

CHAPTER VII - JOBLESS AGAIN.

From her father's works Elizabeth and Harriet drove to the shopping district, where they strolled through a couple of shops and then stopped at one of the larger stores.

Jimmy Torrance was arranging his stock, fully nine-tenths of which he could have sworn he had just shown an elderly spinster who had taken at least half an hour of his time and then left without making a purchase. His back was toward his counter when his attention was attracted by a feminine voice asking if he was busy. As he turned about he recognized her instantly--the girl for whom he had changed a wheel a month before and who unconsciously had infused new ambition into his blood and saved him, temporarily at least, from becoming a quitter.

He noticed as he waited on her that she seemed to be appraising him very carefully, and at times there was a slightly puzzled expression on her face, but evidently she did not recognize him, and finally when she had concluded her purchases he was disappointed that she paid for them in cash. He had rather hoped that she would have them charged and sent, that he might learn her name and address. And then she left, with Jimmy none the wiser concerning her other than that her first name was Elizabeth and that she was even better-looking than he recalled her to have been.

"And the girl with her!" exclaimed Jimmy mentally. "She was no slouch either. They are the two best-looking girls I have seen in this town, notwithstanding the fact that whether one likes Chicago or not he's got to admit that there are more pretty girls here than in any other city in the country.

"I'm glad she didn't recognize me. Of course, I don't know her, and the chances are that I never shall, but I should hate to have any one recognize me here, or hereafter, as that young man at the stocking counter. Gad! but it's beastly that a

regular life-sized man should be selling stockings to women for a living, or rather for a fraction of a living."

While Jimmy had always been hugely disgusted with his position, the sight of the girl seemed to have suddenly crystallized all those weeks of self-contempt into a sudden almost mad desire to escape what he considered his degrading and effeminating surroundings. One must bear with Jimmy and judge him leniently, for after all, notwithstanding his college diploma and physique, he was still but a boy and so while it is difficult for a mature and sober judgment to countenance his next step, if one can look back a few years to his own youth he can at least find extenuating circumstances surrounding Jimmy's seeming foolishness.

For with a bang that caused startled clerks in all directions to look up from their work he shattered the decorous monotone of the great store by slamming his sales book viciously upon the counter, and without a word of explanation to his fellow clerks marched out of the section toward the buyer's desk.

"Well, Mr. Torrance," asked that gentleman, "what can I do for you?"

"I am going to quit," announced Jimmy.

"Quit!" exclaimed the buyer. "Why, what's wrong? Isn't everything perfectly satisfactory? You have never complained to me."

"I can't explain," replied Jimmy. "I am going to quit. I am not satisfied. I am going to er--ah--accept another position."

The buyer raised his eyebrows. "Ah!" he said. "With--" and he named their closest competitor.

"No," said Jimmy. "I am going to get a regular he-job."

The other smiled. "If an increase in salary," he suggested, "would influence you, I had intended to tell you that I would take care of you beginning next week. I thought of making it fifteen dollars," and with that unanswerable argument for Jimmy's continued service the buyer sat back and folded his hands.

"Nothing stirring," said Jimmy. "I wouldn't sell another sock if you paid me ten thousand dollars a year. I am through."

"Oh, very well," said the buyer aggrievedly, "but if you leave me this way you will be unable to refer to the house."

But nothing, not even a team of oxen, could have held Jimmy in that section another minute, and so he got his pay and left with nothing more in view than a slow death by starvation.

"There," exclaimed Elizabeth Compton, as she sank back on the cushions of her car.

"There what?" asked Harriet.

"I have placed him."

"Whom?"

"That nice-looking young person who waited on us in the hosiery section."

"Oh!" said Harriet. "He was nice-looking, wasn't he? But he looked out of place there, and I think he felt out of place. Did you notice how he flushed when he asked you what size?" and the girls laughed heartily at the recollection. "But where have you ever met him before?" Harriet asked.

"I have never met him," corrected Elizabeth, accenting the "met." "He changed a wheel on the roadster several weeks ago one evening after I had taken Harold down to the club. And he was very nice about it. I should say that he is a gentleman, although his clothes were pretty badly worn."

"Yes," said Harriet, "his suit was shabby, but his linen was clean and his coat well brushed."

"My!" exclaimed Elizabeth. "He must have made an impression on some one."

"Well," said Harriet, "it isn't often you see such a nice-looking chap in the hosiery section."

"No," said Elizabeth, "and probably if he were as nice as he looks he wouldn't be there."

Whereupon the subject was changed, and she promptly forgot Mr. Jimmy Torrance. But Jimmy was not destined soon to forget her, for as the jobless days passed and he realized more and more what an ass he had made of himself, and why, he had occasion to think about her a great deal, although never in any sense reproaching her. He realized that the fault was his own and that he had

done a foolish thing in giving up his position because of a girl he did not know and probably never would.

There came a Saturday when Jimmy, jobless and fundless, dreaded his return to the Indiana Avenue rooming-house, where he knew the landlady would be eagerly awaiting him, for he was a week in arrears in his room rent already, and had been warned he could expect no further credit.

"There is a nice young man wanting your room," the landlady had told him, "and I shall have to be having it Saturday night unless you can pay up."

Jimmy stood on the corner of Clark and Van Buren looking at his watch. "I hate to do it," he thought, "but the Lizard said he could get twenty for it, and twenty would give me another two weeks." And so his watch went, and two weeks later his cigarette-case and ring followed. Jimmy had never gone in much for jewelry--a fact which he now greatly lamented.

Some of the clothes he still had were good, though badly in want of pressing, and when, after still further days of fruitless searching for work the proceeds from the articles he had pawned were exhausted, it occurred to him he might raise something on all but what he actually needed to cover his nakedness.

In his search for work he was still wearing his best-looking suit; the others he would dispose of; and with this plan in his mind on his return to his room that night he went to the tiny closet to make a bundle of the things which he would dispose of on the morrow, only to discover that in his absence some one had been there before him, and that there was nothing left for him to sell.

It would be two days before his room rent was again due, but in the mean time Jimmy had no money wherewith to feed the inner man. It was an almost utterly

discouraged Jimmy who crawled into his bed to spend a sleepless night of worry and vain regret, the principal object of his regret being that he was not the son of a blacksmith who had taught him how to shoe horses and who at the same time had been too poor to send him to college.

Long since there had been driven into his mind the conviction that for any practical purpose in life a higher education was as useless as the proverbial fifth wheel to the coach.

"And even," mused Jimmy, "if I had graduated at the head of my class, I would be no better off than I am now."