

A Man and His Money

By

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CHAPTER I

THE COACH OF CONCORD

"Well? What can I do for you?"

The speaker--a scrubby little man--wheeled in the rickety office chair to regard some one hesitating on his threshold. The tones were not agreeable; the proprietor of the diminutive, run-down establishment, "The St. Cecilia Music Emporium," was not, for certain well defined reasons, in an amiable mood that morning. He had been about to reach down for a little brown jug which reposed on the spot usually allotted to the waste paper basket when the shadow of the new-comer fell obtrusively, not to say offensively, upon him.

It was not a reassuring shadow; it seemed to spring from an indeterminate personality. Mr. Kerry Mackintosh repeated his question more brusquely; the shadow (obviously not a customer,--no one ever sought Mr. Mackintosh's wares!) started; his face showed signs of a vacillating purpose.

"A mistake! Beg pardon!" he murmured with exquisite politeness and began

to back out, when a somewhat brutal command on the other's part to "shut that d---- door d---- quick, and not let any more d---- hot air out" arrested the visitor's purpose. Instead of retreating, he advanced.

"I beg pardon, were you addressing me?" he asked. The half apologetic look had quite vanished.

The other considered, muttered at length in an aggrieved tone something about hot air escaping and coal six dollars a ton, and ended with: "What do you want?"

"Work." The visitor's tone relapsed; it was now conspicuous for its want of "success waves"; it seemed to imply a definite cognizance of personal uselessness. He who had brightened a moment before now spoke like an automaton. Mr. Mackintosh looked at him and his shabby garments. He had a contempt for shabby garments--on others!

"Good day!" he said curtly.

But instead of going, the person coolly sat down. The proprietor of the little shop glanced toward the door and half started from his chair. Whereupon the visitor smiled; he had a charming smile in these moments of calm equipoise, it gave one an impression of potential possibilities. Mr. Mackintosh sank back into his chair.

"Too great a waste of energy!" he murmured, and having thus defined his

attitude, turned to a "proof" of new rag-time. This he surveyed discontentedly; struck out a note here, jabbed in another there. The stranger watched him at first casually. By sundry signs the caller's fine resolution and assurance seemed slowly oozing from him; perhaps he began to have doubts as to the correctness of his position, thus to storm a man in his own castle, or office--even if it were such a disreputable-appearing office!

He shifted his feet thoughtfully; a thin lock of dark hair drooped more uncertainly over his brow; he got up. The composer dashed a blithe flourish to the tail of a note.

"Hold on," he said. "What's your hurry?" Sarcastically.

"Didn't know I was in a hurry!" There was no attempted levity in his tone,--he spoke rather listlessly, as one who had found the world, or its problems, slightly wearisome. The composer-publisher now arose; a new thought had suddenly assailed him.

"You say you are looking for work. Why did you drift in here?"

"The place looked small. Those big places have no end of applicants--"

"Shouldn't think that would phase you. With your nerve!"

The visitor flushed. "I seem to have made rather a mess of it," he

confessed. "I usually do. Good day."

"A moment!" said Mr. Mackintosh. "One of my men"--he emphasized "one," as if their number were legion--"disappointed me this morning. I expect he's in the lockup by this time. Have you got a voice?"

"A what?"

"Can you sing?"

"I really don't know; haven't ever tried, since"--a wonderful retrospection in his tones--"since I was a little chap in church and wore white robes."

"Huh!" ejaculated the proprietor of the Saint Cecilia shop. "Mama's angel boy! That must have been a long time ago." The visitor did not answer; he pushed back uncertainly the uncertain lock of dark hair and seemed almost to have forgotten the object of his visit.

"Now see here"--Mr. Mackintosh's voice became purposeful, energetic; he seated himself before a piano that looked as if it had led a hard nomadic existence. "Now see here!" Striking a few chords. "Suppose you try this stunt! What's the Matter with Mother? My own composition! Kerry Mackintosh at his best! Now twitter away, if you've any of that angel voice left!"

The piano rattled; the new-comer, with a certain faint whimsical smile as if he appreciated the humor of his position, did "twitter away"; loud sounds filled the place. Quality might be lacking but of quantity there was a-plenty.

"Bully!" cried Mr. Mackintosh enthusiastically. "That'll start the tears rolling. What's the Matter with Mother? Nothing's the matter with mother. And if any one says there is--Will it go? With that voice?" He clapped his hand on the other's shoulder. "Why, man, they could hear you across Madison Square. You've a voice like an organ. Is it a 'go'?" he demanded.

"I don't think I quite understand," said the new-comer patiently.

"You don't, eh? Look there!"

A covered wagon had at that moment stopped before the door. It was drawn by a horse whose appearance, like that of the piano, spoke more eloquently of services in the past than of hopeful promises for the future. On the side of the vehicle appeared in large letters: "What's the Matter with Mother? Latest Melodic Triumph by America's Greatest Composer, Mr. Kerry Mackintosh." A little to the left of this announcement was painted a harp, probably a reminder of the one Saint Cecilia was supposed to have played. This sentimental symbol was obviously intended to lend dignity and respectability to the otherwise disreputable vehicle of concord and its steed without wings, waiting

patiently to be off--or to lie down and pay the debt of nature!

"Shall we try it again, angel voice?" asked Mr. Mackintosh, playing the piano, or "biffing the ivories," as he called it.

"Drop it," returned the visitor, "that 'angel' dope."

"Oh, all right! Anything to oblige."

Before this vaguely apologetic reply, the new-comer once more relapsed into thoughtfulness. His eye passed dubiously over the vehicle of harmony; he began to take an interest in the front door as if again inclined to "back out." Perhaps a wish that the horse might lie down and die at this moment (no doubt he would be glad to!) percolated through the current of his thoughts. That would offer an easy solution to the proposal he imagined would soon be forthcoming--that was forthcoming--and accepted. Of course! What alternative remained? Needs must when an empty pocket drives. Had he not learned the lesson--beggars must not be choosers?

"And now," said Mr. Mackintosh with the air of a man who had cast from his shoulders a distinct problem, "that does away with the necessity of bailing the other chap out. What's your name?"

The visitor hesitated. "Horatio Heatherbloom."

The other looked at him keenly. "The right one," he said softly.

"You've got the only one you'll get," replied the caller, after an interval.

Mr. Mackintosh bestowed upon him a knowing wink. "Sounds like a nom de plume," he chuckled. "What was your line?"

"I don't understand."

"What did you serve time for? Shoplifting?"

"Oh, no," said the other calmly.

"Burglarizing?" With more respect in his tones.

"What do you think?" queried the caller in the same mild voice.

"Not ferocious-looking enough for that lay, I should have thought. However, you can't always tell by appearances. Now, I wonder--"

"What?" observed Mr. Heatherbloom, after an interval of silence.

"Yes! By Jove!" Mr. Mackintosh was speaking to himself. "It might work--it might add interest--" Mr. Heatherbloom waited patiently. "Would you have any objections," earnestly, "to my making a little addenda to

the sign on the chariot of cadence? What's the Matter with Mother?

'The touching lyric, as interpreted by Horatio Heatherbloom, the reformed burglar'?"

"I should object," observed the caller.

"My boy--my boy! Don't be hasty. Take time to think. I'll go further; I'll paint a few iron bars in front of the harp. Suggestive of a prisoner in jail thinking of mother. Say 'yes'."

"No."

"Too bad!" murmured Mr. Mackintosh in disappointed but not altogether convinced tones. "You could use another alias, you know. If you're afraid the police might pipe your game and nab--"

"Drop it, or--"

"All right, Mr. Heatherbloom, or any other blooming name!" Recovering his jocular manner. "It's not for me to inquire the 'why,' or care a rap for the 'wherefore.' Ethics hasn't anything to do with the realm of art."

As he spoke he reached under the desk and took out the jug. "Have some?" extending the tumbler.

The thin lips of the other moved, his hand quickly extended but was drawn as suddenly back. "Thanks, but I'm on the water wagon, old chap."

"Well, I'm not. Do you know you said that just like a gentleman--to the manner born."

"A gentleman? A moment ago I was a reformed burglar."

"You might be both."

Mr. Heatherbloom looked into space; Mr. Mackintosh did not notice a subtle change of expression. That latter gentleman's rapt gaze was wholly absorbed by the half-tumblerful he held in mid air. But only for a moment; the next, he was smacking his lips. "We'll have a bite to eat and then go," he now said more cheerfully. "Ready for luncheon?"

"I could eat"

"Had anything to-day?"

"Maybe."

"And maybe, not!" Half jeeringly. "Why don't you say you've been training down, taking the go-without-breakfast cure? Say, it must be hell looking for a job when you've just 'got out!'"

"How do you know I just 'got out'?"

"You look it, and--there's a lot of reasons. Come on."

Half an hour or so later the covered wagon drove along Fourteenth street. Near the curb, not far from the corner of Broadway, it separated itself from the concourse of vehicles and stopped. Close by, nickel palaces of amusement exhibited their yawning entrances, and into these gilded maws floated, from the human current on the sidewalk, a stream of men, women and children. Encamped at the edge of this eddy, Mr. Mackintosh sounded on the nomadic piano, now ensconced within the coach of concord, the first triumphal strains of the maternal tribute in rag-time.

He and the conspiring instrument were concealed in the depths of the vehicle from the gaze of the multitude, but Mr. Heatherbloom at the back faced them on the little step which served as concert stage. There were no limelights or stereopticon pictures to add to the illusion,--only the disconcerting faces and the light of day. He never before knew how bright the day could be but he continued to stand there, in spite of the ludicrous and trying position. He sang, a certain daredevil light in his eye now, a suspicion of a covert smile on his face. It might be rather tragic--his position--but it was also a little funny.

His voice didn't sound any better out of doors than it did in; the "angel" quality of the white-robed choir days had departed with the soul

of the boy. Perhaps Mr. Heatherbloom didn't really feel the pathos of the selection; at any rate, those tears Mr. Mackintosh had prophesied would be rolling down the cheeks of the listening multitude weren't forthcoming. One or two onlookers even laughed.

"Figs! Swine!" murmured the composer, now passing through the crowd with copies of the song. He sold a few, not many; on the back step Mr. Heatherbloom watched with faint sardonic interest.

"Have I earned my luncheon yet?" he asked the composer when that aggrieved gentleman, jingling a few dimes, returned to the equipage of melody.

"Haven't counted up," was the gruff reply. "Give 'em another verse! They ain't accustomed to it yet. Once they git to know it, every boot-black in town will be whistling that song. Don't I know? Didn't I write it? Ain't they all had mothers?"

"Maybe they're all Topsies and 'just growed'," suggested Mr. Heatherbloom.

"Patience!" muttered the other. "The public may be a little coy at first, but once they git started they'll be fighting for copies. So encore, my boy; hammer it into them. We'll get them; you see!"

But the person addressed didn't see, at least with Mr. Mackintosh's

clairvoyant vision. Mr. Heatherbloom's gaze wandering quizzically from the little pool of mask-like faces had rested on a great shining motor-car approaching--slowly, on account of the press of traffic. In this wide luxurious vehicle reposed a young girl, slender, exquisite; at her side sat a big, dark, distinguished-appearing man, with a closely cropped black beard; a foreigner--most likely Russian.

The girl was as beautiful as the dainty orchids with which the superb car was adorned, and which she, also, wore in her gown--yellow orchids, tenderly fashioned but very insistent and bright. Upon this patrician vision Mr. Heatherbloom had inadvertently looked, and the pathetic plaint regarding "Mother" died on the wings of nothingness. With unfilial respect he literally abandoned her and cast her to the winds. His eyes gleamed as they rested on the girl; he seemed to lose himself in reverie.

Did she, the vision in orchids, notice him? Perhaps! The chauffeur at that moment increased the speed of the big car; but as it dashed past, the crimson mouth of the beautiful girl tightened and hardened into a straight line and those wonderful starlike eyes shone suddenly with a light as hard as steel. Disdainful, contemptuous; albeit, perhaps, passionate! Then she, orchids, shining car and all were whirled on.

Rattle! bang! went the iron-rimmed wheels of other rougher vehicles. Bing! bang! sounded the piano like a soul in torment.

Horatio Heatherbloom stood motionless; then his figure swayed slightly. He lifted the music, as if to shield his features from the others--his many auditors; but they didn't mind that brief interruption; it afforded a moment for that rough and ready dialogue which a gathering of this kind finds to its liking.

"Give him a trokee! Anybody got a cough drop?"

"It's soothing syrup he wants."

"No; it's us wants that."

"What the devil--" Mr. Mackintosh looked out of the wagon.

Mr. Heatherbloom suddenly laughed, a forced reckless laugh. "Guess it was the dampness. I'm like some artists--have to be careful where I sing."

"Have a tablet, feller, do!" said a man in the audience.

Horatio looked him in the eye. "Maybe it's you want something."

The facetious one began to back away; he had seen that look before, the steely glint that goes before battle.

"The chord now, if you please!" said Mr. Heatherbloom to the composer

in a still quiet voice.

Mr. Mackintosh hit viciously; Mr. Heatherbloom sang again; he did more than that. He outdid himself; he employed bombast,--some thought it pathos. He threw a tremolo into his voice; it passed for emotion. He "caught 'em", in Mr. Mackintosh's parlance, and "caught 'em hard". Some more people bought copies. The alert Mr. Mackintosh managed to gather in about a dollar, and saw, in consequence, great fortune "coming his way" at last; the clouds had a golden lining.

"Say, you're the pard I've been a-looking for!" he jubilantly told Mr. Heatherbloom as they prepared to move on. "We'll make a beautiful team. Isn't it a peach?"

"What?"

"That song. It made them look like a rainy day. Git up!" And Mr. Mackintosh prodded the bony ribs of their steed.

Mr. Heatherbloom absent-mindedly gazed in the direction the big shining motor had vanished.