

A Man of Means

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CONTENTS

THE EPISODE OF THE LANDLADY'S DAUGHTER

THE EPISODE OF THE FINANCIAL NAPOLEON

THE EPISODE OF THE THEATRICAL VENTURE

THE EPISODE OF THE LIVE WEEKLY

THE DIVERTING EPISODE OF THE EXILED MONARCH

THE EPISODE OF THE HIRED PAST

THE EPISODE OF THE LANDLADY'S DAUGHTER

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When a seed-merchant of cautious disposition and an eye to the main chance receives from an eminent firm of jam-manufacturers an extremely large order for clover-seed, his emotions are mixed. Joy may be said to predominate, but with the joy comes also uncertainty. Are these people, he asks himself, proposing to set up as farmers of a large scale, or do they merely want the seed to give verisimilitude to their otherwise bald and unconvincing raspberry jam? On the solution of this problem depends the important matter of price, for, obviously, you can charge a fraudulent jam disseminator in a manner which an honest farmer would resent.

This was the problem which was furrowing the brow of Mr. Julian Fineberg, of Bury St. Edwards, one sunny morning when Roland Bleke knocked at his door; and such was its difficulty that only at the nineteenth knock did Mr. Fineberg raise his head.

"Come in--that dashed woodpecker out there!" he shouted, for it was his habit to express himself with a generous strength towards the junior members of his staff.

The young man who entered looked exactly like a second clerk in a provincial seed-merchant's office--which, strangely enough, he chanced to be. His chief characteristic was an intense ordinariness. He was a young man; and when you had said that of him you had said everything. There was nothing which you would have noticed about him, except the fact that there was nothing to notice. His age was twenty-two and his name was Roland Bleke.

"Please, sir, it's about my salary."

Mr. Fineberg, at the word, drew himself together much as a British square at Waterloo must have drawn itself together at the sight of a squadron of cuirassiers.

"Salary?" he cried. "What about it? What's the matter with it? You get it, don't you?"

"Yes, sir, but----"

"Well? Don't stand there like an idiot. What is it?"

"It's too much."

Mr. Fineberg's brain reeled. It was improbable that the millennium could have arrived with a jerk; on the other hand, he had distinctly heard one of his clerks complain that his salary was too large. He pinched

himself.

"Say that again," he said.

"If you could see your way to reduce it, sir----"

It occurred to Mr. Fineberg for one instant that his subordinate was endeavoring to be humorous, but a glance at Roland's face dispelled that idea.

"Why do you want it reduced?"

"Please, sir, I'm going to be married."

"What the deuce do you mean?"

"When my salary reaches a hundred and fifty, sir. And it's a hundred and forty now, so if you could see your way to knocking off ten pounds----"

Mr. Fineberg saw light. He was a married man himself.

"My boy," he said genially, "I quite understand. But I can do you better than that. It's no use doing this sort of thing in a small way. From now on your salary is a hundred and ten. No, no, don't thank me. You're an excellent clerk, and it's a pleasure to me to reward merit when I find it. Close the door after you."

And Mr. Fineberg returned with a lighter heart to the great clover-seed problem.

The circumstances which had led Roland to approach his employer may be briefly recounted. Since joining the staff of Mr. Fineberg, he had lodged at the house of a Mr. Coppin, in honorable employment as porter at the local railway-station. The Coppin family, excluding domestic pets, consisted of Mr. Coppin, a kindly and garrulous gentleman of sixty, Mrs. Coppin, a somewhat negative personality, most of whose life was devoted to cooking and washing up in her underground lair, Brothers Frank and Percy, gentleman of leisure, popularly supposed to be engaged in the mysterious occupation known as "lookin' about for somethin'," and, lastly, Muriel.

For some months after his arrival, Muriel had been to Roland Bleke a mere automaton, a something outside himself that was made only for neatly-laid breakfast tables and silent removal of plates at dinner. Gradually, however, when his natural shyness was soothed by use sufficiently to enable him to look at her when she came into the room, he discovered that she was a strikingly pretty girl, bounded to the North by a mass of auburn hair and to the South by small and shapely feet. She also possessed what, we are informed--we are children in these matters ourselves--is known as the R. S. V. P. eye. This eye had met Roland's one evening, as he chumped his chop, and before he knew what he was doing he had remarked that it had been a fine day.

From that wonderful moment matters had developed at an incredible speed. Roland had a nice sense of the social proprieties, and he could not bring himself to ignore a girl with whom he had once exchanged easy conversation about the weather. Whenever she came to lay his table, he felt bound to say something. Not being an experienced gagger, he found it more and more difficult each evening to hit on something bright, until finally, from sheer lack of inspiration, he kissed her.

If matters had progressed rapidly before, they went like lightning then. It was as if he had touched a spring or pressed a button, setting vast machinery in motion. Even as he reeled back stunned at his audacity, the room became suddenly full of Coppins of every variety known to science. Through a mist he was aware of Mrs. Coppin crying in a corner, of Mr. Coppin drinking his health in the remains of sparkling limado, of Brothers Frank and Percy, one on each side trying to borrow simultaneously half-crowns, and of Muriel, flushed but demure, making bread-pellets and throwing them in an abstracted way, one by one, at the Coppin cat, which had wandered in on the chance of fish.

Out of the chaos, as he stood looking at them with his mouth open, came the word "bans," and smote him like a blast of East wind.

It is not necessary to trace in detail Roland's mental processes from that moment till the day when he applied to Mr. Fineberg for a reduction of salary. It is enough to say that for quite a month he was

extraordinarily happy. To a man who has had nothing to do with women, to be engaged is an intoxicating experience, and at first life was one long golden glow to Roland. Secretly, like all mild men, he had always nourished a desire to be esteemed a nut by his fellow men; and his engagement satisfied that desire. It was pleasant to hear Brothers Frank and Percy cough knowingly when he came in. It was pleasant to walk abroad with a girl like Muriel in the capacity of the accepted wooer. Above all, it was pleasant to sit holding Muriel's hand and watching the ill-concealed efforts of Mr. Albert Potter to hide his mortification. Albert was a mechanic in the motor-works round the corner, and hitherto Roland had always felt something of a worm in his presence. Albert was so infernally strong and silent and efficient. He could dissect a car and put it together again. He could drive through the thickest traffic. He could sit silent in company without having his silence attributed to shyness or imbecility. But--he could not get engaged to Muriel Coppin. That was reserved for Roland Bleke, the nut, the dasher, the young man of affairs. It was all very well being able to tell a spark-plug from a commutator at sight, but when it came to a contest in an affair of the heart with a man like Roland, Albert was in his proper place, third at the pole.

Probably, if he could have gone on merely being engaged, Roland would never have wearied of the experience. But the word marriage began to creep more and more into the family conversation, and suddenly panic descended upon Roland Bleke.

All his life he had had a horror of definite appointments. An invitation to tea a week ahead had been enough to poison life for him. He was one of those young men whose souls revolt at the thought of planning out any definite step. He could do things on the spur of the moment, but plans made him lose his nerve.

By the end of the month his whole being was crying out to him in agonized tones: "Get me out of this. Do anything you like, but get me out of this frightful marriage business."

If anything had been needed to emphasize his desire for freedom, the attitude of Frank and Percy would have supplied it. Every day they made it clearer that the man who married Muriel would be no stranger to them. It would be his pleasing task to support them, too, in the style to which they had become accustomed. They conveyed the idea that they went with Muriel as a sort of bonus.

* * * * *

The Coppin family were at high tea when Roland reached home. There was a general stir of interest as he entered the room, for it was known that he had left that morning with the intention of approaching Mr. Fineberg on the important matter of a rise in salary. Mr. Coppin removed his saucer of tea from his lips. Frank brushed the tail of a sardine from the corner of his mouth. Percy ate his haddock in an undertone. Albert Potter, who was present, glowered silently.

Roland shook his head with the nearest approach to gloom which his rejoicing heart would permit.

"I'm afraid I've bad news."

Mrs. Coppin burst into tears, her invariable practise in any crisis.

Albert Potter's face relaxed into something resembling a smile.

"He won't give you your raise?"

Roland sighed.

"He's reduced me."

"Reduced you!"

"Yes. Times are bad just at present, so he has had to lower me to a hundred and ten."

The collected jaws of the family fell as one jaw. Muriel herself seemed to be bearing the blow with fortitude, but the rest were stunned. Frank and Percy might have been posing for a picture of men who had lost their fountain pens.

Beneath the table the hand of Albert Potter found the hand of Muriel

Coppin, and held it; and Muriel, we regret to add, turned and bestowed upon Albert a half-smile of tender understanding.

"I suppose," said Roland, "we couldn't get married on a hundred and ten?"

"No," said Percy.

"No," said Frank.

"No," said Albert Potter.

They all spoke decidedly, but Albert the most decidedly of the three.

"Then," said Roland regretfully, "I'm afraid we must wait."

It seemed to be the general verdict that they must wait. Muriel said she thought they must wait. Albert Potter, whose opinion no one had asked, was quite certain that they must wait. Mrs. Coppin, between sobs, moaned that it would be best to wait. Frank and Percy, morosely devouring bread and jam, said they supposed they would have to wait. And, to end a painful scene, Roland drifted silently from the room, and went up-stairs to his own quarters.

There was a telegram on the mantel.

"Some fellows," he soliloquized happily, as he opened it, "wouldn't have been able to manage a little thing like that. They would have given themselves away. They would----"

The contents of the telegram demanded his attention.

For some time they conveyed nothing to him. The thing might have been written in Hindustani.

It would have been quite appropriate if it had been, for it was from the promoters of the Calcutta Sweep, and it informed him that, as the holder of ticket number 108,694, he had drawn Gelatine, and in recognition of this fact a check for five hundred pounds would be forwarded to him in due course.

* * * * *

Roland's first feeling was one of pure bewilderment. As far as he could recollect, he had never had any dealings whatsoever with these open-handed gentlemen. Then memory opened her flood-gates and swept him

back to a morning ages ago, so it seemed to him, when Mr. Fineberg's eldest son Ralph, passing through the office on his way to borrow money from his father, had offered him for ten shillings down a piece of cardboard, at the same time saying something about a sweep. Partly from a vague desire to keep in with the Fineberg clan, but principally

because it struck him as rather a doggish thing to do, Roland had passed over the ten shillings; and there, as far as he had known, the matter had ended.

And now, after all this time, that simple action had borne fruit in the shape of Gelatine and a check for five hundred pounds.

Roland's next emotion was triumph. The sudden entry of checks for five hundred pounds into a man's life is apt to produce this result.

For the space of some minutes he gloated; and then reaction set in. Five hundred pounds meant marriage with Muriel.

His brain worked quickly. He must conceal this thing. With trembling fingers he felt for his match-box, struck a match, and burnt the telegram to ashes. Then, feeling a little better, he sat down to think the whole matter over. His meditations brought a certain amount of balm. After all, he felt, the thing could quite easily be kept a secret. He would receive the check in due course, as stated, and he would bicycle over to the neighboring town of Lexington and start a bank-account with it. Nobody would know, and life would go on as before.

He went to bed, and slept peacefully.

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It was about a week after this that he was roused out of a deep sleep at eight o'clock in the morning to find his room full of Coppins. Mr. Coppin was there in a nightshirt and his official trousers. Mrs. Coppin was there, weeping softly in a brown dressing-gown. Modesty had apparently kept Muriel from the gathering, but brothers Frank and Percy stood at his bedside, shaking him by the shoulders and shouting. Mr. Coppin thrust a newspaper at him, as he sat up blinking.

These epic moments are best related swiftly. Roland took the paper, and the first thing that met his sleepy eye and effectually drove the sleep from it was this head-line:

ROMANCE OF THE CALCUTTA SWEEPSTAKES

And beneath it another in type almost as large as the first:

POOR CLERK WINS L40,000

His own name leaped at him from the printed page, and with it that of the faithful Gelatine.

Flight! That was the master-word which rang in Roland's brain as day followed day. The wild desire of the trapped animal to be anywhere except just where he was had come upon him. He was past the stage when conscience could have kept him to his obligations. He had ceased to think of anything or any one but himself. All he asked of Fate was to

remove him from Bury St. Edwards on any terms.

It may be that some inkling of his state of mind was wafted telepathically to Frank and Percy, for it can not be denied that their behavior at this juncture was more than a little reminiscent of the police force. Perhaps it was simply their natural anxiety to keep an eye on what they already considered their own private gold-mine that made them so adhesive. Certainly there was no hour of the day when one or the other was not in Roland's immediate neighborhood. Their vigilance even extended to the night hours, and once, when Roland, having tossed sleeplessly on his bed, got up at two in the morning, with the wild idea of stealing out of the house and walking to London, a door opened as he reached the top of the stairs, and a voice asked him what he thought he was doing. The statement that he was walking in his sleep was accepted, but coldly.

It was shortly after this that, having by dint of extraordinary strategy eluded the brothers and reached the railway-station, Roland, with his ticket to London in his pocket and the express already entering the station, was engaged in conversation by old Mr. Coppin, who appeared from nowhere to denounce the high cost of living in a speech that lasted until the tail-lights of the train had vanished and Brothers Frank and Percy arrived, panting.

A man has only a certain capacity for battling with Fate. After this last episode Roland gave in. Not even the exquisite agony of hearing

himself described in church as a bachelor of this parish, with the grim addition that this was for the second time of asking, could stir him to a fresh dash for liberty.

Altho the shadow of the future occupied Roland's mind almost to the exclusion of everything else, he was still capable of suffering a certain amount of additional torment from the present; and one of the things which made the present a source of misery to him was the fact that he was expected to behave more like a mad millionaire than a sober young man with a knowledge of the value of money. His mind, trained from infancy to a decent respect for the pence, had not yet adjusted itself to the possession of large means; and the open-handed role forced upon him by the family appalled him.

When the Coppins wanted anything, they asked for it; and it seemed to Roland that they wanted pretty nearly everything. If Mr. Coppin had reached his present age without the assistance of a gold watch, he might surely have struggled along to the end on gun-metal. In any case, a man of his years should have been thinking of higher things than mere gauds and trinkets. A like criticism applied to Mrs. Coppin's demand for a silk petticoat, which struck Roland as simply indecent. Frank and Percy took theirs mostly in specie. It was Muriel who struck the worst blow by insisting on a hired motor-car.

Roland hated motor-cars, especially when they were driven by Albert Potter, as this one was. Albert, that strong, silent man, had but one

way of expressing his emotions, namely to open the throttle and shave the paint off trolley-cars. Disappointed love was giving Albert a good deal of discomfort at this time, and he found it made him feel better to go round corners on two wheels. As Muriel sat next to him on these expeditions, Roland squashing into the tonneau with Frank and Percy, his torments were subtle. He was not given a chance to forget, and the only way in which he could obtain a momentary diminution of the agony was to increase the speed to sixty miles an hour.

It was in this fashion that they journeyed to the neighboring town of Lexington to see M. Etienne FERIAUD perform his feat of looping the loop in his aeroplane.

It was Brother Frank's idea that they should make up a party to go and see M. FERIAUD. Frank's was one of those generous, unspoiled natures which never grow blase at the sight of a fellow human taking a sporting chance at hara-kiri. He was a well-known figure at every wild animal exhibition within a radius of fifty miles, and M. FERIAUD drew him like a magnet.

"The blighter goes up," he explained, as he conducted the party into the arena, "and then he stands on his head and goes round in circles. I've seen pictures of it."

It appeared that M. FERIAUD did even more than this. Posters round the ground advertised the fact that, on receipt of five pounds, he would

take up a passenger with him. To date, however, there appeared to have been no rush on the part of the canny inhabitants of Lexington to avail themselves of this chance of a breath of fresh air. M. Feraud, a small man with a chubby and amiable face, wandered about signing picture cards and smoking a lighted cigaret, looking a little disappointed.

Albert Potter was scornful.

"Lot of rabbits," he said. "Where's their pluck? And I suppose they call themselves Englishmen. I'd go up precious quick if I had a five-pound note. Disgrace, I call it, letting a Frenchman have the laugh of us."

It was a long speech for Mr. Potter, and it drew a look of respectful tenderness from Muriel. "You're so brave, Mr. Potter," she said.

Whether it was the slight emphasis which she put on the first word, or whether it was sheer generosity that impelled him, one can not say; but Roland produced the required sum even while she spoke. He offered it to his rival.

Mr. Potter started, turned a little pale, then drew himself up and waved the note aside.

"I take no favors," he said with dignity.

There was a pause.

"Why don't you do it." said Albert, nastily. "Five pounds is nothing to you."

"Why should I?"

"Ah! Why should you?"

It would be useless to assert that Mr. Potter's tone was friendly. It stung Roland. It seemed to him that Muriel was looking at him in an unpleasantly contemptuous manner.

In some curious fashion, without doing anything to merit it, he had apparently become an object of scorn and derision to the party.

"All right, then, I will," he said suddenly.

"Easy enough to talk," said Albert.

Roland strode with a pale but determined face to the spot where M. Feraud, beaming politely, was signing a picture post-card.

Some feeling of compunction appeared to come to Muriel at the eleventh hour.

"Don't let him," she cried.

But Brother Frank was made of sterner stuff. This was precisely the sort of thing which, in his opinion, made for a jolly afternoon.

For years he had been waiting for something of this kind. He was experiencing that pleasant thrill which comes to a certain type of person when the victim of a murder in the morning paper is an acquaintance of theirs.

"What are you talking about?" he said. "There's no danger. At least, not much. He might easily come down all right. Besides, he wants to. What do you want to go interfering for?"

Roland returned. The negotiations with the bird-man had lasted a little longer than one would have expected. But then, of course, M. FERIAUD was a foreigner, and Roland's French was not fluent.

He took Muriel's hand.

"Good-by," he said.

He shook hands with the rest of the party, even with Albert Potter. It struck Frank that he was making too much fuss over a trifle--and, worse, delaying the start of the proceedings.

"What's it all about?" he demanded. "You go on as if we were never going

to see you again."

"You never know."

"It's as safe as being in bed."

"But still, in case we never meet again----"

"Oh, well," said Brother Frank, and took the outstretched hand.

* * * * *

The little party stood and watched as the aeroplane moved swiftly along the ground, rose, and soared into the air. Higher and higher it rose, till the features of the two occupants were almost invisible.

"Now," said Brother Frank. "Now watch. Now he's going to loop the loop."

But the wheels of the aeroplane still pointed to the ground. It grew smaller and smaller. It was a mere speck.

"What the dickens?"

Far away to the West something showed up against the blue of the sky--something that might have been a bird, a toy kite, or an aeroplane traveling rapidly into the sunset.

Four pairs of eyes followed it in rapt silence.