

Just a Little Different

By Arthur Peach.

COOKE had closed the blinds of his little city restaurant, and he, with his two chums, Stevens, a reporter, and Verven, a plainclothes man, were seated around one of the rear tables, ready for one of their late "feeds."

The steaming food was spread before them when some one tried the door.

Stevens looked up. "Don't let him in, Cooky," he growled. "Let's have a little peace tonight."

Cooke smiled his round smile. "He may be as hungry as you are, and—he may have a stray nickel about him."

"More likely he has a scent," the reporter answered.

But Cooke let him in, and filled his order. The poorly clad man handed over a big bill. Cooke stared, then winked at his friends.

When the three had cleared up Cooke's offerings, and leaned back to smoke, the man who had likewise done damage to Cooke's cooking, came over to them.

"Gentlemen, may I smoke with you? I'm a little lonely, and I had an experience tonight that is a little out of the ordinary and makes a pretty good yarn."

Stevens pricked up his ears, and the detective looked interested. Cooke offered him a seat.

"I was standing in the corridor of the Hotel Weeden, wondering where I was to get enough to buy a meal. I saw a man studying me, and finally he came up. He was a well-dressed chap, looked as if he had money, though I could see he spent it in ways that don't make a man live long.

"He asked me if I were game to do something for him, and do it without asking questions. Any other time I would have winked in his eye; but he followed up his question with a show of bills that dazzled me. And I fell.

"He took me to his rooms and told me he was giving an affair at a place in the city where you can do as you please as long as you pay the bills without a kick.

"He said he wanted me to dress up as a gentleman, go with him to this affair, and he would tell me later, there, what he wanted of me. I was simply to appear on my own hook under the name of Stafford.

"I'm a bum now, but I have seen better days, and it all looked tempting. He fixed me up in a good rig, and gave me instructions what to do when I got there.

"I was taken right in at the door without a word, and soon I was at home. Of course I was wondering what was coming next; but I'm a believer in the present good or evil.

"They were a sporty crowd; I know the brand, and they were having a high old time. I was a little rusty in some lines, but I held up my end, all right.

"I was paired off most of the evening with a girl that was a beauty—a little daring, and a bit too much of other things, perhaps; but she seemed to be unusually interested in me and, of course, I met her half way. I was having a glorious time. This guy who told me to show up was right in the thick of things, and I began to wonder when he was going to put me wise to his real reason for bringing me there. I didn't seem to serve much purpose, and it didn't seem likely that he'd ask me just to fill out.

"But the fun was moving fast, and I didn't worry. I had a pretty girl, and I was willing to let things go on.

"After a while, though, I could see that the affair was dragging. You know how it is at some affairs—a lot of kick and snap for a while, then things go dead, and the fake to keep it up is pretty poor. Well, that's the way the game went.

"I had drifted out into one of the halls with the girl, when suddenly she suggested that we go back. We swung out on to the ball room floor.

"Then the fun commenced. Two men in plain clothes came in, rushed

up to me, and said: 'You are under arrest!'

"Well, I was some jarred. I have done much that I ought not to have done, but nothing that merited arrest.

"The whole place went quiet as a tomb. Every eye was on us.

"I got off something about what they meant, and then they grabbed me. I am hot-tempered, unfortunately, and I didn't like their methods. I shook them around a bit, and of course a fight developed. But they had me.

"When they got a dead grip on me, I saw the chap who hired me, and thought I was crazy. He was saying: 'Take that chap out; he's an impostor! I have just discovered it! He forced his way in through the crowd around us. What do you mean by coming in here? Gentlemen, run him out.'

"I was so stunned I didn't think for a moment, and in that moment I was chucked out, and it was too late for bright thoughts. I tried to talk with the men, but they only grinned.

"I was rushed to the upper floor, and given my old duds, and then rushed out to the sidewalk, and told to beat it.

"I was mad clear through. I couldn't just see what was up, but it was plain to me that the chap wasn't going to hand me all the money he promised—though he had given me some.

"As I stood across the street, I heard a man talking, and a crash of hand-clapping, and it came over me just what the game was.

"I haven't been in the city a week, but I'd heard that this chap's crowd were trying to beat each other out giving stunts that were a little different—some new kick, something for excitement, and he had made me the monkey of this one.

"I made a good one. That scrap I put up in the ball room kept them with their mouths open for awhile; and mind you—I was dead in earnest. I couldn't have been hired to do that stunt, and make it real as I did, and it wouldn't have been such a thundering good joke for him to tell them if he had put me wise what was up. It came as a surprise, all right, and I certainly showed how hard it hit me.

"I was sore enough. That clapping meant he had made a little speech, rehearsing the stunt, and how he got me—a bum, dead broke, down and out, to go there as a gentleman.

"I'd have liked to crack his head, but I'd get mine in return or something worse, so I beat it.

"That's the yarn. I won't tell you who it is, but you'll see the affair written up, and'll know tomorrow. Good-night, gentlemen."

When he had gone, Stevens said: "How much of that was 'con' and how much true? It sounded pretty—"

The telephone tinkled, and he turned to it. His friends saw his face expand with astonishment. He turned and grabbed his hat.

"I'm off, fellows! That guy's yarn is straight! Ed just telephoned me that Irwin gave a blowout, that a guy there was thrown out as an impostor, and—and—as the ball broke up, they found that some one had gone through the duds and cleaned up all the cash in the bunch, with some jewelry thrown in; and the guy who did it was our friend! I'm off!"

The detective rose. "Guess I'll go down to quarters, too. He couldn't have gotten into that affair unless Irwin vouched for him; so the yarn's true. He's buried in the East Side by this time, but I can take a hand. Cooky, you've assisted a criminal. All the time he has been gassing here, behind your blinds, he's been safe."

"Cooky" banged a plate. "I'm dumbed glad of it. I hope he gets away. He deserves to, after that raw deal by Irwin—the mut!"

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