

CHAPTER II

VARYING FORTUNES

Mr. Heatherbloom's new-found employment proved but ephemeral. The next day the sheriff took possession of the music emporium and all it contained, including the nomadic piano and the now empty jug. The contents of the last the composer-publisher took care to put beyond reach of his many creditors whom he, in consequence, faced with a seemingly care-free, if artificial, jocularity. Mr. Heatherbloom walked soberly forth from the shop of concord.

He had but turned the corner of the street when into the now dissonant "hole in the wall", amid the scene of wreck and disaster, stepped a tall dark man, with a closely cropped beard, who spoke English with an accent and who regarded the erstwhile proprietor and the minions of the law with ill-concealed arrogance and disfavor.

"You have," he began in halting tones, "a young man here who sings on the street like the minstrels of old, the--what you call them?--troubadours."

"We had," corrected Mr. Mackintosh. "He has just 'jumped the coup,' or rather been 'shooed out'."

The new-comer fastened his gaze upon the other; he had superb, almost mesmeric eyes. "Will you kindly speak the language as I understand it?" he said. And the other did, for there was that in the caller's manner which compelled immediate compliance. Immovably he listened to the composer-publisher's explanation.

"Eh bien!" he said, his handsome, rather barbaric head high when Mr. Mackintosh had concluded. "He is gone; it is well; I have fulfilled my mission." And walking out, the imposing stranger hailed a taxi and disappeared from the neighborhood.

Meanwhile Mr. Horatio Heatherbloom had walked slowly on; he was now some distance from the one-time "emporium." Where should he go? His fortunes had not been enhanced materially by his brief excursion into the realms of melody; he had thirty cents in cash and a "dollar-and-a-half appetite." An untidy place where they displayed a bargain assortment of creature comforts attracted his gaze. He thought of meals in the past--of caviar, a la Russe, three dollars and a half a portion; peaches Melba, three francs each at the Café de Paris; truffled capon from Normandy; duck after the manner of the incomparable Frederic. About half a dozen peaches Melba would have appealed to him now; he looked, instead, with the eyes of longing at a codfish ball. Oh, glorious appetite, mocking recollections of hours of satiety!

Should he yield to temptation? He stopped; then prudence prevailed. The day was yet too young to give way recklessly to casual gastronomic

allurements, so he stepped on again quickly, averting his head from shop windows. Lest his caution and conservatism might give way, he started to turn into a side street--but didn't.

Instead, he laughed slightly to himself. What! flee from an outpost of time-worn celery? beat an inglorious retreat before a phalanx of machine-made pies? He would look them (figuratively) in the eye. Having, as it were, fairly stared out of countenance the bland pies and beamed with stern contempt upon the "droopy," Preraphaelite celery, he went, better satisfied, on his way. It is these little victories that count; at that moment Mr. Heatherbloom marched on like a knight of old for steadfastness of purpose. His lips veiled a covert smile, as if behind the hard mask of life he saw something a little odd and whimsical, appealing to some secret sense of humor that even hunger could not wholly annihilate. The lock of hair seemed to droop rather pathetically at that moment; his sensitive features were slightly pinched; his face was pale. It would probably be paler before the day was over; n'importe! The future had to be met--for better, or worse. Multitudes passed this way and that; an elevated went crashing by; devastating influences seemed to surround him. His slender form stiffened.

When next he stopped it was to linger, not in front of an eating establishment, but before a bulletin-board upon which was pasted a page of newspaper "want ads" for "trained" men, in all walks of life.

"Trained" men? Hateful word! How often had he encountered it! Ah, here was one advertisement without the "trained"; he devoured it eagerly. The

item, like an oasis in the desert of his general incapacity and uselessness, exercised an odd fascination for him in spite of the absolute impossibility of his professing to possess a fractional part of those moral attributes demanded by the fair advertiser. She--a Miss Van Rolsen--was seeking a paragon, not a person. Nevertheless, he resolved to assail the apparently unassailable, and repaired to a certain ultrafashionable neighborhood of the town.

Before a brownstone front that bore the number he sought, he paused a moment, drew a deep breath and started to walk up the front steps. But with a short laugh he came suddenly to a halt half-way up; looked over the stone balustrade down at the other entrance below--the tradesmen's--the butchers', the bakers', the candlestick makers'--and, yes, the servants'--their way in!--his?

He went down the steps and walked on and away as a matter of course, but once more stopped. He had done a good deal of going this way and that, and then stopping, during the last few months. Things had to be worked out, and sometimes his brain didn't seem to move very quickly.

To be worked out! He now surveyed the butchers' and the bakers' (and yes, the servants') entrance with casual or philosophic interest from the vantage point of the other side of the street. It wasn't different from any other of the entrances of the kind but it held his gaze. Then he walked across the street again and went in--or down. It didn't really seem now such a bad kind of entrance when you came to investigate it, in

a high impersonal way; not half so bad as the subway, and people didn't mind that.

Still Mr. Heatherbloom experienced a peculiar thrill when he put up his thumb, pressed a button, and wondered what next would happen. Who answered doors down here,--the maid--the cook--the laundress? He felt himself to be very indistinct and vague standing there in the shadow, and tried to assume a nonchalant bearing. He wondered just what bearing was proper under the circumstances; he cherished indistinct recollections of having heard or read that the butcher's boy is usually favored with a broadly defying and independent visage; that he comes in whistling and goes forth swaggering. A cat-meat man he had once looked upon from the upper lodge of front steps somewhere in the dim long ago, had possessed a melancholy manner and countenance.

How should he comport himself; what should he say--when the inevitable happened; when the time came to say something? How lead the conversation by natural and easy stages to the purport of his visit? He rehearsed a few sentences, then straightway forgot them. Why did they keep him waiting so long? Did they always keep people as long as that--down here? He put his thumb again--

"Well, what do you want?" The door had opened and a buxom female, arms akimbo, regarded him. Mr. Heatherbloom repaid her gaze with interest; it was the cook, then, who acted as door tender of these regions subterranean. He feared by her expression that he had interrupted her in

the preparation of some esculent delicacy, and with the fear was born a parenthetical inquiry; he wondered what that delicacy might be? But forbearing to inquire he stated his business.

"You'll be the thirteenth that's been 'turned down' to-day for that job!" observed cook blandly. With which cheering assurance she consigned him to some one else--a maid with a tipped-up nose--and presently he found himself being "shown up"; that was the expression used.

The room into which he was ushered was a parlor. Absently he seated himself. The maid tittered. He looked at her--or rather the tipped-up nose, an attractive bit of anatomy. Saucy, provocative! Mr. Heatherbloom's head tilted a little; he surveyed the detail with the look of a connoisseur. She colored, went; but remained in the hall to peer. There were many articles of virtu lying around--on tables or in cabinets--and the caller's appearance was against him. He would bear watching; he had the impudence--Just fancy his sitting there in a chair! He was leaning back now as if he enjoyed that atmosphere of luxury; surveying, too, the paintings and the bronzes with interest. But for no good reason, thought the maid; then gave a start of surprise. The hand of the suspicious-looking caller had lifted involuntarily to his breast pocket; a mechanical movement such as a young gentleman might make who was reaching for a cigarette case. Did he intend--actually intend to--but the caller's hand fell; he sat forward suddenly on the edge of his chair and seemed for the first time aware that his attitude partook of the anomalous; for gathering up his shabby hat from the gorgeous

rug, he abruptly rose.

Just in time to confront, or be confronted by, an austere lady in stiff satin or brocade and with bristling iron-gray hair! He noticed, however, that unlike the maid, she had a very prominent nose--that now sniffed!

"Good heavens! What a frightful odor of gasolene. Jane, where are my salts?"

Jane rushed in; at the same time four or five dogs that had followed in the lady's wake began to bark as if they, too, were echoing the plaint: "What a frightful odor! Salts, Jane, salts!" And as they barked in many keys, but always fortissimo, they ran frantically this way and that as though chased by somebody, or something (perhaps the odor of gasolene), or chasing one another in a mad outburst of canine exuberance.

"Sardanapolis! Beauty! Curly! Naughty!" the lady called out.

But in vain. Sardanapolis continued to cut capers; Beauty's conduct was not beautiful; while as for Naughty (all yellow bows and black curls) he seemed endeavoring to live up to the fullest realization of his name.

"Dear me! What shall I do?"

"Just let 'em alone, ma'am," ventured Jane, "and they'll soon tire themselves out."

Fortunately, by this time, the be-ribboned pets showed signs of reaching that state of ennui.

"Dear me!" said now the lady anxiously. "How wet the poor dears' tongues are!"

"Nature of the b--poor dears, ma'am!" commented Jane.

The lady looked at her. "You don't like dogs," she said. "You can go." And then to Mr. Heatherbloom: "What brought you here? Don't answer at once. Stand farther back."

Mr. Heatherbloom, who seemed to have been rather enjoying this little impromptu entertainment, straightened with a start; he retired a few paces, observing in a mild explanatory tone something about spots on his garments and the necessity for having them removed at a certain little Greek shop, before doing himself the honor of calling and--

"You're another answer to the advertisement then, I suppose?" the lady's voice unceremoniously interrupted.

He confessed himself Another Answer, and in that capacity proceeded now to reply as best he might to a merciless and rapid fire of questions. She would have made an excellent cross-examiner for the prosecution; Mr. Heatherbloom did not seem to enjoy the grilling. A number of queries

he answered frankly; others he evaded. He seemed--ominous circumstance!--especially secretive regarding certain details of his past. He did not care to say where he was born, or who his parents were. What had he done? What occupations had he followed?

Well--he seemed to hesitate a good deal--he had once tried washing dishes; but--dreamily--they had discharged him; the man said something about there being a debit balance on account of damaged crockery. He had essayed the rôle of waiter but had lasted only through the first courses; down to the entrées, he thought; certainly not much past the pottage. He believed he bumped into another waiter; a few guests within range had seemed put out; afterward, he himself was put out. And then--well, he had somehow drifted, more or less.

"Drifted!" said the lady ominously.

"Oh, yes! Tried his hand at this and that," he added rather blithely. He once worked for a moving-picture firm; fell from a six-story window for them. That is, he started to fall; something--a net or a platform--was supposed to catch him at the fifth, and then a dummy completed the descent and got smashed on the sidewalk. He was a little doubtful about their intercepting him at the fifth and that he, instead of the dummy--But he didn't seem to mind taking the risk--reflectively. They said he was a great success falling through the air, and they had him, in consequence, fall from all kinds of places,--through drawbridges into the water, for example. That's where he contracted a bad cold, and when

he had recovered, another man had been found for the heavier-than-air rôle--

"What are you talking about?" The lady's back was stiffer than a poker.

"If ever you go to a moving-picture palace of amusement, Madam, and see a streak in the air, you might reasonably conclude you are"--he bowed--"beholding me. I went once; it seemed funny. I hardly recognized myself in the part. I certainly seemed to be 'going some'," he murmured seriously. "Is there anything else, Madam, you would care to question me about?"

"I think," she said significantly, "what I have learned is quite sufficient. If the occupations you have told me about are so disreputable--what were those you have kept so carefully concealed? For example, where were you and what were you doing four--five--six--years ago? You have already refused to answer. You relate only a few inconsequential and outré trifles. To cover up--What? What?" she repeated.

Then she transfixed him with her eye; the dogs transfixed him with their eyes. Accusingly? Not all of them. Naughty's glance expressed approval; his tail underwent a friendly agitation.

"Naughty!" said the lady sharply. Naughty gamboled around Horatio.

"How odd!" murmured the mistress, more to herself than the other. "How very extraordinary!"

"What, Madam?" he ventured.

"That Naughty, who so seldom takes to strangers, should--" she found herself saying.

"Perhaps it's the scent of the gasolene," he suggested.

"It's in spite of the gasolene," she retorted sharply.

And for some moments ruminated. It was not until afterward Mr. Heatherbloom learned that her confidence in Naughty's instinct amounted to a hobby. Only once had she thought him at fault in his likes or dislikes of people; when he had showed a predilection for the assistant rector's shapely calves. But after that gentleman's elopement with a lady of the choir and his desertion of wife and children, Naughty's erstwhile disrespect for the cloth, which Miss Van Rolsen had grieved over, became illumined with force and significance. Thereafter she had never doubted him; he had barked at all twelve of Mr. Heatherbloom's predecessors--the dozen other answers to the advertisement; but here he was sedulous for fondlings from Horatio. Extraordinary truly! The lady hesitated.

"I suppose we shall all be murdered in our beds," she said half to

herself, "but," with sudden decision, "I've concluded to engage you."

"And my duties?" ventured Mr. Heatherbloom. "The advertisement did not say."

"You are to exercise the darlings every day in the park."

"Ah!" Horatio's exclamation was noncommittal. What he might have added was interrupted by a light footstep in the hall and the voice of some one who stopped in passing before the door.

"I am going now, Aunt," said a voice.

Mr. Heatherbloom started; his hand tightened on the back of a chair; from where he stood he could see but the rim of a wonderful hat. He gazed at a few waving roses, fitting notes of color as it were, for the lovely face behind, concealed from him by the curtain.

The elderly lady answered; Mr. Heatherbloom heard a Prince Someone's name mentioned; then the roses were whisked back; the voice--musical as silver bells--receded, and the front door closed. Mr. Heatherbloom gazed around him--at the furnishings in the room--she who stood before him. He seemed bewildered.

"And now as to your wages," said a voice--not silver bells!--sharply.

"I hardly think I should prove suitable--" he began in somewhat panic-stricken tones, when--

"Nonsense!" The word, or the energy imparted to it, appeared to crush for the moment further opposition on his part; his faculties became concentrated on a sound without, of a big car gathering headway in front of the door. Mr. Heatherbloom listened; perhaps he would have liked to retreat then and there from that house; but it was too late! Fate had precipitated him here. A mad tragic jest! He did not catch the amount of his proposed stipend that was mentioned; he even forgot for the moment he was hungry. He could no longer hear the car. It had gone; but, it would return. Return! And then--? His head whirled at the thought.