

Gospel-Truth Mortimer

By

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Freeeditorial 

Gospel Truth Mortimer

1- His Start in Life

WHEN a millionaire receives a letter which suggests that he should hand to a messenger some thousands of pounds, failing which he will be kidnapped at some time and place convenient to the writer, the millionaire—if he possesses a sense of humour—will laugh and send the letter to the police.

Mr. Chell had no sense of humour whatsoever, and he received the letter when it came with profuse perspiration. He did not send the letter to the police, because he felt in some way that such an action would annoy the kidnapers if they were genuine, and was unnecessary if they were not.

Instead, he looked round for enemies, and found them in his own household; and mainly an inoffending typist-secretary felt the brunt of his funk, because she was a woman and could not hit back.

Then Chell got into the habit of taking friends home “for company,” and he thought of impecunious Mortimer, and discovered him in a quiet hotel in Essex Street.

It was on the second day that Chell fixed the visit of George Mortimer—an interval of time long enough to allow certain interested watchers of the millionaire to make a move.

“Then I’ll pick you up on the Embankment?” asked Chell a little anxiously. “Of course, I’ll come up to the hotel for you, if you like?”

“Not at all,” said Mortimer, as he fixed his monocle more firmly. “I desire to leave Essex Street without ostentation. I am naturally a modest man.”

“That’s all right,” said Chell, who, as has been pointed out, had no humour whatever, “I’ll pick you up in front of Somerset House. So long!” And he went skipping down the steps of the hotel to his palatial car.

Mortimer went back to the smoke-room, and sat down to figure things out. The man with the diamond ring, who had arrived that morning, fixed him with a speculative eye from the other side of the room, and waited till Mortimer had settled himself, then rose and crossed to him.

“Excuse me,” said the man with the diamond ring, taking his cigar from his mouth, “was that my friend, Mr. Chell, you were speaking with?”

George Mortimer looked up at the square-faced, smiling gentleman.

“It was indeed your friend, Mr. Chell,” he said politely.

“He’s worth a million, that fellow,” said the stranger.

“I have never counted his money,” replied Mortimer, “but I’ll accept your estimate.”

The other man was momentarily nonplussed.

“I saw him here last night with you,” said the intruder—for intruder upon George Mortimer’s thoughts he undoubtedly was—“and recognised him.”

“I thought you arrived this morning?” said Mortimer curiously; and the haste of his interrogator to explain his faux pas confirmed George in his worst suspicions.

“Yes; moved down from the Sav-voy—dined here with a friend last night.”

Mortimer smiled genially.

“Cobby, Cobby!” he said reprovingly, “to put it over me! I, who was present in the Tombs Court when Judge Garner sent you to States Penitentiary for the best part of a year, for selling land which wasn’t yours to the green goods of New Jersey!”

The man addressed as Cobby was something more than startled.

“Why—why!” he gasped, “ain’t you that detective feller?”

“I was, but ain’t,” replied George. “I am too honest for a detective agency—it lasted three months, Cobby, and then I broke loose and came home ninth class on a cattle boat. Oh, by the way, Cobby, Mr. Chell tells me he's had threatening letters from people who say they will kidnap him if he doesn’t pay eight thousand pounds by Saturday.”

“You don’t say!” said the astonished man, lighting his cigar again. He might be pardoned if his hand trembled a little, for, though he was one of the best “confidence men” in the world, he was a little upset by the unexpected recognition.

“I do say,” said George Mortimer. “Cut it out, Cobby.”

”Me, Mr. Mortimer?” asked the astounded and outraged Cobby.

“You,” said George Mortimer. “Kidnapping is a side-line of yours, now I come to think of it. You’re the man who held Mayor Gilly to ransom in Paradise City, aren’t you?”

“If I die this minute—” protested Cobby, raising his right hand impressively.

“Don’t worry—you won’t,” said George; “but cut it out—try the newly returned colonial on the Strand—he's easy. Leave kidnapping to chorus-girls.”

It was no coincidence that Mr. Cobham had arrived at the hotel the day following Chell’s call. Not at all. But as it happened, it was so much money wasted.

The Honourable George Mortimer left the hotel that afternoon without any exact idea as to when he would return.

He had taken the proprietor aside and told him things.

“I expected to get a letter,” he said, “and a cheque from a man who owes me a lot of money. I have the letter, but the cheque has not come—and I doubt if it will come.”

The proprietor murmured encouraging things.

“I know,” said Mortimer, and screwed his glass into his right eye with some determination. “You’re an awfully good chap, but I owe you for three weeks board and lodging, and I have no prospect of paying you. You had better keep my boxes—there are one or two curiosities I brought from Java which will fetch the price of the bill—you can let me have the difference when I call. I only ask that you allow me to take away a few necessities.”

“You can stay here, sir,” said the emotional proprietor, “till the cows come home.”

The only son of impecunious Lord Cleghorn smiled and patted the other on the back.

“My dear lad,” he said, “the cows wouldn’t be mine—my dear father owes his milkman quite a lot of money. One tip I give you which will be of value:—a gentleman named Cobham, who is staying here, is a crook.”

“He left half an hour ago,” replied the landlord.

“The devil he did!” said George.

So he went forth to the Embankment with a handbag and a desire for adventure and about eighteen shillings in ready cash; and he had not waited more than ten minutes when Chell found him. Chell drove in a boudoir on wheels, all lacquer and silver and Cee-springs. And the interior of the motor-car was upholstered and downy and full of spring flowers.

“My wife is on the Riviera, I forgot to tell you that,” explained Chell. “I’m all alone, and this business is upsetting me; the police pooh-pooh it, but I assure you I’m worried. Now, suppose these fellows got me—what would they do?”

He speculated on the possibility at some length. He was the same unhealthy-looking Chell whom Mortimer had known at Harrow. Horribly prosperous, as he had always been—a little toady—likewise unchanged.

“How rum!” said Mortimer as the car went spinning along the Portsmouth Road.

“What is rum?” asked Chell.

“Everything,” replied the other vaguely.

Chell returned to his thoughts.

He took from a cunning pocket in the upholstering of the car the prettiest little silver-plated Smith-Wesson revolver George had ever seen.

“They’ll have a little trouble to get me,” he said.

“Give the devil her due,” suggested Mortimer.

“I am giving her a cheque,” snarled the other.

“She may not have robbed you?”

Mortimer’s cigar stuck up at a reflective angle and his eyes were searching the ornate patterns of Chell’s ceiling. When he adopted this attitude, plus a very definite stand with his back to the fireplace and his legs a little apart, Mortimer was a bad man to cross, but Chell did not know this. He had been a millionaire from his birth and a dyspeptic from the age of sixteen, a fact which had not induced him to bother overmuch about the touchiness of others.

His outlook on life was not normal, and his views on women were crude and unwholesome. A man with a recurring toothache pain immediately between the second and third button of his waistcoat is apt to be impatient.

Mortimer had never had an ache or a pain in his life; he had never owned a million in his life, though he had experienced the delightful sensation when somebody had once paid him a hundred pounds all at once in gold.

He was tall, stiff shouldered, red faced, and lean. His eyes were grey, his face thin, and he carried no fat anywhere.

Chell was pale in a disagreeable sense. Had Nature repainted the world, she might have used Chell’s face as a palette for her whites and yellows and livid greys.

All the trouble had come about within two hours of their arrival at Criffley Park, Chell’s beautiful country seat.

The new secretary had handed him a letter which had every appearance of having been opened. Chell was born suspicious; he was the sort of baby who might have refused his bottle till its contents had been passed by the analyst.

There had been a stormy scene. He had accused her of many things which were outside the range of his criticism.

He sat writing savagely at his big library table, and Mortimer continued to survey the ceiling. It was not a pleasant first evening.

“Why don’t you see the girl?” he asked.

“See her!” almost shouted the other, getting red in the face; “see a blackmailer?”

Mortimer made no reply.

“No,” Chell went on, “a girl who has had a good job as that girl had, who opens important letters—”

“And steals money?” suggested Mortimer.

The other hesitated.

“Well, I won’t swear as to that—I honestly think I have lost money.”

“And blackmails you?” continued the man by the fire.

Chell scowled.

“Don’t you think it is blackmail,” he asked, “when a girl tells you that she will take you into court and sue you for libel if you don’t—er—if you don’t—”

“Apologise?” murmured the other.

“Exactly—fancy me apologising to a damned typist!”

“You may be right,” agreed Mortimer.

“I know I’m right,” snapped his host.

“I mean about typists being damned,” said the other. “I often think some of them are. What does a girl expect? Here she has a job in a thousand. Paid like a princess—I suppose you give her a fiver a week?”

Chell wriggled uncomfortably in his chair.

“Pound a week,” he blurted, “and keep—jolly good wages, too”—defiantly.

“Fine,” agreed the other, “and keep—dinner with you, I suppose?”

“For Heaven’s sake don’t be an abject ass,” begged the other. “She dines with the servants.”

“She sleeps here—nice suite of rooms.”

Chell was discreetly silent.

“Your wife never sends her down to the village on errands that she wouldn’t dare give to the chauffeur?”

No reply.

“She doesn’t help round at odd times—taking the dogs out.”

Chell swung round in his swivel-chair.

“You know this girl!” he accused. “She’s been talking to you!”

Mortimer shook his head and flicked the ash of his cigar into the grate.

“I know you, Chelly,” he said.

There was an awkward pause. Chell had brought Mortimer down to Criffley Park on the impulse of the moment. He had not seen him for ten years, and he was in a blue funk. They had been at Harrow together, and Chell wanted to show impecunious Lord Cleghorn’s son that he, Chell, nobody’s son in particular, but one to whom bank-managers said respectfully, “Will you take it in tens or fifties?” was a great man. Also his wife was on the Riviera, and he somehow had an instinct that she would be glad to know that the son of a lord had slept in the blue room.

Thank heaven, this uncomfortable guest was only staying for a few days! It had been a mistake to bring him down, a greater mistake to row with Miss Lowe in front of him.

“You’re still the same old Mortimer,” he said.

The other man could take it as he liked.

“And you haven’t improved either,” said Mortimer earnestly, “and that’s gospel truth.”

“Gospel Truth Mortimer!” said his host, with a little grin. “I remember the nickname, I’ve been trying to think of it all the evening.”

“Gospel Truth Mortimer,” agreed the other, nodding, and looked at the ceiling more carefully than ever.

Then came diversion.

A firm knock at the door proclaimed the arrival of the pale, slight girl in black. Her eyes were red, and a stray tear-curl fell over her forehead. Do you know the tear-curl? It is that which always whisps down over your nose whenever your emotions are excited in the direction of the weeps.

Here it was not unsightly. She was pretty enough, and there was an air of quiet refinement about her which went straight to Mortimer’s heart.

Chell’s face blackened down to an unusual frown.

“Well?” he growled.

The girl hesitated. She shrank from discussing her affairs before a stranger, and shot a timid glance at the tall man. What she saw gave her courage, and she turned to Chell.

“I want you to allow me to leave at the end of the week,” she said.

“You can go now,” he snarled; “here’s your cheque!”

He flung it across the table towards her.

“I can’t go to-night,” she protested. “I don’t want to go to London till the end of May.”

“You don’t want!” lie sneered. “You clear out to-night!”

“But—”

“Don’t ‘but’ me,” stormed Chell, “do as you’re told.”

“Always do as you’re told, Miss Lowe,” smiled Mortimer; “then one of these days you’ll go to heaven and meet Mr. Chell’s papa.”

Chell’s mouth opened, but he said nothing.

“Mr. Chell’s papa,” continued Mortimer, still to all appearances addressing the ceiling, “will touch his hat to you—or possibly his halo—because you are a lady; and all the Chells of all time, ever since, in fact, the first Chell was fashioned out of mud, have touched their hats to ladies.”

“What—what?” spluttered John Heynsham Chell.

“Let me finish my story, naughty, naughty,” said the other, wagging his forefinger at his host. “Do you remember once at Harrow how you interrupted me, and how I went for a walk all over you? Be good.”

He turned to the girl again.

“You will, if you are good,” he went on, “meet Mr. Chell’s uncle, who kept a fried-fish shop in Lambeth before Mr. Chell, senior, made his millions out of an oil well in Russia. It is worth while being good.”

Chell was white with rage.

“You can clear out together,” he said. “There’s a train from Scarborough in twenty minutes.”

A silence fell upon the party.

Mortimer, by his gospel truthfulness, had found himself at various periods of his life in some unhappy circumstances. He had stood at Three Springs, Texas, with a rope round his neck on a shaky soap-box; he had faced a crowd of enraged coolies in Chi-we; he had estranged his one wealthy relative, but never before had he been confronted with the possibility of being turned loose on a midnight world in the society of a pretty typist.

“Very good,” said Mortimer. “I will pack my bag.”

Ten minutes later he joined the girl in the hall. A pathetic figure in black, her lips aquiver.

“Where is Mr. Chell?” asked Mortimer.

“He has gone to bed, sir,” said the footman.

Mortimer laughed.

“How like Chell to go to bed!”

He walked round to the window of Chell’s room. He slept on the ground-floor because he was afraid of fire. There was a light burning. George had a horrible temptation to put a flower-pot through the window, but restrained himself. There were certain things a gentleman could not do; besides, there was no handy flower-pot.

He came back to the girl, that rebellious tear-curl straying again.

Though Chell did not wait to speed the parting guest, he had ordered round the car, and into this Mortimer assisted the girl.

“Station, sir?” said the chauffeur, touching his cap.

“Yes,” said Mortimer; “Charing Cross.”

“London, sir?” asked the man incredulously.

“London, indeed,” repeated Mortimer.

He did not observe the scowl on the man’s face, but he guessed it and sympathised, for London lay at the end of a forty-mile drive.

“I think Mr. Chell only expected we should go to the station,” said the girl timidly.

He nodded.

“I know,” he said; “but there are eighteen reasons why I do not wish to journey

to town by train, and each reason is worth twelve pennies. In other words," he said, "I have eighteen shillings in my pocket, and you have a cheque which is unchangeable at this hour of the night."

They spun through Stamborough, and took the London road eight miles beyond.

The girl sat in silence, revolving in her mind plans for her immediate future. She had no fear of this tall, good-looking young man, who smoked one of Chell's fragrant cigars with evident relish and happiness.

By accident or design, the car did not move in the direction of London. In half an hour they ran through the narrow streets of a little town.

"This is Blescombe, sir," said the chauffeur. "I made a mistake, and took the wrong road. But you can get a train from here in twenty minutes."

"Charing Cross," said George Mortimer.

"A very fast train, sir," pleaded the chauffeur.

"Charing Cross," said George; and went on conversing with the girl.

The chauffeur said many things which it would serve no useful purpose to repeat; but he turned the car, and went back the way they had come.

George found the girl a pleasant companion. They talked for the greater part of forty-five minutes, and might have talked all the way to London, but, in the middle of a story he was telling, the car came to a sudden standstill with a jarring squeak of brakes. The chauffeur got down.

"There is a man lying in the middle of the road, sir," he said. He was respectful, having overcome his pardonable annoyance at this night journey.

Mortimer jumped out of the car. Lying ahead, flat on his back, plain to be seen in the white beam of the car's head lamps, was a man. His arms were outstretched and he gave no sign of life.

Mortimer went forward and bent over the prostrate man. He lifted the arm and felt his wrist with a sure touch; then he slipped his hand in between the shirt opening.

"He's alive," he said, "come and help get him into the car."

The girl had stepped out and stood watching the scene. She came forward apprehensively and looked at the face.

“Is he dead?” she asked.

“Neither dead nor drunk, curiously enough,” replied Mortimer, “though what is wrong with him I cannot tell.”

They lifted the man up and hoisted him into the car.

“You had better sit with the chauffeur,” said Mortimer; “I will attend to him—there’s a hospital at Guildford, isn’t there, Parker?”

“Yes, sir,” said the man, brightening up. (Always remember servants’ names—it is one of the few compliments you can pay them.)

“En avant!” said Mortimer; but first he wrapped the girl in a rug which the chauffeur found under the seat of the car.

It was an uncomfortable journey for Mortimer. He sat with the man’s head on his knees, the body huddled on the bottom of the car. The unknown was well-dressed, and, so far as Mortimer could see, there was no evident injury.

They were a few miles from the outskirts of Guildford, when the man moved with a little moan and opened his eyes. Mortimer had switched on the electric light the better to observe the unknown.

“What has happened?” asked the man huskily.

“I am dying to know,” replied Mortimer.

The man tried to rise, and, with the assistance of Mortimer, succeeded in struggling to the seat.

“Where is Cob and the crowd?” he asked; then suddenly and with resentment, “You’re a split, I suppose?”

“I’m a which?” asked the puzzled young man, who was not acquainted with current slang.

The man was still dazed, and did not seem to hear what Mortimer had asked.

“This comes of working outside my own line,” he said gloomily.

He was a man of forty, dressed, as has been remarked, in respectable attire and had the appearance of a gentleman. But though a man may purchase the livery of breed if he has the trick of choosing the right store, and is advised by a competent valet, he cannot at any price purchase the speech, the tone, the exact pitch of voice, the little drawling trick of pronunciation which should go with the clothes if the illusion is to be complete. He was the correct thing—till

he spoke.

“Cob’s fault,” he grumbled sleepily; “he said—if you’ve got toothache, have a whiff of the stuff—put me on the dicky seat behind the two-seater—rotten!”

“And you whiffed the stuff and fell off?” suggested Mortimer.

“H’m!” nodded the other, “two whiffs—three—fine, no pain.”

“Chloroform by any chance?” asked Mortimer, deeply interested.

“H’m,” admitted the sleepy man; “new idea—Cobs. Oh, silly ass!”

He closed his eyes and slumbered.

The car slowed down at that moment, and Mortimer looked ahead. They were on a country road and there was a car in front. Its bright lamps glared menacingly in the centre of the road, and Mortimer saw a man standing with outstretched arms. The car stopped, and Mortimer got out.

To be exact, two men were waiting. One of these was a very pleasant individual, who lifted his cap as Mortimer approached.

“Have you by any chance picked up a gentleman on the road?” he asked politely.

“I have one—is this the article?”

The stranger approached the car.

“That is the gentleman,” he said gravely; “we dropped him—I presume—as we were going up hill and subsequently at no great pace. Wake up, Jimmy!”

Jimmy woke up reluctantly.

“Pardon me,” said Mortimer, as the two men assisted their friend from the car, “might I suggest that chloroform is a very bad substitute for smelling salts?”

The man looked at him sharply, but it was rather difficult to see George’s face, because his soft hat was pulled over his eyes to keep off the glare of the head lamps.

“Excuse me one moment,” said Mortimer with great ceremony; and he stepped back into his car—he regarded it as his for the time being.

In a big pocket which dived into the upholstered side of the car he had seen Chell put a beautiful revolver with some pride. Yes, here it was; he came out into the white light of the lamps balancing it in his hand.

“Up!” he said quietly; and two pairs of hands were obedient. The doped Mr. Jimmy sank into the roadway like a sack of potatoes.

“Back up, my friends,” said Mortimer; and they backed till they came abreast of the little cosy car, with its closed hood and its low roof. Mortimer lifted a lamp from its brackets and flooded the interior with light. On the floor, uncomfortably trussed, lay Mr. Chell. He wore a gag, and his wrists and ankles were strapped. He was in his pyjamas.

Illustration

“If you only knew what an ass you looked!” said Mortimer, as he loosened the straps with one eye upon the kidnappers, “you wouldn’t be rescued.”

“My heavens!” gasped Chell. “I’m nearly dead, Mortimer. Oh, my heavens! They chloroformed me—”

“Yes, yes,” soothed the other. “Go back to the car; Miss Lowe will pretend she can’t see you.”

The girl had stepped down into the roadway, very shaky and troubled.

“Is anything the matter?” she asked.

“Matter!” moaned Chell, stepping gingerly over the rough, road with his bare feet. “They tried to kidnap me!”

The girl looked at him, and Mortimer saw the look and rejoiced.

“But is anything serious the matter?” she asked sweetly.

Mortimer could have hugged her; but just then a motor-car full of police came up, and the affair became a matter of public interest.

“I’m really greatly obliged to you,” said Chell shame-facedly.

They had all gone back to Criffley Park together, and they sat in the library.

Chell wore clothes, a great source of happiness, for they had endured him for twenty miles in a rug and pyjamas.

“Stay the night and go to town to-morrow. Can I do anything for you, Mortimer—I’d like—some little souvenir?”

“Fifty pounds to the lady for services rendered,” suggested Mortimer, “and I’ll take the car.”

“I thought,” stammered Chell, “something to stick in your tie, or—hang on

your chain. You see, I feel I owe my life to you—”

“Ah!” said Gospel Truth Mortimer, his face falling, “If you’re only going to give me something which represents the value of that, I guess I shall only get away with a head lamp.”

In the end, and in a magnificent moment, Chell gave him the car.

A week later, Gospel Truth Mortimer was careering through London, driving the car now bearing the white plate which proclaimed its promotion to the rank of taxicab.

2 - The Six Blue Rings

MR. CHELL, that parsimonious millionaire, gave George Mortimer a taxicab, though it may be said, in justice to Chell, that he had not the slightest idea in the world that the magnificent limousine which he had given, in a moment of temporary insanity, induced by the service George Mortimer had rendered, would be put to such a base use.

The Hon. George Mortimer, with his monocle, became a taxi driver because he had no other way of earning a living. There were real taxicab-drivers who laughed rudely at George and his eyeglass, and George laughed back with great freedom and good humour. Some were ruder than others. One burly young man snatched George’s eyeglass as it dangled over his spotless overall, stuck it in his own eye, and said, “By gad, ole feller!” with great effect.

“Take that eyeglass out, my son,” said George.

“Why?”

“Because,” said George convincingly, “I’m afraid if I hit you I might possibly break the glass, and do you a greater injury than I intend.”

“If it comes to that,” said the burly young man, with ominous deliberation, “I’m a bit of a hitter meself. Hold that glass, Harry.”

He was making some sort of conventional preparation when George Mortimer hit him. The burly young man has since described the sensation as being something between a collision between one of Messrs. The London General Omnibus Company’s vehicles and having a tooth out without gas.

Thereafter George forsook the ranks, and went pirating up and down kerbs —“a snatcher,” in the argot of his trade, and perfectly unashamed.

One day when he was crawling down Cheapside, Chell hailed him, and Chell’s face, as he saw his twelve hundred pounds’ worth of limousine adorned with a taximeter, was worth stopping in the middle of the traffic to inspect.

“Hallo!” he said bitterly. “Take me down to Waterloo, will you?”

“Certainly, sir! Main line or tube?” asked Mortimer.

“Don’t be an ass!” said Chell. “Main line, of course!”

George touched his hat gravely, pulled down the flag, and drove Chell through all the busiest thoroughfares, into all the traffic blocks, through streets that were up (he had to go back three or four times and try a new route), and eventually arrived at Waterloo with two and eight pence on the clock when, as Chell, who knew the route to the fraction of twopence, was well aware, there should not have been more than one and ten pence.

“You are a rotter, Mortimer!” he grumbled. “I’ve only a couple of minutes to catch my train.”

“Here!” said George. “Where’s the fare?”

Chell stared at the figure behind the steering-wheel.

“Do you mean to tell me that you’re going to charge me for a drive in the car that I gave you? Don’t be absurd!”

He turned wrathfully to the booking-hall.

“Hi, constable!” cried George. “Stop that man—he’s bilking me!”

Chell came back, very annoyed indeed, and handed up exactly two-and-eight pence.

“Where’s my tip?” asked George indignantly.

“Go to—” snarled Chell. He used a hot and hurried word.

”Talking of home,” said George, “how are things in Berkshire?”

But Chell did not wait.

It was fun driving a cab, and there was money in it. He had one standing commission, in which there was no pay. It wasn’t a commission in the ordinary sense of the word, because it was a job he had taken on without

encouragement.

Every evening at five-thirty his limousine was drawn up within twenty yards of the City of London Supply Association, from whence issued the prettiest of typists, with one curl everlastingly straying from her forehead to her cheek.

“You’ll get me an awful bad name,” she reproached him once.

“Jump inside, and please don't argue with me,” said George. “You’re getting me a bad name.”

He would drive her from Queen Victoria Street to her little flat in Putney—a flat which had been furnished on Chell’s money—fifty pounds, handed over with fifty regrets, for Chell was a mean devil, and placed no monetary value upon the life she had saved.

Every night he ignored the uplifted sticks of irascible gentlemen—pulling his flag down as an outward and visible sign of his engagement, and pulled up before the City of London Supply Stores.

A strange friendship had sprung into being between the son of Lord Cleghorn and this dainty little lady. It was one unmarked by any tender passage, or the hint that a period would come when they would be on any terms other than those which marked their comradeship. As for example:

He would discuss with her the necessity for enlarging her circle of acquaintances, and she would talk by the hour—when they dined together at the Petite Riche—on the absolute need for making a good marriage. To this end, she advised him to go to his sister, Lady Violet Mangrow, who was, as he described it, “a sort of an ambadress” in Vienna.

But George preferred the diplomatic service of handling exigent passengers.

Habitual employers of taxicabs came to look for the big limousine and the driver with the monocle. A daily paper had a little account of the “most luxurious taxi in London,” and published a photograph.

“I’d like to take a picture of you, too,” said the enterprising picture-writer. “Get up on your box, and turn your face this way.”

“Unless you want to end your young life in misery,” warned George, “keep your devil-box turned away from me; for if you print my portrait I will follow you to your vile suburban home, and pinch you to death.”

“You might say that over again, will you?” suggested the interested reporter, fumbling for his notebook. “It would make a good start for a comic story.”

“I’ll give you all the information about the car,” said George, fixing his eyeglass. “I found it wandering in the snow when it was only a little side-car, and took it home and put it to bed. I fed it and nourished it, sitting by its side reading into the night, holding its trembling clutch in mine—”

“Listen,” said the reporter: “I want a few words about the car.”

“It is a wonderful car,” said George. “It can either be used as a perambulator or an omnibus; by pulling up the shelf marked ‘C,’ it can be converted into a trouser-stretcher. I sleep in it by night, and give luncheon-parties in it by day. In the summer-time it can be used as a tent or a refrigerator; the front part lets down, and by planting a few trees round it, it can be converted into a house-boat—”

“I like you,” said the reporter regretfully. “What a pity you gas so much.”

An advertisement of any kind is useful, though perhaps less useful to one car than to one type of car. George made his steady £2 a day—and saw London.

It was a joy to him driving through the crowded streets. The police of the City came to know him, and he learnt many things which he never knew before. As, for instance: taxicabs did not pay—because of the taximeter! Wheels and body and chassis earned their keep; the little clock alone cost money for rental, and earned nothing. That little waster kept clerks busy in the great garages, and made not a penny more by its installation. Some of the companies paid thousands a year on these non-producers.

He learnt the tricks of the “mushers” and the “snatchers”; all about the little cab proprietors who had tiny windows put in the side of their hoods to deceive the public into the belief that their cabs were converted private cars. The tricks of paint and lacquer to dazzle the unwary into the illusion that they were going to ride in a four-cylinder cab, when the wheezy engine-power was exactly two.

A new world lies open to the eyes of the taxi man. It is a tragic, comic, sordid, interesting world.

The earlier incident of the burly young man and the eyeglass might have escaped from the mind of Gospel Truth Mortimer, but for a slight happening at Paddington. George occasionally allowed himself the relaxation of a railway wait.

It was here that he met the burly young man for the second, and, as he hoped, the last time.

The Plymouth boat-train had arrived, and George was well down the waiting queue of cabs. There was, however, a plentiful supply of passengers, and

Mortimer found ample amusement in watching the newly arrived travellers, the majority of them burnt to mahogany colour with the tropical sun. There were greetings and huggings, frenzied shrieks of joy from waiting relatives and friends.

Observing these ebullitions, George noticed a girl standing apart. There was evidently none to greet her, and she stood a forlorn and tragic figure on the platform in her widow's black, her two well-worn trunks by her side. She caught George's eye and came across to him.

Illustration

"Will you please take me to this address?" she asked, and she gave him a slip of paper.

He took her all in with one quick glance, the sweet, sad face, the firm chin, and the big, brown eyes. A pretty woman, he thought, and wondered, as he unfolded the paper, what tragedy, what high hopes doomed to bitter results lay in the heart behind that crêpe-trimmed bodice.

Before he could read the address the burly young man had come on the scene; he was in charge of the cab immediately in front of Mortimer.

"Here!" he bullied. "Why don't you take your turn? I've got an eight penny turn, I have! Doin' me out of my livin'!"

"Avaunt, fat man!" said George.

The burly driver scowled his recognition.

"Oh, it's you, is it?" he stated, rather than asked. "You won't arf git into trouble one of these days."

"Nor a quarter, either," said George bafflingly. "To your eight pence, dog!"

For a moment a smile hovered at the corner of the girl's lips.

"Am I doing anything very dreadful?" she asked.

"Beyond endangering that stout lad's life—nothing," said George. He read the slip: "407, Curzon Gardens."

He descended and strapped the baggage to the driving platform, and assisted the girl into the car. 407, Curzon Gardens was a pretty little house near the Park.

George, unstrapping the baggage, saw the girl—for she was little more—

regarding the place with a troubled look.

“So this is it,” she said aloud.

“This is it,” said George, “if you are speaking to me.”

From her bag she took an envelope, tore it open, and took out a key.

“I wasn’t talking to you,” she said apologetically, “but it is rather a relief to talk to anybody.”

She opened the door and he carried in her trunks. The house was well, if newly, furnished. It had the appearance of having been especially arranged for the occupation of one who was starting housekeeping.

“I have no servants yet,” she explained, when she asked him to carry her trunks to her room. He noticed that she was rather hazy as to which was her room.

At the end she gave him half-a-sovereign.

“Keep the change, please,” she smiled.

“I am sorry,” he said gravely, “but I am a member of the anti-tipping league—and that’s gospel truth!” Which it was.

He handed her change with all solemnity. The reluctant hand that was outstretched to take the money, was white and delicate, and adorned with a number of little blue rings, all on one finger.

“Why, you have only charged me eight-pence!” she said.

“That is the fare,” said George hastily, and withdrew.

There was two-and-sixpence on the clock, but George was before everything a sentimentalist.

He saw her again a week later, passed her in Park Lane.

It is no great coincidence for a taxi-driver to be called upon to go twice to the same address, but it was not until three weeks after he “set down” at 407 that he was called upon to visit the house again.

George was going down St. James’s Street one summer evening, wondering whether it would be etiquette to leave his cab in charge of the porter and go into his club—the Carlton James—to dinner, for he had taken a cheery party to Sandown Park and had profited by the fact that one of the party was the owner of a horse called Soldier Joy. Soldier Joy, to the wonder of the sporting

community, had won the Emberley Selling Handicap at the astounding price of 33 to 1—a price which frequently occurs in novels, but which is unusual in a small race.

George, who rarely betted, had backed the horse for £2. Hence his lordly views on the subject of dinner. At the Palace end of St. James's Street a raised umbrella brought him to the signaller.

It was a tall man of swarthy complexion, clean-shaven, elaborately dressed in an obviously new suit.

“407, Curzon Gardens,” he said in a slightly foreign accent.

“Well, I'm dashed!” said George Mortimer, as he pulled down his metal flag and swung the car round. Five minutes later he had pulled up before the sedate little residence.

“Wait,” said the fare.

“Nothing easier,” said George. He looked to see who opened the door, hoping for a glimpse of the lady in black, but the man let himself in with a key.

George had by the side of his seat a locked box of unpolished oak which was regarded by the gentlemen of his profession as a supplementary tool-chest. This he now unfastened and opened the lid, revealing the backs of a dozen books. George took off his gloves, lit a choice cigar, and in a few seconds was absorbed in his Prescott, following the fortunes of the Spanish Invaders in the land of the Incas. There was no sign of his fare, and the clock ticked merrily.

For three hours he read, and when the light failed he switched on the little electric lamp behind his head—a lamp he had had fixed for the purpose—and continued reading. It was nearly ten o'clock when the door opened, and a gentleman came down the steps, closing the door behind him. He glanced curiously at the cab as though he had never seen it before, and was walking away.

“Do you want me to wait?” asked George.

The man started and half turned.

“Wait?” he stammered. “No. How long have you been waiting?” His voice sounded high and musical; it was remarkable that George had not noted this fact before.

“There is nine-and-sixpence on the clock,” he said.

The man fumbled in his waistcoat pocket and produced a coin.

“Don’t bother about the change,” he said.

“There is no need,” said George, calmly examining the coin, “this is a four-anna piece.”

“I’m sorry. Here—”

This time it was a sovereign.

George saw the coin, but he saw, too, the hand—white, slim, and fragile. It was innocent of jewellery, save on the second finger, where five or six blue-stoned rings were placed so close together that they appeared to be one broad band of flashing sapphires.

The man did not wait, but turned abruptly and walked away.

George Mortimer stared after him.

“Sovereigns, and keep the change,” were, he had imagined, the invention of a certain school of sensational fictionist. Yet it was not the sovereign which interested him.

He was tempted to continue in his speculation, but—

“Fuyez les dangers de loisir,” said George virtuously, and started his engine. He literally did fly from the dangers of leisure. He had a “pick up” in Piccadilly, and set down at Maida Vale, picked up again in Edgware Road, and put his passenger out at Liverpool Street Station. In Broad Street he found a fare who wanted to go to Adderley Street, Cape Town, but at the gentle persuasion of a City policeman was induced to alight and take a ’bus, but not before he challenged George to fight, acclaiming himself immodestly as a white man’s hope.

“O happy soul,” said George gently, “go in peace, I envy your high spirits!”

“Are you man enough to fight me?” asked the truculent fare.

“No,” said George, “and that’s the gospel truth!”

“He’s all right,” said the policeman, watching the heroic challenger out of sight. “Get many like that?”

“A few,” said George, “but, alas! not so interesting.”

“There’s a nice attempted murder up West to-night,” said the constable. “Keep your eyes open for a lady with six blue rings on her second finger.”

“Eh?” said George, startled. “Six blue rings?”

”That’s the description we’ve had,” said the policeman, “and we’ve had orders to tell every cabby we can catch. A pretty woman with six narrow rings, set with sapphires, on the second finger of her left hand.”

George stopped his engine and got down.

“Let me hear all about this,” he said. “I’ve seen that hand.”

The policeman produced his notebook with some trouble, opened it, and read:

“All stations. Wanted, for attempted murder by shooting of Mr. Sari Kruttili, a Eurasian, at 407, Curzon Gardens, a woman unknown; six blue rings (sapphire set, thin) on second finger left hand; talks with refined accent; good-looking, brown eyes. Find taxi-driver who waited some hours outside house.”

“That’s me,” said George.

“Hop it down to Scotland Yard,” said the constable.

“I hop,” said George.

It was half an hour after midnight when he was ushered into the office of Superintendent Scott.

“So you are the man who was outside 407?” asked the officer briskly. “Now tell us what happened.”

Briefly, George related the circumstances.

The police chief frowned.

“The man you describe—” he began.

He took a photograph from a drawer and handed it to George.

“That’s the man,” said George Mortimer. “I picked him up in St. James’s Street, and he paid me off after three hours’ wait.”

“Did he?” said the superintendent grimly. “He’s the victim!”

George made an appropriate noise.

“Sit down, Mr. Mortimer,” Scott went on. “You’re the Hon. George Mortimer, aren’t you?”

George nodded.

“Well, I’ll tell you the story briefly. 407 was tenanted by a lady who has recently arrived from India. She is the woman we want—the woman who,

wearing man's clothes, left 407 after shooting a gentleman, who"—the superintendent smiled—"is a little more frightened than hurt, but that is beside the point. She intended killing him, and was dressed ready to make her escape. We gather that because she wore the man's overcoat, and was seen by the constable on point duty in Curzon Gardens. Kruttli, the wounded man, is a Eurasian moneylender who ruined her husband and drove him to suicide. On the night of the attempted murder Kruttli, who had been pursuing this woman, and had only ruined her husband with the object of taking his place, came to claim his reward. 407 had been rented by him apparently. She went there because he gave her three weeks to make up her mind. He was found shot by the servant who had been sent out for the evening. That is all."

"I'm glad you told me," said George.

He went out to his car thoughtfully. He had left it by the kerb on the Embankment, and inside was the fare whom he had picked up between Liverpool Street and Scotland Yard, a foot-weary, distracted fare whom George had hailed and imperiously ordered into the cab. He did not consult the limp figure huddled in one corner of the car, but drove westward, crossing Putney Bridge a quarter of an hour later. He stopped and opened the door of the car a little.

"Wait a while," he said.

He disappeared into a block of flats, and came out in ten minutes' time with a bundle. He tossed it into the cab.

"I'll drive slowly—you can change in comfort," he said.

With such slowness did he drive that he did not arrive at Dover till seven in the morning. He stopped once to get petrol, and delivered his last instructions to the white-faced girl outside that town.

"There's an excursion steamer going to Calais at eight," he said. "The police never watch excursion steamers, especially Sunday-school excursions. My sister in Vienna will look after you till the affair blows over."

"God bless you!" she sobbed.

He handed her a heavy little bag.

"Say 'God bless Soldier Boy,'" he said solemnly; "and if you do any praying in my direction, remember that I have to explain to a suspicious young typist why I borrowed her Sunday clothes at one in the morning."

From the cliff between Dover and Folkestone he watched the smoke of the

outgoing steamer billowing up from the horizon, and turned his car into a field.

“This is where you become a sleeping saloon,” he said to the car.

The dignified car made no reply.

3 - As Cheap as Water

THERE is one man in the world, at any rate, who is perfectly satisfied that everything in this world happens for the best.

The Hon. George Mortimer, a taxi-driver of parts, had few illusions, and most of these were dispelled in the course of three months plying for hire in the streets of London.

He had met seedy men who came to him in a frantic condition of excitement showing, furtively and with quick and troubled glances left and right, magnificent diamond rings which they had “picked up.”

“I don't know the value of it, guv'nor,” said one of these, “me not bein' used to jewelery; but it's no good to me.”

“It's of no use to me,” said George kindly, “because I do know the value of it.”

“Is it worth a pound to you?” suggested the seedy vendor.

“As a souvenir of this happy meeting,” said George, “it is invaluable.”

“Say ten bob?” urged the other.

“If the vulgarism affords you any satisfaction,” responded George, “I will say ‘ten bob’ with pleasure, though I should prefer to say ‘ten shillings.’”

“Well,” said the baffled but persistent dealer in lost property, “what is it worth to you?”

“Exactly what it is worth to you,” replied George Mortimer, “twenty-four shillings a gross when purchased at the excellent Mr. Goggerheimer's, in Houndsditch.”

“All right, clever feller!” sneered the disappointed salesman; “you'll be had one of these days.”

“If I am,” said George, “it will be by somebody who washes himself at least four times a year.”

This insulting reference to his appearance stung the shark to action, and, without warning, he struck out at the driver, depending upon the fact that George was imprisoned between a Stepney tyre and his steering-wheel.

“Oo!” said the seller of rings violently.

He said this because it is the appropriate expression for a man to employ who is the unexpected recipient of a backhander.

“Hence, flat-catcher!” said George sternly.

There were bilkers, too; men who drove to one end of the Burlington Arcade and escaped at the other without paying; ladies—Heaven bless them!—who said “wait,” but did not wait themselves. George was victimised because of his innate politeness.

It seemed that a whole army of parasites had grown up round this new taxicab industry; a shrewd, cunning army that found its proper quarry in the some-time cabmen of London.

One day he was stopped by a bright gentleman who wore glasses and an air of busy benevolence.

“I’m the agent of Tosson Frères,” he said. “Can you give me a minute?”

“’Tis yours,” said George.

The young man handed him a business card. It was inscribed with the name of a firm which immodestly described itself as the greatest motor spirit agency in the world. The spirit was exactly half the price of all other spirits. It was, so the card informed him, provocative of twice the energy per litre of every or any other “essence,” “spirit,” or “petrol preparation.”

“I will send you a couple of tins if you’ll give me the order,” said the young man. “You can’t afford to miss this petrol—it is as cheap as water.”

George had a commercial mind in so far as he was always ready to pay half price, and the spirit was tried and found flawless. It was called the “0 spirit.” You could either call it “oh” or “nought,” according to your fancy.

On a certain day he ordered some eight dozen tins, as did hundreds of other “mushers,” and these were delivered—so subsequent investigation proved—on a Wednesday, by a party of enterprising men who went round London garages with private vans and collected close on two thousand five hundred

pounds in hard cash.

On the morning when a large number of wrathful taxi-drivers were searching for a young man with an air of benevolence, George Mortimer was “standing” at London Bridge Station, blissfully unconscious of the bland man’s villainy. There had been a derailment near St. John's, and the S.E. traffic was somewhat disorganised.

There came to him a placid and elderly gentleman, who eyed the driver and his car with the inspective look of one who has a valuable life and desired to preserve it to its natural conclusion.

“My friend,” said the elderly gentleman “do you know Blackheath?”

“Yes, sir,” said the Hon. George Mortimer respectfully.

“Could you drive me there?”

“I could,” said the young taxi-driver; and fixed his monocle.

“What would the fare be?” asked the old gentleman, with caution.

“About five shillings,” said George patiently.

The old gentleman pursed his lips.

“That’s a lot of money,” he said.

“It depends on how you look at it,” said George. “Colton says that wealth is a relative thing, and that he who needs five shillings and wants half-a-crown is richer than he who wants a guinea and has only a pound.”

There was a twinkle of amusement in the old man’s eyes.

“Henry Taylor says,” he quoted, “prodigality is the vice of a weak nature, as is avarice of a strong one. I am weaker than you.”

George Mortimer turned in his seat, his appetite whetted for combat.

“I don’t know Henry Taylor,” he said, now on his mettle; “but my young friend Confucius has laid it down as an axiom that there never was a mean man who could be virtuous.”

The old gentleman looked at him.

“This isn’t getting me to Blackheath,” he said. “I will be virtuous to the extent of six shillings.”

“That appeals to my strong nature,” said George. “Get inside, please. May I be guilty of an impertinence,” he added, as the old gentleman stood with his hand on the open door, “and say that I think we have met before somewhere?”

The fare smiled.

“That is very possible,” he said gently. “I’m the medical superintendent of the Blackheath Lunatic Asylum.”

“Your bird, sir,” said George.

It was a long drive out to Blackheath, and one which taxicab-drivers rightly regarded with apprehension and dismay, because it is a very bad “set down,” and, though there are many people who want to be driven in that direction, the charms of Blackheath are such that nobody apparently wants to leave the neighbourhood—at least, not by taxicab.

The asylum was between Shooter’s Hill and Blackheath Village, and was disowned by both places, for no community is proud of such an institution.

George dropped his fare at the pretty lodge of the asylum, accepted six shillings with a polite acknowledgment, and was moving off, when the old gentleman stopped him.

“You may get a fare back,” he said, and nodded in the direction of the drive.

George saw a thin-faced man with a wisp of a beard swinging along the carriage drive, his hands in his pockets, his head almost on the breast of his tightly buttoned frock-coat. “Hallo, Pullin!” greeted the elder man. Do you want a cab?”

The other looked up with a start.

“How do you do, Sir William? Glad to see you back from your holiday.”

He shook hands with Sir William Golfarn, that eminent alienist.

George recognised him now. He had met him at dinner years before when Lord Cleghorn, his father, had more credit with London tradesmen than he possessed at present.

“Want a cab! Yes, I do,” said the man addressed as Pullin. “Thank you so much. I’ve been in to see a man—a most interesting fellow—who has discovered the secret of perpetual motion.”

He said this without a smile, but Sir William laughed.

“Rather unusual,” he said. I remember a case in the 60’s—”

Pullin, fingering his untidy beard thoughtfully, looked up at his chief for a moment.

“I don’t know that he is mad,” he said at last. “There are none of the physical symptoms of dementia. I’ve made every test, including the light test, but I can’t find a trace of lunacy.”

“Has he a history?” asked Sir William, interested.

“None,” said the other promptly. “Family healthy and normal, no history of alcoholism. It is just one of those curious cases where all the conventional signs which one looks for are absent. He is perfectly sane except on this question of perpetual motion, and really I’m not going to say that he is mad even on this subject.”

“H’m!” said Sir William, handing his overcoat and umbrella to the waiting porter. “I shall see you again.”

With a nod he went on, leaving Dr. Pullin to negotiate with George.

He gave an address which, to George’s annoyance, was only a short distance away, and that in the opposite direction to London.

“If this car could swim,” said George to himself, “I should probably end this trip in Paris.”

But Fortune was more propitious than he had thought. Arrived at a pretty little house standing back from the heath, he was told to wait.

“I shall want you to drive me through the country somewhere,” said the doctor.

“We shall be delighted,” said George.

Dr. Pullin stared up at him.

“We?” he asked.

“I and the car,” said George. “’Twas a jest.”

The man on the sidewalk looked relieved for some unexpected reason.

He disappeared from view through a narrow gateway set flush with a privet hedge, and was gone some ten minutes.

He returned at the end of ten minutes with a girl and an older woman. The girl

was dressed for a drive, but the older lady was bareheaded—a hard-faced, calculating woman with a large, masterful nose and a slit of a mouth. George noted her, and thanked God that he did not grow upon the same family tree.

The girl was absurdly young to have her hair up, George thought. She was of the milk and roses English type, and if ever a pretty girl could frown herself to ugliness this young lady did. She frowned at the car, and frowned at George; and George Mortimer, not wanting in combativeness, frowned back at her.

“You’ll enjoy the drive, Mona.” said the elder woman, in a harsh, manly voice.

“Yes, auntie,” said the girl meekly.

“You’re to be a good girl,” commanded the other, “and you are never to behave again as you did yesterday.”

“No, auntie.”

“It is very kind of the doctor to take you out,” said the woman, “and it is very ungracious of you to get as far as the car and then turn back.”

“Yes, auntie,” said the girl again.

The doctor opened the door of the car, and, after a momentary exhibition of reluctance, the girl got in.

George got down from his seat.

“What are you going to do?” asked the doctor sharply.

“Lower the hood,” said George.

“Oh, yes, please,” said the girl quickly.

“I think you had better leave it up,” said the man.

“It can easily go up again if you don’t like it down,” said George. “Where am I to go?”

The doctor considered.

“Through Sevenoaks to Tonbridge,” he said.

“I thought so,” mused George, as the car ran smoothly through Blackheath Vale. “I’m going to end this job in Paris.”

George was an optimist.

Nothing untoward happened. They passed through Sevenoaks and took the

Tonbridge Road. They were on a deserted highway when George thought he heard a scream, and looked out of the corners of his eyes. He saw the girl's face, and brought the car to the side of the road.

"Did you want anything?" he asked gently.

Dr. Pullin stared at him. The girl was whiter than George's linen smock.

"He tried to kiss me," she whispered. "He is—he is awful!"

"Oh!" said George blankly.

"Drive on, curse you," snarled the man in the cab.

"Certainement," said George. "Come along, Miss—I don't know your name."

He opened the door and she sprang out.

"What does this mean?" the doctor almost screamed.

"It means," said George, striking one of his ridiculous melodramatic attitudes, "that this lady is under my protection, tarara-tum-tum!"

His imitation of an orchestral flourish left much to be desired—was, in fact, a most appalling row.

"Seriously speaking," he said, gazing benevolently at the outraged man through his eyeglass, "it is not considered good form in taxicab circles to kiss a lady unless she is frightfully pressing. I gather that this young lady was not frightfully pressing, so, in order to save her further apprehension, she may ride by my side—if you will pardon the poetry—for the remainder of the journey."

If he expected an outburst he was pleasantly disappointed. The thin-faced man stroked his straggling beard calmly. He had passed from a stage of violent passion to one of quiescent placidity in the twinkling of an eye. This was a new one to George Mortimer. He had seen men in Texas suddenly change from boiling rage to comparative stillness, but then that had been in consequence of their being dead.

"My friend," said Dr. Pullin in his quietest voice, "you may be justified in what you have done—you will drive me to my house, and then you can take the lady home."

His house was less than a mile away apparently. The girl, sitting on a rug-spread tool-box by the driver's side, told him this and more.

"He's dreadful! Auntie wants me to marry him! She adores him!"

All this in scraps of wind-blown talk.

“Why don't you go to your people?” he asked. They were both engaged in speaking without turn of head or movement of lip, conscious that behind them, crouching in the corner of the car, was a white-faced gentleman who was watching every movement.

“No people—only auntie—she's a little mad!”

George, following the direction of the man in the car, turned off the main road, and in a few minutes pulled up before a gaunt and solitary house, standing alone on the edge of a thick wood. It was enclosed by a low wall, but attempts had been made to reclaim the ground which surrounded it from the condition in which the builder had left it. Nature had clothed the rubble and the debris and the builder's aftermath of rubbish with weed and wild flowers, but the first impression was singularly repellent.

The car stopped, and the man got down. He was smiling quietly as at some joke.

“You had better come in and have some tea, driver—I'll make it; I keep no servants.”

“Tea,” said George genially, “attracts me.”

The girl looked up at him with fearful eyes.

“I think we'll go in,” he said gently. “We've got to remember auntie.”

The house proved to be well furnished, though monstrously untidy, yet it was clean; when the girl explained—the doctor being absent on a tea-making expedition—that two women came up from Tonbridge three times a week to clean the place.

“And he wants me to live here,” said the girl in a horrified whisper.

Dr. Pullin was back in a remarkably short space of time with tea.

It was a strange little party that sat in the desolate drawing-room.

“Driver,” said the doctor, who was unusually vivacious, “you are evidently a man of unusual character.”

“I am,” said Gospel Truth Mortimer.

“A gentleman?”

“The son of a gentleman,” said George cautiously.

“And a student, as I can see by the cast of your face.”

George nodded.

“Do you believe that the laws of specific gravity may be tricked so that, by counter balances cunningly contrived, a man may secure movement without mechanical propulsion?”

He ignored the girl as he spoke, but fixed his earnest gaze upon George.

“In other words, perpetual motion.”

The doctor nodded.

“No,” said George emphatically.

“Then you’re a fool!” said the doctor.

“Noted,” said George, “but not approved.”

A telephone bell rang outside in the hall.

“Excuse me,” said Pullin, “they've called me up from the asylum.”

He went out and they heard him speaking.

“What’s that? Man crazy about perpetual motion, Sir William? Yes; can’t you find him? There are a dozen men—hundreds of men—the asylum is filled with ’em. Don’t be a fool—look for them, can’t you?”

They heard the receiver bang down on the bracket, and he came back frowning.

“There’s another fool!” he said bitterly. I am going to show you something—come with me.”

“You’d better stay here,” said George.

“No, no!” said the girl in terror. “I’ll go with you.”

They followed the doctor into the hall, and he mounted the stairs two at a time.

What he had to show was not on the first floor, nor on the second—it was to a little room at the top of the house that he ushered them.

There, on a wooden pedestal, was a weird machine. It was for all the world like the grille of a theatre stage, all pulleys and blocks, wheels and cords.

“Observe!”

The doctor pressed a little wooden lever, and instantly a wheel at one side of the chaos began to revolve slowly but evenly.

“Only the pressure of my finger!” said the doctor proudly. “Nine years’ work; the pressure of a finger.”

George watched with interest.

“My finger is not necessary. Look!”

Pullin jerked over a little steel catch that held the lever fast, and removed his finger.

Still the wheel turned, and George, peering this way and that, saw that there was neither spring nor motor. Only four little leaden weights at one end of the frame rose and fell irregularly.

George Mortimer looked from machine to man, and from man to machine.

Something like a thrill ran through him, for here were untold millions. He knew enough of applied mechanics to know that this madman—for madman he was—had achieved the impossible.

The girl was frankly bored; pink and white and seventeen is not greatly interested in perpetual motion.

Pullin turned to her, his eyes shining with a strange light.

“All this for you, my lovely rose!” he wailed; and his arms were outstretched in supplication. “All for you, my beloved!”

She shrank back toward George, but he put her behind him roughly, and met the leap of the maniac with a straight left that knocked him sprawling.

He was up again in a moment, groped round like a blind man, then darted to the door and swung it fast with a crash. George took one step and stopped. There was no handle to the door.

He listened. He could hear the patter of the man’s feet as he sped down the stairs.

They looked at one another—the frightened girl and the annoyed taxi-driver.

“Blow!” said Mortimer.

He had a knife in his pocket, but it might as well have been a toothpick for its value in that moment of crisis.

He pushed open the window and looked out. There was no sign of the doctor; the car still stood on the road outside the house.

“The only satisfaction I have,” he said thoughtfully, “is that this little joke is costing him money—the taximeter is still ticking tuppences.”

Then he saw the doctor run from the house in the direction of the car. What was he going to do?

George was curious rather than apprehensive.

The madman climbed on to the driver’s seat and reached up to the roof. There were two tins of petrol there, and these he pulled down.

He disappeared inside the house, and George waited, listening at the door.

“Our doctor is breaking up the home,” he reported.

There was a muffled sound of breakage from below.

George Mortimer opened the window and leant out.

There was no way out of the house that way; no parapet offered footing, nor from the window-sill might he reach the roof. The drop was sheer death, and terrible injury could only result from any attempt to escape in that direction.

Whilst he was cogitating on a line of action, there was a click, and the door drifted open.

He heard a quick patter of feet and a rattle and scramble, as if somebody were climbing through a stack of chairs.

He dashed to the door in time to see Pullin descending from the barricade he had erected at the foot of the stairs.

“Don’t move!” said the doctor, with a chuckle, and George stood still.

The madman had piled chairs and boxes and splinters of furniture till it blocked the lower portion of the stairs.

In between the legs and crossbow of the overturned mass he had stuffed bunches of shavings.

“My love,” said the doctor, “you have been contaminated by this man's presence. I will purify you, my bride—I will purify you by fire, and you shall come to me, the greatest genius of all ages, worthy of your lover!”

He held a lighted candle in one hand and in the other a pail. Two empty petrol

cans told George what that pail contained.

“Friend,” said George calmly, “if you burn us, you burn your model.”

The man laughed, and tapped his forehead.

“Here,” he almost screamed—“here is the model! I can make a dozen such; you could not make one!”

At the last word he flung the lighted candle into the heart of the pyre he had prepared. The shavings caught and blazed fiercely.

“Purify!” shouted Pullin, and, raising the pail, he dashed the contents on the fire.

George caught the girl round the waist and drew her back. He expected an explosion and a burst of flame. Instead, as the liquid fell, the fire sizzled and went out. In an instant George Mortimer went crashing through the barricade, tossing aside chairs and table-legs.

Pullin struck at him with an axe he had employed in the work of destruction, but George caught the arm as it descended, and wrenched the weapon away.

In a second the two men were rolling over and over upon the floor.

The affrighted girl scrambled through the debris, and ran past the two out of the house and into the arms of a grey-haired man who, accompanied by four liveried attendants, had at that moment descended from a motor-car.

“Upstairs!” she gasped, and fainted.

“Look after her, Symond!” said Sir William to one of the men, and ran up the stairs.

He found a dishevelled taxi-driver wiping his forehead.

“He has got away to his model-room,” he explained. “I can't get the hang of the door.”

It was ten minutes before they broke it in, to find a man laughing softly to himself amidst the ruins of the machine which he had created at so terrible a cost.

“I half suspected it,” said Sir William; “and the conversation which you overheard on the telephone confirmed my suspicions. The girl's aunt has been supplying him with money for his experiments.”

“What of her?” asked George, interested.

Sir William shook his head gravely.

“She is an old patient of ours,” he said. “I am afraid she must come back. I shall have to communicate with the Public Trustee. The girl is an heiress, by the way!” he added.

“And she needs be!” said George, brightening up. “There is twenty-eight shillings on my taximeter, and I have every reason to believe I have some hundred tins of water in my garage.”

And he smiled, remembering the young man with the air of busy benevolence who had sold the mushers “petrol as cheap as water.”

4 - The Agent of Kings

ONE evening when Gospel Truth Mortimer was driving slowly up South Molton Street, a hatless man came hurriedly from the Hanover Square end and jumped upon the footboard.

“Don’t stop!” he said peremptorily. “Paddington Station, and a fiver if you make it in time!”

George pulled down the flag and sent the car forward at top speed.

In the noise of the engine he did not hear a police whistle blow, but later, when he turned into Orchard Street, his fare leant out of the window.

“Say, driver, here’s your money!” He pushed a five-pound note into George’s hand. “If they catch me, go to 71, Universal Mansions and tell Dago Larry that Jimmy the Ramp is pinched.”

“Take your own beastly messages, my criminal friend,” said George; and pulled up his cab as the hatless man flung open the door and jumped out.

The men in the following cab were just too late to catch him, and he disappeared across Manchester Square.

“Why the devil didn’t you stop when I whistled?” demanded a uniformed inspector.

“Don’t be silly,” begged George, fixing his monocle. “How the dickens was I to know that you were whistling me?”

“Oh, it’s you, is it, Mr. Mortimer?” smiled the inspector. “You’ve given us a chase. You’ll have to come to the station and explain.”

“Jump in for the joy-ride,” said George, and the inspector jumped.

It was after he had left the station that he remembered the message. For a moment he laughed quietly at the idea of delivering it; then curiosity got the better of him—that curiosity which had so often been his undoing. He set his car for Universal Mansions in Baker Street, and mounted to the third floor of that respectable block of flats.

A young man answered the ring. He was soberly dressed, swarthy of face, and George guessed that this was the Dago.

“Do you want me?” he asked, examining the chauffeur through gold-rimmed pince-nez. George noticed that he had a paper in hand, and wondered if he was buying real estate.

“I’ve to tell Dago Larry that Jimmy the Ramp is either pinched or on the verge being pinched,” said George.

“The devil he is!” said the man. “Come in.”

George followed him into the room.

“They’re after him, eh? That’s very awkward.” The dark man stared at George thoughtfully, and repeated, “Very awkward.”

“I’m much obliged to you,” he said at last. “You’re Coleman, I suppose. Jimmy leaves me without a partner, and I’ve got the nicest little ramp you’ve ever heard about—all ready to go off.” He said this in a tone of regret. “Such a lovely talker Jimmy is, too. Did you notice his voice?”

“I’m not Coleman,” interrupted George cheerfully. “He, I presume, is a taxi-man working with your gang; but do not let your indiscretion distress you.”

“I should worry,” said Dago Larry. “Have a drink! No? Well, good-night.”

It was one of those tiny incidents in the life of a taxi-cab driver which has neither beginning nor end.

George read nothing of the capture of Jimmy the Ramp, and saw no more of the Dago.

Two months later George went to Waterloo Station, partly to pick up an early morning fare to the City, and partly because it always annoyed Chell to see him there.

Soon after he reached the rank he saw the dyspeptic Mr. Chell, who scowled at the car which had once been his, and deliberately chose another cab.

Chell was a millionaire, and he had given the car to the Hon. George Mortimer in a moment of mental aberration, and it is not good to be reminded of one's follies.

George saw other people he knew at Waterloo. He saw a tall white-haired man raise his umbrella, and—"Oh, Lord!" said George; but, like the dutiful son he was, obeyed the summons.

"Hallo, George!" said the immaculate gentleman on the station pavement. "I've been hearing a lot about you and your beastly cab. Take me up to Gerry's."

"With pleasure, my lord," said George.

Lord Cleghorn eyed the car approvingly.

"Jolly nice machine," he said. "What did you give for it?"

"I saved the owner's life," said the other, modestly.

"Do you make a lot of money?" asked Lord Cleghorn.

"Enough to keep body and soul together, my lord and father," said George softly. "But not enough to enable me to lend money to my relations."

"I take you," said his lordship cheerfully. "Gerry's, my man."

"Have you got the fare?" asked George dubiously, for he knew his parent.

The elder man smiled.

"Gerry's!" he said; and got in.

George pulled down his flag, and sent the car spinning over Westminster Bridge. Though he had only seen his father once in the last two years, he had a genuine affection for this rash and reckless man who had dissipated two fortunes in the course of his long and pleasant life. The Hon. George Mortimer was driving a taxi-cab as a result of a certain speculation which Lord Cleghorn had gone into in the '80's but George did not resent this fact.

He was a philosopher and, up to a point, a dutiful son, and he had been cow-puncher in Texas, policeman in New York, and was now a taxi-cab driver in London without any bitterness of spirit.

Gerry's, as all the world knows, is a famous restaurant which is peculiar by

reason of the fact that it is possible to secure breakfast—a deplorable deficiency in other establishments of the same order.

It was eleven o'clock, an hour at which not a few gentlemen either take their first meal or shudder at the thought of it. George wondered idly why his father had chosen Gerry's, which is expensive and notoriously suspicious in the matter of credit.

“Have you change for a fiver?” asked his father.

“Yes,” said George, in a spirit of gentle malice.

To his astonishment, Lord Cleghorn produced a well-filled pocket-book, and extracted, from a disgustingly large collection of notes, one for five pounds.

“What do you think?” asked his lordship smilingly.

“I am trying to remember all the bank robberies I have read about lately,” said George.

The elder man replaced his wallet.

“Put your car somewhere and come and have breakfast,” he suggested.

George did not require breakfast, but he did desire information on this display of wealth, and ten minutes later, with his overall removed, he had rejoined his father.

“It is Deerholm,” explained Lord Cleghorn complacently.

Deerholm Park, the ancestral home of the Cleghorns, was in Derbyshire. It was chiefly remarkable for the fact that it was timberless, tenantless, and mortgaged to the very last farthing of its value. Its farms barely paid the interest on the mortgages, the house itself was so innocent of comfort, and so completely in a condition of disrepair, as to make it the despair of every estate agency in England.

“Nevertheless, it is Deerholm,” said Lord Cleghorn, enjoying his son's astonishment, and supplying a rejoinder to his unspoken thoughts. “It's a devil of a joke!”

“Without knowing anything about it, I should rather agree with you,” said George slowly. “Have you discovered a gold mine on the estate, or something?”

The other shook his head.

“Deerholm has been rented by the Marquis M.,” he said impressively.

“I don’t know him,” said George calmly. “Is he something you get a prize for guessing?”

“He’s the agent of kings—that is all I can tell you,” said his father, who was without illusion, “but so far I am unaware of his identity. All that I know is that I have let the place for £400 a month, and I have had three months’ rent in advance.”

George whistled.

“You lucky father!” he smiled. “Upon my word, sir, you’re one of fortune’s favourites—how did it happen?”

Lord Cleghorn’s eyes twinkled as at a pleasant recollection.

“About a month ago I met a man whom I’ve done business with who told me that he had an inquiry about Deerholm. The only inquiries I have, as a rule, are from the infernal mortgage holders, and it was so remarkable a circumstance that any human being should be interested in the beastly place—”

“Our ancestral home,” murmured George.

“Bah!” responded his father scornfully “You were born in a respectable Chelsea flat, and I was born in Ireland. I don’t think any of the family were ever—well, to go back to my story. I was introduced to the young man—the Marquis M. I wasn’t told his name, and naturally being—a—being—”

“A wily old bird,” suggested George.

“Exactly; I suspected a swindle of some kind. However, my price was asked and I fixed it. I was deuced frank, too. Gave the marquis, a dark little man with a foreign accent, a very complete resumé of the state of the property. But he didn’t care; he said he would put it into repair and furnish it as it had never been furnished before. He paid me twelve hundred pounds cash down, and I gave a receipt; and that is all.”

“Real money?” asked George, incredulous.

“They take it in the shops,” said his father.

“It’s very rum,” said George thoughtfully. “Does anybody at the Foreign Office know who the kings are for whom he is acting?”

“No,” replied his lordship. “At least, the marquis particularly asked me not to let the Foreign Office know his business.”

“I see,” said George. After a while: “Where is the mysterious marquis to be found?” he asked.

“At Grenville Palace Hotel,” replied the other. “He’s staying there as Mr. Johnson. He has tons of money—he’s simply throwing it about.”

He touched the pocket wherein his bank-notes lay with an absent-minded movement.

George was very thoughtful. After a while he asked:

“Is Chell in this?”

Cleghorn looked surprised.

“Yes,” he said, “we’ve been staying the week-end at his place—the marquis and I. You see,” he went on, “the marquis has possibilities for Chell, and Chell, being a mean little devil, naturally enough thinks there is something to be made out of the agent of real kings who has the power to grant concessions and that sort of thing. Chell knows you very well, by the way.”

“Very well,” agreed George gravely.

He parted from his father in the entrance-hall of the restaurant.

“By the way,” said Lord Cleghorn, after he had shaken hands, do you know a very reliable typist?”

“There isn’t such a thing,” said George, then remembered. “By Jove!” he said, “I know the very young party. She is perfect!” he said with enthusiasm. “Do you want her?”

Lord Cleghorn frowned at his son.

“The marquis wants a girl—he may have one by now but, as I only saw him this morning, it is unlikely; he wants her for evening work.”

“Nothing could be better,” said George. “And now, at parting, will you allow me to offer you a word of advice, and to ask you a favour?”

“Anything in reason,” said Lord Cleghorn.

“My advice is: keep the money you’ve got in some place where the marquis can’t get it back again. My request is: that you recommend me to him as a very discreet young taxi-man.”

Lord Cleghorn’s lip twitched.

“Anything I can do to help forward a member of the family I shall do,” he said. “Must I tell him that you are my son?”

“For my sake, no,” said George earnestly, and with that they parted.

That evening the Honourable George Mortimer met an extremely pretty typist, and drove her home to her flat. She was a slim girl, tastefully dressed, and the possessor of a pair of solemn grey eyes that had, it must be confessed, a disturbing influence upon this none-too-impressionable young man. Of course, they were not in love—no more in love than they had been on a certain day when he had seen her in Chell’s library, and had saved her from the wrath of that dyspeptic millionaire.

They were good friends; they were even disciples of Plato—that Plato of whom people speak so glibly who have never heard of Archianassa. They discussed one another’s possible marriage dispassionately, though of late George had been vexed by the cold-blooded way in which she had excluded him from the possibility of good matches.

She had an aunt staying with her, an excuse for George leaving his cab outside her flat and taking tea with her.

“I’ve discovered a fine job for you,” said George, as he took the cup from her hand. “Amanuensis and secretary of state to the Marquis M.”

“M.? What does ‘M’ stand for?” asked the girl, in wonder.

George shook his head.

“It may stand for Montmorency or Moses,” he said. “But, whatever it is, it will not stand for Mug—I mean,” he hastily explained, “for Innocent.”

“A marquis?” she repeated thoughtfully.

“Keep your matrimonial eye off the coronet,” warned George.

She looked at him with a sidelong glance. “A good match for a lady-typist,” she said; and pirouetted round the room with a teacup in one hand and a piece of cake in the other.

But George was not amused.

“Seriously, my child,” he said, “I have a special object in inviting your attention to the most noble one.”

And he gave her a brief outline of the conversation he had had with Lord Cleghorn.

“How exciting!” she said, clapping her hands in glee. “Shall I see the King?”

“The odds are all against it,” said George. “Now, I count on you to be a good little friend, and let me know what the game is.”

“You don’t want me to be a spy, do you?” she demanded haughtily.

“Get down from your perch, birdie!” said George. “A spy is the very thing I wish you to be.”

The girl laughed.

“Of course, I’ll do anything in the world for you—except marry you!” she declared.

“I’ll take jolly good care about that!” said George, rising to go. “Here is the address, but I’ll come and fetch you. You’re not likely to meet Chell, so that need not alarm you. I’ve reconnoitered the country, and I’ve got the lie of the position. Marquis and Co. have a suite at the Grenville Palace—two sitting-rooms, so there’s no occasion for the blush to rise to your maiden cheek. Marquis M. is a young man, tremendously suave and polite. He is a very amiable man but I shall be hanging around if he happens to get too amiable. Go and get the job.”

“Right-ho!” said the girl.

“And avoid slang,” said George severely, “because it doesn’t become a girl with eyes like yours!”

That night he waited for her by arrangement in a side-street. He had taken her to the hotel and set her down, and then turned his car into Little Avenue Street. He did this for a reason. The Marquis occupied a suite on the first-floor, the windows of which opened on the road in which he was waiting, and beneath these windows he pulled up. After two hours she came out and he drove her westward, left his cab on a rank, and took her to supper.

“Well,” she said, her eyes a-sparkle with the importance of the news she had to tell, “one of their Majesties arrives in England on Saturday—in five days. The Marquis has written a very important letter to him.”

“In English or French?” asked George, looking up from the menu he was scanning with such interest.

“In English—and don’t interrupt!” she said, with a raised finger. “A copy of the letter has been sent to Mr. Chell. He is to have four cork forests in Northern Morocco on the following terms.”

She opened her bag and consulted some notes she had made.

“Eight thousand pounds cash,” she read, “and a nominal rental of fifty pounds a year. In the event of the cork forests not producing ten thousand pounds the first year—that is ten thousand pounds profit—the eight thousand is to be restored to him.”

“Wonderfully generous!” murmured George; and beckoned the waiter.

“Lord Cleghorn,” the girl went on; “that’s your father, isn’t it?” George nodded.

“He is to receive a large timber concession in Roumania—the King’s private property—for one thousand pounds down and twenty-five pounds a year.”

“Curiouser and curiouser!” said George. “They gave my dear parent twelve hundred, and they think they’ll get back a thousand. Heaven knows I wish them luck!” he added piously.

“And that’s all, except that the Marquis, who is a personal friend of all the kings of Europe, is enormously wealthy.”

“I see,” said George. “We’ll have two suprême of sole bonne femme, a devilled kidney or so, William, and a pint of the cheapest wine that ever left a chemist’s vat!”—this to the waiter.

What should he do? thought George, in the interval of silence. There was no need to warn his father; Lord Cleghorn and money were inseparable just now. Should he warn Chell?

He did not want to do Chell a turn. There was nothing of the Boy Scout in the composition of Gospel Truth Mortimer, so far as Chell was concerned.

“Hold fast to the Marquis,” he said to the girl, when he had dropped her at her flat, “and look out for me to-morrow night.”

He drove the next morning to Chell’s beautiful country house, and warned by telegram that his visitor was arriving, Chell waited for him, but with no heartiness. The sight of his converted motor-car made him wince, and he was inclined to be ungracious. In other words, he behaved quite naturally.

“Hallo!” he said, with a scowl.

“Hallo yourself!” said George, getting down from the car.

“What do you want to see me about?” asked Chell, showing no inclination to be hospitable.

“I have much to tell you,” said George firmly, “but not before the geraniums, please!”

Chell invited him in with a mumble, and, after George had helped himself to a cigar, and had lit it and found a comfortable seat, and had generally exasperated Chell to a point of madness, the visitor condescended to explain the object of the call.

“A nice cigar!” said George.

“Ought to be!” growled the other. “I pay ten pounds a hundred for them from the manufacturer.”

He pointedly locked the box in his desk.

“You know the Marquis M., I believe?” said George.

“I do—and so does your father,” retorted Chell.

“My father knows everybody,” said George calmly, “not excluding you. Now I want to ask you whether you have paid over any money for concession either to the marquis or to any of the kings he travels in?”

“That is no business of yours!” said Chell defiantly.

“All right,” said George; and got up. “You’re a horrible pup, and that’s gospel truth, and you don’t deserve to be saved!”

“Look here, Mortimer”—Chell followed him to the door—“what do you mean by being saved?” There was an anxious look in his face. “Everybody’s in it!” he blurted out. “Goldings, in the City, Mosentheims, Bordells. Isn’t it natural we want to get concessions?”

“Terribly natural,” said George. “Now, how do you know it’s genuine?”

Chell smiled triumphantly.

“He’s a Protestant,” he said.

“Good Lord! What does that prove?” asked George wearily.

“Wait a bit—do you know that Canon Gattaway was private chaplain to the family?”

“Who the dickens is Gattaway?” demanded Mortimer.

“He’s a regular swell Churchman. The marquis took us down to see him—Bordell and I. He has a magnificent living, and he’s awfully rich,” said Chell

ecstatically. “He told us stories about the wealth and influence of the marquis that positively made my hair stand up, do you know. Do you know,” said Mr. Chell, in almost an awe-stricken whisper, “that the marquis is worth £8,000,000?”

“No,” said George. “I don’t.”

If he was not impressed he was at any rate astonished. So irreproachable a guarantee as a dignitary of the Church of England was overwhelming.

“I suppose this chap Gattaway is genuine?” he asked.

“Genuine!” Chell raised his eyes to the ceiling. “God bless the man, he won’t believe that the vicarage was genuine next. He’s in Crock’s List—is that genuine enough?”

George took the book the other pushed across to him.

There it was plain to be read. The reverend gentleman, holder of innumerable degrees, had held chaplaincies abroad.

“If you’ve any doubts in your mind,” said Chell in a positive welter of smugness, “we can drive over to Chippley Gorse—it’s less than twenty miles away.”

“Come along,” said George, with sudden energy.

They had passed through the magnificent drive, and the most portly of butlers had ushered them into the library. Almost immediately the Rev. Gattaway had come in through another door. A wonderfully imposing man, silvery haired, clean shaven, and inclined to stoutness. His dress was spotless and expensive, his collar snowy, his delicate hands white and shapely.

“Will you sit down?” he said, after he had greeted Chell with warmth.

George was introduced.

Illustration

“The Honourable George Mortimer?” nodded the other sedately. “I think I have met your father.” His voice was refined and well modulated.

“My friend wants to know something about the marquis.”

The other smiled tolerantly.

“I am rather weary of sounding that young man’s praises,” he confessed. “By the way, he has just sent me a cheque for a re-building scheme in which I am

interested—a thousand pounds,” he added in a careless tone of one to whom a thousand one way or the other was not important.

Chell glanced triumphantly at George.

“He holds, of course, an unique position,” the reverend gentleman went on. “I don’t like to see a member of an old family engaged in trade—but what can a man do?” He shrugged his shoulders. “He has so many kingly friends.” He shrugged again.

George was an interested listener as the speaker went on to discuss with easiness and freedom of long acquaintance the history of the Marquis M., its style, and its extraordinary exclusiveness.

Then the silver-haired man finished his eulogy, and the conversation drifted on to general topics, George playing some part in leading the talk the way he would have it go.

On the arduousness of a parson’s life, the Rev. Canon Gattaway was very willing to talk.

“It is really a terrible life,” he said. “It occupies every moment of one’s time, waking or sleeping. Here in Chippley Gorse,” he went on disparagingly, “there is very little to do.”

“What I cannot understand,” said George, in a tone of awestricken admiration, “is how you manage to keep the texts and things in your head.”

The other laughed at the naiveté.

“One must do a lot of midnight memorising,” he said humorously.

“Do you know,” said George, as they walked from the library into the hall—they had declined Mr. Gattaway’s invitation to stay to lunch—“I can never quite place that singularly beautiful quotation, ‘God tempers the winds to the shorn Iamb.’”

“I think it is in the Ecclesiastes,” said his host. “If you like I will go back to the library and make sure.”

“It doesn’t matter,” smiled George.

“What do you think now?” asked Chell, when George had dropped him (with singular generosity) at his City office.

“I still think you’re a mug,” said George.

“And that's gospel truth, I suppose!” sneered the other.

“Absolutely,” said George with conviction.

He was, however, isolated in his views.

There was a constant stream of visitors all day long at the Grenville Palace Hotel, and when the admirable Miss Greta Lowe called, there were enough letters waiting to be answered to keep her till nearly midnight.

She came out to find the patient George waiting.

“Oh, I'm so glad you're here,” she said, gripping him impulsively by the two arms.

“Anything wrong?” he asked quietly.

She shook her head with a little hysterical laugh.

“Oh, George!” she began.

“George?” he repeated in wonder.

She dropped her hands, and in the light of the street lamp he saw the red in her face.

“I'm sorry,” she said in a low voice.

“Say it again,” he said huskily. “I like to hear it.”

She looked at him in amazement, and a great joy came surging into her heart. She had never seen that look in his face, or heard that note in his voice.

“George!” she whispered, and the next moment she was folded in his arms.

“Exactly how did all this come about?” asked the puzzled young man ten minutes later. “You said, ‘Oh, George,’ and I just loved you.”

“I was going to tell you,” she said rapidly, almost incoherently. She desired to carry off a situation that made her feel shy and embarrassed. “He is collecting thousands of pounds, and he actually wants you—”

“Me?”

“You,” she nodded. “I have sent a special messenger to your address—he said you had been recommended to him.”

“Heaven reward my papa,” said George.

“You are to be in front of the hotel at two o’clock,” she went on hurriedly. “You are to go to Southampton—”

“Via Chippley Gorse?” he suggested.

“How did you know?” she asked, astonished.

“I guessed,” he said. “I’m a mighty good guesser. Come, my dearie, you go back to your little home. It is late, and there is much for a taxi-cab gentleman to do. Also, I must ’phone the gent to let him know that I understand his instructions. One thing I must ask you,” he said. “Amongst the jackass—the gentlemen who sent money to the marquis, did you notice a letter from my father?”

“There was a letter from him,” she said, “but it didn’t enclose money. Now I come to think of it, it asked for another three months’ rent in advance.”

“Oh, my sire!” cried George in a paroxysm of admiration, “how like you!”

In the night superintendent’s office at Scotland Yard, George was receiving the commendations of a large and admiring staff of the Criminal Investigation Department.

“The Marquis M.,” he said, “was obviously Dago Larry; the parson was Jimmy the Ramp, with a beautiful voice. Of course he rented the vicarage—you can rent a hundred furnished vicarages in the summer in England, and there’s nothing to prevent you turning up dressed in a parson’s kit, with a parson’s name. The real Mr. Gattaway is on a voyage round the world. I spotted Jimmy at once, but I tried him with a quotation from Sterne’s ‘Sentimental Journey’ to make sure—he said it was from Ecclesiastes!”

“My theory is my father’s theory,” said George; “which is that, if the beggar had to take a country house to bluff his victims, it’s a jolly good job for our family that he took ours.”

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