CHAPTER IV

Mrs. Bowse's boarding-house began to be even better pleased with him than before. He had stories to tell, festivities to describe, and cheerful incidents to recount. The boarders assisted vicariously at weddings and wedding receptions, afternoon teas and dances, given in halls. "Up-town" seemed to them largely given to entertainment and hilarity of an enviably prodigal sort. Mrs. Bowse's guests were not of the class which entertains or is entertained, and the details of banquets and ball-dresses and money-spending were not uncheering material for conversation. Such topics suggested the presence and dispensing of a good deal of desirable specie, which in floating about might somehow reach those who needed it most. The impression was that T. Tembarom was having "a good time." It was not his way to relate any incidents which were not of a cheering or laughter-inspiring nature. He said nothing of the times when his luck was bad, when he made blunders, and, approaching the wrong people, was met roughly or grudgingly, and found no resource left but to beat a retreat. He made no mention of his experiences in the blizzard, which continued, and at times nearly beat breath and life out of him as he fought his way through it. Especially he told no story of the morning when, after having labored furiously over the writing of his "stuff" until long after midnight, he had taken it to Galton, and seen his face fall as he looked over it. To battle all day with a blizzard and occasional brutal discouragements, and to sit up half the night

tensely absorbed in concentrating one's whole mental equipment upon the doing of unaccustomed work has its effect. As he waited, Tembarom unconsciously shifted from one foot to another, and had actually to swallow a sort of lump in his throat.

"I guess it won't do," he said rather uncertainly as Galton laid a sheet down.

Galton was worn out himself and harried by his nerves.

"No, it won't," he said; and then as he saw Tembarom move to the other foot he added, "Not as it is."

Tembarom braced himself and cleared his throat.

"If," he ventured--" well, you've been mighty easy on me, Mr Galton--and this is a big chance for a fellow like me. If it's too big a chance--why--that's all. But if it's anything I could change and it wouldn't be too much trouble to tell me--"

"There's no time to rewrite it," answered Galton. "It must be handed in to-morrow. It's too flowery. Too many adjectives. I've no time to give you--" He snatched up a blue pencil and began to slash at the paper with it. "Look here-- and here--cut out that balderdash--cut this--and this-- oh,--" throwing the pencil down,--"you'd have to cut it all out. There's no time." He fell back in his chair with a

hopeless movement, and rubbed his forehead nervously with the back of his hand. Ten people more or less were waiting to speak to him; he was worn out with the rush of work. He believed in the page, and did not want to give up his idea; but he didn't know a man to hand it to other than this untrained, eager ignoramus whom he had a queer personal liking for. He was no business of his, a mere stenographer in his office with whom he could be expected to have no relations, and yet a curious sort of friendliness verging on intimacy had developed between them.

"There'd be time if you thought it wouldn't do any harm to give me another chance," said Tembarom. "I can sit up all night. I guess I've caught on to what you DON'T want. I've put in too many fool words. I got them out of other papers, but I don't know how to use them. I guess I've caught on. Would it do any harm if you gave me till to-morrow?"

"No, it wouldn't," said Galton, desperately. "If you can't do it, there's no time to find another man, and the page must be cut out. It's been no good so far. It won't be missed. Take it along."

As he pushed back the papers, he saw the photographs, and picked one up.

"That bride's a good-looking girl. Who are these others? Bridesmaids? You've got a lot of stuff here. Biker couldn't get anything." He

glanced up at the young fellow's rather pale face. "I thought you'd make friends. How did you get all this?"

"I beat the streets till I found it," said Tembarom. "I had luck right away. I went into a confectionery store where they make wedding-cakes. A good-natured little Dutchman and his wife kept it, and I talked to them--"

"Got next?" said Galton, grinning a little.

"They gave me addresses, and told me a whole lot of things. I got into the Schwartz wedding reception, and they treated me mighty well. A good many of them were willing to talk. I told them what a big thing the page was going to be, and I--well, I said the more they helped me the finer it would turn out. I said it seemed a shame there shouldn't be an up-town page when such swell entertainments were given. I've got a lot of stuff there."

Galton laughed.

"You'd get it," he said. "If you knew how to handle it, you'd make it a hit. Well, take it along. If it isn't right tomorrow, it's done for."

Tembarom didn't tell stories or laugh at dinner that evening. He said he had a headache. After dinner he bolted upstairs after Little Ann,

and caught her before she mounted to her upper floor.

"Will you come and save my life again?" he said. "I'm in the tightest place I ever was in in my life."

"I'll do anything I can, Mr. Tembarom," she answered, and as his face had grown flushed by this time she looked anxious. "You look downright feverish."

"I've got chills as well as fever," he said. "It's the page. It seems like I was going to fall down on it."

She turned back at once.

"No you won't, Mr. Tembarom," she said "I'm just right-down sure you won't."

They went down to the parlor again, and though there were people in it, they found a corner apart, and in less than ten minutes he had told her what had happened.

She took the manuscript he handed to her.

"If I was well educated, I should know how to help you," she said, "but I've only been to a common Manchester school. I don't know anything about elegant language. What are these?" pointing to the

blue-pencil marks.

Tembarom explained, and she studied the blue slashes with serious attention.

"Well," she said in a few minutes, laying the manuscript down, "I should have cut those words out myself if--if you'd asked me which to take away. They're too showy, Mr. Tembarom."

Tembarom whipped a pencil out of his pocket and held it out.

"Say," he put it to her, "would you take this and draw it through a few of the other showy ones?"

"I should feel as if I was taking too much upon myself," she said. "I don't know anything about it."

"You know a darned sight more than I do," Tembarom argued. "I didn't know they were showy. I thought they were the kind you had to put in newspaper stuff."

She held the sheets of paper on her knee, and bent her head over them. Tembarom watched her dimples flash in and out as she worked away like a child correcting an exercise. Presently he saw she was quite absorbed. Sometimes she stopped and thought, pressing her lips together; sometimes she changed a letter. There was no lightness in

her manner. A badly mutilated stocking would have claimed her attention in the same way.

"I think I'd put 'house' there instead of 'mansion' if I were you," she suggested once.

"Put in a whole block of houses if you like," he answered gratefully. "Whatever you say goes. I believe Galton would say the same thing."

She went over sheet after sheet, and though she knew nothing about it, she cut out just what Galton would have cut out. She put the papers together at last and gave them back to Tembarom, getting up from her seat.

"I must go back to father now," she said. "I promised to make him a good cup of coffee over the little oil-stove. If you'll come and knock at the door I'll give you one. It will help you to keep fresh while you work."

Tembarom did not go to bed at all that night, and he looked rather fagged the next morning when he handed back the "stuff" entirely rewritten. He swallowed several times quite hard as he waited for the final verdict.

"You did catch on to what I didn't want," Galton said at last. "You will catch on still more as you get used to the work. And you did get

the 'stuff,'"

"That--you mean--that goes?" Tembarom stammered.

"Yes, it goes," answered Galton. "You can turn it in. We'll try the page for a month."

"Gee! Thank the Lord!" said Tembarom, and then he laughed an excited boyish laugh, and the blood came back to his face. He had a whole month before him, and if he had caught on as soon as this, a month would teach him a lot.

He'd work like a dog.

He worked like a healthy young man impelled by a huge enthusiasm, and seeing ahead of him something he had had no practical reason for aspiring to. He went out in all weathers and stayed out to all hours. Whatsoever rebuffs or difficulties he met with he never was even on the verge of losing his nerve. He actually enjoyed himself tremendously at times. He made friends; people began to like to see him. The Munsbergs regarded him as an inspiration of their own.

"He seen my name over de store and come in here first time he vas sent up dis vay to look for t'ings to write," Mr. Munsberg always explained. "Ve vas awful busy--time of the Schwartz vedding, an' dere vas dat blizzard. He owned up he vas new, an' vanted some vun vhat

knew to tell him vhat vas goin' on. 'Course I could do it. Me an' my vife give him addresses an' a lot of items. He vorked 'em up good. Dot up-town page is gettin' first-rate. He says he don' know vhat he'd have done if he hadn't turned up here dot day."

Tembarom, having "caught on" to his fault of style, applied himself with vigor to elimination. He kept his tame dictionary chained to the leg of his table--an old kitchen table which Mrs. Bowse scrubbed and put into his hall bedroom, overcrowding it greatly. He turned to Little Ann at moments of desperate uncertainty, but he was man enough to do his work himself. In glorious moments when he was rather sure that Galton was far from unsatisfied with his progress, and Ann had looked more than usually distracting in her aloof and sober alluringness,-- it was her entire aloofness which so stirred his blood,--he sometimes stopped scribbling and lost his head for a minute or so, wondering if a fellow ever COULD "get away with it" to the extent of making enough to--but he always pulled himself up in time.

"Nice fool I look, thinking that way!" he would say to himself. "She'd throw me down hard if she knew. But, my Lord! ain't she just a peach!"

It was in the last week of the month of trial which was to decide the permanency of the page that he came upon the man Mrs. Bowse's boarders called his "Freak." He never called him a "freak" himself

even at the first. Even his somewhat undeveloped mind felt itself confronted at the outset with something too abnormal and serious, something with a suggestion of the weird and tragic in it.

In this wise it came about:

The week had begun with another blizzard, which after the second day had suddenly changed its mind, and turned into sleet and rain which filled the streets with melted snow, and made walking a fearsome thing. Tembarom had plenty of walking to do. This week's page was his great effort, and was to be a "dandy." Galton must be shown what pertinacity could do.

"I'm going to get into it up to my neck, and then strike out," he said at breakfast on Monday morning.

Thursday was his most strenuous day. The weather had decided to change again, and gusts of sleet were being driven about, which added cold to sloppiness. He had found it difficult to get hold of some details he specially wanted. Two important and extremely good-looking brides had refused to see him because Biker had enraged them in his day. He had slighted the description of their dresses at a dance where they had been the observed of all observers, and had worn things brought from Paris. Tembarom had gone from house to house. He had even searched out aunts whose favor he had won professionally. He had appealed to his dressmaker, whose affection he had by that time

fully gained. She was doing work in the brides' houses, and could make it clear that he would not call peau de cygne "Surah silk," nor duchess lace "Baby Irish." But the young ladies enjoyed being besought by a society page. It was something to discuss with one's bridesmaids and friends, to protest that "those interviewers" give a person no peace. "If you don't want to be in the papers, they'll put you in whether you like it or not, however often you refuse them." They kept Tembarom running about, they raised faint hopes, and then went out when he called, leaving no messages, but allowing the servant to hint that if he went up to Two Hundred and Seventy-fifth Street he might chance to find them.

"All right," said Tembarom to the girl, delighting her by lifting his hat genially as he turned to go down the steps. "I'll just keep going. The Sunday Earth can't come out without those photographs in it. I should lose my job."

When at last he ran the brides to cover it was not at Two Hundred and Seventy-fifth Street, but in their own home, to which they had finally returned. They had heard from the servant-girl about what the young gentleman from the Sunday Earth had said, and they were mollified by his proper appreciation of values. Tembarom's dressmaker friend also proffered information.

"I know him myself," she said, "and he's a real nice gentle-manlike young man. He's not a bit like Biker. He doesn't think he knows

everything. He came to me from Mrs. Munsberg, just to ask me the names of fashionable materials. He said it was more important than a man knew till he found out" Miss Stuntz chuckled.

"He asked me to lend him some bits of samples so he could learn them off by heart, and know them when he saw them. He's got a pleasant laugh; shows his teeth, and they're real pretty and white; and he just laughed like a boy and said: 'These samples are my alphabet, Miss Stuntz. I'm going to learn to read words of three syllables in them.'"

When late in the evening Tembarom, being let out of the house after his interview, turned down the steps again, he carried with him all he had wanted--information and photographs, even added picturesque details. He was prepared to hand in a fuller and better page than he had ever handed in before. He was in as elated a frame of mind as a young man can be when he is used up with tramping the streets, and running after street-cars, to stand up in them and hang by a strap. He had been wearing a new pair of boots, one of which rubbed his heel and had ended by raising a blister worthy of attention. To reach the nearest "L" station he must walk across town, through several deserted streets in the first stages of being built up, their vacant lots surrounded by high board fencing covered with huge advertising posters. The hall bedroom, with the gas turned up and the cheap, red-cotton comfort on the bed, made an alluring picture as he faced the sleety wind.

"If I cut across to the avenue and catch the 'L,' I'm bound to get there sometime, anyhow," he said as he braced himself and set out on his way.

The blister on his heel had given him a good deal of trouble, and he was obliged to stop a moment to ease it, and he limped when he began to walk again. But he limped as fast as he could, while the sleety rain beat in his face, across one street, down another for a block or so, across another, the melting snow soaking even the new boots as he splashed through it. He bent his head, however, and limped steadily. At this end of the city many of the streets were only scantily built up, and he was passing through one at the corner of which was a big vacant lot. At the other corner a row of cheap houses which had only reached their second story waited among piles of bricks and frozen mortar for the return of the workmen the blizzard had dispersed. It was a desolate-enough thoroughfare, and not a soul was in sight. The vacant lot was fenced in with high boarding plastered over with flaring sheets advertising whiskies, sauces, and theatrical ventures. A huge picture of a dramatically interrupted wedding ceremony done in reds and yellows, and announcing in large letters that Mr. Isaac Simonson presented Miss Evangeline St. Clair in "Rent Asunder," occupied several yards of the boarding. As he reached it, the heel of Tembarom's boot pressed, as it seemed to him, a red-hot coal on the flesh. He had rubbed off the blister. He was obliged to stop a moment again.

"Gee whizz!" he exclaimed through his teeth, "I shall have to take my boot off and try to fix it."

To accomplish this he leaned against the boarding and Miss Evangeline St. Clair being "Rent Asunder" in the midst of the wedding service. He cautiously removed his boot, and finding a hole in his sock in the place where the blister had rubbed off, he managed to protect the raw spot by pulling the sock over it. Then he drew on his boot again.

"That'll be better," he said, with a long breath.

As he stood on his feet again he started involuntarily. This was not because the blister had hurt him, but because he had heard behind him a startling sound.

"What's that?" broke from him. "What's that?"

He turned and listened, feeling his heart give a quick thump. In the darkness of the utterly empty street the thing was unnatural enough to make any man jump. He had heard it between two gusts of wind, and through another he heard it again - an uncanny, awful sobbing, broken by a hopeless wail of words.

"I can't remember! I can't- remember! 0 my God !"

And it was not a woman's voice or a child's; it was a man's, and there was an eerie sort of misery in it which made Tembarom feel rather sick. He had never heard a man sobbing before. He belonged to a class which had no time for sobs. This sounded ghastly.

"Good Lord!" he said, "the fellow's crying! A man!"

The sound came directly behind him. There was not a human being in sight. Even policemen do not loiter in empty streets.

"Hello!" he cried. "Where are you?"

But the low, horrible sound went on, and no answer came. His physical sense of the presence of the blister was blotted out by the abnormal thrill of the moment. One had to find out about a thing like that- one just had to. One could not go on and leave it behind uninvestigated in the dark and emptiness of a street no one was likely to pass through. He listened more intently. Yes, it was just behind him.

"He's in the lot behind the fence," he said. "How did he get there?"

He began to walk along the boarding to find a gap. A few yards farther on he came upon a broken place in the inclosure - a place where boards had sagged until they fell down, or had perhaps been pulled down by boys who wanted to get inside. He went through it, and

found lie was in the usual vacant lot long given up to rubbish. When he stood still a moment he heard the sobbing again, and followed the sound to the place behind the boarding against which he had supported himself when he took off his boot.

A man was lying on the ground with his arms flung out. The street lamp outside the boarding cast light enough to reveal him. Tembarom felt as though he had suddenly found himself taking part in a melodrama,-" The Streets of New York," for choice,-though no melodrama had ever given him this slightly shaky feeling. But when a fellow looked up against it as hard as this, what you had to do was to hold your nerve and make him feel he was going to be helped. The normal human thing spoke loud in him.

"Hello, old man!" he said with cheerful awkwardness. "What's hit you?"

The man started and scrambled to his feet as though he were frightened. He was wet, unshaven, white and shuddering, piteous to look at. He stared with wild eyes, his chest heaving.

"What's up?" said Tembarom.

The man's breath caught itself.

"I don't remember." There was a touch of horror in his voice, though he was evidently making an effort to control him-self. "I can't - I

can't remember." "What's your name? You remember that?" Tembarom put it to him.

"N-n-no !" agonizingly. "If I could! If I could!"

"How did you get in here?"

"I came in because I saw a policeman. He wouldn't understand. He would have stopped me. I must not be stopped. I MUST not."

"Where were you going? " asked Tembarom, not knowing what else to say.

"Home! My God! man, home!" and he fell to shuddering again. He put his arm against the boarding and dropped his head against it. The low, hideous sobbing tore him again.

T. Tembarom could not stand it. In his newsboy days he had never been able to stand starved dogs and homeless cats. Mrs. Bowse was taking care of a wretched dog for him at the present moment. He had not wanted the poor brute,--he was not particularly fond of dogs,-- but it had followed him home, and after he had given it a bone or so, it had licked its chops and turned up its eyes at him with such abject appeal that he had not been able to turn it into the streets again. He was unsentimental, but ruled by primitive emotions. Also he had a sudden recollection of a night when as a little fellow he had gone into a vacant lot and cried as like this as a child could. It was a

bad night when some "tough" big boys had turned him out of a warm corner in a shed, and he had had nowhere to go, and being a friendly little fellow, the unfriendliness had hit him hard. The boys had not seen him crying, but he remembered it. He drew near, and put his hand on the shaking shoulder.

"Say, don't do that," he said. "I'll help you to remember."

He scarcely knew why he said it. There was something in the situation and in the man himself which was compelling. He was not of the tramp order. His wet clothes had been decent, and his broken, terrified voice was neither coarse nor nasal. He lifted his head and caught Tembarom's arm, clutching it with desperate fingers.

"Could you?" he poured forth the words. "Could you? I'm not quite mad. Something happened. If I could be quiet! Don't let them stop me! My God! my God! my God! I can't say it. It's not far away, but it won't come back. You're a good fellow; if you're human, help me! help me! help me!" He clung to Tembarom with hands which shook; his eyes were more abject than the starved dog's; he choked, and awful tears rolled down his cheeks. "Only help me," he cried--"just help, help, help--for a while. Perhaps not long. It would come back." He made a horrible effort. "Listen! My name--I am--I am--it's--"

He was down on the ground again, groveling. His efforts had failed. Tembarom, overwrought himself, caught at him and dragged him up.

"Make a fight," he said. "You can't lie down like that. You've got to put up a fight. It'll come back. I tell you it will. You've had a clip on the head or something. Let me call an ambulance and take you to the hospital."

The next moment he was sorry he had said the words, the man's terror was so ill to behold. He grew livid with it, and uttered a low animal cry.

"Don't drop dead over it," said Tembarom, rather losing his head. "I won't do it, though what in thunder I'm going to do with you I don't know. You can't stay here."

"For God's sake!" said the man. "For God's sake!" He put his shaking hand on Tembarom again, and looked at him with a bewildered scrutiny. "I'm not afraid of you," he said; "I don't know why. There's something all right about you. If you'll stand by me--you'd stand by a man, I'd swear. Take me somewhere quiet. Let me get warm and think."

"The less you think now the better," answered Tembarom. "You want a bed and a bath and a night's rest. I guess I've let myself in for it. You brush off and brace yourself and come with me."

There was the hall bedroom and the red-cotton comfort for one night at least, and Mrs. Bowse was a soft-hearted woman. If she'd heard the

fellow sobbing behind the fence, she'd have been in a worse fix than he was. Women were kinder-hearted than men, anyhow. The way the fellow's voice sounded when he said, "Help me, help me, help me!" sounded as though he was in hell. "Made me feel as if I was bracing up a chap that was going to be electrocuted," he thought, feeling sickish again. "I've not got backbone enough to face that sort of thing. Got to take him somewhere."

They were walking toward the "L" together, and he was wondering what he should say to Mrs. Bowse when he saw his companion fumbling under his coat at the back as though he was in search of something. His hands being unsteady, it took him some moments to get at what he wanted. He evidently had a belt or a hidden pocket. He got something out and stopped under a street light to show it to Tembarom. His hands still shook when he held them out, and his look was a curious, puzzled, questioning one. What he passed over to Tembarom was a roll of money. Tembarom rather lost his breath as he saw the number on two five-hundred-dollar bills, and of several hundreds, besides twenties, tens, and fives.

"Take it--keep it," he said. "It will pay."

"Hully gee!" cried Tembarom, aghast. "Don't go giving away your whole pile to the first fellow you meet. I don't want it."

"Take it." The stranger put his hand on his shoulder, the abject look

in his eyes harrowingly like the starved dog's again.

"There's something all right about you. You'll help me."

"If I don't take it for you, some one will knock you upon the head for it." Tembarom hesitated, but the next instant he stuffed it all in his pocket, incited thereto by the sound of a whizzing roar.

"There's the 'L' coming," he cried; "run for all you're worth." And they fled up the street and up the steps, and caught it without a second to spare.