and her expression suddenly aroused his interest. She was terrified. She had the look of one who had escaped from prison, but who is yet in dire fear of recapture. Then she turned her head towards Bliss and approached him swiftly. Her eyes shone with eager hope. She accosted him even when he was still a few yards away.

"I don't know who you are," she exclaimed, "but help me, please! I have escaped from that house. Don't ask me anything about it. Give me the money for a taxicab quickly. I must get away."

She hailed a passing cab, and as it drew up at the kerbstone, she looked once more appealingly at Bliss, her hand outstretched, her white face still tremulous with terror. Bliss felt the half-crown in his waistcoat pocket.

"You will never regret it all your life," she continued quickly. "Tell me your name! Tell me where to send it to! Just half a crown, no more. Oh, quickly, quickly, please! Some one will come out."

Bliss' fingers were slowly withdrawn from his waist-

coat pocket. She snatched at the half-crown and jumped into the taxicab. The vehicle vanished in the mist. Bliss stood for a moment looking after it. Then he looked up at the house, frowning. Almost as he did so, the front door was opened. A man in a light tweed suit, with a bunch of violets in his button-hole, came out humming a tune. He looked up and down the street. When he saw Bliss, he, too, approached him.

"Excuse me," he said pleasantly. "Have you seen a young lady?"

"I have," Bliss admitted.

"Can you tell me which way she has gone?"

"I can tell you nothing about her," Bliss replied grimly.

The man stared at him for a moment. His face suddenly lost its good-humoured expression.

"I say," he exclaimed, "you don't mean to tell me that you've given her half a crown?"

Bliss was startled. The mention of the precise sum puzzled him.

"If you want to know," he said slowly, "have I lent the young lady half a crown to get away from the house which you have just left, and from what she told me, I am half inclined to go in and make some enquiries."

The man took the cigarette from his mouth, leaned against the railings, and laughed until the tears came into his eyes. Bliss looked at him in astonishment.

"I've lost!" he remarked resignedly. "Have you many half-crowns, young man, that you can throw them away so easily?"

"I have very few indeed," Bliss replied, "but —"

"I suppose she told you that she'd been insulted in that house and was trying to escape from some one, eh?"

"What she said certainly left that impression," Bliss acknowledged, with a sudden sinking of the heart.

The man had ceased to laugh. He was looking now a little annoyed.

"Well, you've cost me a fiver and put me in a very awkward position," he declared. "The little girl's an actress; lives in that boarding house. She's been bothering me to get her a job for the last two months. I told her last night that she couldn't act. She bet me a five-pound note that she could run out of this house, borrow half a crown from the first perfect stranger she met, and get away with it. I was fool enough to take the bet. Now I've lost, and I shall have to find her a job, too. Confound you, sir!"

"If your story is a true one," Bliss said, "perhaps, as you know the young lady, you wouldn't mind returning my half-crown. I have been working all night for it."

"I'll see you hanged first!" the other replied irritably. "You've cost me a fiver, as it is. If you can't take better care of your money, you don't deserve to have any. Any person of reasonable intelligence ought to have been able to see that the whole affair was only a joke."

"A joke!" Bliss repeated blankly, his voice trembling a little.

The theatrical gentleman, however, had walked off, swinging his cane. Bliss looked after him for a moment wistfully. Then he turned up his coat collar and plunged into the mist, which was fast changing into rain.

CHAPTER XXIX

BLISS awoke, shivering, on the following morning, after a night of fatigued and spasmodic slumber, and, having performed his ablutions with the maximum of discomfort, sat down to await the arrival of his frugal breakfast. It was a fortnight since he had earned more than an odd shilling or two, and the fifty-one days which still remained before the anniversary of his visit to the physician seemed like an unbridgeable chasm of time. His limbs ached, his head felt hot. The thought of the forthcoming weak tea and thick bread and butter was more than usually distasteful. Amongst his dreary surroundings he sat for a moment or two and dreamed of his empty flat in Arleton Court, the soft, luxurious warmth of it, the thick carpets, the diligent care of a trained man servant. He even fancied that he could smell his coffee. He thought of the crisp hot rolls, the yellow butter and the dish of marmalade. Fifty-one days more! It was for Frances as well as himself that he suffered now. He had not ventured to go near her, and his task of writing those cheerful little notes had become day by day more difficult. He set his teeth and clenched his fists. Every impulse in his body seemed drawing him towards the door, down the bare stairway into the street, to throw himself into a taxicab, to go and call for Frances and take her back with him into the life from which his own whim had exiled him, to confess himself beaten,

for her sake as well as his own. Then he heard the sound of his own name, and unconsciously he listened. It was his neighbour in the next room, the wife of a foreman printer, talking to his landlady.

"If you can't let me have the other room, Mrs. Heath, you must take a week's notice, so there! What with baby and the other children, I haven't a yard to turn round in, and Jim said to me only this morning he was willing to pay for it, and if we couldn't get what we wanted here, we must move. That young fellow, Bliss, or whatever his name is, can get a room somewhere else all right. You'd better tell him how things are."

He heard his landlady's reply. Her quiet, tired voice came to him with a new significance.

"I am sorry, Mrs. Mappin," she said. "If you'd let it be just for a week or so! The young fellow's been out of work, and he's owing me a bit. I don't like to turn him out on to the streets. He's been brought up different, — any one can see that, — and my husband used always to say that the young man who has once had to sleep out without a roof over his head was never quite the same afterwards."

"I don't care what your husband used to say, my good woman," was the shrill reply. "If I can't have that room, we leave on Saturday."

Mrs. Heath's reply was inaudible. Bliss rose to his feet. Immediately afterwards, she entered with the breakfast tray.

"Good morning, Mrs. Heath," he said tentatively.

"Good morning," she replied, with her usual attempt at cheerfulness. "Your breakfast, sir."

She turned towards the door a little wearily. In her

face the signs of her lifelong struggle were more than usually visible.

"Anything to say to me, Mrs. Heath?" Bliss asked.

She shook her head.

"Maybe you heard," she replied. "No, I've nothing to say."

"They're good tenants, aren't they?"

"The best I've got."

"I'll pay you what I owe you this morning," Bliss promised, "and you'd better let them have my room. I can easily find a shelter somewhere else."

"I'm not asking you to leave," she said quietly.

"You stay where you are."

"That's all right, Mrs. Heath," Bliss replied cheerfully. "I've something in my mind for this morning."

"I'll be sorry to lose you, Mr. Bliss," she went on, "but —"

Her voice trembled for a moment. He nodded.

"I understand," he interrupted. "Very likely you'll be able to take me back again sometime."

He stood quite still for a minute after she had left the room. Then he sat down and ate as much as he could of his breakfast. Afterwards, he dragged out his little bag, packed it with his spare suit and a few other toilet articles he possessed, and walked downstairs with it in his hand. He passed Mrs. Heath on the landing. She stood on one side to let him pass. "You're not afraid I'm going to bilk you then, Mrs. Heath?" he asked with a smile.

"Not in the least, sir," she replied.

"How much do I owe you exactly?"

"Twenty-eight and sixpence," she told him. "and I don't care if I never see a penny of it. I don't

want you to go, neither, Mr. Bliss, but if I lose the Mappins, I'll never be able to pay my rent. They're hard times, sir," she wound up, with a little sob.

Bliss patted her hand and walked out without speech. He made his way to the nearest pawnbrokers and sold everything he possessed except the clothes he stood up in, for thirty shillings. Then he returned to his lodgings.

"Eighteen-pence change, please, Mrs. Heath," he said, handing her the money. "And, look here! Don't you worry if times are a little hard. I've a sort of idea that the new year may bring you luck."

She smiled wanly as she counted out the eighteen pence.

"I've given up expecting that, sir," she replied drearily. "The best I have to hope for is that I shall be able to hang on for a few years longer until I can get the children started in something or other, and then I think I shall be just too tired to bother much more about myself or any one. I am sorry you're going, Mr. Bliss — I can't tell you how sorry!"

"May come back again," Bliss promised, "if you've room for me! Very likely I'll be able to afford one of your down-stair rooms some day!"

"What have you done with your things?" she asked, still fingering the money doubtfully.

"Left them in the cloakroom," he lied quickly. "I'm after a job this morning, and hadn't time to look for a room before I go. Good-by!"

He shook hands with her, went out, and walked down the street smiling. He recognised within himself traces of a new disposition. He no longer found his thoughts fixed upon the selfish joys of his coming

release. One of the greatest pleasures he could see before him was the emancipation of Mrs. Heath from her financial troubles. He walked down the street with that thought in his head, and he quite forgot that his feet were weary and his head ached. Then he bethought himself of his destination. He found himself face to face with the bald truth. He had one and sixpence in his pocket, a few coppers and no place to sleep in. He made his way to Covent Garden, but his luck was out. In every odd job that was going he was forestalled. Then he tried the labour bureau and spent an hour and a half in a fruitless walk to Bermondsey and back. When night came, although he had eaten insufficiently, he had less than a shilling left, and he was dog tired. He clenched his teeth and presented himself at a public lodging house, paid his sixpence, took a ticket and threw himself down upon one of the beds in a long, bare room, a mere glance at which made him shudder — threw himself down, hoping to sleep. For an hour or two he succeeded. Then he woke up and looked about him. The atmosphere of the place was unbearable. With trembling fingers he dressed and hurried out. The janitor looked at him curiously.

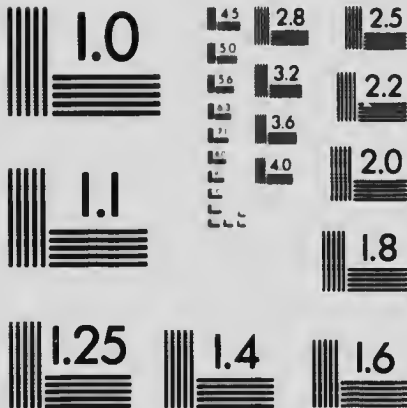
"Off already?" he asked.

Bliss nodded silently and passed out. The first breath of the night air seemed to him the sweetest thing he had ever tasted. Then the languor of insufficient sleep crept over his jaded senses. He made his way unconsciously down towards the Embankment and seated himself on the first vacant seat. He turned his coat collar up and clasped his knees with his hands, turning round with his back to the wind. He slept



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for a few minutes and then woke up, numbed with the cold. A young fellow of about his own age was seated at the other end of the bench. He was adequately dressed and had an air of prosperity which somehow or other Bliss found himself resenting.

"Cold night for sleeping out," the newcomer remarked pleasantly.

"Beastly!" Bliss agreed.

The young man drew nearer to him.

"Don't be afraid," he said. "I am not going to offer you charity. I suppose you're out of work. What is your trade?"

Bliss hesitated for a moment.

"Chauffeur," he replied.

"Why are you out of a place?" the man asked. "Have you a character? Have you been in trouble?"

"I have never been in trouble," Bliss told him, "if by that you mean in prison. I had to take to work unexpectedly, that's all. I got a job at the Sun Motor Company, but they went into liquidation. Since then I've only picked up odd jobs."

"You're the kind of man I've been looking for," the other declared confidently. "You have had a little experience of the difficulty of getting work over here. What about a fresh start in another country, eh?"

"Another country?"

"Look here! I can see, of course, that you're an educated man. You've come down in the world. I don't care how — that isn't our job. My name's Miles. I belong to a society. The Canadian Employment Bureau, we call it. Don't look upon it as a charitable affair, please, but there it is. We've got funds, and we are on the lookout all the time for

deserving cases. We give them a small outfit, send them over to Canada, passage paid; our agent meets them there, keeps a register of the vacant places and finds them job. Now what do you say to it?"

"I say," Bliss replied, "that I should like to know more about the society."

The young man handed him a pamphlet. Bliss thrust it into his pocket.

"Look here," he said, sitting up, "this is no good to me, but it sounds like a thundering good thing, all the same. I have got to stay in England, and the luck will change with me pretty soon. I know that. But I will remember this. I'll drop in and see you sometime if I may. I suppose I shall find the address of the office here?"

The other assented.

"You're a queer chap," he observed curiously. "Why are you so certain that the luck is going to turn?"

"I'm quite sure of it!"

"You're not masquerading, are you? Journalism or anything of that sort?"

Bliss shook his head.

"I'm hard up against it all right," he admitted, "but only for a time. I could anticipate the end of my troubles, but I won't. There! Now I see it's getting light. I'm off for a walk."

The young man coughed.

"Nothing to do with the society," he began, "but if a trifling loan —"

"You can stand me a cup of coffee, if you like," Bliss interrupted.

"With pleasure," the other agreed. "I'll have one myself."

They stood at a stall in the street and drank two cups of the steaming liquid. Then Bliss shook hands with his new friend.

"I am glad to have met you," he said warmly. "Thanks for the coffee. I'll look you up some day."

Bliss walked away with a briskness that was half assumed. Mechanically he made his way again to the labour bureau, and as he stood there a youth thrust a fresh announcement on to the board. Bliss looked at it, and his heart gave a little jump. Seven omnibus drivers wanted that morning—applications to be made at the general offices. One man who had been standing behind him swung round and started off at a run. Bliss drew a long breath and followed him. There were five men before him when he reached the office, breathless. The foreman looked him over, glanced at his references and hesitated.

"Ever driven a 'bus?" he asked tersely.

"Never," Bliss admitted, with a sinking heart. "I've driven all sorts of cars though. I can manage it all right."

The foreman wrote out a slip.

"That's for your test drive," he explained. "You'll find practice omnibus Number 4 in the yard behind. Go to Golder's Green and back and bring me the report."

Bliss obeyed. He found the 'bus and an amiable looking instructor. His fingers trembled as he climbed on to the driver's seat.

"Don't be nervous, young chap," the man by his side said. "She's easier to handle than she seems. Keep her steady, that's all."

Bliss glanced at him gratefully. The streets were

still half empty, and he drove to Golder's Green and back without mishap. The instructor signed his ticket, and Bliss took it back to the foreman. At nine o'clock his licence was checked, and he took out an omnibus. His route was from Golder's Green to Waterloo, a distance which he accomplished six times during the day without incident. When he climbed down after his last journey, he felt almost exhilarated, although his eyes were heavy, and his fingers numb. He made his way to the foreman.

"I forgot to ask what my wages were," he said.

The man laughed.

"All the same," he replied. "Thirty-six bob. You'll see the fines posted up."

"You couldn't advance me a few shillings out of my first week's salary, could you?"

The foreman looked him up and down thoughtfully. Finally he thrust his hand into his pocket.

"Here's five shillings for you, young fellow," he said. "I'll have to lend you that myself. Against the company's rules to advance anything."

"I shan't forget it," Bliss promised gratefully.

Bliss found a small room at the top of a block of buildings off Oxford Street, and that night he slept so well that he had to run all the way to the yard to be in time to answer the roll next morning. Again he took out the 'bus and gazed down on the London streets with new eyes. Towards the middle of the day rain fell, and the asphalt roadway became slippery. Once or twice he felt the great vehicle glide away from under his control. At the end of the day the strain had told upon him. The conductor looked at him curiously as they signed off.

"You look white, Ernie, my boy," he remarked. "Nothing to be s ured about. You ve driven her proper all day."

"I've been in a regular funk about skidding," Bliss confessed.

"They all are at first," the conductor replied. "I'm going to stand you one."

They had a drink together, and Bliss left for home, somehow a little cheered by the other's sympathy. The next day, as he brought his omnibus to a standstill at the corner of the Strand and Waterloo Bridge Road, he saw a familiar figure staring up at him from the pavement, open-mouthed and wondering. It was Mr. Crawley. Bliss kept an immovable countenance, and Mr. Crawley, recovering from his stupefaction, made a plunge for the 'bus. At the next stopping place, Bliss heard his pained voice on the pavement beside him.

"My dear Mr. Bliss!" he gasped. "My dear young sir! I am most shocked! For Heaven's sake be reasonable!"

Bliss leaned towards him.

"Hullo, Crawley!" he exclaimed. "How are things?"

Mr. Crawley was bereft of words. He stretched across from the kerbstone and laid his hand upon the other's shoulder.

"Yesterday," he announced in a hoarse whisper, "I invested thirty-eight thousand pounds for you."

"I hope you remembered what I told you," Bliss observed, "and kept clear of English Rails. South America and the Argentine are the countries I fancy just now."

"I have remembered your instructions, sir," Mr. Crawley assured him. "I only mention the matter of investment at all because the situation is so absolutely absurd. I insist —"

"Look here," Bliss interrupted, "that's the bell, and I'm off. If you say a word to me, except when we're standing still, why, you'll have to leave my 'bus, that's all. Now, jump on behind, if you want to, and I'll talk to you at the next stop."

They drove on for about a quarter of an hour. Then, as Bliss drew in to the side of the street at one of his regular halting places, Mr. Crawley appeared once more by his side.

"I am giving up," he said, "an important appointment in the city, in order to reason with you. I insist upon an explanation. Where your 'bus goes, I go!"

"Is that poetry?" Bliss murmured. "It sounds familiar."

Mr. Crawley reached over with his umbrella and tapped his client vigorously upon the shoulder.

"Young man," he exclaimed, "you are a millionaire! Look at you! There is — pardon my referring to it — a hole in your trousers."

"Where?" Bliss asked anxiously.

"Your hands are unmentionable," Mr. Crawley continued, "and your collar, your tie — for Heaven's sake," he burst out, "what's it all mean? You used to be one of the most carefully turned out young men in London. Finicky we used to think you sometimes. And there you sit on a bit of sacking, in positive rags, with your hands all over grease, a smut on your nose, an omnibus driver and looking the part. What the devil —"

"In a matter of forty-nine days," Bliss interrupted, "I shall resume my position as a sane member of society. Between ourselves," he went on quietly, "I don't think I shall ever be quite the same Ernest Bliss whom you used to know, but, apart from that, I promise you shall have nothing to complain of. Until then, the less I see of you, the better."

Mr. Crawley bustled back to the rear. They were off again, and Bliss was sitting forward with his eyes glued upon the road and his hands firmly upon the wheel. It was ten minutes before a further opportunity for conversation arose.

"Is there nothing whatever I can do?" Mr. Crawley asked, as he came round once more to the front of the 'bus.

"There is," Bliss replied. "I'm glad you haven't gone. Memory as good as ever?"

"I think so," Mr. Crawley rejoined.

"Go to 27 Overton Square, then. Enquire about a young lady, Miss Frances Clayton. See whether she is in employment or not. Let me have all particulars to-morrow. You'll find me doing this same stretch."

"I'll see to it with great pleasure," Mr. Crawley promised, scribbling down the address. "Any commission that has a gleam of common sense about it —"

"Got anything to smoke with you?" Bliss interrupted suddenly.

Mr. Crawley produced a morocco leather case. One side was filled with cigars, the other with cigarettes. Bliss' eyes lit up as he transferred the whole of its contents to his pockets and returned the case empty.

"You can get some more, you know," he said apologetically. "You'd better hop it now. We've got a

clear run before us to Golder's Green, and you don't want to go there."

Mr. Crawley hailed a passing taxicab. Bliss and the conductor started on the cigarettes.

"Run old toff that was talking to you," the latter remarked. "My eye! What smokes!"

"Used to be my lawyer before I blued it in," Bliss confided. "Queer old bird, but he means well!"

CHAPTER XXX

ON the next morning, almost at the same hour and place, Bliss picked up Mr. Crawley. The latter reached his seat in a somewhat ruffled state. He came around to see his eccentric client at the first stop.

"I do not approve of motor-'busses, Bliss," he pronounced, as he gazed down at the crease in his trousers. "Most democratic institutions! And your conductor who pulled me on to the step was, to say the least of it, familiar. I gather that you divided the contents of my cigar case with him."

"Jolly good chap," Bliss replied. "Well, what about it?"

Mr. Crawley coughed.

"The young lady," he announced, "is still without a permanent situation, and I gather that she is owing her landlady money."

Bliss frowned a little.

"I've got to think over that," he said shortly. "Skip round behind now, please. We're off."

At the next halt Mr. Crawley once more made his appearance.

"Have you any instructions to give?" he enquired, tapping his pocketbook with his pencil.

Bliss nodded.

"You can send a thousand guineas to Mr. J. Miles,

Canadian Employment Bureau, 17 Queen Victoria Street," he directed. "Anonymous donation."

"Anything else?"

"A hundred pounds to William Jennings, 17 Pinter Street, Camberwell. That's my mate on the 'bus. He has a child ill and wants to send her away. Anonymous, mind!"

"Certainly," Mr. Crawley assented. "Anything else?"

"Fifty to Thomas Bride, foreman, head office of the Omnibus Company. Then you'd better look up that chap who makes heels down in Finsbury," Bliss proceeded, "and see how he's getting on. If he wants any more capital, let him have it. And now listen to what I have to say. Invest five thousand pounds in the name of Mrs. Heath, and pay her the first quarter's dividend in advance. Write and say that the sum has been placed in your hands absolutely for her benefit. You know the address."

"You seem to have made a few friends," Mr. Crawley remarked. "What about the young lady?"

Bliss' face darkened for a moment. He shook his head regretfully.

"I 't do anything for her," he said simply. "She's got to hang on for forty-eight days."

Mr. Crawley put his book in his pocket

"I'll take a ride with you another morning soon," he promised, "but you might explain to your friend William that a shove up behind, as he calls it, is not exactly a dignified way of assisting a person of my age and figure. What about some cigarettes?"

Bliss shook his head.

"Only ordinary perquisites are in order," he ex-

plained. "A handful of cigarettes from a passenger is all right. Twice following wouldn't do."

"A small tip, I suppose —" Mr. Crawley ventured.

Bliss was thoughtful for a moment. Then his face lightened.

"You might," he suggested, "give sixpence to William. Be careful, though," he added anxiously, "to explain that it is for him to treat the driver as well as himself."

"I will do so with pleasure," Mr. Crawley agreed.

"Don't forget to mention the driver," Bliss called out after him, as he turned away.

The conductor made his way to the front at the next stopping-place.

"The old buffer's stood us a tanner, Ernie!" he exclaimed with glee. "We'll wet it when we get to the end!"

Bliss smiled.

"He does chuck his money about, don't he?" he remarked.

On Saturday, Bliss received twenty-seven shillings and two hours off. He repaid his loan of five shillings to the foreman and made his way at once to Frances' lodgings. She met him at the door, already dressed for the street. Her manner was listless, and even her smile seemed forced as she gave him her hand.

"At last," she murmured. "If I hadn't seen you to-day —"

"No threats, please," he interrupted. "I'll tell you the sober truth. I didn't come before because I dared not."

"Then you were not working?" she exclaimed.

"You must have been wanting the money you lent me all the time!"

"Nothing of the sort," he answered promptly. "I wasn't exactly working, but I was always earning a bit. Now," he added proudly, "I've got a regular job."

"What is it?" she asked, with a tired smile.

"I'm driving a 'bus,'" Bliss explained. "Queer sort of job, in a way, but it's thirty-six bob a week."

"A 'bus!" she repeated.

"I've just been paid, and I'm starving," Bliss remarked, as he took her arm. "Come along."

"I'm not going to have dinner with you," she declared.

"But you are," he insisted.

She shook herself free from him.

"It's no good, Ernest," she said. "I've lost my last place. My landlady has given me notice. I've finished. I am going to write to Mr. Masters to-night. If he wants me to go back, I'm going."

"Fru dees!" he cried anxiously.

"I can't help it," she went on. "I have struggled along, but it's the same every time - make a situation. And there are my sisters to think of. I am doing nothing for them, and there's so much that ought to be done."

"But you don't care about this chap Masters," Bliss protested.

"Of course I don't," she replied. "You know quite well that you are the only person I care about in that way, or ever could. But it isn't any use. A 'bus driver at thirty-six shillings a week can't afford to keep a wife and be saddled with the care of two of her sisters. You know that as well as I do. That's why I don't

want to see you any more. That's why I don't want to have dinner with you to-night."

Bliss was silent for a moment. She glanced at his face, and her eyes filled with tears.

"I'll change my mind," she declared suddenly. "I will come and have dinner with you. We'll have our little table and even a bottle of Médoc, if you like, and perhaps those men will play. I am so dull and tired. And then, Ernest, we must say good-by."

"We'll see about that," he muttered. "Anyway, dinner first."

They made their way to the little restaurant, and as usual she pored over the bill of fare with him, and struck out the more expensive items. Somehow, she had never before seemed so desirable to him. Thin though she was, she had never lost that curious grace of movement, a sort of natural elasticity of frame and carriage which made her easily distinguishable, notwithstanding her worn clothes and thick boots. Her cheeks were paler, but her eyes seemed nearer the shade of violets, and the brown in her hair was softer. A certain severity with which she had sometimes kept him at arm's length deserted her that evening. She leaned back in her chair and abandoned herself to the relaxation of the moment. She was unusually provocative. She let her hand lie in his. He felt the thrill of her presence as he had never felt it before. And when one of the musicians, fingering his instrument, played softly to his companion at a distant table, she listened with half-closed eyes. Her head and all her body seemed to sway gently with the music. They sat in the place for nearly two hours. Then Bliss suddenly glanced at the clock.

"Walk down with me to the yard," he begged. "I have to take out my 'bus in a quarter of an hour."

She sat for a moment quite still. Then she burst into a peal of laughter.

"Take your 'bus out!" she repeated. "Oh, you strange, strange boy! Yes, I'll come!"

Bliss paid his bill. When they got outside he took her arm. She made no effort to withdraw it. On the contrary, she drew closer to him.

"Dear," he said, "there are some things I cannot explain to you. You think I am a fool, over-sanguine, an idiot, because where you see a cul-de-sac, I see before us freedom and happiness. I want you to trust me."

She sighed.

"You've spoken like this before, dear. If you have hopes of which you have told me nothing, then you ought to share them with me. I don't like mystery. This is the end of it, Ernest. I do love you, but there's no hope for us, and I can't go through what I've been going through any longer. I wore spectacles at my last place and did my hair — oh, what a mess I made of it!" she laughed. "My employer coolly asked me if the spectacles were necessary and then instructed me to remove them. That was the day he asked me to go out to lunch for the third time."

"Have one more try," Bliss begged. "Surely you can find a place where you would not be subjected to this sort of thing."

"Find it for me," she challenged. "I've tried everywhere. A woman who earns her own living puts her pride in her pocket. She is supposed not to understand what men mean when they make the stereo-

typed advances. I have tried. I can't stand it, that's all. I'll hate it all my life, but I'd sooner go through a little ceremony with Mr. Masters and call myself his wife, and provide for my sisters and then — rest. That's what I want to do more than anything in the world."

"You shall have plenty of rest," Bliss promised confidently, "but not with Mr. Masters. Listen. These aren't idle words of mine. Trust me, and I swear that before six weeks have passed, I shall be in a position to marry you and help your sisters."

"Show me one atom of proof," she implored him.

"I can't," he confessed. "Trust me."

She shook her head.

"It's always the same, Ernest. If you had friends or a future, would you have drifted almost to starvation all these weeks, and then jumped at the chance of driving a 'bus?"

"I can't explain," he said doggedly.

"Then I can't wait," she retorted. "Why should I?"

"Because I love you," he answered simply, "because there is no other future for you except to be my wife. Don't you understand that we belong to each other? You wouldn't dare do what you suggest. It wouldn't be honest to Mr. Masters."

"I am tired of thinking about other people," she declared.

They were walking more slowly now. They were within a few yards of the great omnibus yard. Bliss glanced at the clock.

"Dear," he pleaded, "trust me a little longer. The time is so short now. Don't ruin both our lives."

She made a little grimace. There were two big tears in her eyes.

"I knew how it would be," she sighed, "if I went out with you at all."

"You promise?" he persisted.

"I promise," she answered. "I'll have another try!"

CHAPTER XXXI

It was nearly six weeks later when Bliss, who had been promoted to the Piccadilly route, was suddenly hailed from the pavement. A tall, exceedingly well-dressed young man had dropped his monocle and was flourishing his cane.

"Hic!" he exclaimed. "Hie, there!"

Bliss brought the 'bus to a standstill. Honerton regarded him from the pavement in blank amazement.

"Hello, Bliss!" he shouted.

"We go to Hammersmith and Barnes," Bliss said, politely. "Did I understand you to hail the 'bus?"

"Well, I'm dashed!" was Honerton's first coherent exclamation.

"Come for a ride with me," Bliss begged. "It won't cost you more than fourpence all the way, and you'll get lots of excitement for your money. How are things?"

"A motor-'bus driver!" Honerton gasped.

"A healthy, not to say a sporting occupation," Bliss assured him. "Jump up behind if you're coming along. Can't keep my 'bus standing here all day."

They were badly blocked at Hyde Park Corner, and Honerton suddenly appeared on the footboard. By this time he had collected himself.

"Ernest, old chap," he said, "I've been looking for you everywhere."

"Is that so?"

Honerton coughed. He seemed a little ill at ease.

"When can I see you for a few minutes under more reasonable circumstances?" he asked, glancing with horror at an oil stain upon his glove.

"Well, I haven't much time after work," Bliss explained doubtfully. "I have to meet my girl directly I leave off."

"Your what?" Honerton gasped, with a visible effort at self-control.

"My girl," Bliss repeated. "Didn't I tell you I was engaged?"

"I don't think you mentioned it," Honerton mumbled.

"Anyway I am," Bliss continued. "She has a temporary job as typist, only a couple of streets off our yard. This is my last journey to-night. I get four hours off, so she'll be round to meet me. Couldn't you come on to the next stopping place if you are not very busy?"

"Righto," Honerton agreed. "I'll come on a little further. See you again later."

The 'bus started again and duly reached its destination. Bliss crossed his legs and, turning around in his seat, found Honerton waiting on the pavement.

"Now then," he invited.

Honerton rested one immaculately gloved hand upon a dry spot on the front of the 'bus and the other upon the rail, and after a nervous glance around to be sure that they were alone, he leaned over from the kerbstone in a confidential manner.

"Look here, Bliss, old chap," he began, "when I left you in the Strand that day, I had the hump for a time. One hates to think of a pal coming a real crop-

per and not seeming to have the gift, you know, for pulling himself together. You understand what I mean," he went on hastily. "Take my case, now. I have been absolutely stoney broke, but do I look it? Could any one ever guess it? That's because I've the knaek of pulling myself together and making the best of things. See?"

Bliss nodded.

"Oh, yes, I see," he assented.

"Well," Honerton continued, "I thought it all over, and finally I diseussed it with a few of our old pals. Now don't get skittish," he exclaimed quickly, as Bliss started. "Listen to what I've got to say. I made a little proposition to them," he proceeded, drawing a sheet of paper from his pocket, "and they were all over it — all over it, Bliss, I assure you. We never asked a single soul to subscribe. The 'oof simply rolled in. There's Freddy Lancaster, never seemed to have a lot, you know, and we used to chaff him about being stingy. He weighed in with a pony before we could tell him the whole of the story, and I tell you, we had the hardest job to keep the girls out of it. There was little Nellie Powers, and Flo Graves, and half a dozen more of them wanted to give half their salary for months. Freddy and I, though, put our foot down at that. We knew how you'd feel, and we wouldn't take a penny from a girl."

"What's it all about, anyway?" Bliss asked, his voice shaking a little.

"Simply this, old chap," Honerton concluded. "Some of your old pals have put their heads together, and they have decided to give you a dinner on your own date, and at the close of the dinner they're going

to hand you a little cheque which, believe me, will be worth having, for you to go out to Canada or America, or wherever you choose, and make a fresh start, or make it here amongst us if you like. Anyway, as Freddy Lancaster said, it's just a little rebate upon all the hospitality and kindness you've shown to lots of these fellows when they've been in a hole, and just to — er — let you see that they don't want a pal to slip down without stretching out a helping hand — er — and that sort of thing," Honerton wound up with a sigh of relief.

Bliss turned his head away. He was looking down the long vista of the crowded street. Suddenly the vehicles seemed all tangled together, the faces of the people blurred and indistinct. There was a lump in his throat. He could scarcely trust himself to answer. Honerton was tremendously busy with his cigarette case and had moved a little further back to get a light.

"Well, old chap?" he asked presently.

"I can't say much to you," Bliss declared. "This has taken my breath away. Will you just say that I'll dine with them all with pleasure, and if it isn't too soon, I should like the date to be December 19th."

"That's fine," Honerton exclaimed. "We'll say eight o'clock, and it will be at the Milan. We shall go to the Venetian Room. If you don't mind, old chap, I'll hop it now," he went on. "I dare say you're used to it, but this 'bus shakes me up a bit. There's a taxi stand there, and I'll just be getting back. So long! Don't forget. Venetian Room at the Milan, eight o'clock, December 19th. And by-the-by," he added, "about the — er — young lady?"

"There's my girl, of course," Bliss said. "May I bring her with me?"

"Of course you may," Honerton replied. "You bring her along, and we'll give you both a good send-off. So long, once more!"

"So long," Bliss echoed a little dazed.

Bliss was unusually silent that night as Frances and he made their way towards the little restaurant.

"Nothing wrong, is there?" she enquired, with some anxiety. "You haven't lost your place?"

"Not I," he assured her promptly. "I haven't even touched a fine yet. Only I had rather a shock to-day. Some of the men I used to know when I was better off want to give us a dinner and a start-off somewhere, Frances. They've subscribed quite a decent sum. What do you think about it?"

"Do you mean to go abroad?"

He nodded.

"That seems to be the idea."

She was thoughtful for a moment. Her eyes were soft, and he knew very well what was in her mind.

"It's your sisters you're thinking about, isn't it?" he asked, as they took their places in the restaurant. "Supposing there was enough to let Ruth have some singing lessons and to send Elsie down to a quiet place in the south somewhere?"

She held his hand under the table.

"I'll do just whatever you think best, dear," she said, "only you mustn't try and do too much for them."

"These fellows want us to dine with them on December 19th," Bliss announced.

She made a little grimace.

"Ernest," she expostulated, "how could I? You know my wardrobe pretty well, and the nineteenth is next Thursday."

He sat quite still in his place. His eyes seemed to be looking through the walls.

"Next Thursday!" he repeated wonderingly.

CHAPTER XXXII

BLISS awoke on the morning of the nineteenth of December with a curious little throb of expectation. He lay with wide-open eyes, looking around him. Now that the time had really come he could scarcely believe that his year was over, his privations actually at an end. His thoughts dwelt for only a moment or two upon the change that the day would bring him personally. The wonderful part of it all was Frances. More wonderful than anything was the fact that, at the end of these twelve long months of hardship and suffering, it was of some one else he thought and not of himself. He sprang out of bed, and washed and dressed as carefully as possible. Then he counted his money. He had thirty-two shillings, and he owed seven for his room. He paid his bill and at a little after eight o'clock sallied out into the street. As he opened the front door, he almost ran into a familiar little figure whose hand was upon the bell.

"Mrs. Heath!" he exclaimed. "Why, good morning."

It was a transfigured Mrs. Heath, a tremulous, beatific Mrs. Heath, with a touch of heaven in her face, and all the joy of the world shining out of her poor tired eyes. She clutched at Bliss' hand.

"It's you, sir! It's you that's done it!" she cried, holding his hands tightly, . . . pouring him with her eager

gaze. "I've thought it out all ways. It came anonymous last night with bank notes for sixty-five pounds — and not a wink of sleep have I had all night, and I've changed some — them, and they're real, and oh, sir! Oh, Mr. Bliss! The children are safe, and I can send Hughie to school, and I — I know it's you, and I can't say a word — my throat's full. May God bless you!"

The wonder of it all seized Bliss. He saw a new world — a new horizon. The tired little woman from Fendon Street had lifted the curtain. He felt strange tears in his own eyes as he thrust his arm protectingly through hers.

"Dear Mrs. Heath," he said, "you were so kind to me, and you taught me — so much! I sent you the money. I want you to be happy and free from anxiety all your life. You've done your share of work, you know. And in a few days I shall bring my wife to see you."

"You've plenty left for yourself, sir?" Mrs. Heath asked, with a very human nervousness.

Bliss laughed gaily.

"I have more money, Mrs. Heath, than any man ought to have," he assured her. "I've wasted a good deal of it — and a good deal of myself. We'll come and tell you the story in a few days. I'm going back to my own."

"If there's a heaven, sir —" she began.

Bliss wrung her hand as he hurried off, but at the corner of the street he turned to watch her for a moment. She was stepping briskly along homewards, and her head was a little uplifted. With a sudden clearness of vision he fancied that he could read her

thoughts, — that he could realise the crushing weight lifted from her poor overtired heart — the sweetness of it all — the children safe and cared for — the warm, luxurious peace of her finished struggle for existence. The little black figure vanished almost jauntily in the crowd, and Bliss turned on his way with a laugh that was almost a sob. Arrived at the offices of the Omnibus Company, he made his way at once to the foreman's office.

"Brought you back my check, sir," he announced. "I couldn't find you last night, and I was driving till past one o'clock."

"Going to leave us, Bliss?" the man asked. "I thought you were getting on so well."

"I have come into a little piece of good fortune, sir," Bliss explained. "I am going to give up driving for the present."

The man stared at him.

"Well, I'm hanged if yours ain't a lucky 'bus!" he declared. "Your mate, Jennings, is going round the place as if he were stark mad. Some bloke he never heard of has sent him a hundred pounds for his kids. Queer part of it is I tumbled into fifty quid myself a few days ago. And now you're in luck! Fair licks me — blowed if it don't."

He glanced a little suspiciously at Bliss, who made his escape as soon as he could. He breakfasted at a coffee stall and set off for Frances' lodgings. She was just leaving the house as he arrived. Her face fell.

"You haven't lost your place, Ernest?" she exclaimed anxiously.

He shook his head.

"I am taking a holiday," he said, "and I want you to take one, too."

"Holiday, indeed!" she echoed bitterly. "You know I can't do anything of the sort."

"On the contrary, I know that you can and you will," he replied. "If I ask nothing more of you in this world, dear, I am going to ask you to do as I tell you to-day. Please telephone to your people and tell them that you are unable to come to work. You might add that it will be exceedingly doubtful if you ever return at all."

She looked at him, and her hands began to tremble. For a moment she did not speak, and he found himself studying her for the last time in this guise, with a rapt and curious interest. He saw the shiny places in her worn black jacket, and the neat lace collar at her throat, grown threadbare with frequent washings. He realised all the pathos of that desperate struggle between her womanly instinct for neatness and the hard hand of poverty; the faded band of ribbon carefully arranged round her hat; the mended gloves; the shoes, both of them now with their little patch. He guessed at the quality of her miserable breakfast. There was something in her footsteps akin to the tired plod of the countless multitudes thronging their way citywards. Nothing that he himself had suffered seemed worth an instant's thought compared with the joy of his present anticipations.

"Ernest," she gasped, "has anything really happened?"

He took her arm tightly and hailed a taxicab.

"Nothing has happened, dear, that is not good," he assured her. "Nothing is going to happen that is not

good for both of us. Now will you just sit still in this cab while I go across to that telephone box and telephone to your people?"

She obeyed him, but when he came back he could see that she was still distressed. He took her hand and held it firmly.

"Dear," he said, "you must please start the day by being a little brave. You have a lot to go through before it is over, but I want you to try and think of one thing and trust in me. Your troubles are over. Not only your troubles, but the troubles of your two sisters are over. My troubles are over. We have had a hard struggle, but to-day it has come to an end."

"Don't tell me too much," she begged. "I'm afraid I cannot bear it. But tell me a little."

"We shall neither of us ever know again what it means to be absolutely poor," he said.

"Do you mean that you have a rise? A better situation?"

He smiled cheerfully.

"Something even better than that," he assured her. "Everything will be made absolutely clear to you quite naturally if you will only trust me and remember that I love you as I love nothing else on earth. Just sit still and take things as they come and believe that what is coming is good."

She pressed his hands with sudden fervour. All that she would have said was in her eyes. Suddenly the taxicab stopped.

"Where on earth are we?" she asked.

He handed her out on to the pavement and paid the taxicab man.

"It's a church!" she gasped, looking at him in amazement.

He led her across the threshold. The church was in a busy neighbourhood, and no one took any notice of them as they passed in. Bliss removed his hat and stood still for a moment.

"Dearest," he said softly, "is this a great shock to you? Try and bear it! We are going to be married."

She laughed a little hysterically, and then, before she could say anything, she was suddenly conscious that he was leading her up the aisle, and that the organ was playing soft music. There was scarcely any one else in the building. The words of the service commenced almost as soon as they reached the chancel. A pew-opener gave her away. Her responses were almost mechanical. The clergyman summoned them afterwards into the vestry, where they signed their names. Bliss laid a piece of paper upon the table and whispered in the clergyman's ear.

"Don't look at that until after we have gone. It is a little thank-offering. You can make what use of it you like."

The clergyman shook hands with them, they walked down the aisle and once more out into the street. She caught at his a.m.

"Ernest," she faltered, "do you realise what we have done?"

"Of course I do," he answered cheerfully. "I have been preparing for it for a long time. Bless you, the banns have been up for nearly a month!"

"And you never told me!"

"I never told you," he replied, "for a reason which

you will now understand in a very short time. All I can say is, please still trust in me."

"Another taxicab!" she exclaimed, as he held up his hand. "Ernest," she added with a frown, "I'm afraid I shall have to begin lecturing you very early. Even if you have a good place, you can't afford taxicabs all the time."

He laughed as he gave the man the address. Then he sat by her side and held her tightly to him.

"Dearest," he whispered fervently, "this is the most wonderful moment of my life. You belong to me for always — you are my wife — do you realise it? My wife!"

He kissed her, heedless of the passers-by. She looked at him wonderingly. His lips were quivering as though with anticipation, his eyes were bright. They drew up at last in Harley Street. He helped her to alight, paid the man, and rang the bell of the familiar front door, which was opened almost immediately by the same pompous servant.

"Is Sir James Aldroyd in?"

"What name, sir?"

"Just tell him a patient," Bliss replied. "I have come to see him professionally."

"Have you an appointment, sir?" the man asked.

"I have," Bliss told him grimly. "I made it twelve months ago."

The servant stared at him for a moment in a puzzled manner.

Then he showed them both into a waiting room and left them. Frances caught his arm.

"But, Ernest!" she exclaimed. "You are not ill? Don't tell me that you are ill!"

"Never better in my life," he assured her cheerfully. "Just wait, that's all, and remember what I told you. Everything is going to turn out wonderfully for us. Think of all the things you want in life and imagine that they are coming true. Then the shock won't be so great."

The servant reappeared.

"Sir James will see you, sir," he announced.

They were ushered into the same consulting room. Sir James looked up from his table, and it was obvious that he failed to recognise his visitor. It was obvious, too, that he was a little surprised by this visit from a young couple who scarcely seemed to belong to the class of patient whom he was accustomed to see in Harley Street. He turned around in his chair.

"What can I do for you?" he asked.

Bliss came and stood by the table.

"You don't recognise me, Sir James?"

The physician looked at him curiously.

"I recollect you perfectly!" he exclaimed, with sudden interest. "Your name is Bliss."

"Quite right," Bliss admitted.

Sir James leaned back in his chair and scrutinised his visitor. There happened to be a mirror just behind, and Bliss caught a glimpse of his own face. With a lightning-like effort of memory, he saw himself as he had been on that memorable visit twelve months ago, dressed in ultra-fashionable clothes, languid, pallid and heavy-eyed with the effects of late hours and ill digestion, a young man about town, seeking for his pleasures in the flowery ways of dissipation, without a single aim in life or a serious thought. In the looking-glass opposite he saw now a very different young man, unfashion-

ably dressed, sturdier, grimmer, with new lines about his mouth and a steady light in his eyes. He drew a great sigh of relief. It seemed to him at that moment that he realised, with a strange and wonderful thankfulness, all that had happened to him.

"Have you brought me," the physician asked, "that twenty-five thousand pounds?"

"I have not," Bliss answered steadfastly, "because you have lost your bet. Twelve months ago I left your rooms, and a few hours later I walked out into the street with a five-pound note in my pocket and only the clothes I stood up in. From that day to this, I have lived entirely and wholly on what I have earned. I have kept my word in the letter and in the spirit. I have accepted alms from no one. I have gained no benefit, direct or indirect, from my position or my means. In cases where, to alleviate the distress of others, I have drawn from my resources, I have cut myself away from those people at once, so that no advantage could possibly come to me. I have been a chauffeur, a light porter, a commercial traveller, and I wound up with driving an omnibus for nearly two months. I left the company this morning with a good character."

The physician leaned back in his chair and looked at his patient thoughtfully.

"And your health?" he enquired.

"Excellent."

"The giddiness and faintness you complained of?"

"Gone."

Sir James rose and held out his hand.

"My young friend," he declared solemnly, "I have never had a patient of whom I am more proud. I

shake your hand, not once, sir, but as many times as you like."

Bliss was conscious of a curious thrill as he stood there, his hand grasped by the strong, capable fingers of the older man. He thought once more of that other day twelve months ago, when he had lounged in after a late night, to receive the first blow which had struck beneath the veneer of his self-confidence and self-esteem. He remembered the rush of passionate shame which had given birth to his bet. He was conscious of the new vigour in his life. The tears stood in his eyes.

"I have gained many things during my exile, Sir James," he said, "amongst others — a wife."

Sir James turned and bowed to Frances.

"My wife," Bliss continued, smiling at the wonder in her face and drawing her affectionately towards him, "was a typist. She did not even call herself a young lady typist. She has earned her own living for the last six years."

"I congratulate you both heartily," Sir James said. "Your husband, my dear young lady," he added to Frances, "is a most wonderful person, for whom I have a sincere admiration. He has done what very few young men in his position and with his bringing up would have been capable of."

Frances was incapable of speech. Bliss patted her hand.

"We were only married this morning," he explained, "and she married me as a poor man. I am trying to prepare her for the change gradually. And in the meantime, if you will give me a dip of ink, Sir James, your hospital shall not suffer from the fact that I have won my wager."

Bliss drew a brand-new cheque book from his pocket. Once more he signed his name at the foot of a cheque. Once more the sense of wealth and power swept over him.

"Pay to Sir James Aldroyd or Order, the sum of Twenty-five thousand pounds."

He read the words upon the cheque over to himself, and laughed softly.

"Doctor," he said, "I had twelve and sevenpence when I came in, and my wife was reproaching me for extravagance because we have had two taxicabs this morning."

The physician leaned over and saw the amount of the cheque. Once more he grasped Bliss' hand.

"My young friend," he exclaimed, "if you could only realise the good this is going to do!"

"Sir James," Bliss replied. "I can realise better now than I could have done twelve months ago. Thanks to you, I have found a dozen ways in which I can occupy my time and my money in the future."

"There is nothing I am so anxious to hear," Sir James said, "as the story of your adventures. Will you and your wife do me the honour of dining with me any night next week? Shall we say Wednesday? I should like to ask some of the directors of my hospital to meet you."

"It will give us great pleasure," Bliss assented. "You will excuse us now? This has been our first visit."

The physician touched the bell. He gave them each a hand.

"I wish you both all the happiness you deserve," he said heartily. "I don't think," he added, patting Bliss upon the shoulder, "that I have ever had a patient who has done me greater credit."

CHAPTER XXXIII

A VERY handsome motor-car was drawn up outside the physician's door. The chauffeur touched his hat and smiled as Bliss and his wife emerged. A footman held open the door.

"Glad to see you again, Hayes," Bliss said pleasantly. "Car going all right?"

"Considering it's been shung up in the garage for twelve months, sir, it's going very well."

"We'll soon get it in running order again," Bliss declared, as he handed Frances in. "We shall be going down to the South of France in a few weeks."

The door was closed, the man sprang to his place, and the car glided off. Frances was looking now almost terrified.

"Don't tell me too much all at once," she implored, "but tell me, is this car yours?"

"No, it's ours," Bliss replied. "Now listen to me, dear. It's time you knew the truth. Twelve months ago I was feeling out of sorts. I was rich, lazy and selfish. I was sitting up too late at night, eating too much, drinking too much, smoking too much, with nothing to occupy my thoughts or my mind but my own pleasure. My nerves gave out. I went to see that man whom we have just left. I wasn't the sort of patient he cared for. He told me just about as brutally as he could, exactly what he thought of me and my manner of life, and he practically showed me

the door. When I held out my hand to say good morning, he refused to shake hands. He wouldn't prescribe for me. The only advice he would give me was to go out and earn my own living for twelve months. He added that he believed me incapable of such an effort. I lost my temper. I bet him that for twelve months I would earn my own living, without touching a penny of my own money except a five-pound note. That twelve months is up to-day, and I have won my bet. The bet was twenty-five thousand pounds for his hospital, against a shake of the hand and an apology. And you saw him, Frances? He paid. He paid like a man."

"And you?" she faltered. "All the time you were rich? You could have paid the twenty-five thousand pounds?"

"I could have paid it many times over," Bliss admitted. "In fact, I have just given that sum to the hospital. I am afraid you will think me a terrible fraud, but don't you see the position I was in? If ever I touched my own money, I had to be careful that no benefit came to me. I saw that nothing but capital could save Mr. Masters, so I got it and pushed his cooking stoves, but after that I had to leave him. I saved that heel manufacturer from bankruptcy, but directly I had advanced the money, I had to go. You were my most severe problem. I was dying to save you from distress and suffering, and on the other hand, I had one great ambition, and that was to win you as a poor man, to have you marry me knowing nothing, and then to try and make life as much like a fairy story as I could."

She began to cry softly.

"Don't take any notice of me for a few moments," she begged. "Life has been so hard lately, and I was beginning to lose even hope."

Presently they drew up at Arleton Court. The porter received Bliss with a glance of astonishment at his attire but with marked deference. They mounted to the fourth floor. Bliss touched the bell. A very subdued Clowes opened the door. Mr. Crawley was waiting in the hall.

"Here we are! Here we are at last!" he exclaimed, holding out his hand with an air of immense relief. "My dear Bliss, I am delighted to see you. I have obeyed all your instructions to the letter, and have asked no questions. May I be introduced?"

"This is Mr. Crawley, Frances," Bliss said, "my lawyer and very good friend. I've driven him nearly mad during the last twelve months, but I think that he will forgive me when he knows all about it."

"A very remarkable young man, your husband, my dear Mrs. Bliss," Mr. Crawley declared, as he shook hands. "I must confess that at times his exploits during the last year have caused me some anxiety. With one of them, however, I am now thoroughly disposed to sympathise."

Frances, still a little shy, gave him her hand with a very sweet smile.

They passed on into the dining room, where the cloth was laid for lunch. Mr. Crawley rang the bell.

"Mrs. Crawley," he said, "has engaged a maid for your wife, and the suite has been got ready as well as possible. This way."

He escorted them to the door of a wonderful little boudoir, which opened into a bedroom. A neatly

dressed maid came respectfully forward. The bedroom was a wonderful sight. Every article of furniture in it was piled with boxes.

"I don't think I have forgotten anything," Mr. Crawley went on, glancing at his notebook. "Levilion's have sent up a dozen morning gowns and half-a-dozen evening ones, and their fitter and dressmaker will be here in an hour's time. The other things you wanted from Bond Street are all here on approval."

"Will madame breakfast first, or would she like her bath prepared?" the maid asked quietly.

Frances looked at Bliss. Her lips quivered. He passed his arm through hers.

"You can prepare madame's bath in half an hour," he directed, "and make a selection of clothes for the morning. Come along, dear, I think it is time we drank one another's health in something better than the Médoc you used to grudge me so. Open some champagne, Clowes," Bliss ordered, as they passed back into the dining room. "Now, Mr. Crawley, if you like, here's my story."

He told it in a few words. The lawyer listened silently to the end, and when it was finished he wrung his client's hand.

"Mr. Bliss," he declared, "you have taken my breath away. All I can say is that I wish you both the happiness you deserve."

"We'll drink to it," Bliss said, holding up his glass.

"I drink both your healths, my dear young people," the lawyer continued. "Yours is a marriage which has begun in romance. You have both had your share of life's hardships, you have both something to remember all your days. And I," Mr. Crawley con-

cluded, as he took up his hat, "shall never forget how well your husband, my dear Mrs. Bliss, looked on the box seat of a motor-omnibus."

He took his leave a few minutes later. For the first time they were alone. Frances turned towards her husband.

"I can't believe it," she faltered. "I shall never get used to it all."

He laughed reassuringly. Then he drew her slowly towards him. She seemed to have become curiously passive.

"Dearest," he said, "it's all quite true. You are rich — just as rich as you want to be. You can send your sisters abroad whenever you want to. You can give them a home. Ruth can go to Dresden for her singing lessons, and Elsie can be sent wherever you like on the Riviera. We might take her with us."

She was crying quietly, but underneath it all Bliss could see the tremulous happiness in her face.

"It's too wonderful," she whispered, clinging passionately to him.

"The most wonderful thing of all," he whispered, "is our two selves — that you are my wife, Frances, that I love you as I never believed I could love any one."

Her arms tightened around his neck. For the moment she forgot everything else. Then there came a discreet knock at the door. The maid entered.

"Everything is ready for madame," she announced.

Twenty-two exceedingly well-groomed young men were awaiting the arrival of Bliss and his wife that evening in the Venetian room at the Milan Restaurant.

Honerton, who was in charge of the proceedings, was a little nervous.

"You don't suppose there's any chance of his not turning up?" Freddy Lancaster asked him.

"Not the slightest," Honerton declared. "He'll be here all right. But, Freddy — I don't know whether you fellows all understand — I'm not sure that he has even a suit of evening clothes to his name. He was looking like nothing on earth when I saw him last."

The young man whom he was addressing smoothed out his tie complacently.

"Poor old Ernie!" he sighed. "Hooked up to a girl, too! I say, you fellows, when do you think we ought to make the presentation?"

"As soon as possible, of course! Don't keep him in anxiety too long. I should think he'd enjoy his dinner better if he knew there was a thousand of the best waiting for him."

The door of the room was suddenly opened, and a servant announced Mr. and Mrs. Bliss. The general feeling, when they appeared, was one of surprise. Bliss was as well and carefully dressed as any of them. He was looking a little thinner and older, perhaps, but he carried himself in a more dignified and serious manner. Frances, too, was not what they expected. She was dressed in a simple but wonderfully made white evening gown, and around her neck hung a string of pearls which looked amazingly like real ones. After the first shock they all crowded around him, and Bliss found himself shaking hands with an amazing number of his quondam companions. The awkwardness which many of them had dreaded was dispelled almost from the first by Bliss himself. He chatted gaily with every

one, and referred to past events without the slightest doleful allusion to the catastrophe which was supposed to have overtaken him. Presently dinner was announced. They all sat at a round table, and Bliss laughingly refused to be parted from Frances. He told them all his secret, that he had only been married that morning. In the midst of the drinking of healths, which naturally followed the announcement, Honerton arose.

"Ernest Bliss," he said, "and you fellows, just a word. I'm not much of a hand at speech-making, but this is a gathering of one or two of your old friends, Bliss, who are sorry to hear that the luck has gone, and who have put their heads together, remembering the good times you used to give us all, and want you to accept a little wedding present from us. That's all, old chap. We've only taken subscriptions from those who insisted upon giving, and I've got to ask you to accept this little cheque — and I hope for the sake of Mrs. Ernest, you won't refuse."

Honerton sat down with an air of immense self-satisfaction and some relief. Bliss rose to his feet and faced them all. The cheque was passed up and lay open before him. He was a little pale, but his voice was wonderfully firm.

"Honerton," he began, "and you others, my dear friends, I stand before you a guilty man. It is true that I have been in the direst poverty for the last twelve months, that I have worked for my living in many strange ways, but, nevertheless, I have a confession to make to you. The position was entirely a voluntary one. I never lost a penny of my money. I am richer to-day than I ever was — a richer," he added, touching Frances' shoulder.

There was a little murmur of amazement, some ejaculations of wonder.

"You must let me explain," Bliss went on. "The fact is, I found out that I had been living a thoroughly selfish, ill-regulated life, and I was badly run down. Twelve months ago to-day, I went to Sir James Aldroyd and explained my symptoms to him. He treated me very brusquely. He wouldn't even trouble to prescribe for me. He told me as plainly as he could that he had no sympathy with young men who lost their health pleasure seeking. He said a few things which stung me to the quick. When I turned to leave, he pretended not to see my hand. The only advice he would give me was to earn my own living for twelve months, and he gave me pretty clearly to understand that he did not think me capable of the job. Well, I took him on. I laid him twenty-five thousand pounds for his hospital to a shake of the hand and an apology that I went off that morning with a five-pound note and earned my living for twelve months entirely on my own. And I did it. That's the secret of my disappearance. I was hard at it, earning enough to keep myself going. I did it somehow or other. The twelve months are up to-day. I have been to see Aldroyd, and he has paid up. Your money, my dear friends," Bliss went on, his voice shaking a little, "you must please take back. But your dinner, and your greetings to my wife and myself, are things which I shall never forget. I thank heaven for the memory of this gathering, and that you fellows have thought it worth while to do this, and I trust that for many years in the future, on the anniversary of this night, you will all consider yourselves my guests."

So the mystery of Bliss' disappearance was explained away at last. He resumed his seat amidst loud cheers and general stupefaction. Honerton himself was almost dazed.

"Jolly plucky thing I call it!" he kept on repeating. "Little Ernie Bliss, too!"

They chaffed Honerton numerically.

"You're a nice discoverer of poverty-stricken pals," one of them declared.

"No one's lost anything by it, that I know of," Honerton retorted. "You'll get your money back, you've had a thundering good dinner, and I know, now, where my windfall came from. Once more before we part, long life and happiness to Mr. and Mrs. Ernest Bliss."

They passed out of the hotel, a short time later, down the carpeted stairs, into the very luxurious motor-car which was waiting. They glided off into the Strand and passed within a few yards of the spot where Frances had turned to go down to Mr. Montague's office. She leaned back amongst the cushions and looked out into the streets. Life was suddenly new and wonderful. The dull weight of care had fallen away. She remembered her many lectures on economy to Bliss, and she burst into a happy little laugh.

"It is the same London, isn't it, Ernest?" she murmured. "The Drury Lane Café is somewhere up there, and you came along here on your omnibus a few hours ago?"

"It's the same London," he assured her, "only I hope that to both of us it will always be a different place. Those fellows to-night have taught me a lesson, Frances, those fellows and some of the people I've

met during the last twelve months. I want to try and do something for the many thousands who are up against it as we were. To-morrow I have all sorts of schemes. To-night — to-night," he added, leaning towards her and taking her hand in his, "belongs to our two selves!"

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