

Jenkins Herbert George

# **Bindle: Some Chapters in the Life of Joseph Bindle**



Herbert Jenkins

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**Jenkins H.**

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# Содержание

FOREWORD	5
CHAPTER I	6
CHAPTER II	13
I	13
II	15
CHAPTER III	19
I	19
II	21
III	22
IV	24
CHAPTER IV	25
CHAPTER V	30
CHAPTER VI	34
I	34
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	35

# **Bindle: Some Chapters in the Life of Joseph Bindle**

## **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,  
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*August, 1916.*

## 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 stutlerin' 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 indiscriminating 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 passionné." 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 burglar 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.

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