

Herbert Jenkins



*Bindle: Some
Chapters
in the Life
of Joseph Bindle*

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER I - THE BINDLES AT HOME

CHAPTER II - A NOCTURNAL ADVENTURE

CHAPTER III - THE HYPNOTIC FIASCO

CHAPTER IV -- THE HEARTYS AT HOME

CHAPTER V - BINDLE TRIES A CHANGE OF WORK

CHAPTER VI - THE HOTEL CORRIDOR

CHAPTER VII - BINDLE COMMITS AN INDISCRETION

CHAPTER VIII - THE GREAT CONSPIRACY

CHAPTER IX - THE TEMPERANCE FÊTE

CHAPTER X - MR. HEARTY PRAYS FOR BINDLE

CHAPTER XI - MR. HEARTY BECOMES EXTREMELY UNPOPULAR

CHAPTER XII - BINDLE AGREES TO BECOME A MILLIONAIRE

CHAPTER XIII - OXFORD'S WELCOME TO BINDLE

CHAPTER XIV - MR. HEARTY GIVES A PARTY

CHAPTER XV - BINDLE AND THE GERMAN MENACE

CHAPTER XVI - THE AMATEUR DETECTIVES

CHAPTER XVII - BINDLE MAKES A MISTAKE

CHAPTER XVIII - BINDLE ASSISTS IN AN ELOPEMENT

CHAPTER XIX - THE SCARLET HORSE COTERIE

CHAPTER XX - MILLIE LEAVES HOME

CHAPTER XXI - CONCLUSION

THE END

CHAPTER I - THE BINDLES AT HOME

Table of Contents

"Women," remarked Bindle, as he gazed reflectively into the tankard he had just drained, "women is all right if yer can keep 'em from marryin' yer."

"I don't 'old wiv women," growled Ginger, casting a malevolent glance at the Blue Boar's only barmaid, as she stood smirking at the other end of the long leaden counter. "Same as before," he added to the barman.

Joseph Bindle heaved a sign of contentment at the success of his rueful contemplation of the emptiness of his tankard.

"You're too late, ole sport," he remarked, as he sympathetically surveyed the unprepossessing features of his companion, where freckles rioted with spots in happy abandon. "You're too late, you wi' three babies 'fore you're twenty-five. Ginger, you're--"

"No, I ain't!", There was a note of savage menace in Ginger's voice that caused his companion to look at him curiously.

"Ain't wot?" questioned Bindle.

"I ain't wot you was goin' to say I was."

"'Ow jer know wot I was goin' to say?"

"Cos every stutterin' fool sez it; an' blimey I'm goin' to 'ammer the next, an' I don't want to 'ammer you, Joe."

Bindle pondered a moment, then a smile irradiated his features, developing into a broad grin.

"You're too touchy, Ginger. I wasn't goin' to say, 'Ginger, you're barmy.'" Ginger winced and clenched his fists. "I was

goin' to say, 'Ginger, you're no good at marriage wi'out tack. If yer 'ad more tack maybe yer wouldn't 'ave got married."

Ginger spat viciously in the direction of the spittoon, but his feelings were too strong for accurate aim.

"The parsons say as marriages is made in 'eaven," growled Ginger. "Why don't 'eaven feed the kids? That's wot I want to know."

Ginger was notorious among his mates for the gloomy view he took of life. No one had ever discovered in him enthusiasm for anything. If he went to a football match and the team he favoured were beaten, it was no more than he expected; if they were victorious his comment would be that they ought to have scored more goals. If the horse he backed won, he blamed fate because his stake was so small. The more beer he absorbed the more misanthropic he seemed to become.

"Funny coves, parsons," remarked Bindle conversationally; "not as I've anythink to say agin' religion, providin' it's kep' for Sundays and Good Fridays, an' don't get mixed up wi' the rest of the week."

He paused and lifted the newly-filled tankard to his lips. Presently he continued reminiscently:

"My father 'ad religion, and drunk 'isself to death 'keepin' the chill out.' Accordin' to 'im, if yer wanted to be 'appy in the next world yer 'ad to be a sort of 'alf fish in this. 'E could tell the tale, 'e could, and wot's more, 'e used to make us believe 'im" Bindle laughed at the recollection. "Two or three times a week 'e used to go to chapel to 'wash 'is sins away,' winter an' summer. The parson seemed to 'ave to wash the 'ole bloomin' lot of 'em, and my father never forgot to take

some think on 'is way 'ome to keep the chill out, 'e was that careful of 'isself.

"'My life is Gawd's,' 'e used to say, 'an' I must take care of wot is the Lord's.' There weren't no spots on my father. Why, 'e used to wet 'is 'air to prove 'e'd been 'mersed,' as 'e called it. You'd 'ave liked 'im, Ginger; 'e was a gloomy sort of cove, same as you."

Ginger muttered something inarticulate. And buried his freckles and spots in his tankard. Bindle carefully filled his short clay pipe and lit it with a care and precision more appropriate to a cigar.

"No," he continued, "I ain't no think agin' religion; it's the people wot goes in for it as does me. There's my brother-in-law, 'Earty by name, an' my missis--they must make 'eaven tired with their moanin'."

"Wot yer marry 'er for?" grumbled Ginger thickly, not with any show of interest, but as if to demonstrate that he was still awake.

"Ginger!" There was reproach in Bindle's voice. "Fancy you arstin' a silly question like that. Don't yer know as no man ever marries any woman? If 'e's nippy 'e gets orf the 'ook; if 'e ain't 'e's landed. You an' me wasn't nippy enough, ole son, an' 'ere we are."

"There's somethin' in that, mate." There was feeling in Ginger's voice and a momentary alertness in his eye.

"Well," continued Bindle, "once on the 'ook there's only one thing that'll save yer--tack."

"Or 'ammerin' 'er blue," interpolated Ginger viciously.

"I draws the line there; I don't 'old with 'ammerin' women. Yer can't 'ammer some think wot can't 'ammer back,

Ginger: that's for furriners. No, tack's the thing. Now take my missis. If yer back-answers 'er when she ain't feelin' chatty, you're as good as done. Wot I does is to keep quiet an' seem sorry, then she dries up. Arter a bit I'll whistle or 'um 'Gospel Bells' (that's 'er favourite 'ymn, Ginger) as if to meself. Then out I goes, an' when I gets 'ome to supper I takes in a tin o' salmon, an' it's all over till the next time. Wi' tack, Gospel Bells,' and a tin o' salmon yer can do a rare lot wi' women, Ginger."

"Wot jer do if yer couldn't whistle or 'um, and if salmon made yer ole woman sick, same as it does mine; wot jer do then?" Ginger thrust his head forward aggressively.

Bindle thought deeply for some moments, then with slow deliberation said:

"I think, Ginger, I'd kill a slop. They always 'angs yer for killin' slops."

There was a momentary silence, as both men drained their pewters, and a moment after they left the Blue Boar. They walked along, each deep in his own thoughts, in the direction of Hammersmith Church, where they parted, Bindle to proceed to Fulham and Ginger to Chiswick; each to the mate that had been thrust upon him by an indiscriminating fate.

Joseph Bindle was a little man, bald-headed, with a red nose, but he was possessed of a great heart, which no misfortune ever daunted. Two things in life he loved above all others, beer and humour (or, as he called it, his "little joke"); yet he permitted neither to interfere with the day's work, save under very exceptional circumstances. No one had ever seen him drunk. He had once explained to a mate

who urged upon him an extra glass, "I don't put more on me back than I can carry, an' I do ditto wi' me stomach."

Bindle was a journeyman furniture-remover by profession, and the life of a journeyman furniture-remover is fraught with many vicissitudes and hardships. As one of the profession once phrased it to Bindle, "If it wasn't for them bespattered quarter-days, there might be a livin' in it."

People, however, move at set periods, or, as Bindle put it, they "seems to take root as if they was bloomin' vegetables." The set periods are practically reduced to three, for few care to face the inconvenience of a Christmas move.

Once upon a time family removals were leisurely affairs, which the contractors took care to spread over many days; now, however, moving is a matter of contract, or, as Bindle himself expressed it, "Yer 'as to carry a bookcase under one arm, a spring-mattress under the other, a pianner on yer back, and then they wonders why yer ain't doin' somethink wi' yer teeth."

All these things conspired to make Bindle's living a precarious one. He was not lazy, and sought work assiduously. In his time he had undertaken many strange jobs, his intelligence and ready wit giving him an advantage over his competitors; but if his wit gained for him employment, his unconquerable desire to indulge in his "little jokes" almost as frequently lost it for him.

As the jobs became less frequent Mrs. Bindle waxed more eloquent. To her a man who was not working was "a brute" or a "lazy hound." She made no distinction between the willing and the unwilling, and she heaped the fire of her

burning reproaches upon the head of her luckless "man" whenever he was unable to furnish her with a full week's housekeeping.

Bindle was not lazy enough to be unpopular with his superiors, or sufficiently energetic to merit the contempt of his fellow-workers. He did his job in average time, and strove to preserve the middle course that should mean employment and pleasant associates.

"Lorst yer job?" was a frequent interrogation on the lips of Mrs. Bindle.

At first Bindle had striven to parry this inevitable question with a pleasantry; but he soon discovered that his wife was impervious to his most brilliant efforts, and he learned in time to shroud his degradation in an impenetrable veil of silence.

Only in the hour of prosperity would he preserve his verbal cheerfulness. "She thinks too much o' soap an' 'er soul to make an 'owlin' success o' marriage," he had once confided to a mate over a pint of beer. "A little dirt an' less religion might keep 'er out of 'eaven in the next world, but it 'ud keep me out of 'ell in this!"

Mrs. Bindle was obsessed with two ogres: Dirt and the Devil. Her cleanliness was the cleanliness that rendered domestic comfort impossible, just as her godliness was the godliness of suffering in this world and glory in the next.

Her faith was the faith of negation. The happiness to be enjoyed in the next world would be in direct ratio to the sacrifices made in this. Denying herself the things that her "carnal nature" cried out for, she was filled with an intense resentment that anyone else should continue to live in

obvious enjoyment of what she had resolutely put from her. Her only consolation was the triumph she was to enjoy in the next world, and she found no little comfort in the story of Dives and Lazarus.

The forgiveness of sins was a matter upon which she preserved an open mind. Her faith told her that they should be forgiven; but she felt something of the injustice of it all. That the sinner, who at the eleventh hour repenteth, should achieve Paradise in addition to having drunk deep of the cup of pleasure in this world, seemed to her unfair to the faithful.

To Mrs. Bindle the world was a miserable place; but, please God! it should be a clean place, as far as she had the power to make it clean.

When a woman sets out to be a reformer, she invariably begins upon her own men-folk. Mrs. Bindle had striven long and lugubriously to ensure Bindle's salvation, and when she had eventually discovered this to be impossible, she accepted him as her cross.

Whilst struggling for Bindle's salvation, Mrs. Bindle had not overlooked the more immediate needs of his body. For many weeks of their early married life a tin bath of hot water had been placed regularly in the kitchen each Friday night that Bindle might be thorough in his ablutions.

At first Mrs. Bindle had been surprised and gratified at the way in which Bindle had acquiesced in this weekly rite, but being shrewd and something of a student of character, particularly Bindle's character, her suspicions had been aroused.

One Friday evening she put the kitchen keyhole to an illicit use, and discovered Bindle industriously rubbing his hands on his boots, and, with much use of soap, washing them in the bath, after which he splashed the water about the room, damped the towels, then lit his pipe and proceeded to read the evening paper. That was the end of the bath episode.

It was not that Bindle objected to washing; as a matter of fact he was far more cleanly than most of his class; but to him Mrs. Bindle's methods savoured too much of coercion.

A great Frenchman has said, "Pour faire quelque chose de grande, il faut être passionné." In other words, no wanton sprite of mischief or humour must be permitted to beckon genius from its predestined path. Although an entire stranger to philosophy, ignorant alike of the word and its meaning, Mrs. Bindle had arrived at the same conclusion as the French savant.

"Why don't you stick at somethin' as if you meant it?" was her way of phrasing it. "Look at Mr. Hearty. See what he's done!" Without any thought of irreverence, Mrs. Bindle used the names of the Lord and Mr. Hearty as whips of scorpions with which on occasion she mercilessly scourged her husband.

At the time of Bindle's encounter with his one-time work-mate, Ginger, he had been tramping for hours seeking a job. He had gone even to the length of answering an advertisement for a waitress, explaining to the irritated advertiser that "wi' women it was the customers as did the waitin'," and that a man was "more nippy than a gal."

Ginger's hospitality had cheered him, and he began to regard life once more with his accustomed optimism. He had been without food all day, and this fact, rather than the continued rebuffs he had suffered, caused him some misgiving as the hour approached for his return to home and Mrs. Bindle's inevitable question, "Got a job?"

As he passed along the Fulham Palace Road his keen eye searched everywhere for interest and amusement. He winked jocosely at the pretty girls, and grinned happily when called a "saucy 'ound." He exchanged pleasantries with anyone who showed the least inclination towards camaraderie, and the dour he silenced with caustic rejoinder.

Bindle's views upon the home life of England were not orthodox.

"I'd like to meet the cove wot first started talkin' about the 'appy 'ome life of ole England,'" he murmured under his breath. "I'd like to introduce 'im to Mrs. B. Might sort o' wake 'im up a bit, an' make 'im want t' emigrate. I'd like to see 'im gettin' away wi'out a scrap. Rummy thing, 'ome life."

His philosophy was to enjoy what you've got, and not to bother about what you hope to get. He had once precipitated a domestic storm by saying to Mrs. Bindle:

"Don't you put all yer money on the next world, in case of accidents. Angels is funny things, and they might sort of take a dislike to yer, and then the fat 'ud be in the fire." Then, critically surveying Mrs. Bindle's manifest leanness, "Not as you an' me together 'ud make much of a flicker in 'ell."

As he approached Fenton Street, where he lived, his leisurely pace perceptibly slackened. It was true that supper awaited him at the end of his journey--that was with luck; but, luck or no luck, Mrs. Bindle was inevitable.

"Funny 'ow 'avin' a wife seems to spoil yer appetite," he muttered, as he scratched his head through the blue-and-white cricket cap he invariably wore, where the four triangles of alternating white and Cambridge blue had lost much of their original delicacy of shade.

"I'm 'ungry, 'ungry as an 'awk," he continued; then after a pause he added, "I wonder whether 'awks marry." The idea seemed to amuse him. "Well, well!" he remarked with a sigh, "yer got to face it, Joe," and pulling himself together he mended his pace.

As he had foreseen, Mrs. Bindle was keenly on the alert for the sound of his key in the lock of the outer door of their half-house. He had scarcely realised that the evening meal was to consist of something stewed with his much-loved onions, when Mrs. Bindle's voice was heard from the kitchen with the time-worn question:

"Got a job?"

Hunger, and the smell of his favourite vegetable, made him a coward.

"'Ow jer know, Fairy?" he asked with crude facetiousness.

"What is it?" enquired Mrs. Bindle shrewdly as he entered the kitchen.

"Night watchman at a garridge," he lied glibly, and removed his coat preparatory to what he called a "rinse" at the sink. It always pleased Mrs. Bindle to see Bindle wash;

even such a perfunctory effort as a "rinse" was a tribute to her efforts.

"When d'you start?" she asked suspiciously.

How persistent women were! thought Bindle.

"To-night at nine," he replied. Nothing mattered with that savoury smell in his nostrils.

Mrs. Bindle was pacified; but her emotions were confidential affairs between herself and "the Lord," and she consequently preserved the same unrelenting exterior.

"'Bout time, I should think," she snapped ungraciously, and proceeded with her culinary preparations. Mrs. Bindle was an excellent cook. "If 'er temper was like 'er cookin'," Bindle had confided to Mrs. Hearty, "life 'ud be a little bit of 'eaven."

Fenton Street, in which the Bindles lived, was an offering to the Moloch of British exclusiveness. The houses consisted of two floors, and each floor had a separate outer door and a narrow passage from which opened off a parlour, a bedroom, and a kitchen. Although each household was cut off from the sight of its immediate neighbours, there was not a resident, save those who occupied the end houses, who was not intimately acquainted with the private affairs of at least three of its neighbours, those above or below, as the case might be, and of the family on each side. The walls and floors were so thin that, when the least emotion set the voices of the occupants vibrating in a louder key than usual, the neighbours knew of the crisis as soon as the protagonists themselves, and every aspect of the dispute or discussion was soon the common property of the whole street.

Fenton Street suited Mrs. Bindle, who was intensely exclusive. She never joined the groups of women who stood each morning, and many afternoons, at their front doors to discuss the thousand and one things that women have to discuss. She occupied herself with her home, hounding from its hiding-place each speck of dust and microbe as if it were an embodiment of the Devil himself.

She was a woman of narrow outlook and prejudiced views, hating sin from a sense of fear of what it might entail rather than as a result of instinctive repulsion; yet she was possessed of many admirable qualities. She worked long and hard in her home, did her duty to her husband in mending his clothes, preparing his food, and providing him with what she termed "a comfortable home."

Next to chapel her supreme joy in life was her parlour, a mid-Victorian riot of antimacassars, stools, furniture, photograph-frames, pictures, ornaments, and the musical-box that would not play, but was precious as Aunt Anne's legacy. Bindle was wont to say that "when yer goes into our parlour yer wants a map an' a guide, an' even then yer 'as to call for 'elp before yer can get out."

Mrs. Bindle had no visitors, and consequently her domestic holy of holies was never used. She would dust and clean and arrange; arrange, clean, and dust with untiring zeal. The windows, although never opened, were spotless; for she judged a woman's whole character by the appearance of her windows and curtains. No religieuse ever devoted more time or thought to a chapel or an altar than Mrs. Bindle to her parlour: She might have reconciled herself

to leaving anything else in the world, but her parlour would have held her a helpless prisoner.

When everything was ready for the meal Mrs. Bindle poured from a saucepan a red-brown liquid with cubes of a darker brown, which splashed joyously into the dish. Bindle recognised it as stewed steak and onions, the culinary joy of his heart.

With great appetite he fell to, almost thankful to Providence for sending him so excellent a cook. As he ate he argued that if a man had an angel for a wife, in all likelihood she would not be able to cook, and perhaps after all he was not so badly off.

"There ain't many as can beat yer at this 'ere game," remarked Bindle, indicating the dish with his fork; and a momentary flicker that might have been a smile still-born passed across Mrs. Bindle's face.

As the meal progressed Bindle began to see the folly of his cowardice. He had doomed himself to a night's walking the streets. He cudgelled his brains how to avoid the consequences of his indiscretion. He looked covertly at Mrs. Bindle. There was nothing in the sharp hatchet-like face, with its sandy hair drawn tightly away from each side and screwed into a knot behind, that suggested compromise. Nor was there any suggestion of a relenting nature in that hard grey line that served her as a mouth.

No, there was nothing for it but to "carry the banner," unless he could raise sufficient money to pay for a night's lodging.

"Saw Ginger to-day," he remarked conversationally, as he removed a shred of meat from a back tooth with his fork.

"Don't talk to me of Ginger!" snapped Mrs. Bindle.

Such retorts made conversation difficult.

It was Mrs. Bindle's question as to whether he did not think it about time he started that gave Bindle the inspiration he sought. For more than a week the one clock of the household, a dainty little travelling affair that he had purchased of a fellow-workman, it having "sort o' got lost" in a move, had stopped and showed itself impervious to all persuasion. Bindle decided to take it, ostensibly to a clock-repairer, but in reality to the pawn-shop, and thus raise the price of a night's lodging. He would trust to luck to supply the funds to retrieve it.

With a word of explanation to Mrs. Bindle, he proceeded to wrap up the clock in a piece of newspaper, and prepared to go out.

To Bindle the moment of departure was always fraught with the greatest danger. His goings-out became strategical withdrawals, he endeavouring to get off unnoticed, Mrs. Bindle striving to rake him with her verbal artillery as he retreated.

On this particular evening he felt comparatively safe. He was, as far as Mrs. Bindle knew, going to "a job," and, what was more, he was taking the clock to be repaired. He sidled tactically along the wall towards the door, as if keenly interested in getting his pipe to draw. Mrs. Bindle opened fire.

"How long's your job for?" She turned round in the act of wiping out a saucepan.

"Only tonight," replied Bindle somewhat lamely. He was afraid of where further romancing might lead him.

"Call that a job?" she enquired scornfully. "How long am I to go on keepin' you in idleness?" Mrs. Bindle cleaned the Alton Road Chapel, where she likewise worshipped, and to this she referred.

"I'll get another job tomorrow; don't be down'earted," Bindle replied cheerfully.

"Down'earted! Y' ought to be ashamed o' yerself," exploded Mrs. Bindle, as she banged the saucepan upon its shelf and seized a broom. Bindle regarded her with expressionless face. "Y' ought to be ashamed o' yerself, yer great hulkin' brute."

At one time Bindle, who was well below medium height and average weight, had grinned appreciatively at this description; but it had a little lost its savour by repetition.

"Call yerself a man!" she continued, her sharp voice rising in volume and key. "Leavin' me to keep the sticks together,--me, a woman too, a-keepin' you in idleness! Why, I'd steal 'fore I'd do that, that I would."

She made vigorous use of the broom. Her anger invariably manifested itself in dust, a momentary forgetfulness of her religious convictions, and a lapse into the Doric. As a rule she was careful and mincing in her speech, but anger opened the flood-gates of her vocabulary, and words rushed forth bruised and decapitated.

With philosophic self-effacement Bindle covered the few feet between him and the door and vanished. He was a philosopher and, like Socrates, he bowed to the whirlwind of his wife's wrath. Conscious of having done everything humanly possible to obtain work, he faced the world with unruffled calm.

Mrs. Bindle's careless words, however, sank deeply into his mind. Steal! Well, he had no very strongly-grounded objection, provided he were not caught at it. Steal! The word seemed to open up new possibilities for him. The thing was, how should he begin? He might seize a leg of mutton from a butcher's shop and run; but then Nature had not intended him for a runner. He might smash a jeweller's window, pick a pocket, or snatch a handbag; but in all these adventures fleetness of foot seemed essential.

Crime seemed obviously for the sprinter. To become a burglar required experience and tools, and Bindle possessed neither. Besides, burgling involved more risks than he cared to take.

Had he paused to think, Bindle would have seen that stealing was crime; but his incurable love of adventure blinded him to all else.

"Funny thing," he mumbled as he walked down Fenton Street. "Funny thing, a daughter o' the Lord wantin' me to steal. Wonder wot ole 'Earty 'ud say."

CHAPTER II - A NOCTURNAL ADVENTURE

Table of Contents

I

Having exchanged the clock for seven shillings and badly beaten the pawnbroker's assistant in a verbal duel, Bindle strolled along towards Walham Green in the happiest frame of mind.

The night was young, it was barely nine o'clock, and his whole being yearned for some adventure. He was still preoccupied with the subject of larceny. His wits, Bindle argued, were of little or no use in the furniture-removing business, where mediocrity formed the standard of excellence. There would never be a Napoleon of furniture-removers, but there had been several Napoleons of crime. If a man were endowed with genius, he should also be supplied with a reasonable outlet for it.

Walking meditatively along the North End Road, he was awakened to realities by his foot suddenly striking against something that jingled. He stooped and picked up two keys attached to a ring, which he swiftly transferred to one of his pockets, and passed on. Someone might be watching him.

Two minutes later he drew forth his find for examination. Attached to the ring was a metal tablet, upon which were engraved the words: "These keys are the property of Professor Sylvanus Conti, 13 Audrey Mansions, Queen's Club, West Kensington, W. Reward for their return, 2s. 6d."

The keys were obviously those of the outer door of a block of mansions and the door of a flat. If they were

returned, the reward was two shillings and sixpence, which would bring up the day's takings to nine shillings and sixpence. If, on the other hand, the keys were retained for the purpose of--

At that moment Bindle's eye caught sight of a ticket upon a stall littered with old locks and keys, above which blazed and spluttered a paraffin torch. "Keys cut while you wait," it announced. Without a moment's hesitation he slipped the two keys from their ring and held them out to the proprietor of the stall.

"'Ow much to make two like 'em, mate?" he enquired. The man took the keys, examined them for a moment, and replied:

"One an' thruppence from you, capt'in."

"Well, think o' me as a pretty girl an' say a bob, an' it's done," replied Bindle.

The man regarded him with elaborate gravity for a few moments. "If yer turn yer face away I'll try," he replied, and proceeded to fashion the duplicates.

Meanwhile Bindle deliberated. If he retained the keys there would be suspicion at the flats, and perhaps locks would be changed; if, on the other hand, the keys were returned immediately, the owner would trouble himself no further.

At this juncture he was not very clear as to what he intended to do. He was still undecided when the four keys were handed to him in return for a shilling.

The mind of Joseph Bindle invariably responded best to the ministrations of beer, and when, half an hour later, he left the bar of the Purple Goat, his plans were formed, and

his mind made up. He vaguely saw the hand of Providence in this discovery of Professor Conti's keys, and he was determined that Providence should not be disappointed in him, Joseph Bindle.

First he bought a cheap electric torch, guaranteed for twelve or twenty-four hours--the shopkeeper was not quite certain which. Then, proceeding to a chemist's shop, he purchased a roll of medical bandaging. With this he retired up a side street and proceeded to swathe his head and the greater part of his face, leaving only his eyes, nose, and mouth visible. Drawing his cap carefully over the bandages, he returned to the highway, first having improvised the remainder of the bandaging into an informal sling for his left arm. Not even Mrs. Bindle herself would have recognised him, so complete was the disguise.

Ten minutes later he was at Audrey Mansions. No one was visible, and with great swiftness and dexterity he tried the duplicate keys in the open outer door. One fitted perfectly. Mounting to the third floor, he inserted the other in the door of No. 13. The lock turned easily. Quite satisfied, he replaced them in his pocket and rang the bell. There was no answer. He rang again, and a third time, but without result.

"Does 'is own charin'," murmured Bindle laconically, and descended to the ground floor, where he rang the porter's bell, with the result that the keys were faithfully redeemed.

Bindle left the porter in a state of suppressed excitement over a vivid and circumstantial account of a terrible collision that had just taken place in the neighbourhood, between a motorbus and a fire-engine, resulting in eleven deaths,

including three firemen, whilst thirty people had been seriously injured, including six firemen. He himself had been on the front seat of the motor-bus and had escaped with a broken head and a badly-cut hand.

II

Professor Conti did not discover his loss until the porter handed him his keys, enquiring at the same time if the Professor had heard anything of the terrible collision between the motor-bus and fire-engine. The Professor had not. He mounted to his flat with heavy steps. He was tired and dispirited. In his bedroom he surveyed himself mournfully in the mirror as he undid the buckle of his ready-made evening-tie, which he placed carefully in the green cardboard box upon the dressing-table. In these days a tie had to last the week, aided by the application of French chalk to the salient folds and corners.

Professor Sylvanus Conti, who had been known to his mother, Mrs. Wilkins, as Willie, emphasised in feature and speech his cockney origin. He was of medium height, with a sallow complexion--not the sallowness of the sun-baked plains of Italy, but rather that of Bermondsey or Bow.

He had been a brave little man in his fight with adverse conditions. Years before, chance had thrown across his path a doctor whose hypnotic powers had been his ruin. Willie Wilkins had shown himself an apt pupil, and there opened out to his vision a great and glorious prospect.

First he courted science; but she had proved a fickle jade, and he was forced to become an entertainer, much against his inclination. In time the name of Professor Sylvanus Conti

came to be known at most of the second-rate music halls as "a good hypnotic turn"--to use the professional phraseology.

One consolation he had--he never descended to tricks. If he were unable to place a subject under control, he stated so frankly. He was scientific, and believed in his own powers as he believed in nothing else on earth.

He had achieved some sort of success. It was not what he had hoped for; still, it was a living. It gave him food and raiment and a small bachelor flat--he was a bachelor, all self-made men are--in a spot that was Kensington, albeit West Kensington.

The Professor continued mechanically to prepare himself for the night. He oiled his dark hair, brushed his black moustache, donned his long nightshirt, and finally lit a cigarette. He was thinking deeply. His dark, cunning little eyes flashed angrily. A cynical smile played about the corners of his mouth, half hidden by the bristly black moustache.

Only that evening he had heard that his rival, Mr. John Gibson, the English Mesmerist, had secured a contract to appear at some syndicate halls that had hitherto engaged only him.

This man Gibson had been dogging Conti for months past. The barefaced effrontery of the fellow added fuel to the fire of his rival's anger. To use an English name for a hypnotic turn upon the English music-hall stage! He should have known that hypnotism, like the equestrian and dressmaking arts, is continental, without exception or qualification. Yet this man, John Gibson, "the English Mesmerist," had dared to enter into competition with him,

Professor Sylvanus Conti. Gibson descended to tricks, which placed him beyond the pale of science. He had confederates who, as "gentlemen among the audience," did weird and marvellous things, all to the glory of "the English Mesmerist."

Still brooding upon a rather ominous future, the Professor wound his watch--a fine gold hunter that had been presented to him three years previously by "A few friends and admirers"--and placed it upon the small table by his bedside, together with his money and other valuables; then, carefully extinguishing his half-smoked cigarette, he got into bed. It was late, and he was tired. A sense of injustice was insufficient to keep him awake for long, and, switching off the electric light, he was soon asleep.

From a dream in which he had just discomfited his rival, "the English Mesmerist," by placing under control an elephant, Professor Conti awakened with a start. He intuitively knew that there was someone in the room. Lying perfectly still, he listened. Suddenly his blood froze with horror. A tiny disc of light played round the room and finally rested upon the small table beside him. A moment later he heard a faint sound as of two substances coming into contact. Instinctively he knew it to be caused by his watch-chain tinkling against his ash-tray.

He broke out into a cold sweat. Moist with fear, he reviewed the situation. A burglar was in the room, taking his--the Professor's-- presentation watch and chain. The thought of losing these, his greatest treasures, awakened in his mind the realisation that he must act, and act speedily. With a slow, deliberate movement he worked his right hand

up to the pillow, beneath which he always kept a revolver. It seemed an eternity before he felt the comforting touch of cold metal. He withdrew the weapon with deliberate caution.

The sound of someone tiptoeing about the room continued--soft, stealthy movements that, however, no longer possessed for him any terror. A fury of anger, a species of blood-lust gripped him. Someone had dared to break into his flat. The situation became intolerable. With one swift movement he sat up, switched on the electric light, and cocked his revolver.

An inarticulate sound, half-cry, half-grumble, came from the corner by the chest of drawers. The back of the head, looking curiously like a monkish crown, flashed into a face, swathed in what appeared to be medical bandages, through which was to be seen a pair of eyes in which there was obvious terror. It was Bindle.

"Hands up, or I shoot! Up, I say.",

Up went Bindle's hands.

The Professor did not recognise his own voice. Suddenly he laughed. The ludicrous expression in Bindle's eyes, the unnatural position in which he crouched, his having caught a burglar red-handed--it was all so ridiculous.

Then there came the triumphant sense of victory. The Professor was calm and collected now, as if the discovery of a burglar in his bedroom were a thing of nightly occurrence. There seemed nothing strange in the situation. The things to be done presented themselves in obvious and logical sequence. He was conscious of the dramatic possibilities of the situation.