

A Social Hireling

Story of an English Gentleman Down on His Luck.

By WILLIAM CHANDLER

A young man whose clothes were of fine texture, of an English cut and beginning to show signs of long wear stepped into an office on an upper floor of a skyscraper on Fifth avenue, New York, and approached a sleek, gentleman-like man sitting at a rosewood desk.

"Beg pardon, sir," said the man who entered, with a smooth English accent. "I have understood that you desire persons for social purposes."

"H'm! I sometimes have occasion to recommend a young man to fill a—to—Do you dance?"

"I do."

"There is also need for dinner substitutes."

"Beg pardon?"

"You are not familiar with New York society methods?"

"I have recently come from London, where I have had the entree to the smart set."

"Very good. We have here a number of families who have recently become enormously rich and who are desirous of getting into society. We call them social climbers. They must begin by inviting the few persons in the swim they can get to their functions, filling up with those who are not in the swim, gradually increasing the number of the former and diminishing the latter. It is essential that the fillers should be familiar with the customs of swelldom. I perceive from your manner that you will make an excellent filler."

"What are your terms?"

"In the beginning I can pay you \$5 for a dancing party and \$25 for a dinner."

"Why is the greater work paid the lesser price?"

"Because the dancer uses his heels and need not betray himself by saying anything. The dinner must talk."

"I see. One must have intellect to be a dinner companion."

"Not at all. He must be able to talk well about nothing. Can you do that?"

"I can only assure you that I have been in society all my life. Only being out of funds induces me to offer my services for what you call a filler."

"Very good. Mrs. Barnaby Ritz gives a dinner tonight and needs several young men. The number has been made up with one exception. Have you evening dress?"

"My evening dress is all I have. It is in fair condition."

"I presume you will need a little something for carriage and other trifles," handing the man five five-dollar bills.

"But, my dear sir, you don't know me. What is to prevent my pocketing this money and not seeing you again?"

"Excuse me for contradicting you. I do know you. What you say is by no means complimentary to my discernment. I know a gentleman when I see him and would know him if he were in the garb of a huckster."

"Thank you very much."

The agent, Mr. Puisifer Short, took the man's name and address, the name given being Ralph Plummer.

"Assumed?" said Mr. Short dryly.

"As you like," was the response.

When Mr. Plummer appeared at

Mrs. Ritz's—he was directed to be on hand in time to be looked over—she brought a lorgnette to bear on him and after asking him a few questions said:

"My most blueblooded guest for the evening is Miss De Witt. She is a descendant of John De Witt, a great something or other of Holland. I don't mind telling you that I secured her because my son saved her from being run over by an auto. You are the only man who is to dine here today who will be up to her high stepping gait. Do what you can to entertain her. I'll send you something substantial tomorrow."

Mr. Plummer was shown into a room where the guests were assembled. They were not all unrefined, and Miss De Witt was evidently high bred. But she was not as Mrs. Ritz had described her, being unassuming and ladylike. Though she was not among persons of her own set, she did not indicate by her manner that she was out of place. When her dinner companion was introduced to her she looked at him with an expression that he could not well define. It might have been curiosity; it might have been surprise.

"Mr. Plummer, did you say, Mrs. Ritz?"

"Yes. This is Mr. Plummer, an old friend of ours."

The filler passed one of the pleasantest evenings of his life, feeling from the first en rapport with his companion. Mrs. Ritz conducted herself quite well, considering that her husband had started his career as a foundryman, but several of her guests made serious breaks. At such times Miss De Witt either went on with what she was saying to Mr. Plummer or listened attentively to what he said to her altogether ignoring the breach. Plummer was too much engrossed with her to even know that a case of ill breeding had occurred.

When the hour for departure came Miss De Witt did not wait for Mr. Plummer to ask permission to call upon her. It is well she did not, for he would not have made the request. He was, however, much pleased when she said, "Come and see me," though he felt that had she known that he was a filler she would certainly not have done so. As he was passing out Mrs. Ritz drew him aside and slipped a bit of paper into his hand, saying that he had done so well that she would not wait to send it to him. He glanced at it and handed it back to her.

"Excuse me, Mrs. Ritz," he said, "but Mr. Short has settled with me."

"But this is extra."

Plummer winced. What! Accept a tip for entertaining his dinner companion? Poverty had brought him to hiring himself out for a social purpose, but to be paid for the pleasure Miss De Witt had given him—this was more than he could bear. Seizing his hat and coat, he bolted for the door.

He had no idea of accepting Miss De Witt's invitation. Being a gentleman, he felt that to do so while he was thus making his living would be an outrage. He had no choice but to proceed, for the present, in the only occupation that was open to him and must use it or starve. Mr. Short gave him all the employment he would accept, which was barely enough to keep body and soul together. He did not meet Miss De Witt again at any of the places he danced or dined, for she did not know the persons who gave the entertainments.

But one morning he received a valuable invitation—not a paid one—to a musicale given by a Mrs. Yearsley. Who Mrs. Yearsley was or why she had invited him he did not know. Curiosity led him to accept. What was his surprise, after greeting the hostess, to be led up to Miss De Witt.

"You two have met before, I believe," said Mrs. Yearsley. "I leave him with you, Catherine; see that he is properly taken care of."

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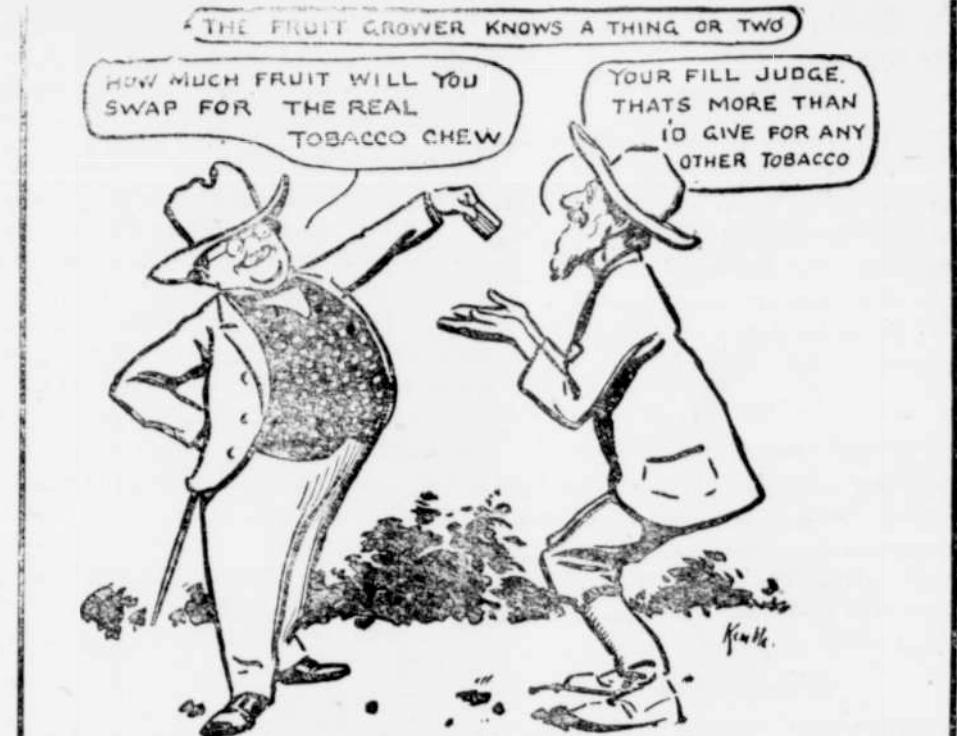
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"Am I indebted to you for this invitation?" he asked.

"I am indebted to my friend Mrs. Yearsley for inviting you. But you don't deserve it. You have been very rude to me."

"In what way?"

"You have paid no attention to my request that you should call on me."

Plummer hesitated in replying to this, finally saying that it would not be proper for him to accept an invitation to call upon a lady into whose social circle he had no entree.

"Your excuse is not accepted."

"Very well; I will do myself the honor to call very soon."

"I shall expect you."

"I must impose one condition."

"What is it?"

"That you ask for no more invitations for me."

"Certainly," replied the lady, "since you do not wish it."

She asked for no reason, which somewhat puzzled Mr. Plummer. Did she know that he had been present at Mrs. Ritz's as a filler? He thought not. Those who hired such persons were not likely to tell of their action.

He made the call and continued his acquaintance with Miss De Witt. One day a letter was handed to him by a young man, who said to him:

"Are you Mr. Ralph Plummer?"

"I am."

"I am from Elkins & Elkins, attorneys. They have been hunting you for some time."

Plummer tore off the envelope and uncovered another addressed to Sir Ralph Trevor.

"Is that you?" asked the lawyer's clerk.

Plummer's only reply was to open the second envelope. A letter contained in it announced to him that an uncle in England had died childless and he was heir to his title.

Plummer, or, rather, Sir Ralph Trevor, leaving the messenger to take care of himself, went out, called a cab and directed the driver to take him to Miss De Witt's home.

"I have come," he said to her, "to

make a confession. Poverty and an unwillingness to be dependent on those in England who"—

"Call it rather pride."

"Call it what you like, my position in America has been contemptible. But there has been a change. I am going to tell you who I really am."

"There is no need to tell me that. You are a gentleman, for I once met you in London society."

"You met me?"

"For only a moment. I don't wonder that you have not remembered me."

"Why have you not told me this?"

"Because you seemed to prefer to remain incognito."

"And you know how I have been keeping myself from starvation here?"

Miss De Witt prevaricated. She knew, for Mrs. Ritz had told her. But she wished to make it easy for him. She said that was none of her affair. He informed her that he was an orphan; that his uncle had led him to suppose that he would be his heir to his fortune, as well as to his title, and had thereupon undertaken to direct his every action. The young man had rebelled and gone away. Death had brought a great change and he was going back to England.

Among the American born ladies prominent in English society is Lady Trevor, who was Miss De Witt of New York. When she comes to America she comes alone. Her husband does not relish being reminded of the period when he was a social hireling.

But in this Sir Ralph is oversensitive. In America there are no titles. Consequently Americans—that is, the social climbers—place very high value upon them. It would not matter among such if a title were snatched all over; it would still be coveted. Arms quartered with prison stripes are still arms, and the social climber would prefer any bar sinister to no arms at all. It is quite likely that if Sir Ralph returned to the scene of his operations as a social filler the fact that he was capable of being a filler would redound to his credit.