
MARIE BELLOC LOWNDES
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CHAPTER XXVII

CHAPTER I

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Robert Bunting and Ellen his wife sat before their dully burning, carefully-banked-up fire.

The room, especially when it be known that it was part of a house standing in a grimy, if not exactly sordid, London thoroughfare, was exceptionally clean and well-cared-for. A casual stranger, more particularly one of a Superior class to their own, on suddenly opening the door of that sitting-room; would have thought that Mr. and Mrs. Bunting presented a very pleasant cosy picture of comfortable married life. Bunting, who was leaning back in a deep leather arm-chair, was clean-shaven and dapper, still in appearance what he had been for many years of his life—a self-respecting man-servant.

On his wife, now sitting up in an uncomfortable straight-backed chair, the marks of past servitude were less apparent; but they were there all the same—in her neat black stuff dress, and in her scrupulously clean, plain collar and cuffs. Mrs. Bunting, as a single woman, had been what is known as a useful maid.

But peculiarly true of average English life is the time-worn English proverb as to appearances being deceitful. Mr. and Mrs. Bunting were sitting in a very nice room and in their time—how long ago it now seemed!—both husband and wife had been proud of their carefully chosen

belongings. Everything in the room was strong and substantial, and each article of furniture had been bought at a well-conducted auction held in a private house.

Thus the red damask curtains which now shut out the fog-laden, drizzling atmosphere of the Marylebone Road, had cost a mere song, and yet they might have been warranted to last another thirty years. A great bargain also had been the excellent Axminster carpet which covered the floor; as, again, the arm-chair in which Bunting now sat forward, staring into the dull, small fire. In fact, that arm-chair had been an extravagance of Mrs. Bunting. She had wanted her husband to be comfortable after the day's work was done, and she had paid thirty-seven shillings for the chair. Only yesterday Bunting had tried to find a purchaser for it, but the man who had come to look at it, guessing their cruel necessities, had only offered them twelve shillings and sixpence for it; so for the present they were keeping their arm-chair.

But man and woman want something more than mere material comfort, much as that is valued by the Buntings of this world. So, on the walls of the sitting-room, hung neatly framed if now rather faded photographs—photographs of Mr. and Mrs. Bunting's various former employers, and of the pretty country houses in which they had separately lived during the long years they had spent in a not unhappy servitude.

But appearances were not only deceitful, they were more than usually deceitful with regard to these unfortunate people. In spite of their good furniture—that substantial outward sign of respectability which is the last thing which

wise folk who fall into trouble try to dispose of—they were almost at the end of their tether. Already they had learnt to go hungry, and they were beginning to learn to go cold. Tobacco, the last thing the sober man foregoes among his comforts, had been given up some time ago by Bunting. And even Mrs. Bunting—prim, prudent, careful woman as she was in her way—had realised what this must mean to him. So well, indeed, had she understood that some days back she had crept out and bought him a packet of Virginia.

Bunting had been touched—touched as he had not been for years by any woman's thought and love for him. Painful tears had forced themselves into his eyes, and husband and wife had both felt in their odd, unemotional way, moved to the heart.

Fortunately he never guessed—how could he have guessed, with his slow, normal, rather dull mind?—that his poor Ellen had since more than once bitterly regretted that fourpence-ha'penny, for they were now very near the soundless depths which divide those who dwell on the safe tableland of security—those, that is, who are sure of making a respectable, if not a happy, living—and the submerged multitude who, through some lack in themselves, or owing to the conditions under which our strange civilisation has become organised, struggle rudderless till they die in workhouse, hospital, or prison.

Had the Buntings been in a class lower than their own, had they belonged to the great company of human beings technically known to so many of us as the poor, there would have been friendly neighbours ready to help them, and the same would have been the case had they belonged to the

class of smug, well-meaning, if unimaginative, folk whom they had spent so much of their lives in serving.

There was only one person in the world who might possibly be brought to help them. That was an aunt of Bunting's first wife. With this woman, the widow of a man who had been well-to-do, lived Daisy, Bunting's only child by his first wife, and during the last long two days he had been trying to make up his mind to write to the old lady, and that though he suspected that she would almost certainly retort with a cruel, sharp rebuff.

As to their few acquaintances, former fellow-servants, and so on, they had gradually fallen out of touch with them. There was but one friend who often came to see them in their deep trouble. This was a young fellow named Chandler, under whose grandfather Bunting had been footman years and years ago. Joe Chandler had never gone into service; he was attached to the police; in fact not to put too fine a point upon it, young Chandler was a detective.

When they had first taken the house which had brought them, so they both thought, such bad luck, Bunting had encouraged the young chap to come often, for his tales were well worth listening to—quite exciting at times. But now poor Bunting didn't want to hear that sort of stories—stories of people being cleverly "nabbed," or stupidly allowed to escape the fate they always, from Chandler's point of view, richly deserved.

But Joe still came very faithfully once or twice a week, so timing his calls that neither host nor hostess need press food upon him —nay, more, he had done that which showed him to have a good and feeling heart. He had offered his

father's old acquaintance a loan, and Bunting, at last, had taken 30s. Very little of that money now remained: Bunting still could jingle a few coppers in his pocket; and Mrs. Bunting had 2s. 9d.; that and the rent they would have to pay in five weeks, was all they had left. Everything of the light, portable sort that would fetch money had been sold. Mrs. Bunting had a fierce horror of the pawnshop. She had never put her feet in such a place, and she declared she never would—she would rather starve first.

But she had said nothing when there had occurred the gradual disappearance of various little possessions she knew that Bunting valued, notably of the old-fashioned gold watch-chain which had been given to him after the death of his first master, a master he had nursed faithfully and kindly through a long and terrible illness. There had also vanished a twisted gold tie-pin, and a large mourning ring, both gifts of former employers.

When people are living near that deep pit which divides the secure from the insecure—when they see themselves creeping closer and closer to its dread edge—they are apt, however loquacious by nature, to fall into long silences. Bunting had always been a talker, but now he talked no more. Neither did Mrs. Bunting, but then she had always been a silent woman, and that was perhaps one reason why Bunting had felt drawn to her from the very first moment he had seen her.

It had fallen out in this way. A lady had just engaged him as butler, and he had been shown, by the man whose place he was to take, into the dining-room. There, to use his own expression, he had discovered Ellen Green, carefully pouring

out the glass of port wine which her then mistress always drank at 11.30 every morning. And as he, the new butler, had seen her engaged in this task, as he had watched her carefully stopper the decanter and put it back into the old wine-cooler, he had said to himself, "That is the woman for me!"

But now her stillness, her—her dumbness, had got on the unfortunate man's nerves. He no longer felt like going into the various little shops, close by, patronised by him in more prosperous days, and Mrs. Bunting also went afield to make the slender purchases which still had to be made every day or two, if they were to be saved from actually starving to death.

Suddenly, across the stillness of the dark November evening there came the muffled sounds of hurrying feet and of loud, shrill shouting outside—boys crying the late afternoon editions of the evening papers.

Bunting turned uneasily in his chair. The giving up of a daily paper had been, after his tobacco, his bitterest deprivation. And the paper was an older habit than the tobacco, for servants are great readers of newspapers.

As the shouts came through the closed windows and the thick damask curtains, Bunting felt a sudden sense of mind hunger fall upon him.

It was a shame—a damned shame—that he shouldn't know what was happening in the world outside! Only criminals are kept from hearing news of what is going on beyond their prison walls. And those shouts, those hoarse, sharp cries must portend that something really exciting had

happened, something warranted to make a man forget for the moment his own intimate, gnawing troubles.

He got up, and going towards the nearest window strained his ears to listen. There fell on them, emerging now and again from the confused babel of hoarse shouts, the one clear word "Murder!"

Slowly Bunting's brain pieced the loud, indistinct cries into some sort of connected order. Yes, that was it —"Horrible Murder! Murder at St. Pancras!" Bunting remembered vaguely another murder which had been committed near St. Pancras—that of an old lady by her servant-maid. It had happened a great many years ago, but was still vividly remembered, as of special and natural interest, among the class to which he had belonged.

The newsboys—for there were more than one of them, a rather unusual thing in the Marylebone Road—were coming nearer and nearer; now they had adopted another cry, but he could not quite catch what they were crying. They were still shouting hoarsely, excitedly, but he could only hear a word or two now and then. Suddenly "The Avenger! The Avenger at his work again!" broke on his ear.

During the last fortnight four very curious and brutal murders had been committed in London and within a comparatively small area.

The first had aroused no special interest—even the second had only been awarded, in the paper Bunting was still then taking in, quite a small paragraph.

Then had come the third—and with that a wave of keen excitement, for pinned to the dress of the victim—a drunken woman—had been found a three-cornered piece of paper,

on which was written, in red ink, and in printed characters, the words,

"THE AVENGER"

It was then realised, not only by those whose business it is to investigate such terrible happenings, but also by the vast world of men and women who take an intelligent interest in such sinister mysteries, that the same miscreant had committed all three crimes; and before that extraordinary fact had had time to soak well into the public mind there took place yet another murder, and again the murderer had been to special pains to make it clear that some obscure and terrible lust for vengeance possessed him.

Now everyone was talking of The Avenger and his crimes! Even the man who left their ha'porth of milk at the door each morning had spoken to Bunting about them that very day.

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Bunting came back to the fire and looked down at his wife with mild excitement. Then, seeing her pale, apathetic face, her look of weary, mournful absorption, a wave of irritation swept through him. He felt he could have shaken her!

Ellen had hardly taken the trouble to listen when he, Bunting, had come back to bed that morning, and told her what the milkman had said. In fact, she had been quite nasty about it, intimating that she didn't like hearing about such horrid things.

It was a curious fact that though Mrs. Bunting enjoyed tales of pathos and sentiment, and would listen with frigid amusement to the details of a breach of promise action, she shrank from stories of immorality or of physical violence. In the old, happy days, when they could afford to buy a paper, aye, and more than one paper daily, Bunting had often had to choke down his interest in some exciting "case" or "mystery" which was affording him pleasant mental relaxation, because any allusion to it sharply angered Ellen.

But now he was at once too dull and too miserable to care how she felt.

Walking away from the window he took a slow, uncertain step towards the door; when there he turned half round, and there came over his close-shaven, round face the rather sly, pleading look with which a child about to do something naughty glances at its parent.

But Mrs. Bunting remained quite still; her thin, narrow shoulders just showed above the back of the chair on which she was sitting, bolt upright, staring before her as if into vacancy.

Bunting turned round, opened the door, and quickly he went out into the dark hall—they had given up lighting the gas there some time ago—and opened the front door.

Walking down the small flagged path outside, he flung open the iron gate which gave on to the damp pavement. But there he hesitated. The coppers in his pocket seemed to have shrunk in number, and he remembered ruefully how far Ellen could make even four pennies go.

Then a boy ran up to him with a sheaf of evening papers, and Bunting, being sorely tempted—fell. "Give me a Sun,"

he said roughly, "Sun or Echo!"

But the boy, scarcely stopping to take breath, shook his head. "Only penny papers left," he gasped. "What'll yer 'ave, sir?"

With an eagerness which was mingled with shame, Bunting drew a penny out of his pocket and took a paper—it was the Evening Standard— from the boy's hand.

Then, very slowly, he shut the gate and walked back through the raw, cold air, up the flagged path, shivering yet full of eager, joyful anticipation.

Thanks to that penny he had just spent so recklessly he would pass a happy hour, taken, for once, out of his anxious, despondent, miserable self. It irritated him shrewdly to know that these moments of respite from carking care would not be shared with his poor wife, with careworn, troubled Ellen.

A hot wave of unease, almost of remorse, swept over Bunting. Ellen would never have spent that penny on herself—he knew that well enough—and if it hadn't been so cold, so foggy, so—so drizzly, he would have gone out again through the gate and stood under the street lamp to take his pleasure. He dreaded with a nervous dread the glance of Ellen's cold, reproving light-blue eye. That glance would tell him that he had had no business to waste a penny on a paper, and that well he knew it!

Suddenly the door in front of him opened, and he beard a familiar voice saying crossly, yet anxiously, "What on earth are you doing out there, Bunting? Come in—do! You'll catch your death of cold! I don't want to have you ill on my hands

as well as everything else!" Mrs. Bunting rarely uttered so many words at once nowadays.

He walked in through the front door of his cheerless house. "I went out to get a paper," he said sullenly.

After all, he was master. He had as much right to spend the money as she had; for the matter of that the money on which they were now both living had been lent, nay, pressed on him—not on Ellen—by that decent young chap, Joe Chandler. And he, Bunting, had done all he could; he had pawned everything he could pawn, while Ellen, so he resentfully noticed, still wore her wedding ring.

He stepped past her heavily, and though she said nothing, he knew she grudged him his coming joy. Then, full of rage with her and contempt for himself, and giving himself the luxury of a mild, a very mild, oath—Ellen had very early made it clear she would have no swearing in her presence—he lit the hall gas full-flare.

"How can we hope to get lodgers if they can't even see the card?" he shouted angrily.

And there was truth in what he said, for now that he had lit the gas, the oblong card, though not the word "Apartments" printed on it, could be plainly seen out-lined against the old-fashioned fanlight above the front door.

Bunting went into the sitting-room, silently followed by his wife, and then, sitting down in his nice arm-chair, he poked the little banked-up fire. It was the first time Bunting had poked the fire for many a long day, and this exertion of marital authority made him feel better. A man has to assert himself sometimes, and he, Bunting, had not asserted himself enough lately.

A little colour came into Mrs. Bunting's pale face. She was not used to be flouted in this way. For Bunting, when not thoroughly upset, was the mildest of men.

She began moving about the room, flicking off an imperceptible touch of dust here, straightening a piece of furniture there.

But her hands trembled—they trembled with excitement, with self-pity, with anger. A penny? It was dreadful—dreadful to have to worry about a penny! But they had come to the point when one has to worry about pennies. Strange that her husband didn't realise that.

Bunting looked round once or twice; he would have liked to ask Ellen to leave off fidgeting, but he was fond of peace, and perhaps, by now, a little bit ashamed of himself, so he refrained from remark, and she soon gave over what irritated him of her own accord.

But Mrs. Bunting did not come and sit down as her husband would have liked her to do. The sight of him, absorbed in his paper as he was, irritated her, and made her long to get away from him. Opening the door which separated the sitting-room from the bedroom behind, and — shutting out the aggravating vision of Bunting sitting comfortably by the now brightly burning fire, with the Evening Standard spread out before him—she sat down in the cold darkness, and pressed her hands against her temples.

Never, never had she felt so hopeless, so—so broken as now. Where was the good of having been an upright, conscientious, self-respecting woman all her life long, if it only led to this utter, degrading poverty and wretchedness?

She and Bunting were just past the age which gentlefolk think proper in a married couple seeking to enter service together, unless, that is, the wife happens to be a professed cook. A cook and a butler can always get a nice situation. But Mrs. Bunting was no cook. She could do all right the simple things any lodger she might get would require, but that was all.

Lodgers? How foolish she had been to think of taking lodgers! For it had been her doing. Bunting had been like butter in her hands.

Yet they had begun well, with a lodging-house in a seaside place. There they had prospered, not as they had hoped to do, but still pretty well; and then had come an epidemic of scarlet fever, and that had meant ruin for them, and for dozens, nay, hundreds, of other luckless people. Then had followed a business experiment which had proved even more disastrous, and which had left them in debt—in debt to an extent they could never hope to repay, to a good-natured former employer.

After that, instead of going back to service, as they might have done, perhaps, either together or separately, they had made up their minds to make one last effort, and they had taken over, with the trifle of money that remained to them, the lease of this house in the Marylebone Road.

In former days, when they had each been leading the sheltered, impersonal, and, above all, financially easy existence which is the compensation life offers to those men and women who deliberately take upon themselves the yoke of domestic service, they had both lived in houses overlooking Regent's Park. It had seemed a wise plan to

settle in the same neighbourhood, the more so that Bunting, who had a good appearance, had retained the kind of connection which enables a man to get a job now and again as waiter at private parties.

But life moves quickly, jaggedly, for people like the Buntings. Two of his former masters had moved to another part of London, and a caterer in Baker Street whom he had known went bankrupt.

And now? Well, just now Bunting could not have taken a job had one been offered him, for he had pawned his dress clothes. He had not asked his wife's permission to do this, as so good a husband ought to have done. He had just gone out and done it. And she had not had the heart to say anything; nay, it was with part of the money that he had handed her silently the evening he did it that she had bought that last packet of tobacco.

And then, as Mrs. Bunting sat there thinking these painful thoughts, there suddenly came to the front door the sound of a loud, tremulous, uncertain double knock.

CHAPTER II

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Mr. Bunting jumped nervously to her feet. She stood for a moment listening in the darkness, a darkness made the blacker by the line of light under the door behind which sat Bunting reading his paper.

And then it came again, that loud, tremulous, uncertain double knock; not a knock, so the listener told herself, that

boded any good. Would-be lodgers gave sharp, quick, bold, confident raps. No; this must be some kind of beggar. The queerest people came at all hours, and asked—whining or threatening—for money.

Mrs. Bunting had had some sinister experiences with men and women —especially women—drawn from that nameless, mysterious class made up of the human flotsam and jetsam which drifts about every great city. But since she had taken to leaving the gas in the passage unlit at night she had been very little troubled with that kind of visitors, those human bats which are attracted by any kind of light but leave alone those who live in darkness.

She opened the door of the sitting-room. It was Bunting's place to go to the front door, but she knew far better than he did how to deal with difficult or obtrusive callers. Still, somehow, she would have liked him to go to-night. But Bunting sat on, absorbed in his newspaper; all he did at the sound of the bedroom door opening was to look up and say, "Didn't you hear a knock?"

Without answering his question she went out into the hall.

Slowly she opened the front door.

On the top of the three steps which led up to the door, there stood the long, lanky figure of a man, clad in an Inverness cape and an old-fashioned top hat. He waited for a few seconds blinking at her, perhaps dazzled by the light of the gas in the passage. Mrs. Bunting's trained perception told her at once that this man, odd as he looked, was a gentleman, belonging by birth to the class with whom her former employment had brought her in contact.

"Is it not a fact that you let lodgings?" he asked, and there was something shrill, unbalanced, hesitating, in his voice.

"Yes, sir," she said uncertainly—it was a long, long time since anyone had come after their lodgings, anyone, that is, that they could think of taking into their respectable house.

Instinctively she stepped a little to one side, and the stranger walked past her, and so into the hall.

And then, for the first time, Mrs. Bunting noticed that he held a narrow bag in his left hand. It was quite a new bag, made of strong brown leather.

"I am looking for some quiet rooms," he said; then he repeated the words, "quiet rooms," in a dreamy, absent way, and as he uttered them he looked nervously round him.

Then his sallow face brightened, for the hall had been carefully furnished, and was very clean.

There was a neat hat-and-umbrella stand, and the stranger's weary feet fell soft on a good, serviceable dark-red drugget, which matched in colour the flock-paper on the walls.

A very superior lodging-house this, and evidently a superior lodging-house keeper.

"You'd find my rooms quite quiet, sir," she said gently. "And just now I have four to let. The house is empty, save for my husband and me, sir."

Mrs. Bunting spoke in a civil, passionless voice. It seemed too good to be true, this sudden coming of a possible lodger, and of a lodger who spoke in the pleasant, courteous

way and voice which recalled to the poor woman her happy, far-off days of youth and of security.

"That sounds very suitable," he said. "Four rooms? Well, perhaps I ought only to take two rooms, but, still, I should like to see all four before I make my choice."

How fortunate, how very fortunate it was that Bunting had lit the gas! But for that circumstance this gentleman would have passed them by.

She turned towards the staircase, quite forgetting in her agitation that the front door was still open; and it was the stranger whom she already in her mind described as "the lodger," who turned and rather quickly walked down the passage and shut it.

"Oh, thank you, sir!" she exclaimed. "I'm sorry you should have had the trouble."

For a moment their eyes met. "It's not safe to leave a front door open in London," he said, rather sharply. "I hope you do not often do that. It would be so easy for anyone to slip in."

Mrs. Bunting felt rather upset. The stranger had still spoken courteously, but he was evidently very much put out.

"I assure you, sir, I never leave my front door open," she answered hastily. "You needn't be at all afraid of that!"

And then, through the closed door of the sitting-room, came the sound of Bunting coughing—it was just a little, hard cough, but Mrs. Bunting's future lodger started violently.

"Who's that?" he said, putting out a hand and clutching her arm.

"Whatever was that?"

"Only my husband, sir. He went out to buy a paper a few minutes ago, and the cold just caught him, I suppose."

"Your husband—?" he looked at her intently, suspiciously. "What —what, may I ask, is your husband's occupation?"

Mrs. Bunting drew herself up. The question as to Bunting's occupation was no one's business but theirs. Still, it wouldn't do for her to show offence. "He goes out waiting," she said stiffly. "He was a gentleman's servant, sir. He could, of course, valet you should you require him to do so."

And then she turned and led the way up the steep, narrow staircase.

At the top of the first flight of stairs was what Mrs. Bunting, to herself, called the drawing-room floor. It consisted of a sitting-room in front, and a bedroom behind. She opened the door of the sitting-room and quickly lit the chandelier.

This front room was pleasant enough, though perhaps a little over-encumbered with furniture. Covering the floor was a green carpet simulating moss; four chairs were placed round the table which occupied the exact middle of the apartment, and in the corner, opposite the door giving on to the landing, was a roomy, old-fashioned chiffonnier.

On the dark-green walls hung a series of eight engravings, portraits of early Victorian belles, clad in lace and tarletan ball dresses, clipped from an old Book of Beauty. Mrs. Bunting was very fond of these pictures; she thought they gave the drawing-room a note of elegance and refinement.

As she hurriedly turned up the gas she was glad, glad indeed, that she had summoned up sufficient energy, two days ago, to give the room a thorough turn-out.

It had remained for a long time in the state in which it had been left by its last dishonest, dirty occupants when they had been scared into going away by Bunting's rough threats of the police. But now it was in apple-pie order, with one paramount exception, of which Mrs. Bunting was painfully aware. There were no white curtains to the windows, but that omission could soon be remedied if this gentleman really took the lodgings.

But what was this—? The stranger was looking round him rather dubiously. "This is rather—rather too grand for me," he said at last "I should like to see your other rooms, Mrs. er —"

"—Bunting," she said softly. "Bunting, sir."

And as she spoke the dark, heavy load of care again came down and settled on her sad, burdened heart. Perhaps she had been mistaken, after all—or rather, she had not been mistaken in one sense, but perhaps this gentleman was a poor gentleman—too poor, that is, to afford the rent of more than one room, say eight or ten shillings a week; eight or ten shillings a week would be very little use to her and Bunting, though better than nothing at all.

"Will you just look at the bedroom, sir?"

"No," he said, "no. I think I should like to see what you have farther up the house, Mrs.—," and then, as if making a prodigious mental effort, he brought out her name, "Bunting," with a kind of gasp.

The two top rooms were, of course, immediately above the drawing-room floor. But they looked poor and mean, owing to the fact that they were bare of any kind of ornament. Very little trouble had been taken over their arrangement; in fact, they had been left in much the same condition as that in which the Buntings had found them.

For the matter of that, it is difficult to make a nice, genteel sitting-room out of an apartment of which the principal features are a sink and a big gas stove. The gas stove, of an obsolete pattern, was fed by a tiresome, shilling-in-the-slot arrangement. It had been the property of the people from whom the Buntings had taken over the lease of the house, who, knowing it to be of no monetary value, had thrown it in among the humble fittings they had left behind.

What furniture there was in the room was substantial and clean, as everything belonging to Mrs. Bunting was bound to be, but it was a bare, uncomfortable-looking place, and the landlady now felt sorry that she had done nothing to make it appear more attractive.

To her surprise, however, her companion's dark, sensitive, hatchet-shaped face became irradiated with satisfaction. "Capital! Capital!" he exclaimed, for the first time putting down the bag he held at his feet, and rubbing his long, thin hands together with a quick, nervous movement.

"This is just what I have been looking for." He walked with long, eager strides towards the gas stove. "First-rate—quite first-rate! Exactly what I wanted to find! You must understand, Mrs.—er— Bunting, that I am a man of science.

I make, that is, all sorts of experiments, and I often require the—ah, well, the presence of great heat."

He shot out a hand, which she noticed shook a little, towards the stove. "This, too, will be useful—exceedingly useful, to me," and he touched the edge of the stone sink with a lingering, caressing touch.

He threw his head back and passed his hand over his high, bare forehead; then, moving towards a chair, he sat down—wearily. "I'm tired," he muttered in a low voice, "tired—tired! I've been walking about all day, Mrs. Bunting, and I could find nothing to sit down upon. They do not put benches for tired men in the London streets. They do so on the Continent. In some ways they are far more humane on the Continent than they are in England, Mrs. Bunting."

"Indeed, sir," she said civilly; and then, after a nervous glance, she asked the question of which the answer would mean so much to her, "Then you mean to take my rooms, sir?"

"This room, certainly," he said, looking round. "This room is exactly what I have been looking for, and longing for, the last few days;" and then hastily he added, "I mean this kind of place is what I have always wanted to possess, Mrs. Bunting. You would be surprised if you knew how difficult it is to get anything of the sort. But now my weary search has ended, and that is a relief —a very, very great relief to me!"

He stood up and looked round him with a dreamy, abstracted air. And then, "Where's my bag?" he asked suddenly, and there came a note of sharp, angry fear in his voice. He glared at the quiet woman standing before him, and for a moment Mrs. Bunting felt a tremor of fright shoot

through her. It seemed a pity that Bunting was so far away, right down the house.

But Mrs. Bunting was aware that eccentricity has always been a perquisite, as it were the special luxury, of the well-born and of the well-educated. Scholars, as she well knew, are never quite like other people, and her new lodger was undoubtedly a scholar. "Surely I had a bag when I came in?" he said in a scared, troubled voice.

"Here it is, sir," she said soothingly, and, stooping, picked it up and handed it to him. And as she did so she noticed that the bag was not at all heavy; it was evidently by no means full.

He took it eagerly from her. "I beg your pardon," he muttered. "But there is something in that bag which is very precious to me —something I procured with infinite difficulty, and which I could never get again without running into great danger, Mrs. Bunting. That must be the excuse for my late agitation."

"About terms, sir?" she said a little timidly, returning to the subject which meant so much, so very much to her.

"About terms?" he echoed. And then there came a pause. "My name is Sleuth," he said suddenly,—"S-l-e-u-t-h. Think of a hound, Mrs. Bunting, and you'll never forget my name. I could provide you with a reference—" (he gave her what she described to herself as a funny, sideways look), "but I should prefer you to dispense with that, if you don't mind. I am quite willing to pay you—well, shall we say a month in advance?"

A spot of red shot into Mrs. Bunting's cheeks. She felt sick with relief—nay, with a joy which was almost pain. She

had not known till that moment how hungry she was—how eager for—a good meal. "That would be all right, sir," she murmured.

"And what are you going to charge me?" There had come a kindly, almost a friendly note into his voice. "With attendance, mind! I shall expect you to give me attendance, and I need hardly ask if you can cook, Mrs. Bunting?"

"Oh, yes, sir," she said. "I am a plain cook. What would you say to twenty-five shillings a week, sir?" She looked at him deprecatingly, and as he did not answer she went on falteringly, "You see, sir, it may seem a good deal, but you would have the best of attendance and careful cooking—and my husband, sir—he would be pleased to valet you."

"I shouldn't want anything of that sort done for me," said Mr. Sleuth hastily. "I prefer looking after my own clothes. I am used to waiting on myself. But, Mrs. Bunting, I have a great dislike to sharing lodgings—"

She interrupted eagerly, "I could let you have the use of the two floors for the same price—that is, until we get another lodger. I shouldn't like you to sleep in the back room up here, sir. It's such a poor little room. You could do as you say, sir—do your work and your experiments up here, and then have your meals in the drawing-room."

"Yes," he said hesitatingly, "that sounds a good plan. And if I offered you two pounds, or two guineas? Might I then rely on your not taking another lodger?"

"Yes," she said quietly. "I'd be very glad only to have you to wait on, sir."

"I suppose you have a key to the door of this room, Mrs. Bunting?

I don't like to be disturbed while I'm working."

He waited a moment, and then said again, rather urgently, "I suppose you have a key to this door, Mrs. Bunting?"

"Oh, yes, sir, there's a key—a very nice little key. The people who lived here before had a new kind of lock put on to the door." She went over, and throwing the door open, showed him that a round disk had been fitted above the old keyhole.

He nodded his head, and then, after standing silent a little, as if absorbed in thought, "Forty-two shillings a week? Yes, that will suit me perfectly. And I'll begin now by paying my first month's rent in advance. Now, four times forty-two shillings is"—he jerked his head back and stared at his new landlady; for the first time he smiled, a queer, wry smile —"why, just eight pounds eight shillings, Mrs. Bunting!"

He thrust his hand through into an inner pocket of his long cape-like coat and took out a handful of sovereigns. Then he began putting these down in a row on the bare wooden table which stood in the centre of the room. "Here's five—six—seven—eight—nine —ten pounds. You'd better keep the odd change, Mrs. Bunting, for I shall want you to do some shopping for me to-morrow morning. I met with a misfortune to-day." But the new lodger did not speak as if his misfortune, whatever it was, weighed on his spirits.

"Indeed, sir. I'm sorry to hear that." Mrs. Bunting's heart was going thump—thump—thump. She felt extraordinarily moved, dizzy with relief and joy.

"Yes, a very great misfortune! I lost my luggage, the few things I managed to bring away with me." His voice dropped