The Strange Visitation

by Marie Corelli

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BY MARIE CORELLI AUTHOR OF “THE LIFE EVERLASTING” “THELMA” “HOLY ORDERS” “THE SORROWS OF SATAN” ETC. ETC.

HODDER AND STOUGHTON LONDON NEW YORK TORONTO

THE STRANGE VISITATION

A WILD night, with a gale of wind, a wind that scratched and tore and howled at doors and windows like an angry cat spitting and spluttering—its miauling voice now rising, now sinking—at one moment savage, at another querulous, but always incessant of complaint, with a threatening under snarl of restless rage in its tone. A wild night!—full of storm and quarrel, with occasional dashes of cold rain sweeping down on the shrieking blast like gusts of angry tears—a noisy night in which the elements were at open war with themselves, making no secret of their hostile intentions—and yet it was the one night of all nights in the year when “peace and goodwill” were the suggested influences of the time. For it was Christmas Eve. Christmas Eve! What a wonderful anniversary it is, if we would but pause in our reckless and senseless rush onward to the grave, just to think quietly about it for a moment! Long, long ago—yet but a short while since—if we count by the world’s great epochs of civilisation wherein a little two thousand years are but a moment—a host of Angels descended from heaven and sang a joyous hymn of general amnesty to mankind on the first Christmas Eve that ever was—and according to the noble poesy of high-thinking, God-revering John Milton:

“No war or battle’s sound

Was heard the world around,

The idle spear and shield were high up hung;

The unhookèd chariot stood

Unstain’d with hostile blood,

The trumpet spake not to the armèd throng;

And kings sat still with awful eye

As if they surely knew their sovran Lord was by.

“And peaceful was the night

Wherein the Prince of Light

His reign of peace upon the earth began;

The winds, with wonder whist,

Smoothly the waters kist,

Whisp’ring new joys to the mild oceàn,

Who now hath quite forgot to rave,

While birds of calm sit brooding on the charmèd wave!”

One wonders if—in those far-off days of angel-singing—there was such a thing as a millionaire? Not a merely “rich” man;—not a “Wise Man of the East,” who, possessing knowledge and insight as well as wealth, hastened to bring his gold with frankincense and myrrh, and to lay these reverently in the humble manger which served as cradle to a Child, whose vast power was destined to conquer and subdue all the mightiest kings of the earth:—but an actual money-gorged, banknote-stuffed ruler of some octopus-like “Trade,” whose tentacles clutched and held everything within its reach—some owner of huge factories where human creatures “sweated” their lives out to fill his pockets, and died in their hundreds,—perchance their thousands—in order that he, like some monstrous bloated leech, should swell to the point of bursting on the blood he sucked from their throbbing arteries! Was there such an one existing in the miracle days when the “Glory to God in the Highest!” rang from star to star, from point to point of the myriad constellations, like a great wave of melody breaking against illimitable and endless shores? Surely not!—else there would have been some break in the music!—some ugly jar in the divine chorus! For instance, if there had at that time been living a multi-millionaire at all

resembling the one whose strange experiences are now about to be related, the angels would have fled in dismay and weeping from the spectacle of a soul so warped from good, so destitute of sympathy, so drained and dry of every drop of the milk of human kindness, and so utterly at variance with the “peace and goodwill” of which they sang!

Yet no one will deny that a multi-millionaire is a great man. What multi-millionaire was ever considered otherwise? It was the glorious environment of multi-millionaire-ism that made Josiah McNason great—and Josiah McNason was a very great man indeed. Quite apart from his connection with you and me, dear reader, as the immediate subject of this story, he was great in business, great in success, great in wealth, great in power, and more than great in his own opinion. Small wonder that he thought much of himself, seeing that thousands of people thought so much of him. Thousands of people had him on their minds, and lay awake at nights, uneasily wondering what might be his next financial “deal.” For on his little finger he balanced mighty “combines.” At his nod “companies” collapsed like card-houses, or rose up again with the aerial brilliancy of “castles in Spain,”—the pulse of Trade beat fast or slow as suited his humour,—speculators on ’Change whispered his name in accents of mingled hope and terror,—aye, even kings were known not to be averse to receiving Josiah in private audience, though they might, and did, deny the privilege to such others of their subjects whose plea was one of merit more than cash. The fact stood out very patently to both royalty and commons alike, that Josiah McNason was a man to be reckoned with,—a man to be studied and considered,—a man whose moods must be tolerated, and whose irritations must be soothed,—a man to be coaxed and coddled,—a man to whom the highest personages in the land might safely—(and even advantageously)—send presents of grouse and salmon in their seasons,—a man whom it was considered politic not to offend. But why? Why all this trouble and anxiety from Majesty itself down to toiling bank-clerks, with respect to the fits and vagaries of one puny biped,

neither handsome to look at, nor pleasant to speak with, but merely, taken as nature made him, an irascible, cut-and-dry pigmy of a man, not worth either a curse or a blessing, to judge by his outward appearance? Oh well! Merely because, by speaking him fair and flatteringly, it might be easier to borrow money of him! Everyone with even a small surplus quantity of this world's goods, knows the taste of that diplomatic bread-and-honey which is always cautiously administered by one dear friend to some other whose pockets are to be tested. Josiah got such bread-and-honey all day long. Someone was always feeding or trying to feed him with it. His appetite however was fastidious, and he seldom swallowed the cloying bait. Even when he did gulp down a large wedge of it with a distrustful smile, it did not have the effect intended. Instead of softening his financial digestion and rendering him pliable, it appeared to make him harder and tougher in mental fibre. The gleam in his cold expressionless eye bored through the soul of the would-be-borrower of cash like a gimlet, and divined his intention before the said borrower could so much as mumble out—"Could you—would you, Mr. McNason—make me a trifling advance?—offer good security—great convenience to me just now!"—trailing the sentence away into indistinguishable fragments as Josiah snapped his thin pale lips on the "No!" which, with sharp snarling sound, hopelessly closed the discussion.

It was Christmas Eve,—and though this fact has already been stated before, it cannot for the purposes of the present veracious chronicle of events be too strongly insisted upon. It was the Eve of the Angels,—and no devils were supposed to be anywhere about. For, as our Shakespeare tells us:—

"Ever 'gainst that season comes

Wherein our Saviour's birth is celebrated,

The bird of dawning singeth all night long,

And then, they say, no spirit can walk abroad;

The nights are wholesome; then no planets strike,

No fairy takes, nor witch hath power to charm,

So hallow’d and so gracious is the time!”

Perhaps the great McNason, if he had not been so occupied with himself and his own affairs, might have thought of these lines when, on leaving his head office in the city, he travelled with the swiftness of the wind through a storm of sleet and snow to his palatial private abode some twenty miles out of town, rushing along at full speed in a superb motor-car sumptuously furnished with a rain-proof covering, rugs, foot-warmers, and all the luxurious paraphernalia wherewith a multi-millionaire may shield his valuable joints from the cold. For he professed, did McNason, to have Shakespearean proclivities, and had been heard to declare publicly that he preferred the Bard of Avon to the Bible. That was the way he put things,—with all the agreeable free-and-easy indifference to religion and to other folks religious sentiments which so frequently embellishes the character of the multi-millionaire. As a matter of fact he knew nothing about either the Immortal Plays or Holy Writ. They were sealed books to his limited comprehension. The divine teachings of Scripture, and the broadly beneficent and tender philosophy of Shakespeare were alike beyond him. He understood Ledger Literature in its every branch,—every smallest point concerning L.S.D. was familiar to him,—and such “quotations” from books as he could make, were intimately connected with the Stock Market. But for all romance he had a fine contempt, and for poetry and poetic sentiment a saturnine derision. More than anything perhaps, he hated and scorned any idea of things “supernatural.” He attended church very regularly on Sundays,—oh yes!—that was a particular item of “conscience and respectability” with him. But as everything he heard there had to do with “supernatural” matters, it is safe to presume that he was a hypocrite in going to listen to what he did not believe. However, in this he was not exceptional,—there are many like him.

"Respectability" may be permitted to play the humbug when it is a millionaire, and drives to its country seat in a motor-car costing two thousand guineas, especially on Christmas Eve, which—despite colossal fortune-makers—remains indissolubly associated in the human mind with Poverty and a Manger. And it was with all the glow and splendour of humbug shining lustrously about him that the world-renowned McNason stepped out of his sumptuous vehicle as it stopped at his own door, and entered his stately baronial hall, where four powdered and liveried flunkeys stood waiting deferentially to receive him. Taking scarcely any notice of these gorgeous personages, who were in his sight no more than flower-pots, umbrella stands, or other portions of ordinary household furniture, he addressed himself to a fifth retainer, severely attired in black, who, by a set of cords and tassels on his left shoulder and the effective simplicity of his costume as compared with the liveries of the other menials, implied to all whom it might concern that he was the commanding officer or major-domo of the royal McNason household.

"Anybody called, Towler?"

"Yessir. Mr. Pitt."

"Mr. Pitt? Dear me! I saw him only this morning at the office. What did he want?"

"I couldn't say, sir. He is waiting to see you."

"Waiting? Here—at this hour?"

"Yessir. In the library."

With a frown of irritation, the great Josiah threw off his sable-lined overcoat, which was received obsequiously by one of the powdered lacqueys in attendance, while a second accepted his hat with an air of grateful and profound humility. Then he walked slowly, deliberately, not to say in heavy-footed style, along a broad corridor, dimly yet richly lit by electric light filtering through coloured glass, where classic marbles were artistically grouped here and there in snowy contrast with the dark fall of velvet draperies and pyramidal masses of flowers,—where Venus gazed from

under her sleepless lids, with white eyeballs astare at the ugly little man who passed her without looking up,—where Mercury, poising on tip-toe with winged heels, appeared to meditate an immediate flight from the wizened, wrinkled, moneyed creature below him who was so far and away from any conception of the god-like—and where Psyche, bending over the butterfly in her small caressing hands, seemed almost to shudder lest the very breath of the celebrated millionaire should shrivel the delicate expanding wings of the Immortal Soul she so tenderly fostered. Preceded by the black-costumed Towler, who threw open various doors majestically as he advanced, Josiah entered the library, warm and cheerful with the red heat and glow of a sparkling log fire. A well-dressed gentlemanly-looking man who had been sitting near the table turning over a newspaper, rose as he approached and stood a moment without speaking, as though in some doubt or hesitation.

"Well, Pitt, what's the matter? Anything gone wrong since this morning?"

"No, sir. Nothing."

"Oh! Then what are you here for at such an hour and in such weather, eh?"

Mr. Pitt hummed and hawed. He was one of McNason's most trusted overseers; and at the great factories which daily ground down human lives into the McNason millions, he had under his management a very large number of the men employed. The only fault that could be found with him from a strictly business point of view was, that he had some vestiges of a heart. These vestiges were troubling him a little just now.

"There was one thing I forgot to mention to you in my report to-day," he began; "I can't think how it slipped my memory."

"Neither can I!" and Josiah smiled a hard smile—"Whatever it is, if you forgot it, it cannot be of much importance!"

Mr. Pitt did not seem to perceive the implied compliment to himself.

"Well, perhaps not,"—he answered slowly,—"still I should blame myself if I

neglected it—I should certainly blame myself——”

Here he broke off and coughed nervously, while McNason, drawing a large elbow-chair to the fire, sat down and spread out his thin veiny hands to the blaze in irresponsive silence.

“It’s—it’s about Willie Dove, sir——” he said.

McNason looked up with peering eyes that narrowed at the corners like those of a snake.

“Willie Dove!” he echoed, slowly. “H’m—h’m—let me see! Who is Willie Dove?”

“Surely you remember him?” replied Pitt, quickly, with a touch of warmth in his tone—“Twenty-five years ago he was one of the smartest travellers in your employ——”

“Was he?” And McNason smiled blandly, but indifferently.

“Why, yes of course he was!” and Mr. Pitt’s voice grew still warmer with feeling as he spoke—“Surely, Mr. McNason, you can’t have altogether forgotten him? He made immense business for the firm,—immense! A wonderfully active and energetic man,—never lost time or opportunity and brought us no end of valuable custom——”

“Quite right of him!” interpolated McNason,—“He did his duty, no doubt, and was paid for doing it. Well?”

Mr. Pitt played absently with his watch-chain. He was conscious that a check had been summarily put on any eloquent dissertation he might have been disposed to make concerning the past abilities and qualifications of Willie Dove.

“I thought—I fancied you might perhaps be interested,” he murmured.

“Twenty-five years is a long time, Pitt,” said McNason, slowly,—“a very long time! It is a quarter of a century. One’s interest in any man is apt to exhaust itself naturally in such a period.”

Mr. Pitt looked up quickly, and then looked down. There was something in the hard, furrowed countenance of Josiah that suggested a mental dry heat or dry cold,—any force in fact, that may be known to absorb or disperse particles of generous sentiment. Yet Pitt was not a coward, and though he stood in wholesome awe of the captious moods and whims of the great millionaire upon whom his own existence and that of his family depended, he determined not to relinquish the errand on which he was bound without a struggle.

"Well, sir," he resumed, in accents rendered firm by a kind of inward desperation, "whether you are interested or not, I think it my duty to tell you that Willie Dove,—the man who through his energy, fidelity and tact, helped to establish the firm, is now lying seriously ill. He is nearly sixty years old, and having a large family to provide for, had been unable to put by anything for his own rainy day——"

"He should not have had a large family,"—interpolated McNason, stretching out his lean ill-shaped legs more comfortably in front of the fire—"it's quite his own fault!"

"Perhaps," proceeded Pitt, with considerable emphasis, "if he had been less honest and high-principled in his business connection with us, he might have been more well-to-do in his own affairs. But, as matters stand, his position is a sad one. He is afflicted with a painful disease, which, however, can be absolutely cured by an immediate surgical operation. The doctors assure him that he will be well and strong enough to live out his full measure of years comfortably and usefully if he will only submit to their treatment——"

"Well, if he wants to live, why doesn't he?" inquired McNason, lazily.

"Simply because he can't afford it," replied Pitt, bluntly.

The great millionaire took up a poker, and looking critically at the fire, broke a large gaseous lump of coal into a bright blaze.

"Oh! Well, that settles it," he said. "Then I suppose he must, as the common folk

say, ‘go home’!”

A sparkle of indignation lightened Mr. Pitt’s quiet grey eyes. But he restrained his feelings.

“The operation fee would be a hundred guineas,” he went on in a calm business-like tone—“Good nursing and a change of air would perhaps run into a hundred more. Say two hundred pounds. That sum would save his life.”

“I daresay!” And McNason’s thin lips widened into a grin—“But if he hasn’t got the two hundred, he must accept the inevitable. After all, when a man is nearly sixty, a few years more or less in the world doesn’t matter!”

Mr. Pitt looked at his employer steadily.

“Have you any cause of complaint or offence against Dove, sir?”

McNason met his inquiring eyes with his own special gimlet glance, sharp as the point of a screw.

“None! Not the least in the world! Why should I? I scarcely remember the man!”

“Well, if you have nothing against him, would you not perhaps be inclined to help him? The claims of your business are, I know, enormous, and it is of course easy to forget the names and identities of the various persons who have all done their little best to build up the firm,—but Dove’s is really an exceptional case. He was always liked and respected at the works,—many of the men there know him well and speak most highly of him, and I can add my own testimony to that of the others. It seems a pity to let so faithful a servant of the firm die for want of a little first aid——”

“Did he send you to beg of me?” asked McNason with a kind of vicious abruptness.

Mr. Pitt’s pale face flushed a little.

“Certainly not, Mr. McNason! Willie Dove would never beg of any man. He merely told me his case and said: ‘Perhaps Mr. McNason would lend me the money. I would work it all back.’ And to speak the truth, I really thought—yes, sir, I really

thought you would be glad to lend it!—even to give it! Two hundred pounds is no more to you than two hundred pence would be to me. But supposing you make it a loan, and have any doubts as to Dove's ability or willingness to pay it back, I myself will be security for him. I would advance him the money if I had it to spare,—but unfortunately I am rather pressed for cash just now—I also have a large family——"

McNason smiled a smile resembling the death-grin of the fabulous dragon of St. George.

"A mistake, Pitt!—quite a mistake! Large families merely make the world more difficult to live in and money scarcer to get! Money needs to be kept in close quarters—close, very close quarters! It has a habit of running away unless it is imprisoned, Pitt! It runs away much faster than it runs in! Governments know that!—and kings! And when governments and kings find it slipping through their fingers, they come to Me!—to me, Josiah McNason!—and I tell you what it is, Pitt, I've enough to do with lending money to Big Persons and taking securities on Big Things without bothering myself concerning Little Commercials! See? I lend to Royalties, Titles and Magnificences of all classes and all nations,—and I've done so much lately in this line that I'm short of money myself just now, Pitt!—ha, ha!—I'm short of money!"

Mr. Pitt stared, and was for a moment speechless. He had often thought (taking shame to himself for indulging in such a reflection) that Mr. McNason was certainly a very ugly man, but he had never seen him look uglier than at the present moment. Such a mouthing, wrinkled mask of a face as the firelight now flashed upon was surely not often seen among living humanity. Even the grey-white goatee beard that adorned Josiah's sharp chin, wagged up and down with its possessor's silent mirth in a fashion which made its expression abnormally atrocious.

"I'm short of money!" repeated the millionaire, rubbing his hands pleasantly together—"I don't mind lending this Willie Dove five pounds, as you say he served

the firm well a quarter of a century ago,—but two hundred! Now, Mr. Pitt, you're a sensible man,—a man of business,—and you know that to ask such a sum on loan for a decayed and diseased commercial traveller is absurd! He would never be able to 'work it back' as he says. And as for your being his security, I have too much respect for you to allow you to put yourself into such an awkward position. You'd regret it,—you really would, Pitt! Besides, why not let Dove go to one of the Hospitals and take his chance among the young students and general cutters-up of bodies, eh? They'd charge him very little—perhaps nothing—especially if they found his disease complex enough for good 'practice'!"

Mr. Pitt gave an unconscious gesture of physical repulsion.

"Mrs. Dove has a nervous horror of her husband's being separated from her,"—he said, slowly—"She says that if he is taken away to a hospital she feels sure he will never come back. Then again, she has great faith in the doctor who has been attending Dove for the past six months—and he strongly recommends a private operation."

"Of course! He wants to put the money into his own pocket,"—said McNason, calmly—"Well! I can't be of any assistance in this business—so if that's all you came about, you may consider that you have done your duty, and that the interview is finished. Good-night, Mr. Pitt!"

But Pitt still hesitated.

"It is Christmas Eve, sir,——" he began, falteringly.

"It is. I have been reminded of that fact several times to-day. What of it?"

"Nothing, sir, except—except—that it is a time of year when everyone tries to do some little kindness to his neighbour, and when we all endeavour to help the poor and sick according to our means,—and—and when some of us who are getting old may look back on our past lives and remember the ones we have loved who are no longer here,—when even you, sir,—you might perhaps think of your only son who

is gone,—the son of the firm, as we used to call him,—Willie Dove carried the child many times on his shoulder round the works to see the engines in full swing,—and he was very fond of Willie—and—er—and—as I say, sir, you might, perhaps, for the dead boy's sake, do a good turn——"

He paused. The millionaire had half risen from his chair, and was gripping its cushioned elbows hard with both hands.

"How dare you!" he muttered in choked accents—"How dare you use the memory of my dead son to urge a beggar's plea! Why do you presume to probe an old grief—a cureless sorrow—in an attempt to get money out of me! Because it is Christmas Eve? Curse Christmas Eve!"

His voice sank to a hiss of rage, and Mr. Pitt, nervously shrinking within himself, sought for his hat and made towards the door. A terrific gust of rain just then swept against the windows like a shower of small stones, accompanied by the shrieking yowl of the wind.

"Christmas Eve!" repeated McNason, fixing his eyes with cold derision on his abashed overseer—"Peace and goodwill! That sounds like it, doesn't it?" And he shook one hand with a mocking gesture towards the rattling casements. "Hear the storm? Any angels singing in it, do you think? Any God about? Bah! Christmas is a vulgar superstition born of barbarous idolatry! It serves nowadays as a mere excuse for the lower classes to gorge themselves with food, get drunk, and generally make beasts of themselves! There is no more 'Peace and goodwill' in it than there is in a public-house beer fight! And as for doing kindnesses to each other, I'll be bound there's not a man at my works who isn't trying to get a bigger round of beef or a fatter goose for himself than his neighbour can afford. That's charity! It begins at home! You know that, Mr. Pitt! Ha-ha! You know that—you have a large family! Christmas is a humbug, like most 'religious' festivals"—here he stretched his thin mouth into that unbecoming slit which suggested smiling, but was nothing like a

smile—“I never keep it—and I do my best to forget it! Good-night!”

“Good-night, sir,”—and Mr. Pitt, hat in hand, stood for a moment facing his employer—“I am sorry if I have troubled you—or—or offended you! I did not mean to do so. I hope you will excuse my boldness! I made a mistake—I thought you might be pleased to do something for an old servant of the firm;—I—I—er—Good-night!”

The door opened and closed softly. He was gone.

McNason looked after him with a frown.

“Like his impudence!” he muttered—“Like his damned impudence! Following me up here all the way from the city and begging me to lend two hundred pounds to a man I hardly ever saw—except—except once or twice when my boy was alive. Among the hundreds and hundreds of travellers for the firm, how the devil should I be expected to remember Willie Dove!”

He settled himself once more in his elbow-chair, and poked the fire vigorously till the bright blaze spread a brilliant glow well over the room, flashing ruddily on the rows of well-bound books, on the marble busts of poets and historians, on the massive desk strewn with letters and papers and lit with electric reading-lamps at either end, and on all the luxurious appurtenances for the study of either Ledgers or Literature which, in these days of superfluous comfort and convenience, assist in furnishing the library of a millionaire. He had dined in town, and there was nothing for him to do except to read,—write,—or sit and meditate. He was alone,—but that was his customary condition when in his own house, unless on those occasions when he chose to invite a select party of persons, often including Royalty itself, to stay with him as guests, and graze on him, as it were, like sheep on a particularly fat pasture. But he never asked people to visit him at all unless for the ulterior purpose of making use of them in business; and just now he had no important object in view that could be served by dining or wining anybody. It was an awkward time of

year,—Christmas-time, in fact. It is always an awkward time for anyone who is incurably selfish. Those who have homes and love them, go to such homes and stay there with their families,—those who are callous concerning home-ties and home-affections, have been known to start for the Riviera (especially that section of it known as Monte Carlo) with “tourist” tickets or otherwise;—in short, everybody has a way of doing as they like, or, if not quite as they like, as near to what they like as they can, at that so-called “festive” season. One naturally thinks that a multi-millionaire would surely have all the amusements and gaieties of the world at his command,—but it seemed that Josiah McNason could find nothing wherewith to amuse himself, all business being at a standstill for a few days,—while as for gaiety!—dear me, the very word could barely have been uttered by the boldest person after one glance at his face! He sat, or rather huddled himself in the depths of his chair with a kind of dull satisfaction in his mind to think that in a couple of hours or so he would be going to bed. There was a damp and chilly feeling in the air; the cry of the incessant wind was teasing and shrewish—and he drew himself nearer to the fire, finding comfort in its warmth and dancing flame. He began to con over certain imposing figures representing the huge sums realized by his firm during the past half-year,—and, with furrowed brows,—so harshly wrinkled that his grey eyebrows met across a small chasm of yellow sunken flesh,—he calculated that his own personal fortune had accumulated to the colossal height of nearly twelve millions sterling. He moistened his lips with his tongue, drawing that member between his teeth with a sharp smacking sound as of satisfactory nut cracking.

“I think,”—he said, half aloud,—“I think the time is ripe for a Peerage! I can spare—now, let me see!—yes!—I can spare the money! Twenty thousand pounds to a hospital will almost do it! And perhaps another twenty thousand in some more private quarter, and,—a little diplomacy!” He sniggered softly and rubbed his hands. “Lord McNason will sound well,—very well! If my son had lived——”

Here the heavy frown again made an abyss of his brow. He stared into the fire with a

kind of melancholy sullenness, and began to think. His thinking was half involuntary, for he was not a man who cared to dwell on memories of the past or possibilities of the present. Yet, despite himself, he found his mind wandering through various byways of reminiscence back to the time when he was young, with all the world before him,—when, through the crafty instruction of an over-moneyed American capitalist he had learned by heart that celebrated paraphrase of a well-known divine text—"'Do' others as you would not be 'done.'" He saw himself practically adopting this rule of life and conduct with brilliant results. He traced the beginning of the great inflow of gold which now encrusted him and rolled him up as it were in a yellow metallic shroud, a singular and separate creature, apart from other men. He recalled against his own will an incident in his career which he would fain have forgotten, when at about thirty-seven years of age he had won the first affections of a sweet and beautiful girl of seventeen whom afterwards he had heartlessly jilted, for no fault of her own, but merely because her father had through sad mischance suddenly lost his fortune. Then,—his mind persisting in its abnormal humour of harking back like a hunted hare to old covers,—he reviewed the circumstances of his loveless marriage with the daughter of a millionaire who was at that time half as rich again as himself,—and even now, though she was dead, it was not without a sense of angry pique and nervous irritation that he remembered her utter callousness and indifference to his personality,—her light regard for his wealth, which she scattered recklessly on every sort of foolish extravagance and dissipation,—and her want of natural care and affection for the one child which she gave him,—a promising boy on whom he lavished what infinitesimal vestiges of love still remained in his rapidly fossilizing moral composition. He thought of all the anxiety and cost which the education of this, his sole heir, had entailed upon him,—anxiety which was futile, and cost which was wasted. For Death cannot be bribed off by bullion. Typhoid fever in its most virulent form had snatched away the boy when he was barely eleven years old, and though the piles of gold still

continued to accumulate and ever accumulate with the workings of the great McNason firm, there was no one to inherit the monster millions that came to birth with every fresh turn of the business wheel. And with his disappointment, Josiah had adopted an opposition front towards Deity. The “ways of Providence” were to him subject for the bitterest acrimony; and though, as has been said, he went to Church regularly on Sundays, and was, indeed, exceptionally careful to make a public show of himself as a man vitally interested in all Church matters, his action in this regard may be truly represented as having been taken on the foundations of unbelief and godless mockery. It tickled his particular vein of humour to think that all the people in the parish where he had his country seat thought him a really religious man. It had been so easy to get this reputation! A few subscriptions to the rector’s pet charities; occasional assistance in taking round the collection-plate on Sundays; and a solemn demeanour during the sermon, had done it. But beneath that solemn demeanour what acrid depths of diabolical atheism lurked, only the diabolical agencies knew! He had worked his way through the world by a judicious use of the world’s follies, obstinacies and credulities,—he had over-reached his neighbours by making capital out of their confidences,—and now, as much as concerned the world’s chief god, Cash, he was at the top of the tree. True, he was getting on for seventy, but in these days when “the microbe of old age” is on the point of being discovered and exterminated, that was nothing. And the toiling engine of his brain having shunted its way thus far into the Long-Ago on a side line of its own, now came rushing swiftly back again into the present brilliant terminus of Wealth and Power which he had so successfully attained. And again the idea of a Peerage commended itself to him.

“It could easily be managed—quite easily!” he mused; “And then—perhaps—I might marry again—and marry well! Some young woman of aristocratic birth and high connections, who wants money. There are scores of them to be had for the asking!”

Just then the clock on the mantelpiece struck a sharp ting!-ting!-ting! Josiah glanced at its enamelled dial and saw that it had chimed the quarter-past eleven. The fire was burning beautifully bright and clear,—and the warmth thrown out by the glowing coals was grateful to his shrunken legs, loosely cased in their too ample trousers. He decided that he would wait a little while longer before retiring to rest. Stretching out one hand he touched the button of an electric bell within his reach. Almost instantaneously his major-domo, the majestic Towler, appeared.

“Towler!”

“Yessir!”

“I shall want nothing more to-night. You can go to bed.”

“Very good, sir!”

“Wake me at seven to-morrow morning.”

“Yessir! To-morrow’s Christmas Day, sir.”

“Well, what’s that to me?”

“Beg pardon, sir! Thought you might like to sleep a little later, sir.”

Josiah gazed at him grimly.

“Sleep a little later! What do you take me for, eh? D’ye think I’m such a fool and sluggard as to want to stay in bed longer on Christmas Day than on any other day? You ought to know me better than that! I have plenty of work to do just the same, Christmas Day or no Christmas Day, and I mean to do it!”

“Certainly, sir. Yessir. Seven o’clock, sir!”

“Seven o’clock, sharp!” And McNason’s thin lips closed upon the word “sharp” like the lid of a spring matchbox.

Thereupon Towler backed deferentially towards the door.

“Good-night, sir. Merry Christmas, sir!”

And with this salutation,—which, offered to a person so distinctly removed from merriment as was his master, seemed almost a satire,—he disappeared.

McNason, uttering a sound between a grunt and a curse, poked the fire again viciously, and flung on two logs from a wood-basket beside him,—chumpy resinous logs which began to splutter and crackle directly the heat touched them, and soon started flaring flames up the chimney with quite a lurid torchlight glow. The storm outside had increased in fury,—and hailstones were now mingled with the rain which dashed threateningly against the windows with every wild circling rush of the wind.

“Glad I’m not going to a Christmas Eve party!” thought Josiah, as he listened to the hurrying roar of the gale—“A great many young fools will probably catch their deaths of cold to-night,—a wise dispensation of Nature for getting rid of surplus population!”

He stretched each end of his mouth as far as it would go, and showed his crooked yellow teeth to the fire, this effort being his way of laughing. The clock struck half-past eleven,—and scarcely had its final chime died away on the air when another and unexpected sound startled him. Ring-ting-ting-ting!—ting-ring-ting-ting-ting!—Ring-ting-TING-TING!

“Someone at the telephone!” he said, getting out of his comfortable chair, and hurrying to that doubtfully useful modern instrument, which, if once fixed in a private house puts the owner of it at the disposal of all his friends and business acquaintances who may be inclined to “call him up” on the most trivial excuses for wasting his time—“Who wants me at this hour, I wonder!”

He soon had his ear to the receiver, and a small, shrill and quite unfamiliar voice came sharply across the wire.

“Hello!”

“Hello!” he rejoined.

“Hell-oh! McNason! Are you there?”

“Yes. I’m here. Who are you?”

“That’s telling!” And the shrill piping accents broke into fragments of falsetto laughter that ran vibratingly into McNason’s ear and gave him cold shivers down his back—“Are you at home?”

“Of course I am! Going to bed.”

“Oh! Don’t go to bed! Hell-oh! McNason, don’t go to bed! I want you!”

“Want me? What for?”

Again the broken laughter quavered along the wire in uncanny snatches.

“On business! Very important! Government loan! No delay! Great chance for you! Peerage! Christmas Eve! Don’t go to bed!”

Josiah’s temper rose. He put his mouth to the transmitter and spoke softly, deliberately and with concentrated viciousness.

“You’re a humbug! You’re some fool playing with the telephone because it’s Christmas Eve, and you don’t know what else to do with yourself! Probably you’re drunk! I don’t know you, and I don’t want to know you. Get off my private wire!”

“Oh!” And then came a curious exclamation that sounded like “Hoo-roo!” “Don’t say you don’t want to know me! You’ve got to know me! I’m coming to you now! Be with you directly!”

Josiah began to feel desperate.

“Hello!” he called.

“Hell-oh!” was the prompt response.

“What’s your name?”

“Tell you when I see you! Hand you my card!”

“Hello! Can you hear what I say?”

"As plain as a penny whistle!"

"Well then, whoever you are, please understand that it's no use your coming all the way here to see me to-night. It's too late! This place is twenty miles from town and there are no trains. The house is shut up, and I'm going to bed. Your business must wait till to-morrow!"

"To-morrow is Christmas Day!" replied the shrill voice; "To-morrow will be here in half-an-hour! But I shall be with you before then! My business won't wait! It can't! Don't worry about getting supper for me,—I never take any! Ta!"

Utterly mystified, McNason fell back from the telephone affected by that strange and disagreeable sensation commonly called "nerves." He was not, constitutionally, a nervous man,—his mental and moral fibres were exceptionally tough and sinewy, and though he was distinctly snarley and irritable on the rare occasions when he could not altogether get his own way, his temperament was neither "highly strung" nor over-sensitive. Nevertheless, he was just now conscious of a vague uneasiness,—the sort of physical discomfort which usually precedes a severe chill.

"I've caught cold in the motor,—that's what it is,"—he said, with a slight shudder, "Such a beastly night as this is enough to freeze a man's blood! And I'm not so young as I was"—here the ugly frown deepened on his brow—"not so young—no!—but young enough—young enough! I'll get into the blankets as quickly as possible." He glanced furtively at the telephone. "Some impudent idiot has been tampering with my wire, that's pretty certain! I'll find out who it is to-morrow! And I'll make him pay for his fooling!"

He turned his eyes towards the fire. It was brighter than ever. Slowly returning to the deep easy chair placed so cosily opposite the sparkling flames, he sat down again.

"I'll get myself thoroughly warmed through before going to bed,"—he decided, spreading out his hands to the red glow—"I'm actually shivering! There must be snow in the air as well as rain!"

His teeth chattered, and though the blaze from the fire was already so strong and vivid, he used the poker again to break asunder a half-consumed lump of coal, which on being split emitted a leaping tongue of gaseous blue flame.

"That's better!" he remarked approvingly, half aloud, "That looks cheerful!"

"So it does!" said a shrill voice at his ear,—the same voice precisely that had just called to him along his "private wire"—"Quite cheerful! And Christmassy! As cheerful and Christmassy as yourself, McNason!"

With a violent start Josiah looked sharply round—and looking, uttered an involuntary cry of terror. On the cushioned arm of his elbow-chair sat, or rather squatted, an Object—a Creature—a kind of nondescript semi-human thing such as drunkards might possibly see in delirious dreams. It was small as regarded its Head, but large as regarded its Paunch. It had tiny legs, thin as a chicken's wish-bone. It had long spidery arms with which it reached down and embraced its turned-up toes. At a first glance it appeared to have a smooth doll-like countenance, but with the least movement such a variety of odd expressions came into play as to make each feature seem a different face. Its eyes were large, and abnormally brilliant. Its hair, jet black and very oily, was rolled back from its narrow brows in the "all-round frame" style of the present-day coiffeur's art, while on the top of this inverted nest, or soup plate, it wore a conical red cap adorned at the extreme point with a glittering fiery tassel. Its attire—or rather that part of its body which seemed to be clothed—was red; its attenuated arms and legs were naked, yellow, and extremely hairy. It was more like an unpleasantly huge spider with a human head than anything else, and though small enough to curl itself up on the arm of an easy chair, it was yet large enough to create fear and repulsion in the mind of even so important and powerful a personage as a multi-millionaire. Josiah McNason was distinctly afraid of it. And that he was so, is no discredit to him. He had never seen anything like it before. And he had no particular wish to see anything like it again. Yet he could not

take his eyes off it. Its eyes were fixed on him with equal pertinacity. With a mighty effort at rallying his wits he stealthily sought for the poker,—if he could get hold of that useful instrument with his right hand, he thought, and give that queer Shape squatting so close at his left a heavy WHACK!—why then it would surely break to pieces,—crumble—smash—disappear—!

"Cheerful and Christmassy like yourself, McNason!" repeated the Creature, at this juncture—"Don't try hitting me with the poker, that's a good fellow! You'll hurt yourself if you do!—you really will! A blow on this"—and it touched its protuberant Paunch significantly—"would send you,—not ME!—into the middle of Next-World's week! And you're not ready for Next-World's Week yet, McNason! There are a few little business matters concerning it which you don't quite understand! Live and learn, you know! And how are you? You're looking a bit lantern-jawed,—not very well preserved! I've seen finer men than you at your age!"

A cold perspiration broke out all over Josiah's body as he found himself mysteriously compelled to meet the dreadfully glittering round eyes of the uncanny Object that discoursed with him thus familiarly. Faintly he managed to stammer forth—

"Who the —— are you?"

"You were going to say 'Who the Devil are you'—and why didn't you?"—retorted the Creature, rapidly untwisting one hairy arm from the embrace of one hairy leg and diving into its red body-covering, from which it produced a small card on which certain letters danced and flickered like tiny dots of flame—"Who the Devil am I? Here, the Devil, is my card! Promised you, the Devil, I would hand it to you, and so, the Devil, I do! Name's quite easy, you'll find!"

With shaking fingers McNason gingerly accepted the card held out to him by the unpleasant looking claw which served his visitor for a hand, and with great difficulty, owing to the constant jumping up and down of the inscribed characters,

read:

Professor Goblin, Hell's United Empire Club.

McNason's fingers shook more violently than ever, and he hastily dropped the card, which as it fell, curled up like a firework bag in a Christmas cracker, emitted a clear blue spark of light, and vanished into space.

"The title of 'Professor' isn't really mine,"—explained the Creature, blinking at him with its owl-like orbs—"I took it."

Sinking back in his chair, Josiah covered his eyes with one hand and groaned. He must be very ill, he thought!—he must be sickening for some fatal malady! His brain was going!—and this terrible visitation—this hallucination of his senses, was the sign and effect of a mental disorder which had come on suddenly and was rapidly growing worse! How long—how long would it last!

"Lots of fellows do it,"—observed the Goblin, after a brief pause.

Some compelling influence forced the panic-stricken millionaire to speak—to reply—in fact to keep up conversation, whether he liked it or not.

"Lots of fellows do what?" he murmured feebly, still holding one hand over his eyes.

"Call themselves Professors when they're not,"—said the Goblin.

Here ensued a moment's intense stillness. Even the noise of the storm outside had, for that short interval ceased,—the fire burned silently,—and not a breath stirred the air. Only the glowing tassel on "Professor" Goblin's cap waved to and fro as though moved by an unfelt wind.

"When I rang you up on the telephone just now,"—resumed the Goblin—

But at this McNason jumped in his chair and uncovered his eyes.

"You rang me up?—you—you—!" he stammered.

"Yes—I! Who did you think it was, eh? Your 'private wire'? Oh, Beelzebub!

Nothing's 'private' to me! I should ring up the Prime Minister out of his bed if I happened to want him!"

McNason felt the muscles of his back stiffening in horror.

"You would?—you would——?"

"Certainly! I often use telephones! Capital things! They have to do with the currents of the air, you know!—and other folks work on currents of the air besides Humans! Humans aren't the only people in the universe! Don't look so scared, McNason!—I won't hurt you! As I remarked before, when I rang you up just now, I wondered what title I should take to ingratiate myself with you. You like titles, I know!—you've been thinking of a Peerage for yourself—quite right too! Get all you can, McNason!—get all you can that money will buy! But as I never deal in Honours now, I couldn't pass myself off as a Duke or an Earl. The man that sells these things is more in your line than mine. And I gave up brewing beer and running 'party' newspapers long ago, so I could hardly be a Lord. Besides Lords are getting so common—frightfully common, McNason! In fact Lords are becoming Commons! Oh, Beelzebub! Excuse the joke! And as for being a 'Sir'—oh, hoo-roo, hoo-roo!" And the Goblin, untwisting itself, beat its large paunch slowly in the fashion of a drum, evoking a dreary hollow sound which almost made McNason cry—"Only a provincial Mayor would accept it nowadays! I half thought I'd say I was a Colonel or a General,—but then you'd have taken me for an American,—and I wouldn't be an American Bounder for twenty Next-Worlds! Then I decided I would be 'Professor.' 'Professor' struck me as being quite the proper thing;—nice-sounding, wise and imposing!—and anyone can call himself a Professor—even a palmist who robs poor silly dupes of money for telling their fortunes which neither he nor anybody knows! Hoo-roo! Hoo-roo! What humbugs there are in the world, McNason! You know that! You're one!"

"I'm not!" said Josiah, indignantly, aroused to sudden defiance. "How dare you say I

am!”

“How dare I!—How dare I!” crooned the Goblin, clasping its legs again and rocking itself to and fro—“Oh, Beelzebub! How high and mighty we are! I dare do anything, McNason! Anything! I’ll skin your soul!”

Josiah gave a smothered cry of terror. Such eyes as were now bent upon him were like nothing in the world except railway signal lamps with the light in them very much intensified and enlarged.

“I’ll skin your soul!” repeated the Goblin, severely—“And you won’t like the process. Do you know what the process is called, McNason? No? Then I’ll tell you! It’s a blistering, flaying, scorching, boiling, steaming, tearing, crunching, blasting, stripping—(don’t groan like that, McNason!)—stabbing, cutting, piercing process called Truth! It will rip off all the lies in which you are so comfortably wadded, as lightning rips off the bark from a tree! And it will show you to be exactly what I say—a Humbug! A pious Fraud, McNason! A rich man who does no good with his money! A hard man who grinds down poor lives into ill-gotten gold! A cruel, avaricious, grasping, selfish man! And yet you go to Church every Sunday and pretend that you’re a Christian! Oh, hoo-roo! Uncharitable, mean, narrow-minded and hypocritical, you are anything but a good man, McNason!—and I’ve come to tell you so!”

Gathering up his courage under this volley of abuse McNason turned round in his chair and deliberately faced his accuser.

“You’re a Bad Dream!” he said slowly—“You’re the result of Cold and Indigestion! You’re—you’re Nothing! But if you were Anything, I should tell you you are an impudent scoundrel and liar! I should tell you to get out of this room before you are kicked out! But you are only an Illusion!—a horrible, horrible Fancy!—and—and you’ll Go!—presently!—in a little while—when I am better—when my brain recovers itself——”

Here he broke off, appalled at the indescribably hideous grimace with which his unpleasant companion favoured him.

“Your brain!” echoed the Goblin. “Your brain indeed! Pooh! When you are better! Hoo-roo! You never will be better—never—not unless I doctor you! I must sk—k——”

“No, no!” cried Josiah, seized by a paroxysm of fear—“Don’t skin me! Anything but that! Don’t,”—and his teeth clattered together—“don’t ski—i—in me!”

“Professor” Goblin relaxed its writhing features and smoothed them into a kind of wise impassibility such as is seen on the physiognomy of a Chinese idol.

“Now answer me, McNason,” it said, impressively—“Do you mean to say that you consider yourself a good man?”

Josiah looked at his inquisitor with one eye askew.

“As good as any man,”—he muttered—“And better than most!”

“Oh, hoo-roo!” and the dismal cry was like a hundred owls hooting in chorus—“Hoo-roo!—hoo-roo! How these conceited mortals deceive themselves!” Here it patted its paunch echoingly. “As good as any man, are you, McNason?—and better than most! Now what have you done in order to get such a very excellent opinion of yourself, eh?”

McNason hesitated. Then the recollection of his vast wealth, and of his wide-reaching business influence flashed across his mind and filled him with a sudden spirit of self-assertiveness.

“I’ve done a good deal in my time,”—he said, boldly—“For one thing, I’ve made my own way in the world!”

“Ah! And without assistance?” queried the Goblin—“Without trampling any poor person down? Without ‘sweating’ labour? Without cheating anybody less ‘sharp’ than yourself?”

McNason was silent.

“You haven’t made your own way in the world!”—went on the Goblin relentlessly—“The men who have worked for you have made it! And you’ve screwed their lives down, McNason!—screwed them down hard and fast to pittance wages in order to wrest every penny you could for yourself out of their labour! And you’ve made a pile of money! Too big a pile by far, McNason! No man in the world makes such a pile without having wronged his fellow-men in some way or other! He has tried to tip the balance of justice falsely—but there’s one thing about that balance, McNason—it always rights itself! When a man is too rich—when a man has gotten his money through close-fistedness, harshness and avarice, then WE come in! We of Hell’s United Empire Club! We give a bloated millionaire fits, I can tell you! When he has got enough gold to gorge himself with expensive food and wine every day in the week if he likes, we take away his digestion! That’s capital fun! We take away his digestion, and the doctors come and limit him to milk and soda! Oh, hoo-roo!” And the Goblin doubled itself up in a writhing tangle of delight,—“And when he marries for Money only and gets an heir to Money only, we take away the heir! And then by and bye he finds he can neither eat nor sleep, and that his Money isn’t such a valuable commodity as he thought it was, not even though it can buy a Peerage! And when he is harsh and unkind and uncharitable, we sk—k—in his soul!”

“I’m not uncharitable!” cried Josiah, goaded almost to frenzy by the darting menace of the terrible eyes that glared fixedly into his own—“Not even YOU can say that! I’ve given hundreds and hundreds of pounds away in charity——”

“On subscription lists—yes! I know you have!” and “Professor” Goblin nodded sagaciously—“I’ve seen your name writ large along with the names of a lot of other bounders who want the world to see how much they’ve given to a hospital! But that’s not charity!”

“Not charity!” echoed Josiah. “Then what is charity?”

“Shall I tell you?” said the Goblin. “You’ve heard, but you’ve forgotten!” And it repeated in a low, almost gentle voice—“‘Charity suffereth long and is kind, charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; Rejoiceth not in iniquity but rejoiceth in the truth; Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things.’ That’s as unlike your charity, McNason, as Heaven is unlike Hell!”

“Any devil can quote Scripture!” said McNason, contemptuously—“I hear all that in Church!”

“You hear, but you don’t listen,”—said the Goblin—“You go to Church every Sunday?”

“I do! My clergyman relies very much on my assistance.”

“Does he now?” and the Goblin put its head questioningly on one side—“Financial assistance, of course?”

McNason gave a short laugh.

“That’s the only kind of assistance he ever asks for!”

“Good man!” said the Goblin, thoughtfully—“And you help him?”

“Very considerably.” Here McNason drew himself up stiffly with an air of importance—“I’m a Churchwarden.”

At this “Professor” Goblin uttered a frightful yell.

“Hoo-roo, hoo-roo, HOO-ROO!” it cried, “The dear old days! The sweet familiar word!” And springing suddenly into the air, it turned a rapid somersault and came gravely squatting down again—“Oh, Beelzebub, McNason! I was once a Churchwarden!”

Josiah trembled in every limb, and his tongue clove to the roof of his mouth in sheer

panic. The alarming abruptness of his unwelcome visitor's movements almost paralysed him with terror. Somehow he had thought the Creature might be a kind of fixture to the arm of his chair,—an hallucination of his eye and brain which was likely perhaps to stay in one position,—but its eldritch screech and somersault upset his logic altogether and turned him sick and dizzy.

"I was once a Churchwarden!" said the Goblin, beginning to emit a spluttering laugh from a grimacing mouth—"Oh, hoo-roo! And I looked so respectable! Tell me, McNason!—do you wear a top-hat on Sundays?"

The shuddering millionaire bent his head feebly in assent.

"So did I! So did I!" And the Goblin clasped its toes and hugged itself in a kind of ecstasy—"And a black frock-coat! So nicely brushed! So well-fitting! I had a figure in those days, McNason! And I walked into Church with brightly polished boots, creaking just a little to show they weren't paid for—because it isn't 'gentlemanly' to pay for what you wear right down on the nail, you know!—and I bent my back before all the people and breathed good little prayers into the crown of my top-hat, just where I could see the name of the hatter printed in gold on the silk lining! I did! Oh, they were happy days! Happy humbug days! Gone, gone, gone! I shall never be a Churchwarden any more!"

Here, unravelling its contorted body, it put its clawlike hands up to its face and began to weep.

"Oh, hoo-roo!" it blubbered—"When I was a Churchwarden people were all so respectful to me! I had a country seat—such as you have, McNason!—and a whole parish bowed down to me! Think of that! Farmers doffed their caps, and farmers' wives curtsied to me! The clergyman spoke of me as his 'high-minded and generous neighbour!' Oh, hoo-roo! I was so proud of myself!—as proud as a Scotch landlord!—and nothing's prouder than that! Hoo-roo! Hoo-roo! Those happy humbug days! I gave myself such airs!—such touch-me-not airs, McNason! I might

have been an up-to-date Highland chief in a kilt, my airs were so superior! You know what an up-to-date Highland chief is, McNason?—a man who lets his ‘dear native home,’ and his ‘beloved’ moors and forests for all he can get, and lives a gay life in London on the profits! A proud and pompous creature, McNason!—and I was just such a one! I was really! Talk of patriotism and love of country! I had it all!—I was as parochial as a town clerk! I had such a grand manner!—so stand-offish! And now—and now——” Here it beat a dreary tattoo on its expressive Paunch—“Oh, hoo-roo!—I shall never be a Churchwarden any more!”

A clammy perspiration bedewed Josiah’s brow. That hollow drumming sound was dreadful!—if the horrible Creature would only stop it!——

“Don’t do that!”—he muttered, feebly, “I—I can’t bear it!”

“Can’t bear what?” demanded the Goblin, quite briskly.

“That sound you make on—on——”

“On my Tum-Tum? Oh, Beelzebub! You oughtn’t to mind that! Tum-Tums are what all you men live for nowadays! One of your dramatists has made a play out of a Tum-Tum. Poor old Shakespeare! He was never as clever as that! I always lived for my Tum-Tum—and of course it’s now the largest part of me. I have to tell it everything,—and when I beat it, it knows what I mean!”

Josiah huddled himself back into the depths of his easy chair and closed his eyes,—if he could only swoon away, he thought!—if he could but lose his sight and hearing in a merciful unconsciousness!—

A low snarling murmur, breathing through the casements, under the door, and down the chimney, now gave warning of the fresh and fiercer rising of the wind, and presently down it swooped with a terrific battery of hail, and such a scream and uproar of rage as is seldom heard save in tropical forests, when huge trees fall crashing under the blow of a storm, and torrents hurl themselves headlong from the summits of the mountains sweeping tons of granite with them like straws into the

valley below. At that instant the clock began striking Midnight. One!—Two!—Three!—Four!—Five!—and to McNason's horror the Goblin suddenly sprang upright. If it had looked uncanny before, it looked a thousand times more uncanny now. Poised on the arm of the chair its lean toes and legs began to stretch,—its body to lengthen,—taller and taller it grew, its Paunch showing as prominently and roundly as a full moon on a winter's night,—its head with its oily hair, conical cap and tassel seemed to be rising steadily into the ceiling, and Josiah, clenching his hands convulsively, watched the process in fearful fascination,—was this the way the awful hallucination would vanish? Was it going?—would the horrible Nightmare elongate itself gradually into fine lines, and, mingling with the atmosphere, disappear altogether?

Six!—Seven!—Eight! The gale rampaged violently outside and shrieked like a drunken fury, battering at the casements as though meaning to break them in. Nine!—Ten!—Eleven!—and lo!—the Goblin all at once pounced down from the height to which it had ascended, and laid its detestable claw on the shuddering McNason's shirt-front! Twelve! With a wild whistling yell, the storm burst open the long latticed windows at last, throwing them back with a savage BANG!—blowing aside the splendid damask curtains as though they were rags, and admitting a gust of bitter cold sleet and snow, while clear on the rushing blast came the sound of bells! Ding—dong!—ding!—dong! Do re mi—FA!—Sol la—si—DO! The rhythmic beat and liquid warble of rich tones melted into the wind and rain like a kind familiar voice arguing with angry children,—but Josiah McNason, half dead with fear at the sight of the hairy claw on his shirt-front and the knowledge that the red moon-like Paunch of the Goblin was almost touching his own shrunken one, heard nothing save the howling of the furious gale, and wondered how long this inexplicable torture of his body and brain would last!

"Christmas Day!" cried the Goblin,—"It's Christmas Day, McNason! Hark to the bells! How they swing! How they ring! Come to church, McNason! It's time! Come

along!" And the round eyes glowed like balls of flame—"Come to Church! Come and sing 'While Shepherds!' You're a Churchwarden, you know! Come along—come!"

"Not now—not now!" gasped the terrified Josiah, seeing that the Goblin was spreading out its long lean arms as though to envelop him in its embrace—"It's not time!—it's the middle of the night!——"

"No, no!—it's Christmas Day!" reiterated the Goblin; "Come to Church, McNason! Come and hear my friend the Reverend Mr. Firebrand hold forth on the vanity of riches! Come in the spirit of One Timothy Two! That's a text! 'Grace, mercy, peace!' Come along, McNason! All are welcome where we are going! Hark! How the bells ring! One Timothy Two! One Timothy Two! Come and 'sit under' good Mr. Firebrand! Come!—come!"

And with a terrible downward clutch, the Goblin caught hold of McNason by the coat-collar.

"Mercy——mercy!" cried the wretched man—"Help!—Help!"

"Help!—help!" shouted the Goblin, derisively—"One Timothy Two! Come along, McNason! Come along!"

Catching up Josiah as easily as though he were a wooden mannikin, the Goblin unfurled a pair of bat-like wings and rose aloft in air.

"Here we go!" it yelled—"Up we go, and down we go! Off to Church! Me and the Churchwarden! Oh, hoo-roo, hoo-roo! Christmas Day and Christmas Bells, and a jolly Christmas altogether! One Timothy Two! Off we go!"

And with the rush and roar of the wind, the Goblin carrying the world-renowned millionaire as a bird of prey might carry a rabbit or a weasel, soared out on a wave of mingled sleet and snow into the stormy night!

What happened to him in that wild supernatural scurry through the air Josiah

McNason never knew. He lived and was conscious,—conscious of being borne along at a furious rate not knowing whither,—conscious of the freezing cold,—the rain, the wind, that tossed him and his unearthly companion about like dead leaves on its angry breath with a “Hoo-roo!” louder than the cry peculiar to the Goblin itself,—conscious above all of the bells! O the Bells! How they trilled and trolled out their Christmas melody!—how they seemed to tumble one over the other in their haste to proclaim “Peace and Goodwill!”—how their metal throats palpitated and throbbed with the angelic message!—angelic still,—angelic always!—even though some mortals nowadays are so miserably-minded as to doubt its truth and sweetness! The Bells rang everywhere!—loudly to the scudding clouds,—softly to the darkened earth,—whisperingly among the chill showers of sleet and snow, and with an echoing clang like musical thunder above and around the shadowy drifting form of the Goblin as it flew along, gripping the quivering Josiah as a cat might grip a mouse, or an eagle a new-born lamb. All at once the rattle and rush of the warring elements rolled off in a pause of quietude, letting the Bells have it all their own way,—and—suddenly descending with lightning-like rapidity by sheer force of the Goblin’s imperative downward pressure, Josiah found himself standing on his feet in the middle of a vast building which looked like a Church, though there was no sacred emblem of religion to be seen anywhere in it save the Pulpit. The Pulpit stood out with singular obtrusiveness, for it was green,—a livid, wicked green like the glare of a serpent’s eye. Panels of white appeared to be inserted round it, but these could not be plainly discerned, at once. The green hue was its chief note of attraction, and McNason’s eyes fastened themselves upon this with a pertinacity surely inspired by some other influence than his own. Breathless, shivering and exhausted as he was, there was something about that Green Pulpit which, wholly against his will, compelled his attention,—and as he looked, he heard a sudden confused murmur of voices which, beginning softly at first, grew louder and louder till it rose into a perfect pandemonium of howling! The unhappy millionaire

trembled. What new and nameless horror was there yet in store for him? Involuntarily he turned to look for the Goblin,—even that uncanny Presence seemed kinder and more friendly than such a dreadful uproar of unknown tongues! And he was actually glad to see it still standing beside him, its round eyes sparkling with a strange light of mingled mirth and malice.

"Well, McNason, how do you feel after your airship voyage?" it inquired—"A bit air-sick?"

Here the howling voices grew fiercer and more shrill,—and yet the alarmed Josiah could see nothing. He felt desperately inclined to take hold of the Goblin's claw for protection.

"What—what's that?" he stammered.

"Only Church!" replied the Goblin—"Firebrand is a strong preacher! He 'draws' like a magnet—or a dentist. There's always a crowded congregation to hear him."

Church!—a strong preacher!—a crowded congregation! McNason stared and stared, seeing nothing but the Green Pulpit and empty space, till all at once the Goblin took off its conical cap and with the tasselled point of that headgear touched his eyes. Then—then—oh, then! But who can describe that "then"! Who in mere words can picture the amazing scene disclosed of which he, Josiah McNason, was a part, and to which he seemed to be the only human witness! All round him, in front of him and behind him were Goblins,—Goblins big, Goblins little, Goblins fat, Goblins lean, Goblins straight, Goblins crooked—Goblins of every imaginable size and shape—Goblins of every possible distortion or monstrosity that ever appeared on the pages of a child's fairy book, were here in their scores, and all attired in the queerest motley. Some wore women's enormous hats trimmed with fantastic bows of ribbon and big waggling plumes,—others had coloured caps like those which are put into very cheap Christmas crackers,—some were decked out with flashy tiaras and crowns that looked as if they were cut out of tin-foil,—others again had their strange

sticky hair dressed as high as surely an hair, sticky or otherwise, could go, and surmounted with fantastic wreaths and garlands of bright coloured flowers apparently made of paper, under which they minced and grinned like female gymnasts at a rough country fair,—and all of them were jostling, pushing, squeezing, and crowding together, each one taking a seemingly mischievous delight in trying to elbow its neighbour out of place. It was a fearsome sight!—and still more fearsome did it become when a great ball of fire suddenly bounced down from Nowhere and burst with a loud report at the foot of the Green Pulpit, where, spreading out a peacock's tail of vivid flame, it lit up the wicked livid colour of that edifice with blinding brilliancy. Josiah McNason's soul froze within him. He was dead, he thought!—he must be dead!

In a swooning access of speechless terror he clung to the Goblin, and was in a vague way comforted when it tucked its hairy arm through his and leered at him quite amicably.

"Don't be nervous, McNason!" it said, "It's all right! Firebrand always likes the electricity turned on when he preaches! He's the 'star' actor of the piece, you see,—the light must show him up more than anyone else. There he is!"

Josiah gazed at the Green Pulpit in quaking awe and aversion as a black figure suddenly sprang up in it like a jack-in-the-box,—a tall, lanky, clothes-prop sort of shape, with a head like a large mop, from which the hair, of a fiery red, hung down in disordered tangles. This Goblin's best feature consisted in its attire, which was of a double-dyed inkiness, with a wonderfully smooth and silky 'shine' upon it, suggestive of black-lead. It was an unfortunate costume, however, so far as concerned its becomingness to the face of its wearer,—a face white as a bleached bone, with prominent eyes which appeared to goggle out of their cavernous sockets like pebbles rolling each on the edge of a hole,—and the sable clothing of the creature only intensified the awful pallor of its countenance, and brought out its

worst points into the strongest possible relief. McNason had barely time to notice these details, which seemed to be insistently forced upon his attention, when his ears were again assailed by renewed howling and screeching, accompanied by a tremendous sound of drums, as if all the drummers that were ever born were drumming their way through the world. Every Goblin had a protuberant paunch,—and as "the Reverend Mr. Firebrand" arose in the pulpit they all started together beating a prolonged tattoo upon these appendages to their otherwise skeleton forms. And ever over the frightful noise rang the Bells!—always the Bells!—the Bells of Christmas,—the Bells of peace and goodwill! Do, re, mi, FA!—Sol, la, si—DO! Ding-dong!—ding-dong! Swinging and swaying, the echoes rose and fell—and in the midst of the pulsating chimes, the Goblins burst into a chorus of wild shouting—

"Firebrand!—Ha ha!"

"Good old Firebrand!"

"Order, order! Silence for Firebrand!"

"Ha-ha, HA! Ha-HA!"

"Firebrand! Hoo-roo! Hoo-roo!"

And then—as though they had been all clashed together by one stroke into silence—the Bells ceased. The shouting and laughter and Paunch-drumming of the Goblins likewise eddied away into a dull murmur—and the Goblin in the Green Pulpit raised a skeleton hand with the first-finger-bone elevated as a signal for attention.

"My friends!" it began—"My dear brethren——!"

"Ha-HA! Ha-ha-HA!"

And the crowd of uncanny creatures twisted and writhed with ecstasy, tossing their queerly decorated heads about, and spreading their wide mouths into elastic grins

which seemed to swallow up all the rest of their faces. As if in sympathy with the general hilarity, the "Reverend Mr. Firebrand" grinned also—a peculiar and very ghastly grin indeed.

"My friends!" he or It resumed—"How good it is for us all to be here! What a sign of regeneration——!"

"Ha-ha-HA!"

"Of penitence——"

"Ha-ha!"

"Of unselfishness and charity——"

"Ha-ha-ha!"

"Of hope for the future——"

"Hoo-roo! Hoo-roo!"

"Of everything beautiful, pleasant, and truthful! Oh, how good it is to know that we are thus assembled together, and that we have among us a Human Creature, unlike, yet so like ourselves! Oh, my dear friends! 'Lest we forget,' let us remember that we were all Humans once! All Humans!—all Humbugs!—and such respectable Humbugs too! Oh, my friends, let us turn our thoughts back along the tide of Time—the tide of Time is such a fine expression!—and reflect on those days—the days of frock-coats and top-hats! The days when we were GOOD!"

"Ha-ha-HA! Hoo-roo! Hoo-roo!"

Screams of laughter echoed through the dim space, where now, faintly discernible through a floating red vapour, the trembling Josiah caught sight of the glittering tubes of a great organ, and scarcely had he seen this when CRASH!—went the keys with a droning and discordant thunder. A hideous black scarecrow of a Goblin, waving its paws or claws about fantastically, began performing on the instrument, whereat all the impish congregation burst out yelling in chorus:

“When WE were ‘good,’ in all the world
None were so ‘good’ as WE;
We thought OURSELVES the only ones
Whose souls would savèd BE!—
When WE were ‘good’ our neighbours all
We found so very BAD,
That only US, and only WE
Some little Morals HAD!
“When WE were ‘good,’ we went to Church,
That every one might see
How ‘good’ we were,—much better far
Than other folks could be!—
We slandered all our dearest friends,
Told all the lies we could,
And chose our own front seats in Heaven,
Because we were so ‘good’!
“And now we find that other folks
Whom we thought very BAD,
Were better than OURSELVES at best,
And ALL the Morals HAD!
And sad to say, we’ve lived to learn,
That shuffle as we would,
No HUMBUG lasts in Heaven or Hell
Not even—‘BEING GOOD’!”

Renewed yelping, and "hoo-roos" of diabolical laughter followed this vocal effort, and the miserable Josiah McNason felt cold trickles of perspiration running down his back as he listened. Yet he could not speak. Speech for the moment was taken from him,—he tried to utter some word—some ejaculation,—but his tongue was stiffened in his mouth as though it were paralysed. And he was forced to pay close attention to the "Reverend Mr. Firebrand" whether he liked it or not.

"Oh my friends!" pursued that grim and ghastly preacher—"How I thank you for that beautiful hymn! How sweetly it expresses our innermost feelings! Does it not, my friends? Oh yes, indeed it does! And our brother here—our Human brother—does it not express his feelings likewise? Yes—oh yes!—indeed it does!"

"Ha-ha-ha-ha! Ha-HA!" shrieked the Goblins—"Indeed it does! Ha-HA!"

"Our Human brother," went on "Mr. Firebrand"—"is a 'good' man——"

"Hoo-oo! Hoo-roo!—Hoo—oo!"

"A 'good' man because, my friends, he has made Money! Money is Morals,—Morals are Money! Our Human brother is a rich man,—therefore virtuous. Virtue, as you all know, consists in being rich,—Vice in being poor. Our Human brother is also a wise man. Wisdom consists in looking after Number One. He does that! He has always done it admirably! Number One is to him the centre of the universe. And we sympathise with him, do we not, my friends? Oh yes, oh yes, we do! For we also, in former days—we also looked after Number One. Not One Timothy Two! No—no! One Self One! That was our text in life. And we acted up to it, did we not, my friends? Oh yes, we did—we did! We should not be here now if we had not looked after Number One!"

"Hoo-roo!—oh—oh—Hoo-roo!"

And the wild cry had a dismal note in it this time like the shriek of the wailing wind.

"Again, my friends,"—went on the Goblin "Firebrand,"—"Our Human brother is a charitable man. We all know what charity is, do we not? Oh yes, we do! Charity

begins at home! Charity never gives a penny away unless it can get something for itself out of the bargain! Charity never subscribes to anything unless it can see its name printed on a subscription list! That's Charity, my friends!—as WE understand it—as our Human brother understands it! The Charity which distinguished US when we,—like our Human brother,—wore frock-coats and top-hats on Sundays, was a charity which suffered nothing and was never kind,—envied everybody,—vaunted itself greatly,—was always puffed up,—often behaved itself unseemly,—sought its own,—was easily provoked,—thought evil of most things,—rejoiced in iniquity,—hated the truth,—bore nothing,—believed nothing,—hoped nothing,—endured nothing! This is the Charity of Human Nature—material Human Nature!—and our Human brother is a glorious living example of it! Soon—oh yes!—very soon!—our charitable Human brother will give twenty thousand pounds to a hospital. How generous! How noble! The poor and sick will benefit,—but our Human brother will not be left out in the cold! Oh no! He will buy a Peerage with the money and also with an additional 'little diplomacy.' And he will be a lord!—oh my brethren, how great a thing it is to be a lord! Do we not know this? Yes, indeed, indeed we do! Some of us have been lords, and some of us have been commons. Both sets have their advantages. But when one is a lord, one can do so much! One can become the 'noble' director of bogus 'Companies,' and pocket a fee for attendance at every meeting! And one can owe bills to one's tailor for an indefinite period! And one can sell one's self and one's 'nobility' to any American female title-hunter who will pay sufficient cash down! Oh yes, my brethren, it is a great thing to be a lord! And when our Human brother is a lord, he will be so proud and glad that he won't know himself! He is a good man now, but when he becomes a peer, he will be a better one! Oh yes, my friends!—the world and Human Nature generally will find him better, wiser, more generous, more charitable, more everything that is pleasant, beautiful, and truthful! Will it not be so? Yes, indeed it will be so! We know it will be so, for we were all 'good' men! I myself was a 'good'

man—once!”

“Ha-ha-ha-ha! Ha-HA! Ha-ha-ha-ha!”

And like twisting boughs of trees in a storm, the goblins swayed and rocked themselves to and fro, convulsed with laughter.

“I say I was a ‘good’ man!” repeated the demon preacher, leaning down over the edge of the green pulpit, and rolling its goggle eyes at its audience, particularly at the shuddering McNason—“Good in the sense that you and I and our Human brother understand goodness! I wore a top-hat——”

“Ha-ha!”

“And a frock-coat——”

“Ha-ha!”

“And I went to Church every Sunday——”

“Ha-ha-Ha!”

“I took round the collection-plate——”

“Ha-ha!”

“And I always put a sixpence into it myself—never less—never more!”

“Ha-ha-ha! Ha-Ha!”

“When any poor man asked me to help him, and said he had a large family to keep, I told him he shouldn’t have a large family——”

“Ha-ha-ha!”

“I never sacrificed my own comfort or convenience at any time on any account, and I never parted with a penny I thought it better to keep! I was a most respectable man!”

“Hoo-roo-oo! Hoo-roo!”

“Now, my friends, I will ask you in the spirit of One Timothy Two to consider the

interesting subject of my discourse,—our dear Human brother! He, too, is most respectable! He is even more than respectable, for he is a millionaire! And not only a millionaire, but a multi-millionaire! He is all Money! Oh, my friends, how good it is to be all Money! All Money and no Heart! Heart is never respectable—it is always a scoundrel! Always trusting the wrong people, loving the worst sinners, and making a fool of itself in business! Oh yes, my friends, Heart is desperately wicked! But our dear Human brother has none of it. Let us congratulate him! Especially at this time of year,—this dreary, melancholy, grumbling-time—when all the world's tiresome little children want holiday treats, and all the tradesmen send in their bills,—this wretched, stupid, depressing season when even WE are made uncomfortable——"

"Hoo-oo-oo! Hoo-roo!"

And now the Goblins beat their paunches desperately and instead of laughing, began to weep. One cadaverous-looking creature took off its woman's hat, large as an extra large lamp-shade, and shed tears into it as though it were a bucket.

"Ah—ee!—ah—ee!" it sobbed—"How I do hate the compliments of the season! I always did! When I was a Human, I always had to tip my butler and my coachman on what they called Boxing Day! They expected it,—the Brutes! Ah—ee!—ah—ee! Such bitter, bitter memories!"

Other wailings and groanings of a similar nature arose in chorus, and even Josiah McNason's own particular companion goblin moaned and blubbered.

"It is a terrible time!" it whimpered—"A terrible, terrible time! Everybody expects everybody else to give them something! Such a waste and such an expense! Oh, hoo-roo!"

Again Josiah essayed to speak,—but his tongue still refused to utter.

"At this depressing period," went on the ranting "Firebrand"—"When stupid Humans wished each other to be 'Merry' without any cause for merriment, it is a great joy to find so sensible and practical a person as our dear, rich, wise friend Mr.

Millionaire McNason among us! Yes, my brethren, it is a great joy! For he never wished anyone a ‘merry’ or even a happy time in his life, and quite right too! He never wanted to be ‘merry’ himself—never felt like it—never looked like it! He is the master of a great Business and has no time for Sentiment. Sentiment is an imbecile quality pertaining to girls, women and fools. And our Human brother is not a fool! Oh dear no! He is living precisely as he wishes to die;—he is making himself into one of US with all possible speed! And how clever that is of him! His only regret is that he will have no use for Money when he becomes a member of our United Empire Club:—and that to be a lord will give him no extra privileges! Otherwise, he is perfectly satisfied with Himself—just as we all used to be perfectly satisfied with Ourselves! And are we not satisfied with ourselves still? Oh yes, my brethren!—oh yes, we are satisfied, because we are compelled to be satisfied! There is no getting out of Our condition! We chose it, We made it, and here We are! And in the spirit of One Timothy Two, we exhort our Human brother to continue in the self righteous way he is going! We beseech him never to be ‘merry,’ never to be kind! We implore him never to either lend or give money to those in need, not even to an old and faithful servant! For old and faithful servants are just as great humbugs as any other class of persons! Moreover gifts are always resented, and kindnesses considered as merely personal advertisements of generosity! Let our Human brother always be as he is now, and so shall he reap the just reward of his labours! The just reward!—the just reward——”

Here the bells suddenly began again, pealing their chimes with a delicious softness as though far, far away.

“Soon, very soon,” continued the “Firebrand,” lifting both its skeleton arms aloft from the enshrouding folds of its black draperies—“for our Human brother the joys of money-making will be no more! Soon, very soon, the demands upon his Purse will cease, and his weary eyes will close for the last time upon the pleasant sun! Soon, very soon, he will hear no more ‘compliments of the season’—nor will he be

troubled by the hand-shake of a friend, or the suffering appeal of the sick and needy. Soon, very soon, his ears will be deaf to all entreaties or messages—he will not even hear the message of the Bells! The Bells!"

Here the Goblins all began to jump and dance up and down, up and down,—and turning their hideous faces towards Josiah McNason they bowed and bobbed before him, shouting and shrieking:

"The Bells! The Bells!"

"The message of the Bells!" reiterated the demon orator, waving its bony hands excitedly—"Grace, mercy, peace! One Timothy Two! Soon, very soon, our dear Human brother will be offended by that message no more! Soon—very soon—he will be one of US!"

With a tremendous effort, Josiah suddenly regained his speech.

"Never!" he cried, with extraordinary passion—"Never will I be one of You! Never, so help me God!"

As he spoke, a sudden terrific roar of mingled flame and wind sounded in his ears,—the peacock's tail of light playing up like foam against the Green Pulpit leaped to an abnormal height, and swallowed up the "Reverend Mr. Firebrand" in a twinkling,—then, spreading itself into a rolling stream of fire it swept over the crowd of Goblins and drove them all helter-skelter before it like dead leaves drifting in a hurricane, engulfing them all out of sight save one,—the self-styled "Professor" that still, with its bone of an arm thrust familiarly through McNason's, remained beside him as it were "on guard." The Green Pulpit vanished, and nothing remained of the whole shadowy building that had seemed to be a Church, save the great organ, where now instead of a Goblin, sat a boy acolyte dressed in a little white surplice. Under his tender young fingers the notes breathed tremulously but sweetly, and presently he opened his cherub mouth and sang:

"O be joyful in the Lord, all ye lands,—serve the Lord with gladness and come

before his presence with a song!”

Here the anthem was taken up by some mighty invisible choir:

“Be ye sure that the Lord He is God; it is He that hath made us and not We Ourselves——”

And all at once a white cloud filled the near and distant spaces like the rushing-in of a wave, and on this opaque pearly vapour came floating a great number of dazzling Angelic Shapes, wonderfully fair, gloriously beautiful, carrying palms in their uplifted hands and singing:

“Glory! Glory to God in the highest! And on earth, peace and goodwill! Glory to God!”

Stricken with a great awe, Josiah McNason looked and listened. He trembled violently. Should he kneel? He wondered! He had often pretended to kneel in Church—though he had really only bent his back slightly for convention’s sake, but now——?

Before he could make up his mind one way or the other the Goblin’s clutch descended once more upon his coat-collar.

“Come along, McNason!” it whispered, “We must go now! We’re not wanted here! Come!”

“Oh! Leave me alone, for Heaven’s sake!” muttered Josiah pleadingly—“Let me stay here! Why take me away?”

“Why? Because they’re beginning to keep Christmas! We don’t believe in Christmas, do we? We say ‘Curse Christmas’ don’t we? Of course we do! Come along! You’re not wanted and I’m not wanted! One Timothy Two! Off we go!”

Another terrible rush and hurry-scurry through unknown heights and depths of the stormy air, and then with a sudden swoop and pounce, the Goblin dumped Josiah McNason down outside the garden gate of a pretty cottage in a quiet country lane.

Here, as if by magic, the sky cleared to a bright blue, and the sun shone out brilliantly. Birds began to sing, and the scent of a thousand flowers perfumed every light breath of wind.

“A little bit of sunshine, McNason!” whispered the Goblin—“It’s winter time for a good many Humans in many places, but it’s always summer here. It’s what WE call a ‘spiritual’ climate,—not affected by outside conditions!”

The suffering millionaire, breathless, exhausted and conscious of a great aching pain at his heart, gazed at the peaceful scene before him in silence. It was a very little garden upon which he looked,—a mere tea-cup of a garden,—but full to the brim of the sweetest blossom. The cottage to which the garden belonged was likewise very small, but it had a deep and cosy porch, up which the loveliest jessamine clambered and threw out tufts of odorous white spray. Red roses thrust their warm glowing faces through the masses of snowy bloom, and, twining in friendly garlands, showered their velvety petals at the feet of a fair woman who sat just within the porch, with her arms thrown round a sturdy boy of some nine or ten years old. She was well worth the homage of the roses—for she was very sweet to look upon,—fresh-complexioned as the bloom on a peach,—soft-eyed,—full-bosomed, and of an aspect expressing the serenest peace, love and tenderness.

“Once upon a time!” she said.

“Oh, mother!” cried the boy she clasped, “That’s the old way of telling a story! Try some other way!”

She laughed.

“Darling, there’s no other way! Everything was ‘once upon a time’ wasn’t it?” The little fellow looked up at her seriously.

“No, I don’t think so! You could never say you were my mother ‘once upon a time,’ could you? You are my mother always!”

“Always!” she murmured—“That’s very true, little man! Your mother

always!”—and her lips moved silently—“On earth, and, please God, in Heaven!”

Josiah McNason, peering over the garden gate, now tried to open it, but found it inflexibly closed against him. He heaved an involuntary sigh. The Goblin echoed the sigh derisively.

“Heigh-ho, Beelzebub!” it said—“Good-looking woman, eh, McNason? And a pretty boy! That’s her youngest. She’s got three sons and a lovely daughter. Feel a bit envious, McNason? Don’t you wish you hadn’t jilted her?”

Josiah started. A sense of fear and shame began to tingle through his long-chilled blood.

“She is—she——?” he faltered.

“Exactly! That’s it!” said the Goblin. “She—she IS! The girl whose first affections you won and threw over! That was a nasty trick of yours, McNason! You did it for Money—yes!—you’ve always done everything for Money! But the girl deserved a better fate than either YOU or your MONEY!—and she’s got it! There she is—a beloved woman, wife, and mother. Just as pretty as you’re plain! She’s poor and you’re rich. But she’s contented and you’re wretched! She has three sons—all clever bright boys,—and you haven’t an heir to your name! You treated her like a CAD,—and she has married a MAN! He hasn’t millions, but he has Heart. Heart is a curious thing, McNason! You don’t know what it is, but it’s really a curious thing! It makes Happiness,—and you don’t know what that is either!”

McNason listened dreamily. All desire to resent or deny the Goblin’s accusations had died out of him. He looked yearningly over that barred garden gate as an unforgiven sinner might look at the closed doors of Paradise. So that beautiful woman with the golden-haired boy was Lilias? Lilias was her name, he remembered;—he had called her familiarly by it in the old days,—days which he recalled now with a sense of imminent desolation. Lilias had married and was happy. Did her happiness please him? No, he could not say it did. A bitter jealousy

burnt in his soul,—a wrathful impatience with Deity. Why was the future veiled? Why were men left so much in the dark concerning their destinies? How could he ever have guessed that Lilias would have ripened from the timid, pretty, trusting girl he had known, into this gracious, lovely, and loving woman with all the sacred sweetness of home enfolding her as securely as a rose is enfolded by the cherishing summer air! And still he looked at her,—and still the bitterness in him grew yet more bitter, and in a kind of impotent anger he shook the garden gate with both his hands, determined to force it open.

"Steady, McNason!" said the Goblin at this juncture—"You're not master here, you know! Every man's house is his castle! You want to be a burglar, do you? So like you! I know a lot of fellows who feel that way! When they see a man happier than themselves, with a nice wife belonging to him, they try to steal the wife away and make him wretched! It's a fashionable pastime with them, and they call it 'Souls!' Oh, Beelzebub! When they find out what Souls really are, won't they be sorry for themselves! Come along, McNason!"

But Josiah clung to the garden gate.

"Lilias! Lilias!" he called.

But Lilias, laughing, was playing with her boy's curls, and neither turned her head nor raised her eyes. The Goblin chuckled.

"Think she can hear you, do you?" it inquired mockingly—"Oh—hoo-roo!—what a fool you are, McNason! She is as far away from you as you are from her—and that's a pretty long distance, I can tell you! You're out in the storm and wind—she's in the full sunshine! As I told you, she enjoys a 'spiritual' climate—supernatural weather! But you don't believe in the supernatural, do you, McNason? Of course not! Why should you! You don't believe in anybody but yourself! Not even in Me! Oh Beelzebub! Come along, come along!"

"Where to?" cried the miserable man, "Where in the name of Heaven do you want to

take me next?"

"You shouldn't talk about Heaven,"—said the Goblin, severely—"That's a 'supernatural' place. I don't want to take you there, you may be sure! It wouldn't suit you at all! Nor me! Come along, come along! Don't hanker any more after what you have lost and can never find again! Sentiment is Stupidity—Money is Wisdom! Think of that! It makes you one of the wisest men on earth! Come! I've got another old friend waiting to see you—urgent appointment! Come along, I tell you!" And the Goblin made a vicious grab at McNason's coat-collar. "Don't yearn like that! You're too old to play Romeo, and ever so much too ugly! Hoo-roo-oo-oo! One Timothy Two!—and away we go!"

Out into the storm again on the wings of the bitter winter wind! All the sunshine of the "spiritual" climate vanished, and a great panorama of dark clouds moved rapidly through the freezing air. Clouds everywhere!—clouds of fantastic form and giant shape,—clouds like rocky fortresses set on the summits of high mountains,—clouds resembling huge ruminative animals wallowing in ether,—clouds heavy and threatening, suggesting pent-up thunder and jagged flame! Like a couple of midges the Goblin and its human victim were tossed from edge to edge of the thick rolling vapours, and when they descended to earth once more, Josiah McNason found himself in the small "best parlour" of an unpretentious residence,—one in a row of similar dwellings in an unpretentious street.

"Keep your eyes open, McNason!" said the Goblin—"And your ears! Nobody sees YOU, you know, or ME! We're invisible. And if you want to curse and swear, do so by all means! Nobody hears, and nobody cares!"

Josiah looked, and saw before him a man reclining in an invalid chair near a small bright fire, his eyes fixed on the sparkling flames with a patient and wistful sadness. A pale, sweet-faced woman with soft brown hair somewhat silvered, knelt by him, clasping one of his hands tenderly in her own. There were traces of tears on her

worn thin cheeks, and her lips quivered. And standing close by, with one arm resting on the mantelpiece, and eyes bent compassionately down upon the pair, was another man whom McNason had no difficulty in recognising as his overseer, Mr. Pitt. Yet his surprise at this was so great that he could not forbear an exclamation.

“Pitt here! How the devil——!”

“Exactly!” said the Goblin—“How the devil and why the devil! Only the devil knows!”

Josiah groaned, and then the overpowering dumbness that had seized him before caught him again in its paralysing power. Stricken mute himself, he was nevertheless forced to listen with the closest attention to all that passed around him. And when Pitt spoke, the sound of that equable familiar voice sent a new and violent shock through his already racked nervous system.

“Mr. McNason is a man of iron,”—said Pitt—“There’s no doubt about it! In fact he’s harder than any metal, for metal can be made to melt, and he can’t!”

The man in the invalid chair moved restlessly.

“Did he remember me at all?—did you remind him?—” he murmured.

“Yes, Willie, I did! I even recalled the days when you used to carry his little son on your shoulder round to see the works—and I said, ‘Dove was one of the smartest men in your employ, and brought valuable custom to the firm.’ But it was all no use—no use!” He paused and then addressed himself gently to the woman who knelt by her husband’s side. “I am sure, Mrs. Dove, you believe that I have done my best?”

“Indeed, indeed, I know you have!” she answered earnestly—“And,—after all—I never had much hope. Mr. McNason must have endless claims upon his purse—and memory! It is so seldom one finds a very very rich man who cares to help little outside troubles like ours—” Here her voice trembled dangerously, and she ceased.

Willie Dove sighed a little wearily.

"Ah well!" he said—"I did my best for him in my day! And I thought he might possibly be disposed to do me a good turn now. It's true I haven't so many years before me, but I've got some working power left if I could only get well——"

"I'm afraid it's my fault, Will!" said his wife piteously. "You could, of course, go to the Hospital and doctors would attend to you there—but oh! I couldn't bear it!—I couldn't bear it!" And here her self-control gave way, and she began to sob—"I couldn't bear to see you taken away from me after all the years we have spent so happily together! I couldn't bear to think of you ill, and in a place where I could only get at you at stated times, with strangers always about you! It is very foolish of me and perhaps very wrong—but I—I cannot help it!"

Her husband stroked her bent head with his thin delicate hand.

"Don't cry, Jennie!" he said softly—"I won't go away from you! I'd rather die!"

Mr. Pitt coughed obstreperously.

"Look here, Dove," he said—"Don't let us be miserable on Christmas Eve! I left McNason himself looking as wretched as a plucked crow. Poor old chap! With all his money, I wouldn't be in his shoes for the world! Tell me, what did the doctor say when he saw you to-day?"

"About the same as he has always said," replied Dove, resignedly—"That an operation would not only relieve, but cure me, and that he should like to perform it here in my own house, and get a good surgical nurse to attend upon me, with my wife's assistance. For my wife is a capital nurse, aren't you, Jennie?" He caressed the bent head again and went on—"He thinks me of too nervous a temperament to do well away from home."

There followed a silence. Presently Pitt spoke again in determined accents.

"I tell you what it is, Dove," he said, "I'll lend you the money!"

Dove started.

“You, Mr. Pitt?”

“Yes, I!” and Pitt, smiling, drew himself up with an air of resolution—“I can’t afford it a bit—but I’ll risk it! I’ll risk it because—well!—because it’s Christmas-time!—Now don’t try to get up!” for Dove raising himself in his chair with some difficulty, caught at Pitt’s hand and grasped it hard, while tears stood in his eyes. “And don’t thank me, because I can’t bear to be thanked! It’s Christmas-time, as I’ve said—and I’ve always had ‘old-fashioned’ ideas of Christmas. My mother taught them to me—God bless her!—I think”—and his voice sank a little—“that perhaps we ought to spare a little ‘gold, frankincense and myrrh’ just at this season—and this loan to you will be my thank-offering—though it’s a poor thing at best, for you see I can’t give you the money, Willie! McNason could have given it and never have missed it, but I can’t. I wish I could! However, if you’ll take the will for the deed——”

And now Mrs. Dove, rising gently from her knees, came up to him and laid her hand on his arm.

“God bless you, Mr. Pitt!” she said, in clear sweet tones—“He will bless you!—be sure of that! What you lend to us is more than given, because you have such a friendly sympathy with us, and sympathy is greater than gold! I will not even try to thank you——”

“No, don’t!” interrupted Pitt, hastily, pressing her hand hard—“It’s—it’s all right! Dove and I will arrange our business matters, and I’ll see the doctor to-morrow, even though it is Christmas Day!”

“I’ll pay it all back!” said Dove, excitedly—“I can work well still—I’ve got all my wits about me—and I have a fine offer from a firm to undertake some affairs for them immediately if I can only pull up my strength. And I think I shall manage—now!”

Pitt here drew a chair to the fire opposite the sick man and sat down.

“It’s a curious thing,”—he said—“how the possession of enormous wealth hardens some people, and makes them not only difficult to deal with, but often positively cruel to themselves and to others! Now if one is to judge by outward looks, Mr. McNason, though a multi-millionaire, is just about one of the most miserable men alive!”

The Goblin chuckled, and gave Josiah a nudge with its sharp elbow.

“Hear that, McNason!” it said—“It’ll do you good to learn what other folks think of you!”

“So old, so feeble and so lonely!” went on Mr. Pitt, almost pathetically—“When he refused to do anything for your assistance, Dove, I was inclined to be very plain-spoken and give him a bit of my mind, even at the risk of offending him,—but seeing what a forlorn old wreck he seemed, with his shrivelled body and wrinkled face, I thought it was no use being angry with him,—especially at Christmas-time! He’s not long for this world!”

Again the Goblin nudged Josiah’s arm and its fiery eyes glowed with railway-signal brilliancy.

“It’s not exactly age that will kill him,”—went on Pitt, meditatively—“He’s not seventy yet, and ought to look much healthier and stronger than he does. My father is eighty-two, and is as well set-up a veteran as anyone could wish to see—walks his six miles a day, and is as young in heart as a boy—but of course he has always lived a very simple life and never hankered after more money than just as much as would keep him going and save him from debt. Mr. McNason has all the cares of an immense business on his brain—and naturally a break-down must come sooner or later——”

He ceased. A gust of wind roared down the chimney, throwing the flames of the little fire crookedly to and fro. Mrs. Dove shivered, and looked about her uneasily.

“What a stormy night!” she said—“Not at all a peaceful Christmas!”

Her husband, lying restfully back in his chair, smiled at her.

“The peace must be in our hearts, Jennie!” he said—“If we don’t keep Christmas there, it’s no Christmas at all! Storm or calm, it’s a blessed time!—a time of thanksgiving—a time of hope!”

“So it is,”—agreed Pitt—“and so may it always be! Now, Mrs. Dove, bring out a bottle of that old port your good doctor sent you the other day, and we’ll drink to Willie’s recovery and health and general usefulness! And we’ll wish old McNason a Merry Christmas, too!”

They all laughed, and Mrs. Dove set the wine and glasses on the table. Mr. Pitt poured out the ruby-red cordial, and raising his own glass to his lips said:

“A Merry Christmas to you, Mrs. Dove! A Merry Christmas to you, Willie! And to our grim and gaunt old governor, Mr. McNason, a Merry Christmas also! And may he find something better than riches in the next world and be all the happier for the finding!”

They all three drank this toast, and while they drank, Josiah McNason trembled in every limb with an ague of exceeding cold. Was he so near death, he wondered, that even Pitt could see the near approach of his end? He turned his miserable eyes upon the Goblin, who grinned.

“Brother ‘Firebrand’ was quite right, you see!” it remarked—“Soon, very soon, you will be one of US! We are your ‘next world,’ you know! And riches don’t count in our United Empire Club—but you’ll be happy, McNason! Oh yes—you’ll be so happy! Because you will have reaped the just reward of your labours, and you will be exactly what you have made of YOURSELF! Nothing could be more satisfactory! Listen! Willie Dove is talking about you now!”

And so he was. Willie Dove was speaking in the kindest and gentlest way possible of the man who had refused to help him in his need.

"Well, I hope Mr. McNason will live many years yet," he said—"and that he will learn how to enjoy and get the best out of the large fortune he has made. The amount of good he could do if he liked is simply incalculable—and if he would only use some of his money just for the sole purpose of benefiting others, and would not merely put it out like a magnet to draw more money in again, he would be the happiest man alive. For instance, if instead of subscribing large sums to charities which are presided over by 'committees' who use up half the money for their own expenses, he would go himself among the poor and personally relieve them at first hand,—if he would try to help those who are, with great difficulty, trying to help themselves,—those who cannot borrow and will not beg,—if he would just put himself out a bit——"

"Ah, that's just what he won't do!" interposed Pitt—"He can't see anything or anybody but Himself—that's the pity of it!"

"Poor soul!" said Mrs. Dove, gently—"We mustn't forget that he lost his only son,—a dear little boy!—and that may have embittered him. All our children have been mercifully spared to us, thank God!—but even if one had been taken, I'm sure we should always have been thinking of that one! And his 'one' was his all! We must remember that! And however hard he is upon us, we mustn't be hard upon him! That wouldn't be keeping Christmas rightly!"

At this Josiah turned and flung himself desperately against the Goblin's paunch.

"Take me away!" he muttered, finding his speech with an effort—"Take me out of this! I—I don't want to stop here! I want to get away—QUICK!"

"'Coals of fire,' eh?" said the Goblin—"A trifle scorching, even on a thick skull like yours, McNason! So you'd forgotten Willie Dove, had you? Curious! He was always a very excellent fellow, though, and one of the best men in your employ. The honour of the firm was the first thing with him at all times, and you owe to his hard work and straight principles more than you have the honesty to acknowledge! But

it's no use trying to tip the balance of things, McNason! That balance always rights itself! Good is good, and evil is evil,—you can't make one out to be the other, however much you try! If you're spiteful, if you're mean, if you're unthankful for the blessings bestowed on you—and more than all, if you refuse to help those who have helped you, you are punished! You are, really! And a good sound flogging you get, I can tell you! Oh Beelzebub!—don't I know this! When I was a Churchwarden——"

"Will you do as I ask you?" implored Josiah, desperately, "Get me out of this! I want to go home!"

"Poor old baby! Wants to go home, does it!" jeered the Goblin—"Oh, but it mustn't be naughty! It must go where its nursey takes it! Just another little ridey-pidey in its coachy-poachy!" And rising aloft on its skeleton toes, the Goblin grew larger and more threatening of aspect, while its bat-wings, slowly unfurling, seemed spreading out so darkly and interminably that Josiah fell on his knees in terror—"Just another taste of the 'supernatural,' McNason! Just another little experience of Hell's United Empire Club!"

"No, no!" gasped the trembling millionaire—"Let me get home! Give me a chance to—to——"

His voice gurgled away into a faint tremolo.

"Chance! You've had a thousand chances!" retorted the Goblin, scornfully, "And you've thrown them all away! Now you're asking for one chance! Oh, hoo-roo! Come and see how Christians love one another! With a love that perhaps you may appreciate, because it is so like hate! Come and hear an 'ordained' clerical Judas deny his Master! You and such men as YOU—gorged with gold, and diseased with Self,—are chiefly to blame for the wicked blasphemies which to-day brand the Christian world with infamy! Come—come! Blasphemy will suit you! You have aided it and abetted it many a time, even though you are a 'churchwarden.' Oh,

hoo-roo, hoo-roo! Come in the spirit of One Timothy Two! Come!—come! Come!”

And like a great phantom of black Night descending, the Goblin swooped upon Josiah once more;—the little quiet room,—where Willie Dove, his wife and friend were all cheerily drinking “A Merry Christmas,”—was blotted from his sight, and again limitless space enshrouded and enveloped him in darkness.

A muffled and monotonous sound of chanting—the twinkling of many bright lights,—and the subdued rustling movement of many people gathered together,—these were the next impressions that awakened McNason to renewed consciousness. He stood in what seemed a shadowy forest of architecture;—there were great marble monuments all round him inscribed with the names of famous poets, warriors and historians, and on one of these the Goblin squatted cross-legged beside him, blinking with its owl-like eyes.

“There’s not a seat to be had, McNason!” it remarked, with a leer—“You must stand! Oh, Beelzebub! What a thing it is to be a ‘fashionable’ preacher! Nothing ‘draws!’ so well nowadays as an Atheist in Holy Orders! Not even our reverend brother ‘Firebrand’! Oh, hoo-roo!”

McNason looked bewilderedly about him. Surely he knew the place he was in?—its blackened arches, its shadowy aisles were not wholly unfamiliar? Gradually he recognised it as that melancholy Valhalla of English departed greatness, Westminster Abbey. But why had his uncanny incubus, “Professor” Goblin, brought him hither? What had he to do with the dense crowd of people massed round him—all looking—all listening——!

Hush! The monotonous chanting ceased—there was a brief pause of pretence at prayer—and then a man’s voice, clear and incisive, but with a falsetto ring of cold superciliousness and irony in its tone, sounded vibratingly on the silence. The Church’s ordained Preacher of the Gospel began to preach, and Josiah McNason, more than any other human unit in the congregation, was compelled to listen. And as

he listened, he became aware that this same ordained preacher was calmly, but none the less surely, doing his best to undermine the very faith of which he was a professed disciple. Craftily, and with cunningly devised arguments, which held their meaning deftly secreted under a veil of choice expressions and well-turned phrases, he spoke of "old" beliefs with delicate tolerance and compassion—throwing in occasional questionings as to the meaning of "miracles," and setting down "Divine" interposition as a fable, or rather as a beautiful myth which in the "darker" ages of the world was eminently useful as a means of intimidating and chastening the spirits of the ignorant. He spoke much of a "New Feeling" which was awakening among more advanced and civilised human kind,—that special "New Feeling" which looks upon Man as in himself supreme, and answerable to no Higher Tribunal than His Own for his actions. He deprecated the unfortunately chaotic state of things in the Churches which prevented a full inquiry into the foundations of belief, and hoped that the time was fast approaching when a larger and broader view might be obtained, and humanity be absolved from special duties to a Supernatural Conception which might possibly be a mistaken conception after all. In fine, the drift of his involved and euphuistic eloquence was to imply that pigmy Man would in due course be permitted to fathom the Mind of God,—and not only be permitted to fathom it, but to criticize it, question it and possibly condemn it after the same easy style, and in the same casual fashion, in which all human criticism condemns what it is too limited to comprehend. And gradually it was forced in upon Josiah McNason's not always receptive intelligence that the rankest heresy, the vilest blasphemy was being preached from a Christian pulpit, by one who, passing for a "Christian" minister, was nothing more nor less than a foul hypocrite, and a disgrace to his sacred calling. Yet the congregation listened. They did not rise at once and make a quiet exit as they should have done, had they been honest and brave,—had they truly loved the Faith which leads to Heaven! Yet their faces expressed a certain dull bewilderment,—some looked worried and sad—others perplexed,—though

many of them appeared indifferent. And certain words which he had heard often, yet which he had scarcely heeded while hearing them, came ringing across McNason's mind as clearly as though they had just been spoken into his ears:

"And because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold!"

He trembled. His eyes were dim,—but he could still see the Atheist-Preacher's cold, intellectual face,—he was still in a vague way conscious that the sermon was going on, and that a human creature, full to the very brows of self-sufficiency and conceit, was presuming to lay down the law concerning the possible limitations of the Divine—a human creature moreover who occupied his very position in the Church through having solemnly sworn fidelity to the Master whom now, by the most covert subterfuges and sophistries, he was denying,—and he was aware that a sense of uneasiness and discomfort affected nearly all present, including even himself. He turned to look at the Goblin,—but to his amazement it had disappeared! Was he free then?—free once more to go where he liked and do as he liked?

He tried to move—but his feet seemed fastened to the earth with iron weights; he essayed to speak,—but his tongue refused to obey the impulse of his brain. On, still on, the voice of the Atheist-Preacher in England's ancient Abbey flowed, with that equable fluency which comes of long and careful elocutionary practice, and Josiah McNason, wedged as he was into the close-pressing crowd, wondered how long he would have to stand there, listening to what at another more convenient time he might very likely have considered a clever and "up-to-date" exposition of the "New Feeling." All at once he saw a great Light, like that of the sun at noonday, suddenly begin to shine. With glorious effulgence it formed into a halo of exceeding brilliancy, spreading from north to south, from east to west of the old Church, between the Choir and the Nave, and with a palpitating dread shaking his very soul, Josiah watched it widening and ever widening, till taking upon itself the shape of a Cross, it fired the whole scene with the radiance of a golden morning! Yet no one

saw it apparently,—no one save he, the world's great millionaire, who, denying the "supernatural," was for the time under "supernatural" sway. And trembling, he beheld that wondrous Cross move mysteriously forward, till its light poured with a gracious beauty and beneficence over all the dull worn faces of the people—on men and women and children alike,—though, as it moved, it left the face of the Atheist-Preacher covered with darkness. And in the very heart and centre of its environment lustre, a majestic Figure paced slowly—a god-like Man, whose Features were sorrowful, and whose Brow was crowned with Thorns. A faint whisper floated on the air like the sigh of small spirit voices in plaintive unison:

"Despised and Rejected! Love, Divine and Human, Love, Perfect and Eternal! Despised and Rejected! Even NOW!"

Down, down on his knees fell the man of many millions, overcome by the most poignant fear and shame he had ever known. He had disbelieved! He knew it at last,—he knew that he had, for the sake of public conventionality, made mere hypocritical pretence to worship One Whose sublime teaching he outraged every day of his life, Whose commands he ignored, and Whose example he had never at any time tried to follow. And now—now! With pulses beating as though they would burst, and eyes dim with painful tears wrung from the centre of the rocky region of his heart, he sought to cover his face,—but was forced against his will to gaze, half blind and giddy as he was, on that majestic advancing Shape, which appeared to draw away all the shadows of the great cathedral and transfuse them into light. He noticed, with an extraordinary anguish, which to him was as new as it was keen, that the crowded congregation of people among whom he knelt seemed totally unaware of the shining Presence that passed them by,—and as that Presence moved slowly and silently towards the closed doors of the Abbey, he felt that he must cry out wildly:—

"Look—look! Kneel down and pray! Entreat Him not to leave us, for if He goes,

why should we remain!”

But all utterance was denied him. He could only watch and tremble. Slowly, very slowly, with a grand reproach expressed in every feature of its glorious Countenance, the heavenly Vision of the Crucified moved on,—the doors of the Abbey opened noiselessly, as though flung aside by invisible hands, admitting a broad shaft of winter moonlight from the outer air,—and so, never once looking back, it passed out and away from the crowded church of “Christian” worshippers, and, melting into the silvery radiance of the moon, disappeared. The doors closed darkly behind it—and black shadows drooped from the dim cathedral arches, hanging drearily over the people, and filling the aisles and chapels with a dull noxious vapour—and then with a sudden startling clangour, out rang the Bells again! The Bells! Hoarse and reproachful!—full of menace and foreboding, loneliness and despair! Such a tolling chime they gave as might fit the burial of all the faiths and aspirations of the world! They spoke of Death, not Life!—of the black grave from which all hope of resurrection had been taken,—with a sob in their savage metal throats they proclaimed the closing of the gates of Heaven!—with harsh resistance they bewailed the loss of confidence in God, of trust in the future, of comfort in sorrow—and with dismal and heavy reverberation they thundered forth “Death! Death! Death is the end of all! There shall be no Hereafter!”

Within the Abbey the people looked doubtfully at one another. Some smiled—some sighed,—one or two had tears in their eyes. A faint whisper ran from lip to lip. “Christmas Day!” they murmured—“It is Christmas Day!” And again they sighed and smiled. But it was evident that the old Festival for them held no meaning—no tender or pious memory. Once perhaps it might have had—but now—! Why now the very Spirit and Soul of Christmas had departed!—the doors of the Christian Church itself were closed against it,—the Divine Friend of Mankind had passed by unheeded, and had gone away from those who were passively permitting His honour to be assailed,—what then was Christmas Day but the mere empty name of a

discarded Blessing! The dark shadows steadily thickened,—and Josiah, still grovelling on the ground, with the awful clang of the moaning Bells in his ears, felt that he was being stifled and pressed down into a tomb of everlasting icy cold,—when he was suddenly plucked up from his knees by the grip of a too familiar claw, and lo!—the Goblin stood confronting him with a sad and sober grin.

"Dull place, Westminster Abbey!" it remarked—"Oh hoo-roo! All damp and dismals! I wouldn't be an England's great man for anything! It's the last reward an England's great man ever gets,—the 'honour'—oh, hoo-roo!—of being allowed to moulder among the most mouldered remains that ever mouldered! Hoo-roo! I'm glad the body I used to wear when I was a Churchwarden is all turned into daisies in a country churchyard. Pretty things, daisies! Fancy your old wrinkles turning into them!"

McNason was silent. He stood quietly resigned to the Goblin's clutch, waiting for its next move. And while he waited, he saw the crowd in front of him sway, part asunder, and begin to disperse,—while the Atheist-Preacher, descending from the pulpit, held brief conversation with a man who took from his hand a roll of paper. McNason could hear him speaking, despite the space between them.

"Here's my sermon in full,"—he said—"I hope you will give it the widest publicity. The 'copy' contains a good many effective bits which I was obliged to leave out with a mixed congregation. You never know how people may take the upsetting of their cherished creeds! In such work the Press can do more than the Pulpit. Nothing like a good Press discussion for shaking the old foundations! And I think my remarks are likely to cause a fluttering in the dove-cotes!"

The reporter—for such he was—smiled.

"You are not afraid of your Archbishop?" he said.

The Atheist-Preacher laughed.

"My Archbishop! He has no time to give his attention to any such matter as this.

He's too busy with the claims of the Poor Clergy!"

They both laughed then, shook hands and separated. McNason, in the Goblin's grasp, watched them go their several ways, and then suddenly recovering his speech, said:—

"That man ought to be put out of the Church!"

"Quite right—so he ought!" agreed the Goblin—"You are getting quite discriminating, Josiah! He ought to be put out of the Church, but who's going to do it? He isn't drunk or disorderly! He's a liar and a hypocrite, and he's taking his 'salary' on false pretences—but there are hundreds—perhaps thousands—like him! Besides, those who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones! You're as bad as he is in your way! You pretend——"

"I have pretended——!" said McNason, humbly.

The Goblin looked at him, and closed one round eye in a most horrible and portentous wink.

"I see!" it observed—"You're preparing to make a good end! You're like the Naughty Duchess! Oh, hoo-roo! What a character she was! She went the pace as hard as ever she could till she was quite worn out and could count her crows-feet,—then she began to go to Church regularly, and became publicly charitable. She turned herself into a Bazaar Lady; opened several soup-kitchens, and used to cry over the newest sweet thing in curates. Naughty, naughty Duchess! When she died an eminent Dean preached a sermon about her. She left him five thousand pounds in her will. He said she was 'one of the noblest women that ever lived.' And she's one of us now. Oh hoo-roo! Don't you try to be like her, McNason!—it doesn't pay! Come along!—Come and take a look at London!"

With a fantastic caper, the Goblin sidled and skipped out of the Abbey, its conical cap glowing like the flame of a will-o'-the-wisp in a dark morass,—while passively, and without any strength to resist its imperious lead, the millionaire followed. In the

full radiance of a moon which made the streets as light as day, they presently stood,—and as in a fevered dream, Josiah saw the familiar clock-tower of Westminster, the great square in front of the Houses of Parliament, and the twinkling lamps on the bridge that spans the steely gleam of the river Thames. The dull human roar of the great metropolis thundered in his ears like the rushing of many waters, and while he yet looked on the scene which he knew so well, the Goblin took off its cap and touched his eyes with its tasselled point.

"Tick-tock! Tick-tock! Only two thousand years by the Spirit's clock!" it said.

And lo!—the stately tower, buildings and streets disappeared! Smooth green fields spread out on every side, full-flowering with meadow-sweet, buttercups and daisies,—there was no longer any bridge across the river, which, flowing calmly between low banks of mossy turf and fern, reflected the sunshine in a thousand sparkles and plashed against the double shores with musical murmurs of peace. A flock of sheep grazed on the quiet pasture, and their shepherd sat at his ease by the side of the placid stream.

And now the Goblin waved its spidery arms.

"Ask him," it said—"what has become of London!"

Obediently McNason put the question. The shepherd turned upon him a young wondering face.

"London!" he echoed. Then he smiled. "Oh yes, I think I know what you mean! There was a city of that name somewhere about here once, but I don't know exactly where! There's nothing of it left now!"

"Nothing!" exclaimed McNason, aghast.

"Nothing!"—And the Goblin, pronouncing this word, waved its arms again, whereupon the Vision vanished,—"Nothing! Not a shred!—not a brick—not a bone! Not even a gold Coin! All the business—Gone!—all the pleasure—Gone!—all the scheming, plotting, lying, cheating, villainy, hatred and envy of one human creature

contesting with the other—Gone! All the self-sufficiency, learning, little wisdom, and utter godlessness—Gone! Such will London be in two thousand years! And Nature will not miss it! Nature can do without it very well; Nature can do without you equally well, McNason! The sun will go on shining and the birds will go on singing none the less because You are wanting! Come along!—come along! In the spirit of One Timothy Two, time's up! Off we go on our last journey!"

Once more Josiah fell on his knees.

"Spare me!" he cried—"Spare me! Surely I have suffered enough!"

"Suffered? You? Oh Beelzebub!" And the Goblin began to elongate itself in its own peculiar and terror-striking style, "You've only just begun to know what it is to feel! You hard old scoundrel! You talk of suffering!—why, you have lived till over sixty years of age, caring nothing at all for the troubles of others unless you could turn such troubles to your own advantage! As a child you were selfish,—as a boy you were selfish,—as a young man you were selfish,—as an old man you are selfish! You have crushed out hundreds of human lives in your factories as if they were mere ants swarming under your iron heel! You have cut down the expenses of your business to the narrowest, meanest, most pitiful margin,—you 'sweat' your labourers to such an extent that you know you dare not walk through your own workshops without a revolver in your pocket and a man on either side of you for protection—you are a living curse to the majority of those you employ—and they look for your death in the hope that after you are gone they will have a kinder master! And you quote Shakespeare, do you? And the Bible! Oh hoo-roo! Come along! Time's up, I tell you! And we're not going far. Just a little see-saw ride to a Home Sweet Home! A last long Home! A Happy Home! Oh hoo-roo-oo-oo! One Timothy Two, and away we go!"

Again a brief spell of semi-consciousness—a kind of waking nightmare in which many confused sights and sounds were intermingled;—flying visions of pale worn

faces full of sorrow and appeal; noises as of weeping, with stifled cries and sobs of pain;—and then Josiah McNason opened his eyes widely, to find himself lying flat on a narrow bed in the centre of a rather large room. His head rested on a small, very hard pillow,—and on this pillow squatted the Goblin with an air of being quite at ease.

"Here we are in a happy 'Home,' McNason!" it chuckled softly in his ear—"Don't worry! Don't agitate yourself! Keep quiet calm! You will have every possible attention!"

Josiah stared helplessly about him. He saw his clothes neatly folded and placed all together on the top of a chest of drawers,—his top-hat was also a particularly conspicuous object on a chair close by. He realised that he had been undressed and put to bed, but how this had happened he could not tell. He turned a miserable questioning gaze on the Goblin.

"What—what's this?" he stammered—"What are you going to do to me?"

"I?" And the Goblin, with an injured air of perfect innocence, executed a diabolical French shrug of its shoulders—"I'm not going to do anything to you, my dear sir! I wouldn't be so cruel! It is THEY!—THEY are going to do something to you,—but all for your good!—oh, hoo-roo—all for your good!"

They! Who were THEY? With painful hesitation Josiah turned his eyes round about again, and presently saw, standing near him like dim figures in a blurred photograph, two men talking confidentially together—one fairly young, the other elderly,—while with them was a smart, well-set-up, rather perky looking woman attired in the conventional grey gown, spotless apron and cap of the "professional" nurse. The elderly man's back was turned, but he seemed to be expounding some knotty point of argument to his companions with particular emphasis and gusto.

"Something's gone wrong with the Works, McNason!" said the Goblin, confidentially, "That's what's the matter?"

"Works?" And McNason's troubled mind immediately reverted to his huge factories—"What works?"

"Your works!" and the Goblin leered at him sideways with a frightful grin—"Your internal works! And these two learned gentlemen are going to find out what it is. You're ill, you know!—you're very ill! The learned gentlemen don't quite understand how or why you're ill, but they're going to find out! They're going to slice you up and see what you're like inside! It will be most interesting and instructive—to the learned gentlemen! It won't interest YOU at all, because you're to be put under chloroform, and you won't know anything about it except when you 'come to.' Then you will die! But that won't particularly matter! The operation is sure to be 'most successful.' An operation is always 'successful,' even if the patient never recovers! The medical profession must be safeguarded, you know!"

McNason heard, and in an instant became a prey to the most violent access of nervous horror.

"I'm not ill!" he said fiercely. "There's nothing whatever the matter with me! How dare you say there is! It's all a mistake—an abominable mistake! I've never suffered from any illness except gout and indigestion—never!—there's no operation needed for such ailments!—what the devil do you mean by bringing me here?"

"You will talk about the devil!" And the Goblin shook its tasselled cap at him reproachfully—"Don't say I mentioned him first! You're ill, I tell you!—you're more seriously ill than your old friend Willie Dove, and you're here because you're ill! 'To this complexion must we come at last'! Oh Beelzebub! They don't know whether it's cancer or appendicitis with YOU!"

"Look here!" almost shouted Josiah, addressing himself to the two men, who, with the nurse, still stood together talking, but who appeared not to hear him—"Take me out of this place directly! I've been brought here on false pretences! I'm not ill! I don't want an operation! I won't be operated upon! I'll—I'll——!"

Here exhausted, he sank back on his hard pillow impotently clenching his hands in a paroxysm of rage and fear.

The Goblin grinned.

“Now, McNason, keep cool!” it said—“Don’t show temper! Doctors don’t like that sort of thing. They call it ‘nerves’ and they give you a soothing draught. Besides, these two eminent personages who are just now discussing your ‘case’ can’t hear you, and if they could they wouldn’t listen. One’s a ‘Sir.’ He’s a clever man, of course, or he wouldn’t be a ‘Sir.’ It’s a little unpleasant that the title puts him on the same rank with any provincial Mayor who has presented an address to the Sovereign! But it can’t be helped. There’s no suitable honour in this country for merely intellectual and scientific persons! Now about your case——”

“I’ve no case!” groaned the wretched millionaire—“No case at all——”

“You are a case!” declared the Goblin—“A whole case in yourself! A case of a man gone wrong! A case of a human creature who has a stone in the place where his heart ought to be!—a hard, heavy stone, without a pulse of love or kindness in it! A case? Oh Beelzebub! I should think you are a case! Sir Slasher Cut-Em-Up—that’s the broad-backed elderly gentleman over there,—thinks you’ve got something ‘malignant’ inside! Oh hoo-roo-oo-oo! I should think you had! Sir Slasher believes it’s cancer. But if it is, they’ll never find it, McNason! No!—your cancer’s on the mind!—and they’ll never cut that out! But they’re going to have a good try!”

Josiah moaned helplessly.

“Sir Slasher Cut-Em-Up is a great vivisector,”—proceeded the Goblin, cheerfully—“He knows where to find every little nerve and muscle in the body of a dog, for instance. I don’t say your body is at all like that of a dog!—I know your Soul isn’t half so honest or so faithful! Sir Slasher has had more than a hundred innocent animals under his scalpel—all poor, trustful, good creatures whom he has pinned and stretched in every possible position on his rack of torture—whose nerves

he has severed—whose muscles he has galvanized—and whom he has killed as slowly, as ruthlessly and as criminally as any Torquemada that ever roasted a heretic to the sound of sacred music! Hoo-roo! Sir Slasher knows a thing or two, I can tell you! He's a licensed murderer of the harmless and helpless,—but even a dog's soul has a place in the eternal countings, as Sir Slasher may find out to his cost when he becomes a member of our United Empire Club! He cut up a dog yesterday—now he's going to cut up YOU! You're a splendid subject for him, you know! You've got so much MONEY!"

Again Josiah moaned in a stupor of fear.

"You've got so much MONEY!" repeated the Goblin, smacking its wide lips as though it were tasting something savoury,—"And MONEY's a great thing! Money has enabled you to come to this 'Home'—one of the most select 'Homes' in London! Oh, Home Sweet Home! Oh happy, happy Home! It's the special pet 'Nursing Home' of Sir Slasher Cut-Em-Up, where he's got the matron and all the nurses under his big Thumb! Oh, hoo-roo! Such a dear Home! You pay Five Guineas a week for your room to begin with,—and then when you're very ill, you pay Ten. Afterwards, when you get worse and are likely to die, you pay Fifteen. The nurse is extra. If you have two nurses you have two extras. Everything apart from the room and the bed is 'extra.' If you want a bottle of soda water you pay sixpence for a 'split,' ninepence for a full. And so on! And so on! Oh, what a dear 'comfy' Home! There aren't many like it in London, I can tell you! Only a few—a beautiful, blessed few!"

At this moment, the personage whom the Goblin designated as Sir Slasher-Cut-Em-Up finished his conversation with his younger colleague, and both gentlemen smiled pleasantly, not to say flirtatiously, at the grey-gowned nurse.

"Twelve o'clock to-morrow will do very well," said Sir Slasher—"We shall leave you to make all the preliminary arrangements, Nurse Drat-Em-All. He's asleep just

now, I see!”

“I’m not asleep!”—gurgled McNason, feebly.

But Sir Slasher apparently did not hear. He stood by the bedside, smiling blandly, his hands clasped behind him under his coat-tails.

“One of the richest men in the world!” he ejaculated, appreciatively—“Dear me, dear me! Ah well, well! Has he any family?”

“None,”—said Nurse Drat-Em-All—“He had one son, I believe, who died in childhood.”

She spoke primly, her lips opening and shutting on her words like a kind of mechanical valve. But while she spoke she flashed her eyes at the younger doctor with a feline cajolery in their hard brown depths.

“Then who,” murmured Sir Slasher, thoughtfully—“Who is to carry on his vast business concerns? Who is to inherit his enormous fortune?”

No answer was forthcoming to this profound proposition.

Sir Slasher thereupon removed his hands from under his coat-tails, and consulted his watch.

“I must be going,”—he said—“You will attend to all that is necessary, Nurse?”

“Certainly, Sir Slasher!”

“I shall bring Dr. Choke-Em-Off with me to-morrow—and I think—yes, I think”—here he looked benevolently considerate—“that taking into account Mr. McNason’s great wealth and important position, and—er—also—er—the very great difficulty and uncertainty of the operation, Dr. Choke-Em-Off’s fee should be doubled! He is one of our best anæsthetists—what do you say, Nurse?”

Sir Slasher had a delightful smile, and he was smiling delightfully now. Nurse Drat-Em-All responded to the charm of it.

“There is no doubt that it is justifiably a case of double fees all round!” she said, her

own smile breaking into a giggle.

“Exactly!” And Sir Slasher shed a fatherly glance upon her—“And our young friend here”—at this he laid a hand on his fellow-surgeon’s shoulder—“Our young and brilliant friend will also have an opportunity of displaying his skill and securing his reward! Of course,”—here he became portentously business-like—“it will be advisable to get the patient to sign the required cheques in advance,—there will be no difficulty about that I should imagine! Because you see,—afterwards!”

“Ah!—afterwards!” echoed the younger doctor, speaking for the first time.

Sir Slasher tried to look grave, but failed in the attempt.

“Afterwards,” he said pleasantly,—“the worthy millionaire may not be in a condition to sign anything! I think”—and he paused, stroking his smooth double chin—“I think, Nurse, he should be told that the operation is a grave, very grave one, in case—these things sometimes happen!—in case he has not made a will—or—let us say in case he might wish to make some last testamentary gift—to—er—to me?—or—or to you?—or to anyone else who may have rendered him a service?”

“I’ll see that he does all that he ought to do!” said Nurse Drat-Em-All, with some severity—“I like my patients to be prepared for the worst!”

“Quite right—quite right!” murmured Sir Slasher—“But prepare him gently—quite gently, Nurse! By degrees—and cautiously! I have known cases where patients, getting too much alarmed, have made their escape from a home like this by jumping out of the window! And strange to say they have—some of them—escaped uninjured!—and stranger still, they have recovered and lived many years! Most curious and remarkable! But nerves are unaccountable things!” Here he paused and looked again at McNason. “He sleeps very soundly! I should say he was older than he admits! Ah well, well! We shall see! But I very much fear there’s no chance for his recovery!”

“Then why not spare the knife and let him live as long as Nature will allow him?” asked the younger doctor suddenly.

Sir Slasher looked amazed and reproachful.

“My dear sir! I was called in by Mr. McNason, and I must do my best for such a very wealthy man! Besides, I think his is a very complex case, and likely to prove most helpful and instructive. To-morrow at twelve o’clock, Nurse! Good-evening!”

And Sir Slasher Cut-Em-Up walked softly out of the room, followed by his colleague. Nurse Drat-Em-All, with a casual glance at the bed where Josiah McNason lay, settled her cap more coquettishly on her head and tripped after them.

“They’re gone!” said the Goblin then, sliding down from the pillow and sitting astride on Josiah’s recumbent body—“But Nurse Drat-Em-All will soon be back!”

“I don’t want her back!” groaned McNason, making an attempt to draw up the bed-quilt in order to cover his eyes, in which effort he did not succeed—“I don’t want anything! Leave me alone!”

“Sorry I can’t oblige you!” replied the Goblin—“I can’t leave you alone till you leave YOURSELF alone! And Nurse Drat-Em-All must come back to attend to her duties! She’s got a lot of things to do to you!”

McNason peered over the extreme edge of the bed-quilt.

“A lot of things to do to me?” he echoed, whimperingly—“What—what will she do?”

“She will wash you first!” said the Goblin, briskly—“All over! Oh, such a nice wash! Made of carbolic disinfectant! And you will be so clean—outside you!”

Josiah closed his eyes shudderingly.

“And then you will be put into a new flannel night-shirt,”—went on the Goblin—“And you will perhaps be allowed a cup of hot milk or beef tea. And when you’re nice and warm and clean and cosy, Nurse Drat-Em-All will come and tell

you to prepare for your end!”

“No—no!” cried McNason—“I’m not ill!—and I’m not ready—!”

“You are ill!” declared the Goblin, firmly—“And never mind about not being ready for your end. Nurse Drat-Em-All will make you ready! She’ll tell you what a very serious and expensive matter it will be to slice you up scientifically to-morrow—and she will ask you where your cheque book is——”

“I won’t tell her—I won’t—” stuttered McNason.

“Oh yes, you will! She’ll get it out of you! And then you’ll write a big cheque for Sir Slasher Cut-Em-Up, and another for the matron of this happy ‘Home’—and for Dr. Choke-Em-Off,—and for everybody else who wants a fee for sending you into the next world—and then—then you’ll be allowed to sleep if you can! And to-morrow—to-morrow——”

Here the Goblin paused. Josiah raised himself up on his hard pillow and looked at it with appealing eyes.

“Not so very long ago,”—it went on presently, in a kind of sing-song monotone, “A man I knew went to a ‘Home’ something like this, only not quite so up-to-date and expensive. He was a bold, kindly, genial creature, fond of life and life’s pleasures. Something went wrong with him and he consulted the doctors. They told him he had an internal ailment, but they could not tell whether it was ‘malignant’ or not, till they had, so to speak, ‘opened him up.’ He felt strong and hopeful, and consented to the operation. The surgeons did their work—and how they did it, of course, only they can tell. But it was, according to their own report, ‘successful.’ In forty-eight hours the warm-blooded personality of the man that had talked, smiled and jested with his own danger, was a mere lump of cold, stiff clay. He had relatives—oh yes!—he had children for whom he had worked all his life. What did they do? Why, they allowed his body which had so lately pulsated with love for them all, to be taken away from the ‘home’ in which he died, and laid in a dismal vault without a single soul to keep

watch by it at night or say a prayer! The world is growing callous concerning the dead, you know! And they don't keep corpses in 'Homes.' When a man dies under an operation he must be 'removed' by his family at once. In this case the poor fellow was 'removed' to a chill city mortuary. His children, warm and comfortable, ate food as usual and discussed the funeral business. Down in the cold and darkness lay the once animated, cheery, generous-hearted man, alone—all, all, alone!—shut out from the movement and light of natural things, with no loving eyes to keep watch by his mortal remains,—no tender hands to lay flowers on his lifeless breast!—and yet sentimentalists talk about family love and home-affections! Oh hoo-roo!" And the Goblin actually had tears like sparks of fiery dew in its eyes—"You ought to be glad you've got no children, McNason! You've got MONEY instead! And MONEY will enable you to have your body carried home grandly to your country seat by special train! You can be laid out in state if you like!—provided you give the order before Sir Slasher Cut-Em-Up arrives to-morrow—candles burning all round you and wreaths on your coffin,—it's all done for MONEY!—and you can have a most expensive funeral,—a beautiful mausoleum,—a marble monument and a lying Epitaph! All for MONEY! Money's a great thing, McNason!—and you've got it! Oh Beelzebub! You've got it! But you've got nothing else!"

At this juncture McNason suddenly sat up in bed.

"Yes, I have!" he said, with a kind of trembling eagerness—"I've got something else! I've got YOU! And I want—I want to make a friend of YOU!"

The Goblin opened its round eyes so wide that they threatened to fall out.

"Oh, you do, do you?" it queried doubtfully—"That's odd! Now what put that into your head?"

"I don't know—I don't know!" stammered McNason agitatedly—"But I think——I feel——you don't really want to do me any harm! Look here!—Get me out of this! Take me away—take me away—take me home!"

The Goblin took off its conical cap and examined the interior of that head gear with critical gravity. Its hair, in the all-round style, seemed blacker and stickier than ever, and its features worked into the most alarming contortions.

"Take you home!" it echoed—"What! Before Nurse Drat-Em-All comes back?"

"Yes—yes!" and Josiah wrung his hands imploringly; "Take me away at once——!"

"But you're ill!" said the Goblin—"You're very ill!"

"I'm not!"

"You ARE! You've got a cancer!"

"I haven't!"

"You HAVE! It's called Selfishness! It is eating your life away,—poisoning your blood—rotting your Soul!"

"I'll get rid of it!—I'll—I'll cut it out myself!"—and in his excitement McNason caught hold of the Goblin's claw and pressed it fervently—"I will—I will! Only take me out of this! Give me a chance!"

"You're feverish too!" continued the Goblin, severely. "Your temperature has gone up to the very highest point of Fraudulent Philanthropy!"

"I know—I know!—but it will be all right!—only let me get home, and you shall see—you shall see——!"

Here his voice ebbed away into a kind of choked sob.

"And I'm not sure that you haven't got eczema,"—pursued the Goblin—"Your snobbish hankering after a Peerage will probably break out in a rash all over you!"

"It won't!" said McNason—"It shan't! I'll—I'll do whatever you tell me——!"

"Oh, will you really though!" And the Goblin sniffed the air with its terribly plastic nose very dubiously—"Do you mean it? Or is it all funk? And only because you want to get away from Sir Slasher Cut-Em-Up? I don't believe in death-bed

repentances!”

“It’s not—it’s not a death-bed repentance!” wailed McNason—“I don’t want this to be my death-bed! I want to die in my own home!”

“Ah! So does Willie Dove!” said the Goblin. “Perhaps you can understand now why his wife doesn’t want to send him to a Hospital!”

McNason shuddered. Time was flying fast, he thought—that cruel-looking Nurse Drat-Em-All would be coming back immediately!—and with an imploring cry he held out his arms to the Goblin.

“Ah, be good to me!” he moaned—“Take me home! I’ll promise anything—anything!”

“It’s easy to promise,”—said the Goblin, “Anyone can do that! But will you keep your promises? For instance, will you think of some other few things besides YOURSELF?”

McNason lifted his trembling hands in the fashion of one invoking the gods.

“I will!—I will!”

“You are a Man of Money,”—pursued the Goblin—“And with all the MONEY you possess will you think of POVERTY? Of the thousands and thousands of human beings made of the same flesh and blood as yourself, who perish every year for lack of food? Of infants starving? Of patient genius, toiling for mere pence? Of delicate women working their lives away in order to provide sustenance for their children? Will you think of all these, and help them when you can?—not grudgingly, nor patronisingly,—but with a full heart and a generous spirit?”

Faintly as a bride at the altar, McNason murmured “I will!”

“You are a Man of Luxury,”—went on the Goblin—“Will you think of CRIME? Of the woeful sins which wretched men are driven to commit through want and misery? Of the prisons, crowded with branded human creatures, who in nine cases out of ten

owe their guilt to the evil persuasions of others more cunning, more treacherous and powerful than themselves! Of unhappy mothers, gone mad with despair, who have murdered their children rather than see them die of hunger! Of girls, once innocent,—betrayed, ruined and deserted by the villainy and cruelty of such devils in the shape of men that even Hell might close its doors against them! Will you think of CRIME?—and, thinking of it, will you remember that it is often the sight of a man like YOU,—over-prosperous, over-proud,—that helps to drive the poor into the labyrinths of envy, hatred, drink, murder and suicide! Will you think of CRIME?—and do your best to fight against it with all your influence, all your power and all your MONEY?"

And at this juncture the Goblin looked positively terrific. McNason quailed before its Gorgon eyes, and shivered.

"I—I will try!" he murmured.

The Goblin rose on its skeleton toes and lifted its skeleton arms. Its voice grew loud and shrill.

"You are a Man of Commerce and Calculation,"—it said—"Will you think of WAR! Think of nation rising against nation and kingdom against kingdom! The beginning of sorrows! Think of widows and orphans!—think of thousands of dying and dead men! Of human blood springing hot to heaven and clamouring for vengeance! Of burning cities and wrecked ships! Hark! Listen to the rush of waters and the roll of guns!"

And now, as the Goblin spoke, there came a distant booming sound upon the air, mingled with the measured tramp of many marching feet, and hundreds of male voices strongly uplifted in defiant chorus:

"We sweep the seas!

Our glorious flag unfurl'd

From North to South, from East to West

Shines o’er the world!

Our cannon’s bellowing thunder

Roars with the roaring waves—

For Britain’s foes wild ocean holds

Nothing but graves!

“We sweep the seas!—

On waters far and near

Our signals flash, and write in fire

Our meanings clear!

No other land, no other race

Can match our British men!—

They’ve won a thousand fights before,

They’ll win again!

“We sweep the seas!—

We rule the restless foam!

We struggle not for place or pelf,

We fight for Home!

Loud let the shout of ‘Victory!’

Ring on the fav’ring breeze,—

Down with the foe ten fathoms deep!

We sweep the seas!”

“War!” said the Goblin, tossing its arms wildly as the sounds died away,—“War! Accursed, yet triumphant War! Think of it, YOU, with your millions! Can you, will you think of it without SPECULATING in the wide-spread misery it involves?

Without making more MONEY on the traffic in blood? Without lending yourself and your wealth to wicked Contracts by which you steal from your Country's government and line your own pockets? Can you be true to the land in which you live? Can you,—will you boldly refuse to sell material assistance for your own personal advantage to your Country's foes?"

Lashed into a fit of nervous desperation McNason almost shouted:

"I can! I can! And I will!"

Whereupon the Goblin put on its conical cap.

"You are coming round, McNason!" it observed encouragingly—"You are really coming round! I think you are better! Your temperature is lower—nearer the normal Principle! Principle is an excellent pulse—it's firm and steady, and keeps the whole body going wholesomely! Very few have it nowadays, and as a natural consequence the statistics of insane and diseased persons show an alarming increase! Now,"—this with an oblique but not unfriendly leer—"Are you sure you feel well enough to go home?"

"Sure—sure!"—and Josiah began to scramble out of bed in his excitement—"I'll get my clothes on in a minute——"

"Won't you wait for Nurse Drat-Em-All?" suggested the Goblin with a chuckle, "She'll be back directly!"

"No—no—NO!" Here his voice faltered and died away as he discovered to his terror that he had no power to put his feet to the floor, nor could he reach his clothes. "Oh, I am so helpless!" he wailed—"So feeble and helpless! Oh dear, oh dear! What shall I do!"

"Have a split soda!" said the Goblin—"In this dear sweet 'Home' it's only sixpence! But if you put a B in it, it's two shillings!"

Half mad with impatience, Josiah wriggled about in the bed, turning his imploring

eyes on the relentless Goblin, who, perched on the quilt, was beginning to elongate itself in the most leisurely manner.

“I suppose you want to keep Christmas now!” it remarked presently—“And you’re in a hurry to begin. Is that it?”

“Yes—yes, that’s it!” stuttered Josiah, “You’ll take me, won’t you—you’ll take me——”

The Goblin waved its claw. And in another instant Josiah McNason stood erect, fully clothed, gazing fearfully up—up, ever so high at the indescribable face and form which now loomed like a monstrous bat above him. So tall had it suddenly grown and so thin,—so terrible were its goggle eyes,—so enigmatical its wide grin, that anxious as he was to depart from his present place of torture, he shook like a leaf in a stiff breeze at the prospect of another “airship” voyage with such a fearsome skipper of the winds.

“One Timothy Two!” said the Goblin,—and its voice seemed to fall from some magic pinnacle reared miles above the clouds—“One Timothy Two! Grace, Mercy, Peace! Time to keep Christmas! Christmas Day and Christmas Bells! Come along! Come along! Home for the holidays! Off we go!”

Stooping forward like a giant Cloud from the sky, the Goblin whisked off the shrinking, shuddering millionaire as easily as a gust of wind whisks off the broken branch of a tree, and spreading its great wings, whirled with a wild “Hoo-roo-oo-oo!” out into the starry spaces of the night.

Now came soft pauses of silence,—flashing gleams of colour like broken rainbows floating at will through the pure ether,—glimpses of clear sky wherein the greater planets shone gloriously, resembling revolving lights set in the watch-towers of Heaven,—straying films of pearly vapour through which the moon peered fitfully with a doubtful brilliancy—then lo! the dear familiar Earth, lifting its dark rim against the pale blue reaches of the morning—and then the Sun! Warm with its

golden heart's effulgence, the splendid Orb of life and health and beauty rose in a flood of glory over the mountain-tops and over the seas,—spreading radiance on the wintry fields,—illumining the leafless trees,—and deepening to a more vivid scarlet the berries of the thick green holly, and the dainty feathers on the breasts of the robins. And the Bells!—oh, the Bells! How they rang!—how they sang in all the turrets and steeples of every church that lifted its shining spire to the sunshine! "Peace—Good—will—! Peace—Good—will!" they seemed to say over and over again with such a gladness and a thankfulness in their soft chiming as made the heart grow full of tenderness and tears! And now, all suddenly, a tremulous little chorus of small fresh voices began to mingle with the Bells' sweet tune—

"God rest you, merry gentlemen!

Let nothing you dismay!

Remember Christ our Saviour

Was born on Christmas Day!"

Then came a pause,—a murmur—and again the quaint old melody began—

"God rest you, merry gentlemen!

Let nothing you dismay!——"

Uttering a smothered cry, Josiah McNason started to his feet. What—what was this? Where was he? Wildly he stared about him—and then with a kind of hysterical shout, recognised his surroundings.

"I'm at home!" he cried—"At home! In my own house! In my own room! Thank God!"

Pressing his hands to his forehead he gazed bewilderedly at every familiar object. There was his desk—his armchair,—(he seemed to have just sprung out of that chair)—the fireplace, where now there was no fire but only a heap of white ashes in the grate—the telephone—ah, that telephone!—his papers, books, letters, ink,

pens—ledgers—and a cheque-book,... On this last object his eyes rested meditatively.

“It was a dream!” he muttered—“A horrible, horrible dream! Nothing else! It was a Dream!”

“It WASN’T!”

The answer came sharply and with remarkable emphasis.

Josiah trembled violently. He was not yet alone then? A sudden thought struck him, and a light came into his eyes—a light new and strange, that gave them quite a youthful sparkle.

“At any rate,”—he said—“I’ll be before Pitt this time! I’ll—I’ll cut him out!”

And sitting down at his desk, he drew pen and paper to his aid, and wrote the following—

“My dear Sir,—I am exceedingly sorry to hear of your precarious condition of health, especially when I recall the strength and activity which used to distinguish you so greatly at one time when you did such excellent work for the firm. I understand from my overseer, Mr. Pitt, that a couple of hundred pounds will be useful to you at this particular juncture, and I have much pleasure in enclosing you a cheque for that amount as a slight testimony of my great appreciation of your former faithful services. Trusting you will pull through your illness, and assuring you of the great satisfaction it gives me to be of assistance to you in a time of need, believe me, with best wishes for a pleasant Christmas,

“Yours obliged and sincerely. “Josiah McNason.”

Taking his cheque-book, he wrote the required formula, that Two Hundred Pounds (200l.) should be paid to William Dove “or order,” and signed his name “Josiah McNason” with a free proud dash under the signature that made it even more characteristic than usual. Putting letter and cheque in an envelope, he sealed and

addressed it to “William Dove, Esq.,” and enclosed the whole packet in another envelope with a few words addressed to Mr. Pitt.

“I think,”—he said then, with a bland, almost smiling air—“that will do for Mr. Pitt! Mr. Pitt will find himself out of court this time!”

He got up from his desk and stood irresolute. Then he rang his bell.

“This must be taken by special messenger,”—he said—“There’s no late post on Christmas Day!”

He smiled, and rubbed his hands. At that instant the door opened, and his servant Towler appeared, with a pale, rather scared face.

“Good-morning, Towler!”

“Good-morning, sir! Glad to see you well, sir!”

“Glad to see me well! Have I been ill, then?”

“No, sir I—at least I hope not, sir! But I went to call you at seven o’clock, as you told me, sir, and you weren’t in your room, and your bed hadn’t been slept in—and—I—er—didn’t know what to think, sir! I didn’t dare to come in here!”

“I was busy,”—said Josiah, calmly—“Very busy!—tremendously busy all night! What time is it now?”

“Nine o’clock, sir!”

“And it’s Christmas Day, isn’t it?”

“Yessir!”

“Here’s a sovereign for you,”—and McNason handed that coin to his astonished retainer—“And just get someone to take this letter to Mr. Pitt’s house at once. It’s important.”

“Yessir! Certainly, sir! Thank-you, sir! A Merry Christmas to you, sir!”

“Thank-you! Same to you!”

Backing deferentially out of his master's presence, Towler ran downstairs as fast as he could into the servants' hall, there announcing that "Something's happened to the Governor! He's too pleasant to last!"

And McNason, still standing thoughtfully by his desk, repeated again in an undertone:

"It was a Dream! It must have been a Dream!"

"It WASN'T!" And a shrill falsetto voice rang clear on the silence. "Hoo-roo—oo—oo! Don't you dare to call ME a Dream!"

And with a violent shock of renewed terror McNason saw, poised between him and the sunlight which poured through the windows, the Goblin, shrunk in size to the smallest quaintest creature possible, holding over its strangely shaped head a sprig of holly, exactly as a man holds an open umbrella.

"I'm going!" it said—"But don't you be such a fool as to think yourself a Something and me a Nothing! You'll make an awful mistake if you do!"

"I'm sorry!" said McNason, humbly—"I don't want to make any more mistakes——"

"You'd better not!" said the Goblin, and its form began to grow more vague and indistinct—"You've got the chance you asked for—but if you lose it now——"

"I won't!"

"What you would like to think was only a Dream, is a Supernatural Reality!" went on the Goblin; "It has all happened, or it will happen if you don't take care! If your mind breeds disease, so will your body,—and Sir Slasher will have to be called in! And if he's once called in, YOU will be called OUT!"

McNason shuddered,—but was silent.

"You've begun to keep Christmas in the proper way for the first time in your life,"—and the Goblin's voice grew fainter and fainter—"But if you don't go on

keeping it!——”

“I will!” cried Josiah, eagerly—“I will!”

“In the spirit of One Timothy Two?”

“I will!”

“Grace—mercy—peace!”

The words floated on the air like a breath—and then, the Goblin turned its back and began to trot slowly away under its holly sunshade. Smaller and smaller it grew, till it looked no bigger than a tiny Christmas doll on a Christmas tree. And then all at once a shining tangle of golden curls and a glitter of sparkling eyes flashed against the window—a semi-circle of children pressed their round rosy faces close to the panes, and again began to sing:

“God rest you, merry Gentlemen!

Let nothing you dismay!

Remember Christ our Saviour

Was born on Christmas Day!”

Whereat the great Josiah McNason, multi-millionaire, laughed,—actually laughed! Going to the window he threw it open, and putting a hand into his pocket, he took out a bunch of silver.

“Hullo, youngsters!” he cried—“Christmas morning, eh? Here you are!”

Out flew threepences, sixpences and shillings in a shower.

“Fair play!” he exclaimed—“Equal profits! Don’t trample one on the other! Girls first, boys next! The strong must help the weak! That’s right!—all good friends together—all happy! No envy, no jealousy,—all peace and goodwill! A Merry Christmas!”

“Merry Christmas! Merry Christmas!” shouted the astonished children, as, jumping for joy, they gathered up their gifts.

“Merry Christmas!” lisped a small boy with a flaxen head, sturdily clambering up to the window from the lawn a couple of feet below, and looking boldly in the face of the world’s celebrated Rich Man;—“God Bless You!”

And the Rich Man answered gently:

“God bless you, little man!”

Then the whole group of young folks, determined to do the best they could for what they had received, burst out again in lusty chorus:

“God rest you, merry Gentle Man!

Let nothing you dismay!

Remember Christ our Saviour

Was born on Christmas Day!”

And Josiah McNason, listening quietly, while the old carol was sung through, saw, as he gazed beyond the children’s faces into the Christmas morning sunshine, a tiny Shape slowly disappearing into space—a Shape so delicate as to seem no more than one of the sunbeams,—while a voice, fine and far, yet clear as a flute said:

“Remember!”

“I will!” he answered, under his breath.

“In the spirit of One Timothy Two, good-bye!” whispered the Goblin—“Grace—Mercy—Peace!”

“And Christmas Day!” said Josiah—“I shall remember!”

THE END

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