

The Grand Babylon Hotel

by Arnold Bennett

Chapter One

THE MILLIONAIRE AND THE WAITER

‘YES, sir?’

Jules, the celebrated head waiter of the Grand Babylon, was bending formally towards the alert, middle-aged man who had just entered the smoking-room and dropped into a basket-chair in the corner by the conservatory. It was 7.45 on a particularly sultry June night, and dinner was about to be served at the Grand Babylon. Men of all sizes, ages, and nationalities, but every one alike arrayed in faultless evening dress, were dotted about the large, dim apartment. A faint odour of flowers came from the conservatory, and the tinkle of a fountain. The waiters, commanded by Jules, moved softly across the thick Oriental rugs, balancing their trays with the dexterity of jugglers, and receiving and executing orders with that air of profound importance of which only really first-class waiters have the secret. The atmosphere was an atmosphere of serenity and repose, characteristic of the Grand Babylon. It seemed impos-

sible that anything could occur to mar the peaceful, aristocratic monotony of existence in that perfectly-managed establishment. Yet on that night was to happen the mightiest upheaval that the Grand Babylon had ever known.

‘Yes, sir?’ repeated Jules, and this time there was a shade of august disapproval in his voice: it was not usual for him to have to address a customer twice.

‘Oh!’ said the alert, middle-aged man, looking up at length. Beautifully ignorant of the identity of the great Jules, he allowed his grey eyes to twinkle as he caught sight of the expression on the waiter’s face. ‘Bring me an Angel Kiss.’

‘Pardon, sir?’

‘Bring me an Angel Kiss, and be good enough to lose no time.’

‘If it’s an American drink, I fear we don’t keep it, sir.’ The voice of Jules fell icily distinct, and several men glanced round uneasily, as if to deprecate the slightest disturbance of their calm. The appearance of the person to whom Jules was speaking, however, reassured them somewhat, for he had all the look of that expert, the travelled Englishman, who can differentiate between one hotel and another by instinct, and who knows at once where he may make a fuss with propriety, and where it is advisable to behave exactly as at the club. The Grand Babylon was a hotel in whose smoking-room one behaved as though one was at one’s club.

‘I didn’t suppose you did keep it, but you can mix it, I guess, even in this hotel.’

‘This isn’t an American hotel, sir.’ The calculated insolence of the words was cleverly masked beneath an accent of humble submission.

The alert, middle-aged man sat up straight, and gazed placidly at Jules, who was pulling his famous red side-whiskers.

‘Get a liqueur glass,’ he said, half curtly and half with good-humoured tolerance, ‘pour into it equal quantities of maraschino, cream, and crème de menthe. Don’t stir it; don’t shake it. Bring it to me. And, I say, tell the bar-tender—’

‘Bar-tender, sir?’

‘Tell the bar-tender to make a note of the recipe, as I shall probably want an Angel Kiss every evening before dinner so long as this weather lasts.’

‘I will send the drink to you, sir,’ said Jules distantly. That was his parting shot, by which he indicated that he was not as other waiters are, and that any person who treated him with disrespect did so at his own peril.

A few minutes later, while the alert, middle-aged man was tasting the Angel Kiss, Jules sat in conclave with Miss Spencer, who had charge of the bureau of the Grand Babylon. This bureau was a fairly large chamber, with two sliding glass partitions which overlooked the entrance-hall and the smoking-room. Only a small portion of the clerical work of the great

hotel was performed there. The place served chiefly as the lair of Miss Spencer, who was as well known and as important as Jules himself. Most modern hotels have a male clerk to superintend the bureau. But the Grand Babylon went its own way. Miss Spencer had been bureau clerk almost since the Grand Babylon had first raised its massive chimneys to heaven, and she remained in her place despite the vagaries of other hotels. Always admirably dressed in plain black silk, with a small diamond brooch, immaculate wrist-bands, and frizzed yellow hair, she looked now just as she had looked an indefinite number of years ago. Her age—none knew it, save herself and perhaps one other, and none cared. The gracious and alluring contours of her figure were irreproachable; and in the evenings she was a useful ornament of which any hotel might be innocently proud. Her knowledge of Bradshaw, of steamship services, and the programmes of theatres and music-halls was unrivalled; yet she never travelled, she never went to a theatre or a music-hall. She seemed to spend the whole of her life in that official lair of hers, imparting information to guests, telephoning to the various departments, or engaged in intimate conversations with her special friends on the staff, as at present.

‘Who’s Number 107?’ Jules asked this black-robed lady.

Miss Spencer examined her ledgers.

‘Mr Theodore Racksole, New York.’

‘I thought he must be a New Yorker,’ said Jules, after a brief, significant pause, ‘but he talks as good English as you or me. Says he wants an “Angel Kiss”—maraschino and cream, if you please—every night. I’ll see he doesn’t stop here too long.’

Miss Spencer smiled grimly in response. The notion of referring to Theodore Racksole as a ‘New Yorker’ appealed to her sense of humour, a sense in which she was not entirely deficient. She knew, of course, and she knew that Jules knew, that this Theodore Racksole must be the unique and only Theodore Racksole, the third richest man in the United States, and therefore probably in the world. Nevertheless she ranged herself at once on the side of Jules.

Just as there was only one Racksole, so there was only one Jules, and Miss Spencer instinctively shared the latter’s indignation at the spectacle of any person whatsoever, millionaire or Emperor, presuming to demand an ‘Angel Kiss,’ that unrespectable concoction of maraschino and cream, within the precincts of the Grand Babylon. In the world of hotels it was currently stated that, next to the proprietor, there were three gods at the Grand Babylon—Jules, the head waiter, Miss Spencer, and, most powerful of all, Rocco, the renowned chef, who earned two thousand a year, and had a chalet on the Lake of Lucerne. All the great hotels in Northumberland Avenue and on the Thames Embankment had tried to get Rocco away from the Grand Babylon, but without success. Rocco was well aware

that even he could rise no higher than the maître hôtel of the Grand Babylon, which, though it never advertised itself, and didn't belong to a limited company, stood an easy first among the hotels of Europe—first in expensiveness, first in exclusiveness, first in that mysterious quality known as 'style'.

Situated on the Embankment, the Grand Babylon, despite its noble proportions, was somewhat dwarfed by several colossal neighbours. It had but three hundred and fifty rooms, whereas there are two hotels within a quarter of a mile with six hundred and four hundred rooms respectively. On the other hand, the Grand Babylon was the only hotel in London with a genuine separate entrance for Royal visitors constantly in use. The Grand Babylon counted that day wasted on which it did not entertain, at the lowest, a German prince or the Maharajah of some Indian State. When Felix Babylon—after whom, and not with any reference to London's nickname, the hotel was christened—when Felix Babylon founded the hotel in 1869 he had set himself to cater for Royalty, and that was the secret of his triumphant eminence.

The son of a rich Swiss hotel proprietor and financier, he had contrived to establish a connection with the officials of several European Courts, and he had not spared money in that respect. Sundry kings and not a few princesses called him Felix, and spoke familiarly of the hotel as 'Felix's'; and Felix had found that this was very good for trade. The Grand Babylon

was managed accordingly. The 'note' of its policy was discretion, always discretion, and quietude, simplicity, remoteness. The place was like a palace incognito. There was no gold sign over the roof, not even an explanatory word at the entrance. You walked down a small side street off the Strand, you saw a plain brown building in front of you, with two mahogany swing doors, and an official behind each; the doors opened noiselessly; you entered; you were in Felix's. If you meant to be a guest, you, or your courier, gave your card to Miss Spencer. Upon no consideration did you ask for the tariff. It was not good form to mention prices at the Grand Babylon; the prices were enormous, but you never mentioned them. At the conclusion of your stay a bill was presented, brief and void of dry details, and you paid it without a word. You met with a stately civility, that was all. No one had originally asked you to come; no one expressed the hope that you would come again. The Grand Babylon was far above such manoeuvres; it defied competition by ignoring it; and consequently was nearly always full during the season.

If there was one thing more than another that annoyed the Grand Babylon—put its back up, so to speak—it was to be compared with, or to be mistaken for, an American hotel. The Grand Babylon was resolutely opposed to American methods of eating, drinking, and lodging—but especially American methods of drinking. The resentment of Jules, on being re-

quested to supply Mr Theodore Racksole with an Angel Kiss, will therefore be appreciated.

‘Anybody with Mr Theodore Racksole?’ asked Jules, continuing his conversation with Miss Spencer. He put a scornful stress on every syllable of the guest’s name.

‘Miss Racksole—she’s in No. 111.’

Jules paused, and stroked his left whisker as it lay on his gleaming white collar.

‘She’s where?’ he queried, with a peculiar emphasis.

‘No. 111. I couldn’t help it. There was no other room with a bathroom and dressing-room on that floor.’ Miss Spencer’s voice had an appealing tone of excuse.

‘Why didn’t you tell Mr Theodore Racksole and Miss Racksole that we were unable to accommodate them?’

‘Because Babs was within hearing.’

Only three people in the wide world ever dreamt of applying to Mr Felix Babylon the playful but mean abbreviation—Babs: those three were Jules, Miss Spencer, and Rocco. Jules had invented it. No one but he would have had either the wit or the audacity to do so.

‘You’d better see that Miss Racksole changes her room to-night,’ Jules said after another pause. ‘Leave it to me: I’ll fix it. Au revoir! It’s three minutes to eight. I shall take charge of the dining-room myself to-night.’

And Jules departed, rubbing his fine white hands slowly and meditatively. It was a trick of his, to rub his hands with a strange, roundabout motion, and the action denoted that some unusual excitement was in the air.

At eight o'clock precisely dinner was served in the immense salle manger, that chaste yet splendid apartment of white and gold. At a small table near one of the windows a young lady sat alone. Her frocks said Paris, but her face unmistakably said New York. It was a self-possessed and bewitching face, the face of a woman thoroughly accustomed to doing exactly what she liked, when she liked, how she liked: the face of a woman who had taught hundreds of gilded young men the true art of fetching and carrying, and who, by twenty years or so of parental spoiling, had come to regard herself as the feminine equivalent of the Tsar of All the Russias. Such women are only made in America, and they only come to their full bloom in Europe, which they imagine to be a continent created by Providence for their diversion.

The young lady by the window glanced disapprovingly at the menu card. Then she looked round the dining-room, and, while admiring the diners, decided that the room itself was rather small and plain. Then she gazed through the open window, and told herself that though the Thames by twilight was passable enough, it was by no means level with the Hudson, on whose shores her father had a hundred thousand dollar coun-

try cottage. Then she returned to the menu, and with a pursing of lovely lips said that there appeared to be nothing to eat.

‘Sorry to keep you waiting, Nella.’ It was Mr Racksole, the intrepid millionaire who had dared to order an Angel Kiss in the smoke-room of the Grand Babylon. Nella—her proper name was Helen—smiled at her parent cautiously, reserving to herself the right to scold if she should feel so inclined.

‘You always are late, father,’ she said.

‘Only on a holiday,’ he added. ‘What is there to eat?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Then let’s have it. I’m hungry. I’m never so hungry as when I’m being seriously idle.’

‘Consommé Britannia,’ she began to read out from the menu, ‘Saumon d’Ecosse, Sauce Genoise, Aspics de Homard. Oh, heavens! Who wants these horrid messes on a night like this?’

‘But, Nella, this is the best cooking in Europe,’ he protested.

‘Say, father,’ she said, with seeming irrelevance, ‘had you forgotten it’s my birthday to-morrow?’

‘Have I ever forgotten your birthday, O most costly daughter?’

‘On the whole you’ve been a most satisfactory dad,’ she answered sweetly, ‘and to reward you I’ll be content this year with the cheapest birthday treat you ever gave me. Only I’ll have it to-night.’

‘Well,’ he said, with the long-suffering patience, the readiness for any surprise, of a parent whom Nella had thoroughly trained, ‘what is it?’

‘It’s this. Let’s have filleted steak and a bottle of Bass for dinner to-night. It will be simply exquisite. I shall love it.’

‘But my dear Nella,’ he exclaimed, ‘steak and beer at Felix’s! It’s impossible! Moreover, young women still under twenty-three cannot be permitted to drink Bass.’

‘I said steak and Bass, and as for being twenty-three, shall be going in twenty-four to-morrow.’

Miss Racksole set her small white teeth.

There was a gentle cough. Jules stood over them. It must have been out of a pure spirit of adventure that he had selected this table for his own services. Usually Jules did not personally wait at dinner. He merely hovered observant, like a captain on the bridge during the mate’s watch. Regular frequenters of the hotel felt themselves honoured when Jules attached himself to their tables.

Theodore Racksole hesitated one second, and then issued the order with a fine air of carelessness:

‘Filleted steak for two, and a bottle of Bass.’ It was the bravest act of Theodore Racksole’s life, and yet at more than one previous crisis a high courage had not been lacking to him.

‘It’s not in the menu, sir,’ said Jules the imperturbable.

‘Never mind. Get it. We want it.’

‘Very good, sir.’

Jules walked to the service-door, and, merely affecting to look behind, came immediately back again.

‘Mr Rocco’s compliments, sir, and he regrets to be unable to serve steak and Bass to-night, sir.’

‘Mr Rocco?’ questioned Racksole lightly.

‘Mr Rocco,’ repeated Jules with firmness.

‘And who is Mr Rocco?’

‘Mr Rocco is our chef, sir.’ Jules had the expression of a man who is asked to explain who Shakespeare was.

The two men looked at each other. It seemed incredible that Theodore Racksole, the ineffable Racksole, who owned a thousand miles of railway, several towns, and sixty votes in Congress, should be defied by a waiter, or even by a whole hotel. Yet so it was. When Europe’s effete back is against the wall not a regiment of millionaires can turn its flank. Jules had the calm expression of a strong man sure of victory. His face said: ‘You beat me once, but not this time, my New York friend!’

As for Nella, knowing her father, she foresaw interesting events, and waited confidently for the steak. She did not feel hungry, and she could afford to wait.

‘Excuse me a moment, Nella,’ said Theodore Racksole quietly, ‘I shall be back in about two seconds,’ and he strode out of

the *salle à manger*. No one in the room recognized the millionaire, for he was unknown to London, this being his first visit to Europe for over twenty years. Had anyone done so, and caught the expression on his face, that man might have trembled for an explosion which should have blown the entire Grand Babylon into the Thames.

Jules retired strategically to a corner. He had fired; it was the antagonist's turn. A long and varied experience had taught Jules that a guest who embarks on the subjugation of a waiter is almost always lost; the waiter has so many advantages in such a contest.