BINDLE

BINDLE is the greatest cockney that has come into being through the medium of literature since Dickens was writing Pickwick Papers for thirty pounds a number.

Mr. T. P. O'CONNOR, M.P.

FOR SUMMARY OF THIS STORY SEE BACK OF WRAPPER

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BINDLE

SOME CHAPTERS IN THE LIFE OF JOSEPH BINDLE

BY
HERBERT JENKINS

"Bindle is the greatest Cockney
that has come into being through
the medium of literature since
Dickens wrote Pickwick Papers"
MR. T. P. O'CONNOR, M.P.

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TO

MY MOTHER

**WHO AS HER SON'S
BEST FRIEND IS
PROBABLY HIS
WORST CRITIC**

FOREWORD

Some years ago I wrote an account of one of Bindle's "little jokes," as he calls them, which appeared in *Blackwood's Magazine*. As a result the late Mr. William Blackwood on more than one occasion expressed the opinion that a book about Bindle should be written, and suggested that I offer it to him for publication. Other and weighty matters intervened, and Bindle passed out of my thoughts.

Last year, however, the same suggestion was made from other quarters, and in one instance was backed up by a material reasoning that I found irresistible.

A well-known author once assured me that in his opinion the publisher who wrote books should, like the double-headed ass and five-legged sheep, be painlessly put to death, preferably by the Society of Authors, as a menace to what he called "the legitimate."

Authors have been known to become their own publishers, generally, I believe, to their lasting regret; why, therefore, should not a publisher become his own author? At least he would find some difficulty in proving to the world that his failure was due to under-advertising.

H. J.

12, ARUNDEL PLACE,
HAYMARKET, LONDON, S.W.
August, 1916.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER

FOREWORD
I. THE BINDLES AT HOME
II. A NOCTURNAL ADVENTURE
III. THE HYPNOTIC FIASCO
IV. THE HEARTYS AT HOME
V. BINDLE TRIES A CHANGE OF WORK
VI. THE HOTEL CORRIDOR
VII. BINDLE COMMITS AN INDISCRETION
VIII. THE GREAT CONSPIRACY
IX. THE TEMPERANCE FÊTE
X. MR. HEARTY PRAYS FOR BINDLE
XI. MR. HEARTY BECOMES EXTREMELY UNPOPULAR
XII. BINDLE AGREES TO BECOME A MILLIONAIRE
XIII. OXFORD'S WELCOME TO BINDLE
XIV. MR. HEARTY GIVES A PARTY
XV. BINDLE AND THE GERMAN MENACE
XVI. THE AMATEUR DETECTIVES
XVII. BINDLE MAKES A MISTAKE
XVIII. BINDLE ASSISTS IN AN ELOPEMENT
XIX. THE SCARLET HORSE COTERIE
XX. MILLIE LEAVES HOME
XXI. CONCLUSION

BINDLE

CHAPTER I

THE BINDLES AT HOME

"Women," remarked Bindle, as he gazed reflectively into the tankard he had just drained, "women is all right if yer can keep 'em from marryin' yer."

"I don't 'old wiv women," growled Ginger, casting a malevolent glance at the Blue Boar's only barmaid, as she stood smirking at the other end of the long leaden counter. "Same as before," he added to the barman.

Joseph Bindle heaved a sign of contentment at the success of his rueful contemplation of the emptiness of his tankard.

"You're too late, ole sport," he remarked, as he sympathetically surveyed the unprepossessing features of his companion, where freckles rioted with spots in happy abandon. "You're too late, you wi' three babies 'fore you're twenty-five. Ginger, you're——"

"No, I ain't!" There was a note of savage menace in Ginger's voice that caused his companion to look at him curiously.

"Ain't wot?" questioned Bindle.

"I ain't wot you was goin' to say I was."

"'Ow jer know wot I was goin' to say?"

"'Cos every stutterin' fool sez it; an' blimey I'm goin' to 'ammer the next, an' I don't want to 'ammer you, Joe."

Bindle pondered a moment, then a smile irradiated his features, developing into a broad grin.

"You're too touchy, Ginger. I wasn't goin' to say, 'Ginger, you're barmy.'" Ginger winced and clenched his fists. "I was goin' to say, 'Ginger, you're no good at marriage wi'out tack. If yer 'ad more tack maybe yer wouldn't 'ave got married."

Ginger spat viciously in the direction of the spittoon, but his feelings were too strong for accurate aim.

"The parsons say as marriages is made in 'eaven," growled Ginger. "Why don't 'eaven feed the kids? That's wot I want to know."

Ginger was notorious among his mates for the gloomy view he took of life. No one had ever discovered in him enthusiasm for anything. If he went to a football match and the team he favoured were beaten, it was no more than he expected; if they were victorious his comment would be that they ought to have scored more goals. If the horse he backed won, he blamed fate because his stake was so small. The more beer he absorbed the more misanthropic he seemed to become.

"Funny coves, parsons," remarked Bindle conversationally; "not as I've any think to say agin' religion, providin' it's kep' for Sundays and Good Fridays, an' don't get mixed up wi' the rest of the week."

He paused and lifted the newly-filled tankard to his lips. Presently he continued reminiscently:

"My father 'ad religion, and drunk 'isself to death 'keepin' the chill out.' Accordin' to 'im, if yer wanted to be 'appy in the next world yer 'ad to be a sort of 'alf fish in this. 'E could tell the tale, 'e could, and wot's more, 'e used to

make us believe 'im." Bindle laughed at the recollection. "Two or three times a week 'e used to go to chapel to 'wash 'is sins away,' winter an' summer. The parson seemed to 'ave to wash the 'ole bloomin' lot of 'em, and my father never forgot to take somethink on 'is way 'ome to keep the chill out, 'e was that careful of 'isself.

"'My life is Gawd's,' 'e used to say, 'an' I must take care of wot is the Lord's.' There weren't no spots on my father. Why, 'e used to wet 'is 'air to prove 'e'd been "mersed,' as 'e called it. You'd 'ave liked 'im, Ginger; 'e was a gloomy sort of cove, same as you."

Ginger muttered something inarticulate, and buried his freckles and spots in his tankard. Bindle carefully filled his short clay pipe and lit it with a care and precision more appropriate to a cigar.

"No," he continued, "I ain't nothink agin' religion; it's the people wot goes in for it as does me. There's my brother-in-law, 'Earty by name, an' my missis—they must make 'eaven tired with their moanin'."

"Wot jer marry 'er for?" grumbled Ginger thickly, not with any show of interest, but as if to demonstrate that he was still awake.

"Ginger!" There was reproach in Bindle's voice. "Fancy you arstin' a silly question like that. Don't yer know as *no* man ever marries any woman? If 'e's nippy 'e gets orf the 'ook; if 'e ain't 'e's landed. You an' me wasn't nippy enough, ole son, an' 'ere we are."

"There's somethin' in that, mate." There was feeling in Ginger's voice and a momentary alertness in his eye.

"Well," continued Bindle, "once on the 'ook there's only one thing that'll save yer—tack."

"Or 'ammerin 'er blue," interpolated Ginger viciously.

"I draws the line there; I don't 'old with 'ammerin' women. Yer can't 'ammer somethink wot can't 'ammer back, Ginger; that's for furriners. No, tack's the thing. Now take my missis. If yer back-answers 'er when she ain't feelin' chatty, you're as good as done. Wot I does is to keep quiet an' seem sorry, then she dries up. Arter a bit I'll whistle or 'um 'Gospel Bells' (that's 'er favourite 'ymn, Ginger) as if to meself. Then out I goes, an' when I gets 'ome to supper I takes in a tin o' salmon, an' it's all over till the next time. Wi' tack, 'Gospel Bells,' and a tin o' salmon yer can do a rare lot wi' women, Ginger."

"Wot jer do if yer couldn't whistle or 'um, and if salmon made yer ole woman sick, same as it does mine; wot jer do then?" Ginger thrust his head forward aggressively.

Bindle thought deeply for some moments, then with slow deliberation said:

"I think, Ginger, I'd kill a slop. They always 'angs yer for killin' slops."

There was a momentary silence, as both men drained their pewters, and a moment after they left the Blue Boar. They walked along, each deep in his own thoughts, in the direction of Hammersmith Church, where they parted, Bindle to proceed to Fulham and Ginger to Chiswick; each to the mate that had been thrust upon him by an undiscriminating fate.

Joseph Bindle was a little man, bald-headed, with a red nose, but he was possessed of a great heart, which no misfortune ever daunted. Two things in life he loved above all others, beer and humour (or, as he called it, his "little joke"); yet he permitted neither to interfere with the day's work, save under very exceptional circumstances. No one had ever seen him drunk. He had once explained to a mate who urged upon him an extra glass, "I don't put more on me back than I can carry, an' I do ditto wi' me stomach."

Bindle was a journeyman furniture-remover by profession, and the life of a journeyman furniture-remover is fraught with many vicissitudes and hardships. As one of the profession once phrased it to Bindle, "If it wasn't for them bespattered quarter-days, there might be a livin' in it."

People, however, move at set periods, or, as Bindle put it, they "seems to take root as if they was bloomin' vegetables." The set periods are practically reduced to three, for few care to face the inconvenience of a Christmas

move.

Once upon a time family removals were leisurely affairs, which the contractors took care to spread over many days; now, however, moving is a matter of contract, or, as Bindle himself expressed it, "Yer 'as to carry a bookcase under one arm, a spring-mattress under the other, a pianner on yer back, and then they wonders why yer ain't doin' somethink wi' yer teeth."

All these things conspired to make Bindle's living a precarious one. He was not lazy, and sought work assiduously. In his time he had undertaken many strange jobs, his intelligence and ready wit giving him an advantage over his competitors; but if his wit gained for him employment, his unconquerable desire to indulge in his "little jokes" almost as frequently lost it for him.

As the jobs became less frequent Mrs. Bindle waxed more eloquent. To her a man who was not working was "a brute" or a "lazy hound." She made no distinction between the willing and the unwilling, and she heaped the fire of her burning reproaches upon the head of her luckless "man" whenever he was unable to furnish her with a full week's housekeeping.

Bindle was not lazy enough to be unpopular with his superiors, or sufficiently energetic to merit the contempt of his fellow-workers. He did his job in average time, and strove to preserve the middle course that should mean employment and pleasant associates.

"Lorst yer job?" was a frequent interrogation on the lips of Mrs. Bindle.

At first Bindle had striven to parry this inevitable question with a pleasantry; but he soon discovered that his wife was impervious to his most brilliant efforts, and he learned in time to shroud his degradation in an impenetrable veil of silence.

Only in the hour of prosperity would he preserve his verbal cheerfulness.

"She thinks too much o' soap an' 'er soul to make an 'owlin' success o' marriage," he had once confided to a mate over a pint of beer. "A little dirt an' less religion might keep 'er out of 'eaven in the next world, but it 'ud keep me out of 'ell in this!"

Mrs. Bindle was obsessed with two ogres: Dirt and the Devil. Her cleanliness was the cleanliness that rendered domestic comfort impossible, just as her godliness was the godliness of suffering in this world and glory in the next.

Her faith was the faith of negation. The happiness to be enjoyed in the next world would be in direct ratio to the sacrifices made in this. Denying herself the things that her "carnal nature" cried out for, she was filled with an intense resentment that anyone else should continue to live in obvious enjoyment of what she had resolutely put from her. Her only consolation was the triumph she was to enjoy in the next world, and she found no little comfort in the story of Dives and Lazarus.

The forgiveness of sins was a matter upon which she preserved an open mind. Her faith told her that they should be forgiven; but she felt something of the injustice of it all. That the sinner, who at the eleventh hour repenteth, should achieve Paradise in addition to having drunk deep of the cup of pleasure in this world, seemed to her unfair to the faithful.

To Mrs. Bindle the world was a miserable place; but, please God! it should be a clean place, as far as she had the power to make it clean.

When a woman sets out to be a reformer, she invariably begins upon her own men-folk. Mrs. Bindle had striven long and lugubriously to ensure Bindle's salvation, and when she had eventually discovered this to be impossible, she accepted him as her cross.

Whilst struggling for Bindle's salvation, Mrs. Bindle had not overlooked the more immediate needs of his body. For many weeks of their early married life a tin bath of hot water had been placed regularly in the kitchen each Friday night that Bindle might be thorough in his ablutions.

At first Mrs. Bindle had been surprised and gratified at the way in which Bindle had acquiesced in this weekly rite, but being shrewd and something of a student of character, particularly Bindle's character, her suspicions had been aroused.

One Friday evening she put the kitchen keyhole to an illicit use, and discovered Bindle industriously rubbing his hands on his boots, and, with much use of soap, washing them in the bath, after which he splashed the water about the room, damped the towels, then lit his pipe and proceeded to read the evening paper. That was the end of the bath episode.

It was not that Bindle objected to washing; as a matter of fact he was far more cleanly than most of his class; but to him Mrs. Bindle's methods savoured too much of coercion.

A great Frenchman has said, "Pour faire quelque chose de grande, il faut être passioné." In other words, no wanton sprite of mischief or humour must be permitted to beckon genius from its predestined path. Although an entire stranger to philosophy, ignorant alike of the word and its meaning, Mrs. Bindle had arrived at the same conclusion as the French savant.

"Why don't you stick at somethin' as if you meant it?" was her way of phrasing it. "Look at Mr. Hearty. See what he's done!" Without any thought of irreverence, Mrs. Bindle used the names of the Lord and Mr. Hearty as whips of scorpions with which on occasion she mercilessly scourged her husband.

At the time of Bindle's encounter with his onetime work-mate, Ginger, he had been tramping for hours seeking a job. He had gone even to the length of answering an advertisement for a waitress, explaining to the irritated advertiser that "wi' women it was the customers as did the waitin'," and that a man was "more nippy than a gal."

Ginger's hospitality had cheered him, and he began to regard life once more with his accustomed optimism. He had been without food all day, and this fact, rather than the continued rebuffs he had suffered, caused him some misgiving as the hour approached for his return to home and Mrs. Bindle's inevitable question, "Got a job?"

As he passed along the Fulham Palace Road his keen eye searched everywhere for interest and amusement. He winked jocosely at the pretty girls, and grinned happily when called a "saucy 'ound." He exchanged pleasantries with anyone who showed the least inclination towards camaraderie, and the dour he silenced with caustic rejoinder.

Bindle's views upon the home life of England were not orthodox.

"I'd like to meet the cove wot first started talkin' about the "appy 'ome life of ole England,'" he murmured under his breath. "I'd like to introduce 'im to Mrs. B. Might sort o' wake 'im up a bit, an' make 'im want t' emigrate. I'd like to see 'im gettin' away wi'out a scrap. Rummy thing, 'ome life."

His philosophy was to enjoy what you've got, and not to bother about what you hope to get. He had once precipitated a domestic storm by saying to Mrs. Bindle:

"Don't you put all yer money on the next world, in case of accidents. Angels is funny things, and they might sort of take a dislike to yer, and then the fat 'ud be in the fire." Then, critically surveying Mrs. Bindle's manifest leanness, "Not as you an' me together 'ud make much of a flicker in 'ell."

As he approached Fenton Street, where he lived, his leisurely pace perceptibly slackened. It was true that supper awaited him at the end of his journey—that was with luck; but, luck or no luck, Mrs. Bindle was inevitable.

"Funny 'ow 'avin' a wife seems to spoil yer appetite," he muttered, as he scratched his head through the blue-and-white cricket cap he invariably wore, where the four triangles of alternating white and Cambridge blue had lost much of their original delicacy of shade.

"I'm 'ungry, 'ungry as an 'awk," he continued; then after a pause he added, "I wonder whether 'awks marry." The idea seemed to amuse him. "Well, well!" he remarked with a sigh, "yer got to face it, Joe," and pulling himself together he mended his pace.

As he had foreseen, Mrs. Bindle was keenly on the alert for the sound of his key in the lock of the outer door of

their half-house. He had scarcely realised that the evening meal was to consist of something stewed with his much-loved onions, when Mrs. Bindle's voice was heard from the kitchen with the time-worn question:

"Got a job?"

Hunger, and the smell of his favourite vegetable, made him a coward.

"'Ow jer know, Fairy?" he asked with crude facetiousness.

"What is it?" enquired Mrs. Bindle shrewdly as he entered the kitchen.

"Night watchman at a garridge," he lied glibly, and removed his coat preparatory to what he called a "rinse" at the sink. It always pleased Mrs. Bindle to see Bindle wash; even such a perfunctory effort as a "rinse" was a tribute to her efforts.

"When d'you start?" she asked suspiciously.

How persistent women were! thought Bindle.

"To-night at nine," he replied. Nothing mattered with that savoury smell in his nostrils.

Mrs. Bindle was pacified; but her emotions were confidential affairs between herself and "the Lord," and she consequently preserved the same unrelenting exterior.

"'Bout time, I should think," she snapped ungraciously, and proceeded with her culinary preparations. Mrs. Bindle was an excellent cook. "If 'er temper was like 'er cookin'," Bindle had confided to Mrs. Hearty, "life 'ud be a little bit of 'eaven."

Fenton Street, in which the Bindles lived, was an offering to the Moloch of British exclusiveness. The houses consisted of two floors, and each floor had a separate outer door and a narrow passage from which opened off a parlour, a bedroom, and a kitchen. Although each household was cut off from the sight of its immediate neighbours, there was not a resident, save those who occupied the end houses, who was not intimately acquainted with the private affairs of at least three of its neighbours, those above or below, as the case might be, and of the family on each side. The walls and floors were so thin that, when the least emotion set the voices of the occupants vibrating in a louder key than usual, the neighbours knew of the crisis as soon as the protagonists themselves, and every aspect of the dispute or discussion was soon the common property of the whole street.

Fenton Street suited Mrs. Bindle, who was intensely exclusive. She never joined the groups of women who stood each morning, and many afternoons, at their front doors to discuss the thousand and one things that women have to discuss. She occupied herself with her home, hounding from its hiding-place each speck of dust and microbe as if it were an embodiment of the Devil himself.

She was a woman of narrow outlook and prejudiced views, hating sin from a sense of fear of what it might entail rather than as a result of instinctive repulsion; yet she was possessed of many admirable qualities. She worked long and hard in her home, did her duty to her husband in mending his clothes, preparing his food, and providing him with what she termed "a comfortable home."

Next to chapel her supreme joy in life was her parlour, a mid-Victorian riot of antimacassars, stools, furniture, photograph-frames, pictures, ornaments, and the musical-box that would not play, but was precious as Aunt Anne's legacy. Bindle was wont to say that "when yer goes into our parlour yer wants a map an' a guide, an' even then yer 'as to call for 'elp before yer can get out."

Mrs. Bindle had no visitors, and consequently her domestic holy of holies was never used. She would dust and clean and arrange; arrange, clean, and dust with untiring zeal. The windows, although never opened, were spotless; for she judged a woman's whole character by the appearance of her windows and curtains. No religieuse ever devoted more time or thought to a chapel or an altar than Mrs. Bindle to her parlour. She might have reconciled herself to leaving anything else in the world, but her parlour would have held her a helpless prisoner.

When everything was ready for the meal Mrs. Bindle poured from a saucepan a red-brown liquid with cubes of a darker brown, which splashed joyously into the dish. Bindle recognised it as stewed steak and onions, the culinary joy of his heart.

With great appetite he fell to, almost thankful to Providence for sending him so excellent a cook. As he ate he argued that if a man had an angel for a wife, in all likelihood she would not be able to cook, and perhaps after all he was not so badly off.

"There ain't many as can beat yer at this 'ere game," remarked Bindle, indicating the dish with his fork; and a momentary flicker that might have been a smile still-born passed across Mrs. Bindle's face.

As the meal progressed Bindle began to see the folly of his cowardice. He had doomed himself to a night's walking the streets. He cudgelled his brains how to avoid the consequences of his indiscretion. He looked covertly at Mrs. Bindle. There was nothing in the sharp hatchet-like face, with its sandy hair drawn tightly away from each side and screwed into a knot behind, that suggested compromise. Nor was there any suggestion of a relenting nature in that hard grey line that served her as a mouth. No, there was nothing for it but to "carry the banner," unless he could raise sufficient money to pay for a night's lodging.

"Saw Ginger to-day," he remarked conversationally, as he removed a shred of meat from a back tooth with his fork.

"Don't talk to me of Ginger!" snapped Mrs. Bindle.

Such retorts made conversation difficult.

It was Mrs. Bindle's question as to whether he did not think it about time he started that gave Bindle the inspiration he sought. For more than a week the one clock of the household, a dainty little travelling affair that he had purchased of a fellow-workman, it having "sort o' got lost" in a move, had stopped and showed itself impervious to all persuasion Bindle decided to take it, ostensibly to a clock-repairer, but in reality to the pawn-shop, and thus raise the price of a night's lodging. He would trust to luck to supply the funds to retrieve it.

With a word of explanation to Mrs. Bindle, he proceeded to wrap up the clock in a piece of newspaper, and prepared to go out.

To Bindle the moment of departure was always fraught with the greatest danger. His goings-out became strategical withdrawals, he endeavouring to get off unnoticed, Mrs. Bindle striving to rake him with her verbal artillery as he retreated.

On this particular evening he felt comparatively safe. He was, as far as Mrs. Bindle knew, going to "a job," and, what was more, he was taking the clock to be repaired. He sidled tactically along the wall towards the door, as if keenly interested in getting his pipe to draw. Mrs. Bindle opened fire.

"How long's your job for?" She turned round in the act of wiping out a saucepan.

"Only to-night," replied Bindle somewhat lamely. He was afraid of where further romancing might lead him.

"Call that a job?" she enquired scornfully. "How long am I to go on keepin' you in idleness?" Mrs. Bindle cleaned the Alton Road Chapel, where she likewise worshipped, and to this she referred.

"I'll get another job to-morrow; don't be down'earted," Bindle replied cheerfully.

"Down'earted! Y' ought to be ashamed o' yerself," exploded Mrs. Bindle, as she banged the saucepan upon its shelf and seized a broom. Bindle regarded her with expressionless face. "Y' ought to be ashamed o' yerself, yer great hulkin' brute."

At one time Bindle, who was well below medium height and average weight, had grinned appreciatively at this description; but it had a little lost its savour by repetition.

"Call yerself a man!" she continued, her sharp voice rising in volume and key. "Leavin' me to keep the sticks together—me, a woman too, a-keepin' you in idleness! Why, I'd steal 'fore I'd do that, that I would."

She made vigorous use of the broom. Her anger invariably manifested itself in dust, a momentary forgetfulness of her religious convictions, and a lapse into the Doric. As a rule she was careful and mincing in her speech, but anger opened the flood-gates of her vocabulary, and words rushed forth bruised and decapitated.

With philosophic self-effacement Bindle covered the few feet between him and the door and vanished. He was a philosopher and, like Socrates, he bowed to the whirlwind of his wife's wrath. Conscious of having done everything humanly possible to obtain work, he faced the world with unruffled calm.

Mrs. Bindle's careless words, however, sank deeply into his mind. Steal! Well, he had no very strongly-grounded objection, provided he were not caught at it. Steal! The word seemed to open up new possibilities for him. The thing was, how should he begin? He might seize a leg of mutton from a butcher's shop and run; but then Nature had not intended him for a runner. He might smash a jeweller's window, pick a pocket, or snatch a handbag; but in all these adventures fleetness of foot seemed essential.

Crime seemed obviously for the sprinter. To become a burger required experience and tools, and Bindle possessed neither. Besides, burgling involved more risks than he cared to take.

Had he paused to think, Bindle would have seen that stealing was crime; but his incurable love of adventure blinded him to all else.

"Funny thing," he mumbled as he walked down Fenton Street. "Funny thing, a daughter o' the Lord wantin' me to steal. Wonder wot ole 'Earty 'ud say."

CHAPTER II

A NOCTURNAL ADVENTURE

I

Having exchanged the clock for seven shillings and badly beaten the pawnbroker's assistant in a verbal duel, Bindle strolled along towards Walham Green in the happiest frame of mind.

The night was young, it was barely nine o'clock, and his whole being yearned for some adventure. He was still preoccupied with the subject of larceny. His wits, Bindle argued, were of little or no use in the furniture-removing business, where mediocrity formed the standard of excellence. There would never be a Napoleon of furniture-removers, but there had been several Napoleons of crime. If a man were endowed with genius, he should also be supplied with a reasonable outlet for it.

Walking meditatively along the North End Road, he was awakened to realities by his foot suddenly striking against something that jingled. He stooped and picked up two keys attached to a ring, which he swiftly transferred to one of his pockets and passed on. Someone might be watching him.

Two minutes later he drew forth his find for examination. Attached to the ring was a metal tablet, upon which were engraved the words: "These keys are the property of Professor Sylvanus Conti, 13 Audrey Mansions, Queen's Club, West Kensington, W. Reward for their return, 2s. 6d."

The keys were obviously those of the outer door of a block of mansions and the door of a flat. If they were returned the reward was two shillings and sixpence, which would bring up the day's takings to nine shillings and sixpence. If, on the other hand, the keys were retained for the purpose of——

At that moment Bindle's eye caught sight of a ticket upon a stall littered with old locks and keys, above which blazed and spluttered a paraffin torch. "Keys cut while you wait," it announced. Without a moment's hesitation he slipped the two keys from their ring and held them out to the proprietor of the stall.

"'Ow much to make two like 'em, mate?" he enquired. The man took the keys, examined them for a moment, and replied:

"One an' thruppence from you, capt'in."

"Well, think o' me as a pretty girl an' say a bob, an' it's done," replied Bindle.

The man regarded him with elaborate gravity for a few moments. "If yer turn yer face away I'll try," he replied, and proceeded to fashion the duplicates.

Meanwhile Bindle deliberated. If he retained the keys there would be suspicion at the flats, and perhaps locks would be changed; if, on the other hand, the keys were returned immediately, the owner would trouble himself no further.

At this juncture he was not very clear as to what he intended to do. He was still undecided when the four keys were handed to him in return for a shilling.

The mind of Joseph Bindle invariably responded best to the ministrations of beer, and when, half an hour later, he left the bar of the Purple Goat, his plans were formed, and his mind made up. He vaguely saw the hand of Providence in this discovery of Professor Conti's keys, and he was determined that Providence should not be disappointed in him, Joseph Bindle.

First he bought a cheap electric torch, guaranteed for twelve or twenty-four hours—the shopkeeper was not

quite certain which. Then, proceeding to a chemist's shop, he purchased a roll of medical bandaging. With this he retired up a side street and proceeded to swathe his head and the greater part of his face, leaving only his eyes, nose, and mouth visible. Drawing his cap carefully over the bandages, he returned to the highway, first having improvised the remainder of the bandaging into an informal sling for his left arm. Not even Mrs. Bindle herself would have recognised him, so complete was the disguise.

Ten minutes later he was at Audrey Mansions. No one was visible, and with great swiftness and dexterity he tried the duplicate keys in the open outer door. One fitted perfectly. Mounting to the third floor, he inserted the other in the door of No. 13. The lock turned easily. Quite satisfied, he replaced them in his pocket and rang the bell. There was no answer. He rang again, and a third time, but without result.

"Does 'is own charin'," murmured Bindle laconically, and descended to the ground floor, where he rang the porter's bell, with the result that the keys were faithfully redeemed.

Bindle left the porter in a state of suppressed excitement over a vivid and circumstantial account of a terrible collision that had just taken place in the neighbourhood, between a motor-bus and a fire-engine, resulting in eleven deaths, including three firemen, whilst thirty people had been seriously injured, including six firemen. He himself had been on the front seat of the motor-bus and had escaped with a broken head and a badly-cut hand.

II

Professor Conti did not discover his loss until the porter handed him his keys, enquiring at the same time if the Professor had heard anything of the terrible collision between the motor-bus and fire-engine. The Professor had not. He mounted to his flat with heavy steps. He was tired and dispirited. In his bedroom he surveyed himself mournfully in the mirror as he undid the buckle of his ready-made evening-tie, which he placed carefully in the green cardboard box upon the dressing-table. In these days a tie had to last the week, aided by the application of French chalk to the salient folds and corners.

Professor Sylvanus Conti, who had been known to his mother, Mrs. Wilkins, as Willie, emphasised in feature and speech his cockney origin. He was of medium height, with a sallow complexion—not the sallowness of the sun-baked plains of Italy, but rather that of Bermondsey or Bow.

He had been a brave little man in his fight with adverse conditions. Years before, chance had thrown across his path a doctor whose hypnotic powers had been his ruin. Willie Wilkins had shown himself an apt pupil, and there opened out to his vision a great and glorious prospect.

First he courted science; but she had proved a fickle jade, and he was forced to become an entertainer, much against his inclination. In time the name of Professor Sylvanus Conti came to be known at most of the second-rate music halls as "a good hypnotic turn"—to use the professional phraseology.

One consolation he had—he never descended to tricks. If he were unable to place a subject under control, he stated so frankly. He was scientific, and believed in his own powers as he believed in nothing else on earth.

He had achieved some sort of success. It was not what he had hoped for; still, it was a living. It gave him food and raiment and a small bachelor flat—he was a bachelor, all self-made men are—in a spot that was Kensington, albeit West Kensington.

The Professor continued mechanically to prepare himself for the night. He oiled his dark hair, brushed his black moustache, donned his long nightshirt, and finally lit a cigarette. He was thinking deeply. His dark, cunning little eyes flashed angrily. A cynical smile played about the corners of his mouth, half hidden by the bristly black moustache.

Only that evening he had heard that his rival, "Mr. John Gibson, the English Mesmerist," had secured a contract to appear at some syndicate halls that had hitherto engaged only him.

This man Gibson had been dogging Conti for months past. The barefaced effrontery of the fellow added fuel to the fire of his rival's anger. To use an English name for a hypnotic turn upon the English music-hall stage! He should have known that hypnotism, like the equestrian and dressmaking arts, is continental, without exception or qualification. Yet this man, John Gibson, "the English Mesmerist," had dared to enter into competition with him, Professor Sylvanus Conti. Gibson descended to tricks, which placed him beyond the pale of science. He had confederates who, as "gentlemen among the audience," did weird and marvellous things, all to the glory of "the English Mesmerist."

Still brooding upon a rather ominous future, the Professor wound his watch—a fine gold hunter that had been presented to him three years previously by "A few friends and admirers"—and placed it upon the small table by his bedside, together with his money and other valuables; then, carefully extinguishing his half-smoked cigarette, he got into bed. It was late, and he was tired. A sense of injustice was insufficient to keep him awake for long, and, switching off the electric light, he was soon asleep.

From a dream in which he had just discomfited his rival, "the English Mesmerist," by placing under control an elephant, Professor Conti awakened with a start. He intuitively knew that there was someone in the room. Lying perfectly still, he listened. Suddenly his blood froze with horror. A tiny disc of light played round the room and finally rested upon the small table beside him. A moment later he heard a faint sound as of two substances coming into contact. Instinctively he knew it to be caused by his watch-chain tinkling against his ash-tray.

He broke out into a cold sweat. Moist with fear, he reviewed the situation. A burglar was in the room, taking his—the Professor's—presentation watch and chain. The thought of losing these, his greatest treasures, awakened in his mind the realisation that he must act, and act speedily. With a slow, deliberate movement he worked his right hand up to the pillow, beneath which he always kept a revolver. It seemed an eternity before he felt the comforting touch of cold metal. He withdrew the weapon with deliberate caution.

The sound of someone tiptoeing about the room continued—soft, stealthy movements that, however, no longer possessed for him any terror. A fury of anger, a species of blood-lust gripped him. Someone had dared to break into his flat. The situation became intolerable. With one swift movement he sat up, switched on the electric light, and cocked his revolver.

An inarticulate sound, half-cry, half-grumble, came from the corner by the chest of drawers. The back of the head, looking curiously like a monkish crown, flashed into a face, swathed in what appeared to be medical bandages, through which was to be seen a pair of eyes in which there was obvious terror. It was Bindle.

"Hands up, or I shoot! Up, I say."

Up went Bindle's hands.

The Professor did not recognise his own voice. Suddenly he laughed. The ludicrous expression in Bindle's eyes, the unnatural position in which he crouched, his having caught a burglar red-handed—it was all so ridiculous.

Then there came the triumphant sense of victory. The Professor was calm and collected now, as if the discovery of a burglar in his bedroom were a thing of nightly occurrence. There seemed nothing strange in the situation. The things to be done presented themselves in obvious and logical sequence. He was conscious of the dramatic possibilities of the situation.

Not so Bindle.

"This comes o' takin' advice of a 'daughter o' the Lord,'" he groaned. "Wonder wot 'Earty'll say?"

In spite of his situation Bindle grinned.

"Turn round and face the wall, quick!"

It was the Professor's voice that broke in upon Bindle's thoughts. He obeyed with alacrity and the tonsured scalp reappeared.

Carefully covering with his revolver the unfortunate Bindle, whose first effort at burglary seemed doomed to end so disastrously, Professor Conti slipped out of bed and, without removing his eyes from Bindle's back, sidled towards a small chest at the other side of the room. This he opened, and from it took a pair of handcuffs, a "property" of his profession.

"Put your hands behind your back," he ordered with calm decision.

For one brief moment Bindle meditated resistance. He gave a swift glance over his shoulder; but, seeing the determined look in his captor's eyes and the glint of the revolver, he thought better of it and meekly complied.

The handcuffs clicked and Professor Conti smiled grimly.

As he stood gazing at the wall, Bindle's mind was still running on what Mrs. Bindle would say when she heard the news. Fate had treated him scurvily in directing him to a flat where a revolver and handcuffs seemed to be part of the necessary fittings. He fell to wondering what punishment novices at burglary generally received.

He was awakened from his reverie and the contemplation of a particularly hideous wallpaper, by a sharp command to turn round. He did so, and found himself facing a ludicrous and curiously unheroic figure. Over his nightshirt Professor Conti had drawn an overcoat with an astrachan collar and cuffs. Beneath the coat came a broad hem of white nightshirt, then two rather thin legs, terminating in a pair of red woollen bedroom slippers.

Bindle grinned appreciatively at the spectacle. He was more at his ease now that the revolver had been laid aside.

"You're a burglar, and you're caught."

The Professor showed his yellow teeth as he made this pronouncement. Bindle grinned. "You'll get five years for this," proceeded the Professor encouragingly.

"I was just wonderin' to meself," responded Bindle imperturbably. "The luck's wi' you, guv'nor," he added philosophically. "Fancy you 'avin' 'andcuffs as well as a revolver! Sort o' Scotland Yard, this 'ere little 'ole. 'Spose you get a touch of nerves sometimes, and likes to be ready. Five years, you said. Three was my figure. P'raps you're right; it all depends on the ole boy on the bench. Ever done time, sir?" he queried cheerfully.

Professor Conti was too intent upon an inspiration that had flashed upon him to listen to his visitor's remarks. Suddenly he saw in this the hand of Providence, and at that moment Bindle saw upon the chest of drawers one of the Professor's cards bearing the inscription:

PROFESSOR SYLVANUS CONTI,
Hypnotist and Mesmerist.

13 AUDREY MANSIONS,
QUEEN'S CLUB,
WEST KENSINGTON,
LONDON, W.

He turned from the contemplation of the card, and found himself being regarded by his captor with great intentness. The ferret-like eyes of the Professor gazed into his as if desirous of piercing a hole through his brain. Bindle experienced a curious dreamy sensation. Remembering the card he had just seen, he blinked self-consciously, licked his lips, grinned feebly, and then half closed his eyes.

Professor Conti advanced deliberately, raised his hands slowly, passed them before the face of his victim, keeping his eyes fixed the while. Over the unprepossessing features of Bindle there came a vacant look, and over those of the Professor one of triumph. After a lengthy pause the Professor spoke.

"You are a burglar. Repeat it."

"I am a burglar," echoed Bindle in a toneless voice.

The Professor continued: "You tried to rob me, Professor Sylvanus Conti, of 13 Audrey Mansions, Queen's Club, West Kensington, by breaking into my flat at night."

In the same expressionless voice Bindle repeated the Professor's words.

"Good," murmured Conti. "Good! Now sit down." Bindle complied, a ghost of a grin flitting momentarily across his face, as the Professor turned to reach a chair which he placed immediately opposite to the one on which Bindle sat, and about two yards distant. With his eyes fixed, he commenced in a droning tone:

"You have entered my flat with the deliberate and cold-blooded intention of robbing, perhaps of murdering me. It is my intention to write a note to the police, which you will yourself deliver, and wait until you are arrested. Now repeat what I have said."

In a dull, mechanical voice Bindle did as he was told. For a full minute the Professor gazed steadily into his victim's eyes, made a few more passes with his hands, and then, rising, went to a small table and wrote:

DEAR SIR,

The bearer of this letter is a burglar who has just broken into my flat to rob me. I have placed him under hypnotic control, and he will give himself up. You will please arrest him. I will 'phone in the morning.

Yours faithfully,
SYLVANUS CONTI.

Sealing and addressing the letter, the Professor then removed the handcuffs from Bindle's wrists, bade him rise, and gave him the envelope.

"You will now go and deliver this note," he said, explaining with great distinctness the whereabouts of the police-station. Bindle was proceeding slowly towards the door, when the Professor called upon him to stop. He halted abruptly. "Show me what you have in your pockets."

Bindle complied, producing the presentation watch and chain, a gold scarf-pin, a pair of gold sleeve-links, one diamond and three gold studs, and a diamond ring. He omitted to include the Professor's loose change, which he had picked up from the small table by the bedside.

For a moment the Professor pondered; then, as if coming to a sudden determination, he told Bindle to replace the articles in his pocket, and dismissed him.

Having bolted the door, Professor Conti returned to his bedroom. For half an hour he sat in his nondescript costume, smoking cigarettes. He was thoroughly satisfied with the night's work. It had been ordained that his flat should be burgled, and he, Sylvanus Conti, professor of hypnotism and mesmerism, seizing his opportunity, had diverted to his own ends the august decrees of destiny.

He pictured Mr. William Gibson reading the account of his triumph in the evening papers. He saw the headlines. He himself would inspire them. He saw it all. Not only would those come back who had forsaken him for "the English Mesmerist," but others also would want him. He saw himself a "star turn" at one of the West-end halls.

He saw many things: fame, fortune, a motor-car, and, in the far distance, the realisation of his great ambition, a scientific career. In a way he was a little sorry for the burglar, the instrument of fate.

Throwing off his overcoat and removing his slippers, the Professor switched off the light, got into bed, and was soon asleep.

CHAPTER III

THE HYPNOTIC FIASCO

I

Whilst Professor Conti was building elaborate castles in the air, Bindle with tense caution crept down the three flights of stairs that led to the street.

Everything was quiet and dark. As he softly closed the outer door behind him he heard a clock striking three. Swiftly he removed the bandages that swathed his head, tucked them in his pockets and stepped out briskly.

He wanted to think, but above all he wanted food and drink.

As a precaution against the attentions of the police he began to whistle loudly. None, he argued, would suspect of being a burglar a man who was whistling at the stretch of his power. Once he stopped dead and laughed.

"Joe Bindle," he remarked, "you been burglin', and you're mesmerised, an' you're goin' to give yerself up to the police, an' don't you forget it, as it might 'urt the Professor's feelings."

He slapped his knee, laughed again, recommenced whistling, and continued on his way.

Occasionally his hand would wander in the direction of the left-hand pocket of his coat, when, feeling the Professor's watch and chain and the note to the police, his face would irradiate joy.

He *must* think, however. He could not continue walking and whistling for ever. He must think; and with Bindle to think it was necessary that he should remain still. This he dare not do for fear of arousing suspicion.

Once in turning a corner suddenly he almost collided with a policeman.

"Tryin' to wake the whole place?" enquired the policeman. "Where are you goin', makin' such a row about it?"

"To 'ell, same as you, ole sport," responded Bindle cheerfully. "Goo'-night! See yer later!"

The policeman grumbled something and passed on. Presently Bindle saw the lights of a coffee-stall, towards which he walked briskly. Over two sausages and some bacon he reviewed the situation, chaffed the proprietor, and treated to a meal the bedraggled remnants of what had once been a woman, whom he found hovering hungrily about the stall.

When he eventually said "Good-mornin'" to his host and guest, he had worked out his plan of campaign.

He walked in the direction of the police-station, having first resumed his bandages. Day was beginning to break. Seeing a man approaching him, he quickened his pace to a run. As he came within a few yards of the man, who appeared to be of the labourer class, he slackened his pace, then stopped abruptly.

"Where's the police-station, mate?" he enquired, panting as if with great exertion.

"The police-station?" repeated the man curiously. "Straight up the road, then third or fourth to the right, then ____"

"Is it miles?" panted Bindle.

"'Bout quarter of a mile, not more. What's up, mate?" the man enquired. "Been 'urt?"

"Quarter of a mile, and 'im bleedin' to death! I got to fetch a doctor," Bindle continued. Then, as if with sudden inspiration, he thrust Professor Conti's letter into the astonished man's hands.

"In the name of the law I order yer to take this letter to the police-station. I'll go for a doctor. Quick—it's burglary and murder! 'Ere's a bob for yer trouble."

With that, Bindle sped back the way he had come, praying that no policeman might see him and give chase.

The workman stood looking stupidly from the letter and the shilling in his hand to the retreating form of Bindle. After a moment's hesitation he pocketed the coin, and with a grumble in his throat and the fear of the Law in his heart, he turned and slowly made his way to the police-station.

II

When Professor Conti awoke on the morning of the burglary, he was horrified to find, from the medley of sounds without, produced by hooters and bells, that it was half-past eight.

Jumping quickly out of bed, he shaved, washed, and dressed with great expedition, and before nine was in a telephone call-box ringing up the police. On learning that his note had been duly delivered, he smiled his satisfaction into the telephone mouthpiece.

Fortunately he was known to the sergeant who answered him, having recently given his services at an entertainment organised by the local police. After some difficulty he arranged that the charge should be taken through the telephone, although a most irregular proceeding.

"He's givin' us a lot of trouble, sir. Talks of having been given the note, and about a burglary and attempted murder," volunteered the sergeant.

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed the Professor.

"Ha, ha, ha!" echoed the sergeant, and they rang off.

In spite of his laugh, the Professor was a little puzzled by the sergeant's words. The man should still be under control. However, he reasoned, the fellow was caught, and he had other and more important things to occupy his mind. Hailing a passing taxi, he drove to the offices of *The Evening Mail*. Sending up his card with the words IMPORTANT NEWS written upon it, he gained immediate access to the news-editor.

Within ten minutes the story of the hypnotised burglar was being dictated by the editor himself to relays of shorthand writers. The police had, on the telephone, confirmed the story of a man having given himself up, and the whole adventure was, in the argot of Fleet Street, "hot stuff."

By half-past eleven the papers were selling in the streets, and the Professor was on his way to the police-court. He had been told the case would not come on before twelve. As his taxi threaded its way jerkily westward, he caught glimpses of the placards of the noon edition of *The Evening Mail*, bearing such sensational lines as:

MESMERISM EXTRAORDINARY

AN AMAZING CAPTURE

ALLEGED BURGLAR HYPNOTISED

He smiled pleasantly as he pictured his reception that evening, as an extra turn, at one of the big music-halls.

He fell to speculating as to how much he should demand, and to which manager he should offer his services.

"The Napoleon of Mesmerists," was the title he had decided to adopt. Again the Professor smiled amiably as he thought of the column of description with headlines in *The Evening Mail*. He had indeed achieved success.

III

The drowsy atmosphere of the West London Police Court oppressed even the prisoners. They came, heard, and departed; protagonists for a few minutes in a drama, then oblivion. The magistrate was cross, the clerk husky, and the police anxiously deferential, for one of their number had that morning been severely censured for being unable to discriminate between the effects upon the human frame of laudanum and whisky.

Nobody was interested—there was nothing in which to be interested—and there was less oxygen than usual in the court, the magistrate had a cold. It was a miserable business, this detection and punishing of crime.

"Twenty shillings costs, seven days," snuffled the presiding genius.

A piece of human flotsam faced about and disappeared.

Another name was called. The sergeant in charge of the new case cleared his throat. The magistrate lifted his handkerchief to his nose, the clerk removed his spectacles to wipe them, when something bounded into the dock, drawing up two other somethings behind it.

The magistrate paused, his handkerchief held to his nose, the clerk dropped his spectacles, the three reporters became eagerly alert—in short, the whole court awakened simultaneously from its apathy to the knowledge that this was a dramatic moment.

In the dock stood a medium-sized man with nondescript features, a thin black moustache, iron-grey hair, and dishevelled clothing. Each side of him stood a constable gripping an arm—they were the somethings that had followed him into the dock.

For a moment the prisoner, who seemed to radiate indignation, looked about him, his breath coming in short, passionate sobs.

The clerk stooped to pick up his glasses, the magistrate blew his nose violently to gain time, the reporters prepared to take notes. Then the storm burst.

"You shall pay for this, all of you!" shouted the man in the dock, jerking his head forward to emphasise his words, his arms being firmly held straight to his sides. "Me a burglar—me?" he sobbed.

"Silence in the court!" droned the clerk, who, having found his glasses, now began to read the charge-sheet, detailing how the prisoner had burglariously entered No. 13 Audrey Mansions, Queen's Club, in the early hours of that morning. He was accustomed and indifferent to passionate protests from the dock.

The prisoner breathed heavily. The clerk was detailing how the prisoner had awakened the occupant of the premises by lifting his gold watch from the table beside the bed. At this juncture the prisoner burst out again:

"It's a lie, it's a lie, an' you all know it! It's a plot! I'm—I'm——" He became inarticulate, sobs of impotent rage shaking his whole body, and the tears streaming down his face.

At that moment Professor Sylvanus Conti entered the court, smiling and alert. He looked quickly towards the dock to see if his case had come on, and was relieved to find that his last night's visitor was not there. He had feared being late.

The magistrate cleared his throat and addressed the prisoner:

"You are harming your case by this exhibition. If a mistake has been made you have nothing to fear; but if you continue these interruptions I shall have to send you back to the cells whilst your case is heard."

Turning to the officer in charge of the case, he enquired:

"Is the prosecutor present?"

The sergeant looked round, and, seeing Professor Conti, replied that he was.

"Let him be sworn," ordered the magistrate.

To his astonishment, Professor Conti heard his name called. Thoroughly bewildered, he walked in the direction in which people seemed to expect him to walk. He took the oath, with his eyes fixed, as if he were fascinated, upon the pathetic figure in the dock. Suddenly he became aware that the man was addressing him.

"Did I do it?—did I?" he asked brokenly.

"Silence in the court!" called the clerk.

Suddenly the full horror of the situation dawned upon the Professor. He broke out into a cold sweat as he stood petrified in the witness-box. Somehow or other his plan had miscarried. He looked round him. Instinctively he thought of flight. He felt that he was the culprit, the passionate, eager creature in the dock his accuser.

"Am I the man?" he heard the prisoner persisting. "Am I?"

"N-no," he faltered in a voice he could have sworn was not his own.

"You say that the prisoner is not the man who entered your flat during the early hours of this morning?" questioned the magistrate.

"No, sir, he's not," replied Conti wearily, miserably. What had happened? Was he a failure?

"Please explain what happened," ordered the magistrate.

Conti did so. He told how he had been awakened, and how he conceived the idea of hypnotising the burglar and making him give himself up to the police.

The prisoner was then sworn and related how he had been commanded in the name of the law to deliver the note at the police-station; how he had done so, and had been promptly arrested; how he had protested his innocence, but without result.

The Professor listened to the story in amazement, and to the subsequent remarks of the magistrate upon quack practices and police methods with dull resignation.

He did not, however, realise the full horror of the catastrophe that had befallen him until five minutes after leaving the court, when he encountered a newsvendor displaying a placard of *The Evening Mail* bearing the words:

PROFESSOR CONTI'S GREAT HYPNOTIC FEAT

CAPTURE OF AN ALLEGED BURGLAR

He then saw that he had lost his reputation, his belief in his own powers, his living, and about fifty pounds' worth of property.

When he reached his flat late in the afternoon, he was astonished to find awaiting him a small packet that had come by post, which contained the whole of the missing property, even down to the small change, also the two duplicate keys that Bindle had caused to be fashioned.

"I'm a bloomin' poor burglar," Bindle had assured himself cheerfully as he dropped the parcel containing the proceeds of his "burglary" into a pillar-box, "a-returnin' the swag by post. I got to be careful wot sort o' little jokes I

goes in for in future."

IV

That evening Joseph Bindle sat at home in his favourite chair reading with great relish *The Evening Post's* account of THE GREAT HYPNOTIC FIASCO. Being at bitter enmity with *The Evening Mail*, the *Post* had given full rein to its sense of the ludicrous.

Puffing contentedly at a twopenny cigar, Bindle enjoyed to the full the story so ably presented; but nothing gave him so much pleasure as the magistrate's closing words. He read them for the fourth time:

"Professor Conti sought advertisement; he has got it. Unfortunately for him, he met a man cleverer than himself, one who is something of a humorist." Bindle smiled appreciatively. "The conduct of the police in this case is reprehensible to a degree, and they owe it to the public to bring the real culprit to justice."

With great deliberation Bindle removed his cigar from his mouth, placed the forefinger of his right hand to the side of his nose, and winked.

"Seem to be pleased with yourself," commented Mrs. Bindle acidly, as she banged a plate upon the table. To her, emphasis was the essence of existence.

"You've 'it it, Mrs. B., I *am* pleased wi' meself," Bindle replied. He felt impervious to any negative influence.

"What's happened, may I ask?"

"A lot o' things 'ave 'appened, an' a lot of things will go on 'appenin' as long as your ole man can take an 'int. You're a wonderful woman, Mrs. B., more wonderful than yer know; but yer must give 'em some nasty jars in 'eaven now and then."

Bindle rose, produced from his pocket the tin of salmon that inevitably accompanied any endeavour on his part to stand up to Mrs. Bindle, then picking up a jug from the dresser he went out to fetch the supper beer, striving at one and the same time to do justice to "Gospel Bells" and his cigar.

CHAPTER IV

THE HEARTYS AT HOME

The atmosphere of the Hearty ménage was one of religious gloom. To Mr. Hearty laughter and a smiling face were the attributes of the ungodly. He never laughed himself, and his smile was merely the baring of a handful of irregular yellow teeth, an action that commenced and ended with such suddenness as to cast some doubt upon its spontaneity.

He possessed only two interests in life—business and the chapel, and one dread—his wife's brother-in-law, Joseph Bindle. As business was not a thing he cared to discuss with his wife or eighteen-year-old daughter, Millie, the one topic of conversation left was the chapel.

Mr. Hearty was a spare man of medium height, with a heavy moustache, iron-grey mutton-chop whiskers, and a woolly voice.

"I never see a chap wi' whiskers like that wot wasn't as 'oly as oil," was Bindle's opinion.

Mr. Hearty was negative in everything save piety. His ideal in life was to temporise and placate, and thus avoid anything in the nature of a dispute or altercation.

"If 'Earty's goin' to be a favourite in 'eaven," Bindle had once said to Mrs. Bindle, "I don't think much of 'eaven's taste in men. 'E can't 'it nothink, either with 'is fist or 'is tongue."

"If you was more like him," Mrs. Bindle had retorted, "you might wear a top hat on Sundays, same as he does."

"Me in a top 'at!" Bindle had cried. "'Oly Moses! I can see it! Why, my ears ain't big enough to 'old it up. Wot 'ud I do if there was an 'igh wind blowin'? I'd spend all Sunday a-chasin' it up and down the street, like an ole woman after a black 'en."

Bindle himself was far from being pugnacious; but his conception of manhood was that it should be ready to hit any head that wanted hitting. He had been known to fight men much bigger than himself, not because he personally had any dispute to settle with them, but rather from an abstract sense of the fitness of things. Once when a man was mercilessly beating a horse Bindle intervened, and a fight had ensued, which had ended only when both parties were too exhausted to continue.

"Blimey, but you ain't 'arf a fool, Joe," remarked Ginger, to whom a fight was the one joy in life, regarding with interest Bindle's bruised and bleeding face as he stood sobbing for breath. "Wot jer do it for? 'E wasn't 'urtin' you; it was the 'orse."

"Somebody 'ad to 'ammer 'im, Ginger," gasped Bindle with a wry smile, "an' the 'orse couldn't." Then after a pause he added, "It ain't good for a cove to be let 'it things wot can't 'it back."

Meals at the Heartys' table were solemn affairs in which conversation had little or no part, save when Bindle was present.

Mr. Hearty ate his food with noisy enjoyment. His moustache, which seemed bent on peeping into his mouth and, coupled with his lugubrious appearance, gave him the appearance of a tired walrus, required constant attention, particularly as he was extremely fond of soups and stewed foods. This rendered conversation extremely difficult. During the greater part of a meal he would be engaged in taking first one end and then the other of his moustache into his mouth for the purpose of cleansing it. This he did to the accompaniment of a prolonged sucking sound, suggestive of great enjoyment.

"I likes to watch 'Earty cleanin' 'is whiskers," Bindle had once remarked, after gazing at his brother-in-law for some minutes with great intentness. "'E never misses an 'air."

Mr. Hearty had got very red, and for the rest of the meal refused all but solid foods.

Bindle was a perpetual source of anxiety to Mr. Hearty, who, although always prepared for the worst, yet invariably found that the worst transcended his expectations. Had he not been a Christian he might have suggested cutting himself and family adrift from all association with his brother-in-law. Even had he been able to overcome his scruples, there was the very obvious bond of affection between Mrs. Hearty, Millie, and "Uncle Joe": but, what was more alarming, there was the question of how Bindle himself might view the severance.

Mrs. Hearty was a woman on whom fat had descended like a plague. It rendered her helpless of anything in the nature of exertion. In her Bindle found a kindred spirit. Her silent laugh, which rippled down her chins until lost to sight in her ample bust, never failed to inspire him to his best efforts. He would tell her of his "little jokes" until Millie would have to intervene with a timid:

"Oh, uncle, don't! You're hurting mother!"

Great amusement rendered Mrs. Hearty entirely helpless, both of action and of speech, and to her laughter was something between an anguish and an ecstasy.

She was quite conscious of the stimulating effect upon Bindle of her "Oh, Joe, don't!" yet never hesitated to utter what she knew would eventually reduce her to a rippling and heaving mass of mirth.

She was Bindle's confidante, and seemed to find in the accounts of his adventures compensation for the atmosphere of repression in which she lived. In her heart she regretted that her husband had not been a furniture-remover instead of a greengrocer; for it seemed to produce endless diversions.

Little Millie would sit on a stool at her mother's feet drinking in Uncle Joe's stories, uttering an occasional half-laughing, half-reproachful, "Oh, Uncle Joe!"

If Mrs. Hearty had a weakness for Bindle's stories, Mrs. Bindle found in Alfred Hearty her ideal of what a man should be. When a girl she had been called upon to choose between Alfred Hearty, then a greengrocer's assistant, and Joseph Bindle, and she never quite forgave herself for having taken the wrong man.

In those days Bindle's winning tongue had left Alfred Hearty without even a sporting chance. To Mrs. Bindle her mistaken choice was the canker-worm in her heart, and it was not a little responsible for her uncompromising attitude towards Bindle.

In a moment of pride at his conquest Bindle had said to Hearty:

"It's no good goin' after a woman wi' one eye on the golden gates of 'eaven, 'Earty, and that's why I won."

Since then Bindle had resented Hearty's apathetic courtship, which had brought about his own victory. Many times Bindle had thought over the folly of his wooing, and he always came to the same conclusion, a muttered:

"If 'e 'ad 'ad a little more ginger 'e might 'ave won. They'd 'ave made a tasty pair."

The result had been that Mrs. Bindle's sister, Martha, had caught Mr. Hearty at the rebound, and had since regretted it as much as she ever regretted anything.

"When you're my size," she would say, "you don' trouble much about anything. It's the lean ones as worries. Look at Lizzie." Lizzie was Mrs. Bindle.

Mrs. Bindle herself had been very different as a girl. Theatres and music-halls were not then "places of sin"; and she was not altogether above suspicion of being a flirt. When it dawned upon her that she had made a mistake in marrying Bindle and letting her sister Martha secure the matrimonial prize, a great bitterness had taken possession of her.

As Mr. Hearty slowly climbed the ladder towards success, Mrs. Bindle's thoughts went with him. He became her great interest in life. No wife or mother ever watched the progress of husband or son with keener interest or

greater admiration than Mrs. Bindle watched that of her brother-in-law.

Gradually she began to make him her "pattern to live and to die." She joined the Alton Road Chapel, gave up all "carnal" amusements, and began a careful and elaborate preparation for the next world.

Bindle, as the unconscious cause of her humiliation—the supreme humiliation of a woman's life, marrying the wrong man—became also the victim of her dissatisfaction. He watched the change, marvelling at its cause, and with philosophic acceptance explaining it by telling himself that "women were funny things."

As a girl Mrs. Bindle had been pleasure-loving, some regarded her as somewhat flighty; and the course of gradual starvation of pleasure to which she subjected herself had embittered her whole nature. There was, however, no suggestion of sentiment in her attitude towards her brother-in-law. He was her standard by which she measured the failure of other men, Bindle in particular.

Like all women, she bowed the knee to success, and Alfred Hearty was the most successful man she had ever encountered. He had begun life on the tail-board of a parcels delivery van, he was now the owner of two flourishing greengrocer's shops, to say nothing of being regarded as one of Fulham's most worthy citizens.

From van-boy to a small greengrocer, he had risen to the important position of calling on customers to solicit orders, and here he had shown his first flash of genius. He had cultivated every housewife and maid-servant assiduously, never allowing them to buy anything he could not recommend. When eventually he started in business on his own account, he had carefully canvassed his late employer's customers, who, to a woman, went over to him.

"It was that 'oly smile of 'is wot done it," was Bindle's opinion.

When in the natural course of events his previous employer retired a bankrupt, it was taken as evidence of the supreme ability of the man who had taken from him his livelihood.

In the administration of his own business Alfred Hearty had shown his second flash of genius—he never allowed his own employés an opportunity of doing as he had done, but, by occasional personal calls upon his customers, managed to convey the idea that it was he who was entirely responsible for the proper execution of their orders. As a further precaution he constantly changed the rounds of his men, and thus safeguarded himself from any employé playing Wellington to his Napoleon.

Occasionally on Sunday evenings Bindle and Mrs. Bindle would be invited to supper at the Heartys' in Fulham High Street, where they lived over their principal shop. Mr. Hearty and Mrs. Bindle would return after chapel with Millie; Bindle invariably arranged to arrive early in order to have a talk with Mrs. Hearty, who did not go to chapel because her "breath was that bad."

"Funny thing, you and Lizzie bein' sisters; you seem to have got all the meat an' left 'er only the bones!" Bindle would say.

Bindle hated anything that was even remotely connected with lemons, a fruit that to him symbolised aggressive temperance. Mr. Hearty was very partial to lemon flavouring, and in consequence lemon puddings, lemon cakes, and lemon tarts were invariably served as sweets at his table.

"Lemonade, lemon cakes, and lemon faces, all as sour as an unkissed gal, that's wot a Sunday night at Hearty's place is," Bindle had confided to a mate.

Once the chapel party returned, the evening became monotonous.

After supper Millie was sent to the harmonium and hymns were sung. Mrs. Bindle had a thin, piercing voice, Millie a small tremulous soprano, and Mr. Hearty was what Bindle called "all wool and wind." Mrs. Hearty appeared to have no voice at all, although her lips moved in sympathy with the singers.

At first Bindle had been a silent and agonised spectator, refusing all invitations to join in the singing. He would sit, his attention divided between Mr. Hearty's curious vocal contortions, suggestive of a hen drinking water, and the rippling motion of Mrs. Hearty's chins. When singing Mr. Hearty elevated his head, screwed up his eyes and raised

his eyebrows; the higher the note the higher went his eyebrows, and the more closely he screwed up his eyes.

"'E makes faces enough for a 'ole band," Bindle had once whispered to Mrs. Hearty, who had brought the evening to a dramatic termination by incontinently collapsing.

"A laugh and an 'ymn got mixed," was Bindle's diagnosis.

It was soon after this episode that Bindle hit upon a happy idea for bringing to a conclusion these, to him, tedious evenings. Mrs. Bindle's favourite hymn was "Gospel Bells," whereas Mr. Hearty seemed to cherish an equally strong love for "Pull for the Shore, Sailors." Never were these hymns sung less than three times each during the course of the evening.

Bindle had thought of many ways of trying to end the performance. Once he had dexterously inserted his penknife in the bellows of the harmonium whilst looking for a pencil he was supposed to have dropped. This, however, merely added to the horror of the situation.

"The bloomin' thing blew worse than 'Earty," he said.

One evening he determined to put his new idea into practice. The gross volume of sound produced by the quartette with the harmonium was extremely small, and Bindle conceived the idea of drowning it.

"I'll stew 'em in their own juice," he muttered.

He had no voice, and very little idea either of tune or of time. What he did possess he was careful to forget. The first hymn in which he joined was "Pull for the Shore, Sailors."

From the first Bindle's voice proved absolutely uncontrollable. It wavered and darted all over the gamut, and as it was much louder than the combined efforts of the other three, plus the harmonium, Bindle appeared to be soloist, the others supplying a subdued accompaniment. Unity of effort seemed impossible. Whilst they were in the process of "pulling," he was invariably on "the shore"; and when they had arrived at "the shore," he had just started "pulling." Time after time they stopped to make a fresh start, but without improving the general effect.

Bindle showed great concern at his curious inability to keep with the others, and suggested retiring from the contest; but this Mr. Hearty would not hear of. To help matters he beat time with his hand, but as his vocal attitude was one of contemplation of the ceiling, generally with closed eyes, he very frequently hit Millie on the head, causing her to lose her place and forget the pedals, with the result that the harmonium died away in a moan of despair. Bindle, however, always went on. All he required was the words, to which he did full justice.

The evening was terminated by the collapse of Mrs. Hearty.

On the following day Bindle could not talk above a whisper.

One result of Bindle's vocal efforts had been that invitations to spend Sunday evenings with the Heartys had become less frequent, a circumstance on which Mrs. Bindle did not fail to comment.

"You're always spoilin' things for me. I enjoyed those evenin's," she complained.

"Shouldn't have arst me to sing," Bindle retorted. "Yer know I ain't a bloomin' canary, like you and 'Earty."

To Mr. Hearty the visits of the Bindles took on a new and more alarming aspect. Sunday was no day for secular things, and he dreaded his brother-in-law's reminiscences and comments on "parsons," and his views regarding religion. Sooner or later Bindle always managed to gather the desultory threads into his own hands.

"Y' oughter been a parson, 'Earty," Bindle remarked pleasantly one Sunday evening àpropos nothing. "So ought Ginger, if 'is language wasn't so 'ighly spiced. It's no good lookin' 'appy if you're a parson. Looks as if yer makin' a meal o' the soup in case the fish ain't fresh.

"I remember movin' a parson once," remarked Bindle, puffing away contentedly at a cigar he had brought with

him (Mr. Hearty did not smoke), now thoroughly well-launched upon a conversational monologue. "Leastways 'e was a missionary. 'E was due somewhere in Africa to teach niggers 'ow uncomfortable it is to 'ave a soul.

"'E 'ad to go miles into the jungle, and all 'is stuff 'ad to be carried on the 'eads of niggers. Forty pounds a man, and the nigger a-standin' by to see it weighed, an' refusin' to budge if it was a ounce overweight. I never knew niggers was so cute. This missionary was allowed about ten bundles o' forty pounds each. Lord! yer should 'ave seen the collection of stuff 'e'd got. About four ton. The manager worked it out that about two 'undred niggers 'ud be wanted.

"'E 'ad 'is double-bed; the top itself weighed seventy pounds. Wot a missionary wants with a double-bed in the jungle does me. 'E gave up the bedstead idea, an' 'e give it to me instead o' beer money. That's 'ow Mrs. B. comes to sleep in a missionary's bed. 'E stuck to a grandfather clock, though. Nothink could persuade 'im to leave it be'ind. The clock and weights was too much for one nigger, so I put the weights in wi' the tea-things."

"Oh, Uncle Joe!" from Millie.

"Yes, 'e's got the time in the jungle, but if 'e wants 'is tea 'e'll 'ave to drink it out of 'is boot. Them weights must 'ave made an 'oly mess of the crockery!"

At this juncture Mr. Hearty made a valiant effort to divert the conversation to the forthcoming missionary tea; but Bindle was too strong for him.

"There was one parson," he continued, "'oo was different from the others. 'E was a big gun. I moved 'im when 'e was made a dean. 'E'd come an' sit an' talk while we 'ad our dinner, which 'e used to give us. Beer too, 'Earty. No lemon flavourin' about 'im.

"One day I sez to 'im, 'Funny thing you bein' a parson, sir, if you'll forgive me sayin' so.'

"'Why?' he arst.

"'Well, you seem so 'appy, just like me and 'Uggles.' 'Uggles is always grinnin' when 'e ain't drunk.

"'E laughed as if it was the best joke 'e'd ever 'eard.

"'If religion don't make yer 'appy, it's the wrong religion,' 'e says.

"Now look at 'Earty and Lizzie; do they look 'appy?"

Mrs. Hearty and Millie looked instinctively at the two joyless faces.

"They got the wrong religion, sure as eggs," pronounced Bindle, well pleased at the embarrassment on the faces of Mrs. Bindle and Mr. Hearty. "I went to 'ear that cove preach. I liked 'is Gawd better'n yours, 'Earty. 'E didn't want to turn the next world into a sort of mixed grill. He was all for 'appiness and pleasure. I could be religious with a man like that parson. He was too good for 'is job.

"There's some people wot seem to spend their time a-inventin' 'orrible punishments in the next world for the people they don't like in this."

"I wish you'd learn 'ow to be'ave before your betters," remarked Mrs. Bindle, in the subdued voice she always adopted in the presence of Mr. Hearty. "I'm ashamed of you, Bindle, that I am."

"Don't you worry, Mrs. B. 'Earty knows me bark's worse'n me bite, don't yer, ole sport?"

Mr. Hearty shivered, but bared his teeth in token of Christian forbearance.

"An' now, Mrs. Bindle, it's 'ome and 'appiness and the missionary's bed."

As Bindle was in the hall, putting on his coat, Millie slipped out.

"Uncle," she whispered, "will you take me to the pictures one night?"

"O' course I will, little Millikins. Name the 'appy day."

"Friday," she whispered; "but ask before father; and uncle, will you put on your hard hat and best overcoat?"

Bindle eyed his niece curiously.

"Wot's up, Millikins?" he enquired; whereat Millie hid her face against his sleeve.

"I'll tell 'you Friday. You will come, won't you?" There was a tremor in her voice, and a sudden fear in her eyes.

"At seven-thirty J.B.'ll be 'ere at yer ladyship's service, 'at an' all. 'E'd put on 'is best face only 'e ain't got one.

"That pretty face of 'ers 'll cause 'Earty a nasty jar one of these days," muttered Bindle, as he and Mrs. Bindle walked home in silence.

CHAPTER V

BINDLE TRIES A CHANGE OF WORK

"Paintin' 'as its points," Bindle would remark, "that is, providin' it ain't outdoor paintin', when you're either on top of a ladder, which may be swep' from under yer and bang yer goes to Kingdom Come, or else you're 'angin' like a bally worm on an 'ook."

In the spring when moving was slack, Bindle invariably found a job as a painter. It was shortly after his encounter with Professor Conti that he heard hands were wanted at the Splendid Hotel, where a permanent staff of painters and decorators was kept. It was the pride of the management to keep the hotel spotless, and as it was always full, to give a wing bodily over to the painters and decorators would mean a considerable loss of revenue. Consequently all the work of renovation was done during the night.

The insides of the bedrooms were completely redecorated within the space of twenty-four hours. All corridors and common-rooms were done between midnight and the hot-water hour, special quick-drying materials being used; but most important of all was the silence of the workers.

"The bloomin' miracles," Bindle called the little army that transformed the place in the course of a few hours.

When first told of the system he had been incredulous, and on applying for a job to the foreman in charge he remarked:

"I've 'eard tell of dumb dawgs, mebbe it's true, and dumb waiters; but dumb painters—I won't believe it—it ain't natural."

The foreman had eyed him deliberately; then in a contemptuous tone, remarked:

"If you get this job you've got to go without winkin' or breathin' in case you make a noise. If you want to cough you've got to choke; if you want to sneeze you've got to bust instead. You'll get to like it in time."

"Sounds pleasant," remarked Bindle drily; "still, I'll join," he added with decision, "though it's like bein' a night-watchman in a museum."

The hours were awkward and the restrictions severe, but the pay was good, and Bindle had in his mind's eye the irate form of Mrs. Bindle with her inevitable interrogation, "Got a job?"

"You starts at eleven p.m.," proceeded the foreman, "and you leaves off at eight next mornin'—if you're lucky. If y'ain't you gets the sack, and leaves all the same."

At first Bindle found the work inexpressibly dreary. To be within a few yards of a fellow-creature and debarred from speaking to him was an entirely new experience. Time after time he was on the point of venturing some comment, checking himself only with obvious effort. He soon discovered, however, that if he were to make no noise he must devote his entire attention to his work.

"Mustn't drop a bloomin' brush, or fall over a bloomin' paint-pot," he grumbled, "but wot yer gets the sack. Rummy 'ole, this."

Once his brush slipped from his hand, but by a masterly contortion he recovered it before it reached the ground. The foreman, who happened to be passing at the time, eyed him steadily for several seconds, then with withering scorn remarked in a hoarse whisper as he turned on his heel:

"Paintin's your job, slippery, not jugglin'."

Not to be able to retort and wither an opponent was to Bindle a new experience; but to remain silent in the face of an insult from a foreman was an intolerable humiliation. To Bindle foremen were the epitome of evil. He had

once in a moment of supreme contempt remarked to his brother-in-law:

"Call yerself a man, 'Oly Moses! I've seen better things than you in bloomin' foremen's jobs!"

Mr. Hearty had not appreciated the withering contempt that underlay this remark, being too much aghast at its profanity. Bindle had said to his wife:

"You and 'Earty is always so busy lookin' for sin that you ain't time to see a joke."

Bindle quickly tired of the work, and after a few days allowed it to transpire, as if quite casually, that he was a man of many crafts. He gave his mates to understand, for instance, that he was a carpenter of such transcendental ability as to be entirely wasted as a painter. He threw out the hint in the hope that it might reach the ears of the foreman and result in an occasional change of work.

He was inexpressibly weary of this silent painting. The world had changed for him.

"Sleepin' all the sunny day," he grumbled, "and dabbin' on paint all the bloomin' night; not allowed to blow yer nose, an' me not knowin' the deaf-and-dumb alphabet."

He would probably have been more content had it not been for the foreman. He had known many foremen in his time, but this man carried offensiveness to the point of inspiration. He had been at his present work for many years, and was consequently well versed in the arts of conveying insult other than by word of mouth.

He was possessed of many gestures so expressive in their power of humiliating contempt, that upon Bindle their effect was the same as if he had been struck in the face. One of these Bindle gathered he had learned from a sailor, who had assured him that in Brazil the inevitable response was the knife. Ever after, Bindle had a great respect for the Brazilian, and the laws of a country that permitted the arbitrary punishment of silent insult.

Henceforward the foreman became the centre of Bindle's thoughts. Too genial and happy-go-lucky by nature himself to nourish any enmity against his superior, Bindle was determined to teach him a lesson, should the chance occur. The man was a bully, and Bindle disliked bullies. At last his chance came, much to Bindle's satisfaction, as a result of his own foresight in allowing it to become known that he possessed some ability as a carpenter.

The third floor corridor, known as No. 1 East, was to be redecorated. In painting the doors all the numbers, which were separate figures of gun-metal, had to be removed before the painting was commenced and replaced after it was completed. This required great care, not only that the guests might not be awakened, but that the partially dried paint might not be smeared. The foreman always performed this delicate operation himself, regarding it as of too great importance to entrust to a subordinate.

On this particular occasion, however, the foreman had received an invitation to a beanfeast at Epping. This was for the Saturday, and the corridor was to be redecorated on the Friday night. As an early start was to be made, the foreman was anxious to get away and obtain some sleep that he might enjoy the day to its full extent.

He had done all he could to postpone the work until the next week, but without success, so it became necessary for him either to find a substitute, or go weary-eyed and sleepless to his pleasure.

For a man of the social temperament of the foreman to decline such an invitation was unthinkable.

Just as he had arrived at the conclusion that he would have to go straight from work, his eye lighted on Bindle, and remembering what he had heard about his varied abilities, he beckoned him to follow to a room that temporarily served as an Office of Works. Inside the room Bindle gazed expectantly at his superior.

"I 'ear you've been a carpenter," the foreman began.

"Funny 'ow rumours do get about," remarked Bindle pleasantly. "I remember when my brother-in-law, 'Earty's 'is name—ever met him? Quaint ole bird, 'Earty.—Well, when 'e——"

"Never mind 'im," returned the foreman, "can you 'andle a screw-driver?"

"'Andle any think except a woman. Married yerself?" Bindle interrogated with significance.

Ignoring the question the foreman continued: "Can you take the numbers off them rosy doors in the east corridor, and put 'em back again to-night without makin' a stutterin' row?"

"Me?" queried Bindle in surprise.

"I got to go to a funeral," continued the foreman, avoiding Bindle's eye, "an' I want to get a bit o' sleep first."

Bindle eyed his superior curiously.

"Funny things, funerals," he remarked casually. "Goin' to 'ave a cornet on the 'earse?"

"A what?"

"The last time I went to a funeral the guv'nor saw me on the box, next to Ole 'Arper, and all the boys a-shoutin' somethink about 'Ope and Glory. The ole guv'nor didn't ought to 'ave been out so early. Ole 'Arper could play; 'e'd wake a 'ole village while another man was thinkin' about it," he added reminiscently.

"It's my mother wot's dead," said the foreman dully, unequal to the task of stemming the tide of Bindle's loquacity and at the same time keeping on good terms with him.

"Yer mother? I'm sorry. Buryin' 'is mother twice got 'Oly Jim into an 'orrible mess. He fixed 'er funeral for February—all serene; but wot must he go an' do, the silly 'Uggins, but forget all about it and start a-buryin' of 'er again in June. 'Is guv'nor used to keep a book o' buryin's, and it took Jim quite a long time to explain that 'is buryin' of 'er twice all come about through 'im bein' a twin."

The foreman's impatience was visibly growing. "Never you mind about Jim, 'oly or otherwise. Can yer take off and put on again them numbers?"

Then after a pause he added casually, nodding in the direction of a cupboard in the corner:

"There's a couple of bottles o' beer and some bread an' cheese an' pickles in that cupboard."

Bindle's face brightened, and thus it was that the bargain was struck.

When Bindle left the room it was with the knowledge that his superior had been delivered into his hands. He did not then know exactly how he intended to compass the foreman's downfall. Inspiration would come later. It was sufficient for him to know that correction was to be administered where correction was due.

In Bindle there was a strong sense of justice, and his sympathies were all with his mates, who suffered the foreman's insults rather than lose good jobs. Bindle was always popular with his fellow-workers. They liked and respected him. He was free with his money, always ready with a joke or a helping hand, was sober and clean of speech without appearing to notice any defect in others save on very rare occasions. He had been known to fight and beat a bigger man than himself to save a woman from a thrashing, and when Mrs. Bindle had poured down reproaches upon his head on account of his battered appearance, he had silently gone to bed and simulated sleep, although every inch of his body ached.

It was about nine o'clock in the evening that the foreman had seen in Bindle the means of his obtaining some sleep and arriving at his bean-feast refreshed. At eleven o'clock he left the hotel, after having given to his deputy the most elaborate instructions. His parting words filled Bindle with unholy joy.

"If anythin' goes wrong I'll lose my job, and don't you forget it." Bindle promised himself that he would not.

"I'll not forget it, ole son," he murmured, with the light of joy in his eyes. "I'll not forget it. It's your beano to-morrow, but it's goin' to be mine to-night. Last week yer sacked poor ole Teddy Snell, an' 'im wi' seven kids," and Bindle smiled as St. George might have smiled on seeing the dragon.

For some time after the foreman's departure, Bindle cogitated as to how to take full advantage of the situation which had thus providentially presented itself. Plan after plan was put aside as unworthy of the occasion.

There are great possibilities for "little jokes" in hotels. Bindle remembered an early effort of his when a page-boy. The employment had been short-lived, for on his first day the corridors were being recarpeted. The sight of a large box of exceedingly long carpet nails left by the workmen at night had given him an idea. He had crept from his room and carefully lifted the carpet for the whole length of the corridor, inserting beneath it scores of carpet nails points upwards; later he had sounded the fire alarm and watched with glee the visitors rush from their rooms only to dance about in anguish on the points of the nails, uttering imprecations and blasphemies.

This effort had cost him his job and a thrashing from his father, but it had been worth it.

It was, however, merely the crude attempt of a child.

It was one of the chambermaids, a rosy-cheeked girl recently up from the country, who gave Bindle the idea he had been seeking. As he was unscrewing the numbers with all the elaborate caution of a burglar, he felt a hand upon his shoulder, and found the chambermaid beside him.

"Mind you put them numbers back right," she whispered, "or I shan't know t'other from which."

Bindle turned and eyed her gravely.

"My dear," he remonstrated, "I'm a married man, and if Mrs. Bindle was to see you wi' yer arm round me neck—wot!"

The pretty chambermaid had soundly boxed his ears.

"A girl would have to have tired arms to rest them round *your* neck," she whispered, and tripped off down the corridor.

For some minutes Bindle worked mechanically. His mind was busy with the chambermaid's remark. At the end of half an hour all the numbers were removed and the painters busy on the doors. Bindle returned to the Office of Works.

"'Oly angels," he muttered joyously, as he attacked the bread and cheese and pickles, and poured out a glass of beer. "'Oly angels, if I was to forget, and get them numbers mixed, an' them bunnies wasn't able to get back to their 'utches!"

He put down his glass, choking. When he had recovered his breath, he wiped his eyes with the back of his hand, finished his meal, and returned to the corridor.

It was the rule of the hotel that no workmen should be seen about after seven-thirty. Just before that hour Bindle had completed his work of replacing the numbers on the doors, and had removed from the corridor the last traces of the work that had been in progress. He returned to the Office of Works which commanded a view of the whole length of the East Corridor. He was careful to leave the door ajar so that he had an uninterrupted view. He sat down and proceeded to enjoy the morning paper which the "Boots" had brought him, the second bottle of the foreman's beer, and the remains of the bread and cheese.

"Shouldn't be surprised if things was to 'appen soon," he murmured, as he rose and carefully folded the newspaper.

CHAPTER VI

THE HOTEL CORRIDOR

I

As Bindle watched, a face peeped cautiously round the door of one of the bedrooms. It was a nervous, ascetic face, crowned by a mass of iron-grey hair that swept from left to right, and seemed to be held back from obliterating the weak but kindly blue eyes only by the determination of the right eyebrow.

The face looked nervously to the right and to the left, and then, as if assured that no one was about, it was followed by a body clothed in carpet slippers, clerical trousers and coat, with a towel hanging over its shoulders.

"Parson," muttered Bindle, as the figure slid cautiously along the corridor towards him.

At the sight of Bindle emerging from the Office of Works the clergyman started violently.

"C-c-can you direct me to the bath-room, please?" he enquired nervously.

"Ladies' or gents', sir?" demanded Bindle.

"Ladies', of—I mean gentlemen's." The pale face flushed painfully, and the tide of hair refused to be held back longer and swept down, entirely obliterating the right eye.

"Must 'ave forgot 'is dressin'-gown," remarked Bindle, as the cleric disappeared round a corner in the direction of the bath-room furthest from his own room, to which he had been directed.

"'E must get over that nervousness of 'is," was Bindle's excuse to himself, as he returned to his room.

He was just wiping his mouth on his coat sleeve after draining the last drop of beer, when he heard a suppressed scream from the corridor. He opened the door suddenly, and was startled to find himself confronted by a woman of uncertain age in an elaborate rose-pink négligé and mob cap—beneath which was to be seen a head suspiciously well-coiffed for that hour of the morning.

"Oh! Oh!! Oh!!!" she gasped, as she entered the room, obviously labouring under some great emotion.

"Anythink I can do, miss?" enquired Bindle respectfully, marvelling at the make-up that lay thick upon her withered cheeks.

"Looks like an apple wot they've forgot to pluck," he commented inwardly. "Anythink I can do, miss?"

"There's—there's a—a m-m-man in my room," she gasped.

"A wot, miss?" enquired Bindle in shocked surprise.

"A m-m-man."

"Yer 'usband, mum," Bindle suggested diplomatically.

"I haven't got one," she stuttered. "Oh! it's dreadful. He—he's in my bed, and he's bald, and he's got black whiskers."

Bindle whistled. "'Ow long's 'e been there, miss?" he enquired.

"I went to the bath-room and—and he was there when I got back. It's horrible, dreadful," and two tears that had

hung pendulously in the corner of her eyes decided to made the plunge, and ploughed their way through the make-up, leaving brown trails like devastating armies.

"Oh, what shall I do?"

"Well, since you arst me, miss, I shouldn't say any think about it," replied Bindle.

"Nothing about it, nothing about a man being in my bed?" She was on the verge of hysterics. "What do you mean?"

"Well, miss, 'otels is funny places. They might put 'im on the bill as a extra."

"You—you——"

What it was that Bindle most resembled he did not wait to hear, but with great tact stepped out into the corridor, closing the door behind him.

"Some'ow I thought things would 'appen," he murmured joyously.

A few yards from him he saw the form of a fair-haired youth, immaculately garbed in a brilliantly hued silk kimono, with red Turkish slippers and an eye-glass. He was gazing about him with an air of extreme embarrassment.

"Hi! You!" he called out.

Bindle approached the young exquisite.

"There's—er—someone got into my room by mistake. She's in my bed, too. What the devil am I to do? Awfully awkward, what!"

Bindle grinned, the young man laughed nervously. He was feeling "a most awful rip, you know."

"Some people gets all the luck," remarked Bindle with a happy grin. "A lady 'as just complained that she's found a man in 'er bed, bald 'ead and black whiskers an' all, an' now 'ere are you a-sayin' as there's a girl in yours. 'As she a bald 'ead and black whiskers, sir?"

"She's got fair hair and is rather pretty, and she's asleep. I stole out without waking her. Now, I can't walk about in this kit all day." He looked down at his elaborate deshabille. "I must get my clothes, you know. How the deuce did she get there? I was only away twenty minutes."

Bindle scratched his head.

"You're in a difficult sort of 'ole, sir. I'm afraid it's like once when I went a-bathin', and a dog went to sleep on me trousers and growled and snapped when I tried to get 'em away. I 'ad to go 'ome lookin' like an 'Ighlander."

"Look here," remarked the young man. "I'll give you a sovereign to go and fetch my things. I'll dress in a bath-room."

He was a really nice young man, one who has a mother and sisters and remembers the circumstance.

"I'm afraid Mrs. Bindle—my wife, sir, my name's Bindle, Joseph Bindle—wouldn't like it, sir. She's very particular, is Mrs. B. I think yer'd better go in there," indicating the Office of Works, "an' I'll call the chambermaid."

"Ah, that's a brainy idea," remarked the youth, brightening. "I never thought of that."

Bindle opened the door and the youth entered.

There was a shrill scream from the pink négligé.

"It's all right, miss. This gentleman's like yerself, sort o' got hisself mixed up. There's a lady in 'is room—ahem!

in 'is bed too. Kind o' family coach goin' on this mornin', seems to me."

The youth blushed rosily, and was just on the point of stammering apologies for his garb, when a tremendous uproar from the corridor interrupted him.

Bindle had purposely left the door ajar and through the slit he had, a moment previously, seen the clergyman disappear precipitately through one of the bedroom doors. It was from this room that the noise came.

"Mon Dieu!" shrieked a female voice. "Il se battent. À moi! à moi!" There were hoarse mutterings and the sound of blows.

"'Ere, you look arter each other," Bindle cried, "it's murder this time." And he sped down the corridor.

He entered No. 21 to find locked together in a deadly embrace the clergyman and a little bald-headed man in pyjamas. In the bed was a figure, Bindle mentally commended its daintiness, rising up from a foam of frillies and shrieking at the top of her voice "silly things wot wasn't even words," as Bindle afterwards told Mrs. Hearty.

"Mon Dieu! Mon Dieu! Il sera tué!"

"Regular fightin' parson," muttered Bindle, as he strove to part the men. "If 'e don't stop a-bumpin' 'is 'ead on the floor 'e'll break it. 'Ere, stop it, sir. Yer mustn't use 'is 'ead as if it was a cokernut and yer wanted the milk. Come orf!"

Bindle had seized the clergyman from behind, and was pulling with all his strength as he might at the collar of a bellicose bull-terrier.

"Come orf, yer mustn't do this sort o' thing in an 'otel. I'm surprised at you, sir, a clergyman too."

Half choking, the clergyman rose to his feet, and strove to brush the flood of hair from his eyes. His opponent seized the opportunity and flew back to bed, where he sat trying to staunch the blood that flowed from his nose and hurling defiance at his enemy.

"Wot's it all about?" enquired Bindle.

"I—I came back from my bath and found this man in my bed with a—a——"

"Ma femme," shrieked the little Frenchman. "Is it not that we have slept here every night for——"

"'Ush, sir, 'ush!" rebuked Bindle over his shoulder with a grin. "We don't talk like that in England."

"Sort of lost yer way, sir, and got in the wrong room," Bindle suggested to the clergyman.

"He rushed at me and kicked me in the—er—stom—er—well, he kicked me, and I—I forget, and I—I——"

"Of course yer did, sir; anyone 'ud 'a done the same."

Then to the Frenchman Bindle remarked severely:

"Yer didn't ought to 'ave kicked 'im, 'im a clergyman too. Fancy kicking a clergyman in the—well, where you kicked 'im. Wot's the number of yer room, sir?" he enquired, turning to the clergyman.

"Twenty-one; see, it's on the door."

Bindle looked; there was "21" clear enough.

"Wot's yer number, sir?" he asked the Frenchman.

"Vingt-quatre."

"Now don't you go a-using none of them words 'fore a clergyman. Wot's yer number? that's wot I'm arstin'."

"Twenty-four—vingt-quatre."

"Well," said Bindle with decision, "you're in the wrong room."

"Mais c'est impossible," cried the Frenchman. "We have been here all night. Is it not so, cherie?" He turned to his wife for corroboration.

Bindle had no time to enter further into the dispute. Suddenly a fresh disturbance broke out further along the corridor.

"What the devil do you mean by this outrage, sir?" an angry and imperious voice was demanding. "What the devil do you——"

With a hasty word to the clergyman, who now looked thoroughly ashamed of himself, and a gentle push in the direction of the Office of Works, Bindle trotted off to the scene of the new disturbance. He heard another suppressed scream from the pink négligé betokening the entry of the clergyman.

"What the devil do you mean by entering my room?"

A tall, irate man, with the Army stamped all over him, dressed in pyjamas, with a monocle firmly wedged in his left eye, was fiercely eyeing a smaller man in a bath-robe.

"Not content with having got into my room, but damme, sir, you must needs try and get into my trousers. What the devil do you mean by it?"

Bindle looked along the corridor appreciatively. "Looks like a shipwreck at night, it do," he remarked to the chambermaid.

"It's my room," said the man in the bathrobe.

"Confound you," was the reply, "this is my room, and I'll prosecute you for libel."

"My room is No. 18," responded the other, "and I left my wife there half an hour ago."

He pointed to the figures on the door in proof of his contention. The man in the monocle looked at the door, and a puzzled expression passed over his face.

"Damme," he exploded, "my room is No. 15, but I certainly slept in that room all night." He darted inside and reappeared a moment after with his trousers in his hand.

"Here are my trousers to prove it. Are these your trousers?" The man in the bath-robe confessed that they were not.

"That seems to prove it all right, sir," remarked Bindle, who had come up. "A man don't sleep in a different room from his trousers, leastways, unless 'e's a 'Ighlander."

Similar disturbances were taking place along the corridor. The uproar began to attract visitors from other corridors, and soon the whole place was jammed with excited guests, in attire so varied and insufficient that one lady, who had insisted on her husband accompanying her to see what had happened, immediately sent him back to his room that his eyes might not be outraged by the lavish display of ankles and bare arms.

The more nervous among the women guests had immediately assumed fire to be the cause of the disturbance, and thinking of their lives rather than of modesty and decorum, had rushed precipitately from their rooms.

"It might be a Turkish bath for all the clothes they're wearin'," Bindle whispered to the exquisite youth, who with his two fellow-guests had left the Office of Works. "Ain't women funny shapes when they ain't braced up!"

The youth looked at Bindle reproachfully. He had not yet passed from that period when women are mysterious and wonderful.

At the doors of several of the rooms heated arguments were in progress as to who was the rightful occupant. Inside they were all practically the same, that was part of the scheme of the hotel. The man with the monocle was still engaged in a fierce altercation with the man in the bath-robe, who was trying to enter No. 18.

"My wife's in there," cried the man in the bath-robe fiercely.

At this moment the deputy-manager appeared, a man whose face had apparently been modelled with the object of expressing only two emotions, benignant servility to the guests and overbearing contempt to his subordinates. As if by common consent, the groups broke up and the guests hastened towards him. His automatic smile seemed strangely out of keeping with the crisis he was called upon to face. Information and questions poured in upon him.

"There's a girl in my bed."

"There's a man in my room."

"Somebody's got into my room."

"Is it fire?"

"It's a public scandal."

"This man has tried to take my trousers."

"Look here, I can't go about in this kit."

"I left my wife in room 18, and I can't find her."

"I shall write to *The Times*."

"I protest against this indecent exhibition."

The more questions and remarks that poured down upon him, the more persistently the deputy-manager smiled. He looked about him helplessly. Hitherto in the whole of his experience all that had been necessary for him to do was to smile and promise attention, and bully his subordinates. Here was a new phase. He wished the manager had not chosen this week-end for a trip to Brighton.

The eyes of the deputy-manager roved round him like those of a trapped animal seeking some channel of escape. By a lucky chance they fell upon the fireman who was just preparing to go off duty. The deputy-manager beckoned to him; the smile had left his face, he was now talking to a subordinate.

"What's the meaning of this?" he enquired.

The fireman looked up and down the corridor. He had been at the hotel over ten years, that is, since its opening, and knew every inch of the place. From the crowd of figures he glanced along the corridor. He was a man of few words.

"Somebody's been 'avin' a joke. The numbers 'ave all been changed. That," pointing to No. 18, "is No. 15, and that," pointing to No. 24, "is No. 21."

At the fireman's words angry murmurs and looks were exchanged. Each of the guests suspected the others of the joke. The fireman, who was a man of much resource as well as of few words, quickly solved the problem by obtaining some envelopes and putting on the doors the right numbers. Within a quarter of an hour every guest had found either his clothes, his lost one, or both, and the corridor was once more deserted.

"Well," murmured Bindle, as he stepped out of the service lift, "I s'pose they won't be wantin' me again, so I'll

go 'ome an' get a bit o' sleep." And he walked off whistling gaily, whilst the fireman searched everywhere for the one man the deputy-manager most desired to see.

II

On the Monday evening following the hotel episode Mr. and Mrs. Bindle were seated at supper. Bindle had been unusually conversational. He was fortunate in having that morning obtained employment at a well-known stores. He was once more a pantechnicon-man. "King Richard is 'isself again," he would say, when he passed from a temporary alien employment to what he called the "legitimate."

He had felt it desirable to explain to Mrs. Bindle the cause of his leaving the Splendid Hotel. She had seen nothing at all humorous in it, and Bindle had studiously refrained from any mention of women being in the corridors.

He had just drawn away from the table, and was sitting smoking his pipe by the fire, when there was a loud knock at the outer door. He looked up expectantly.

Mrs. Bindle went to the door. From the passage he heard a familiar voice enquiring for him. It was Sanders, the foreman, who followed Mrs. Bindle into the room. He made no response to Bindle's pleasant, "Good-evenin'."

"D'you know what you done?" enquired Sanders aggressively. "You lost me my ruddy job. You did it a-purpose, and I've come to kill yer."

"Ain't yer 'ad enough of buryin'?" enquired Bindle significantly. "Buryin' yer mother on Saturday, and now yer wants to kill yer ole pal on Monday."

The menacing attitude of the foreman had no effect upon Bindle. He had a great heart and would cheerfully have stood up to a man twice the size of Sanders. The foreman made a swift movement in the direction of Bindle.

"You stutterin', bespattered——Gawd!"

Mrs. Bindle, seeing that trouble was impending, had armed herself with a very wet and very greasy dishcloth, which she had thrown with such accurate aim as to catch the foreman full in the mouth.

"You dirty 'ound," she vociferated, "comin' into a Christian 'ome and usin' that foul language. You dirty 'ound, I'll teach yer."

Mrs. Bindle's voice rose in a high crescendo. She looked about her for something with which to follow up her attack and saw her favourite weapon—the broom.

"You dirty-mouthed tyke," she cried, working herself into a fury. "You blasphemin' son o' Belial, take that." Crack came the handle of the broom on the foreman's head. Without waiting to observe the result, and with a dexterous movement, she reversed her weapon and charged the foreman, taking him full in the middle with the broom itself. In retreating he stumbled over the coal-scuttle, and sat down with a suddenness that made his teeth rattle.

Bindle watched the episode with great interest. Never had he so approved of Mrs. Bindle as at that moment. Like a St. George threatening the dragon she stood over the foreman.

"Now then, will yer say it again?" she enquired menacingly. There was no response. "Say, 'God forgive me,'" she ordered. "Say it," she insisted, seeing reluctance in the foreman's eye. "Say it, or I'll 'it yer on yer dirty mouth with this 'ere broom. I'm a daughter of the Lord, I am. Are yer goin' to say it or shall I change yer face for yer?"

"God forgive me," mumbled the foreman, in a voice entirely devoid of contrition.

Mrs. Bindle was satisfied. "Now up yer get, and orf yer go," she said. "I won't 'it yer again if yer don't talk, but

never you think to come a-usin' such words in a Christian 'ome again."

The foreman sidled towards the door warily, When he was within reach of it he made a sudden dive and disappeared.

Bindle regarded his wife with approval as she returned from banging the door after him.

"I didn't know," he remarked, "that they taught yer that sort of thing at chapel. I likes a religion that lets yer do a bit in the knock-about business. Can't understand you and 'Earty belongin' to the same flock of sheep. Rummy thing, religion," he soliloquised, as he applied a match to his pipe; "seems to 'ave its Bank 'Olidays, same as work."

CHAPTER VII

BINDLE COMMITS AN INDISCRETION

"Anyone would think you was goin' to a weddin'." Mrs. Bindle eyed Bindle aggressively.

"Not again; I got one little canary bird; two might make me un'appy."

Bindle had remembered his promise to his niece, Millie, in every particular, and had added as his own contribution a twopenny cigar resplendent in a particularly wide red-and-gold band, which he had been careful not to remove.

"Anythink might 'appen to me in this get-up," he remarked pleasantly, "so don't expect me till I'm 'ome——"

"You never take me out," broke in Mrs. Bindle stormily, "but you can take that chit of a girl out first time she asks."

"You don't like the pictures, Mrs. B., they ain't 'oly enough, an' some of the young women in 'em are a bit generous like with showin' their ankles—but there, there!"

"You used to take me out before we was married," replied Mrs. Bindle, ignoring Bindle's remark.

Bindle looked at her curiously.

"Them was the days when yer wasn't above goin' to a music-'all. There ain't nowhere to take yer 'cept the chapel, an' I don't enjoy it as you an' 'Earty do."

"Where do you expect to go to?" demanded Mrs. Bindle angrily. She always became angry when mention was made of the pleasures she once enjoyed. "Where do you expect to go to?"

"Well," remarked Bindle judicially, "accordin' to you an' 'Earty it's a place where yer don't 'ave to pay no water rates."

Mrs. Bindle sniffed derisively.

"Look 'ere, my one an' only," continued Bindle, "I got to 'ave a pretty bad time in the next world, accordin' to wot you an' 'Earty believes, so I'm goin' to the pictures an' I'll 'ave a drink or two in this. If I was as sure of 'eaven as you an' 'Earty is, maybe I'd be more careful."

Mrs. Bindle banged the iron she was using down upon the rest, but made no comment.

"Well, see you later, if I'm lucky," said Bindle, and he was gone.

He found Millie in a fever of expectation. She opened the door to him herself, looking very pretty and smart in her Sunday hat.

"I was so afraid you'd forget, uncle," she whispered, snuggling against him as they walked along. "You look so nice," she added.

Bindle looked down at himself and grinned.

"I pays for dressin'," he observed. "The cigar was me own idea. It gives a sort o' finish, eh, Millikins?"

They walked past the Fulham Grand Theatre, and at the Cinema Palace on the Fulham side of the bridge Bindle paused.

"Not this one, the one over the bridge," Millie cried anxiously.

"Further to walk for yer ole uncle."

"But—but—" faltered Millie, "Charlie Chaplin's at the other and I do so want to see him."

"Charlie Chaplin's 'ere too, Millikins. Look, it says so."

"Oh, uncle, please, *please*, the other one." There were tears in Millie's eyes and her voice shook.

Bindle was puzzled, but to please her he would have walked over many bridges.

"Uncle, you *are* good," was all she said as she smiled at him happily.

They passed over the bridge in silence, watching the stream of trams, buses, and people. When with Millie, Bindle never ventured upon those little personalities in which he indulged when alone.

"Do yer like chapel, Millikins?" Bindle enquired suddenly.

"I hate it, Uncle Joe!" There was such feeling and decision in Millie's voice that Bindle turned and regarded her curiously.

"Why?"

"I want to be happy, oh! I do so want to be happy, Uncle Joe." There was almost a sob in Millie's voice and her eyes were moist with unshed tears.

Bindle said nothing, but he pondered deeply as they walked slowly along. When they saw the brilliant lights of the Putney Pavilion Millie visibly brightened.

As they entered Millie looked eagerly round, and a sigh of contentment escaped her as her eyes rested on a tall, pale-faced youth who stood smoking a cigarette. He raised his hat about an inch from his head, squaring his elbow in the process as if saluting. The action was awkward and sheepish.

Bindle looked from the young man to Millie, then remembering Millie's distress at his suggestion of going to the other cinema, light dawned upon him. With elaborate courtesy, and to the youth's obvious astonishment, he returned the salute, then walking across seized his hand and shook it effusively.

"Millikins, this is a young man I used to know, but 'ave forgotten. 'E remembers me, 'owever, and that's all that matters. This is me niece Millie," he added to the youth who, staring in utter bewilderment from Bindle to Millie, stood with downcast head.

"Goin' in to see the pictures?" Bindle enquired casually.

"Er—no—er—yes, of course," stuttered the youth.

"Nice evenin' for pictures," continued Bindle, thoroughly enjoying the situation. "Don't yer think so?" he added, as the youth did not reply.

"Yes, very."

"Now you an' me's ole pals, but I've quite forgot yer name. Is it 'Orace?"

"Dixon, Charlie Dixon." A faint smile flickered across the young man's face as he caught Millie's eye. He was beginning to realise that somewhere in this astonishing adventure there was fun, and that Bindle had been first to see it.

For some seconds Bindle, who was a shrewd judge of character, regarded the young man. He was obviously nervous, but his grey eyes looked out honestly from a rather pleasant face into those of Bindle.

Suddenly he laughed. Millie looked from one to the other, her pretty brows puckered. The situation was

obviously beyond her.

"Uncle, I want to speak to you, *please*." Millie's voice was scarcely audible.

"All right, my dear, we'll go and buy the tickets. You wait here, young feller," he added. "We'll be back in two ticks."

When out of earshot Millie whispered shyly, "That's Charlie Dixon, and we—we like each other, and I'm—I'm a wicked girl, Uncle Joe. I told him to be here and——"

"That's all right, Millikins, don't you worry."

Millie gave his arm an ecstatic squeeze as he left her to purchase the tickets.

When Bindle and his niece rejoined Charlie Dixon Bindle's mind was made up. He liked the look of the young man. He also remembered his own youth, and a glance at the happy face of his niece decided him upon his course of action.

"'Ow long 'ave yer known each other?" he enquired.

"More than six months," replied Charlie Dixon.

"Seems a lifetime, eh?" he grinned.

"I knew you'd understand, dear Uncle Joe," whispered the now radiant Millie.

"Look 'ere," said Bindle to Charlie Dixon, "I jest remembered I got to see a mate round the corner. You two go in wi' these tickets and I'll follow in ten minutes. If I misses yer, be 'ere in this 'all at ten sharp. See?"

They both saw, and exchanged rapturous glances.

"Mind, ten sharp, or I'll get the sack."

"Thank you, Mr. Bindle," said Charlie Dixon, raising his hat, to which Bindle responded with an elaborate sweep that brought a smile to the face of the attendant.

Just before turning into Putney High Street Bindle looked round to see Millie and Charlie Dixon in earnest converse, walking slowly towards the door leading in to the pictures—and bliss.

Bindle sighed involuntarily. "I wonder if I done right. Funny thing me playin' Coopid. Wonder wot Mrs. B. and 'Earty 'ud say. There's goin' to be trouble, J. B., and you're a-goin' to get yerself in an 'oly sort o' mess. If it 'adn't been for petticoats yer might a' been Mayor of Fulham or Charlie Chaplin."

At a quarter to ten Bindle left a merry group of intimates at the Scarlet Horse, and a few minutes later was waiting in the vestibule of the Pavilion, where he was joined by the lovers.

"I never knew Millikins was such a pretty gal," muttered Bindle, as they approached. Then aloud, "Where'd you two got to? I been searchin' everywhere."

With a wealth of detail they explained exactly where they had been sitting.

"Funny I didn't see yer," remarked Bindle. "Now you two must say good-night; and," turning to the youth, "if yer'll follow across the bridge slowly, maybe I'll see yer outside the Grand Theatre after I've taken this young woman 'ome."

Millie was strangely silent as the three crossed Putney Bridge. She was thinking deeply of her new-found happiness and, as she gripped Bindle's arm with both hands, she felt that he represented her special Providence. She could tell him anything, for he understood. She would always tell Uncle Joe everything.

Outside Fulham Theatre she said good-night to Charlie Dixon.

"You ain't said a word since I met you, Millikins. Wot's up?" enquired Bindle, puzzled at Millie's silence.

"I've been wondering, Uncle Joe," replied the girl in a subdued voice.

"Wot about? Tell yer ole uncle."

"I've been wondering why you are so good to me, and why you don't think me a wicked girl." Then, turning to him anxiously, "You don't, Uncle Joe, do you?"

"Well, Millikins, there ain't any think very wicked, so far as I can see, in wantin' to be 'appy in the way you do. 'Is nibs looks a nice young chap, an' if 'e ain't 'e'll wish 'e'd never seen your ole uncle." There was a grim note in Bindle's voice that surprised his niece.

"You don't think God minds us being happy that—that way, do you, Uncle Joe?" questioned Millie earnestly.

"I'm sure 'E don't, Millikins. 'E's all for the 'appiness wot don't do nobody any 'arm. That parson chap told me, an' 'e was a dean or somethink, an' 'e ought to know."

Millie drew a sigh of relief. Then her mood suddenly changed.

"Uncle, let's run," she cried; and without waiting for the protest that was forming itself on Bindle's lips, she caught him by the hand and dashed off. After a moment's hesitation Bindle entered into her mood and the pair tore up Fulham High Street, Millie running obliquely in front, striving to urge Bindle to a greater pace.

Just as they reached the Heartys' private door, Mr. Hearty himself emerged on his way to post a letter. Millie running sideways did not see him. Bindle was unable to avoid the inevitable collision, and Millie's elbow took her father dead in the centre of his waistcoat and drove the breath out of his body.

"Oh, father!" cried his horrified daughter.

"Millie!" gasped Mr. Hearty when he had regained sufficient breath for speech.

"My fault, 'Earty. I likes a run now and again; we was 'avin' a bit of a race. Millikins beats me in the matter o' legs."

To Mr. Hearty women had limbs, not legs, and he disliked intensely Bindle's reference to those of his daughter.

"I hope this will not occur again," he said severely. "I shall have to stop these—these——" Unable to find the word, Mr. Hearty passed on to the pillar-box.

Millie stood watching him, horror in her eyes.

"Oh, Uncle Joe, am I a very bad girl? Father always makes me feel so wicked."

"'E'd make an 'oly saint feel a bit of a rip. You're just about as bad as a first-class angel; but p'raps it 'ud be better not to 'old sports outside the shop. Might get me a bad name. Now in yer go, young 'un, an' we'll 'ave another bust next Friday, eh? I'll be seein' 'is nibs on me way 'ome."

"Good-night, dear Uncle Joe. I'm glad you're my uncle." She put her arms round his neck and kissed him, and Bindle experienced a curious sensation in his throat.

"Gawd bless yer, Millikins," Bindle mumbled in an unsteady voice, as she tripped along the passage.

"Fancy me sayin' that!" he muttered, as he closed the door. "It kind o' slipped out."

A few yards down the High Street Bindle met his brother-in-law returning from the post.

"I'm sorry, 'Earty, about that collision. It was all my fault. I like playin' wi' kids." There was an unaccustomed humility in Bindle's voice, assumed for the purpose of making things easier for Millie, that pleased Mr. Hearty.

"Millie is no longer a child, Joseph," he remarked, "but we'll say no more about it. I'm not hurt. Good-night." He bared his yellow teeth in token of forgiveness.

As he passed on, Bindle gazed up at the skies meditatively. "I wonder if Gawd really likes that sort?" he murmured with a seriousness that was unusual to him.

Outside the theatre he found waiting for him Charlie Dixon, who greeted him with:

"Will you bring her again, Mr. Bindle?"

"'Ere, I ain't a nurse, young feller. Nice mess you got me in. It's all through you that Millikins nearly killed 'er father. Ran clean into 'im and sort o' knocked the wind out of 'is bellows." Bindle told the story of the collision with great gusto.

"Now," he continued, "you and me's got to 'ave a talk, an' we'll 'ave a glass of beer at the same time."

Bindle learned the story of Millie's romance. It appeared that she and Charlie Dixon, who was in a shipping-office, went to the city by the same train every morning, Millie being a typist at a wholesale draper's. Young Dixon had watched her week after week, and he eventually became acquainted owing to a breakdown on the line, which resulted in a corresponding breakdown of the passengers' usual reserve. After that they went up regularly together, met at lunch, after business hours and on every occasion that Millie could possibly manage it. Once they had each obtained a half-holiday, which they had spent at the Zoo.

Charlie Dixon's frankness and obvious devotion to Millie Hearty entirely won Bindle's heart.

"You will help us, Mr. Bindle, won't you?" he pleaded.

"Look 'ere, young feller," said Bindle, with an unusual note of seriousness in his voice, "I don't know nothink about yer, an' before I 'elps I got to be sure wot I thinks yer are. Now you jest get me a letter or two from them as knows wot sort of a villain yer are, an' then p'r'aps I'll be the same sort of ole fool I been to-night. See?"

They parted with mutual regard and promises to meet again next Friday, when Charlie Dixon was to bring such documents as would vouch for his respectability.

"Yes; I been an ole fool," muttered Bindle, as he walked home. "This 'ere business is goin' to lead to trouble between me an' 'Earty. What a pity people gets it as bad as 'Earty. No man didn't ought to be religious all the week. It ain't natural."

That night Bindle entered his house whistling "Gospel Bells" with unaccustomed abandon.

"Been enjoyin' yerself, leavin' me at 'ome to slave and get yer meals ready," snapped Mrs. Bindle. "One o' these days you'll come 'ome and find me gone."

"'Oo's the man?" interrogated Bindle with a temerity that surprised himself.

That night Bindle lay awake for some time thinking over life in general and the events of the evening in particular. He never could quite understand why he had been precipitated into an atmosphere so foreign to his nature as that surrounding Mrs. Bindle and Mr. Hearty. He had striven very hard to stem the tide of religious gloom as it spread itself over Mrs. Bindle. Unaware of the cause, he not unnaturally selected the wrong methods, which were those of endeavouring to make her "cheer up."

"The idea of goin' to 'eaven seems to make her low-spirited," was Bindle's view.

Even Mrs. Bindle was not entirely proof against his sallies, and there were times when a reluctant smile would momentarily relieve the grim severity of her features. There were occasions even when they chatted quite amiably,

until the recollection of Mr. Hearty, and the mental comparison of his success with Bindle's failure, threw her back into the slough from which she had temporarily been rescued.

"There must be somethink funny about me," Bindle had once confided to Mrs. Hearty. "My father was as religious as a woman wi' one leg, then I gets Lizzie an' she turns away from me an' 'Mammon'—I don't rightly know 'oo 'e is, but she's always talkin' about 'im—then you goes back on me an' gives me a sort of brother-in-law 'oo's as 'oly as ointment. You ain't been a real pal, Martha, really you ain't."

If called upon to expound his philosophy of life Bindle would have found himself in difficulties. He was a man whose sympathies were quickly aroused, and it never troubled him whether the object of his charity were a heathen, a Christian, or a Mormon. On one occasion when a girl had been turned out of doors at night by an outraged father who had discovered his daughter's frailty, it was Bindle who found her weeping convulsively near Putney Pier. It was he who secured her a night's lodging, and stood her friend throughout the troubled weeks that followed, although it meant neither beer nor tobacco for some months.

On another occasion a mate had been ill, and it was Bindle who each week collected what pence he could from his fellow-workmen and made up from his own pocket the amount necessary to keep the man, his wife, and child. To do this he had done work as a whitewasher and labourer, never working less than one whole night a week in addition to his regular occupation, until his mate was well again.

No one knew of these little acts, which Bindle kept profound secrets. He would have felt ashamed had they become known, more particularly had Mrs. Bindle or Mr. Hearty heard of them.

Once he had remarked, apropos some remark of Mr. Hearty's regarding what in his opinion would be Heaven's attitude towards some unfortunate wretch who had stolen food for his wife, "I shouldn't like to 'ave a Gawd I'd sometimes 'ave to feel ashamed of," whereat Mr. Hearty had become very red and embarrassed.

CHAPTER VIII

THE GREAT CONSPIRACY

I

At Harridge's Stores Bindle had made himself very popular with the manager of the Furniture Removing Department. His cheery outlook on life, his racy speech and general trustworthiness resulted in his being frequently entrusted with special jobs where reliability was required.

When the order was received to supply the refreshments for the Barton Bridge Temperance Fête, Bindle was selected to go down to erect the marquee and stalls, and be generally responsible for the safe transit of the eatables and drinkables.

"Yer can always trust me wi' lemonade and religion," he had assured the manager. "I don't touch neither; they sort of goes to me 'ead."

The Barton Bridge Temperance Society had determined to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of its foundation in a manner that should attract to it the attention of the temperance world. After much deliberation and heart-burning, an English Rustic Fête had been decided upon.

The whole of the surrounding country had been put under contribution, and everyone had responded either with generosity or with scorn. Old Sir John Bilder, of Bilder's Entire, had replied with ponderous humour that he "would supply all the ale required." When he received a request for three gross of pint bottles of a particular kind of temperance ale he had been surprised. "Well, I'm damned!" was his comment; but being a sportsman he had sent the ale, which he regarded as a fair price for a good story.

Barton Bridge was proud of its Temperance Society, but prouder still of its breadth of mind. It had been a tradition for a quarter of a century that the Society should be non-sectarian. It is nothing to the discredit of Barton Bridge that the Temperance Society was the only thing in the place that had not been warped from its orbit by sect.

For a churchman to be discovered eating bread of Mr. Lacey's baking, Mr. Lacey being a nonconformist, would have meant social ostracism. He must, by virtue of his beliefs, masticate none but bread kneaded and baked by Mr. Carter, the church baker.

A one-time vicar had sought to demolish this "ridiculous wall of prejudice" by dealing alternately with church and chapel tradesmen. There had been no protest from the chapel people, but the indignation of the church tradesmen had been so great, and their absence from service so persistent, that the vicar had been forced to give way. Tolerance was an acquired habit rather than an instinctive virtue in Barton Bridge, and the temperance meetings were solemn minglings of bodies accompanied by a warring of souls.

A witty Frenchman has said that, "In order to preserve the purity of his home life, the Englishman invented the Continental excursion." It is a cynicism; but at least it shows how dear tradition is to the Englishman's heart. It was this same spirit of tradition that raised above the strife of sect the Barton Bridge Temperance Society.

The question of the doctor was another instance of the effect of tradition upon what, at first glance, might appear to be a grave problem. There was not room for two doctors at Barton Bridge, and no doctor could reasonably be expected to be a bi-religionist. It therefore became the accepted thing that the Barton Bridge doctor should attend neither church nor chapel; but it was incumbent upon him to become a member of the Temperance Society.

The catering for the Temperance Fête had at first presented a serious difficulty, and at one time had even threatened to divide the camp. The church party recoiled in horror from the thought of eating nonconformist sandwiches; whilst if the lemonade were of church manufacture it would mean that scores of dissenters would have

a thirsty afternoon.

The problem had been solved by Lady Knob-Kerrick, who insisted that the order should be placed with a London firm of caterers, which, as a limited company, could not be expected to have religious convictions. Thus it was that the order went to Harridge's Stores.

II

By eight o'clock on the morning of the Fête a pantechnicon was lumbering its ungainly way along the Portsmouth Road. Bindle sat meditatively on the tail-board, smoking and obviously bored.

With the wholesome contempt of an incorrigible cockney he contemplated the landscape.

"'Edges, trees, an' fields, an' a mile to walk for a drink. Not me," he muttered, relighting his pipe with solemn gravity.

As the pantechnicon rumbled its ponderous way through hamlet and village, Bindle lightly tossed a few pleasantries to the rustics who stood aside to gaze at what, to them, constituted an incident in the day's monotony of motor-cars and dust.

The morning advanced, and Bindle grew more direct in his criticisms on, and contempt for, the bucolic life. At last out of sheer loneliness he climbed up beside the driver.

"'Owd jer like to live 'ere, ole son?" he enquired pleasantly, as they approached a tiny hamlet where a woman, a child, and some ducks and chickens seemed to be the only living inhabitants.

"All right with a bit o' land," responded the driver, looking about him appreciatively.

Bindle gazed at his colleague curiously, then, feeling that they had nothing in common regarding the countryside, continued:

"Funny thing you an' me comin' to a temperance fête." Then regarding the driver's face critically, he proceeded: "'Ope you've got yer vanity-case wi' yer. You'll want to powder that nose o' yours 'fore the ladies come. Course it's indigestion, only they mightn't believe it."

The driver grunted.

"Fancy," continued Bindle, "'avin' to 'aul about chairs and make up tables a day like this, an' on lemonade too. Can't yer see it, mate, in glass bottles wi' lemons stuck in the tops and no froth?"

The driver grumbled in his throat.

The start had been an early one and he was dry, despite several ineffectual attempts to allay his thirst at wayside inns.

It was nearly eleven o'clock before a sprinkling of houses warned them that they were approaching Barton Bridge. Soon the pantechnicon was awaking echoes in the drowsy old High Street. Half-way along what is practically the only thoroughfare stands the Pack Horse, outside which the driver instinctively pulled up, and he and Bindle clambered down and entered, ostensibly to enquire the way to the Fête ground.

Behind the bar stood Mr. Cutts, wearing the inevitable red knitted cap without which no one had ever seen him during business hours. He was engaged in conversation with Dick Little, the doctor's son, and by common consent the black sheep of Barton Bridge. The subject of their talk was temperance. He showed no particular inclination to come forward, and Bindle was extremely thirsty.

After regarding the red cap for a moment Bindle approached the landlord.

"No offence, your 'Oliness! Sorry to be a noosance, but can yer tell me where the Temperance Fête is to be 'eld? Me and my mate is delegates come all the way from London. No; your 'Oliness is wrong, it's indigestion. That nose of 'is always takes a lot of explainin'."

Mr. Cutts flushed a deep purple at the reference to his cap. He wore it to hide his baldness, and was extremely sensitive. Dick Little laughed outright. It was he who answered Bindle.

"Half a mile up, and down the avenue of poplars."

"D' yer 'ear, mate?" Bindle turned to the driver. "D' yer know a poplar when yer see it? Same for me." The last remark referred to the driver's order for a pint of ale. After finishing his draught the driver went out to see to the watering of his horses, whilst Mr. Cutts, having cast at Bindle a look which he conceived to be of withering scorn, retired to his parlour.

"Seem to 'ave 'urt Old Bung's feelin's," Bindle remarked genially to Dick Little.

"You said you were going to the Temperance Fête?"

"Yes; we're carryin' along the buns, sangwidges, cakes, an' lemonade, likewise tents and things."

"Like a drink?" enquired Little.

"Well!" grinned Bindle judicially, as he surveyed his empty glass, "it would lay the dust a bit; provided," he added with mock gravity, "it ain't a split soda. Never could digest split sodas. Where's 'is 'Oliness?" he enquired, looking round.

"Never mind him," responded Little, taking a flask from his pocket. "Wash the glass out."

Bindle did so, and threw the water in a delicate line upon the floor. Little emptied the greater part of the contents of the flask into the glass held before him. With a happy look in his eyes Bindle took a short drink, tasted the liquid critically, looked at Little, then with a puzzled expression emptied the glass at the second attempt.

"Wot jer call it, sir? It's new to me," he remarked, as he replaced his glass upon the counter.

"It hasn't got a name yet. I make it myself. It's not bad, eh?"

"It beats all I've ever tasted, sir. It ain't for suckin'-babes, though. Pretty strong."

"Yes; you said you had lemonade for the Temperance Fête in there, didn't you?" enquired Little.

"Well, not exactly, sir. It's got to be watered down, see? Ther'll be about fifty gallons, 'sides bottled stuff."

"Are you open to earn a sovereign?" asked Little.

"Well, sir, it's funny you should arst that. Jest 'fore I came away from 'ome this morning my missus told me the Income Tax paper 'ad come in. That ole Lloyd George is fairly messin' up my estates. Yes, I don't mind if I do."

At this moment the driver put his head in at the door and muttered something about getting on.

"'Arf a mo', ole son," responded Bindle; then turning to Little added with a grin, "I makes it a rule never to keep me 'orses waitin', mister; the coachman gets so cross."

When Mr. Cutts returned to the bar he saw Dick Little in deep conversation with Bindle, which surprised him. He saw Bindle's face irradiating joy and heard him remark:

"'Old me, somebody, 'old me, I say! You jest leave it to me, sir."

Presently they both went out. A moment later the pantechnicon rumbled off, leaving Mr. Cutts still wondering.

The pantechnicon lumbered on towards the meadow adjoining Kerrick Castle, which had been placed at the disposal of the committee of the Temperance Society by its owner. On the tail-board sat Bindle, a metamorphosed Bindle. All the morning's gloom had vanished from his features, giving place to a joy not entirely due to the partial quenching of a persistent thirst.

Dick Little walked slowly home to an early lunch. He had many old scores to settle with Barton Bridge, and he realised that there was an excellent chance of a balance being struck that afternoon.

His one anxiety was lest his father should be involved. Between Dr. Little and his two sons, Dick and Tom, there was little in common save a great bond of affection. Dr. Little was serious-minded, inclined to be fussy, but of a generous nature and a genial disposition that gained for him the regard of all his patients. His son Dick was a rollicking dandy, an inveterate practical joker, and the leader of every mischievous escapade at St. Timothy's Hospital, known as "Tim's," where he enjoyed an all-round popularity.

III

By half-past one o'clock everything was ready for the Temperance Fête. The large marquee had been erected, the chairs and tables had been dotted about the meadow. Rustic stalls, gay with greenery and bunting, invited the visitor to refresh himself. In the centre of a roped-off space stood a gaily beribboned maypole.

A "cokernut shy," a Punch-and-Judy Show, and the old English game of Aunt Sally were some of the diversions provided. There was also to be Morris dancing, the dancers having been trained by Miss Slocum, the vicar's daughter, aided, for reasons of policy rather than individual prowess, by Miss McFie, the sister of the Congregational minister. The girl attendants in their gaily coloured dresses and sun-bonnets, and the men in smock-frocks and large straw hats, added picturesqueness to the scene.

Bindle's activity had been prodigious. With the ease of a man who is thoroughly conversant with his subject, he had taken charge of the drink department. The lemonade had been distributed to the various stalls, and the right amount of water added, according to the directions upon each cask. Every drop of water had been fetched under the supervision of Bindle himself.

On arriving at the Fête ground Bindle had gone direct to a corner of the meadow and brought forth half a dozen stone jars, each capable of holding about two gallons. The contents of these he had carefully poured into the casks containing the nucleus of the lemonade. These same jars had been subsequently used for fetching water with which to weaken the lemonade.

Finally they had been stowed away in the far end of the pantechnicon.

Bindle stood out in strong relief from the other workers, both on account of his costume and personality. He wore the green baize apron of his class. On his head was the inevitable cricket cap. His face had taken on the same hue as his nose, and the smile that irradiated his features transcended in its joyous abandon the smiles of all the others. For everyone he had a merry word. In the short space of two hours he had achieved an astonishing popularity.

By three o'clock the Fête was in full swing. Every stable in Barton Bridge was full, and the High Street presented a curious appearance, with its rows of horseless carriages, carts, and traps. The coach-houses and available sheds had all been utilised to give shelter to the scores of horses. The members of the committee, wearing big dark-blue rosettes, smiled largely their satisfaction. They knew that reporters were present from *The Blue Ribbon News* and *The Pure Water World*.

Bindle had entered into the spirit of the revelry in a way that attracted to him the attention of many members of the organising committee.

"An extremely droll fellow, quite a valuable addition to our attendants," the vicar remarked to the Rev. Andrew McFie, the young Congregational pastor, as they stood surveying the scene.

"An admeerable man, Meester Slocum," the cautious Scot had replied. "I have no wish to be uncharitable, but I meestrust his nose."

Entirely unconscious that he was a subject of conversation between the two shepherds of Barton Bridge, Bindle was standing behind a refreshment stall that he had appropriated to himself, surrounded by an amused crowd of revellers.

He was discoursing upon the virtues of lemonade upon a hot day. "Give 'er a drink, sir," he called to one sheepish-looking rustic, who stood grasping in his the hand of a lumpy, red-faced girl. "Give 'er a drink, sir, do, or she'll faint. 'Er tongue's almost 'anging out as it is. Be a sport. No, miss, it's no use your looking at me; my wife won't let me."

As they took their first sip of the much-praised lemonade, many looked wonderingly at Bindle. There was about it an unaccustomed something that they could not quite analyse or describe. Whatever it was, it was pleasant to the taste, and it gave them courage. Eyes that had previously been sheepish became merry, almost bold. The prospect of joy seemed nearer.

The fame of the lemonade soon spread. The fringes about the stalls deepened. The air became bright with shouts and laughter.

A spirit of wild revelry was abroad. The cokernut-shy was the centre of an uproarious throng. Balls were bought and flung with such wildness that none dared to replace the cokernuts that had been knocked off, or to fetch what by rights was his own property.

Mr. Slocum and Mr. McFie strolled round the grounds, sedately benign. They, the representatives of a Higher Power, must of necessity keep aloof from such pleasures, even temperance pleasures; still, they were glad to see about them evidences of such simple and wholesome gaiety.

With measured steps they approached a considerable group of young people who were laughing and shouting boisterously. When within about twenty yards of the crowd it suddenly opened out.

"It's a race, sir," shouted someone, and they smilingly stood aside to see the sport. A moment after their smiles froze upon their faces and gave place to a look of wonder and of horror. It was indeed a race; but such a race! Coming towards them were five youths, each bearing, pick-a-back fashion, a girl. There was an exhibition of feminine frilleries that caused the reverend gentlemen to gasp, to look at each other quickly and then turn hurriedly aside. When just opposite to where they stood, one couple came to the ground and the pair following immediately behind fell over the others. Mr. McFie blushed, and Mr. Slocum, remembering his companion's youth, gripped him by the arm and hurried him away with a muttered, "Dreadful, dreadful!"

No other word was spoken until they reached the refreshment-stall over which Bindle presided, and then the vicar once more murmured, "Dreadful!"

"Have you any tea?" enquired Mr. McFie, more from a desire to say something than a feeling of thirst.

"No, sir," responded Bindle, "tea's over there, sir. Try the lemonade, sir; it's A-1. It'll pull yer together, sir. Do try it, sir," Bindle added eagerly. "You look 'ot and tired, sir. It'll do yer good."

The two pastors looked curiously at Bindle, but accepted each without comment a glass of lemonade. They put it to their lips, tasted it, looked at each other and then drank greedily.

"Another, sir?" enquired Bindle of the vicar when he had finished his glass.

"Er ... no," murmured Mr. Slocum; but Bindle had already refilled his glass and was doing a like service for Mr. McFie. When they left the stall it was arm-in-arm, and Mr. McFie directed his steps to the spot where, a few minutes previously, he had received so severe a shock; but the sport was over and the crowd had dispersed.

CHAPTER IX

THE TEMPERANCE FÊTE

When Lady Knob-Kerrick drove round to the Fête ground she was surprised to find the gate open and unattended, but was rendered speechless with astonishment at the noise that assailed her ears. At first she thought there had been an accident; but in the medley of hoarse shouts and shrill screams she clearly distinguished the sound of laughter. She turned to Miss Isabel Strint, her companion, whom she always persisted in treating as she would not have dared to treat her maid. Miss Strint elevated her eyebrows and assumed a look that was intended to be purely tentative, capable of being developed into either horror or amusement.

"People say it takes beer to make the lower classes gay," remarked her ladyship grimly.

"I'm sure they couldn't make more noise if they were intoxicated," responded Miss Strint, developing the tentative look into one of amused tolerance.

"Strint, you're a fool!" remarked Lady Knob-Kerrick.

Miss Strint subsided.

Lady Knob-Kerrick looked round her disapprovingly. She was annoyed that no one should be there to welcome her.

"Strint, see if you can find Mr. Slocum and Mr. McFie, and tell them I am here." Then to the footman, "Thomas, come with me."

At that moment Dick Little came towards the small group.

"How d'you do, Lady Kerrick?" he smiled easily. "Delighted to be the first to welcome the Lady of the Feast. May I get you some refreshment?"

"You may not," was the ungracious response.

Lady Knob-Kerrick disliked both Little and his well-bred manner. She was accustomed to deference and servility. She also disapproved of what she conceived to be her daughter Ethel's interest in the doctor's son, and for that reason had not brought her to the Fête.

With a smile and a lifting of his hat, Little passed on in the direction of Barton Bridge.

Just as Lady Knob-Kerrick was preparing to descend from her carriage, a girl with a flushed face darted round the canvas screen that had been erected inside the gate. A moment after a man followed, coatless, hatless, and flushed. He caught her, lifted her in his arms and carried her back laughing and screaming. Neither had seen the carriage or its occupants. Tool, the coachman, looked only as a well-trained man-servant can look, wooden; but Thomas grinned, and was withered by his mistress's eye.

The man who had pursued and caught the girl was Mr. Marsh, the people's churchwarden, a widower with grown-up daughters.

With an air of stern determination, Lady Knob-Kerrick descended from her carriage and marched boldly round the screen. Never had she beheld such a scene. She did not faint, she did not cry out, she grimly stood and watched.

Bindle had relinquished his refreshment-stall to assume the direction of the revels. All seemed to look to him for inspiration. The dingy cricket cap was to be seen bobbing about everywhere, his grin of enjoyment was all-embracing. He it was who set the Morris dancers going and picked them up when they fell. He it was who explained to Miss Slocum, who hitherto had refreshed herself with tea, that their inability to keep an upright position was due to the heat.

"It's the 'eat, miss, 'as a wonderful effect. Look at 'er now." He indicated to Miss Slocum's horror-stricken gaze the form of Miss McFie, who was sitting on the ground, hat awry, singing quietly to herself.

It was Bindle, too, who fetched for Miss Slocum a glass of lemonade, after which she seemed to see more with the others.

The maypole dance was in full progress when Lady Knob-Kerrick entered the meadow. Youths and girls, men and women staggered unsteadily round the gaily decorated scaffold-pole that had been lent by Mr. Ash, the builder. Lady Knob-Kerrick distinguished many of her tenants among the fringe of stumbling humanity, and two of her own domestics.

The principal object of the men dancers seemed to be to kiss each girl as she passed, and that of the girls to appear to try to avoid the caress without actually doing so. The dance ended prematurely, there being none of the dancers any longer capable of preserving an upright position.

A little to the right of the maypole Lady Knob-Kerrick beheld the Rev. Andrew McFie, who was endeavouring to give a representation of his native sword-dance to an enthusiastic group of admirers. On his head was a pink sunbonnet, round his waist, to represent a kilt, was tied a girl's jacket. His trousers were tucked up above the knee. On the ground sat a girl producing, by the simple process of holding her nose and tapping her throat, strange piercing noises intended to represent the bagpipes.

In another part of the meadow Mr. Grint, the chapel butcher, and an elder of irreproachable respectability, was endeavouring to instruct a number of girls in the intricacies of a quadrille, which, as he informed them, he had once seen danced in Paris. It was this exhibition of shameless abandon that decided Lady Knob-Kerrick upon immediate action.

"Strint," she called, looking about for her companion, "Strint." But Miss Strint was at that moment the centre of a circle of laughing, shouting, and shrieking men and women, hesitating in her choice of the man she should kiss.

"Thomas!"

"Yes, m'lady," replied Thomas, his eyes fixed intently upon a group of youths and girls who were performing a species of exalted barn dance.

"Fetch Saunders and Smith; tell them to fix the fire-hose to the hydrant nearest the meadow, and connect as many lengths as are necessary to reach where I am standing. Quick!"

The last word was uttered in a tone that caused Thomas to wrench his eyes away from the dancers as if he had been caught in the act of some impropriety.

"Yes, m'lady," and he reluctantly left the scene of festivity, full of envy and self-pity.

As Thomas disappeared round one side of the canvas screen, Dr. Little bustled round the other. He had been detained by an important patient who lived ten miles away. When his eyes beheld the scene before him, he stopped as if he had been shot. He looked about in a dazed fashion. Then he closed his eyes and looked again. Finally he saw Lady Knob-Kerrick, and hurried across to her.

"Dear me, dear me!" he fussed. "Whatever does this mean? Is everybody mad?"

"Either that or intoxicated, doctor. I'm not a medical man. I've sent for my fire-hose." There was a note of grim malevolence in Lady Knob-Kerrick's voice.

"Your fire-hose? I—I don't understand!" The doctor removed his panama and mopped his forehead with a large handkerchief.

"You will when it comes," was the reply.

"Dear me, dear me!" broke out the alarmed doctor; "but surely you're not——"

"I am," interrupted Lady Knob-Kerrick. "I most certainly am. It's my meadow."

"Dear me! I must enquire into this. Dear me!" And the doctor trotted off in the direction of the maypole. The first object he encountered was the prostrate form of the vicar, who lay under the shadow of a refreshment-stall, breathing heavily. The doctor shook him.

"Slocum," he called. "Slocum!"

"Goo' fellow tha'," was the mumbled response. "Make him my curate. Go 'way."

"Good God!" ejaculated the doctor. "He's drunk. They're all drunk. What a scandal."

He sat down beside the vicar, trying to think. He was stunned. Eventually he was aroused from his torpor of despair by a carelessly flung cokernut hitting him sharply on the elbow. He looked round quickly to admonish the culprit. At that moment he caught sight of the Rev. Andrew McFie arm-in-arm with Mr. Wace, the vicar's churchwarden, singing at the top of their voices, "Who's your Lady Friend?" Mr. McFie's contribution was limited to a vigorous but tuneless drone. He was obviously unacquainted with either the melody or the words, but was anxious to be convivial. He also threw in a rather unsteady sort of dance. Mr. Wace himself seemed to know only about two lines of the song, and even in this there were gaps.

"Shissssssssssh!" The two roysterers were on their backs gasping and choking beneath a deluge of water. Lady Knob-Kerrick's hose had arrived, and in the steady hands of Saunders, the head-gardener, seemed likely to bring the Temperance Fête to a dramatic conclusion.

"A water-spout!" mumbled Mr. Wace vacuously.

"Water spout!" cried Mr. McFie. "It's that red-headed carlin wi' the hose."

With a yell of rage he sprang to his feet and dashed at Saunders. Lady Knob-Kerrick screamed, Dr. Little uttered a plaintive "Dear me!" Saunders stood as if petrified, clinging irresolutely to the hose. He was a big man and strong, but the terrifying sight of the minister bearing down upon him with murder in his eyes clearly unnerved him. Releasing his hold of the hose he incontinently bolted. For a moment the force of the water caused the hose to rear its head like a snake preparing to strike, then after a moment's hesitation it gracefully descended, and discharged its stream full in the chest of Dr. Little, who sat down upon the grass with a sob of surprise.

McFie's yell had attracted to him an ever-enlarging crowd.

"Turned the hose on me," he explained thickly. "Me, Andrew McFie of Auchinlech." Suddenly catching sight of the retreating form of Lady Knob-Kerrick, he yelled, "It's all her doin', the old sinner."

With a whoop he sprang after Lady Knob-Kerrick, who at that moment was disappearing round the canvas screen seeking her carriage. The crowd followed, and some bethought themselves of the hose.

Lady Knob-Kerrick was just in the act of getting into her carriage when the jet of water from the hose took her in the small of the back and literally washed her into her seat as, a moment later, it washed her coachman off his. The horses reared and plunged; but McFie and Bindle rushed to their heads. Several men busied themselves with undoing the traces, the frightened animals were freed from the pole, and a cut from the whip, aided by the noise of the crowd, was sufficient to send them clattering down the road.

Hitherto Bindle had been by tacit consent the leading spirit; but now the Rev. Andrew McFie assumed the mantle of authority. Ordering the coachman and footman to take their mistress home, he caused the carriage to be drawn into the meadow and placed across the gateway, thus forming a barricade. This done, he mounted upon the box and harangued the throng.

Cokernuts and the balls used at the shies, together with the Aunt Sally sticks, were collected and piled up near the gate, and every preparation made to hold the meadow against all comers. McFie succeeded in working his hearers into a state of religious frenzy. They danced and sang like mad creatures, ate and drank all that was left of the provisions and lemonade, made bonfires of the stalls and tables; in short, turned Lady Knob-Kerrick's meadow

into a very reasonable representation of an inferno.

"There's a-goin' to be trouble over this 'ere little arternoon's doin's," murmured Bindle to himself, as he slipped through a hole in the hedge and made his way towards Barton Bridge, whither he had already been preceded by a number of the more pacific spirits. "The cops 'll be 'ere presently, or I don't know my own mother."

Bindle was right. Lady Knob-Kerrick had telephoned to Ryford, and the police were already on their way in three motor-cars.

At Barton Bridge they were reinforced by the two local constables and later by the men-servants from the Castle. When they arrived at the entrance to the meadow they found McFie leading an extremely out-of-tune rendering of "Onward, Christian Soldiers." Immediately he saw the approaching forces of Mammon, as he called them, he climbed down from his post of vantage and secured the hose.

The police and the retainers from the Castle approached the carriage to remove it and thus gain entrance to the meadow. Led by the red-faced superintendent from Ryford, they presented an imposing array. Allowing them to approach quite close, McFie suddenly gave the signal for the water to be turned on. He had taken the precaution to post men at the hydrant to protect it.

The superintendent's legs flew up into the air as the jet of water caught him beneath the chin. In a few seconds the attacking party had been hosed into a gasping, choking, and struggling heap. Cokernuts, wooden balls, sticks, bits of chairs, glasses and crockery rained upon them.

The forces of Mammon gathered themselves together and retired in disorder. Andrew McFie's blood was up. Victory was at hand. In his excitement he committed the tactical blunder of causing the carriage to be removed, that he might charge the enemy and complete its discomfiture. His followers, however, had too long been accustomed to regard the police with awe, and most of the men, fearful of being recognised, sneaked through holes in the hedges, and made their way home by circuitous routes.

Those who remained, together with a number of girls and women, fought until they were overpowered and captured, and the Barton Bridge Temperance Fête came to an inglorious end.

That same evening, having laden the van with such of the property and tents as had not been utilised for bonfires and missiles, Bindle took his seat on the tail-board, and the van lumbered off in the direction of London.

He proceeded to review the events of the day. What particularly diverted him was the recollection of the way in which horses and vehicles had been mixed up.

When he had returned to the High Street he found there numbers of those who had visited the Fête and were now desirous only of getting home. He helped them to harness their horses, assuring them that the beasts were theirs. If he were asked for a dog-cart he selected the first to hand, and then sought out a horse of suitable size and harnessed it to the vehicle.

If any demur were made, or if identification marks were sought, he hurried the objector off, telling him that he ought to be glad he had got a horse at all.

Bindle was grinning comfortably at the thought of the days it would take to sort out the horses and vehicles, when he saw in the distance a bicycle being ridden by someone obviously in a hurry.

As it came nearer he recognised the rider as Dick Little, who pedalled up beside the van and tendered a sovereign to Bindle.

"No, sir," Bindle remarked, shaking his head. "I'm a bit of a sport myself. Lord! wasn't they drunk!" He chuckled quietly. "That young parson chap, too. No, sir, I been paid in fun."

After a somewhat lengthy discussion carried on in whispers, so that the driver should not hear, Bindle suggested

that Dick Little had better come inside the van, as if anyone were to see them it might result in suspicion.

"Yer seem to like a little joke," he added. "I can tell yer about some as won't make yer want to cry."

An hour later, when Dick Little hunched his bicycle from the tail of the van he said:

"Well, come and see me in London; I'm generally in Sunday evenings."

"Right, sir; I will," replied Bindle; "but might I arst, sir, wot it was that made 'em so fidgety?"

"It was pure alcohol mixed with distilled mead," was the reply.

"Well, it done the trick. Good-night, sir. Lord! won't there be some 'eads wantin' 'oldin' in the mornin'," and he laughed joyously as the pantechnicon rumbled noisily Londonwards.

CHAPTER X

MR. HEARTY PRAYS FOR BINDLE

Mrs. Bindle had just returned from evening chapel. On Sundays, especially on Sunday evenings, when there had been time for the cumulative effect of her devotions to manifest itself, Mrs. Bindle was always in a chastened mood. She controlled those gusts of temper which plunged her back into the Doric and precipitated Bindle "into 'ell, dust an' all."

On this particular evening she was almost gentle. The bangs with which she accentuated the placing of each plate and dish upon the table were *piano* bangs, and Bindle duly noted the circumstance.

With him Sunday was always a day of intellectual freedom. He aired his views more freely on that than on other days.

Having laid the supper, Mrs. Bindle began to remove her bonnet. With a hat-pin in her mouth and her hands stretched behind her head in the act of untying an obstreperous veil that rested like a black line across the bridge of her nose, she remarked, in that casual tone which with her betokened an item of great interest and importance:

"Mr. Hearty prayed for you to-night, Bindle."

Bindle sat up in his chair as if he had been shot.

"'Earty wot?" he interrogated, with unaccustomed anger in his voice, and an unwonted flash in his eye. "'Earty wot?"

"He prayed for you," replied Mrs. Bindle in what was for her a hushed voice; "a beautiful prayer about a brother who had fallen by the wayside, a wheat-ear among thorns."

"'*E* prayed for *me*—'*im*?"

Bindle removed his pipe from his mouth, and gripping the bowl between thumb and finger, pointed what remained of the stem at Mrs. Bindle, as she stuck a hat-pin through her bonnet and placed it on the dresser.

"'*E* prayed for *me*?" The words came with such deliberation and intensity that Mrs. Bindle glanced round sharply.

"Yes!" she snapped, "an' you want it. You're nothin' but an 'eathen." Mrs. Bindle was forgetting her careful articulation.

"A brother fallen by the roadside——"

"Wayside," corrected Mrs. Bindle, as she banged a loaf on the table.

"A brother 'oo 'as fallen by the wayside, a wheat-ear among thorns," murmured Bindle as if to himself. Suddenly he grinned; the humour of the thing seemed to strike him. "Prayed for in church—leastwise chapel—jest like the Royal Family an' rain. You're comin' on, Joe Bindle," he chuckled.

"Seems to amuse you," remarked Mrs. Bindle as she took her place at the table.

"Yer've 'it it," replied Bindle, as he skilfully opened the tin of salmon. "Yer've just 'it it. Alfred 'Earty was sent to annoy 'eaven with 'is 'ymns and tickle up Joe Bindle with 'is prayers."

"If you was more like what he is, you'd be a better man."

"'Earty is as 'Earty does," flashed Bindle with a grin. Then after a pause to enable him to reduce a particularly large mouthful of bread and salmon to conversational proportions, he continued:

"If I 'ad the runnin' of this 'ere world, there'd be some rather big alterations, with a sort of 'end o' the season' sale, an' there'd be some pretty cheap lines in parsons an' greengrocers, not to speak of chapel-goers."

"I'm surprised at you, Bindle, talking such blasphemies in a Christian 'ome. Unless you stop I'll go out."

"Not while there's any salmon left, Mrs. B.," remarked Bindle oracularly.

"You're a bad man. I done my best, I'm sure——"

"You 'ave; if yer'd done yer second best or yer third best, Joe Bindle might 'a been a better man than wot 'e is." Bindle dug a morsel of salmon out of the tin with the point of his knife. "I been too well brought up, that's wot's the matter wi' me."

"You're always scoffin' and sneerin' at me an' the chapel," responded Mrs. Bindle tartly. "It don't hurt me, whatever you may think."

"There you're wrong, me blossom." Bindle was in high spirits. His mind had been busily at work, and he saw a way of "bein' a bloomin' thorn in 'Earty's wheat-ear 'ole."

"I ain't a scoffer; it's just that I don't understan' 'ow a thing wot was meant to make people 'appy, seems to make 'em about as joyful as a winkle wot feels the pin."

"Winkles are boiled first," retorted the literal Mrs. Bindle, wiping round her plate with a piece of bread; "an' bein' dead don't feel pins. I wouldn't eat them if it hurt. Besides, winkles haven't anythin' to do with religion."

"That's wot makes 'em so tasty," retorted Bindle. "You an' 'Earty 'ave sort o' spoiled me appetite for religion; but winkles still 'old me." After a short silence he continued, "I never see a religious cove yet wot I 'ad any likin' for, leastwise, wot said 'e was religious. It's a funny thing, but as soon as people become good they seems to get about as comfortable to live with as an 'edge'og in bed.

"Funny thing, religion," Bindle continued. "There was one cove I know'd 'oo spent 'is time in 'avin' D.T.'s and gettin' saved, about 'alf an' 'alf, with a slight leanin' to D.T.'s. We called 'im Suds an' Salvation, 'suds' bein' 'is name for beer.

"Look at 'Earty, now. 'E's always talkin' of 'eaven, but 'e ain't in no 'urry to get there. 'E's as nippy as a cat if 'e 'ears a motor 'ooter when 'e's crossin' the road; and 'e 'ustles like 'ell to get inside of a bus when it's rainin'."

"His life is not 'is own, and he's waitin' his call."

Bindle looked up with a laugh.

"'Ow'll 'e know it's for 'im an' not next door?" he asked.

"I won't listen to your evil talk," announced Mrs. Bindle, half rising from her chair, and then resuming her seat again as if thinking better of her determination.

"When," continued Bindle imperturbably, "I 'ears of a place where the beer's better an' cheaper than wot I gets 'ere, orf I goes like a bunny after a lettuce. Now you an' 'Earty knows that in 'eaven 'appiness is better an' cheaper than wot it is 'ere, yet yer does all yer can to keep away from it; and they're all the same. That's wot does me."

"If you wasn't such an 'eathen you'd understand," stormed Mrs. Bindle, "and my life would be 'appier. You won't go to chapel, an' you won't 'ave a bath, and——"

"I don't 'old with all this talk o' washin'. It ain't natural," broke in Bindle cheerfully. "Look at the ladies. Wot do they do? When they gets sort o' soiled, do they wash? Not a bit of it; they shoves on another coat of powder to cover it up. I seen 'em doin' it."

"Scarlet women!" Mrs. Bindle's jaws snapped loudly.

"Yes, an' pink an' white 'uns too. I seen all sorts doin' it—which reminds me of 'ow ole Snooker lorst 'is job. 'E wos sent round by 'is guv'nor to a lady with an estimate for white-washin' and paper-'angin'. When she saw the price she gives a sort of screech o' surprise.

"'This is very expensive,' she says. 'It didn't cost little more than 'alf this last time.'

"'It's the right price, mum,' says Snooker. 'I been through it myself,' 'e says.

"'But I don't understand,' says she.

"'Well, mum,' says Snooker, 'there's the ceilin's to be washed off,' 'e says, 'an' the old paper to be stripped off the walls,' 'e says, 'and it all takes time.'

"'But is that necessary?' says the lady.

"'Well, mum,' says Snooker, quiet like, 'yer wouldn't put clean stockin's on dirty legs, would yer?' says 'e.

"She was as angry as an 'en, and wrote in that Snooker 'ad been sayin' disgustin' things, 'im wot blows a cornet in the Salvation Band o' Sundays. Why, 'e ain't got enough wind left on week-days to be disgustin' with. Any'ow 'e lorst 'is job, and the lady went to someone else as didn't talk about legs."

"Y' ought to be ashamed of yourself, Joseph Bindle, telling me such lewd tales."

"'Lewd!' Wot's that?" queried Bindle.

"An abomination in the sight of the Lord," replied Mrs. Bindle sententiously. "Your talk ain't fit for a woman to listen to. Last time we was at Mr. Hearty's you was speakin' of babies in front of Millie. I went hot all over."

"Is babies lewd then?" enquired Bindle innocently.

"They're born in sin."

"Oh, Lord!" grinned Bindle, "I'm always doin' it. Fancy babies bein' as bad as that."

"You shouldn't speak about them before a young girl like Millie."

"Babies is funny things," remarked Bindle, replacing his empty glass on the table, and wiping his mouth with the back of his disengaged hand. "Babies is funny things. If yer want one it never seems to come; but if yer don't want 'em it rains babies, an' 'fore yer know it you've got a dose or two o' triplets at three pound a bunch from the King. There wos 'Arry Brown; 'e wanted a kid, and 'e 'ated kittens. Yet 'is missis never 'ad a baby, though the cat was always 'avin' kittens, which shows as there wasn't anythink wrong wi' the 'ouse."

"I'm goin' to bed," announced Mrs. Bindle, as she rose. "Your talk ain't fit for decent ears to listen to. If it wasn't the Sabbath I'd tell you wot I think of you."

"I'm goin' out," announced Bindle with decision.

"At this time? You ain't goin' round to Mr. Hearty's?" There was a note of anxiety in Mrs. Bindle's voice. "It's past nine o'clock."

"I ain't decided whether I'll punch 'Earty's 'ead or go an' get drunk. I'm sick of all this 'umbug."

Whilst speaking, Bindle had seized his coat and cap, and made for the door. The utterance of the last word synchronised with the banging of the door itself.

Bindle walked to the Fulham Road, where he boarded an east-bound bus. At Beaufort Street he alighted, and a few minutes later was ringing the bell at 550 Beaufort Mansions, the address given to him by Dick Little. The door was opened by Little himself.

"Why, it's Aristophanes," he said with obvious pleasure.

"No, sir, Joe Bindle."

"Come in, man, whoever you are. Come in, you're just the man we want," said Dick Little heartily.

At that moment there was a gust of laughter from an adjoining room.

"I'm afraid you got friends, sir," said Bindle, hesitating on the mat. "I'll call round another night, sir. Shouldn't like to interrupt you."

"Rot! Come in," Little replied, dragging Bindle towards the room from whence the laughter came. Through the door he cried out:

"Shut up that damned row. Here's Bindle, the immortal Bindle."

The momentary hush that Little's command had produced was followed by yells of delight which crystallised into, "For he's a Jolly Good Fellow!"

Bindle stood at the door listening in amazement; then with a grin remarked to Little:

"Seem to know me, sir; seem sort o' fond of me."

"Know you, Bindle, my boy? There's not a fellow in Tim's that doesn't know and love you. A toast, you fellows," he cried.

Little seized a glass half-full of whisky-and-soda. "A toast," he cried, "to Bindle the Incomparable, rival of Aristophanes as a maker of mirth."

Cries of "Bindle! Bindle!" echoed from all parts of the smoke-dimmed room, and again there broke out what Dick Little called "the National Anthem of Good Fellowship," followed by calls for a speech.

Before he knew it Bindle was hoisted upon the table, where he stood gazing down upon some eight or ten flushed faces.

"Gentlemen, chair, please." Little rapped a glass on the table. Silence ensued. "Now, Aristophanes," to Bindle.

"Bindle, sir, plain Joe Bindle, *if* you please." Then turning to the expectant faces round him Bindle began his first speech.

"Gentlemen—leastways, I 'ope so. You all seem to know me, and likewise to be very fond o' me; well, p'r'aps I might become fond o' you if I don't get to know too much about yer 'abits. I'm sorry to break up this 'ere prayer-meetin', but I come to 'ave a word with Mr. Little." (Cries of "Have it with us.") "Very well, then," continued Bindle. "I got a brother-in-law, 'Earty by name." (There were cries of "Good old Hearty!") "Seem to know 'im too. P'r'aps yer sings in the choir at 'is chapel. Any'ow, 'Earty's been prayin' for me to-night at 'is chapel, an' I come to arst Mr. Little wot I'd better do."

Bindle's announcement caused a sensation and something of an uproar. His voice was drowned in cries of "Shame!"

"Just a moment, gentlemen, and I've done. 'E called me 'a brother fallen by the wayside, a wheat-ear among thorns.'"

Yells of laughter followed this announcement, and Bindle was pulled down and drink forced upon him. Soon he was sitting in the most comfortable armchair in the room, smoking a colossal cigar, with a large kitchen jug full of beer at his elbow. He saw before him nearly a dozen of the most riotous spirits in London listening with eager interest to his stories and opinions, which they punctuated with gusts of laughter. The night was far advanced when at length he rose to go.

"Well, gentlemen," he said, "I never thought that doctors was such sports. Now I understand why it is that the ladies is always gettin' ill. S' long, and thanks for this friendly little evenin'. If I've talked too much you jest come and 'ear Mrs. Bindle one evenin' and yer'll be glad it's me and not 'er."

As Dick Little showed him out Bindle enquired:

"'Ow am I to get 'ome on that psalm-singin' brother-in-law o' mine?—that's wot I wants to know. Prayin' for me in chapel." Bindle wreaked his disgust on the match he was striking.

"I'll think it over," said Little, "and let you know. Good-night, and thanks for coming. We shall always be glad to see you any Sunday night."

"Different from 'Earty's Sunday nights," muttered Bindle, as he walked away. "I wonder which makes the best men. It's a good job I ain't got anythink to do with 'eaven, or them wheat-ears might sort o' get mixed wi' the thorns."

CHAPTER XI

MR. HEARTY BECOMES EXTREMELY UNPOPULAR

"'Earty may be all 'ymns an' whiskers," Bindle had said, "an' I 'ate 'is 'oly look an' oily ways; but 'e sticks to his job an' works like a blackleg. It don't seem to give 'im no pleasure though. 'E don't often smile, an' when 'e does it's as if 'e thought Gawd was a-goin' to charge it up against 'im."

Mr. Hearty was an excellent tradesman; he sold nothing that he had not bought himself, and Covent Garden knew no shrewder judge of what to buy and what not to buy, or, as Bindle phrased it:

"'E's so used to lookin' for sin in the soul that 'e can see a rotten apple in the middle of a barrel without knockin' the top off. Yes, I'll give 'Earty 'is due. There ain't many as can knock spots off 'im as a greengrocer, though as far as bein' a man, I seen better things than 'im come out o' cheese."

On the Saturday morning after Bindle's visit to Dick Little, Mr. Hearty was busily engaged in superintending the arrangement of his Fulham High Street shop, giving an order here and a touch there, always with excellent results.

According to his wont he had returned from market before eight o'clock, breakfasted, hurried round to his other shop in the Wandsworth Bridge Road, and before ten was back again at Fulham.

He was occupied in putting the finishing touches to a honey-coloured pyramid of apples, each in its nest of pink paper like a setting hen, when an ill-favoured man entered leading an enormous dog, in which the salient points of the mastiff, bull-terrier, and French poodle struggled for expression. The man looked at a dirty piece of paper he held in his hand.

"Name of 'Earty?" he interrogated.

"I am Mr. Hearty," was the reply, uttered in a voice that was intended to suggest dignity with just a dash of Christian forbearance.

"I brought your dawg," said the man with ingratiating geniality, baring three dark-brown stumps that had once been teeth; "I brought your dawg," he repeated, looking down at what appeared to be four enormous legs loosely attached to a long, sinuous body.

"You're mistaken," said Mr. Hearty. "It's not mine; I don't keep a dog."

"My mistake, guv'nor," replied the man with a grin; "I should 'a said the dawg wot you're a-lookin' for. 'Ere, Lily, drop it."

This last remark was addressed to the dog, who, seeing Mr. Hearty's soft black felt hat lying on a box, had seized it in her enormous jaws. She looked up at her master and shook the hat roguishly with a gurgle of joy; but a sharp cuff on the muzzle caused her to drop what her teeth and saliva had already ruined.

"This is just the dawg you're wantin'," continued the man pleasantly, indicating Lily, who had lain down and was now occupying the entire centre of the shop, looking about her with distended jaws and a great flap of whitey-red tongue hanging out amiably. "Playful as a kitten, and an 'ouse-dog as 'ud eat a burglar an' then go back to dawg-biscuit wivout a murmur. She's some dawg, is Lily!"

"But I don't want a dog," replied Mr. Hearty, eyeing his hat, which the man was endeavouring to clean with his coat-sleeve. "Will you please take it away?" There was a note of asperity in his voice.

"Don't want a dawg? Don't want a dawg?" There was menace in the man's manner that caused Mr. Hearty some anxiety, and he looked appealingly at Smith, his chief assistant, and the boy, who stood regarding the episode with an enjoyment they dare not express.

"Don't want a dawg?" repeated the man for the third time. "You jest read this," thrusting out towards Mr. Hearty the dirty piece of paper he held in his hand. "You jest read this an' you'll ruddy well see that yer do want a dawg, an' this 'ere is the dawg yer want."

Mr. Hearty mechanically took the piece of paper the man thrust towards him. It was a cutting of an advertisement, which read:

"DOG WANTED, breed not important, provided it is a large and good house-dog. Not to cost more than £4. Apply personally with animal to Alfred Hearty, 530 Fulham High Street, S.W., on Saturday at 10.30 a.m."

Mr. Hearty looked from the paper to Lily's owner in an uncomprehending way and then back to the advertisement again.

"The breed ain't important in Lily," remarked the man. "She's took prizes as a mastiff, a French poodle, a bull-terrier, and a pom., and she got hon'ble mention as a grey'ound once. She'll chaw up a man she don't like, won't yer, Lily, old gal?"

Lily looked up with a ridiculously amiable expression for a dog possessed of such qualities.

"But I don't want a dog," repeated Mr. Hearty, looking helplessly at Smith.

"Then wot the grumblin' 'ereafter do yer put in this advertisement for?" growled the man angrily.

"But I didn't."

"Is your name 'Earty?"

"I am Mr. Hearty."

"Then you want a dawg, an' Lily's your dawg, an' I want four pound. Now, 'and it over, guv'nor. I'm in a 'urry. I ain't a bloomin' non-stop."

At that moment a middle-aged woman entered, followed by a very small boy with a very large dog, as indeterminate as to pedigree as Lily herself. The woman looked about her and approached Smith.

"Mr. Hearty?" she almost whispered.

Smith, a man of few words, jerked his thumb in the direction of his employer. The woman walked over to him. Meanwhile the new dog had growled ominously at Lily, who, throwing out her forepaws and depressing her head upon them, had playfully challenged it to a romp.

"Mr. Hearty?" meekly enquired the woman.

As she spoke a woman and two more men with other dogs entered the shop. These were quickly followed by another woman of a I -know-what-I-want-and-'Uggins-is-my-name-an'-I've-got-me-marriage-lines appearance. Following her came a mild-mannered man with yet another dog, larger and more bewildering in the matter of breed than Lily and the other animal combined.

"I want to see Mr. 'Earty," announced the third woman to Smith. Smith indicated Mr. Hearty in his usual manner by a jerk of the thumb.

"I come in answer to the advertisement," she announced.

"For a dawg?" enquired Lily's owner suspiciously.

"For an 'ousekeeper," replied the woman aggressively. "Wot's that got to do wi' you? You ain't Mr. 'Earty, are yer? You jest shut yer ugly face."

The man subsided.

The shop was now full. Lily and the second dog had decided to be friends, and had formed an alliance against the third dog. In their gambols they had already upset a basket of apples.

Whilst Mr. Hearty was endeavouring to convince Lily's owner that not only did he not require a dog, but that as a matter of fact he had a marked antipathy for the whole species, other animals continued to arrive. They grouped themselves outside with their owners, together with a nondescript collection of men, women, and boys, with and without dogs. All seemed inspired with the same ambition—to interview Mr. Hearty.

Mr. Hearty looked at the sea of faces outside as an actor suffering from stage-fright might gaze at the audience that had bereft him of the power to speak or move. He felt that he must act promptly, even sternly; but he was not a brave man and saw that he was faced by a crowd of potential enemies. Summoning up all his courage he turned to Lily's owner.

"Kindly remove that dog," he ordered in what he meant to be a stern voice, indicating Lily, who was playing a game of hide-and-seek round an apple-barrel with a pomeranian-Irish-terrier.

"'Oo are you talkin' to? Just answer me that," demanded Lily's owner.

Mr. Hearty saw clearly that the man intended to be awkward, even insolent.

"I am speaking to you, and unless you take that dog away, I—I——" Mr. Hearty stopped, wondering what he really would do. What ought he to do under such circumstances?

"Why did yer advertise?" demanded the aggressive woman.

"I didn't," replied Mr. Hearty miserably, turning to his new assailant. "I have advertised for nothing."

"Didn't yer advertise for a 'ousekeeper?" continued the woman.

"No!"

"Yer a blinkin' liar."

At this uncompromising rejoinder Mr. Hearty started. He was unaccustomed to such directness of speech.

"Unless you are civil I shall order you out of my shop," retorted Mr. Hearty angrily.

"An' if yer do I shan't go; see?" The woman placed her hands on her hips and looked at Mr. Hearty insultingly. "Look at 'im," she continued, addressing the crowd, "playin' 'is dirty jokes on pore people. I paid eightpence return to get 'ere all the way from Brixton, then 'e says it's a joke."

There was an ominous murmur from the others. All sorts of epithets were hurled at Mr. Hearty.

"Will yer pay our fares?"

"I'll punch 'is bloomin' 'ead till it aches!"

"Let me get at 'im!"

"Yer dirty tyke!"

"You goin' to buy my dawg?" demanded Lily's owner, thrusting his face so close to Mr. Hearty's that their noses almost touched.

"No, I'm not," shouted Mr. Hearty in desperation. "Smith, put this man and his dog out."

Smith looked embarrassed and Lily's owner laughed outright, a sneering, insulting laugh, which his black stumps of teeth seemed to render more sinister and menacing.

Mr. Hearty felt that the situation was passing beyond his control. How had it all happened and what did it mean? Events had followed upon one another so swiftly that he was bewildered. Where were the police? What did he pay rates and taxes for if he were to be subjected to this? What would be the end of it all? Would they kill him?

Just as he saw himself being bruised and buffeted by a furious crowd, a shadow fell across the shop as a pantechnicon drew up outside. It was one of three, and from the tail-board of the last Bindle slipped off and began forcing his way towards the shop entrance.

"Now then," he called out cheerfully, "make way there. I'm the brother o' the corpse. Wot's it all about—a fire or a dog-show?"

The crowd good-humouredly made room. Pushing his way into the shop he hailed his brother-in-law.

"'Ullo, 'Earty; 'oldin' a levée? What-oh!"

"'E wants a dawg," broke in the dog man, indicating Lily with a jerk of his thumb.

"I come all the way from Brixton," shouted the would-be housekeeper.

"An' very nice, too," replied Bindle, as he pushed his way to the side of Mr. Hearty, who was listening with anguished intentness to an eager group of women whose one desire seemed to caretake for him.

Bindle looked round the shop with a puzzled expression, his eyes finally resting on Lily.

"Call that a dawg?" he enquired of Lily's owner with an incredulous grin.

"Yus, I do," replied the man aggressively. "What 'ud you call it? A rosy kitten?"

"Well," remarked Bindle imperturbably, regarding Lily critically, "since you arsts me, I'd call it a bloomin' 'istory o' dawgs in one volume."

"Where'll yer 'ave the coal, guv'nor?" bawled a voice from the fringe of the crowd.

At that moment Mrs. Hearty entered from the parlour behind the shop. She gazed about her in mild wonderment.

"We don't want any coals, Alf. We had them in last week." Mrs. Hearty subsided into a chair. Suddenly her eyes fell upon Lily, who was trying to shake off her head Mr. Hearty's hat, which someone had placed there, and she collapsed, helpless with laughter.

"'Ere, get out of it," cried Bindle, giving Lily a cuff, whereat she yelped dismally. Providence had evidently intended her for doughty deeds, having endowed her with the frame of an Amazon, but had then lost interest and given her the heart of a craven.

By dint of threats, badinage, and persuasion Bindle at last cleared the shop of all save Mr. and Mrs. Hearty, Smith, and the boy. Posting the staff at the door with instructions to admit no one, Bindle approached his brother-in-law.

"Wot jer been doin', 'Earty? The 'ole bloomin' street's full o' carts and people wantin' to see yer. I brought three vans. What's it all about?"

Never had Mr. Hearty been so genuinely pleased to see Bindle. Before he had time to reply to his question, a big man pushed his way past Smith and entered the shop.

"Where'll yer 'ave the beer, guv'nor?" he shouted in a thick, hearty voice redolent of the Trade.

"'Ere, come out of the way," shouted a small wiry man who had followed him in. "All this little lot goin'?" he asked, nodding in the direction of the crowd that blocked the street. "I only got three brakes, an' they won't take 'em all."

"What's *your* little game?" Bindle enquired of the newcomer.

The brakeman eyed him with scornful contempt.

"You Mr. 'Earty?" he enquired.

"I'm 'is brother; 'e's been took ill. There's a mistake. You better get 'ome."

"Get 'ome!" shouted the man. "'Oo's goin' to pay?"

"Try Lloyd George!" suggested Bindle cheerfully.

A policeman pushed his way into the shop and Bindle slipped out. The real drama was being enacted outside. From all directions a steady stream of people was pouring towards Mr. Hearty's shop.

"'Earty, 'Earty," murmured Bindle joyously to himself, as he surveyed the High Street, "wot 'ave yer been an' done?"

The place presented an extraordinary appearance.

There were coal-carts, strings of them, brewers'-drays, laundry-carts, railway-vans, huge two-horse affairs, pantechnicons, char-a-bancs, large carts, small carts, and medium-sized carts. There were vehicles with one, two, and three horses. There were motor-cars, motor-vans, motor-lorries, and motor-cycles. There were donkey-carts, spring-carts, push-carts, and pull-carts. Everything capable of delivering goods was represented, and all were locked together in a hopelessly congested mass.

Everything had come to a standstill and the trams strove in vain to clang their way through the inextricable tangle.

The footpaths were crowded with men, women, boys, and dogs, all endeavouring to reach Mr. Hearty's shop, the Mecca of their pilgrimage. Crowds overflowed the paths into the roadway and seemed to cement together the traffic.

Bindle passed along the line intent on gleaning all the information he could.

"'Ave yer come after the job o' 'ousekeeper, nurse, or dawg?" he asked one seedy-looking man with an alarming growth of nose.

"'Ow about my railway fare?" enquired Lily's owner, recognising Bindle. "'Oo's goin' to pay it?"

"You're a-goin' to pay it yerself, ole sport, unless you're goin' to walk." Then eyeing the man critically he added, "A little exercise might ease yer figure a bit."

Bindle pushed among the throng of disappointed applicants for employment and deliverers of goods. Fate had been kind to him in sending him this glorious jest.

"Might 'a been foundin' a colony," he muttered, as he passed from group to group; "'e ain't forgot nothink: plumbers, bricklayers, vans, 'ousekeepers, dawgs, kids to adopt, 'orses, carpenters, caretakers, shovers; an' 'e's ordered everythink what ever growed or was made, *includin'* beer, enough to keep the Guards drunk for a year. 'Earty's mad, pore chap. Religion do take some that way."

At first Bindle had been puzzled to account for the throngs of applicants; but enquiry made things very clear. In

every case the advertisements—and they had appeared in every daily and innumerable weekly papers—stated the wages, which were unusually high. A vanman was offered fifty shillings a week, a housekeeper thirty shillings a week all found; for an errand-boy fifteen shillings a week was suggested, and ten pounds as a bonus to the parents of the child that was to be adopted.

The officials at Putney Bridge station were puzzled to account for the extraordinary increase in the westward-bound traffic on that Saturday morning; but what particularly surprised them was the stream of dogs that each train seemed to pour forth.

The run upon dog-tickets at certain East-end stations broke all records, and three stationmasters had to telephone to headquarters for a further supply.

Dogs occupied the gangways of every train arriving at Putney Bridge station between 10 a.m. and 10.40 a.m. Dogs growled, fawned, and quarrelled.

The stream of dogs, however, was as nothing to the stream of men, women and boys, and small children for adoption. The station officials and the bus-men outside wearied of instructing people how to get to Fulham High Street.

The congestion of traffic in Fulham High Street was felt as far east as Piccadilly and the Strand, where the police on point duty were at a loss to account for it. The disorganisation in the tram service was in evidence equally at Wood Green and Wandsworth.

Certain elements in the crowd, notably the younger and more light-hearted sections, in particular those who lived in the neighbourhood and were not out of pocket for railway fares, were inclined to regard the whole affair as a huge joke, and badinage flowed freely. There was, however, another section that thirsted for somebody's blood, and was inclined to regard Mr. Hearty as the person most suitable to supply this.

In the immediate vicinity of the shop-door the excitement was intense, everyone pushing and striving to get nearer. There was no suggestion of personal feeling save in the case of those who were bent on the same errand. Thus a potential housekeeper felt nothing but friendliness for a would-be dog-seller, whilst a hopeful housemaid was capable of experiencing almost an affection for a mother who had a spare offspring she was wishful of having adopted.

When the first brewers' dray drew up it was greeted with cheers, and one man who drove up in a donkey-cart with a flashily-dressed young woman was greeted with the inevitable:

> "Who's your lady friend? I am surprised at you,
> It isn't the one I saw you with at 'Ampstead,"

sung by a score of robust voices.

Cries, cat-calls, and advice to those inside to "save a drop for uncle," and "'urry up," were continuous. Many crude jokes were levelled at Mr. Hearty's name.

When the helmets of the police were seen bobbing their way through the crowd there were prolonged cheers.

The first policeman to arrive, having foreseen the possibility of trouble, had promptly telephoned for assistance. At the time the reinforcements arrived, including an inspector and two mounted constables, the attitude of the crowd was beginning to assume an ugly look. One of the more aggressive spirits had endeavoured to single out Mr. Hearty as a target for one of his own potatoes; but he had, unfortunately for him, hit the policeman, whose action had been so swift and uncompromising that there was no further attempt at disorder.

The inspector quickly saw that very little that was coherent could be obtained from Mr. Hearty. It was Bindle who supplied the details of what had occurred.

"'Earty's me brother-in-law," he replied. "'E's either gone off 'is onion or someone's been pullin' 'is leg. All this 'ere little lot," and Bindle indicated the congested High Street, "'as brought 'im things they says 'e's ordered, and 'e

says 'e ain't, an' them crowds of men, women, and dogs and kids 'as come sayin' he wants to give 'em jobs or 'omes."

The inspector asked a few questions, and gleaned sufficient information to convince him that this was a huge practical joke, and that prompt action was imperative. He telephoned for more men and set to work in an endeavour to organise the traffic and reduce it to manageable proportions.

Constables were placed at different points along the main thoroughfare leading to Fulham High Street, asking all drivers and chauffeurs if they were bound for Mr. Alfred Hearty's shop in Fulham High Street, and if so sending them back. Men were stationed at Hammersmith and Putney High Street to divert the streams of traffic that still poured towards Fulham.

Putney and Fulham had never seen anything like it. Families went dinnerless because housewives either could not get to the shops, or could not get away from them again. Telephones rang, and irate housekeepers enquired when the materials for lunch were coming. Taxicab drivers with fares sat stolidly at the wheel, conscious that their income was increasing automatically, whilst the fares themselves fumed and fussed as they saw their twopences vanish.

It was not until past one o'clock that the trams restarted, and it was 2.30 before Bindle got back to the yard with his three pantechnicons.

"Poor ole 'Earty's got it in the neck this time," he muttered as he turned back towards Fulham High Street to lend a hand in putting things straight. Mr. Hearty was distracted at the thought that none of his customers had received their fruit and vegetables, and Bindle was genuinely sorry for him. All that afternoon and late into the night he worked, helping to weigh up and deliver orders; and when he eventually left the shop at a few minutes before midnight, he was "as tired as a performin' flea."

"I like 'Earty when 'e goes mad," he muttered to himself as he left the shop. "It sort o' wakes up sleepy old Fulham. I wonder 'oo it was. Shouldn't be surprised if I could spot 'im. If it ain't Mr. Dick Little call me Jack Johnson. I wish 'e 'adn't done it, though."

Bindle was thinking of the pathetic figure Mr. Hearty had cut, and of the feverish manner in which he had worked to make up for the lost hours, Bindle had been genuinely touched when, as he was about to leave the shop, his brother-in-law had shaken him warmly by the hand and, in an unsteady voice, thanked him for his help. Then looking round as if searching for something, he had suddenly seized the largest pineapple from the brass rail in the window, thrust it upon the astonished Bindle, and fled into the back room.

For some seconds Bindle had stood looking from the fruit to the door through which his brother-in-law had disappeared, then, replacing it on the rack, he had quietly left the shop, muttering: "It takes a long time to get to know even yer own relations. Queer ole card, 'Earty."

CHAPTER XII

BINDLE AGREES TO BECOME A MILLIONAIRE

I

As the intervals between Mr. Hearty's invitations for Sunday evenings lengthened, Bindle became a more frequent visitor at Dick Little's flat, where he could always be sure of finding jovial kindred spirits.

Both Mrs. Hearty and Millie missed Bindle, and broadly hinted the fact to Mr. Hearty; but he enjoyed too well his Sunday evening hymns to sacrifice them on the altar of hospitality. Millie in particular resented the change. She disliked intensely the hymn-singing, and she was greatly attached to "Uncle Joe."

At Dick Little's flat Bindle found ample compensation for the loss of Mr. Hearty's very uncordial hospitality.

"Mrs. Bindle ain't at 'er best Sunday evenin's," he had confided to Dick Little. "'Er soul seems to sort of itch a bit an' 'er not able to scratch it."

He was always assured of a welcome at Chelsea, and the shout that invariably greeted his entrance flattered him.

"Different from ole 'Earty's 'Good-evenin', Joseph,'" he would remark. "I'd like 'Earty to meet this little lot."

One Sunday evening, about nine o'clock, Bindle made his way round to the flat, and found Dick Little alone with his brother Tom, who was spending the week-end in town. Bindle had not previously met Tom Little, who, however, greeted him warmly as an old friend.

"P'r'aps I'd better be goin'," suggested Bindle tentatively, "seein' as you're——"

"Not a bit of it," broke in Dick Little; "sit down, mix yourself a drink; there are the cigars."

Bindle did as he was bid.

"We were talking about Gravy when you came in," remarked Tom Little.

"An' very nice too, with a cut from the joint an' two vegs.," remarked Bindle pleasantly.

Dick Little explained that "Gravy" was the nickname by which Mr. Reginald Graves was known to his fellow-undergraduates. "We're about fed up with him at Joe's," Tom Little added.

"An' 'oo might Joe be, sir, when 'e's at 'ome, an' properly labelled?" enquired Bindle.

"It's St. Joseph's College, Oxford, where my brother is," explained Dick Little.

In the course of the next half-hour Bindle learned a great deal about Mr. Reginald Graves, who had reached Oxford by means of scholarship, and considered that he had suffered loss of caste in consequence. His one object in life was to undo the mischief wrought by circumstances. He could not boast of a long line of ancestry; in fact, on one occasion when in a reminiscent mood he had remarked:

"I had a grandfather——"

"Had you?" was the scathing comment of another man. The story had been retailed with great gusto among the men of St. Joseph's.

Reginald Graves was a snob, which prompted him to believe that all men were snobs. *Burke's Peerage* and *Kelly's Landed Gentry* were at once his inspiration and his cross. He used them constantly himself, looking up the ancestry of every man he met. He was convinced that his lack of "family" was responsible for his unpopularity.

In his opinion, failing "blood" the next best thing to possess was money, and he lost no opportunity of throwing out dark and covert hints as to the enormous wealth possessed by the Graves and Williams families, Williams being his mother's maiden name.

His favourite boast, however, was of an uncle in Australia. Josiah Williams had, according to Graves, emigrated many years before. Fortune dogged his footsteps with almost embarrassing persistence until, at the time that his nephew Reginald went up to Oxford, he was a man of almost incredible wealth. He owned mines that produced fabulous riches, and runs where the sheep were innumerable.

Graves was purposely vague as to the exact location of his uncle's sheep-stations, and on one occasion he spent an unhappy evening undergoing cross-examination by an Australian Rhodes scholar. However, he persisted in his story, and Australia was a long way off, and it was very unlikely that anyone would be sufficiently interested to unearth and identify all its millionaires in order to prove that Josiah Williams and his millions existed only in the imagination of his alleged nephew.

Graves was a thin, pale-faced young man with nondescript features and an incipient moustache. Furthermore, he had what is known as a narrow dental arch, which gave to his face a peevish expression. When he smiled he bared two large front teeth that made him resemble a rabbit. His hair was as colourless as his personality. He was entirely devoid of imagination, or, as Tom Little phrased it, "What he lacked in divine fire, he made up for in damned cheek."

He led a solitary life. When his fellow undergraduates deigned to call upon him it was invariably for the purpose of a "rag."

Trade was the iron that had entered his soul; he could never forget that his father was a grocer and provision merchant in a midland town. His one stroke of good luck, that is as he regarded it, was that no one at St. Joseph's was aware of the fact. Had he possessed the least idea that the story of his forebears was well known at St. Joseph's it would have been to him an intolerable humiliation.

Subservient, almost fawning with his betters, he was overbearing and insulting to his equals and inferiors: since his arrival at St. Joseph's his "scout" had developed a pronounced profanity. Rumour had it that Graves was not even above the anonymous letter; but there was no definite evidence that those received by certain men at St. Joseph's found their inspiration in the brain of Reginald Graves.

Nothing would have happened, beyond increased unpopularity for Graves, had it not been for an episode out of which Graves had come with anything but flying colours, and which had procured for him a thrashing as anonymous as the letters he was suspected of writing.

He was a favourite with Dr. Peter, the Master of St. Joseph's, and this, coupled with the fact that the Master was always extremely well-informed as to the things that the undergraduates would have preferred he should not know, aroused suspicion.

One day Travers asked Graves to dinner, and over a bottle of wine confided to him the entirely fictitious information that he was mixed up in a divorce case that would make the whole of Oxford "sit up." Next day he was sent for by Dr. Peter, who had heard "a most disturbing rumour," etc. Travers had taken the precaution of confiding in no one as to his intentions. Thus the source of Dr. Peter's information was obvious.

The men of St. Joseph's were normal men, broad of mind and brawny of muscle; they had, however, their code, and it was this code that Graves had violated. Tom Little had expressed the general view of the college when he said that Graves ought to be soundly kicked and sent down.

"Now, Bindle," remarked Dick Little, "you're a man of ideas: what's to be done with Gravy?"

"Well, sir, that depends on exes. It costs money to do most things in this world, and it'll cost money to make Mr.

Gravy stew in his own juice."

"How much?"

"Might cost"—Bindle paused to think—"might cost a matter of twenty or thirty quid to do it in style."

"Right-oh! Out with it, my merry Bindle," cried Tom Little. "Travers and Guggers alone would pay up for a good rag, but it must be top-hole, mind."

"Yes," said Bindle, with a grin; "it 'ud be top-'ole right enough." And Bindle's grin expanded.

"Out with it, man," cried Dick Little. "Don't you see we're aching to hear?"

"Well," said Bindle, "if the exes was all right I might sort o' go down an' see 'ow my nephew, Mr. Gravy, was gettin' on at——"

With a whoop of delight Tom Little sprang up, seized Bindle round the waist, and waltzed him round the room, upsetting three chairs and a small table, and finally depositing him breathless in his chair.

"You're a genius, O Bindle! Dick, we're out of it with the incomparable Bindle."

Dick Little leaned back in his easy chair and gazed admiringly at Bindle, as he pulled with obvious enjoyment at his cigar.

"Course I never been a millionaire, but I dessay I'd get through without disgracin' meself. The only thing that 'ud worry me 'ud be 'avin' about 'alf a gross o' knives an' forks for every meal, an' a dozen glasses. But I'm open to consider anythink that's goin'."

"The only drawback," remarked Little, "would be the absence of the millions."

"That would sort o' be a obstacle," admitted Bindle.

After a pause Dick Little continued, "If you were to have your expenses paid, with a new rig-out and, say, five pounds for yourself, do you think that for three or four days you could manage to be a millionaire?"

"Don't you worry," was Bindle's response.

"What about the real Josiah Williams?" Dick Little had enquired.

"All fudge, at least the millions are," his brother replied. "The unspeakable Reggie could not repudiate the relationship without giving the whole show away. It's immense!" He mixed himself another whisky-and-soda. "I'll talk it over with Travers and Guggers and wire you on Wednesday. Good-bye, Bindle." And he was gone.

That night Bindle stayed late at Little's flat, and talked long and earnestly. As he came away he remarked:

"Of course you'll remember, sir, that millionaires is rather inclined to be a bit dressy, and I'd like to do the thing properly. Maybe, with some paper inside, I might even be able to wear a top 'at."

II

One Tuesday afternoon, when Reginald Graves entered his rooms, he found awaiting him a copy of *The Oxford Mail*, evidently sent from the office; on the outside was marked, "See page 3."

He picked up the packet, examined it carefully, and replaced it upon the table. He was in all things studied, having conceived the idea that to simulate a species of superior boredom was to evidence good-breeding. Although alone, he would not allow any unseemly haste to suggest curiosity. Having removed his hat and coat and donned a

smoking-jacket and Turkish fez—he felt that this gave him the right touch of undergraduate bohemianism—he picked up the paper, once more read the address, and, with studied indifference, removed, it could not be said that he tore off, the wrapper. He smoothed out the paper and turned to the page indicated, where he saw a paragraph heavily marked in blue pencil that momentarily stripped him of his languorous self-control. He read and re-read it, looked round the room as if expecting to find some explanation, and then read it again. The paragraph ran:

"A DISTINGUISHED VISITOR

"Australia has been brought very closely into touch with this ancient city by the munificence of the late Mr. Cecil Rhodes and his scheme of Scholarships, which each year brings to our colleges gifted scholars, and to the playing-fields and boats magnificent athletes. It is interesting to note that we are shortly to have a visit from Mr. Josiah Williams, the Australian millionaire and philanthropist, whose wealth is said to be almost fabulous, and whose sheep-runs are famous throughout the Antipodes.

"It would appear that we have often eaten of his mutton—that is, of the sheep that he has reared to feed the Empire—and now we are to have the privilege of welcoming him to Oxford.

"We understand that Mr. Williams is to remain in our city for only a few days, and that his main purpose in coming is to visit his nephew Mr. Reginald Graves, of St. Joseph's College. Mr. Williams is, we gather, to be entertained by his nephew's fellow-undergraduates at Bungem's, so famous for its dinners and suppers, and it is mooted that the Corporation may extend its hospitality to so distinguished a citizen of the Empire. Thus are the bonds of Empire cemented.

"It would appear that Mr. Josiah Williams has engaged a suite of rooms at the Sceptre, where he will experience the traditional hospitality of that ancient English hostelry.

"Mr. Williams arrives to-morrow, Wednesday, and we wish him a pleasant stay."

Reginald Graves gasped. It was his rule never to show emotion, and in his more studied moments he would have characterised his present attitude as ill-bred.

"Damn!" It was not his wont to swear. His pose was one of perfect self-control. He was as self-contained as a modern flat, and about as small in his intellectual outlook. He was just on the point of reading the paragraph for the fifth time when the door of his room burst open, admitting Tom Little, Dick Travers, and Guggers.

"Congrats., Gravy. So the old boy's turned up," cried Little, waving a copy of *The Oxford Mail* in Graves's face.

"Joe's is going to do him proud," broke in Travers. "You've seen the *Mail*? We'll give him the time of his life."

"Gug-gug-good egg!" broke in Guggers, so named because of his inability to pronounce a "g" without a preliminary "gug-gug" accompanied by inconvenient splashings. It had become customary at St. Joseph's to give Guggers plenty of space in front, whenever he approached a "g." Tom Little called it "Groom."

"We're gug-gug-going to give him a gug-gug-gorgeous time."

"We'll have him drunk from morn till dewy eve," cried Tom Little, "and extra drunk at night. Oh, my prophetic soul!"

"Gravy, where's your sense of hospitality?" cried Travers. Reggie reluctantly produced whisky, a syphon, and some glasses.

"By gug-gug-gosh!" cried Guggers, semi-vapourising the remains of a mouthful of whisky and soda, "won't it be a rag! Bless you, Gug-Gug-Gravy for having an uncle."

Tom Little explained that they had been to the Sceptre and discovered that Mr. Josiah Williams would arrive by the 3.3 train, and that St. Joseph's was going down in a body to meet him. Graves, of course, would be there.

"I have heard nothing," said Graves. "I—I don't understand. If he writes of course I'll go."

"You'll jolly well gug-gug-go, any old how, or we'll carry you down," cried Guggers in a menacing voice, looking down at Graves from his six-foot-three of muscle and bone.

Graves looked round him helplessly. What was he to do? Could he disown this uncle? Should he explain that the whole thing was an invention, and that he had never possessed a rich uncle in Australia? Was it possible that by some curious trick there really was a Josiah Williams, Australian millionaire and philanthropist? If these men would only go and leave him alone to think!

Then suddenly there presented itself to his mind the other question: what would Josiah Williams be like? Would he be hopelessly unpresentable? Would he humiliate him, Reginald Graves, and render his subsequent years at St. Joseph's intolerable? How he wished these fellows would go!

CHAPTER XIII

OXFORD'S WELCOME TO BINDLE

I

At three o'clock on the following day the down platform at Oxford station presented an almost gala appearance. Not only were the men of St. Joseph's there, but hundreds of undergraduates from other colleges, with rattles, whistles, horns, flags, and every other attribute of great rejoicing.

Outside the station was a carriage with four horses, a piebald, a skewbald, a white, and another horse that seemed to have set out in life with a determination to be pink. Tom Little had himself selected the animals with elaborate care.

A little distance away, standing in groups, was a band clothed gorgeously in scarlet and gold tunics and caps, and nondescript trousers, ranging from light grey to black.

Tom Little had given careful instructions that as soon as Josiah Williams should emerge from the station, the band was to strike up "See the Conquering Hero Comes," and they were to put into it all they knew. If they produced a really good effect they were to have unlimited beer.

Reginald Graves stood in the centre of the platform, some of the leading spirits of St. Joseph's keeping a clear space so that the meeting between uncle and nephew might be dramatic. A more wretched-looking nephew of a millionaire uncle never existed.

Round him were scores of men with cameras, whom Graves instinctively knew to be newspaper men; and perched high above the crowd occupying important strategical positions he counted eight cinematograph cameras, each with its attendant operator.

St. Joseph's men had been good customers to a well-known London perruquier for false wigs, whiskers, and moustaches, with the aid of which an unlimited supply of "newspaper" and "cinematograph-men" had been produced.

Ignorant of all this, Graves groaned in spirit.

At four minutes past three the London train, amid a general buzz of excitement, steamed into the station. Pandemonium seemed to have broken out. Whistles shrilled, bugles blew, voices roared, and rattles added their share to the general uproar.

The passengers in the train were at first startled, and then became deeply interested. From the platform hundreds of eyes searched the opening carriage doors. Presently there was seen to alight a small man, dressed in a black-and-white check suit, with a pale grey homburg hat adorned with a white puggaree, a Ted tie, patent boots, and white spats. Over his left arm he carried a light dust-coat, and in his hand a gold-mounted malacca cane with a broad gold band. In the right hand was an enormous cigar adorned with a red-and-gold band.

It was Bindle.

"That's him," cried a hundred voices.

"Good old Josh!"

"What price wallabys?"

"Where's your lady friend?" and other irrelevant remarks were hurled from all quarters.

The "cinematograph-men" turned their handles. The "newspaper-men" swarmed down upon Bindle and levelled their cameras from every possible angle. Graves was hastened to the spot where Bindle was endeavouring to avoid looking into the barrel of a huge "camera."

Men hit him on the back, poked him in the ribs, shouted their welcomes and generally cheer-oh'd him.

After a desperate effort Tom Little fought his way through the crowd, followed by Travers and Guggers dragging the reluctant Graves. Suddenly Tom Little jumped up on Guggers' back.

"Mr. Josiah Williams, we welcome you to Oxford, we, the men of St. Joseph's."

Bindle looked at the laughing faces and remarked, "And very nice, too. Cheer-oh the lot!"

"This," continued Tom Little, when a space had been cleared, largely due to Guggers' magnificent tackling, "this is your distinguished nephew, Reginald Graves, whom to know is to love."

The unhappy Graves was dragged forward. Bindle extended two fingers of his left hand.

"So you're Polly's boy?"

Graves started. His mother's name had been Mary Williams, and his father had always called her Polly. Was he dreaming, or could it be possible that it was all true, and that fame and fortune were before him? A brother of his mother's had gone to Australia when quite a little lad. He was roused from his reverie by somebody shouting:

"Say how-d'ye-do to uncle," and he found himself clasping Bindle's two fingers with a warmth that surprised himself.

He looked round him. There was a dense crowd waving flags, and all in honour of this man who greeted him as nephew. A new prospect opened itself to his bewildered brain. If only it prove to be true!

"Now, come along, Mr. Williams." It was Tom Little's voice again that broke in upon his thoughts. "We've got a carriage waiting for you."

Travers had slipped out and found the band split up into three groups. He went up to each in turn; the first two he reminded that they were playing "See the Conquering Hero Comes," and the third group he told that the clash of welcome had been changed to "Auld Lang Syne." They must start at once, as Mr. Williams was just leaving the station. Urged by Travers the band formed up with incredible speed. Just then Bindle emerged, with Tom Little on one side and Guggers on the other. He was saying to Guggers:

"Look 'ere, young feller, if you can't talk without spittin' in my ear, you just dry up."

At that second the band broke out, every man doing his utmost. Everyone looked a little surprised, for the two melodies combined badly. The drummer was the first to discover that something was wrong. Recognising that the instruments round him were playing "Auld Lang Syne" he changed the time of his thumps. Then hearing the other tune, he paused and with inspiration finished up by trying to combine the two melodies by putting in thumps from both.

Some of the Conquering Heroes stopped and became Auld Lang Syners, whilst several Auld Lang Syners went over to the enemy. It was pandemonium.

"What's up wi' the band?" enquired Bindle. "Sounds like a Crystal Palace competition; I 'ope nothink busts."

Still the band went on.

"Gawd Almighty! wot's that?" Bindle's eyes dilated with something like horror at the sight of a huge brown shape sitting on the box of the carriage. He stopped as if electrified.

"That," said Tom Little, "is a kangaroo. Your national animal."

"Me national wot?" said Bindle.

"The national animal of Australia."

"Oh!" said Bindle, keeping a wary eye on the beast, whose tail hung down into the body of the carriage. "Well, I'm jiggered! It looks like a circus," he muttered. "Look at them 'osses!" he exclaimed, pointing with the hand that held the cigar to the steeds which had just caught his eye. "Look at them 'osses!"

Bindle eventually entered the carriage with Reginald Graves on his left hand, Dick Little and Travers opposite. Guggers had intended to sit opposite also, but Bindle had asked in a whisper which nobody failed to hear:

"'Ere, can't yer put that syphon somewhere else? 'E'll soak me to the skin."

Amid cheers the procession started. The band, which had a few minutes before blown itself to silence, was now devoting itself enthusiastically to "The Washington Post." On the box the kangaroo, known in private life as Horace Trent, the cox of the St. Joseph's boat, performed a few innocent tricks, to the great diversion of the crowd, whilst Bindle, drawing from his pocket a red pocket-handkerchief with the five stars of Australia upon it, alternately waved his acknowledgments and lifted his hat.

"I never knew young fellers like this could be so friendly," he muttered.

Graves spent his time alternately in praying that no one might see him and that Bindle would become less uproariously genial.

Having passed up and down every street of importance, the procession finally made its way to the Sceptre, where Bindle alighted and was conducted to his apartments by the bland manager. At every turn were to be seen obsequious and deferential servants, who had one eye on him and the other on the day of reckoning.

A late edition of that evening's *Oxford Courier* contained a piquant account of the reception accorded to Mr. Josiah Williams. It referred to the generous if boisterous humour of the undergraduates. It went on to state how

"our representative called at the Sceptre, where he was so fortunate as to catch the distinguished visitor just as he was entering. Mr. Williams is delighted with Oxford, his welcome, and everybody he has met. 'They say English people are stiff and stand-offish—why, I've had to change my collar. Kicking kangaroos!' exclaimed Mr. Williams, 'this is some country.'

"The first thing that struck our representative about Mr. Williams was his genial and pleasant bearing and entire absence of self-importance. He is obviously a simple man, unspoiled by his great success."

Reginald Graves shuddered as he read this in the privacy of his own rooms, remembering Bindle's accent and deportment.

"Although he would neither confess nor deny it, we understand that Mr. Williams is in England in connection with certain philanthropic schemes. We congratulate Mr. Reginald Graves on possessing as an uncle Mr. Josiah Williams, and Oxford on possessing Mr. Reginald Graves, if only for a short time."

II

"So you're Polly's boy." Bindle was receiving in his sitting-room at the Sceptre, surrounded by the leading spirits of St. Joseph's, including the kangaroo, which was clutching a large glass of shandygaff. In the public bar

below the band was busy realising what hitherto had been little more than an ambition, and about "the High" the remains of the crowd lingered.

"Reginald's your name, ain't it?" Bindle continued. "Reg will do for me. Mother livin'? 'Ow's yer father? Still in the grocery business?"

Graves burst into an assurance that they were quite well, then added that his mother was dead.

"Poor ole Poll," murmured Bindle, looking anything but doleful, and hiding a grin in the huge tankard that he raised to his lips. "She was a rare ole sport. Never met yer father. Quaint ole bird, ain't 'e?"

Mr. Graves was thankful when the conversation took a less domestic turn. That afternoon he felt that the eyes of all Oxford were upon him, and deep down in his soul he cursed St. Joseph, the college, and every man therein.

Worse was in store for Graves. When he returned to his rooms a message was brought by his "scout" that the Master would like to see him. In an agony of apprehension he made his way to the Master's study. He was relieved at the cordiality of his reception.

"I understand that your uncle has arrived, Graves? I shall be very pleased to make his acquaintance. Perhaps you will bring him to luncheon to-morrow."

Even Reginald Graves's self-repression could not disguise his agony of mind. He saw the luncheon-table, Dr. Peter playing the conventionally cordial host, and Mrs. Peter, with her frigid mid-Victorian austerity, endeavouring to pose as a great lady.

Was fate conspiring against him? There was the supper that evening at Bungem's, which he knew would be a torture, and the martyrdom of the morrow. Human flesh was too frail to withstand it!

He found himself again saying that he should be delighted; at least, he assumed that was what he said. Dr. Peter seemed satisfied. Just as he was taking his leave he remarked:

"Were you responsible for this ill-conceived demonstration to-day at the station?"

"No, sir, most certainly not," replied Graves, in a voice that carried conviction.

"Very deplorable, most deplorable. It will probably give Mr. Williams a very bad impression of English culture. I shall look into the matter, and find out who was guilty of this most unseemly exhibition. I am glad to hear that you are not in any way implicated, Graves. Most deplorable, most."

With a murmur of thanks Graves left the Master's study, praying that Dr. Peter might visit his wrath upon those responsible for what had caused him so much anguish and suffering.

III

Oxford without Bungem's would not be Oxford. "St. Bungem the Hospitable" was known throughout the Empire. His fame reached from east to west and north to south. Up the staircase leading to the famous dining-hall many illustrious men, as yet unillustrious, had passed with firm and confident step. On the walls were innumerable flashlight photographs of famous suppers, suppers that had reduced potential judges and incipient statesmen to helpless imbecility. Prime ministers-to-be, generals of the future, and admirals of the next generation had lost their bearings and their equilibrium as a result of the good fare, liquid fare, that is, dispensed by the immortal Bungem.

Colonial governors, viceroys, and archbishops could have recalled uproarious nights spent beneath the hospitable roof of Bungem's, had their memories not been subject to severe censorship.

Framed above the head of the table was the quatrain, written by a future Poet Laureate, that was the pride of Bungem's heart:

"Take from me all I have: my friends,
My songs, for no one's ever sung 'em;
One crowded hour of glorious life
I crave, but let it be with Bungem."

Never had Bungem's presented so gay and glorious an appearance as on the Wednesday evening of the famous supper to Josiah Williams.

Applications for tickets had poured in upon the Dinner Committee hastily organised by the men of St. Joseph's. Many ideas, in which originality and insanity were happily blended, had been offered to the Committee. One man had even suggested that the waiters should be dressed as kangaroos; but the idea had been discarded owing to the difficulty of jumping with plates of soup. Another suggestion had been that nothing but Mr. Williams's mutton should be eaten, whilst a third had proposed a bushman's menu. An Australian Rhodes man had, however, with great gravity of countenance, assured the Committee that the Bushmen were cannibals, and the project had been abandoned.

The banquet was limited to two hundred covers, and the applications had exceeded twice that number. Preference was given to men of St. Joseph's, and after that to the Australian Rhodes scholars, who had kindly undertaken during the course of the evening to reproduce the battle-cry of the Bushmen.

One Rhodes scholar, more serious than the rest, suggested that the Bushmen had no battle-cry; but he was promptly told that they would possess one after that evening.

Tom Little had taken upon himself the guarding of Reginald Graves, as a suspicion had flitted through the minds of the organisers of the feast that he might fail them at the last moment. As a matter of fact he did venture a remark that he felt very ill, and would go to bed. That was during the afternoon. But the Committee of Management had made it clear that he was to be at the dinner, and that if he went to bed he would probably be there in pyjamas.

The Committee called for Mr. Josiah Williams at the Sceptre at 8.30, formally to escort him to Bungem's. They discovered Bindle in the happiest of moods and full evening-dress. In his shirt-front blazed the "Moonagoona star, the second finest diamond that Australia had ever produced." On his head was an opera hat, and over his arm a light overcoat. The party walked over to Bungem's, passing through a considerable crowd that had collected outside the Sceptre.

At Bungem's the guests lined up on each side from the pavement up the stairs into the reception-room, and as the guest of honour arrived arm-in-arm with Tom Little they broke out into "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow," led by an impromptu band consisting of a concertina, three mouth-organs, six whistles, eighteen combs, and a tea-tray.

Dick Little, who had arrived by a later train than that carrying Bindle, was in the chair. He was an old St. Joseph's man and his memory was still green, although he had gone down some years previously. On his right sat Bindle, the guest of the evening; next to him were Reginald Graves and Guggers.

When all the guests were seated the chairman's mallet called for order.

"Gentlemen, you are too graceless a crew for grace, but you understand the laws of hospitality, that much I grant you. It is our object to make our distinguished visitor, Mr. Josiah Williams of Moonagoona, thoroughly welcome and at home, and to remind him of the sylvan glades of Moonagoona." Then, turning to Bindle, "Am I right, sir, in assuming that Moonagoona has sylvan glades?"

"'It it first time," replied Bindle. "Mooniest place I was ever in. It used to be called Moonaspoona till the birth-rate dropped." This remark was greeted with a roar of approval.

"We will open the proceedings with a representation of the Australian Bushmen's war-cry, kindly contributed by certain Rhodes scholars and others from the Antipodes."

The war-cry was not a success, but the meal that followed savoured of the palmiest days of Bungem's. The food

was plentiful and excellently cooked; the wine more plentiful and generously served.

Bindle's greatest concern was his white shirt-front. He had tucked his napkin in his collar, but that did not reassure him, because he then became alarmed lest the napkin should be soiled. However, he watched very carefully the careless, well-bred eating of Little and the finicking deportment of Graves, and managed to strike the middle course. It is true he absorbed his soup with sibilance and from the point of the spoon; but apart from that he acquitted himself excellently until the arrival of the asparagus. When the waiter presented it Bindle eyed the long, slender stems suspiciously. Then he looked at the waiter and back again at the stems and shook his head.

"Nonsense!" said Dick Little; "nobody ever refuses asparagus at Bungem's."

Asperge à la Bungem is a dish the memory of which every Oxford man cherishes to the end of his days.

Bindle weakened, and helped himself liberally, a circumstance which he soon regretted.

"How do I eat it?" he enquired of Dick Little in an anxious whisper.

"Watch me," replied Little.

The asparagus was tired and refused to preserve an erect position. Each stem seemed desirous of forming itself into an inverted "U." Little selected a particularly wilted stem and threw his head well back in the position of a man about to be shaved, and lowered the asparagus slowly into his mouth.

Nobody took any particular notice of this, and Little had been very careful to take only two or three stems. To the horror of Graves, Bindle followed Dick Little's lead.

"Funny sort o' stuff, Reggie, ain't it?" said Bindle, resuming an upright position in order to select another stick. "Seems as if yer 'ad to 'ave somebody rubbin' yer while it goes down."

Never in the history of Bungem's had the famous asparagus been so neglected. Everybody was watching alternately Bindle and Graves. Bindle was enjoying himself; but on the face of Graves was painted an anguish so poignant that more than one man present pitied him his ordeal.

Dick Little's mallet fell with a thump, and the attention of the guests became diverted from Graves to the chairman, amidst cries of "Chair," "Order," "Shame," and "Chuck him out."

"Gentlemen—a mere euphemism, I confess," began Dick Little; "men of St. Joseph's never propose the toast of the King; that is a toast that we all drink silently and without reminder. The toast of the evening is naturally that of the health and happiness of the guest of the evening, Mr. Josiah Williams of Moonagoona—a man, need I say more?"

There were loud cheers, in which Bindle joined.

In proposing the toast of the evening, Dick Little dwelt upon the distinction conferred upon Oxford in general and St. Joseph's in particular by Reginald Graves in selecting it from out of the myriad other universities and colleges. He touched lightly upon the love Graves had inspired in the hearts of his contemporaries; but never greater than when he had generously decided to share with them his uncle.

"This uncle," he continued, "has raised mutton and a nephew, and it is difficult to decide which of the two the men of St. Joseph's love the more: Josiah's mutton, or Josiah's nephew.

"Gentlemen, fellow-wanderers along the paths of knowledge, I give you the toast, Mr. Josiah Williams of Moonagoona, and with that toast I crave your permission to associate all his bleating sheep."

The whole assembly sprang to its feet, cheering wildly, among the others Bindle, who drank his own health with gusto and enthusiasm.

The shouts that greeted Bindle when he rose to respond to the toast created a record even for Bungem's. Bindle

gazed round him imperturbably, as if the making of a speech were to him an everyday matter.

In his right hand he held a cigar, and three fingers of his left hand rested lightly upon the edge of the table. When the din had subsided he began.

"Gentlemen, I never knew 'ow fortunate I was until now. I been raisin' sheep and 'ell in Moonagoona for years, forgettin' all about this 'ere little cherub," Bindle indicated Graves with a wave of his hand, "and all the jolly times I might 'ave 'ad through 'im. Moonagoona ain't exactly a paradise, it's too 'ot for that; still, if any of yer ever manages to find yer way there you'll be lucky, and you'll be luckier still if yer finds yours truly there at the same time. No; I done raisin' 'ell an' mutton, bein' too old for one an' too tired for the other.

"When I decided to 'ave a nephew I prayed 'ard for a good 'un, an' they sent me this little chap." Bindle patted Reggie's head affectionately amidst resounding cheers. "'E ain't much to look at," continued Bindle, with a grin, "'e ain't the beauty 'is uncle was at 'is age; still, 'e seems to 'ave a rare lot o' pals."

More eyes were watching Graves than Bindle. His face was very white and set, and he strove to smile; but it was a sickly effort. His immediate neighbours noticed that his glass, which those around him were careful to keep filled, was raised frequently to his lips. From time to time he looked round him like a hunted animal who seeks but fails to find some avenue of escape.

"'E was always a good boy to 'is mother, my sister Polly, an' now 'e's a gentleman, 'im wot once took round oil an' sausages for 'is father when 'e kep' a general shop.

"Everyone," proceeded Bindle, referring to a scrap of paper he held, "'as heard o' Tom Graves, grocer, of 60 'Igh Street, Bingley. 'E don't mix sand with 'is sugar and sell it at threepence a pound, not 'im; 'e mixes it wi' the tea at one-an'-eight a pound. There ain't no flies on old Tom.

"'Is mother, when she was in service, 'fore she married Tom, 'ad a face almost as pretty as Reggie's." Bindle placed his hand beneath Graves's chin and elevated his flushed face and gazed down into his nephew's watery eyes.

Graves half rose from his seat, an ugly look on his face, but someone dragged him down again. He looked round the room with unseeing eyes, making vain endeavours to moisten his lips. Once or twice he seemed determined to get up and go, but Guggers' brawny arm was always there to restrain him. There was nothing for it but to sit and listen.

"Now, gentlemen," continued Bindle, "I mustn't keep yer." (There were loud cries of "Go on," "The night is young," and similar encouragements.) "Although," continued Bindle, "I could tell yer things yer might like to know about 'orses, beer, women, an' other things wot 'urt." (Loud cries of "No!") "Well, wait till you're married, then yer'll see. As I was sayin', this is an 'appy evenin'.

"Lord, I seen things in Moonagoona," continued Bindle reminiscently, "that 'ud make yer 'air stand on end. There's the Moonagoona linnet, big as an eagle, and you 'ave to plug yer ears when it sings. Then there's the Moonagoona beetle, wot'll swallow a lamb 'ole, an' then sit up an' beg for the mint-sauce.

"We got eels that big that yer wouldn't believe it. We once caught a eel at Moonagoona, and it pulled an' pulled so, that 'fore long we'd got the 'ole bloomin' population on the end o' the rope. We 'auled in miles of it, an' presently we see comin' along the river a crowd o' people; they was the in'abitants of Gumbacooe, the next town. They'd caught the other end o' the eel, wot 'ad two 'eads, an' we was a-'aulin' of 'em as well as Mister Eel. Moonagoona's the place to see things.

"I been very 'appy this evenin'," proceeded Bindle, "so's Reggie. No one would know yer was gents, yer behave so nicely." Bindle grinned broadly as he raised his glass. "Well, 'ere's to us, mates," he cried.

With a roar the company once more sprang to its feet and, assisted by bells, rattles, whistles, a tray, a phonograph which played "You Made Me Love You," combs and mouth-organs, sang in various keys, "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow."

Bindle was at that moment the most popular man in Oxford. He was one of the greatest successes that

Bungem's had ever known. He was hoisted on brawny shoulders and borne in triumph round the room. In his hand he held a finger-bowl full of champagne, the contents of which slopped over the heads and persons of his bearers at every step.

"If only 'Earty could see me now," he murmured happily. "These chaps 'ud make a man of 'Earty 'fore 'e knew it. Leggo my leg!" he yelled suddenly, as one enthusiast seized his right leg and strove to divert the procession from its course. "You funny 'Uggins, you! Think I'm made o' rubber? Leggo!"

Too excited for mere words to penetrate to his brain, the youth continued to pull, and Bindle poured the rest of the champagne over his upturned face. With a yelp the youth released Bindle's leg.

In the excitement that followed Bindle's speech Graves saw his opportunity. Guggers' eye was momentarily off him and he slipped towards the door unnoticed. He had almost reached safety when Bindle, who was the first to observe the manoeuvre, uttered a yell.

"Stop 'im! stop 'im! 'Ere, let me down," he shouted, and by pounding on the head of one of his bearers with the finger-bowl and with a kick that found the stomach of another, he disengaged himself.

Bindle's cry had attracted general attention to Graves, but too late to stop him. With a bound he reached the door and tore down the stairs.

"After him, you chaps," cried Guggers, and with yells and cries ranging from "Tally-ho!" to the "Bushmen's war-cry" the whole company streamed out of Bungem's and tore down "the High" in hot pursuit.

That night those who were late out beheld the strange sight of a white-faced man in evening-dress running apparently for his life, pursued by a pack of some two hundred other men similarly garbed and uttering the most horrible shouts and threats. Windows were thrown up and heads thrust out, and all wondered what could be the meaning of what the oldest, and consequently longest-suffering, townsman subsequently described as defying even his recollection.

Late that night the porter at St. Joseph's was aroused by a furious ringing of the bell, accompanied by a tremendous pounding at the door. On the doorstep he found, to his astonishment, the dishevelled figure of Graves, sobbing for breath and sanctuary, and with terror in his eyes. In the distance he heard a terrible outcry, which next morning he was told was the Australian Bushmen's war-cry.

IV

Bindle was awakened next morning by a continuous hammering at his bedroom door.

"Who the 'oppin' robin are yer?" he shouted; "shut up and go 'ome."

The door burst open, and Tom Little, Guggers, and Travers entered.

"Up you gug-gug-get," cried Guggers. "You must catch the 11.6."

"Look 'ere, ole Spit and Speak, if you're wantin' to get 'urt you're on the right road." Bindle grinned up at Guggers impudently. "I'm as tired as yer mother must be o' you."

"Up you get, you merry wight," cried Tom Little, laughing; "there's the devil to pay."

"There always is, exceptin' sometimes it's a woman," remarked Bindle, yawning. "Devils are cheaper, on the 'ole. What's the trouble?"

"The Master has invited you to lunch," broke in Travers, "and that ass Gravy never told us."

"You must be recalled to town," said Tom Little, "or we shall all be sent down. Now up you get."

Bindle climbed out of bed resplendent in pyjamas with alternate broad stripes of pale blue and white.

"'Oo's the Master? I'll lunch with anybody wot's not temperance." Bindle was sleepy.

"It's the Master of St. Joseph's, and you've got to clear out."

"We've sent him a letter in your name regretting that you have to return to town at once."

"Oh, you 'ave, 'ave yer?" remarked Bindle drily. "I 'ope you told 'im that I got ter call at Buckingham Palace."

Bindle dressed, shaved, and kept his visitors amused by turn. He caught the 11.6, accompanied by Dick Little. The two men spent their time in reading the long accounts in the Oxford papers of the previous evening's "banquet." They were both full and flattering. Bindle chuckled to find that his speech had been reported verbatim, and wondered how Reggie was enjoying the biographical particulars.

Dick Little and Bindle were unaware that in his rooms at St. Joseph's Reginald Graves also was reading these selfsame accounts with an anguish too great for expression. The accounts of his early life in particular caused him something akin to horror.

"It didn't last long," murmured Bindle regretfully, "but it was top-'ole (your words, sir) while it did. I wonder 'oo's 'oldin' Reggie's 'ead this mornin'?" and he chuckled gleefully.

CHAPTER XIV

MR. HEARTY GIVES A PARTY

I

"I'm surprised at 'Earty," remarked Bindle to Millie one Friday evening as they walked across Putney Bridge on the way to meet Charlie Dixon. "Fancy 'im givin' a party! It'll be all 'ymns an' misery, wi' some oranges thrown in to give it the right smell. There won't be no Kiss-in-the-ring an' Postman's-knock for the likes o' you an' me, Millikins."

Millie blushed. She had no illusions as to the nature of the festivity: she knew who were to be invited.

"I'm glad you're coming, Uncle Joe," she cried, dancing along beside him. "It would be hateful without you."

"Well, o' course I am a bit of an attraction," replied Bindle. "Lord! how the ladies fight for me in the kissin' games!"

It was rarely that Mr. Hearty unbent to the extent of entertaining. He was usually content with the mild pleasures that the chapel provided, in the shape of teas, the annual bazaar, and occasional lantern-lectures bearing such titles as "Jerusalem Revisited," "The Bible in the East," "A Christian Abroad," delivered by enthusiastic but prosy amateurs and illustrated by hired lantern-slides.

One day, however, Mr. Hearty came to the determination that it was quite compatible with his beliefs to give a party. Not one of the stupid gatherings where the gramophone vied with round-games, and round-games with music-hall songs; but one where the spirit of revelry would be chastened by Christian sobriety. Mr. Hearty did not object to music as music, and there were certain songs, such as "The Village Blacksmith" and "The Chorister" that in his opinion were calculated to exercise a beneficial effect upon those who heard them.

When Mr. Hearty had at length come to his momentous decision, he was faced with the problem of the Bindles. He felt that as a fellow-chapel-goer he could not very well omit Mrs. Bindle from the list of the invited; but Bindle would be impossible where Mr. Sopley, the pastor of the chapel, was to be an honoured guest.

One evening at supper he had, as he thought with consummate tact, broached the matter to his family.

"Not have Joe?" wheezed Mrs. Hearty.

"Not ask Uncle Joe?" Millie had exclaimed in a tone that her father thought scarcely filial.

"He is not interested in parties," Mr. Hearty had explained feebly.

"We can't leave Joe out," panted Mrs. Hearty with a decisiveness unusual to her. "Why, he'll be the life and soul of the evening."

This was exactly what Mr. Hearty feared; but seeing that his women-folk were united against him, and after a further feeble protest, he conceded the point, and the Bindles received their invitation. Mr. Hearty had, however, taken the precaution of "dropping a hint" to Mrs. Bindle, the "hint" in actual words being: "I hope that if Joseph comes he—he won't——"

"I'll see that he doesn't," was Mrs. Bindle's reply, uttered with a snap of the jaws that had seemed to reassure her brother-in-law.

II

Mrs. Bindle was engaged in removing curl-papers from her front hair. On the bed lay her best dress of black alpaca with a bright green satin yoke covered with black lace. Beside it lay her best bonnet, also of black, an affair of a very narrow gauge and built high up at the back, having the appearance of being several sizes too small for its wearer.

Mrs. Bindle was dressing with great care and deliberation for Mr. Hearty's party. Her conception of dress embodied the middle-class ideals of mid-Victorian neatness, blended with a standard of modesty and correctness peculiarly her own.

It had cost Mrs. Bindle many anxious days of thought before she had been able to justify to herself the green satin yoke in her best dress. With her, to be fashionable was to be fast. A short skirt and a pneumonia-blouse were in her eyes the contrivances of the devil to show what no modest woman would think of exhibiting to the public gaze.

As she proceeded with her toilette Mrs. Bindle was thinking of the shamelessness of women who bared their arms and shoulders to every man's gaze. On principle she disapproved of parties and festivities of any description that were not more or less concerned with the chapel; but to her Mr. Hearty could do no wrong, and the fact that their pastor was to be present removed from her mind any scruples that she might otherwise have felt.

She was slowly brushing her thin sandy hair when Bindle entered the bedroom in full evening-dress, the large imitation diamond stud in the centre of his shirt, patent boots, a red silk handkerchief stuck in the opening of his waistcoat, the light coat over his arm, and an opera hat stuck at a rakish angle on his head. Between his lips was a cigar, one of the last remaining from the Oxford adventure.

Mrs. Bindle knew nothing of that, and consequently was unaware that Bindle's wardrobe had been considerably enlarged.

Mrs. Bindle caught sight of him in the looking-glass. For a moment she stared at the reflection in helpless amazement, then turning round with startling suddenness, she continued to regard him with such fixity as he stood complacently smoking his cigar, that Bindle could not resist replying with the broadest of grins.

"Where'd you get that dress-suit?" she asked at length, in the tone a policeman might adopt to a navvy found wearing a diamond tiara.

"It's me own, o' course," replied Bindle cheerily.

"Your own!" gasped Mrs. Bindle.

"O' course it is. Your ole man's a bit of a blood, Mrs. B., and you're a lucky woman. Won't ole 'Earty open them merry eyes of 'is when 'e sees me to-night. What-oh!" and Bindle executed a few impromptu steps, holding his overcoat at arm's-length.

Mrs. Bindle continued to regard him with wonder. She glanced at her own rather shabby black dress lying on the bed, and then her eyes returned to Bindle. She examined with grim intentness his well-cut clothes.

"Where'd you get them from?" she rapped.

"Don't you worry where your peacock got 'is tail; you just feel proud," replied Bindle, seating himself on the only chair the bedroom boasted. "Your ole man is goin' to be the belle of the ball to-night."

"You been buyin' them things, an' me doin' my own housework an' keepin' you when you're out of work!" Mrs. Bindle's voice rose as the full sense of the injustice of it all began to dawn upon her. "You spendin' money on dress-suits and beer, an' me inchin' an' pinchin' to keep you in food. It's a shame. I won't stand it, I won't." Mrs. Bindle looked about her helplessly. "I'll leave you, I will, you—you——"

"Oh no, yer won't," remarked Bindle complacently; "women like you don't leave men like me. That's wot matrimony's for, to keep two people together wot ought to be kept apart by Act o' Parliament."

"Where'd you get that dress-suit?" broke in Mrs. Bindle tenaciously.

"As I was sayin'," continued Bindle imperturbably, "matrimony's a funny thing."

"Where'd you get that dress-suit?" Mrs. Bindle broke in again.

Bindle sighed, and cast up his eyes in mock appeal. "I 'ad it give to me so that I might be worthy o' wot the Lord 'as sent me an' won't 'ave back at no price—that is to say, yerself, Mrs. B. If marriages is really made in 'eaven, then there ought to be a 'Returned with thanks' department. That's my view." The happy smile with which Bindle accompanied the remark robbed it of its sting.

For some time Mrs. Bindle continued her toilette in silence, and Bindle puffed contentedly at his cigar. Mrs. Bindle was the first to speak.

"I hope you'll be careful what you say to-night." She had just put on her bonnet and with many strange grimaces had at last adjusted it and the veil to her satisfaction.

As she spoke she began to draw on a pair of tight brown kid gloves, which so contracted her palms as to render her hands practically useless.

"Our minister is to be there," she continued, "and I don't want to feel ashamed."

"You ain't a-goin' to feel ashamed o' this, are yer?" enquired Bindle, as he rose and looked down at himself with obvious appreciation. "There ain't a-goin' to be nothin' tastier at 'Earty's to-night than yours truly."

As Mrs. Bindle turned towards the door Bindle lifted his hat with elaborate courtesy and offered her his left arm. With a sniff of disdain Mrs. Bindle passed out of the room.

"I'll find out where you got it, see if I don't," she called out over her shoulder.

"Well, well!" muttered Bindle as he leisurely followed her. "I never was able to lose anythink I wanted to, nor keep anythink I didn't want ter lose. 'Ow a cove can commit bigamy does me. Fancy two Mrs. B.'s! 'Old me, 'Orace!"

The Bindles' progress from Fenton Street to the Heartys' private door was something of a triumph for Mrs. Bindle. The neighbours turned out in force, and Bindle exchanged pleasantries with them, whilst Mrs. Bindle smiled in what was to her an entirely prodigal manner.

"Funny thing me wearin' a top 'at," Bindle had remarked, as he lifted it for about the twentieth time, this time to a policeman, who stared hard at him. Bindle was in a mood to be extremely pleasant with everybody, and he raised his hat impartially to those he knew and those he did not know.

The Bindles were late. The invitation had been for seven o'clock, and it was fully half-past seven when they arrived. They were admitted by the maid-of-all-work, resplendent in a befrilled cap and apron. Bindle winked at her, the girl giggled, and Mrs. Bindle glared.

When Mr. and Mrs. Bindle were announced, a hush fell upon the fifteen or twenty guests who sat in rigid attitudes round the Heartys' drawing-room. Conversation had been carried on in constrained and self-conscious undertones. Milly, looking very pretty in a simple white frock with an orange sash, ran across to greet the newcomers, kissing her uncle heartily and Mrs. Bindle dutifully.

"My!" said Bindle, "ain't we pretty to-night. You an' me'll go off with the biscuit, Millikins." Then he added, after surveying the circle of vacant faces, "Looks to me as if they want a bit o' ginger.

"'Ullo, 'Earty," said Bindle, advancing towards his brother-in-law, "sorry we're late, but the coachman was drunk."

Mr. Hearty shuddered.

As he led the Bindles round the room, introducing them with great elaboration to each and every guest, he

marvelled at Bindle's clothes. He himself wore a black frock-coat, very shiny at the edges, with trousers that seemed far too long and hung in folds over his boots.

"'Ullo, Martha," Bindle cried, regarding Mrs. Hearty, whose ample person was clothed in a black skirt and a pale yellow bodice, the neck of which was cut in a puritan "V." "You looks like a little canary-bird." Then bending down and regarding her earnestly: "Yes, I'm blowed! why, there's two chins wot I ain't seen before."

Whereat Mrs. Hearty collapsed into ripples and wheezes. Bindle was the only self-possessed person in the room. He regarded his fellow-guests with keen interest, noted the odour of camphor and mustiness and the obvious creases in the men's coats. "Smells like a pawn-shop," he muttered. Then he came to the Rev. Mr. Sopley, a gaunt, elderly man, with ragged beard that covered his entire face, save the cheeks which, like two little hillocks of flesh, peeped out from a riot of whiskered undergrowth.

"'Ow are yer, sir?" asked Bindle.

Mr. Sopley raised a pair of agonised eyes. Before he had time to reply Mr. Hearty had dragged Bindle on to the next guest.

"Who's 'e?" enquired Bindle in a hoarse whisper, easily heard by everyone in the room. "'E seems to 'ave sort o' let his face grow wild."

Mr. Hearty, who had completed the introductions, coughed loudly.

"Won't you have an orange, Joseph?" he enquired.

Bindle came to a dead stop.

"'Ave a wot?" he asked with great emphasis. "'Ave a *wot*?"

"An—an—orange, or—or—perhaps you'd sooner have an apple?" Mr. Hearty was painfully nervous.

"Now look 'ere, 'Earty," said Bindle, taking his brother-in-law by the lapel of his coat, "do I look like oranges? Me wot 'asn't got a bib wi' me."

Mr. Hearty looked about him. Everybody seemed to be looking at Bindle with marked disapproval. Bindle, on the other hand, gazed about him with manifest appreciation.

Mrs. Hearty's drawing-room was in its gala attire. From the gasolier in the centre chains of coloured paper were festooned to the corners of the room. Two large bunches of artificial flowers had been carefully dusted and renovated and placed in ornaments on the mantel-piece, at each corner of which stood a rather insignificant-looking lustre containing a large pink candle. In the fireplace were white shavings through which ran threads of gold tinsel. On a mahogany sideboard was the first-aid equipment, the preliminary to the more elaborate refreshments to be served in the dining-room.

There were oranges and apples cut into halves, a pineapple, uncut, and which it was Mr. Hearty's intention never should be cut, a large plate of bananas, another of almonds and raisins, several plates of sweets, which seemed anxious to challenge their hardness against the teeth of those courageous enough to attack them, three different kinds of nuts, some syphons, and two large jugs of home-made lemonade. There were also plates of figs and oval boxes of dates, looking ashamed of their own stickiness, and two high piles of blue and white plates.

As Bindle surveyed the refreshments he gave vent to an involuntary sigh.

"There are times," he muttered, "when I wishes I was the brother-in-law of a bloomin' drunkard."

Mr. Hearty was anxious. He moved from one guest to another, to some merely baring his teeth, to others uttering a few meaningless phrases. Mrs. Hearty sat still, breathing heavily. Her favourite topic of conversation was her breath, vast quantities of which were expended in explaining how little of it she possessed.

Millie flitted about like a disappointed butterfly, finding no place where she might rest and fold her wings.

At the suggestion of Mr. Hearty two maiden ladies essayed a pianoforte duet, but with marked unsuccess. They seemed unable to get off together. After several unsuccessful attempts Bindle walked over to the piano.

"Look 'ere," he remarked, "I'll be starter. When I say 'three,' off yer go like giddy-o."

Without a word the duettists rose from the piano and returned to their seats, their heads held high. Bindle looked at them in wonderment. A silence had fallen over the whole room. Mr. Sopley looked at the culprit with an agonised expression, or, as Bindle afterwards expressed it, "Like a calf wot's lost 'is mother and found a nanny-goat, an' wonders wot 'e'll do at tea-time."

After a whispered conversation between Millie and Mr. Hearty, they both bore down upon Mr. Flinders, a small man seated next to a very large wife, and began an animated conversation with him in undertones. Mr. Hearty was genial, Millie pleading, and Mr. Flinders protesting and shrinking. Mrs. Flinders eventually terminated the discussion by giving his arm an upward push, accompanied by a whispered, "Yes, George, do," whereat George did. He walked towards the piano, looking back at his wife and protesting all the while.

Bindle started clapping loudly, which still further embarrassed the victim. After much preparation and searching for music, Millie played the opening chords of "Queen of the Earth," peering anxiously forward at the music, praying that she should make no mistake. Mr. Flinders was an excellent grocer, but a bad singer. His voice was weak and erratic. Each time he reached the chorus, in which everybody joined in various keys, Bindle in no key at all, it was as if a drowning man were making a last despairing effort to reach the shore.

At the conclusion of the song things seemed to sink back again into the slough from which Mr. Flinders had valiantly rescued them.

Unconsciously Mr. Hearty was defeating his object and infecting his guests with his own nervousness. Every time he moved across the room he was followed by the eyes of the whole assembly. It seemed that only one thing was capable of happening at a time. When Millie brought in her Persian kitten, "Tibbins," everyone became absorbed in it. Those who were not near enough to stroke and caress it turned to each other almost eagerly and said how pretty it was, and what a beautiful tail it had.

When Tibbins showed with voice and claw that it had exhausted any capacity for interest that the company may have possessed for it, and had been let out, another terrible silence fell upon the room. In desperation Mr. Hearty seized a plate of figs and another of half-oranges and handed them round to everyone in turn. Again interest centred in him. Those who had refused watched with the keenest interest those who were about to refuse, and Mr. Hearty returned the plates to the sideboard without having disembarrassed them of a single fig or half-orange.

In desperation he took a fig himself and began to eat it. Suddenly he became conscious that all eyes were upon him, watching each bite and every movement of the curiously large adam's-apple in his throat, which always jumped about so when he ate. Nervously he picked up a plate and placed the remains of the fig upon it, wishing he had not taken it.

Suddenly he had an inspiration. "We must have a game," he said with ponderous geniality, putting down the plate containing the half-eaten fig. "We'll play 'Here We Go Looping, Looping.'" With unaccustomed energy and much labour and persuasion he marshalled all his guests in a ring, all save Mrs. Hearty and Mr. Sopley.

After much persuasion, arrangement, and explanation, the ring was got into joyless motion, the guests droning:

> "Here we go looping, looping.
> Here we go looping light.
> Here we go looping, looping.
> Looping all the night.
> Put your noses in,
> Put your noses out,
> Shake them a little, a little, a little.

And then turn round about."

When they had shaken "a little, a little, a little" such portions of their anatomy as Mr. Hearty thought it quite proper to mention, the game ended with the same mirthlessness with which it had begun, and the players resumed their seats with an air that seemed to say, "We are our host's guests and must do as he bids us."

"They none of 'em seems to know wot to do wi' their 'ands," whispered Bindle to Millie. "They're a rummy crowd. 'Earty must 'ave 'ad a rare job to pick up such a little lot."

An awkward silence fell over the room.

"'Ave you ever played Kiss-in-the-ring, or Postman's-knock, sir?" enquired Bindle of Mr. Sopley, at a moment when all attempts at conversation seemed to have languished.

Mr. Sopley raised his eyes, and Mr. Hearty moved swiftly to his assistance. At that moment the door opened and a fair-haired young man, wearing the turndown collar and white tie of nonconformity, entered. For a moment Mr. Hearty hesitated between his desire to save Mr. Sopley and his duties as host, then with sudden decision threw his pastor overboard, and turned to welcome the new arrival.

At the Alton Road Chapel a week's mission had been held by a young missionary, whose remarkable preaching had been the sensation of the hour. Mr. Hearty had summoned up sufficient courage to invite him to the party, and the Rev. Edward Winch had accepted with a cordiality which still further increased Mr. Hearty's embarrassment.

When the ceremony of introduction and greeting was over, Mr. Winch seated himself between Mr. Sopley and Bindle, who had been much interested to hear that the new arrival was a missionary.

"Do yer live in the jungle, sir?" enquired Bindle of Mr. Winch.

"Well, I live in the interior, miles away from any other white men," replied Mr. Winch. "Why do you ask?"

Bindle was thoughtful for a moment.

"Did yer 'appen to take a double-bed with yer, sir?" enquired Bindle.

"A double-bed?" Mr. Winch looked surprised. "Why, no."

Mr. Hearty coughed, Mr. Sopley lifted his eyes to the ceiling as if seeking explanation from heaven. Mrs. Hearty wheezed, and Mrs. Bindle's lips entirely disappeared. Bindle looked round at the embarrassed faces.

"I only knew one missionary," he remarked, "an' 'e wanted to take a double-bed into the jungle. Seemed a bit funny like——"

"You must have some lemonade," interrupted Mr. Hearty with forced geniality.

Mr. Winch smilingly declined, then turning to Bindle, he said:

"No, I have a camp-bedstead, which does not err on the side of luxury or comfort."

Bindle liked this young man with the blue eyes and ready laugh. After watching him for some time, he remarked:

"Yer seem sort of 'appy, sir, if I may say so."

"I am," replied Mr. Winch with a smile.

"Funny," murmured Bindle, half to himself, "an' you a parson, leastwise a missionary."

"But what has that got to do with it?" Mr. Winch looked at Bindle in surprise.

Bindle cast his eyes round the room. "They don't look wot yer'd call a jolly crowd, do they? Look at ole Woe an' Whiskers." Bindle's glance left no doubt in Mr. Winch's mind as to whom he referred.

The missionary bit his lip to hide a smile.

"Mr. Sopley has had a lot of trouble," he said quietly.

"It seems to 'ave gone to 'is face," was Bindle's comment. "'E might be a bigamist from the look of 'im."

Mr. Winch laughed aloud. "Why?" he asked.

"You married?" enquired Bindle.

"No."

"Yer'll know when yer are," was the laconic reply.

The arrival of Mr. Winch seemed to transform the whole assembly. He and Bindle quickly became the leaders of the revels. Faces that had hitherto been shrouded in gloom broke into slow and hesitant smiles. Several of the men laughed, arguing that if so devout a man as Mr. Winch could find it in him to laugh, as he very frequently did, then surely they, being merely laymen, might allow themselves the same privilege.

It was Mr. Winch who proposed "Blind Man's Buff," and it was Bindle who when blindfolded caught Mr. Sopley, who was not playing, and after feeling all over his be-whiskered face guessed him as Millie; and it was Mr. Winch who laughed so loudly that the others joined in.

Later, at Mr. Winch's suggestion, Bindle led a game of "Follow my Leader," in which Mr. Sopley had been persuaded to join, and only Mrs. Hearty remained sitting out. Bindle's imagination ran riot, and he led his unwilling tail into many grotesque pranks. He crawled about on all fours, barked like a dog, mewed like a cat, jumped and howled, laughed and sang. In everything he was faithfully followed by Mr. Winch, who seemed to enjoy himself with a thoroughness that astonished his fellow-guests.

The riot culminated in Bindle kissing Millie, who was next to him. Mr. Winch, who was third in the living tail, left no doubt in Millie's mind that she was intended to pass on the compliment. Bindle watched with keen enjoyment the embarrassment of his victims, in particular that of Mrs. Bindle, who was next to Mr. Sopley, as she looked up enquiringly at the pastor, who bent his head towards her with a weary smile.

"Look at my missis a-burrowin' in all them whiskers," whispered Bindle to Mr. Winch.

Other games followed, and even Mr. Hearty's face lost that anxious, haunted look that it had worn during the earlier part of the evening. When Millie, Bindle, and Mr. Winch handed round the refreshments everybody took something, and Mr. Hearty beamed. He became quite conversational. His party was a success. His heart warmed towards Mr. Winch and Bindle, and—he cut the pineapple.

At supper tongues became loosed, and everyone found that there was more joy in the world than he or she had thought possible. Mr. Sopley's grace had cast a momentary gloom over the table; but this quickly passed away. After the meal Mr. Winch said "a few words," and told of some native customs at similar gatherings, keeping his hearers in a constant titter. It was he who suggested that Bindle, whom he described as "our merry master-of-the-ceremonies," should propose a vote of thanks to their host.

As Bindle rose with obvious satisfaction, Mr. Hearty caught Mrs. Bindle's eye, and each knew what were the other's thoughts.

"Ladies an' gentlemen," began Bindle with all the assurance of an inveterate after-dinner speaker, "I seen some funny things in me time, includin' a stuffed kangaroo, an' a temperance meetin' where they was as drunk as dooks; but I never yet see a missionary as could laugh and enjoy 'isself as Mr. Winch can."

There were looks of consternation on the faces of some of the guests which Mr. Winch's hearty laugh quickly caused to vanish.

"I almost wish I was one of them funny beggars wot wear only a smile o' week-days, an' add a bead for Sundays."

Mr. Hearty coughed and Mr. Sopley gazed up at the ceiling. Mrs. Bindle had shown no sign of lips since Bindle had risen.

"I never liked missionaries till to-night, though me an' Mrs. Bindle 'ave slep' in a missionary's bed for five year or more. It never made no difference to me, though. If I wasn't in the furniture movin' business I think I'd be a missionary.

"But I'm up on my 'ind legs to propose the 'ealth of 'Earty, Alfred 'Earty, who's a credit to the vegetables 'e sells for more'n they're worth. 'E's a bit solemn-like at times, but 'e's got as good a 'eart as 'is own cabbages. I known 'Earty since 'e was a young man, and me an' 'im was arter the same gal once. She's sittin' over there." Bindle indicated Mrs. Bindle with a jerk of his thumb. Mrs. Bindle and Mr. Hearty grew very red, and Mrs. Hearty wheezed painfully. "I won, though; 'Earty warn't nippy enough. 'E could sing 'ymns an' I couldn't; but yer don't get round gals with 'ymns, leastways not young gals. So 'Earty lost one gal an' got another, one of the best." Bindle pointed to Mrs. Hearty.

"We've all 'ad a pleasant evenin', thanks to Mr. Winch an 'Earty's lemonade; an' if some of us gets a jar by goin' to the wrong place when we turns up our toes, I don't mind bettin' a quid it won't be Mr. Winch. 'E may be a missionary, but 'e's one o' the bhoys."

With that Bindle sat down. For a moment there was a hush of consternation, but Mr. Winch came to the rescue with a "Thank you, Mr. Bindle, I hope you're right."

After that everyone applauded and "Auld Lang Syne" was sung and the company dispersed, conscious that they had enjoyed themselves as they had never thought it possible. They were aware of a feeling that seemed to be perilously near the mammon of unrighteousness; but they argued that no blame could attach itself to the flock for doing what the shepherd acquiesced in.

Mr. Hearty was astonished at the cordiality of the good-nights extended to Bindle; but when Mr. Sopley said that he hoped to see him at the Chapel Bazaar to be held a fortnight hence, he was amazed.

He was even more astonished when he heard himself saying, as he shook Bindle warmly by the hand, "Thank you, Joseph, for—for——" And then he lapsed into silence, wondering what it really was for which he was thankful.

That night Mrs. Bindle had much food for thought. She had heard Mr. Sopley's invitation.

CHAPTER XV

BINDLE AND THE GERMAN MENACE

I

"One of the points about this perfession, Ginger," Bindle remarked, "is that yer sometimes gets an 'oliday."

The two men were seated on the steps leading up to Holmleigh, a handsome house standing in its own grounds in the village of Little Compton, in Suffolk.

"Fancy you an' me sittin' 'ere drinkin' in the sunshine," continued Bindle with a grin.

Ginger grunted.

"Though, Ginger, sunshine ain't got no froth, an' it ain't altogether good for yer complexion, still it's good for vegetables and most likely for you too, Ginger. 'Ere we are, 'edges, trees, and no temptation. The village beauties is nearly as ugly as wot you are, Ginger. Puts me in mind o' one of the ole 'Earty 'ymns:

> "Where every prospect pleases,
> And only man is vile."

When they wrote that 'ymn, Ginger, they must 'ave been thinkin' o' you at Little Compton.

"Well, I'm orf for a drink; I can't eat me dinner dry, same's you. The further yer goes for yer beer the more yer enjoys it. Sorry you're too tired, ole son. S' long!"

Bindle and Ginger, among others, had been selected by the foreman to accompany him on an important moving job. A Mr. Henry Miller, well known throughout the kingdom as possessing one of the most valuable collections of firearms in the country, was moving from London into Suffolk. He had stipulated that only thoroughly trustworthy men should be permitted to handle his collection, and insisted on the contractors supplying all the hands instead of, as was usual, sending one man and hiring the others locally. Thus it came about that Bindle and the gloomy Ginger found themselves quartered for a few days at Lowestoft.

As Bindle approached the Dove and Easel, famous as being the only inn in the kingdom so named, Mr. John Gandy stood reading a newspaper behind the bar. When business was slack Mr. Gandy always read the newspaper, and in consequence was the best-informed man upon public affairs in Little Compton.

As if sensing a customer, Mr. Gandy laid down the paper and gazed severely over the top of his gold-rimmed spectacles at nothing in particular. He was a model publican, from his velvet skullcap and immaculate Dundreary whiskers to his brilliantly polished and squeaky boots.

As he pursued his contemplation Mr. Gandy saw the outer doors pushed open, admitting a stream of yellow sunshine and with it a little bald-headed man with a red nose and green baize apron. It was Bindle. He approached the counter, eyed Mr. Gandy deliberately, and ordered a pint of ale.

Mr. Gandy drew the beer as if it were a sacred office, wheezing the while. He was a man with a ponderous manner, and a full bar or an empty bar made no difference to the sacred flow of the liquor. He had an eye that could cower a "drunk" more effectually than the muscle of a barman.

"Dry work, movin'," said Bindle pleasantly.

Mr. Gandy wheezed.

"I'm a stranger 'ere," Bindle continued, as he produced some bread and cheese from a piece of pink newspaper. "Funny little 'ole I calls it. Nothin' to do, as far as I can see. No street accidents 'ere, wot?" and he laughed genially at his own joke.

"You're one of the pantechnicon-men from Holmleigh?" queried Mr. Gandy with dignity.

"Right, first time!" laughed the irrepressible Bindle with his mouth full of bread and cheese. "I'm up at the fort, I am."

"The fort?" queried Mr. Gandy. "The fort?"

"Yes, the fort," grinned Bindle. "That's what I calls it. Never saw so many guns in all me puff—millions of 'em."

Bindle was obviously serious, and Mr. Gandy became interested. At that moment a carter entered. Bindle immediately proceeded to get into conversation with the newcomer. Presently he caught Mr. Gandy's eye and read in it curiosity. Mr. Gandy then slowly transferred his gaze to the door of the bar-parlour. Bindle followed Mr. Gandy's eye, and with a nod, sauntered towards the door, looked round, saw that he was right and passed through, softly closing it behind him.

A minute later Mr. Gandy moved in the same direction, lifted the flap of the bar and passed into the room, also closing the door behind him. As he left the bar he touched a bell which produced Mrs. Gandy, in black, wearing much jewellery and a musical-comedy smile as persistent as Mr. Gandy's wheeze.

When Bindle went forth from the bar-parlour it was with a joyous look in his eye and half-a-crown in his pocket. Outside the Dove and Easel he lifted his green baize apron, a finger and thumb at each corner, and made a few shuffling movements with his feet; then he winked, grinned, and finally laughed.

"I shouldn't be surprised if things was to 'appen in this funny little 'ole," he remarked, as he passed on his way up the road.

Mr. Gandy left the bar-parlour, spoke to Mrs. Gandy, and disappeared through the glass door into the private parlour. Two hours later Mr. Gandy reappeared. He had made up his mind.

Bindle's mind was working busily. He was obviously in possession of a secret that other people thought worth paying for. As he walked down the village street he pondered deeply. He paused and slapped his green baize apron-covered leg. He walked over to where Mrs. Grinder was standing at the door of her little general shop. A remark of Mr. Gandy's had set him thinking.

"Mornin', mother," he called out in salutation.

"Good-morning," responded Mrs. Grinder with a smile.

"'Oo's the biggest bug 'ere?"

"The what?"

"The swells; them as grind you an' me down an' make us un'appy," Bindle explained.

"There's Sir Charles Custance at The Towers, up on the left where the poplars are, and Mr. Greenhales at the Home Farm, and——"

"That's enough. I'm stayin' in this neighbour'ood, and if I wasn't to call on the nobs they might be 'urt in their private feelin's. Glad to see yer lookin' so merry an' bright. Mornin'." And cap in hand, Bindle made an elaborate bow and passed on his way, leaving the buxom Mrs. Grinder wreathed in smiles.

Half an hour later he walked down the drive of The Towers, the residence of Sir Charles Custance, J.P., a sovereign richer than when he entered.

At the gates of The Towers he paused. Coming towards him was a dog-cart, driven by a small, fierce-looking little man. It was Mr. Roger Greenhales, who farmed as a hobby, at a considerable yearly loss, to prove that the outcry against the unprofitableness of English land-culture was ridiculous.

Bindle spoke to Mr. Greenhales, and in ten minutes received five shillings. He then proceeded to Holmleigh, where he found his foreman, and also that he had extended his dinner hour into two.

II

"It's a national affair, I tell you, Wrannock!"

Sir Charles Custance, J.P., leaned back in his library chair, and surveyed the impassive features of Sergeant Wrannock, as if searching for some contradiction; but Sergeant Wrannock of the Suffolk County Constabulary merely shuffled his feet and said:

"Yes, sir!"

"I'll call at the house this afternoon, and see if there's anything to be discovered. I'll go now; damme, if I don't. We'll both go."

Sir Charles jumped up forthwith. He was a short, stout man, with bushy, magisterial eyebrows, a red complexion, a bald head, a monocle, and a fierce don't-argue-with-me-sir manner.

He was a man who had but one topic of conversation—the coming German invasion. It would not be his fault if the Germans found Little Compton unprepared. He had pointed out that, being an East Coast village, it lay in the very centre of the battle-ground. At first Little Compton had felt uncomfortable; but later it had apparently become reconciled to its fate. It did nothing.

No village in England knew better what invasion would mean. Sir Charles had drawn a vivid picture of what would be the fate of the women of Little Compton unless their men-folk repelled the invaders, with the result that the Dorcas Society, with the full approval of the vicar, wrote to Sir Charles protesting against such things being said on a public platform.

As he trotted towards the door, Sir Charles turned to the sergeant and said:

"This is a big business, Wrannock, a big business. We'll find out more before we communicate with headquarters. See?" And Sir Charles glared fiercely at the sergeant.

Sergeant Wrannock did see. He saw many things, including promotion for himself, and he replied, "It is indeed, sir!" And the two men went out.

From The Towers to Holmleigh is not more than half a mile. Sir Charles went first, leaving the sergeant to follow on his bicycle. If they were seen together it might arouse suspicion.

Sir Charles was to go to Holmleigh, making the best excuse he could think of, and spy out the land, and the sergeant, who fortunately was not in uniform, was to follow half an hour later. At six o'clock they were to meet at The Towers and compare notes.

On his way up the drive of Holmleigh Sir Charles met Mr. Gandy coming away with a flushed and angry face. For the first time in history his "look" had failed. He had been insulted, and that by a foreman pantechnicon-man.

Sir Charles acknowledged Mr. Gandy's salute, attaching no significance to the presence of the host of the Dove and Easel in the grounds of Holmleigh. Most probably he had called to solicit the new tenant's custom. So Mr. Gandy passed down the drive with a stormy face, and Sir Charles walked up with a determined one.

The hall door was open, and men were passing to and fro carrying various articles of furniture. Sir Charles's

eyes greedily devoured all that was to be seen—in particular some long, coffin-like wooden cases.

He stood at the door for a minute; it seemed unnecessary to ring with so many men about. Presently a man came up and stared at him, rather offensively Sir Charles thought; but, remembering the delicate nature of his mission, he adjusted his monocle and said politely:

"I—er—want to see one of the er—er—moving men."

"Certainly, sir," responded the man; "'ave you any choice?'"

Sir Charles fixed his monocle more firmly in his left eye, and stared at the man in astonishment.

"We've got 'em from twenty-three to sixty-five. I'm forty-eight meself, but p'r'aps you'd like a young 'un. Fair or dark, sir, tall or short?"

Sir Charles gazed at the man as if dazed, then went very red, but controlling his wrath he replied:

"I do not know his name, I'm afraid. He has a green baize apron and is—er—bald, and—er—has a rather red nose."

The man smiled broadly, insolently, intolerably, Sir Charles thought.

"That won't 'elp us much, sir. Blessed if you 'aven't described the 'ole blessed perfession. Hi! Ginger?" This to Ginger, who was passing. He approached. "This is rather a tasty little lot, sir. 'E's got a red 'ead as well as a red nose. Not 'im? Well, let me see. Tell Bindle to come 'ere. I think Bindle may be your man, sir; 'e's got some pals in these 'ere parts, I think."

For nearly half a minute Sir Charles glared at the man before him, who grinned back with perfect self-possession.

"This 'im, sir?" he queried, as Bindle approached.

"Damn your insolence!" burst out Sir Charles. "I'll report you to your employers!" But the foreman had disappeared to give an order, and Bindle also had slipped away.

Sir Charles raged back down the drive, striving to think of some means of punishing the insolence of the foreman pantechnicon-man.

A quarter of an hour later Mr. Greenhales arrived at the hall door of Holmleigh. The foreman was there to receive him.

"Good-afternoon," said Mr. Greenhales pleasantly.

"You want to see one of our men; you don't know 'is name, but 'e's a rather bald little man, with a green baize apron an' a red nose?" replied the foreman blandly.

"Exactly!" responded Mr. Greenhales genially. "Exactly! Kindly tell him."

"I'm sorry, sir, it was 'is reception-day, but 'e's been took ill; 'e asked me to apologise. 'E's got a lot of pals about 'ere. I shouldn't be surprised if that was the cause of his illness. Good-arternoon, sir. I'll tell 'im you called."

The foreman shut the door in Mr. Greenhales' face, and for the third time that afternoon anger strode down the drive of Holmleigh.

In the hall the much-wanted Bindle was listening intently to his foreman.

"You seem to be holdin' a levvy to-day, Bindle. Seem to 'ave a lot o' blinkin' pals 'ere, too! Didn't know you was a society man, Bindle. They're all so fond of you, so it 'pears. 'Adn't you better give up this line o' business, you with your gif's, and take to squirin' it? You'd look fine follerin' the 'ounds, you would. Now, it's about time you decided

wot you really are. Two hours you take for yer dinner, an' spend the arternoon receivin' callers, me a-openin' the scarlet door. Now you get back to the brilliant furniture removin', and give up yer stutterin' ambitions. If I was you ——"

Bindle was never to know what the foreman would do if in his place. At that moment a loud peal at the bell caused the foreman to pause. He gazed from Bindle to the door, from the door to Bindle, and back again to the door. During the two seconds that his superior's eyes were off him Bindle slipped stealthily away.

The foreman went slowly to the door and opened it. He found there a middle-aged, rather stout man, dressed in tweeds, with trousers clipped for cycling. Behind him he held a bicycle. It was Sergeant Wrannock.

The foreman eyed the caller aggressively, his hands moving convulsively. There was that about his appearance which caused his caller to step suddenly back. The bicycle overturned with a clatter, and the sergeant sat down with great suddenness on the front wheel.

The foreman eyed him indifferently. The tears were streaming from the sergeant's eyes, for he had sat with considerable force upon one of the coasters. When he had picked himself up and replaced the bicycle the foreman spoke.

"If you've come 'ere to show me that trick, you've bloomin' well wasted yer time. You ain't no Cinquevalli, ole son! If, 'owever, you're a-lookin' for a bald little man with a green apron and a red nose"—the sergeant's eyes brightened beneath the tears—"well, 'e's bin took ill, an' 'is mother's took 'im 'ome.

"Now you'd better go, cockie, 'fore I set the dog on yer. I'm pretty damn well sick of the 'sight of yer, comin' 'ere with yer bicycle tricks, interruptin' o' the day's work. 'Ere, Bindle—where's Bindle?" he shouted into the house.

But the sergeant did not wait. He mounted his machine and disappeared down the drive. Before Bindle came—and Bindle was uneager to respond—he was a quarter of a mile up the road.

Sergeant Wrannock was stunned at the treatment he had received. From such men he was accustomed to respect, deference, and blind obedience. To be called "cockie" by a workman astonished him. Soon he became annoyed, in time his annoyance crystallised into anger, and eventually, passing through the alembic of professional discretion, it became distilled into a determination to teach this man a lesson.

He had no intention of letting him know that it was a police sergeant whom he had thus rudely treated, as if he were some ordinary person. He could not quite understand the reference to the "bald little man with a green apron and a red nose." The particulars seemed, however, to tally with the description of the man of whom Sir Charles had spoken.

At six o'clock he presented himself at The Towers, told his story, and was bidden by Sir Charles to leave the matter until the morning, when it would probably be better to report the whole affair to the superintendent at Lowestoft. Sir Charles had his reasons for suggesting delay.

CHAPTER XVI

THE AMATEUR DETECTIVES

I

By nine o'clock the last pantechnicon that was going back that night had rumbled off to Lowestoft, there to be entrained for London. One still remained on the drive, waiting to be taken back by the horses that would bring the first van in the morning.

With the last van went Bindle, much to his regret.

"It's like not goin' to yer own funeral," he grumbled.

Holmleigh was shut up and in darkness, save for a slit of light that could be seen beneath the Venetian blind of the dining-room. Inside the room sat the foreman.

He was smoking a meditative pipe, and cursing the luck that left him at Holmleigh to play night-watchman. He was not a nervous man, but his mind instinctively travelled back to the events of the day. Why had so many people been desirous of seeing Bindle? He had subjected Bindle himself to a very thorough and picturesque cross-examination. He had told him what he thought of him, and of those responsible for his being. He had coaxed him and threatened him, but without result. Bindle had expressed the utmost astonishment at his sudden popularity, and professed himself utterly unable to account for it.

Once or twice the foreman thought he saw the shadow of a grin flit across Bindle's face, especially when Bindle suggested that he should act as night-watchman, adding as an excuse the obvious fatigue of his superior. It was this that had terminated the interview with great suddenness.

Thus meditating upon the curious occurrences of the day, the foreman dropped off to sleep, for he was tired, and the armchair, in which he half lay, half sat, was extremely comfortable.

As he slept a dark form moved stealthily up the drive towards the house. Keeping well within the shadow of the trees, it paused to listen, then moved on for a dozen yards and stopped again. When it reached the top of the drive it crept off to the left in the direction of the tradesmen's entrance.

Displaying great caution, the figure finally reached the scullery window, which by a curious chance was unfastened. After great deliberation, and much listening, it opened the window, and inserting itself feet foremost disappeared.

Three minutes later the back door was noiselessly unbolted and opened. The figure looked out cautiously, then retreated within, leaving the door open to its fullest extent.

The first figure had scarcely disappeared before another approached the back door from the opposite direction. It must have come through the hedge and crept along in its shadow from the main entrance. The second figure paused, as if astonished at finding the back door open. For some minutes it stood in the shadow of the water-butt, listening. Finally, with a quiet, insidious motion, it slid through the doorway.

The first figure, passing cautiously through the servants' quarters, had reached the hall. Finding all the doors shut, it proceeded stealthily upstairs to the large drawing-room that overlooked the drive. The door was open! Groping its way with great care, the figure for one second allowed the light of a dark lantern to show. The effect was startling. The whole room was piled up with long narrow wooden cases. On several tables, formed by boards on trestles, were laid out what appeared to be dozens of rifles. The figure gasped. The place was apparently nothing less than a huge arsenal. The long narrow cases contained guns! guns!! guns!!!

The figure had just picked up one of the guns to make sure that its eyes were telling the truth, when there was the sound of a footfall on the landing.

The figure turned quickly, and the rifle dropped with a crash to the floor. For some time it stood as if petrified with horror, then with a swift, stealthy movement reached the door. Here it turned sharply to the left and ran into something small and soft. With a yell the something turned. In a moment two forms were locked together. With a thud they fell, and lay a writhing, wriggling mass at the top of the stairs.

II

The foreman had no idea how long he had slept, or what it was that awakened him; but suddenly he found himself wide awake with a feeling that something was happening. The lamp had gone out, there was no moon, and he felt cold, although he knew it to be July.

For a minute he listened intently. Not a sound broke the stillness, save the rustle of the trees as the wind sighed through them. He went to the window and looked out under the blind. It was quite dark. He shook himself, then pinched his leg. Yes, he was awake.

Then he heard a creak overhead, and it suddenly came home to him that the house was being burgled. A passionate anger seemed to grip hold of him. Silently and swiftly he opened the door that led into the hall. He had not moved three steps before he was brought to a standstill by a yell that echoed through the whole place. It was followed a moment later by what appeared to be an avalanche descending the stairs. From stair to stair it bumped through the darkness, and finally lay heaving and grunting almost at his feet. There were muttered exclamations, curses, threats, and the dull sound of blows.

The foreman sprang forward and clutched with his right hand a human ear. Feeling about with his left hand, he secured a handful of hair. Then he brought two heads together with a crack. The muttering and movement ceased, and the foreman pantechnicon-man struck a match.

"Crikey!" The exclamation burst involuntarily from his lips. He rummaged in his pockets and presently produced about two inches of candle; this he lighted and held over the recumbent mass at his feet.

"Well, I'm—I'm blowed!" he stuttered, conscious of the inadequacy of his words. There at his feet lay Mr. Greenhales and Sergeant Wrannock, whom the foreman recognised only as two of the afternoon's visitors. For fully two minutes he stood regarding his captives; then, with a grin of delight, he blew out the candle, carefully opening the front door.

There was nothing to be seen save the trees and the empty pantechnicon-van. The great black shape appeared to give him an idea. The doors were open, and without hesitation he stepped back into the hall, picked up one of the prostrate figures, and carried it into the van; a moment later he did the same with the other. Closing the doors, he barred and padlocked them and re-entered the hall.

Later he returned to the pantechnicon, unfastened the padlock, and left the doors merely barred. Still grinning to himself he once more entered the house, picking up an old-fashioned pistol from many that lay upon the dining-room table. Next he opened the dining-room windows at the bottom, performing the same operation with those in the morning-room.

Finally, locking the doors of both rooms from the outside, he made a tour of the whole house, and, having satisfied himself that no one was secreted within, he slipped out of the front door and closed it behind him, unaware that a pair of terrified eyes were watching him from the head of the stairs.

"There's two still to come," he muttered, and waited. At the end of an hour he heard a grind as of gravel beneath a boot. He listened eagerly. After fully five minutes of silence he heard another grind, and a dark shape approached the dining-room window. The foreman still waited. It took a quarter of an hour for the shape to make up its mind to raise the window higher and enter. The sound of suppressed wheezing could be distinctly heard. When the figure

had with difficulty forced itself upon the window-sill, the foreman leapt out, grasped its leg, and pulled. There was a wheezy shout, and the foreman was kneeling on the path, with a figure between his knees and the gravel.

Again he struck a match, which disclosed the ashen features of the landlord of the Dove and Easel. Without hesitation the foreman picked him up and bundled him into the pantechnicon and once more barred the door. As he turned back he saw the hall door open slightly. At first he thought it was his imagination. As he watched, however, the door continued to open stealthily, inch by inch, until finally a figure appeared.

Dawn was breaking, and in the half-light he saw a small man slide out and creep along by the side of the house. At first the foreman watched; then, seeing that his man was likely to escape, he sprang out. The figure ran, the foreman ran, and ran the faster. Then the fugitive stopped, and facing round caught the foreman a blow in the chest as he came on unable to stop.

With a yell of rage the foreman lifted his pistol and brought it down with a crash upon his opponent's head. In a grey heap the trespasser dropped. Another match was struck, revealing Sir Charles Custance's rubicund features, down which a slow trickle of blood wound its way.

"That's the 'ole bloomin' bag, I take it," commented the victor grimly, as he bundled the portly frame of the magistrate into the van, taking every precaution against a possible rush for freedom on the part of the other captives. He then addressed the interior at large.

"I'm a-watchin' outside, and if yer so much as cough or blow yer noses I'll shoot through the sides with this 'ere ole blunderbuss. D' ye 'ear, cockies?"

With that he banged the doors to, barred and padlocked them, and sat on the tail-board watching the greyness of the dawn steal through the trees, as he struggled to keep awake.

He was so occupied when, at half-past seven, a distant rumble announced the arrival of the expected pantechnicon from Lowestoft. As it slowly lumbered up the drive the foreman grinned, and he grinned more broadly when he saw Bindle slip from the tail-board, followed by Ginger and two other men.

"Mornin', Bindle; mornin', Ginger," he called out politely. "Slep' well?"

Bindle grinned, and Ginger grumbled something inaudible.

"Now, one o' you two go an' get my breakfast, and the other telephone for the perlice."

The men stared at him.

"Ginger," he continued complacently, "you'll find two eggs and some bacon in the 'all, an' a stove in the kitchen, an' a pot of coffee wot only wants warmin' up. I'm 'ungry, Ginger—as 'ungry as 'ell is for you, Ginger. Bindle, give my compliments to the perlice at Lowestoft, and arst them to send a few peelers over 'ere at once to take charge o' what I caught last night."

Bindle scratched his head, uncertain whether or no it was all a joke.

"Yes, Bindle," continued the foreman, "I've got 'em all—all in Black Maria," and he jerked his thumb in the direction of the pantechnicon. "All yer very dear ole pals, cockie. Like to see 'em?"

Bindle still looked puzzled; but when the foreman had explained his grin transcended in its breadth and good-humour that of his superior. Then the foreman changed the style of his idiom, and his subordinates went their ways as he had intended and directed that they should.

The foreman was just finishing his breakfast by sopping up the bacon-fat with a piece of bread, when there reached him the sound of a motor-car chunking its way along in the distance.

The news of the night's doings had spread rapidly, and a small crowd was collected round the gates of Holmleigh. Bindle grinned through the bars, and occasionally threw to the curious neighbours bits of information.

The car approached and drew up. In it was a tall, spare man of about thirty-eight or forty, with thin, angular features. He seemed surprised to see the crowd; but turning the car through the open gates drove slowly up to the house.

The crowd recognised the stranger as Mr. Richard Miller, the new tenant of Holmleigh. He nodded to the foreman, who immediately descended from the tail-board and approached.

"Good-mornin', sir," he said. "You're earlier than wot I 'ad 'oped, sir; but that's on the lucky side. I been 'avin' rather a lively night, sir."

At this moment there was a loud and continuous pounding from within the pantechnicon that he had just left.

"If you're not quiet I'll shoot—God forgive me, but I will," he shouted over his shoulder. Then turning to Mr. Miller he winked jocosely. "Gettin' a bit impatient, sir. They 'eard you come, I s'pose. I've 'ad 'em there for several hours now. Ah! 'ere's the perlice!"

As he spoke another car appeared round the bend of the drive, and an inspector in uniform and three plain-clothes men got out.

"Now there's goin' to be some fun," the foreman chuckled to himself as, addressing Mr. Miller, he told of the happenings of the night before.

When he had finished, the features of Bindle, who had been relieved by Ginger, were suffused with a grin so broad and good-humoured that it contrasted strangely with the astonishment written on the faces of the others.

"That's the story, gentlemen, and there's my bag," jerking his thumb in the direction of the pantechnicon. "Four of 'em there are, I counted 'em carefully, an' every one a Charles Peace. You'd better be careful as you let 'em out," he added. "I 'adn't time to search 'em. They came so quick, like flies in summer."

The inspector breathed hard, Mr. Miller looked grave and concerned, the plain-clothes men looked blank, Bindle looked cheerful, whilst the foreman looked as a man looks only once in a lifetime. Deliberately he approached the tail of the van, undid the lock, removed the bar, threw open the doors, and stood quietly aside. For fully half a minute nothing happened; then the portly form of Sergeant Wrannock emerged.

"Wrannock!" gasped the inspector from Lowestoft. The sergeant forgot to salute his superior officer. He was humiliated. His collar was torn, one eye was blackened, and his nose was swollen.

Closely following him came Sir Charles Custance and Mr. Greenhales, who between them supported the inert form of Mr. Gandy, wheezing pitifully. All were much battered. Sir Charles's face was covered with blood, Mr. Greenhales had lost his wig and his false teeth, whilst Mr. Gandy had lost the power to move.

"What in heaven's name is the meaning of this?" asked the inspector.

"It means," thundered Sir Charles, who was the first to find his voice, "that we have been brutally and murderously assaulted by a band of ruffians."

"That's me, and me only!" commented the foreman complacently. "I'm the band, cockie, and don't you forget it."

"It means," said Sergeant Wrannock, "that having information that this house was packed with firearms, I came to make investigation and——"

"Got caught, cockie," interrupted the foreman.

"Hold your tongue!" shouted Mr. Greenhales, in a hollow, toothless voice, dancing with fury. "Hold your tongue! You shall suffer for this."

At last, from the incoherent shoutings and reproaches in which the words "Germans," "Spies," "Herr Müller,"

were bandied back and forth, Mr. Miller and the inspector pieced together the story of how four patriots had been overcome by one foreman pantechnicon-man. The inspector turned to Mr. Miller.

"As a matter of form, sir, and in the execution of my duty, I should be glad to know if it is true that your house is full of arms and ammunition?" he asked politely.

"Of arms, certainly, Inspector, most certainly," Mr. Miller replied. "I am supposed to have the finest collection of firearms in the country. Come and see them, or such as are unpacked."

And the inspector looked at Sergeant Wrannock, and the plain-clothes constables looked away from him, and Sir Charles and Mr. Greenhales looked irefully round for Bindle; but Bindle was nowhere to be seen.

"Funny none of 'em seem to see the joke!" he remarked to a clump of rhododendrons half-way down the drive.

CHAPTER XVII

BINDLE MAKES A MISTAKE

I

"Bindle there?"

"No, sir; 'e's down the yard."

"Tell him I want him."

"Right, sir."

The manager of the West London Furniture Depository, Ltd., returned to his office. A few minutes later Bindle knocked at the door and, removing the blue-and-white cricket cap from his head, entered in response to the manager's, "Come in."

"Wonder wot 'e's found out. Shouldn't be surprised if it was them guns," muttered Bindle prophetically under his breath.

Bindle had been employed by the Depository for six months, and had acquitted himself well. He was a good workman and trustworthy, and had given conclusive proof that he knew his business.

The manager looked up from a letter he held in his hand.

"I've had a very serious letter from Sir Charles Custance of Little Compton," he began.

"No bad news, I 'ope, sir," remarked Bindle cheerfully. "Brooks sort o' shook 'im up a bit, accordin' to 'is own account." Brooks was the foreman pantechnicon-man.

The manager frowned, and proceeded to read aloud Sir Charles's letter. It recapitulated the events that had taken place at Little Compton, painting Bindle and the foreman as a pair of the most desperate cut-throats conceivable, threatening, not only them, but the West London Furniture Depository with every imaginable pain and penalty.

When he had finished, the manager looked up at Bindle with great severity.

"You've heard what Sir Charles Custance writes. What have you got to say?" he asked.

Bindle scratched his head and shuffled his feet. Then he looked up with a grin.

"Yer see, sir, I wasn't to know that they was as scared as rabbits o' the Germans. I jest sort o' let an 'int drop all innocent like, an' the 'ole bloomin' place turns itself into a sort o' Scotland Yard."

"But you sought out Sir Charles and"—the manager referred to the letter—"'and laid before me an information,' he says."

"I didn't lay nothink before 'im, sir, not even a complaint, although 'is language when 'e come out o' the ark wasn't fit for Ginger to 'ear, an' Ginger's ain't exactly Sunday-school talk."

The manager was short-handed and anxious to find some means of placating so important a man as Sir Charles Custance, and, at the same time, retaining Bindle's services. He bit the top of his pen meditatively. It was Bindle who solved the problem.

"I better resign," he suggested, "and then join up again later, sir. You can write an' say I'm under notice to go."

The manager pondered awhile. He was responsible for the conduct of the affairs of the Depository, and, after all, Sir Charles Custance and the others had been mainly responsible for what had occurred.

"I'll think the matter over," he remarked. "In the meantime Brooks is away, Mr. Colter is ill, and Jameson hasn't turned up this morning, and we have that move in West Kensington to get through during the day. Do you think that you can be responsible for it?"

"Sure of it, sir. I been in the perfession, man and boy, all me life."

The West London Furniture Depository made a specialty of moving clients' furniture whilst they were holiday-making. They undertook to set out the rooms in the new house exactly as they had been in the old, with due allowance for a changed geography.

"Here is the specification," said the manager, handing to Bindle a paper. "Now how will you set to work?"

"'Five bed, two reception, one study, one kitchen, one nursery,'" read Bindle. "Two vans'll do it, sir. Best bedroom, servant's. dinin'-room, No. 1; second bedroom, drawin'-room, No. 2; two bedrooms and kitchen No. 3, and the rest No. 4. Then you see we shan't get 'em mixed."

The manager nodded approvingly.

"Do you think you could replace the furniture?"

"Sure as I am o' Mrs. Bindle. I can carry an 'ole 'ouse in me eye; they won't know they've even moved."

"The keys are at the West Kensington Police Station. Here is the authority, with a note from me. It's No. 181 Branksome Road you're to fetch the furniture from. Here's the key of the house you are to take it to—No. 33 Lebanon Avenue, Chiswick. Take Nos. 6 and 8 vans, with Wilkes, Huggles, Randers, and the new man."

"Right, sir," said Bindle; "I'll see it through."

Bindle returned to the yard, where he narrated to his mates what had just taken place in the manager's room.

"So yer see, Ginger, I'm still goin' to stay wi' yer, correct yer language an' make a gentleman o' yer. So cheer up, 'Appy."

Bindle gathered together his forces and set out. He was glad to be able to include Ginger, whose misanthropic outlook upon life was a source of intense interest to him. Outside the police-station he stepped off the tail-board of the front van, saying that he would overtake them.

"Come to give yourself up?" enquired the sergeant, who had a slight acquaintance with Bindle.

"Not yet, ole sport; goin' to give yer a chance to earn promotion. I come for a key."

Bindle handed in his credentials.

At that moment two constables entered with a drunken woman screaming obscenities. The men had all they could do to hold her. Bindle listened for a moment.

"Lord, she ain't learnt all that at Sunday-school," he muttered; then turning to the sergeant, said, "'Ere, gi'e me my key. I didn't ought to 'ear such things."

The sergeant hurriedly turned to a rack behind him, picked up the key and handed it to Bindle. His attention was engrossed with the new case; it meant a troublesome day for him.

Bindle signed for the key, put it in his pocket and left the station.

He overtook the vans just as they were entering Branksome Road. Pulling the key out of his pocket he looked at the tag.

"Funny," he muttered, "thought he said a 'undred an' eighty-one, not a 'undred an' thirty-one."

He took a scrap of paper out of his pocket, on which he had written down the number in the manager's office. It was clearly 181. The sergeant had given him the wrong key.

"'Ere! Hi!" he began, when he stopped suddenly, a grin overspreading his features. Suddenly he slapped his knee.

"Wot a go! 'Oly Moses, I'll do it! I only 'ope they 'aven't left no servants in the 'ouse. Won't it be—— Hi, where the 'ell are you goin' to? You're passin' the 'ouse."

"Didn't yer say a 'undred an' heighty-one?" came the hoarse voice of Wilkes from the front of the first of the pantechnicons.

"A 'undred an' thirty-one, you ole 'Uggins. 'Adn't yer better count it up on yer fingers? Yer can use yer toes if yer like."

There was a growl in response. Bindle was popular with his mates, and no one ever took offence at what he said.

The two vans drew up before No. 131, and the four men grouped themselves by the gate.

Bindle surveyed them with a grin.

"Lord, wot a army of ole reprobates! Wilkes," said Bindle gravely, addressing an elderly man with a stubbly beard and a persistent cough, of which he made the most, "yer must get out of that 'abit o' yours o' shavin' only on jubilee days and golden weddin's. It spoils y' appearance. Yer won't get no more kisses than a currycomb."

Bindle was in high spirits.

"'Ullo, Ginger, where's that clean coller you was wearin' last Toosday week? Lent it to the lodger? 'Ere, come along. Let's lay the dust 'fore we starts." And Bindle and his squad trooped off to the nearest public-house.

A quarter of an hour later they returned and set to work. Bindle laboured like one possessed, and inspired his men to more than usual efforts. Nothing had been prepared, and consequently there was much more to do than was usually the case. One of the men remarked upon this fact.

"They ain't a-goin' to pay you for doin' things and do 'em theirselves, so look slippy," was Bindle's response.

The people at No. 129 manifested considerable surprise in the doings of Bindle and his assistants. Soon after a start had been made, the maidservant came to the front door for a few moments, and watched the operations with keen interest. As Bindle staggered down the path beneath a particularly voluminous armchair she ventured a tentative remark.

"I'm surprised that Mrs. Rogers is movin'," she said.

"Not 'alf as surprised as she'll be when she finds out," muttered Bindle with a grin, as he deposited the chair on the tail of the van for Ginger to stow away.

"Funny she shouldn't 'ave told yer," he remarked to the girl as he returned up the path.

"You ain't 'alf as funny as you think," retorted the girl with a toss of her head.

"If you're as funny as you look, Ruthie dear, you ought to be worth a lot to yer family," retorted Bindle.

"Where did you get that nose from?" snapped the girl pertly.

"Same place as yer got that face, only I got there first. Now run in, Ruthie, there's a good girl. I'm busy. I'm also married." The girl retired discomfited.

Later in the day the mistress of No. 129 emerged on her way to pay a call. Seeing Bindle she paused, lifted her lorgnettes, and surveyed him with cold insolence.

"Is Mrs. Rogers moving?" she asked.

"No, mum," replied Bindle, "we're goin' to take the furniture for a ride in the park."

"You're an extremely impertinent fellow," was the retort. "I shall report you to your employers."

"Please don't do that, mum; think o' me 'ungry wives an' child."

There was no further endeavour to enquire into the destination of Mrs. Rogers's possessions.

By four o'clock the last load had left—a miscellaneous mass of oddments that puzzled Bindle how he was ever going to sort them out.

It was past seven before Bindle and his men had finished their work. The miscellaneous things, obviously the accumulation of many years, had presented problems; but Bindle had overcome them by putting in the coal-cellar everything that he could not crowd in a lumber room at the top of the house, or distribute through the rest of the rooms.

"Seemed to have moved in an 'urry," coughed Wilkes; "I never see sich a lot of truck in all me life."

"P'r'aps they owed the rent," suggested Huggles.

"'Uggles, 'Uggles," remonstrated Bindle with a grin, "I'm surprised at you. 'Cos your family 'as shot the moon for years—'Uggles, I'm pained."

Bindle duly returned the key to the police-station, put up the vans, and himself saw that the horses were made comfortable for the night. Whenever in charge of a job he always made this his own particular duty.

II

At six o'clock on the following afternoon a railway omnibus drew up at the West Kensington police-station. In it were Mr. and Mrs. Railton-Rogers, seven little Rogerses, a nursemaid, and what is known in suburbia as a cook-general.

After some difficulty, Mr. Rogers, a bald-headed, thick-set man with the fussy deportment of a Thames tug, extricated himself from his progeny. After repeated injunctions to it to remain quiet, he disappeared into the police-station and a few minutes later emerged with the key.

"Don't do that, Eustace," he called out.

Eustace was doing nothing but press a particularly stubby nose against the window of the omnibus; but Mr. Rogers was a man who must talk if only to keep himself in practice. If nothing worthy of comment presented itself, he would exclaim, apropos the slightest sound or movement, "What's that?"

The omnibus started off again, and a few minutes later turned into Branksome Road. It was Nelly, the second girl, aged eleven, who made the startling discovery.

"Mother, mother, look at our house, it's empty!" she cried excitedly.

"Nelly, be quiet," commanded Mr. Rogers from sheer habit.

"But, father, father, look, look!" she persisted, pointing in the direction of No. 131.

Mr. Rogers looked, and looked again. He then looked at his family as if to assure himself of his own identity.

"Good God! Emily," he gasped (Emily was Mrs. Rogers), "look!"

Emily looked. She was a heavy, apathetic woman, who seemed always to be a day in arrears of the amount of sleep necessary to her. A facetious relative had dubbed her "the sleeping partner." From the house Mrs. Rogers looked back to her husband, as if seeking her cue from him.

"They've stolen my horse!" a howl of protest arose from Eustace, and for once he went uncorrected.

The omnibus drew up with a groan and a squeak opposite to No. 131. Mr. Rogers, followed by a stream of little Rogerses, bounded out and up the path like a comet that had outstripped its tail. He opened the door with almost incredible quickness, entered and rushed in and out of the rooms like a lost dog seeking his master. He then darted up the stairs, the seven little Rogerses streaming after him. When he had reached the top floor and had thoroughly assured himself that everywhere there was a void of desolation, he uttered a howl of despair, and, forgetful of the tail of young Rogerses toiling after him in vain, turned, and tearing down the stairs collided with Nelly, who, losing her balance, fell back on Eustace, who in turn lost his balance, and amidst wails and yells comet and tail tumbled down the stairs and lay in a heap on the first-floor landing.

Mr. Rogers was the first to disentangle himself from the struggling mass.

"Stop it, you little beasts! Stop it!" he shouted.

They stopped it, gazing in wonderment at their father as he once more dashed down the stairs. At the door Mr. Rogers found Mrs. Rogers and the two maids talking to the next-door neighbour, Mrs. Clark, who was there with her maid, whom Bindle had addressed as "Ruthie." As he approached, Mrs. Clark was saying:

"I thought there must be something wrong, the man looked such a desperate fellow."

"Then why didn't you inform the police?" snapped Mr. Rogers.

"It was not my business, Mr. Rogers," replied Mrs. Clark with dignity. Then, turning to Mrs. Rogers and the maid, she added, "The way that man spoke to my maid was a scandal, and he was most insolent to me also."

"Get in, you little devils, get in!" Mr. Rogers roared.

"Albert dear, don't!" expostulated Mrs. Rogers with unaccustomed temerity.

"In you get!" he repeated. And the family and maids were packed once more into the omnibus.

"Back to the police-station," shouted Mr. Rogers.

Just as the vehicle was on the move Mrs. Clark came down to the gate and called out, "I told Archie to follow the van on his bicycle in case anything was wrong. He's got the address, but I have forgotten it. He will be back in a minute. It was somewhere in Chiswick."

"Send him round to the police-station," shouted Mr. Rogers. "For God's sake hurry, this is not a funeral," he almost shrieked to the driver.

"No, an' I ain't no bloomin' nigger neither," growled the man.

Neighbours were at their gates, scenting trouble in the way that neighbours will. All sorts of rumours were afloat, the prevalent idea being that Mr. Rogers was a bankrupt, and that his furniture had been taken by the representatives of his creditors.

At the police-station Mr. Rogers once more bounced from the omnibus, the little Rogerses climbing out after

him. This time the nursemaid joined the crowd in the charge-room.

"I have been robbed," almost sobbed Mr. Rogers; then with unconscious irony added, "Everything has gone, except my wife and children."

The sergeant was conventionally sympathetic, but officially reticent. A man should be sent to No. 131 Branksome Road, to institute enquiries.

"What the devil is the use of that?" shouted Mr. Rogers. "I want my furniture, and it's not in my house. What are the police for?"

"I want my horse!" Eustace set up another howl. He, together with his six brothers and sisters and the nursemaid, were now ranged behind their father, looking with large-eyed wonder at the sergeant.

"Look at these!" Mr. Rogers turned and with a sweep of his hand indicated his progeny as if he were a barrister calling attention to a row of exhibits. "What am I to do with them to-night?"

There was another howl from Eustace, and a whimper from Muriel the youngest.

The sergeant had not been on duty when Bindle called for the key, but he had heard it said that the key of No. 131 had been handed to the bearer of a letter from a firm of furniture-removers. This he explained to Mr. Rogers, regretting that apparently the letter itself had been put aside. On Monday the whole matter should be threshed out and the guilty brought to justice.

He gave the assurance rather as an official formality than as the result of any inherent conviction of his own.

"Monday?" almost shrieked Mr. Rogers. "What am I to do until Monday?"

The sergeant suggested that perhaps the neighbours might extend hospitality.

"Who is going to take in eleven people?" shouted Mr. Rogers. "We shall all starve!"

At this announcement the Rogerses, who were all sturdy trenchermen, set up such a howl as to bring Mrs. Rogers and the other maid out of the omnibus.

Just at that moment Archie Clark, a precocious youth of twelve, rode up full of importance and information. He pushed his way through the mass of Rogerses, and without preliminary shouted, "33 Lebanon Avenue, Chiswick; that's where the van went."

The sergeant picked up a pen and began to take down the address.

"Get into the bus, get in, all of you," shouted Mr. Rogers. He saw that little help was to be obtained from the police. In the hurry of getting off, somehow or other and in spite of his protests, Archie Clark was bundled into the omnibus and Eustace was left howling on the pavement beside Archie's bicycle.

III

Bindle had discovered at the office that the new occupants of 33 Lebanon Avenue expected to reach Chiswick about six o'clock on the day following the move. It was nearly a quarter to seven before their taxi hove in sight. Bindle sauntered up the avenue whistling, and arrived just in time to see Mr. Daniel Granger open the front door with a key, enter, and suddenly bolt out very hurriedly and examine the number; then he looked in again and called to Mrs. Granger, a thin little woman, with round black eyes and a porcelain smile that deceived no one.

Mrs. Granger tripped up the path and followed the burly form of her husband through the door. By this time Bindle had reached the gate.

"Want a 'and wi' the luggage, mate?" he enquired of the taxi-driver.

"Maybe yes, maybe no," was the reply.

Bindle examined the man curiously.

"You ain't a-goin' to take no risks, ole card, I can see that," he retorted with a grin. "I 'ad a mate once 'oo said that to the parson at 'is weddin', an' 'is missis is never quite sure whether she's a respectable woman or ought to be a widder. You'll 'ave to get out of that 'abit; it's as bad as stutterin'."

The taxi-driver grinned.

"I knew a cove," began Bindle, "wot——"

At that moment Mr. Railton-Rogers's omnibus drew up behind the taxi, and before it had stopped Mr. Rogers bounced out, followed by his entire suite of wife, progeny, and retainers. Into the house he dashed, and as he recognised his lares and penates he uttered a howl of triumph.

The hall was dark, and he fell over a chair, which brought Mr. and Mrs. Granger out from the dining-room.

"So I've caught you," shouted Mr. Rogers triumphantly, looking up defiantly at the burly form of Mr. Granger, whose good-humoured blue eyes wore a puzzled expression. "You're a thief, a daylight-robber; but I've caught you."

Mr. Rogers planted himself in the doorway. Mr. and Mrs. Granger looked at each other in mute wonder.

"Will you kindly get out of the way?" requested Mr. Granger.

"No, I won't. I've caught you and I mean to keep you," said Mr. Rogers, making a clutch at Mr. Granger's coat-sleeve. Then something happened, and Mr. Rogers found himself sitting in the hall, and Mr. and Mrs. Granger were walking down the path towards their taxi.

"Police! fetch a policeman! Don't let them escape," yelled Mr. Rogers, and the cry was taken up by his family and retainers. Mr. Rogers picked himself up and dashed down the path shouting to the drivers of the taxi and the omnibus that, if they aided and abetted the criminals to escape, their doom was certain.

"'As anythin' 'appened, sir?" enquired the taxi-driver civilly.

Bindle had retired behind a tree in order to avoid being seen. He had recognised Archie Clark.

"He's stolen my furniture——'

"Shut up, you silly little ass," interrupted Mr. Granger. Then turning to the taxi-driver he said, "Perhaps you had better fetch a policeman."

"Better fetch a Black Maria to take all this lot," muttered Bindle.

The neighbours were now arriving in strong force, and Mr. Rogers cheerfully told his tale to all who would listen; but none could make much of what he was saying. At the end of a few minutes the taxi returned with a policeman sitting beside the driver. As soon as he alighted Mr. Rogers dashed up to him.

"I give this man and woman in charge for stealing my furniture. You'd better keep the driver, too. He's probably an accomplice."

The policeman turned to Mr. Granger. "Have you anything to say, sir?"

"I think we had better all go to the police-station," remarked Mr. Granger coolly. "There has been a mistake, and the wrong furniture has been moved into my house."

The last Bindle saw of the protagonists in this domestic drama, of which he was the sole author, was the

Railton-Rogerses being bundled into their omnibus by Mr. Railton-Rogers, and Mr. and Mrs. Granger calmly entering their taxi, on the front seat of which sat the policeman. He turned reluctantly away, regretful that he was not to see the last act.

The epilogue took place on the following Monday, when early in the morning Bindle was called into the manager's office and summarily dismissed.

Returning to Fenton Street earlier than usual he was greeted by Mrs. Bindle with the old familiar words:

"Lorst yer job?"

"Yes," said Bindle, as he removed his coat; "but it was worth it:"

Mrs. Bindle stared.

CHAPTER XVIII

BINDLE ASSISTS IN AN ELOPEMENT

I

When Bindle announced to Mrs. Bindle that he intended to enlist in Kitchener's Army, she opened upon him the floodgates of her wrath.

"You never was a proper husband," she snapped viciously. "You've neglected me ever since we was married. Now you want to go away and get killed. What shall I do then? What would become of me?"

"Well," said Bindle slowly, "yer would become wot they calls a widder. Then yer could marry into the chapel and you an' 'im 'ud go to 'eaven 'and in 'and."

Mrs. Bindle snorted and started to rake out the kitchen fire. Whenever Mrs. Bindle reached the apex of her wrath, an attack upon the kitchen fire was inevitable. Suddenly she would conceive the idea that it was not burning as it should burn, and she would rake and dab and poke until at last forced to relight it.

Bindle watched her with interest.

"The next worst thing to bein' Mrs. Bindle's 'usband," he muttered, "is to be a bloomin' kitchen fire with 'er at the other end of a poker." Then aloud he said, "You'd get an allowance while I'm away, and a pension when I dies o' killin' too many Germans."

Mrs. Bindle paused. "How much?" she asked practically.

"Oh, about a pound a week," said Bindle recklessly.

Mrs. Bindle put down the poker and proceeded to wash up. She seemed for ever washing up or sweeping. Presently she enquired:

"When are you goin'?"

"Well," said Bindle, "I thought of trottin' round to the War Office this afternoon and breakin' the news. It'll sort o' buck 'em up to know that I'm comin'."

Mrs. Bindle raised no further objections.

It was Saturday afternoon, and Bindle's time was his own. He joined the queue outside the Recruiting Station in the Fulham Road and patiently waited his turn, incidentally helping to pass the time of those around him by his pungent remarks.

"Lord!" he remarked, "we're a funny sort o' crowd to beat the Germans. Look at us: we ain't got a chest among the 'ole bloomin' lot."

At length Bindle stood before the recruiting officer, cap in hand and a happy look on his face.

"Name?" enquired the officer.

"Joseph Bindle."

"Age?"

"Wot's the age limit?" enquired Bindle cautiously.

"Thirty-eight."

"Then put me down as thirty-seven and a 'arf," he replied.

The officer looked up quickly. There was just the suspicion of a smile in his eyes. This was the type of man he liked.

After a few more questions he was turned over to the doctor, who ordered him to strip.

After a very rapid examination the doctor remarked:

"You won't do—varicose veins."

"Beg pardon, sir?" said Bindle.

"Varicose veins," said the doctor.

"An' 'oo's 'e when 'e's at 'ome?" enquired Bindle.

"You have got varicose veins in the legs and therefore you cannot enlist." The doctor was tired and impatient.

"But ain't you got veins in your legs?" enquired Bindle. "Why can't I be a soldier 'cos I got various veins in me legs?"

"You couldn't stand the marching," was the reply.

"Oh, couldn't I? That's all you know about it. You should see me 'oppin' in an' out of 'ouses carrying pianners an' sofas. I want to enlist." Bindle was dogged.

The doctor relented somewhat. "It's no good, my man. We cannot take you. I'm sorry."

"But," said Bindle, "couldn't yer put me in somethin' wot sits on an 'orse, or 'angs on be'ind? I want to go."

"It's no good; I cannot pass you."

"Couldn't yer make me even a 'ighlander? Me legs ain't too thin for that, are they?"

"It's no good!"

"Are they catchin'?" enquired Bindle, with some eagerness in his voice.

"Are what catching?"

"Various veins."

"No."

"Just my luck," grumbled Bindle, "a-gettin' somethink wot I can't 'and on."

The doctor laughed.

Finding that nothing could break down the doctor's relentless refusal, Bindle reluctantly departed.

During the week following he made application at several other recruiting offices, but always with the same result.

"Nothin' doin'," he mumbled. "Nothin' left for me but to become a bloomin' slop. I must do somethink." And he

entered the local police-station.

"What is it?" enquired the officer in charge.

"Come to gi' meself up," said Bindle with a grin. "Goin' to be a special constable and run in all me dear ole pals."

He found the interrogations here far less severe. Certain particulars were asked of him. Finally he was told that he would hear in due course whether or no his services were accepted.

After an interval of about a week Bindle was sworn in. A few days later he called once more at the police-station for his equipment. As the truncheon, armlet, and whistle were handed to him, he eyed the articles dubiously, then looking up at the officer, enquired:

"This all I got to wear? It don't seem decent."

He was told that he would wear his ordinary clothes, and would be expected to report himself for duty at a certain hour on the following Monday.

On his way home he called in on his brother-in-law and, to the delight of Smith and the errand boy, solemnly informed Mr. Hearty of the step he had taken.

"Now look 'ere, 'Earty," he remarked, "you got to be pretty bloomin' careful what yer up to, or yer'll get run in. Yer'd look sort o' tasty with me a-shovin' of yer from be'ind in me new uniform, a bit in each 'and and the rest round me arm. S' long! an' don't yer forget it. No late nights. No carryin's on with the choir." And Bindle winked knowingly at Smith and the boy.

Bindle's popularity among his brother special constables was instantaneous and complete. They were for the most part sent out in pairs. "'untin' in couples," Bindle called it. The man who got Bindle as a companion considered himself lucky.

If Bindle saw a pair of lovers saying good-night, he would go up to them gravely and demand what they were doing, and warn them as to their proper course of conduct.

"There ain't goin' to be no kissin' on my beat," he would remark, "only wot I does meself. Why ain't you in the army, young feller?"

He never lost an opportunity of indulging his sense of the ludicrous, and he soon became known to many of those whose property it was his duty to protect. From servant-girls he came in for many dainties, and it was not long before he learnt that the solitary special gets more attention from the other sex than the one who "'unts in couples." As a consequence Bindle became an adept at losing his fellow-constable. "I can lose a special quicker than most chaps can lose a flea," he remarked once to Mrs. Bindle.

One night, about half-past nine, when on duty alone on Putney Hill, Bindle saw a man slip down one of the turnings on the left-hand side, as if desirous of avoiding observation. A moment after he heard a soft whistle. Grasping his truncheon in his right hand, Bindle slid into the shadow of the high wall surrounding a large house. A few minutes later he heard another whistle.

"'Ullo," he muttered, "shouldn't be surprised if there wasn't somethink on. Now, Joe B., for the V.C. or a pauper's grave."

Creeping stealthily along under the shadow of the wall, he came close up to the man without being observed. Just as he gave vent to the third whistle Bindle caught him by the arm.

"Now then, young feller, wot's all this about? I 'eard you. 'Oly Angels!" Bindle exclaimed in astonishment, "where did you spring from, sir?"

It was Dick Little.

"I was just a-goin' to run you in for a burglar."

"Well, you wouldn't have been far wrong," replied Little. "I'm bent on theft."

"Right-oh," said Bindle. "I'm with yer, special or no special. What are yer stealin', if it ain't a rude question?"

"A girl," Little replied.

Bindle whistled significantly.

In the course of the next five minutes Dick Little explained that he was in love with a girl whose people disapproved of him, and she was being kept almost a prisoner in the house in question. At night he was sometimes able to get a few words with her after dinner, she mounting a ladder and talking to him from the top of the garden wall.

"One of these nights," Little concluded, "we're going to make a bolt for it. By Jove!" he suddenly broke off. "You're the very man; you'll help, of course."

"'Elp?" said Bindle; "o' course I'll 'elp. If yer want to be made un'appy that's your affair. If yer wants me to 'elp to make yer un'appy, that's my affair."

At this moment there was a faint whistle from farther down the road.

"I must be off," said Little. "Come round and see me on Sunday, and I'll tell you all about it."

The next Sunday night Bindle heard the whole story. Dick Little was desperately in love with Ethel Knob-Kerrick, the daughter of Lady Knob-Kerrick, whose discomfiture at the Barton Bridge Temperance Fête had been due to his tampering with the lemonade. Lady Knob-Kerrick had come to know of clandestine meetings, and henceforth her daughter had been practically a prisoner, never being allowed out of her mother's sight or that of Miss Strint, who, although in sympathy with the lovers, was too much afraid of Lady Knob-Kerrick to render them any assistance.

"So I'm going to bolt with her," said Dick Little.

"And very nice too," remarked Bindle, as he gazed admiringly at the photograph of an extremely pretty brunette with expressive eyes and a tilted chin.

"Funny things, women," continued Bindle. "Yer think yer've got a bloomin' peach, when squash! and there is only the stone and a little juice left in yer 'and. Funny things, women! She'll probably nag yer into an asylum or the Blue Boar or——"

"Shut up, Bindle!" There was a hard note in Dick Little's voice.

"All right, sir, all right," said Bindle patiently. "I'd 'ave said the same meself when I was a-courtin' me little red-'eaded blossom. Funny things, women!

"If it ain't rude, sir," Bindle continued after a pause, "'ave yer got an 'ome ready? 'Cos when yer get a bird yer sort o' got to get a cage, an' if that cage ain't gold, wi' bits o' gold sort o' lyin' about, well, there'll be some feathers flyin', an' they won't be 'ers. A woman wot ain't got money makes a man moult pretty quick. Yer'll excuse me, sir, but I'm an old warrior at this 'ere game."

"I've bought a practice in Chelsea, and besides I've got between three and four hundred a year," replied Little.

"H'm," said Bindle, "may keep 'er in scent an' shoe-strings. I suppose you're set on doin' it?"

"Absolutely."

"Well, I'll 'elp yer; but it's a pity, it's always a pity when a nice chap like you gets balmy on a bit o' skirt."

"Right-oh!" said Little. "I knew you would."

A week later Bindle, wearing what he called his "uniform," met Dick Little by appointment outside Lady Knob-Kerrick's house on Putney Hill. Miss Kerrick had arranged to be ready at 9.30. Dick Little had borrowed, through his brother, Guggers' Rolls-Royce, which, according to the owner, would "gug-gug-go anywhere and do anything."

Guggers volunteered to drive himself. At 9.30 the car slid silently down the road at the side of Lady Knob-Kerrick's house. It was a dark night and the lights were hooded. Under the shade of a huge elm, and drawn close up against the house, no one could distinguish the car from the surrounding shadow.

A short ladder was placed in the tonneau and reared up against the wall. Bindle and Little both mounted the wall and waited what to Little seemed hours. It was nearly ten o'clock before a slight sound on the gravel announced the approach of someone. A subdued whistle from Dick Little produced a tremulous answer. Not a word was spoken. Presently a scraping against the wall announced the placing of the ladder from inside the garden, and a moment later a voice whispered:

"Is that you, Dick?"

"Yes, Ettie," was the reply. "Quick. I've got a friend here."

"It's all right, miss," whispered Bindle; "I'll catch hold of one arm and Mr. Little will do ditto with the other, and 'fore you can wink you'll be over. You ain't the screamin' sort, are yer?" he enquired anxiously.

A little laugh answered him.

"Now then, look slippy, in case the old gal—sorry, miss, yer mother—smells a rat."

It was a hot, soundless night. The atmosphere hung round them like a heavy garment saturated with moisture. Every sound seemed to be magnified. As he finished speaking, Bindle's quick ear detected a footstep inside the garden. Bending down he whispered to Guggers:

"Start the car, sir, there's someone comin'. Come along, miss," he added.

"Ethel!" Three hearts gave a great leap at the sound of a harsh, uncompromising voice from almost beneath them.

"Ethel, where are you? You will catch your death of cold walking about the garden at this time of night. Come in at once!"

It was Lady Knob-Kerrick. There was no mistaking her disapproving voice. Bindle grinned as he recollected the inglorious figure she had cut at the Temperance Fête.

"Ethel, where are you?" The voice cut sharply through the still air.

"Steady, sir," whispered Bindle to Dick Little, who had lifted Miss Kerrick off the wall.

"I'll keep the ole gal jawin'. Tell ole Spit-and-Speak to get off quietly."

"Strint!" Lady Knob-Kerrick's voice again rang out. "Strint, where are you?"

Bindle heard the sound of feet hastening down the path. He was standing on the wall, grasping with one hand the top of the ladder used by Miss Kerrick, which reached some three feet above the top of the wall. He had taken the precaution of putting his uniform in his pocket "in case I gets nabbed," as he explained to Dick Little.

Bindle heard a suppressed "gug-gug" from Guggers, on whose head Miss Kerrick had alighted. He wondered why Guggers had not started the engine.

Somewhere below him he heard Lady Knob-Kerrick moving about. Would she find the ladder? If she did, how

was he to cover the retreat of the car? He was conscious of enjoying to the full the excitement of the situation.

"Where is Miss Knob-Kerrick?" Lady Knob-Kerrick always insisted on the "Knob." Her voice came from out of the darkness immediately below where Bindle was standing.

"I'm afraid——" began another voice, that of Miss Strint, when suddenly several things seemed to happen at once. There was a triumphant "Ah!" from Lady Knob-Kerrick, as she found the ladder and wrenched it from the wall, a yell from Bindle as he lost his balance, and an agonised shriek from Miss Strint, as she was swept from her feet by what she thought was a bomb, but what in reality was the ladder, which fell, pinning her to the earth.

"Help! Help!! Murder!!!" shrieked Lady Knob-Kerrick, until Bindle reached the ground, marvelling at the softness of the substance on which he had fallen, when her cries ceased suddenly and only the moans of Miss Strint were to be heard by the servants, who rushed from the house to the rescue.

On the other side of the wall the two occupants of the car held their breath, but Guggers saw in the sudden pandemonium that for which he had been waiting, and the Rolls-Royce leapt forward.

"Stop, Guggers," whispered Dick Little, leaning forward, "we can't leave him like this."

"Gug-gug-go to blazes! This is my car," was the response, as they tore up Putney Hill on the way to Walton, where Miss Kerrick was to spend the night with Guggers' sister.

II

Five minutes later Bindle stood in Lady Knob-Kerrick's drawing-room with Thomas, the footman, holding one arm, and Wilton, the butler, the other. On Wilton's face was an expression of disgust at having temporarily to usurp the duties of the police.

Lady Knob-Kerrick had made enquiries of the servants, and was now convinced that her daughter had either eloped or been abducted. Her hair was disarranged, there was dirt upon her face, and leaves and mould upon her gown; but of these she was unconscious, and she regarded Bindle with an expression of grim triumph. At least she had captured one of the ruffians, probably the worst.

Bindle himself was quite self-possessed. All he desired was to gain time so that the fugitives might get well beyond the possibility of capture.

"Now, look here, Calves," he remarked, obliquely examining the footman's gorgeous raiment, "if you pinch I kick. See?"

Apprehensive of an attack upon his white silk legs, Thomas moved away as far as he could, holding Bindle at arm's-length.

"I have had the police telephoned for," said Lady Knob-Kerrick grimly. "Now, where is Miss Knob-Kerrick?"

"You may search me, mum," replied Bindle imperturbably.

"You were with the villains who abducted her," snapped Lady Knob-Kerrick.

"Who wot, mum?"

"Abducted her."

"I never done that to any woman. I kissed a few, but I never gone further. Mrs. Bindle (my name's Bindle—Joseph Bindle) is sort o' particular."

"Then you refuse to confess?" Lady Knob-Kerrick glared at Bindle through her lorgnettes.

"I ain't got nothin' to confess, mum; leastways nothin' I'd like to say 'fore a lady. Look 'ere, Dicky-Bird, if you pinch my arm I'll break your bloomin' shins." This last remark was addressed to Wilton, whom Bindle examined with insulting deliberation. "Must cost a bit to keep yer in clean dickies, ole son," he remarked. Wilton writhed. Bindle suddenly caught sight of Miss Strint slipping into the room, looking very ill and obviously in a state bordering on hysteria.

"'Ello, miss, you do look bad. I hope you ain't 'urt." There was solicitude in Bindle's voice.

"I am very upset and——"

"Strint!" admonished Lady Knob-Kerrick, "please be silent. How dare you converse with this man?"

"Now look 'ere, mum, I ain't said much so far, but you're goin' to get into a bit of a mess if yer ain't careful. If you'll just call orf Dicky-Bird and Calves, I'll show yer wot an' 'oo I am. I'm a special constable, I am, and you done a fine thing to-night. P'r'aps yer know the law, p'r'aps yer don't. But this is a case for 'eavy damages. Now, Dicky-Bird, leggo!"

With a dexterous movement Bindle wrenched his arm free from Wilton's clutch, and drew his truncheon, which he flourished under the nose of his astonished captors. Thomas, fearing an attack, released the arm he held and retreated precipitately to the door.

"Thomas! Wilton!" shrieked Lady Knob-Kerrick, "hold him, don't let him escape."

"I'll keep the door, m' lady," said Thomas, his hand on the handle, his attitude that of a man solicitous as to his own safety rather than desirous of preventing another's escape.

With great deliberation Bindle produced his armlet and whistle.

"This 'ere, mum," holding the articles of equipment for Lady Knob-Kerrick's inspection, "is me summer uniform, but as the nights is a little bit chilly I added a pair o' trousers and a few other things."

Miss Strint tittered, and then, appalled at her own temerity, coughed violently.

Lady Knob-Kerrick turned upon her accustomed victim.

"Strint," she cried, glaring through her lorgnettes, "have you no sense of decency?"

"She's got an awful cough, mum. Yer'd better leave 'er alone," and Bindle grinned in a manner that Lady Knob-Kerrick decided was intolerable.

"I want you to explain, mum, wot you mean by letting Calves and Dicky-Bird keep a special constable from the execution of 'is duty."

Lady Knob-Kerrick looked uncertainly from Bindle to Wilton, then to Miss Strint, and then back again to Bindle.

"You were with the ruffians who have taken my daughter," she said.

"Well, mum, that's where you're sort o' wrong. I've collected white mice and rabbits and once I had a special sort of jumpin' fleas, but I never collected daughters. Besides, there's Mrs. Bindle. She's a bit funny when it comes to another woman. What she'll say when she gets to know that yer've had me 'eld 'ere, a-givin' of me the glad eye through them two 'oles on a stick—I tell yer, mum, I jest daren't think."

"How dare you, you vulgar fellow!" Lady Knob-Kerrick had seen the ghost of a smile flit across Thomas's face. "Hold your tongue!"

"I can't, mum. Lived too long wi' Mrs. B. I'm sort o' surprised at you 'oldin' me 'ere like this. It's like kissin' a girl against her will."

At this juncture there was a loud ringing at the outer bell.

"Go!" said Lady Knob-Kerrick, addressing Thomas.

"Now then, 'op it, Calves," added Bindle, as he resumed his armlet.

A minute later an inspector of police entered. He bowed to Lady Knob-Kerrick and looked towards Bindle, who saluted with a suddenness so dramatic as to cause both Wilton and Thomas involuntarily to start back.

"This man has been——" Lady Knob-Kerrick paused, at a loss to formulate the charge.

"Says I've run off with 'er daughter—me! 'Oly Moses! If Mrs. Bindle only knew!" And Bindle smiled so broadly and so joyously that even the official face of the inspector relaxed.

"What is the complaint, my lady?" the inspector enquired, producing his note-book.

"Someone has abducted my daughter and—and—we—I got this man."

Lady Knob-Kerrick was hesitant, and clearly not very sure of her ground.

She explained how she had gone into the garden in search of Miss Knob-Kerrick, had come across the ladder, and how in moving it Bindle had come crashing down upon her, and had been captured.

The inspector turned to Bindle, whom he knew as a special constable.

"This 'ere's goin' to be a serious business for 'er," Bindle indicated Lady Knob-Kerrick with his thumb. "I 'eard a whistle, then see a man on the wall and another in a motor-car. 'What-oh!' says I, 'burglars or German spies. If I blows me whistle orf they goes.' I climbs up a tree and drops on to the wall, crawls along, then I 'ears a young woman's voice. I jest got to the top of the ladder, frightened as a goat I was, when somebody gives it a tug. Over I tumbles on wot I thought was a air-cushion, but it was 'er." Bindle bowed elaborately to Lady Knob-Kerrick, who flushed scarlet. "She nabs me when I was goin' to nab the lot of 'em. I might 'a got the V.C.! Silly things, women." Bindle spat the words out with supreme disgust.

The inspector turned to Lady Knob-Kerrick.

"Do you wish to charge this special constable?"

"Yes, that's it," put in Bindle. "Jest let 'er charge me. She's got to do it now since she's 'eld me 'ere, and I'm out for damages. There's also goin' to be some damage done to Dicky-Bird and Calves before I've finished." And Bindle looked fiercely from one to the other.

Lady Knob-Kerrick motioned the inspector to the other end of the room, where she held a whispered conversation with him. Presently they returned to Bindle. The inspector said with official coldness:

"There seems to have been a mistake, and her ladyship offers you a sovereign in compensation."

"Oh, she does, does she?" remarked Bindle. "Well, jest tell 'er bloomin' ladysillyship wi' Joseph Bindle's compliments that there's nothin' doin'. A quid might 'ave been enough for a ordinary slop, but I'm a special sort o' slop and, like a special train, I 'as to be paid for. She can stump up a fiver or——"

The inspector looked nonplussed. He was not quite sure what authority he had over a special constable. A further whispered conversation followed, and eventually Lady Knob-Kerrick left the room and a few minutes later returned with five one-pound notes, which she handed to the inspector without a word, and he in turn passed them on to Bindle.

"Well," Bindle remarked, "I must be off. 'Ope you'll find your daughter, mum; and as for you, Dicky-Bird and Calves, we'll probably meet again. S'long." And he departed.

CHAPTER XIX

THE SCARLET HORSE COTERIE

One of the indirect results of Millie's romance was the foregathering each Friday night under the hospitable roof of the Scarlet Horse of a number of congenial and convivial spirits. It was Bindle's practice to spend the two hours during which Millie and Charlie Dixon were at the cinema in drinking a pint of beer at the Scarlet Horse, and exchanging ideas with anyone who showed himself conversationally inclined.

In time Bindle's friends and acquaintance got to know of this practice, and it became their custom to drop into "the 'Orse to 'ear ole Joe tell the tale."

Ginger would come over from Chiswick, Huggles from West Kensington, Wilkes from Hammersmith, and one man regularly made the journey from Tottenham Court Road.

At first they had met in the public bar, but later, through the diplomacy of Bindle, who had explained to the proprietor that "yer gets more thirsty in a little place than wot yer does in a big 'un, 'cause it's 'otter," they had been granted the use of a small room.

Sometimes the proprietor himself would join the company.

One September evening, having handed over Millie to her cavalier with strict injunctions to be outside the Cinema at ten sharp, Bindle turned his own steps towards the Scarlet Horse. As he entered he was greeted with that cordiality to which he had become accustomed. Calling for a pint of beer, he seated himself beside a rough-looking labourer known as "Ruddy" Bill, on account of the extreme picturesqueness and sustained directness of his language.

On Bindle's arrival Bill had been delivering himself of an opinion, accompanied by a string of explicatory oaths and obscenities that obviously embarrassed his hearers, rough though they were. Waiting his opportunity, Bindle presently remarked quite casually:

"Words such as 'damn' and ''ell,' like beer and tobacco, was sent to sort of 'elp us along, 'specially them wot is married. Where'd I be wi' Mrs. B. if I 'adn't 'ell an' a few other things to fall back on? No!" he continued after a moment's pause, "I don't 'old wi' swearin'." He turned and looked at Ruddy Bill as if seeking confirmation of his view.

"'Oo the blinkin' 'ell arst wot you 'old wiv?" demanded Bill truculently, and with much adornment of language.

Bindle proceeded deliberately to light his pipe as if he had not heard the question; then, when it was drawing to his entire satisfaction, he raised his eyes and gazed at Bill over the lighted match.

"No one, ole sport. Yer always gets the good things for nothink, like twins an' lodgers."

Bill resented the laugh that greeted Bindle's reply, and proceeded to pour forth his views on those given to "shovin' in their decorated snouts."

When he had exhausted his eloquence Bindle remarked good-humouredly.

"It 'ud take a bucketful of carbolic an' a damn big brush to clean the dirty words out o' your mouth, Sweet William."

Bill growled out further obscenities.

"I ain't religious," continued Bindle, "I don't suppose none of us is. I don't seem to see 'Uggles wi' wings, and Ginger ain't exactly fitted for sittin' on a cloud a-pullin' 'arp strings; but if yer want to come 'ere an' listen to my talk and Wilkes's cough, Sweet William, you got to clean up that talk o' yours a bit. Ain't that so, mates?"

The rest of the company made it abundantly clear that Bindle had expressed its sentiments, and Ruddy Bill subsided into *sotto voce* blasphemies.

During these Friday nights at the Scarlet Horse, many subjects came up for discussion; marriage, politics, religion were dealt with in turn, but it was impossible to keep the talk away from the War, to which time after time it returned with the same persistency that the needle of the compass flutters back to the north.

"I'd sooner be like 'Earty than a German," Bindle once remarked with decision. "If they'd only come over 'ere I'd get a smack at 'em, spite of me various veins."

His forced inaction was to Bindle a tragedy of which he seldom spoke; but when he did it was generally to the point, and more than one man enlisted as a direct result of Bindle's views on the war.

For "the slacker" he had one question. "You got various veins?" he would enquire; and on hearing that the man had not, he would say, "Then yer got to join."

To those who suggested that he himself should enlist, he made only one reply, "You get me in the army, ole sport, an' I'll give yer anythink I got. Gawd strike me dead if I won't." And impressed by Bindle's earnestness, almost without exception, the questioner had the grace to feel ashamed of himself.

One man had cast some doubt upon the genuineness of Bindle's refusal by the authorities.

"Come along, then," yelled Bindle in a passion; "come along an' see." And seizing the astonished man by the arm he marched him round to the nearest recruiting station, followed by those who had heard the challenge. Before the sceptic had recovered his self-possession he found himself a soldier and Bindle once more convicted of "various veins."

"Well, Ginger," remarked Bindle pleasantly, after the pause that followed Ruddy Bill's discomfiture, "wot 'ave yer been doin' that yer can talk about without 'urtin' Sweet William's ears. Any noos?"

"I been an' joined," grumbled Ginger, as if he had committed one of the Seven Deadly Sins.

"Ginger," said Bindle approvingly, "the next pint yer 'as yer drinks wi' me, see?" After a pause Bindle continued, "Now yer got to kill three Germans, Ginger, as a sort of apology for 'avin' three babies. That'll square things."

"I don't want to kill Germans," growled Ginger.

"Then why did yer do it?" asked Wilkes.

"It's all through that rosy song. Blimey! I get fair sick of it."

Bindle laughed joyously.

"I thought you was goin' to 'ammer the next cove as said it, Ging. Why didn't yer?" he remarked.

"I couldn't 'ammer the 'ole yard, could I? They used to sing it every time I come in, so I 'listed."

There was a general laugh at this.

"Well, Ginger, you been an' done the right thing. 'Uggles may laugh, Wilkes may show that 'e ain't got no teeth, and Bill may pump up dirty words, but you done right. I wish," he added reflectively, "I 'adn't various veins. I'd look tasty in khaki a-tryin' to keep 'Uggles from runnin' away. 'Ow about you, Weary?" The last remark was addressed to a heavy-looking man who seemed half-asleep.

"I'm goin' to wait an' see," the man replied, with a strange movement of his lips, which his intimates were able to recognise as a smile.

"You're one of them bloomin' wait-an'-see radicals. One o' these days they'll see things wot they won't wait for."

"If yer wait an' see," remarked Wilkes, "yer don't get married, an' that saves a lot of trouble." He trailed off into a cough. Wilkes was always coughing.

"Yes," said Bindle reflectively; "it also saves yer explainin' 'ow it 'appened. I'm glad you woke up, Wilkie.

"Marriage is a funny thing," continued Bindle, meditatively filling his pipe. "I seen it quite change men, sometimes for better, sometimes for worse, sometimes neither one thing nor the other. There was a mate o' mine wot got married and it ruined 'im.

"'E was a rare sport; used to back 'orses and wink at women and get drunk; yes, 'e used to do everythink wot a decent man ought to do. Then he took up with a gal an' married 'er, an' she started a-dressin' 'im up so that all 'is mates used to laugh when they met 'im.

"Last time I saw 'im 'e was wearing a white weskit, a black coat, and a pale-blue tie and top 'at. 'E saw me comin' and tried to look the other way, but I crossed over, and takin' off me cap bowed to 'em both, and 'e raised 'is 'at, and then I watched 'im after 'e'd passed, and 'e couldn't get it on right again. 'E fidgeted about with the bloomin' thing until 'e was out o' sight. No, yer 'as to be born to a top 'at, just as yer 'ave to be born to an 'ump, like a camel."

"Women ain't wot they was." The remark came from a small man with grey side-whiskers who, as soon as he had spoken and attracted to himself the attention of the company, fidgeted as if he regretted his temerity.

"Wot jer know about the ornamental Jezebels?" Ruddy Bill struck in.

"'Ullo! you woke up too, Sweet William?" grinned Bindle. "You're right, Tom Cave," he continued, turning to the man who had spoken. "They ain't, an' it's all through the fashions."

"'Ow's that? Fashions don't make women, it's them as makes the fashions," ventured Huggles.

"Fashions is funny things, 'Uggles. When I was a boy women was a bit shy about their ankles, an' now they sort o' takes a pride in 'em. I given up goin' in toobes," Bindle added with a grin. "I get 'ot all over. Them short skirts, oh! naughty! naughty!" And he put his fingers before his eyes.

"It's women everywhere now. They're on buses, drivin' vans, shovin' barrers—yer can't get away from 'em," said Wilkes resentfully.

"That's all right for you, Wilkie, saves yer lookin' for trouble, ole son," said Bindle. "'Ope they 'aven't been chasin' yer too much, Charlie; you ain't no sprinter."

"Wot's the war about, that's wot I want to know? Why are we fightin' the Germans?" Ginger broke in irrelevantly, looking round him aggressively as if for someone to attack.

No one seemed desirous of answering Ginger's question. All looked instinctively towards Bindle, who, to gain time, began filling his pipe with great care and deliberation.

"You got war on the brain, Ginger," remarked Ruddy Bill.

"Wot's the war about, Joe?" asked Wilkes.

"About the silliest thing I ever 'eard of," said Bindle. "Everybody says they wanted peace, on'y they was attacked. As far as I can see, Germany wanted wot she calls a place in the sun; she was sort o' gettin' chilly in the shade, so she says to the Alleys, 'Sun or blazes, the choice is wi' you, mates,' an' the Alleys says, 'Blazes it is, ole sport,' an' starts a-firin' back, an' that's 'ow it all come about."

"Why don't they arbitrate?" enquired the little man with the grey whiskers.

Bindle looked at him pitifully. "Cave, yer surprise me. If 'Uggles 'ere wanted your trousers and started a-pullin'

away at the legs, would yer say, 'We'll arbitrate'? No, yer'd fetch 'im one on the jaw."

"Wot's arbitration?" demanded Ruddy Bill.

"Arbitration, Sweet William, is somethin' you're always advisin' other people to do, but never does yerself. Now, if you an' Ginger both wanted to stand me my next pint, an' was goin' to fight about it, someone might say 'arbitrate'—that is to say, let another cove decide wot 'adn't no interest in the matter, an' p'r'aps he'd get the beer."

"Then why don't they arbitrate instead of blowin' each other to bits?" demanded a whiskered man known as Ted.

"Because war comes about by someone wantin' wot ain't 'is," replied Bindle oracularly. "Wot 'ud you say if I said I wanted yer watch?"

"I'd see yer to blinkin' nowhere, fust," was the reply.

"Well, that's jest wot the gents say wot we votes for, on'y they says it prettier than wot you can, ole son." Bindle grinned contentedly at his exposition of international ethics.

"We're fightin' just because Germany went for Belgium," remarked a heavy-bearded man who had not previously spoken. "It ain't our scrap, an' we been let in for it by a lot o' stutterin' toffs wot us workin'-men sends to Parliament. It makes me fair sick, an' beer goin' up like 'ell."

There was a murmur that showed the man had voiced the general opinion of the room.

"Wot jer got to say to that, Joe?" demanded Ruddy Bill aggressively.

"I got a good deal to say to it, Sweet William," remarked Bindle, removing his pipe from his mouth and speaking with great deliberation. "I got quite a lot to say. Supposin' I see a couple of big chaps a-'ammerin' your missis an' kickin' yer kids about, an' I says, 'It ain't nothink to do wi' me,' an' takes no notice. Would any of yer ever want to speak to me again?"

Bindle looked round him enquiringly, but there was no reply.

"Well, that's wot Germany's done to Belgium an' the other place, an' that's why we chipped in. Look 'ere, mates, if any of yer thinks yer can live thinkin' only o' yerselves, yer mistaken. We got a fine ole country and a good king, an' we can tell a archbishop to go to 'ell if we want to wi'out gettin' pinched for it; an' when yer got all them things—an' there ain't no other country wot 'as—then it's worth 'avin' a scrap now an' then to keep 'em."

"But we should 'ave 'ad 'em all the same; Germany didn't want to fight us," protested the whiskered man.

"Ain't you a silly ole 'uggins! an' you wi' all that 'air on yer face ought to be a man. The Germans 'ud 'ave come for us next, when they'd beaten the others. Besides, yer don't always fight for beer an' baccy; sometimes yer does it because somethink's bein' 'urt wot can't 'it back. Got it, Whiskers?"

The man addressed as Whiskers subsided, finding that opinion had veered round to Bindle's point of view.

"An' when's it goin' to end?" enquired Huggles in an aggrieved tone.

"It'll end, my lovely 'Uggles, jest as soon as a fight 'tween you an' me 'ud end—when one of us 'ad 'ad enough."

"That's goin' to be the Germans," almost shouted Ginger.

"Well, up to this evenin' I wasn't sure, Ginger, but now I 'ear you're a-goin', o' course I'm puttin' me money on the ole lion."

"I don't 'old wi' war," grumbled Ginger. "S' 'elp me if I do."

"Well, mates," Bindle remarked, as he rose to go, the hands of the clock on the mantelpiece pointing to ten

minutes to ten, "I'm due at the War Office, an' they don't like to be kep' waitin'. Lord! 'ow the Kayser must 'ate me! So long." And he set out to meet and escort Millie home.

CHAPTER XX

MILLIE LEAVES HOME

Bindle's visits to "the pictures" with Millie had become a weekly institution. Mr. Hearty had made several tentative attempts to interfere. He had mentioned more than once the evil influence of the cinema, and had called attention to paragraphs in the newspapers and the remarks of magistrates in support of his view. Bindle had, however, been firm, inspired by the fear and appeal he saw in Millie's eyes.

"Look 'ere, 'Earty," he would say, "I'm an ole warrior. You an' my Little Rosebud at 'ome 'ave 'elped me, an' there ain't a known sin that I can't dodge. Millie's all right wi' me. When they kiss I 'olds me 'at over 'er eyes."

Millie would blush, and Mr. Hearty, who was never equal to Bindle's persistent good-humour and racy speech, would allow the matter to drop.

A great change had come over Millie. She was gayer and brighter, her laugh was more frequently heard, and she seemed to be developing opinions of her own. In her dress she was more extravagant, although always neat and refined.

Mr. Hearty became conscious of the change. His eyes were often upon his daughter, and his slow-moving brain at work seeking for some explanation of this new phenomenon.

Had he been told of the happiness that had come into her life, he would have been unable to understand it working so great a change. He would also have disapproved, for to his narrow faith any happiness that sprang from association of the opposite sexes, however innocent, was the happiness of sin.

In a passive way Mrs. Hearty also had noticed the change. She had even gone to the length of remarking upon it to Bindle.

"She's growin' into a woman, Martha," had been Bindle's diagnosis; "an' an uncommon pretty woman, too. I s'pose she gets it from 'Earty," he added, whereat Mrs. Hearty had subsided into waves of mirth.

At first Bindle had been in some doubt as to the wisdom of his action in encouraging the romance between the young lovers; but as it progressed and he saw their devotion and Millie's happiness, all scruples vanished.

"I may be a silly ole fool," he muttered to himself one night as he left the radiant Milly at her door, "but I'm 'elpin' them two kids to be 'appy, an' after all, 'appiness is the thing wot matters. If yer can get it through lookin' into a gal's eyes, it's better'n gettin' it through lookin' into a beer-glass. I'd sooner be 'appy than drunk any day."

Unconsciously Bindle had stumbled upon a great truth.

At first Millie's "evenin' out," as Bindle called it, was spent at a local cinema, Bindle conveniently disappearing until ten o'clock, when he would take Millie home. Later, however, walks and rides on omnibuses took the place of "the pictures" in the evening's entertainment.

Several times Millie and Charlie Dixon begged Bindle to accompany them, but he had always resolutely refused.

"Look 'ere, young feller, yer wouldn't 'ave a look in wi' Millie if I was there. Ain't that so, Millikins?" And Millie would hang on to Bindle's arm with both hands and give a little jump of joy.

One evening when Bindle arrived at the cinema at a few minutes to ten, he saw Charlie Dixon there alone, obviously in a state of great excitement.

"'Ullo, Charlie!" said Bindle, "wot's up? Where's Millikins?" There was alarm in Bindle's voice.

"We met Mr. Hearty in Putney High Street and he's taken her home. I don't know what to do. I'm——"

Bindle whistled. "'Oly Angels, 'ere's a go," he exclaimed. "'Ere, come along, young feller, we mustn't stop a-jawin' 'ere." Hurriedly they left the cinema together.

"'Ow long ago was this?" enquired Bindle, as they hurried along in the direction of Fulham High Street.

"About ten minutes. What shall we do?" Charlie Dixon's voice shook with anxiety.

"Well," said Bindle, "yer'd better go 'ome. I'm goin' to 'ave it out with 'Earty." There was a grim note in Bindle's voice. "I ain't a-goin' to leave our little Millikins to 'im."

Charlie Dixon felt that at that moment he could have hugged Bindle. All he could do was to grip his arm. His voice had deserted him.

"'E learnt that from Millikins," murmured Bindle to himself as they sped along. Outside the Grand Theatre they parted, Charlie Dixon vowing that he would wait there until Bindle came to him.

"There's goin' to be an 'ell of a row," muttered Bindle, as he rang the Heartys' bell.

He was admitted by a tearful Mrs. Hearty.

"Oh, Joe, I'm so glad," she wheezed. "Go up; I'll——"

Bindle raced up the stairs to the Heartys' sitting-room. As he opened the door Mr. Hearty was standing by the mantelpiece, his face white and set and his lips slightly drawn from his discoloured teeth. Facing him stood Millie, with flushed face and rebellious eyes. At the sight of Bindle she uttered a cry and ran to him, threw her arms round his neck, choking with sobs.

Bindle soothed her as if she had been a child.

"Oh, don't leave me, Uncle Joe, promise, promise!" She looked at Bindle with fear in her eyes. "Promise, darling Uncle Joe."

"I won't leave the little Millikins," said Bindle reassuringly. "I won't leave yer until yer say I can go, see?"

Disengaging Millie's arms from his neck, Bindle placed her gently on the sofa, and Mrs. Hearty, who had just entered the room breathing laboriously, sat down beside the half-fainting girl, looking at her helplessly.

"Don't cry, Millie dear," Mrs. Hearty wheezed, although there were no signs of tears, as she stroked one of Millie's hands.

All this time Mr. Hearty had been looking on in a dazed way, conscious that the control of the situation was slipping from his grasp. He was roused by Bindle's voice.

"Now then, 'Earty, wot the 'ell do yer mean by this?"

It was a new Bindle that Mr. Hearty saw before him. The humorous twist had gone from his mouth, the light of fun was no longer in his eyes. Mr. Hearty saw a stern, resolute man who was demanding of him an explanation.

During the last quarter of an hour he had pictured a scene vastly different from this. He was to be the outraged father indignantly demanding an explanation from a crestfallen and humbled Bindle. Through his mind there had passed the thought that the enemy had been delivered into his hands. He had felt like a righteous and triumphant Israel; and now everything had turned out so differently.

"Ain't you got nothink to say?" Mr. Hearty was awakened from his meditation by Bindle's angry enquiry. Even Mrs. Hearty looked up, mildly surprised at the unaccustomed note in Bindle's voice.

"I have a lot to say," replied Mr. Hearty with an obvious effort, "and I want an explanation from you, Joseph."

Instinctively Mr. Hearty felt that his tone was too mild for that of the outraged father, and he added in what he meant to be a stern voice, "and I—I demand an explanation before you leave this house to-night."

"There ain't no fear o' my leavin' before yer want me to," replied Bindle grimly. "Don't you worry yer saintly soul about that, 'Earty. Now, what is it yer want to know?"

Mr. Hearty stroked his chin. "I—I——" How he disliked scenes! "I—I want to know why Millie was alone with a strange young man in Putney High Street this evening, when she was supposed to be with you?"

Mr. Hearty strove to be dignified and at the same time appropriately stern and uncompromising; but always with a dash of Christian forbearance.

"That all?" enquired Bindle contemptuously. "That won't take long. She was there 'cause she wants to be 'appy, wot she's got a right to be. If yer was a man, 'Earty, instead of an 'oly greengrocer, yer'd understan' wi'out tellin'. If yer was to listen to the 'ymns o' the birds instead o' them 'ungry-lookin' young women in the choir" (Mr. Hearty flushed) "yer'd know why Millie was wi' Charlie Dixon to-night.

"She wants love, 'Earty, an' she don't get it at 'ome. She wants 'appiness, an' you never even smile at 'er—not as that 'ud 'elp 'er much," he added, with a flash of the old Bindle. "Yer want to shove Gawd down 'er throat all the time, and it ain't the real Gawd 'oo was kind to children."

"She's my daughter and must obey me." There was determination in Mr. Hearty's voice. He felt he must assert his parental authority.

"Now, listen," said Bindle; and he proceeded to tell the whole story of Millie's romance and the part he had played in it. "Now, 'ave yer any think to complain about?" he enquired in conclusion.

"I forbid her ever to see him again," almost shouted Mr. Hearty. The story he had just listened to had roused him to anger. It had outraged his sense of the proprieties that his daughter should be walking the streets alone with a young man she had met casually in a train! That his own brother-in-law should be a party to such a disgraceful and sordid intrigue made matters worse. Being a religious man Mr. Hearty thought the worst.

He looked at Bindle. There was no suggestion of shame or contrition in his bearing.

"I will have no such goings-on in my family," fumed Mr. Hearty, "and in future I'll thank you, Joseph, not to interfere." Mr. Hearty's face was very set and hard. "What would Mr. Sopley say if he knew?"

"That," remarked Bindle calmly, "would depend on 'ow long ago it was since 'is mind was cleaned."

"Anyhow, I won't have it." And Mr. Hearty drew himself up to his full height.

"Wot jer goin' to do then?" enquired Bindle with ominous calm.

Mr. Hearty was nonplussed. What was he going to do? What could he do? To gain time he asked a question.

"Does Elizabeth know about this?" he demanded.

"Not 'er," replied Bindle contemptuously. "She'd like to stop the birds a-matin', if she could." Suddenly he grinned. "An' there wouldn't be no lamb to go wi' your mint, 'Earty, if she 'ad 'er way."

"I won't have it," fumed Mr. Hearty again. "I've been very patient, but—but—I won't have it."

"Yer can't stop a runaway 'orse with a notice-board," remarked Bindle with unconscious philosophy.

"I'll thank you not to interfere in my affairs, Joseph. As I say, I've been very patient and, and——" Mr. Hearty, whose face was deathly white, broke off. "If," he continued, "if this—er—fellow has ruined Millie, it's your fault."

Bindle made a movement towards his brother-in-law; his hand was raised and there was murder smouldering in

his eyes, when something seemed to rush between them. Both men fell back a step and Mr. Hearty found himself looking into a pair of blazing eyes that he failed to recognise as those of his daughter.

"How dare you, father!" she panted, her young breast heaving, her face flaming, and her eyes burning with suppressed fury. Bindle regarded her with amazement and awe.

"How dare you say that of Charlie and me? I hope God will punish you for it. You have always made me unhappy. You have never allowed me the pleasures other girls have. If it hadn't been for mother I should have run away long ago. It is fathers like you that make girls bad. I won't have you blame Uncle Joe. I—I wish he was my father."

Mr. Hearty watched her as if fascinated. Her tempest of passion had overwhelmed him. Bindle looked from Hearty to Mrs. Hearty, who was sitting crying softly and comfortably to herself.

Millie looked round her in a dazed way, then produced from somewhere a handkerchief, with which she proceeded to wipe her eyes. With great deliberation she walked over to where her hat and jacket lay upon a chair and proceeded to put them on.

"Millie, I forbid you to go out." Mr. Hearty was making a last despairing effort.

Millie flashed a look of scorn at him.

"I am going away," she said quietly; "and I will never speak to you again until you take back those words."

Bindle looked from father to daughter. He felt helpless, as if he were the onlooker at some impending tragedy which he was powerless to avert.

"You are not of age, Millie, and you must obey your father." There was a more persuasive note in Mr. Hearty's voice.

"I am going away, father," said Millie in the same colourless voice; "and if you try and prevent me——" She did not finish.

"Good-night, mother." Millie went over to her mother and kissed her tenderly. Mrs. Hearty continued to cry. She looked appealingly at Bindle, who nodded reassuringly.

"Look 'ere, 'Earty," whispered Bindle, "you're up agin' somethin' yer don't understand, I don't rightly understand it meself. Better let me take Millie 'ome to Lizzie, she'll look after 'er all right."

For a moment Mr. Hearty hesitated; then with a glance at Millie's resolute face, he said:

"Millie, your uncle will take you to your Aunt Elizabeth."

"That is where I was going, father," she replied quietly, and Mr. Hearty felt that he had been badly beaten, and by his own daughter, who, until this evening, he had always regarded as a child.

Millie leant heavily on Bindle's arm as they walked down the High Street. She did not notice that they were going in the opposite direction from the Bindles' house. Suddenly her eyes grew wide with wonder; coming towards them was Charlie Dixon, whose half-hour had been spent in torture.

"Millie!"

She smiled up into his face wearily.

"Now, young feller," said Bindle with forced cheerfulness, "don't arst questions. Millie's comin' 'ome wi' me. It'll be all right, but," and he whispered to Charlie Dixon, "it's been——" Bindle completed his sentence with a look. "Now then, Millikins, say good-night to Charlie an' we'll be off."

Like a tired child she lifted her face to be kissed, a flicker of a smile playing round her moist lips.

"Good-night, Charlie," she whispered. "I'm so tired."

"I shall always be grateful, Mr. Bindle," said Charlie Dixon, grasping Bindle's hand.

"Leggo, you young fool," yelled Bindle. Charlie Dixon dropped his hand as if it had been electrified. "Next time you're grateful," remarked Bindle, as he ruefully examined his hand, "you put it down on paper; it won't 'urt so much."

And they parted.

"That you, Bindle?" Bindle recognised the familiar tones as he groped along the passage of his house with Millie.

Mrs. Bindle looked up from the supper table as they entered the kitchen.

"I brought Millie 'ome, Lizzie," said Bindle simply. "There's been trouble. 'Earty's gone mad. I'll tell yer all about it later."

One look told Mrs. Bindle everything she wanted to know. All the baulked motherhood in her nature rose up as she took the girl in her arms, and led her upstairs.

Bindle sat down to his supper. Several times Mrs. Bindle entered the room to fetch various things, but no word passed between them. Bindle had been taken by surprise. He would have been even more surprised had he seen the expression on Mrs. Bindle's face as she coaxed and crooned over the girl lying on the bed upstairs.

When she finally returned to the kitchen, Bindle, his supper finished, had made up his mind to a great sacrifice. For a few seconds they stood regarding each other. It was Bindle who broke the silence.

"Lizzie," he said awkwardly, "I'll go to chapel on Sunday if you like."

And then for no reason at all Mrs. Bindle sat down at the table, buried her face in her arms and sobbed convulsively.

"I wonder wot I done now," muttered Bindle, as he regarded Mrs. Bindle's heaving shoulders with a puzzled expression on his face. "Funny things, women."

CHAPTER XXI

CONCLUSION

"So 'Earty comes round in the mornin' an' says 'e's sorry, an' Millikins she be'aves jest like a little princess, 'oldin' 'er 'ead as 'igh as 'igh, an' agrees to go back, an' everybody lives 'appy ever after, everybody 'cept me. Since that night Mrs. B. 'as given me pickles. I don't understand it," he added in a puzzled way; "seems as if she's sort of 'uffy cause she dripped a bit."

"I think that is what it must be," remarked Mrs. Dick Little. "You must be gentle with her."

"Gentle! You don't know Mrs. B., miss, I mean mum. When Mrs. B.'s at one end o' the broom an' you're within range o' the dust she raises, it's nippy you got to be, not gentle."

Mrs. Little laughed.

It was a fortnight after the events at Mr. Hearty's house that had led up to Millie's leaving home, and Bindle was seated with the Littles in their new flat in Chelsea Palace Mansions.

"Yes," continued Bindle, after a pause, "them two love-birds is engaged, and Charlie Dixon's enlisted, an' Millie's as proud as an 'en wot's laid an egg. 'Earty's a different man; but it's Mrs. B. wot does me. She'd take the edge orf a chisel. Gentle! I'd like to meet the man 'oo'd got the pluck to try it on wi' Mrs. B." And Bindle laughed good-humouredly.

"An' to think," continued Bindle, looking quizzically from Dick Little to his wife, "to think that I 'elped you two to get tied up."

Mrs. Little laughed gaily, and Bindle drank deeply of a large glass of ale at his elbow.

"I'm afraid you're a terrible misogynist, Mr. Bindle," said Mrs. Little.

"A wot, mum?" queried Bindle, with corrugated brow.

"A woman-hater," explained Little.

"There you're wrong, mum, if yer'll allow me to say so; I don' 'ate women."

"But," persisted Mrs. Little, "you are always suggesting how happy the world would be without us."

Bindle removed his cigar from his mouth and, bending forward towards Mrs. Little, remarked impressively, "You got 'old o' the wrong end o' the stick, mum. I ain't got nothink to say agin women. I likes the ladies."

"But," broke in Little, "didn't you solemnly warn me, Bindle? Now own up."

"That's quite correct," replied Bindle, with undisturbed composure. "I did as I would like a mate to do by me, I jest put up me 'and like an' said, 'Dangerous crossin' 'ere,' same as they do for motors."

"But you say you are not a woman-hater; I don't understand." Mrs. Little screwed up her pretty face in what Little regarded as a most provoking manner.

"Well, mum, you're sort o' mixin' up women an' wives. I ain't got nothink to say against women provided they don't marry yer. When they do they seems to change." Bindle paused, then with unconscious philosophy added, "P'r'aps it's because they find out all about yer."

The silence that ensued was broken by Bindle. "I s'pose," he said thoughtfully, "I'd sort o' miss my little bit of 'eaven if anythink wos to 'appen to 'er. Fancy goin' 'ome an' no one there to say, 'Got a job?'"

There was a note in Bindle's voice which constrained Little and his wife to silence. After a minute's pause he added:

"It can't be all 'oney livin' with an 'eathen such as me."

For fully five minutes no one spoke. It was again Bindle who broke the silence.

"It was you, sir, o' course, wot played that little game on 'Earty?"

"What, the Theodore Hook joke?" enquired Little.

Bindle looked puzzled. "I mean the dogs an' 'ousekeepers an' orphans. I felt sorry for 'Earty then." And Bindle laughed in spite of himself.

"It was a cruel jest, whoever played it," said Mrs. Little with decision; and looking meaningly at her husband she added, "I hope I shall never know who did it, or I should speak very bluntly."

Dick Little looked uncomfortable, and Bindle created a diversion by rising.

"Well, I must be 'oppin' it," he remarked genially. "I enjoyed this little talk."

Dick Little preceded him into the hall. Bindle stepped back into the room.

"Miss—mum, I mean," he said awkwardly, "you ain't inclined to be religious, are yer?"

There was such earnestness in his voice that Mrs. Little checked the laugh that was upon her lips.

"No, Mr. Bindle, I'm afraid I'm not at all a good person."

Bindle heaved a sigh of relief. "Then 'e's got a sportin' chance," he muttered, half to himself. "Good-night, mum." And Bindle closed the door behind him.

"Well, Ettie," said Dick Little, as he re-entered the room, "what do you think of J. B.? Not a bad sort of fellow, eh?"

"Dick, I think he's a perfect dear."

And Dick Little expressed entire concurrence with his wife's view in a way that young husbands have.

THE END

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