

MY £50 ENGAGEMENT.

"Well," I said, addressing Harry Ilford as the door of his shop closed behind a departing customer, "I should have thought that a swell like that would have been able to run to something better than a three-halfpenny Manila. Out of cash, I expect."

Harry smiled. "Possibly," he replied, "but it may be merely a question of taste or of stinginess, one can never tell. Even a Sherlock Holmes might be deceived if he began making deductions as to a man's social or financial position from the brand of cigar he smokes. I don't say he would, but he might be. I remember once myself—but it's rather a long yarn, and you may be in a hurry, sir."

"Not a bit of it," I said, lighting a fresh pipe and settling myself comfortably in the chair Ilford provides for loungers. "I hope," I added, "the yarn deals with the—the interesting period of your life."

He nodded assent, fully understanding my delicate reference to his somewhat irregular "past." Then, interrupted only by an occasional customer—for the night was wet and cheerless and few people were about—he told me the following story:—

One morning about a year since, just before my poor, forgiving old dad died and left me this business, I was sitting in my diggings looking over the paper when I came upon an advertisement that ran, as nearly as I can remember, like this:—

WANTED immediately, for a few days only, a young gentleman of good manners and appearance to undertake a mission of some difficulty in the interests of suffering humanity. A large honorarium given at the conclusion of the enterprise.—Apply by letter to X., 15a, Embankment Court, Charing Cross.

Well, I thought to myself when I'd read the thing through two or three times, I wonder what the game is. Something risky, probably; anyhow, it'll only cost a penny stamp to try and find out. With which I sat down and wrote a letter applying for the post advertised there and then.

A little later on I went out and dropped my missive into the nearest pillar-box, and next morning I received a reply, signed "William Mynfield," asking me to call after six the same evening.

Accordingly, a few minutes after the hour named, I dismounted from a favorite 'bus at the corner of Northumberland Avenue and soon found myself in Embankment Court—a narrow, out-of-date-looking thoroughfare in the vicinity of the Adelphi arches. Making my way to No. 15a, I had scarcely knocked before the door was opened by a youngish-looking man, who inquired in a low tone whether I was Mr. Ilford. When I had answered in the affirmative he conducted me upstairs to a small back room on the first floor, which contained two chairs, a bed, and a table strewn with newspapers.

"Sorry we're so untidy," he remarked, when we were seated, "but this is only a temporary office. The society will soon be more conveniently located, I expect. In fact, our tenancy of this room terminates to-morrow."

"Society," I murmured, as he stopped. "Yes," he said, "of course. But I forgot you didn't know. I'm the secretary of the Society for Benefiting the Undeserving. You see—as I was about to interrupt—"the deserving have plenty done for them and, after all, they're in a minority—a small minority, perhaps—so that it is only right the other should have a look in. At least, that's my view; don't you agree with me?"

"I'm not sure yet," I replied. "Go on. I'm anxious to hear all about the difficult mission you want undertaken. That is, if the place advertised is not already filled."

He laughed. "Oh, no," he said, "it's not filled. There have been plenty of applicants, but none of them will take the job on. Listen! The society requires a thousand pounds for a more than usually underserving cases by next Monday, and their object in advertising was to find someone who'd get it for them."

At this I looked fixedly at Mr. William Mynfield, and observed that, in spite of his light and airy way of speaking, he was evidently trying to determine what kind of a man he had to deal with. So I resolved to give him a lead.

"Mr. Mynfield," I said, "I'm a bit of a physiognomist, and—well, I don't gather from your face that you're quite so philanthropic as you make out. I haven't much faith in societies whose operations are conducted from a fellow's bedroom; and, in short, I reckon you're the more than usually underserving case yourself."

"Oh, I—," he began. "And," I interrupted, "that the mission for the benefit of suffering humanity is for your own benefit, eh?"

"What then?" he said. "You can't separate the individual from the mass."

"No," I agreed; "but now that we're beginning to understand each other let us come to the point. What's the game and what's the pay? Out with it; you needn't be afraid. Good gracious, man, I suspected some swindle was afoot from the first. I shouldn't have answered your advertisement else."

"H'm," he remarked, "the other chaps who've been here were down-at-heel mugs

who thought me mad, but you're evidently sharp enough, Mr. Ilford. Your dress and appearance, too, are all that could be wished. I should really think my advertisement had not been wasted, after all, if only I could be sure you're to be trusted."

I rose as if to go. "If you can't take my word for it, we may as well part company," I said. "I'll bid you good evening."

"Don't be a fool," he cried, with a sudden change of manner. "Sit down again."

I complied, with a shrug of the shoulders. "The pay?" I asked.

"Fifty pounds, if successful."

"Ah, and the work?"

Mynfield again looked at me dubiously, but a moment later cried, suddenly, "Very well, I'll trust you. Time presses, and I can't do otherwise. The job must be done to-morrow, and its one that needs a smart man. I bet you'll manage it, though, if you'll only follow my instructions."

"I'll do my best; fire away."

"Very well, then. I must explain in the first place that until a fortnight ago I was for some years confidential assistant to Mr. George Codicot, head of the firm of Codicot and Co., the big West-end jewellers and pawnbrokers. I left his service hurriedly, under painful circumstances that need not be entered into now, but before doing so I took a few useful notes as to his future movements. To-morrow he goes to Brighton, and it will be your task, since it obviously can't be mine, to shadow him—on his homeward journey, that is; it'll be better to keep out of the way till then. He'll leave Brighton by the 7.10 train, which runs right through to Victoria without stopping, and he'll travel first-class. You must get into the same compartment, and manage somehow or other to substitute the small black bag I shall give you to-night for a similar one he'll have with him. The latter you'll hand to me at Victoria, where I shall await you, and in exchange I'll hand you fifty pounds in gold, and the transaction will be finished. What do you say? Will you take it on?"

"Supposing I were to say 'yes,' how should I know my man?"

"Easily enough. I'll describe him. He's a fellow of medium height, wears a beard, and an overcoat trimmed with astrachan; will probably be smoking a cigar, and, as likely as not, will have a drink in the refreshment-room before the train starts. Then, of course, there'll be the bag to look out for."

"H'm. Altogether I understand Mr. Codicot to be the sort of chap that emits an aroma of opulence, eh?"

"You've put it well."

"Now as to the contents of the bag."

"Jewellery. A tiara, a necklace, and several smaller articles, all placed together in a roan leather case."

"How do you know as much?"

"Because the things come into Codicot's possession about this time every year. They belong to Lady Gwelon, who is a widow and lives at Brighton, and whose income is paid to her annually in May, but don't last the twelve months out. So she's arranged with Codicot to supply imitations, and advance her a big enough sum on the originals to keep her going till her next payment comes due. Tomorrow, for the fourth year, I think, he will take down the fakes and a crossed cheque and bring back—well, what he will actually get home with depends on you."

"It seems to me," I remarked, as Mynfield paused, "that so much depends on me that fifty pounds is a ridiculously inadequate payment for my services. Suppose I were to stick to the jewellery instead?"

Mynfield laughed. "If you tried to get rid of it in this country you'd precious soon find yourself in chocke," he said. "You may bet Codicot won't wait long before raising a hue and cry directly he discovers he's been had. That won't hurt me, however, for I've already made arrangements to bolt to the Continent to-morrow night—never mind where. No, you mustn't try to swindle me, Mr. Ilford, and you must be content with what I offer—if you can earn it, that is."

"I don't know that I can," I answered, gloomily. "Suppose the compartment's full of people?"

"Not likely to be this time of the year; besides, Codicot has a theory—rather a doubtful one, perhaps—that a person travelling with valuable luggage shouldn't attract notice by appearing to take unusual care of it. As likely as not he'll put the bag on the rack, or at least on the seat beside him. Of course, if he keeps hold of it all the time it'll make your job a little difficult, especially if there should be anyone else in the compartment."

"I should just think it will," I rejoined. "However, I can't afford to let the chance of making a big go by. Pay my first-class return fare to Brighton and I'll see what I can do. If I succeed, so much the better for both of us; if I don't, so much the worse. I sha'n't take any big risks, mind."

Mynfield wanted me to pay the fare myself, but eventually gave way on the point and handed me the money together with the bag he had spoken of. Then, with a promise to meet him, as arranged, at Victoria Station on the following evening, and a joke about the coming dissolution of the Society for Benefiting the Undeserving, I took my de-



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Well, sir, I need not describe my proceeding on the following day in detail. It will be enough to say that I went down to Brighton by a morning train, and, although the month was February and the air cold, I passed several pleasant hours in the King's Road. Just after six o'clock I turned into West Street and, making my way to the station, entered the refreshment-room, where I obtained a bun and a glass of beer. Carrying this frugal fare from the bar counter, I placed it with my bag on a small table near the door and sat down to watch and wait.

At ten minutes to seven I was rewarded by seeing a bearded man pass by me, who wore a coat trimmed with astrachan, carried a bag like mine, and seemed in every other respect to tally with Mynfield's description. "Codicot, without doubt," I murmured, as I saw him advance to the bar and, removing his cigar from his mouth, give some order to the barmaid. The next moment a small glass, apparently containing whisky, was set in front of him. "Codicot, without doubt," I murmured again, as I turned and glanced casually around the room.

I was met by a most unpleasant sight, for there, coming through the door, was a second individual, closely resembling the first in appearance and attire, carrying also an ordinary black leather bag and smoking a cigar. Here was an unexpected dilemma, indeed. How on earth was I to identify my man?

I thought of the "aroma of opulence" I was to look for, and I soon made up my mind how to act. I would go behind the two men in turn—for the second, like the first, was drinking whisky by this time—and I would shadow him who was indulging in the more expensive smoke. It seemed impossible to imagine that a well-to-do pawnbroker could possibly affect any brand but the best—impossible!

I may perhaps remind you here, sir, that my poor father had brought me up to the tobacco trade, and that before I quarrelled with him and went astray for a time I acquired quite enough experience to tell a good thing from an inferior in the cigar line.

You will understand, then, that my task proved an easy one, when I say that the first man who had entered the refreshment-room was smoking a twopenny Mexican, while the second was on the point of finishing a high-class Havana. I naturally at once decided that Mr. Codicot No. 2 should be honoured with my attentions—of course, supposing that he went by the 7.10 train.

Well, to make a long story short, he did go by that train, and when I had seen him get into a first-class compartment, and settle himself in one of the farther corners, I pretended to be a friend of his and bribed the guard to put nobody else in the compartment. Then, when the train was on the point of starting and I had seen the other fellow also installed in a "first" some distance to the rear, I jumped in, and we were whistled off.

Before we had reached Preston Park I had come to the conclusion that I was in for a nice soft job after all. The difficulties I had expected, and some of which I had come prepared to meet, had not arisen. On the contrary, what could be better than that the bag I wanted should be on the rack opposite to me, while its owner reclined against the cushions underneath it fast asleep?

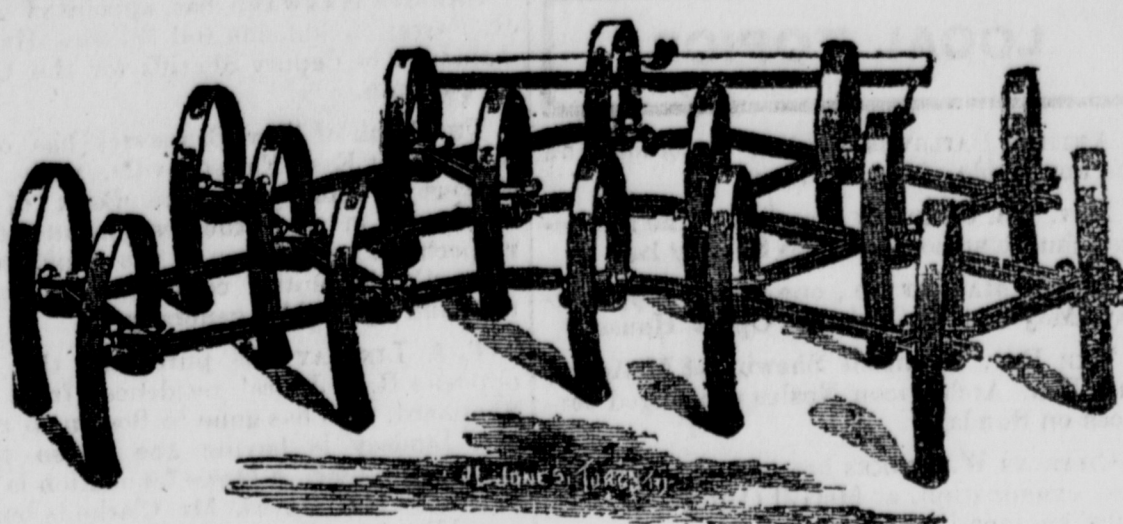
I waited a few minutes, then cautiously but swiftly I took down my own bag from the rack above me, and in a twinkling the exchange was effected.

Having felt that my friend's bag contained a box-shaped article, which I was quite satisfied was Lady Gwelon's jewel-case, I put it on the rack and sat still watching the sleeper, in the hope that he would not awaken until the train was nearing its destination.

Continued on Third page.

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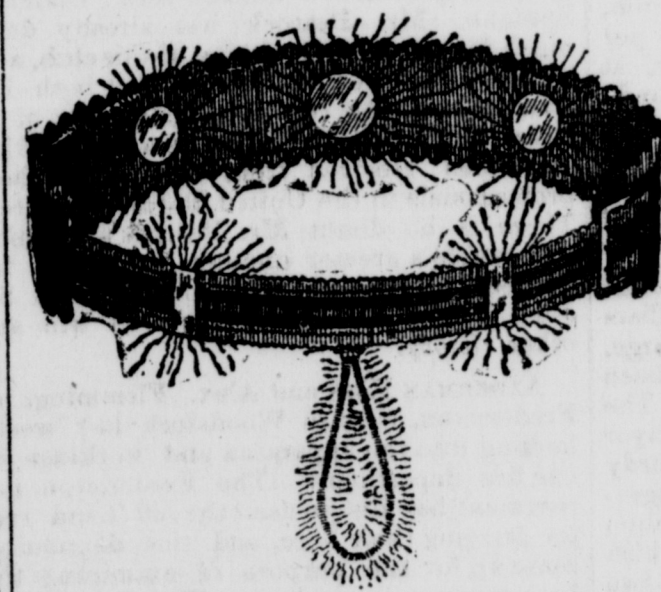
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