

THE YELLOW LABEL

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CHAPTER I.

AN ENTERPRISING WAITER.

Alfred Knox Atherton was one of the most popular members of the "Marmawell Club." He was a man in the prime of life, but, in spite of his wealth and good looks—and in spite of the schemes of designing mothers—he was still unmarried.

He had a country house in the Berkshires, and a luxuriously furnished bachelor's apartment on Park Avenue. He was also the owner of a small, up-to-date steam yacht, which bore the uncommon name of *The Philosopher's Stone*.

As is usually the case in such places, most of the waiters at the Marmawell Club were foreigners. One among them is worthy of special mention. He was the cardroom waiter, who went by the name of Max Berne, and was understood to hail from that land of model hotel keepers and waiters, Switzerland.

Max evidently had seen a great deal of the world, although he was still a young man. Paris, Berlin, Vienna, Rome, Madrid, St. Petersburg—we beg pardon, Petrograd—mention any of these cities to Max, and he could tell you which was the quickest way of getting there, which were the best hotels to stay at, how much they would charge you, what the cooking was like, and what quality of cigars and wines they stocked.

Needless to say, this made him very popular with the members of the Marmawell. He was, in fact, a perfect encyclopedia of information on all matters relating to the leading cities of Europe,

and he could speak French, Italian, and Spanish as fluently as he spoke English.

That evening he was hovering over one of the tables in the deserted cardroom, giving a deft touch here and there, when Atherton walked in.

“Evening, Max!” the social favorite said affably. “Do you know if Mr. Frost is about?”

He referred to Jackson Frost—“Jack Frost,” as his friends called him—a young man of excellent family and expensive tastes, who belonged to the so-called “sporting set.”

“Yes, sir,” replied Max, in his silky, deferential voice. “Mr. Frost is in the writing room. He told me to let him know when you arrived. Shall I tell him you are here, or will you go up to him?”

“Is he alone in the writing room?”

“No, sir—at least, he wasn’t when I was there. There were several other gentlemen in the room.”

“Then ask him to join me here, and, after you have given him my message, bring me some Scotch.”

Max noiselessly retired, and presently returned with the whisky.

“Mr. Frost will be down in a moment, sir,” he said, as he placed the articles at Atherton’s elbow.

He had scarcely spoken before Jackson Frost appeared, a tall young fellow, faultlessly dressed.

“So, here you are!” he said, addressing Atherton. “A bit late, aren’t you?”

Before Atherton could reply, two other members of the club strolled into the room, a fact which brought a frown of annoyance to the man’s handsome face.

While the newcomers were giving their orders to Max, the latter stood before them in an attitude of respectful attention. All the time, however, he was straining his ears to catch what was passing between Atherton and Frost.

“Is everything arranged?” he heard the latter ask, in a low tone.

“Yes,” Atherton replied. “I came to tell you what the arrangements are, but we can’t talk here.”

“Come up to my room,” suggested Frost. “I’ll say I’m going up to dress for dinner, and you can follow me in a few minutes.”

“Right,” said Atherton. “We’ll be safe from interruption there.”

By this time the others had given their orders to Max, and one of them turned to Jackson Frost.

“We’re trying to make up a four for cards; would you and Mr. Atherton care to join us?”

“Thanks, but I haven’t time,” said Frost. “I’m dining out tonight, and I’m just going up to my room to change.”

“And I’m only staying for a few minutes,” put in Atherton. “As a matter of fact, I only dropped in for a drink, and as soon as I’ve finished it, I’m off. By the way, did I pay you for this Scotch, Max?”

“No, sir,” said the waiter.

Atherton paid, and Max left the room.

The club bar was in the basement, but instead of going there to procure the drinks which had been ordered, Max glided to the end of the entrance hall, walked leisurely up one flight of stairs, and then, being out of sight from below, darted up two other flights.

It seemed a curious thing for a cardroom waiter to do. On the fourth floor of the building were quite a number of private rooms, which were reserved by members who wished to have a place where they could spend a night, or where they could change into evening dress—or out of it—without the trouble of going home. One of these rooms—it was number twenty-five—was rented by Jackson Frost.

Reaching this fourth floor, Max did another curious thing—an extremely curious thing for a cardroom waiter to do.

Approaching the door of Frost’s room, he drew a bunch of skeleton keys from his pocket, selected one of them, and opened the door. Having gained access to the room, he darted across to the window, opened it an inch or two from the bottom, then hastily retreated, locking the door behind him and hurrying back downstairs.

Halfway down the last flight of stairs, he met Jackson Frost. Max humbly stepped aside to allow Frost to pass, and then went on to the bar, secured the drinks which had been ordered, and took them to the cardroom.

Atherton was still there, but two or three minutes later he rose to his feet, nodded to the two other members, and left the room.

“He’s going up to Frost’s room,” thought the waiter.

He glanced impatiently at his watch. It was five minutes to seven. In five minutes he would be off duty.

“Confound it!” he exclaimed inwardly. “Why couldn’t Atherton have waited that long? However, I don’t suppose he and Frost will finish their talk in five minutes. All the same, I hope Sachs won’t be late to-night.”

Sachs was the name of the waiter who was to relieve Max at seven o’clock. He was very punctual as a rule, and this was no exception. Just as the clock was striking seven, he appeared at the cardroom door.

“Anything new, Max?” he asked.

“Nothing,” Max answered shortly. “Good night.”

“What’s your rush?” asked Sachs, with a grin. “You seem to be in a tearing hurry.”

“I am,” was the answer, and without another word Max left the room.

If he was in such a desperate hurry to be off, though, one would have expected him to go straight down to the waiters’ room, change his clothes, and leave the premises, but, instead of doing this, he repeated most of his curious performances of a few minutes earlier.

That is to say, he dawdled up the first flight of stairs, and then, as soon as he was out of sight of those in the entrance hall, he darted up to the fourth floor.

With catlike steps he glided to the door of room No. 25, and stood for a moment in a listening attitude.

A murmur of voices inside the room told him that Atherton and Frost were there. He could not hear what they were saying, but he had anticipated that, and that was why he had opened the window of Frost's room.

Having satisfied himself of the whereabouts of the two, he stole to the door of number twenty-seven, adjoining, picked the lock, glided into the room, and closed the door behind him.

Groping his way softly along the dark room, he quietly opened the window and stepped out on the fire escape.

The platform of the fire escape extended from the window of number twenty-seven to that of number twenty-five, and all Max had to do was to creep along the iron grating until he was beside the window with which he had previously tampered.

When he reached it, he crouched down, hidden by the dark shade which had been drawn, and put his ear close to the crack.

He could now hear every word that was spoken, and, it was plain to be seen, it afforded him the liveliest satisfaction.

“So I was right!” he thought triumphantly, “I suspected it for some time, but now I know it. I must have some more tangible proof, though. I must see the thing done, and find out who else is in the plot. And then—farewell to the old Mar, and hurrah for a life of ease and luxury.”

CHAPTER II.

THE WAITER HAS A WIFE.

The waiter remained outside the window until he heard Atherton leave the room, then he stole back to number twenty-seven, left things exactly as he had found them, and descended to the waiters' room, where he changed to street attire.

Ten minutes later he left the premises, and at the end of half an hour he let himself into a modest little flat in a "model" tenement house on East Seventy-seventh Street, near the river.

Here he proceeded to do other things which were out of the ordinary for a club waiter.

For instance, he changed his clothes once more, and, after he had done so, he loaded a revolver and stowed it away in one of his pockets. He put a fresh battery into an electric flash light, and slipped that into another pocket.

He next went down to a room in the basement, in which a motor cycle was stored, and he spent half an hour in pumping up the tires, tinkering with the lamp, oiling the bearings, filling the tank, and generally putting the machine in order for a run.

Finally he returned to the little sitting room, set out a frugal supper for two, consisting of cold beef and potato salad from a delicatessen store, bread and cheese, and a bottle of first-class claret—the last named being from the cellars of the Marmawell.

When all these preparations were completed, he lighted a pipe and consulted his watch.

“Half past nine,” he mused. “I needn’t start for the theater for another hour yet.”

He opened a black leather case and drew out a well-worn mandolin. Dropping into an easy-chair, he started to play the instrument in a fashion which proved that he was both a passionate lover of music and a capable performer.

Any one popping into the little room and seeing him leaning back in that easy-chair, with a far-away, dreamy look in his half-closed eyes, and a rapt expression on his face, would have found it hard to believe that he was capable of the side he had shown shortly before.

To say the least, he must have been a curious combination of the poetic and the matter of fact, of the dreamer and the doer, otherwise that revolver in his pocket, for instance, was decidedly out of place.

Such was the case, and, moreover, the man had had many ups and downs, which his pretty wife had shared.

The latter was an American girl, who had married him some five years before, and who now—because funds were low—had returned to her former calling. In other words, she was back on the stage, in the chorus of a Broadway production.

Elaine Stowe was the name by which she was professionally known.

Max was a most devoted husband, and never allowed his young wife to return from the theater alone. As a rule, he left the flat about half past ten, and was waiting at the stage door when Elaine came out.

To-night, however, he was so absorbed in his mandolin—and in other things—that he forgot all about the flight of time, and he was positively amazed when the door opened and there walked into the room a remarkably attractive and well-formed young woman, cheaply but effectively dressed, with an innocent, babyish face lighted by a pair of big blue eyes.

“Elaine!” he ejaculated, jumping up and laying his instrument aside. “Why are you home so early to-night?”

“Early!” the girl echoed with a laugh, unbuttoning her gloves. “Do you call half past eleven early?”

“Never!” he cried, dragging out his watch. “By George, so it is! What a thoughtless brute I am to let you come home alone. I fully intended to come for you as usual, but I just sat down to play for an hour, and the combination of the music and my plans for the future made me forget everything else.”

“Your plans for the future?” Elaine repeated, with just a touch of irony in her voice. “More plans of making our fortunes, I suppose?”

Her husband nodded.

“Yes,” he answered. “I know what you think, but you’re wrong this time, as it happens. These plans are the real thing, and I’m going to put them through.”

Elaine shrugged her dainty shoulders.

“I wonder how often I’ve heard that,” she said wistfully. “We’re always going to make our fortunes, but somehow or other

something always turns up at the last moment and messes up our schemes.”

“I’ll tell you while we’re having supper,” Max replied. “I haven’t too much time, for I must start in three-quarters of an hour.”

“Start? Where are you going?” his wife asked curiously, as she removed her hat and coat.

“That doesn’t come until almost the end of the story,” was the answer. “Sit down and you’ll hear it all.”

The girl obeyed wonderingly, and Max began.

“Do you remember,” he said, “that very shortly after I started work at the Marmawell, I told you I had a suspicion that Alfred Knox Atherton was more or less crooked?”

“Yes,” answered Elaine, “you’ve said so often, and you made the same statement about another member of the club—Frost, I think was the name. You told me you thought he was so crooked that if he ever fell out of bed he could rock himself to sleep on the floor.”

“That’s right,” agreed the waiter, with an appreciative grin. “I couldn’t give you any reason for my suspicions, though. It was just instinct, I guess. You know the old saying, ‘set a thief to catch a thief.’ It must have been that. Being a rogue myself, I instinctively spotted a fellow rogue when I saw him. Anyhow, I was convinced that Atherton and ‘Jack Frost,’ as they call him, were playing some deep game of a crooked nature, and I determined to find out what it was.”

“And have you found out?” asked Elaine.

“I certainly have, and it is a deeper game and a more crooked one than ever I dreamed of.”

“This sounds interesting,” remarked the girl, pouring out a glass of wine for herself. “Do tell me what you have discovered.”

“Well, about half past six this evening,” her husband explained, “Frost came to the club and asked me if Atherton was there. When I told him he was not, he said he would go up to the writing room, and I was to let him know when Atherton arrived. There was nothing much in that, of course, but it showed me that Atherton and Frost had arranged to meet at the club this evening.

“Presently Atherton put in an appearance. He came into the cardroom, which was deserted at the time, and asked me if Frost was about. I told him Frost was in the writing room, and asked him if he would go up. His answer showed me that he wished to see Frost alone, for he asked me if there was anybody else in the writing room, and when I said there was, he told me to tell Frost to come down to the cardroom. It was plainer than ever that they shared some secret, so naturally I determined by hook or crook to hear what they had to say to each other.

“I delivered Atherton’s message to Frost and the latter came down to the cardroom. Before he had a chance to say anything of a personal nature to Atherton, however, a couple of other men walked in, and I saw Atherton scowl at them.

“While I was taking their orders, I kept my ears open, and heard Atherton and Frost arrange to meet in the latter’s private room upstairs.

“As soon as I got that tip, I slipped upstairs, used a skeleton key on Frost’s door, and opened his window a little from the bottom. I passed Frost on the lower flight, and a few minutes later Atherton left the cardroom and went upstairs.

“That was five minutes to seven, and at seven I was relieved. The moment I was free I sneaked upstairs once more, and made use of the room adjoining Frost’s. By picking the lock of that room, and softly opening the window, I managed to get out on the fire escape, and in that way reached Frost’s window. The crack I had left made it possible for me to hear every word they said, without the risk of being seen.”

“Very clever!” commented Elaine. “And what did you hear?”

CHAPTER III.

“GOOD-BY TO THE SIMPLE LIFE!”

He told her what he had heard, and her big, blue eyes grew bigger still with incredulous amazement.

“You take my breath away!” she gasped. “Alfred Knox Atherton, one of the idols of New York society, who is hand in glove with most of the ‘big bugs’! It sounds unbelievable.”

“It’s a bit of an eye opener, isn’t it?” chuckled the waiter. “What a sensation I could create if I hunted up a reporter and filled him up with the details of that little conversation in Frost’s room! But, of course, I’m not going to do anything of the kind. It’s too good a thing to give away. It’s a veritable gold mine, and I’m going to work it for all it’s worth.”

“Blackmail, I suppose?” the girl suggested calmly. “You will interview Mr. Atherton and tell him what you have discovered, and threaten to expose him unless he buys your silence?”

“Not so fast, my dear! That’s not quite the idea. I shall certainly interview Atherton and tell him what I have discovered, but instead of demanding money as the price of my silence, I shall demand a place in the firm. In other words, I shall say to Atherton: ‘I know everything. Let me stand in with you and share the loot, or I’ll give away the show!’”

The girl nodded approvingly.

“Yes, that will be much better than merely demanding money,” she said.

“You bet your life it will!” declared her husband, and it was curious to note that he seemed perfectly at home with American slang. Indeed, there was nothing suggestive of Switzerland about him now. “Instead of a lump sum,” he went on, “it means a comfortable income for the rest of our lives. Better still, it means action, excitement, risk. Perhaps, even the chance of a tussle with Nick Carter.”

Elaine shivered at the mention of the great detective’s name, but the man laughed light-heartedly.

“You don’t like to hear that name?” he asked teasingly.

“I don’t,” his wife confessed. “Nick Carter has never really caught us, but he’s spoiled more than one pretty plan of ours, and he has always seemed a sort of bogey man to me. I wish you hadn’t mentioned him just now, and I don’t see how you can think of him at such a time—at least, how you can make a joke of it. Whenever Nick Carter comes to my mind, I find my courage oozing out, and my feet getting cold.”

Her husband leaned over the corner of the table, gave her a great hug, and kissed her.

“Cheer up, little girl!” he said. “Nick Carter isn’t going to hurt you. Trust me for that.”

“But what if he catches you? Could anything hurt me more than that?”

“But he isn’t going to catch me, dear. I’ll admit that he hasn’t really tried as yet, but I’m perfectly ready to have him do it. He’s certainly a wonder, but I think I can tie him up in a knot, and I like to think of him when I’m planning to turn a trick. It puts me on my

mettle, and makes me plan more carefully than I otherwise might. Therefore, I'm really glad he's on the job. You mustn't have such fancies. They're no real part of you. You're the pluckiest girl who ever bucked up against the law, and you know you would tackle anything."

Elaine's smile was serious.

"I've proved that I'm not a coward, and I like excitement as well as you do. I come nearer being afraid of Nick Carter, though, than of anybody else. He's been so successful. They say he never really went after a crook, big or little, without getting him in the end, no matter how long it took."

Max reseated himself again.

"The longest string of victories is sometimes broken," he said confidently. "There's no doubt that Carter has set a hot pace, but he can't keep it up. Somebody is going to spoil his record some of these days—and why not yours truly?"

The girl shrugged her shoulders.

"I know there's no use of arguing with you," she said. "I wouldn't have you different, anyway. If you weren't so sure of yourself, you couldn't have done half the things you've done, and very likely you wouldn't have won me, either. Tell me this, though: Supposing Mr. Atherton tries to bluff you when you go to see him? Supposing he indignantly denies your charge, and orders you to leave the house, and all that sort of thing, what will you do? You see, you can't prove that he and Mr. Frost are leading this double life. You were alone when you listened to their talk this evening,

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