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MR. BINGLE

By George Barr McCutcheon

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CHAPTER I — THE FIVE LITTLE SYKESES

A coal fire crackled cheerily in the little open grate that supplied warmth to the steam-heated living-room in the modest apartment of Mr. Thomas S. Bingle, lower New York, somewhere to the west of Fifth Avenue and not far removed from Washington Square—in the wrong direction, however, if one must be precise in the matter of emphasizing the social independence of the Bingle family—and be it here recorded that without the genial aid of that grate of coals the living-room would have been a cheerless place indeed. Mr. Bingle had spent most of the evening in trying to coax heat from the lower regions into the pipes of the seventh heaven wherein he dwelt, and without the slightest sign of success. The frigid coils in the corner of the room remained obdurate. If they indicated the slightest symptom of warmth during the evening, it was due entirely to the expansive generosity of the humble grate and not because they were moved by inward remorse. They were able, however, to supply the odour of far-off steam, as of an abandoned laundry; and sometimes they chortled meanly, revealing signs of an energy that in anything but a steam pipe might have been mistaken for a promise to do better.

Mr. Bingle poked the fire and looked at his watch. Then he crossed to the window, drew the curtains and shade aside and tried to peer through the frosty panes into the street, seven stories below. A holly wreath hung suspended in the window, completely obscured from view on one side by hoar frost, on the other by a lemon-coloured window shade that had to be handled with patience out of respect for a lapsed spring at the top. He scraped a peep-hole in the frosty surface, and, after drying his fingers on his smoking jacket, looked downward with eyes a-squint.

"Do sit down, Tom," said his wife from her chair by the fireplace. "A watched pot never boils. You can't see them from the window, in any event."

"I can see the car when it stops at the corner, my dear," said Mr. Bingle, enlarging the peep-hole with a vigour that appeared to be aggravated by advice. "Melissa said seven o'clock and it is four minutes after now."

"You forget that Melissa didn't start until after she had cleared away the dinner things. She—"

"I know, I know," he interrupted, still peering. "But that was an hour ago, Mary. I think a car is stopping at the corner now. No! It didn't stop, so there must have been some one waiting to get on instead of off."

"Do come and sit down. You are as fidgety as a child."

"Dear me," said Mr. Bingle, turning away from the window with a shiver, "how I pity the poor unfortunates who haven't a warm fire to sit beside tonight. It is going to be the coldest night in twenty years, according to the—there! Did you hear that?" He stepped to the window once more. The double ring of a street-car bell had reached his ears, and he knew that a car had stopped at the corner below. "According to the weather report this afternoon," he concluded, re-crossing the room to sit down beside the fire, very erect and expectant, a smile on his pinched, eager face. He was watching the hall door.

It was Christmas Eve. There were signs of the season in every corner of the plain but cosy little sitting-room. Mistletoe hung from the chandelier; gay bunting and strands of gold and silver tinsel draped the bookcase and the writing desk; holly and myrtle covered the wall brackets, and red tissue paper shaded all of the electric light globes; big candles and little candles flickered on the mantelpiece, and some were red and some were white and yet others were green and blue with the paint that Mr. Bingle had applied with earnest though artless disregard for subsequent odours; packages done up in white and tied with red ribbon, neatly double-bowed, formed a significant centrepiece for the ornate mahogany library table—and one who did not know the Bingles would have looked about in quest of small fry with popping, covetous eyes and sleekly brushed hair. The alluring scent of gaudily painted toys pervaded the Christmas atmosphere, quite offsetting the hint of steam from more fortunate depths, and one could sniff the odour of freshly buttered pop-corn. All these signs spoke of children and the proximity of Kris Kringle, and yet there were no little Bingles, nor had there ever been so much as one!

Mr. and Mrs. Bingle were childless. The tragedy of life for them lay not in the loss of a first-born, but in the fact that no babe had ever come to fill their hungry hearts with the food they most desired and craved. Nor was there any promise of subsequent concessions in their behalf. For fifteen years they had longed for the boon that was denied them, and to the end of their simple, kindly days they probably would go on longing. Poor as they were, neither would have complained if fate had given them half-a-dozen healthy mouths to feed, as many wriggling bodies to clothe, and all the splendid worries that go with colic, croup, measles, mumps, broken arms and all the other ailments, peculiar, not so much to childhood as they are paramount to parenthood.

Lonely, incomplete lives they led, with no bitterness in their souls, loving each other the more as they tried to fill the void with songs of resignation. Away back in the early days Mr. Bingle had said that Christmas was a bleak thing without children to lift the pall—or something of the sort.

Out of that well-worn conclusion—oft expressed by rich and poor alike—grew the Bingle Foundation, so to speak. No Christmas Eve was allowed to go by without the presence of alien offspring about their fire-lit hearth, and no strange little kiddie ever left for his own bed without treasuring in his soul the belief that he had seen Santa Claus at last—had been kissed by him, too—albeit the plain-faced, wistful little man with the funny bald-spot was in no sense up to the preconceived opinions of what the roly—poly, white-whiskered, red-cheeked annual visitor from Lapland ought to be in order to make dreams come true.

The Bingles were singularly nephewless, nieceless, cousinless. There was no kindly-disposed relative to whom they could look for the loan of a few children on Christmas Eve, nor would their own sensitiveness permit them to approach neighbours or friends in the building with a well-meant request that might have met with a chilly rebuff. One really cannot go about borrowing children from people on the floor below and the floor above, especially on Christmas Eve when children are so much in demand, even in the most fortunate of families. It is quite a different matter at any other time of the year. One can always borrow a whole family of children when the mother happens to feel the call of the matinee or the woman's club, and it is not an uncommon thing to secure them for a whole day in mid-December. But on Christmas Eve, never! And so Mr. and Mrs. Bingle, being without the natural comforts of home, were obliged to go out into the world searching for children who had an even greater grudge against circumstances. They frequently found their guests of honour in places where dishonour had left them, and they gave them a merry Christmas with no questions asked.

The past two Christmas Eves had found them rather providentially supplied with children about whom no questions had ever been asked: the progeny of a Mr. and Mrs. Sykes. Mr. Sykes being dead, the care and support of five lusty youngsters fell upon the devoted but far from rugged shoulders of a mother who worked as a saleswoman in one of the big Sixth Avenue shops, and who toiled far into the night before Christmas in order that forgetful people might be able to remember without fail on the morning thereafter. She was only too glad to lend her family to Mr. and Mrs. Bingle. More than that, she was ineffably glad, on her own account, that it was Christmas Eve; it signified the close of a diabolical season of torture at the hands of a public that believes firmly in "peace on earth" but hasn't the faintest conception of what "good will toward men" means when it comes to shopping at Christmas-time.

Mrs. Sykes' sister Melissa had been maid-of-all-work in the modest establishment of Mr. and Mrs. Bingle for a matter of three years and a half. It was she who suggested the Sykes family as a happy solution to the annual problem, and Mr. Bingle almost hugged her for being so thoroughly competent and considerate!

It isn't every servant, said he, who thinks of the comfort of her employers. Most of 'em, said he, insist on going to a chauffeurs' ball or something of the sort on Christmas Eve, but here was a jewel-like daughter of Martha who actually put the interests of her master and mistress above her own, and complained not! And what made it all the more incomprehensible to him was the fact that Melissa was quite a pretty girl. There was no reason in the world why she shouldn't have gone to the ball and had a good time instead of thinking of them in their hours of trouble. But here she was, actually going out of her way to be kind to her employers: supplying a complete family for Christmas Eve purposes and never uttering a word of complaint!

The more he thought of it, the prettier she became. He mentioned it to his wife and she agreed with him. Melissa was much too pretty, said Mrs. Bingle, entirely without animus. And she was really quite a stylish sort of girl, too, when she dressed up to go out of a Sunday. Much more so, indeed, than Mrs. Bingle herself, who had to scrimp and pinch as all good housewives do if they want to succeed to a new dress once a year.

Melissa had something of an advantage over her mistress in that she received wages and was entitled to an afternoon off every fortnight. Mrs. Bingle did quite as much work about the house, ate practically the same food, slept not half so soundly, had all the worry of making both ends meet, practised a rigid and necessary economy, took no afternoons off, and all without pecuniary compensation—wherein rests support for the contention that Melissa had the better of her mistress when all is said and done. Obviously, therefore, Mrs. Bingle was not as well off as her servant. True, she sat in the parlour while Melissa sat in the kitchen, but to offset this distinction, Melissa could sing over her pans and dishes.

Mr. Bingle, good soul, insisted on keeping a servant, despite the strain on his purse, for no other reason than that he couldn't bear the thought of leaving Mrs. Bingle alone all day while he was at the bank. (Lest there should be some apprehension, it should be explained that he was a bookkeeper at a salary of one hundred dollars a month, arrived at after long and faithful service, and that Melissa had but fifteen dollars a month, food and bed.) Melissa was company for Mrs. Bingle, and her unfailing good humour extended to Mr. Bingle when he came home to dinner, tired as a dog and in need of cheer. She joined in the table-talk with unresented freedom and she never failed to laugh heartily over Mr. Bingle's inspired jokes. Altogether, Melissa was well worth her wage. She was sunshine and air to the stifled bookkeeper and his wife.

And now, for the third time, she was bringing the five rollicking Sykeses to the little flat beyond Washington Square, and for the thousandth time Mr. and Mrs. Bingle wondered how such a treasure as Melissa had managed to keep out of heaven all these years.

Mr. Bingle opened the front door with a great deal of ceremony the instant the rickety elevator came to a stop at the seventh floor, and gave greeting to the five Sykeses on the dark, narrow landing. He mentioned each by name and very gravely shook their red-mittened paws as they sidled past him with eager, bulging eyes that saw only the Christmas trappings in the room beyond.

"Merry Christmas," said the five, not quite in one voice but with well-rehearsed vehemence, albeit two tiny ones, in rapt contemplation of things beyond, quite neglected their duty until severely nudged by Melissa, whereupon they said it in a shrill treble at least six times without stopping.

"I am very pleased to see you all," said Mr. Bingle, beaming. "Won't you take off your things and stay awhile?"

It was what he always said to them, and they always said, "Yes, thank you," following out instructions received on the way down town, and then, in some desperation, added, "Mr. Bingle," after a sententious whisper from their aunt.

They were a rosy, clean-scrubbed lot, these little Sykeses. Their mother may not have fared overly well herself, but she had contrived to put flesh and fat on the bones of her progeny, and you would go a long way before you would find a plumper, merrier group of children than those who came to the Bingle flat on Christmas Eve in their very best garments and with their very best appetites. The eldest was ten, the youngest four, and it so happened that the beginning and the end of the string were boys, the three in between being Mary, Maud, and Kate.

Mrs. Bingle helped them off with their coats and caps and mufflers, then hugged them and lugged them up to the fire, while Melissa removed her skunk tippet, her poney coat and a hat that would have created envy in the soul of a less charitable creature than the mistress of the house.

"And now," said Mr. Bingle, confronting the group, "who made you?"

"God, Mr. Bingle," said the five Sykeses, very much after the habit of a dog that is ordered to "speak."

"And who was it that said, 'Suffer little children to come unto me?'"

"Jesus, Mr. Bingle," said the five Sykeses, eyeing the pile on the table.

"And where do you expect to go when you die?" demanded Mr. Bingle, with great severity.

"Heaven!" shouted the perfectly healthy Sykeses.

"How is your mother, Mary?" asked Mrs. Bingle, always a rational woman.

Mary bobbed. "She's working, ma'am," said she, and that was all she knew about her mother's state of health.

"Are you cold?" inquired Mr. Bingle, herding them a little closer to the grate.

"Yes," said two of the Sykeses.

"Sir," admonished Melissa.

"Sir!" said all of the Sykeses.

"Now, draw up the chairs," said Mr. Bingle, clearing his throat. "Mary, you'd better take Kate and Georgie on your lap, and suppose you hold Maud, Melissa. It will be more cosy." This was his way of overcoming the shortage in chairs.

Now, it was Mr. Bingle's custom to read "The Christmas Carol" on Christmas Eve. It was his creed, almost his religion, this heart-breaking tale by Dickens. Not once, but a thousand times, he had proclaimed that if all men lived up to the teachings of "The Christmas Carol" the world would be sweeter, happier, nobler, and the churches could be put to a better use than at present, considering (as he said) that they now represent assembling places for people who read neither Dickens nor the Scripture but sing with considerable intelligence. It was his contention that "The Christmas Carol" teaches a good many things that the Church overlooks in its study of Christ, and that the surest way to make good men out of ALL boys is to get at their hearts while their souls are fresh and simple. Put the New Testament and "The Christmas Carol" in every boy's hand, said he, and they will create a religion that has something besides faith for a foundation. One sometimes forgets that Christ was crucified, but no one ever forgets what happened to Old Scrooge, and as Mr. Bingle read his Bible quite assiduously it is only fair to assume that he appreciated the relativeness of "The Christmas Carol" to the greatest Book in all the world.

For twenty years or more, he had not once failed to read "The Carol" on Christmas Eve. He knew the book by heart. Is it any wonder, then, that he was a gentle, sweet-natured man in whom not the faintest symptom of guile existed? And, on the other hand, is it any wonder that he remained a bookkeeper in a bank while other men of his acquaintance went into business and became rich and arrogant? Of course, it is necessary to look at the question from both directions, and for that reason I mention the fact that he remained a bookkeeper while those who scorned "The Christmas Carol" became drivers of men.

Experience—and some sage conclusions on the part of his wife—had taught him, after years of unsatisfactory practice, that it was best to read the story BEFORE giving out presents to the immature guests. On a great many occasions, the youngsters—in those early days they were waifs—either went sound asleep before he was half way through or became so restless and voracious that he couldn't keep his place in the book, what with watching to see that they didn't choke on the candy, break the windows or mirrors with their footballs, or put some one's eye out with a pop-gun.

Of late he had been reading the story first and distributing the "goodies" and toys afterward. It was a splendid arrangement. The "kiddies" kept their eyes and ears open and sat very still while he read to them of Tiny Tim and his friends. And when Mr. Bingle himself grinned shamefacedly through his tears and choked up so that the words would not come without being resolutely forced through a tightened throat, the sympathetic audience, including Mrs. Bingle and Melissa—and on one occasion an ancient maiden from the floor above—wept copiously and with the most flattering clamour.

A small reading-lamp stood on the broad arm of his chair, which faced the expectant group. Mr. Bingle cleared his throat, wiped his spectacles, and then peered over the rims to see that all were attending. Five rosy faces glistened with the sheen of health and soap lately applied with great force by the proud but relentless Melissa.

"Take off your ear-muffs, James," said Mr. Bingle to the eldest Sykes, who immediately turned a fiery red and shrank down in his chair bitterly to hate his brothers and sisters for snickering at him. "There! That's much better."

"They're new, Mr. Bingle," explained Melissa. "He hasn't had 'em off since yesterday, he likes 'em so much. Put 'em in your pocket, Jimmy. And now listen to Mr. Bingle. Are you sure they ain't too heavy for you, ma'am? Georgie's getting pretty big—oh, excuse me, sir."

Mr. Bingle took up the well-worn, cherished book and turned to the first page of the text. He cleared his throat again—and again. Hesitation at a time like this was unusual; he was clearly, suddenly irresolute. His gaze lingered for a moment on the white knob of a door at the upper end of the room, and then shifted to his wife's face.

"I wonder, my dear, if Uncle Joe couldn't be persuaded to come in and listen to the reading," he ventured, a wistful gleam in his eyes. "He's been feeling better the last few days. It might cheer him—"

"Cheer your granny," said Mrs. Bingle scornfully. "It's no use. I asked him just before dinner and he said he didn't believe in happiness, or something to that effect."

"He is the limit," said Melissa flatly. "The worst grouch I've ever seen, Mr. Bingle, even if he is your own flesh and blood uncle. He's almost as bad as Old Scrooge."

"He is a sick man," explained Mr. Bingle, lowering his voice; "and he hasn't known very much happiness in his lifetime, so I suppose we ought to overlook—er, ahem! Let me see, where was I?" He favoured young Mary Sykes with a genial grin. "Where was I, Mary?"

Mary saw her chance. Without a trace of shame or compunction, she said page seventy-eight, and then the three grown people coughed in great embarrassment.

"You sha'n't come next Christmas," whispered Melissa very fiercely into Mary's ear, so ominously, in fact, that Mary's lip began to tremble.

"Page one," she amended, in a very small voice. James moved uneasily in his chair, and Mary avoided his gaze.

"I believe I'll step in and ask Uncle Joe if he won't change his mind," said Mr. Bingle. "I—I don't believe he has ever read the Christmas Carol. And he is so lonely, so—er—so at odds with the world that—"

"Don't bother him, Tom," said his wife. "Get on with the reading. The children are impatient." She completed the sentence in a yawn.

Mr. Bingle began. He read very slowly and very impressively at first, but gradually warmed up to the two-hour task. In a very few minutes he was going along rapidly, almost monotonously, with scant regard for effect save at the end of sentences, the ultimate word being pronounced with distinct emphasis. Page after page was turned; the droning sound of his voice went on and on, with its clock-like inflections at the end of sentences; the revived crackle of coals lent spirit to an otherwise dreary solo, and always it was Melissa who poked the grate and at the same time rubbed her leg to renew the circulation that had been checked by the limp weight of Katie Sykes; the deep sighs of Mrs. Bingle and the loud yawns of the older children relieved the monotony of sound from time to time; and the cold wind whistled shrilly round the corners of the building, causing the youngsters to wonder how Santa was enduring the frost during his tedious wait at the top of the chimney pot. Mrs. Bingle shifted the occupants of her lap more and more often as the tale ran on, and with little attempt to do so noiselessly; Mary's feet went to sleep, and James fidgeted so violently that twice Mr. Bingle had to look at him. But eventually he came to the acutely tearful place in the story, and then he was at his best. Indeed, he quite thrilled his hearers, who became all attention and blissfully lachrymose. Mrs. Bingle sobbed, Melissa rubbed her eyes violently, Mr. Bingle choked up and could scarcely read for the tightening in his throat, and the children watched him through solemn, dripping eyes and hung on every word that told of the regeneration of Scrooge and the sad happiness of Tiny Tim. And finally Mr. Bingle, as hoarse as a crow and faint with emotion, closed the book and lowered it gently to his knee.

"There!" he said. "There's a lesson for you. Don't you feel better for it, young ladies and gentlemen?"

"I always cry," said Mary Sykes, with a glance of defiance at her eldest brother, who made a fine show of glowering.

"Everybody cries over Tiny Tim," said Melissa. "As frequent as I've heard Mr. Bingle read that story I can't help crying, knowing all the time it's only a novel. It seems to me I cry a little worse every time it's read. Don't you think I do, ma'am? Didn't you notice that I cried a little more this time than I did last year?"

"It touches the heart-strings," said Mr. Bingle, blowing his nose so fiercely that Georgie whimpered again, coming out of a doze. "I'll bet my head, dear, that Uncle Joe would sniffle as much as any of us. I wish—er—I do wish we'd asked him to come in. It would do him a world of good to shed a few tears."

"He hasn't a tear in the whole hulk of him," said Mrs. Bingle, sorrowfully.

"Poor old man," said Melissa, relenting a bit.

"I bet I know what he's doing," said James brightly.

"Doing? What is he doing, James?" demanded Mr. Bingle, surprised by the youngster's declaration.

"You can't fool me. I bet he's out there dressing up to play Santa Claus."

"Dear me!" exclaimed Mr. Bingle, blinking. The thought of crabbed Uncle Joe taking on the habiliments of

the genial saint was too much for his imagination. It left him without the power to set James straight in the matter, and Uncle Joe was immediately accepted as Santy by the expectant Sykeses, all of whom revealed a tremendous interest in the avuncular absentee. They even appeared to be properly apprehensive, and crowded a little closer to the knees of the grown-ups, all the while eyeing the door at the upper end of the room.

Melissa's involuntary snort was not enlightening to the children, but it served as a spur to Mr. Bingle, who abruptly gave over being sentimental and set about the pleasant task of distributing the packages on the table. Hilarity took the place of a necessary reserve, and before one could say Jack Robinson the little sitting-room was as boisterous a place as you'd find in a month's journey and no one would have suspected that Mr. and Mrs. Bingle were eating their hearts out because the noisy crew belonged to the heaven-blest Mrs. Sykes and not to them.

Ten o'clock came. Mr. and Mrs. Bingle sat side by side in front of the fireplace, her hand in his. The floor was littered with white tissue paper, red ribbons, peanut hulls and other by-products of festivity; the rugs were scuffled up and hopelessly awry; chairs were out of their accustomed places—two or three of them no longer stood upon their legs as upright chairs should do—and the hearth was strewn with coals from an overturned scuttle. Candle grease solidified on the mantelpiece and dripped unseen upon the mahogany bookcase—all unnoticed by the dreamy, desolate Bingles. They were alone with the annual wreck. Melissa and the five Sykeses were out in the bitter night, on their frolicksome way to the distant home of the woman who had so many children she didn't know what to do for them, not with them. They had gone away with their hands and pockets full, and their stomachs, too, and they had all been kissed and hugged and invited to come again without fail a year from that very night.

Mr. Bingle sighed. Neither had spoken for many minutes after the elevator door slammed behind the excited, shrill-voiced children. Mr. Bingle always sighed exactly at this moment in his reflections, and Mrs. Bingle always squeezed his hand fiercely and turned a pair of darkly regretful eyes upon him.

"I am sorry, dear heart," she murmured, and then he kissed her hand and said that it was God's will.

"It doesn't seem right, when we want them, need them so much," she said, huskily.

And then he repeated the thing he always said on Christmas Eve: "One of these days I am going to adopt a —er—a couple, Mary, sure as I'm sitting here. We just can't grow old without having some of them about us. Some day we'll find the right sort of—"

The bedroom door opened with a squeak, slowly and with considerable caution. The gaunt, bearded face of a tall, stooping old man appeared in the aperture; sharp, piercing eyes under thick grey eyebrows searched the room in a swift, almost unfriendly glance.

"The infernal brats gone, Tom?" demanded Uncle Joe harshly.

Mr. and Mrs. Bingle stiffened in their chairs. The tall old man came down to the fireplace, disgustedly kicking a stray, crumpled sheet of tissue paper out of his path.

"Oh, they are perfect dears, Uncle Joe," protested Mrs. Bingle, trying her best not to bristle.

"I wish you had come in for a look at 'em—" began Mr. Bingle, but the old man cut him off with a snort of anger.

"Cussed little nuisances," he said, holding his thin hands to the blaze.

"I don't see how you can say such things about children you don't know and can't—" began Mrs. Bingle.

He glared at her. "You can't tell me anything about children, Mary. I'm the father of three and I know what I'm talking about. Children are the damnedest curse on earth. You ought to thank God you haven't got any."

CHAPTER II — RELATING TO AN ODD RELATION

Now, Mr. Joseph Hooper had excellent cause for being a sour old man, and in a measure was to be pitied because of his attitude toward the young of his species. He had not been well-used by his own children, although it is no more than right to explain that they were hardly what any one save a parent would call children when they turned against him. At that particular period in the history of the Hooper family, the youngest of Joseph's three children was seventeen, the oldest twenty-two—and it so happens that the crisis came just fifteen years prior to the opening scene in this tale. It did not actually come on Christmas Eve, but, as a matter of record, on the 2lst of December at about half-past three in the afternoon. At that precise instant a judge sitting on the bench in one of the courtrooms in New York City signed the decree divorcing Mrs. Joseph Hooper from her husband, and four minutes later the lady walked out of the building with her son and two daughters, all of them having deliberately turned their backs upon the miserable defendant in the case. As all of the children were of an age to legally choose the parent with whom they preferred to live,

and as they elected to cast off the paternal for the maternal, it readily may be seen that Mr. Hooper was not entirely without proof that this is a cruel, heartless, ungrateful world and filled with gall.

As a matter of fact, he had not been wholly to blame for the family crash, notwithstanding a rather loose respect on his part for the sanctity of the home. (It was not to be denied that he had strayed into crooked paths and devious ways—and, to do him justice, he did not attempt to deny it: he ventured only to EXPLAIN it.) According to his version of the affair, the trouble began long before he took to wine and women. It began with his wife's propensity for nagging. Being a high-spirited, intelligent person with a mind of his own, Mr. Hooper didn't like being nagged, and as he rather harshly attempted to put a stop to it just as soon as it dawned upon him that he was being hen-pecked, his wife, not to be outdone, went at it harder than ever. And that is how it all began, and that is why I say that he was not wholly to blame. She was very pretty and very peevish, and they lived a cat and dog life for ten years after the birth of the last child.

Mr. Hooper took to drink and then took to staying away from home for days at a time. It was at this stage of the affair that the children began to see him through their mother's eyes. Certain disclosures were inevitable. In a word, Mrs. Hooper hired detectives, and finding herself in a splendid position to secure all she wanted in the way of alimony, heralded Mr. Hooper's shortcomings to the world. The only good that ever came out of the unfortunate transaction, so far as Mr. Hooper was concerned, was to be found in the blessed realisation that she had actually deprived herself of the right to nag him, and that was something he knew would prove to be a constant source of irritation to her.

But when his children turned against him, he faltered. He had not counted on that. They not only went off to live with their mother, but they virtually wiped him out of their lives, quite as if he had passed away and no longer existed in the flesh. The three of them stood by the mother—as they should have done, we submit, considering Mr. Hooper's habits—and shuddered quite as profoundly as she when the name of the erring parent was mentioned in their presence. Mr. Hooper couldn't for the life of him understand this treachery on the part of his pampered offspring, on whom he had lavished everything and to whom he had denied nothing in the way of luxury. It was hard for him to realise that he was as much of a scamp and scapegrace in their young eyes as he was in the eyes of his wife—and the whole of his wife's family, even to the remotest of cousins.

In the bright days of their early married life, before he knew the difference between what he looked upon as affectionate teasing and what he afterwards came to know as persistent nagging, he deeded over to her the house and lot in Madison Avenue. He did that willingly, cheerfully. Two days after the divorce was granted, he paid over to her one hundred thousand dollars alimony. He did that unwillingly, gloomily. And the very next week the stock market went the wrong way for him, and he was cleaned out. He hadn't a dollar left of the comfortable little fortune that had been his. He remained drunk for nearly two months, and when he sobered up in a sanitarium—and took the pledge for the first and last time—he came out of the haze and found that he hadn't a friend left in New York. Every man's head was turned away from him, every man's hand was against him.

He sent for his son to come to the cheap hotel in which he was living. The son sent back word that he never wanted to see his face again. Whereupon Joseph Hooper for the first time declared that the sons and daughters of men are curses, and slunk out of New York to say it aloud in the broad, free stretches of the world across which he drifted without aim or purpose for years and years and always farther away from the home he had lost.

He always said to himself—but never so much as a word of it to any one else—that if his wife hadn't driven him to distraction with her nagging he would have avoided the happy though disastrous pitfalls into which he stumbled in his desperate efforts to find appreciation. He would have remained an honourable, faithful spouse to her, and an abstainer—as such things go. He would have shared with her the love and respect of their three children, and he would have staved off bankruptcy with the very hundred thousand dollars that she exacted as spite money. But she was a nagger, and he was no Job. There was a modicum of joy in the heart of him, however: having been cleaned out to the last penny, he was in no position to come up monthly with the thousand dollars charged against him by the court for the support and maintenance of two of his children until they reached their majority. He took a savage delight in contemplating the rage of his late wife when she realised that the children would have to be provided for out of the income from the one hundred thousand she had received in a lump sum, and he even thanked God that she was without means beyond this hateful amount. It tickled him to think of her anguish in not being able to spend the income from her alimony on furs and feathers with which to bedeck herself. Instead of spending the five thousand on herself she would be obliged to put it on the backs and into the stomachs of her three brats! He chuckled vastly over this bit of good fortune! It was really a splendid joke on her, this smash of his. No doubt the children also hated him the more because of his failure to remain on his feet down in Wall Street, but he consoled himself with the thought that they would sometimes long for the old days when father did the providing, and wish that things hadn't turned out so badly.

In his hour of disgrace—and we may add degeneration—he possessed but one blood relation who stood by him and pitied him in spite of his faults. That was his nephew, Tom Bingle, the son of his only sister, many years dead. But even so, he did not deceive himself in respect to the young man's attitude toward him. He realised that Tom was kind to him simply because it was his nature to be kind to every one, no matter how unworthy. It wasn't in Tom Bingle to be mean, not even to his worst enemy. Notwithstanding the fact that the young man had just taken unto himself a wife, and was as poor as a church-mouse, the door and the cupboard in his modest little flat were opened cheerfully to the delinquent Uncle Joe, and be it said to the latter's discredit and shame—he proceeded to impose upon the generosity of his nephew in a manner that should have earned him a booting into the street. But young Tom was patient, he was mild, he even seemed to enjoy being put upon by the wretched bankrupt. The thing that touched his heart most of all and caused him to overlook a great many shortcomings, was the cruel, unfilial slap in the face that had been administered by the

three children of the man, and the crushing, bewildering effect it had upon him.

It was Tom who virtually picked the once fastidious Joseph Hooper out of the gutter, weeks after the smash, and took him under his puny wing, so to speak, during a somewhat protracted period of regeneration. The broken, shattered man became, for the time being, the Bingle burden, and he was not by any means a light or pleasant one. For months old Joseph ate of his nephew's food, drained his purse, abused his generosity, ignored his comforts and almost succeeded in driving the young but devoted wife back to the home from which Tom had married her.

It was at this juncture that the mild-mannered bookkeeper arose to the dignity of a fine rage, and co-incidentally Joseph Hooper for the first time realised what an overbearing, disagreeable visitor he had been and departed, but without the slightest ill-feeling toward his benefactors. Indeed, he was deeply repentant, deeply apologetic. He ruefully announced that it would never be in his power to repay them for all they had done for him, but, resorting to a sudden whim, declared that he would make them his heirs if they didn't mind being used as a means to convey his final word of defiance to the children who had cast him off. Not that he would ever have a dollar to leave to them, but for the satisfaction it would give him to cut the traitors off with the proverbial shilling. Beset with the notion that this was an ideal way to show his contempt for his offspring, he went to the safety deposit vault and took there from the worthless document known as his last will and testament and in the presence of witnesses destroyed the thing, thereby disinheriting the erstwhile wife and her children as effectually as if he had really possessed the estate set forth in the instrument.

"I'll make a will in your favour, Tom," he said at the time, with a mocking grin, "and in it I will include this miserable carcass of mine, so that you may at least have something to sell to the doctors. And who knows? I may scrape together a few hundred dollars before I die, provided I don't die too soon."

"We will give you a decent burial, Uncle Joe," said Thomas Bingle, revolting against the specific. "Do you suppose I would sell my uncle to a—"

"Haven't you a ray of humour in that head of yours?" demanded his uncle. "Can't you SEE a joke?"

"Well, if you were joking," said Bingle, relieved, "all well and good, but it didn't sound that way."

"You are a simple soul," was all that Joseph said, and then borrowed fifty dollars from his nephew for a fresh start in the world, as he expressed it. With this slender fortune in his purse he set out into a world that knew him not, nor was it known to him.

He came back fifteen years afterward, poorer than when he went away, broken in health, old to the point of decrepitude, bedraggled, unkempt and prideless. And once more Thomas Bingle took him in and provided the prospective death-bed for him. They made the old derelict as comfortable as it was in their power to do, and sacrificed not a little in order that he might have some of the comforts of life.

He was a very humble, meek old man, and they pitied him. Screwing up his courage, Mr. Bingle went one day to the home of the son of Joseph Hooper and boldly suggested that, inasmuch as the mother was no longer living, it would not be amiss for him and his sisters to take the father who created them back into the family circle once more, and to ease his declining years. Mr. Bingle was ordered out of the rich man's office. Then he approached the two daughters, both of whom had married well, and met with an even more painful reception. They not only refused to recognise their father but declined to recognise their father's nephew.

A few days afterward, a lawyer came to the bank to see Mr. Bingle. He informed the bookkeeper that the Hooper family had been thinking matters over and were prepared to pay him the sum of seventy-five dollars a month for the care of Joseph Hooper, or, in other words, they would contribute twenty-five dollars apiece toward sustaining the life of one who was already dead to them. Moreover, they stood ready to pay the expenses of his funeral when actual dissolution occurred, but farther than that they could not be expected to go.

Mr. Bingle flared up—a most unusual thing for him to do. "You tell them that I will take care of Uncle Joe as long as he lives without a nickel from them and that I'll bury him when he dies."

"Out of your own pocket?" exclaimed the lawyer, who knew something of bookkeepers' salaries.

"Most certainly not out of anybody else's," said Mr. Bingle, with dignity. "And you can also tell them that they are a pack of blamed good-for-nothings," he added, with absolutely no dignity.

"My dear sir."

"Be sure to tell 'em, will you? If I was a swearing man I'd do better than that but I guess it will do for a starter."

"My clients will insist upon re-imbursing you for—" began the lawyer stiffly, but Mr. Bingle snapped his fingers disdainfully, much nearer the gentleman's nose than he intended, no doubt, and with a perfectly astonishing result. The legal representative's hat fell off backwards and he actually trod upon it in his haste to give way before the irate little bookkeeper.

"You tell 'em just what I said, that's all you've got to do," said Mr. Bingle, and then picked up his visitor's hat and pushed the crown into shape with a vicious dig. "Here's your hat. Good day."

He was so boiling mad all the rest of the afternoon that he could not see the figures clearly, and made countless mistakes, necessitating an extra two hours' work on the books before he could even think of going home.

Arriving at the apartment, he found his wife in a state of perturbation, not over his tardiness, but over the extraordinary behaviour of Uncle Joe. The old man had been out most of the day and had come in at five,

growling and cursing with more than ordinary vehemence.

"He is in his bedroom, Tom, and I don't know what to make of him. He has had bad news, I think."

"Bad news?" cried Mr. Single. "The very worst news on earth wouldn't seem bad to Uncle Joe after all he has gone through. I'll go in and see him."

"Be careful, dear! I—I—he may be insane. You never can tell what—"

It turned out that the old man had visited his three children during the day, going to each of them as a suppliant and in deep humility. After fifteen years, he broke his resolve and went to them with his only appeal. He wanted to die with his children about him. That was all. He did not ask them to love him, or forgive him. He only asked them to call him father and to let him spend the last weeks of his life within the sound of their voices.

Sitting at the supper table, he grimly related his experiences to the distressed Bingles.

"I went first to Angela's, Tom," he said, scowling at the centre-piece. "Angela married that Mortimer fellow in Sixty-first Street, you know—Clarence Mortimer's son. Ever seen their home? Well, the butler told me to go around to the rear entrance. I gave him my card and told him to take it up to MY DAUGHTER. I had a fellow in a drug-store write my name neatly on some blank cards, Mary. The butler threatened to call the police. He thought I was crazy. But just then old Clarence Mortimer came up the steps. It seems that he is living with his son, having lost all of his money a few years ago. He recognised me at once, and I knew by the way he shook hands with me that he has been leading a dog's life ever since he went broke. He said he'd speak to Angela—and he did. I waited in the hall downstairs. Old Clarence didn't have the courage to come back himself. A footman brought down word that Mrs. Mortimer could not see Mr. Hooper. She was not at home to Mr. Hooper, and—never would be. That was what her servant was obliged to tell me. So I went away. Then I tried Elizabeth. She lives in one of those fifteen thousand dollar a year apartments on Park Avenue. She has three lovely children. They are my grand-children, you know, Tom. I saw them in the automobile as I came out of the building and went my way after Elizabeth Bransone had told me to my face—I managed to get in to see her—had told me that I was a sight, a disgrace, that she couldn't bear to look at me, and that I had better clear out before her husband came in. My own daughter, Tom, my own flesh and blood. She informed me that provision would be made for me, but she made it very plain—damnably plain—that I was never to bother her again. So I went away from Elizabeth's. There was only one of 'em left, and I hated to tackle him worse than either of the girls. But I did. I went down to his office. He refused to see me at first, but evidently thought it best to get the thing out of his system forever, so he changed his mind and told the office boy to let me in. Well, my son Geoffrey is a very important person now. He married a Maybrick, you know, and he is a partner in old Maybrick's firm—steamship agents. Geoffrey looked me over. He did it very thoroughly. I told him I'd come to see if he couldn't do something toward helping me to die a respectable, you might say comfortable death. He cut me off short. Said he would give me a thousand dollars to leave New York and stay away forever. I—-"

"I trust you did not accept the money," cried Mr. Bingle in a shocked voice.

"I'm pretty well down and out, Tom, but I'd sooner starve than to take money from him in that way. So I told my son to go to the devil."

"Good for you!" cried Mr. Bingle. "And then what?"

"He is a humorous individual, that pompous son of mine," said old Joseph, with a chuckle. "He said I ought to be ashamed of myself for advising my own son to go to the devil in view of what a similar excursion had done for me. I managed to subdue my temper—it's a bad one, as you know—and put the matter up to him in plain terms. 'I am your father, Geoffrey, when all is said and done. Are you going to kick me out into the world when I've got no more than a month or two to live? Are you going to allow my body to lie in the Potter's field? Are you willing to allow this poor nephew of mine to take care of me, to assume the responsibility of seeing that I get a decent burial in a decent—-'"

"Oh, Uncle Joe, you oughtn't even to think of such things," broke in his niece by marriage. "You MUST think of cheerful—-"

"You are good for years and years—-" began Mr. Bingle.

"Don't interrupt me," said Uncle Joe irascibly. "I guess I know what I'm talking about. I'm good for a couple of months at the outside. I'm seventy years old and I feel two hundred. Why, dammit, old Clarence Mortimer said I LOOK a hundred. To make the story short, Geoffrey said he had arranged to pay you for my keep, no matter how long I lasted, but he thought I was foolish not to take the thousand and go to some quiet little place in the country—and wait. If—if it should happen that I lived longer than the thousand would carry me, he'd see to it that I had more. Only he didn't want me hanging around New York. That was the point, d'you see? He very frankly said that he had always sided with his mother against me, and that was all there was to it, so far as he was concerned. And, see here, Tom, he said you had been down to see him about me. Is that true?"

"Well, I—I thought perhaps—er—I might be able to bring about a reconciliation," floundered Mr. Bingle.

"And you found that in the upper circles it is not considered good form to be reconciled unless it pays, eh? What would be the sense in becoming reconciled to a wreck of a father, who hasn't a dollar in the world, after getting along so nicely for fifteen years without him? No, it isn't done, Tom—it's not the thing. Geoffrey made no bones about admitting that as far as he is concerned, I have been dead for fifteen years. He—-"

"Well then," said Mr. Bingle, slamming his fist upon the dining-table so violently that the cutlery bounced,

"why the dickens does he object to burying you? If I discovered a relative that had been dead for fifteen years, I'd see to it that he was buried, if only for the good of the community."

"He doesn't object to burying me," explained Uncle Joe. "He implies that he'll do that much for me with pleasure. As a matter of fact, he said that if I'd arrange to have some one notify him when I was literally dead, he would see to it that I was buried. But I told him he needn't bother his head about it, because I was quite sure you would do it even more cheerfully than he and undoubtedly with less secrecy."

"Cheerfully?" gasped the Bingles.

"Cheerfully," repeated Uncle Joe firmly. "And now, can't we talk about something else? I've done my best to make peace with my son and daughters, and now I wash my hands of 'em. I never intended to weaken in my resolve, but I—I just couldn't help it, Tom. I swore I'd never look into their faces again, but, after all, I AM their father, you see, and I suppose I'm getting weak and childish in my old age. I gave in, that's all. I thought they might have some little feeling for me, and—" He did not finish the sentence, and as the Bingles took that instant to blow their noses and to look so intently at the electric chandelier that their eyes smarted, it was perhaps just as well that he ended his ruminations when he did.

All this happened six weeks prior to Christmas Eve, and they were six long, trying weeks for the two Bingles. The old man was sick two-thirds of the time and had to have a physician. He insisted on having the now famous Dr. Fiddler, one of the most expensive practitioners in New York, obstinately refusing to listen to reason. Fiddler had been the Hooper family physician years ago and that was all there was to be said. He WOULD have him. So poor Tom Bingle sent for the great man, who came and prescribed for his old friend and client. After a week the Bingles began to count the number of visits, and grew lean and gaunt-faced over the prospect ahead of them. Fiddler's fee was ten dollars a visit—to a friend, he explained, in accounting for the ridiculously low figure—and he came twice a day for nearly two weeks. The Bingles did not complain. As Mr. Bingle said, they took their medicine, even as Uncle Joe took his—only he thrived on it and they withered. Dr. Fiddler was very nice about it, however. He assured Mr. Bingle that he was in no hurry for his money. Any time before the first of February would be perfectly satisfactory. He was only too glad to have been instrumental in dragging his old friend, Joseph Hooper from the very edge of the grave.

"And if he has a recurrence of the—" he began suavely.

"There's no danger of THAT, is there, Doctor? cried Mr. Bingle, gripping his fingers tightly in his coat pockets.

"Don't hesitate a moment, Mr. Bingle. Send for me. You may depend upon it, I will come on the instant. I think your poor uncle has been very badly—er—treated, Mr. Bingle."

"Do you attend the families of his son and daughters—I mean to say, as their regular—"

"No," said Dr. Fiddler shortly, "I have not that felicity, Mr. Bingle." And Mr. Bingle thought he understood why Dr. Fiddler felt that Uncle Joe had been badly treated.

Later on, Uncle Joe blandly asseverated that it pays to have the best, no matter what it costs. "Why, one of these cheap, rattle-brained doctors would have let me die, sure as fate. Old Fiddler comes high, but he cures. If I should happen to get sick again, Tom, send for him without delay, will you?"

Mr. Bingle said he would, and he meant it. He had jotted down in the back of a little notebook each successive visit of Dr. Fiddler, and, consulting it from time to time, had no difficulty in realising that he came high. Twenty-one visits, at ten dollars a visit, that's what it amounted to, say nothing of the drug bill, the extra-food bill, the night-nurse's wages, and the wear and tear on the nerves of his wife, himself—and Melissa. For, it would appear, Melissa had nerves as well as the rest of them, and Uncle Joe was the very worst thing in the world for Melissa's nerves. She very frequently said so, and sometimes to his face, although she never neglected him for an instant. In truth, she shared with Mrs. Bingle the day nursing, and seldom slept well of nights, knowing that the night-nurse was upsetting everything in the kitchen and pantry in her most professional way.

Of course Uncle Joe did not actually get well. He merely recovered. In other words, he survived the attack of influenza and heart trouble, only to go on ailing as he had ailed before. He was quite cheerful about it, too. They used to catch him chuckling to himself as he sat shivering over the fireplace, and he seemed to take especial delight in demanding three eggs for breakfast when every one knew that eggs were seventy-two cents a dozen. The only compensation they had out of the experience—aside from the realisation that they were living up to a principle—was the untiring effort he made to entertain them with stories of his adventures as a tramp! He gracelessly confessed that he had travelled under many names, and that he was known by various soubriquets that would not sound well on Fifth Avenue but still possessed the splendid virtue of being decorative. There was not the slightest doubt that he had roamed the land over, and there was not even the faintest suspicion that he had profited by travel.

And this brings us up to Christmas Eve. With February not far away, and Uncle Joe lamentably liable to have another attack, the Bingles curtailed quite considerably in their preparations for the festivities in honour of the five little Sykeses. They spent but a third of the customary amount in providing presents, and they were not quite sure that they were wise in spending as much as that. Uncle Joe went to considerable pains to convince them that they were making fools of themselves in throwing away money that might be needed for his funeral, and absolutely refused to become a party to the affair. He moped in his bedroom, over an oil-stove, and made himself generally unpleasant. As for "The Christmas Carol," he had but one opinion about it, and this is no place to express it.

When he came into the sitting-room after the departure of the Sykeses, breaking in upon the tender reflections of Mr. and Mrs. Single, he represented the ghost who might have been at the feast but was, for

some reason, obligingly late.

As he stood over the blaze, rubbing his bony old knuckles, he was a depressing figure indeed. His gloomy eyes had no reflected glow in them; his long, stooped frame suggested nothing so much as a weather-worn scare-crow about which a thousand storms had thrashed. There was no joy in his soul.

"Yes," he said, as if they had disputed him without reason, "you ought to be thankful you have no children. What you can see in this tomfoolery about Christmas Eve is beyond me. Better save your money for something worth while, that's what I say. Something worth while."

"Well, WHAT, for instance?" demanded Mr. Bingle, suddenly irritated beyond control.

"Confound you, Tom, do you forget that you owe Dr. Fiddler more than two hundred dollars?" snapped Uncle Joe, turning on him.

"Oh, I will pay him—I will pay him all right, never fear," replied Mr. Bingle, shrinking.

Old Joseph Hooper regarded him keenly for a long time before speaking again. His voice softened and his manner underwent a swift change.

"Tom Bingle, you are the best man living to-day," he said, a strange huskiness in his voice. "If you were not as good as gold you would kick me out and—and—"

"Kick you out, Uncle Joe!" cried Mr. Bingle, coming to his feet and laying his hand on the bent shoulder. "God bless you, sir, I—I—I ought to kick you out for SAYING such a thing!"

And old Joseph suddenly laid his arm on the mantelpiece and buried his face upon it, his gaunt figure shaking with sobs.

CHAPTER III — THE DEATH OF UNCLE JOE

When Thomas Bingle made his inspired visit to Geoffrey Hooper in the interest of peace, he took it upon himself to advise his wealthy cousin to read "The Christmas Carol" before it was too late, and formed a permanent and irradicable opinion of the pauper's son when that individual curtly informed him that he was not in the habit of reading "trash." Mr. Bingle was patient enough to inquire if he knew anything about "The Christmas Carol" and Geoffrey in turn asked "who wrote the words for it," although it really didn't matter, he added by way of cutting off the reply of his astonished visitor, who naturally could not have expected to know that his cousin was a consistent church-goer and knew a great deal about Christmas carols. If it had been in his power to hate any one, Mr. Bingle would have hated his solitary male cousin for that stupendous insult to literature. As it was, he could only pity him for his ignorance, and at the same time blame Uncle Joseph for bringing up his son in such a slip-shod manner.

It all went to show the trend of the world, however, in this callous age of ours; it went to show that the right sort of missionary work was not being performed. Mr. Bingle never forgave Geoffrey for calling "The Christmas Carol" trash. In the light of what took place afterwards, he felt that he was completely justified in an opinion formed almost on the instant the abominable word was uttered.

Christmas fell on a Wednesday. Three days out of each year Mr. Bingle slept late of a morning: Christmas, Easter Sunday and Labour Day. On this particular Christmas morning he slept much later than usual; the little clock in the parlour was striking eight when he awoke and scrambled out of bed.

Mrs. Bingle always had her coffee in bed. She adhered strictly to that pleasant custom for the somewhat pathetic reason that it afforded a distinct exemplification of the superiority of mistress over maid. By no manner of means could Melissa have arrived at this expression of luxury.

"Merry Christmas," said Mr. Bingle, crimping his toes on the cold carpet and bending over to kiss his companion's cheek. She responded with unwonted vigour, proving that she had been wide awake for some time.

"I shall get up, Thomas," she declared, much to his surprise.

"It's pretty cold," said he. "Better stay where you are."

"I thought I heard Uncle Joe moving about in the sitting-room quite a while ago," she said. "Do you suppose he needed a hot-water bottle?"

Mr. Bingle sighed. "If he did, you may be quite sure he would have got the whole house up with his roars, Mary."

"You will take cold, Thomas, standing around without your—"

"I'll just run in and see if Uncle Joe needs anything," he interrupted, a note of anxiety in his voice. Pausing at the bedroom door, with his hand on the knob, he turned toward her with a merry grin on his deeply-seamed face. His sparse hair was as tousled and his eyes as full of mischief as any child's. "Maybe it was old

Santa you heard out there, Mary—filling the stockings."

She was too matter-of-fact for anything like that. "If you knew what was good for you, Tom Bingle, you'd fill that pair of stockings lying at the foot of the bed instead of running around in your bare feet," she said, pulling the covers up about her chin. "I think I'll have my breakfast in bed, after all."

"That's right," said he, and hurried nimbly out of the room so that she would not hear the chattering of his teeth. Mrs. Single was enjoying the paroxysm of a luxurious, comfortable yawn when she heard a shout of alarm from the sitting-room. She sat straight up in bed.

"Mary! Oh, my goodness! I say, Melissa!"

Then came the pattering of Mr. Bingle's feet across the floor, followed by the intrusion of an excited face through the half-open door.

"Wha—what IS the matter?" she quavered.

"He—he's gone!"

"Dead?" she shrieked.

"No! Gone, I said—left the house. Out in the cold. Freezing. Wandering about in the streets—"

"In—in his night clothes?" gasped his wife. "Don't tell me he has gone into the street without—"

"Get up!" cried Mr. Bingle, making a dash for his own garments. "We must do something. Let me think—give me time. Now what is the first thing to do? Notify the police or—"

"IS HE DRESSED?" she demanded.

"Of course," he replied. "At least he took his clothes with him. They're not in his bedroom."

"Well, ask the elevator boy. He'll know when he went out. Hurry up, Thomas. Don't stop to put on a collar. Do hurry—"

"I'm not putting on a collar," came in smothered tones. "I'm putting on a shirt."

He didn't quite have it on when Melissa appeared in the doorway, wide-eyed and excited.

"Uncle Joe has disappeared, ma'am," she chattered. "I can't find hide or hair of him. Did you call, Mr. Bingle, or was it—"

"I called," said Mr. Bingle, getting behind the foot-board of the bed. "Where is he? Did you—"

"I heard him moving about the kitchen about six or half-past. I peeked out of my door, and there he was, all dressed, putting the coffee pot on the stove. I says to him: 'What are you doing there?' and he says: 'I'm getting breakfast, you lazy lummix,' and I says: 'Well, get it, you old bear, 'cause I won't, you can bet on that,'—and went back to bed. Oh, goodness—goodness! I wouldn't ha' said that to him if I'd knowed he—"

"Don't blubber, Melissa," cried Mrs. Bingle. "Ask the elevator boy what time it was when—"

"Hand me my trousers, Mary," shivered Mr. Bingle, "or send Melissa out of the room. I can't—"

"He made himself some coffee and—"

"Call the elevator boy, as I tell you—No, wait! Dress yourself first, you silly thing," commanded Mrs. Bingle, and Melissa fled.

The old man was gone, there could be no doubt about that. Investigations proved that he had left the building at precisely sixteen minutes of seven, the janitor declaring that he had looked at his watch the instant the old man appeared on the sidewalk where he was shovelling away the snow. He admitted that nothing short of a miracle could have caused him to go to the trouble of getting out his watch on a morning as cold as this one happened to be, and so he regarded old Mr. Hooper's exit as a most astonishing occurrence. Further investigation showed that he had walked down the six tortuous flights of stairs instead of ringing for the elevator, and that he was clad in Mr. Bingle's best overcoat, an ulster of five winters, to say nothing of his arctics, gloves and muffler.

No one, not even Mr. Bingle, could deny that it was a very shabby thing to do on a Christmas morning, and for once the gentle bookkeeper lost faith in his fellow-man. In all probability he would have excused Uncle Joe's early morning stroll in garments that did not belong to him had it not been for the fact that the old gentleman also took away with him all of his own scanty belongings neatly wrapped in the morning newspaper, an almost priceless breakfast possession from Mr. Bingle's way of looking at it.

At first Mrs. Bingle insisted on having the police notified. It was so evident that Uncle Joe had departed without even contemplating an early return that she couldn't see why her husband shouldn't at least recover what belonged to him before the old ingrate could get to a pawn-shop, notwithstanding the family shame that would attend an actual arrest.

"He is an old scamp, Tom, and I don't see why you should put up with the scurvy trick he has played on you," she protested, almost in tears. "After all we've done for him, it really seems—"

"I swear to goodness, Mary, I believe I'd do it if—if it wasn't Christmas," groaned Mr. Bingle, who sat dejectedly over the fire, his hands jammed deep into his pockets, his chin on his breast. "But really, my dear, I—I can't—I just can't set the police after him on Christmas Day. Besides, he may come back of his own accord."

"He can't go very far on what he will get for your overcoat," she said ironically. "He'll be back, never fear, when he gets good and hungry, and he'll not bring your overcoat with him, either."

"My dear, whatever else Uncle Joe may have been, he is not a thief," said Mr. Bingle stiffly.

"How do you know?" she demanded. "He may have been in the penitentiary, for all we know about him. At any rate, he HAS stolen your overcoat, and your rubbers, and—and—"

"My ear-muffs," supplied Mr. Bingle, seeing that she was taxing her memory.

"I suppose you regard all that as the act of an honest man," she said irritably. "I DO wish, Tom Bingle, that you had a little more backbone when it comes to—"

"Tut, tut!" interposed Mr. Bingle, uncomfortably. He resented her occasional references to his backbone, or rather to the lack of it.

"—being put upon," she concluded. "Oh, just to think of the old scamp doing this to you on Christmas Day!" she wailed. "No wonder his children despise him."

"Well, we'll see what—" he began and then cleared his throat in some confusion. His wife's appraising eye was upon him.

"What are we going to see?" she inquired, after a moment.

"We'll see what turns up," said he, somewhat defiantly, "I don't believe in condemning a man unheard. I have a feeling that he—"

"What do you expect to wear when you go down to the bank in the morning?" she demanded, still eyeing him severely. "Your spring overcoat? People will think you're crazy. It's below zero."

"Oh, I'll get along all right," said he stoutly. "Don't you worry about me, Mary. By hokey, I wish he'd come back this afternoon, just to prove to you that it isn't safe to form an opinion without—"

"There you go, Tom Bingle, wishing as you always do that somebody would do something good just to show me that no one ever does anything bad. You dear old goose! Only the meanest man in the world could have the heart to rob you. That's what Uncle Joe is, my dear—the meanest man in the world."

Mr. Bingle sighed. He was in no position to argue the point. Uncle Joe had not left him very much to stand upon in the shape of a theory. There was nothing to do but to concede her the sigh of admission.

"It's possible," he said hopefully, "that the poor old man is—is out of his head. Let us hope so, at any rate." And with this somewhat doubtful sop to the family honour, he lapsed into the silence of one who realizes that he has uttered a foolish remark and shrinks from the consequences.

Mrs. Bingle said "Humph," and no more, but there is no word in any vocabulary that represents as much in the way of sustained argument as that homely, unspellable ejaculation.

Mr. Hooper DID return, but not until the Saturday following Christmas Day. He justified Mr. Bingle's faith in mankind to some extent by restoring the overcoat and the arctics, but failed to bring back the ear-muffs and the newspaper. He also failed to account for his own scanty belongings which he had taken away from the flat wrapped up in the newspaper. As a matter of fact, he did not feel called upon to account for anything that had transpired since a quarter before seven on Christmas morning. He merely walked in upon Mrs. Bingle at noon and told her to send for Dr. Fiddler at once. Then he got into bed and shivered so violently that the poor lady quite forgot her intention to berate him for all the worry and trouble he had caused. She proceeded at once to dose him with quinine, hot whisky and other notable remedies while Melissa telephoned for the doctor and Mr. Bingle.

"Don't you think I'd better send for Dr. Smith, on the first floor, Uncle Joe?" said Mrs. Bingle nervously.

"I want Dr. Fiddler," growled the old man. "I won't have anybody else, Mary. He's the only doctor in New York. Well, why are you standing there like a fence-post? Can't you see I'm sick? Can't you see I need a doctor? Can't—"

"I only thought that perhaps Dr. Smith could do something to relieve you before Dr. Fiddler arrives. You should not forget that Dr. Fiddler is a great man and a—a busy one. He may not be able to come at once, and in that case—"

"He'll come the minute you send for him," argued the sick man. "Didn't he say he would? Do you want me to die like a dog? Where's Tom?"

"He is at the bank, Uncle Joe," said Mrs. Bingle patiently. "Now, try to be quiet, we'll have the doctor here as quickly as possible."

"I don't want any of your half-grown doctors, Mary, understand that. I want a real one. I'm a mighty sick man, and—"

"You'll be all right in a day or two, Uncle Joe," said she soothingly. "Don't worry, you poor old dear. Drink this."

"What is it?"

"Never mind. It's good for you. Take it right down."

Uncle Joe surprised himself by swallowing the hot drink without further remonstrance. His own docility

convinced him beyond all doubt that he was a very sick man.

"Send for Tom," he sputtered. "Send for him at once. He ought to be here. I am his uncle—his only uncle, and he—"

"Now, do be quiet, Uncle Joe. Tom will be here before long. It's Saturday, you know—a half holiday at the bank."

She sat down on the edge of the bed and gently stroked his hot forehead. For a short time he growled about the delay in getting the doctor to the apartment; then he became quietly watchful. His gaze settled upon the comely, troubled face of Tom Bingle's wife and, as he looked, his fierce old eyes softened.

"Mary," he said at last, and his voice was gentle, almost plaintive; "you are a real angel. I just want you to know that I love you and Tom, and I want you to tell me now that you forgive me for—for—"

"Sh! See if you can't go to sleep, Uncle Joe."

"I'd just like to hear you say that you don't hate me, Mary."

"Of course, I don't hate you. How can you ask such a question?"

"I've been a dreadful—"

"Hush, now. Here's Melissa. Did you get Dr. Fiddler, Melissa?"

"Yes, ma'am," said the little maid-of-all-work, appearing in the doorway with a couple of blankets that she had been warming behind the kitchen range. "He's coming at once, ma'am, and—" her eyes were expressive of an immense pity for her mistress—"he says he's prepared to stay all night if necessary, and he's sent for TWO nurses, night and day. Besides all that, his assistant is coming with him."

"That's the kind of a doctor to have," said Uncle Joe, with a vast satisfaction. "None of your cheap, dollar-a-visit incompetents for me, Mary. If a man's life is worth anything at all, it's worth more than a couple of one dollar visits from these—What's the matter with you, Melissa? Don't glare at me like that. Haven't I the right to live? Can't I ask for a doctor—a mere doctor—without being—"

"Oh, I ain't begrudgin' you a doctor, Uncle Joe," said Melissa shortly. "It's none of my business. You can have all the doctors in New York if you want 'em."

"I don't want 'em, confound you," exclaimed Uncle Joe. "I only want a fighting chance, that's all. I—"

"Nobody's fighting you, is they?" demanded Melissa, whipping a blanket across the bed with more energy than seemed necessary. She began tucking in the edges. "I guess we've always been pretty nice to you, Uncle Joe—every one of us—and I guess we'll keep on being nice to you, so don't growl."

"That's right, Melissa," said the sick man humbly. "You've been a jewel, my girl. I—I shall never forget you."

"I'm a soft-hearted fool or I'd ha'—" began Melissa, somewhat ominously, but checked herself after a quick glance at her mistress's face. "Try to go to sleep, Uncle Joe," she substituted. "I'll have some toast and tea for you when you wake up. You—you look as if you hadn't eat anything since you left, you poor old thing."

"I hope Tom didn't need his overcoat while I was away, Mary," said Uncle Joe, abruptly changing the topic of conversation.

"He has another coat," said Mrs. Bingle, evasively. "When you feel better you must tell us what you have been doing for the past—"

"I'm not going to feel any better," said Uncle Joe, quite cheerfully. "I may hang on for a long time but I'm not going to be any better. This is the finish for me, Mary. And I'd like you to know that I didn't come back here to die on your hands without first giving my children a chance to take me in. I—I tried them once more."

"You—you went to them again?" she cried. Melissa laid the second blanket across the bed more gently than the first.

"Yes," said Mr. Hooper, his thick eyebrows meeting in a scowl of anger. "Yes, I talked with all three of them this morning before I came here. I told them that I was sick and—and—" He choked up suddenly as Mrs. Bingle began to pat his lean old knuckles with her soft, warm hand.

"I wouldn't talk about it if I were you, Uncle Joe."

"But I—I want to talk about it," he said, with an effort. "First I wrote a nice, kind letter to each one of them. Then I called them up on the telephone and told them all how sick I was, that I couldn't last much longer, that I didn't want to die in the street, or a charity hospital, or—the police station. That confounded Christmas Carol of yours made me relent. I read the thing the other night after you went to bed. They all asked me where I was and said they would send an ambulance to take me to Bellevue, and that was the best they could do for me. After the holidays, when they had a little more time, they might possibly send me to a sanitarium if I—if I showed any signs of improvement. That was all there was to it, Mary. I told them—each one of 'em—that I washed my hands of them, and they could all go to the devil. They won't do it, of course. People like that never go to the devil for the simple reason that the devil hasn't anything to offer them that they don't already possess. And so, Mary, I came back here to see if you'd take me in. You and Tom have been my best, my only real friends, and I—I thought you'd give me another chance. If you feel even now that I am going to be too much bother and expense, I'll get out. I'll go to a hospital and—"

"Not another word, Uncle Joe," said Mary Bingle, and she kissed his grim old cheek. "Not another word."

"Thank you, Mary, thank you for that. I—I was just wondering whether you could stand all of the expense and—"

Melissa broke in sharply: "Of course, we can. My wages can go over till—"

"And you will not turn me out?" whispered Uncle Joe, his eyes shining.

"Never!" said Mrs. Bingle.

"Never!" said the maid-of-all-work.

Mr. Hooper turned over on his side and was strangely quiet after that. His nephew came home at three and found himself confronted by two nurses, two doctors and a cabman who was waiting in the hallway for his fare. It seemed that Uncle Joe had driven home in a cab, and being somewhat uncertain as to the duration of his stay in the apartment of his nephew, instructed the fellow to wait, which the fellow did for a matter of more than three hours and was prepared to wait a good while longer unless he got his pay. Uncle Joe's forgetfulness cost Mr. Bingle six dollars and fifty cents, and he entered the sitting-room with a heart doubly sore. Of one thing he was uncomfortably certain: the nurses would cost fifty dollars a week and they would have to be paid on the dot. They were not like doctors, who could afford to wait. They were working for a living.

Mr. Bingle's salary at the bank was one hundred dollars a month. He was an expert accountant, but it did not require the intelligence of an expert to do the "sum" that presented itself for his hasty consideration. His small, jealously guarded account in the savings bank would be wiped out like a flash. And yet he entered the sick-room with a cheerful countenance and an unfaltering faith in the fitness of all things. He greeted his repentant Sindbad with such profound gladness and relief that one might well have believed him to be happy in having the burden restored to his frail shoulders.

"Well, well, here you are!" he cried, rubbing his cold hands vigorously before offering to grasp the bony old fingers that were extended to him. "Glad to see you back, Uncle Joe. Comfortable? Well, well, how are you?" He shook his uncle's hand warmly. "Sorry to see you laid up again, sir, but we'll have you as good as new in no time. Eh, doctor? As good as new, eh?"

Uncle Joe had nothing to say. He clung to his nephew's hand and smiled faintly.

Mr. Bingle looked puzzled. This was not like the Uncle Joe he had known. He sent a questioning glance toward the sober-faced doctor, and then sat down beside the bed, very much shaken by the news that came to him in the significant shake of Dr. Fiddler's head.

After many minutes had passed, Uncle Joe began to speak to his nephew. His voice was weak and the words came haltingly.

"Tom, you are a good boy—as good as gold. No, that isn't fair to you. You're better than gold. I honestly believe you like me, wretched and troublesome as I am. Your mother loved me, Tom. No one ever had a sister who loved a brother more than she loved me. Thank God, she died long before I came to this dreadful pass. She was spared seeing me as I am now. Well, I want to ask a last favour of you, nephew. I want you to see that I am buried beside your mother up at Syracuse. Just have a simple funeral, my boy. No fuss, no flowers, no singing. Then take me up to the old burying ground and—and I won't bother any one after that. I suppose it will cost you something to do it, but—but if you knew how much it will mean to me now if I have your promise to—"

"Sh!" whispered Mr. Bingle. "Don't talk of dying, Uncle Joe. Don't speak of graveyards while—"

"Will you promise? That's the question," said Uncle Joe stubbornly.

"Yes," said Mr. Bingle painfully; "when the time comes I'll lay you beside my mother. Don't worry about it, Uncle Joe."

"I hate to put you to the expense of—"

"Pooh!" said Mr. Bingle, as if the cost of the thing was the merest trifle to him.

"If I were to live for a thousand years, Tom, I could never find the means to adequately compensate you and Mary for the joy and comfort you have given me at so great a cost to yourselves. By dying, I may be able to make your load lighter, so I am going to die as quickly as the doctor will allow me to do so."

He died at nine o'clock that night. The next day Mr. Bingle notified his three children that he was taking their father to Syracuse for burial, and that if they chose to do so they could come to the apartment late that afternoon for the brief funeral service. Geoffrey, speaking for his sisters as well as for himself, expressed regret that poor Tom had been saddled with certain annoyances and inconvenience in connection with the late Joseph Hooper, and that they, as a family, would be pleased to assume the cost of his funeral, provided Tom would present an itemized statement on his return from Syracuse, covering all legitimate expenses not only in connection with the funeral but also anything that may have arisen during his most recent illness.

And Mr. Bingle, without consulting his wife, informed Geoffrey that he was quite able to meet all of the expenses without aid from "the family" and that he preferred to have nothing more said about the matter. Whereupon Geoffrey told him to go ahead and do as he pleased about it, and hung up the telephone receiver.

Greatly to the amazement and relief of the Bingles, Dr. Fiddler insisted on paying all of the funeral expenses, including the railroad fare of the two mourners to and from Syracuse. Moreover, he calmly announced that he would not accept a penny from Mr. Bingle for services rendered the sick man.

"Mary," said Mr. Bingle, on the way back to New York after the interment in Syracuse, "if everybody in this world was as good as Dr. Fiddler, what a happy place it would be. Just think of it! He gave all of his time, all of his experience—everything—and now refuses to take a cent from me. It isn't everybody who is as easy on the poor as that man is, my dear. He is a—a real nobleman."

Mrs. Bingle had been thinking too. "Well, I dare say he makes up for it by being a little harder on the rich every time he finds it necessary to be easy on the poor," she said cryptically.

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing," she said, ashamed of her estimate of the good doctor. "I shouldn't have said that."

"I insist on an explanation."

"Well, if you must have it, I'll bet he gets even somehow. I'd hate to be his next patient if I was rich enough to call him in to attend me."

"I am surprised at you, Mary," said Mr. Bingle, and his expression convinced her that he really was.

CHAPTER IV — FORTY MINUTES LATE

Mr. Bingle was late at the bank the morning after their return from the North. Not in all the years of his connection with the institution had such a thing happened to him—or to the bank, for that matter. He made it a point to be punctual. In his opinion, a man was taking something that did not belong to him when he failed his employer in the matter of promptness. Working AFTER hours to make up the lost time was, in his estimation, a rather cowardly form of penance; it was simply a confession that the delinquent had robbed his master of a certain number of fresh minutes earlier in the day, and was trying to restore them at the end of the day, when he was in no condition to give as good as he had taken.

One could set his watch by Thomas Bingle. All of the clocks, and all of the watches, and all of the clerks in the bank might be late, but NEVER Thomas Bingle. He kept absolutely perfect time, year in and year out. And so, when he came dashing into the bank on this particular morning nearly forty minutes late, every man in the long counting-room jerked out his watch and glanced at its face with an expression of alarm in his eyes, absolutely convinced that he had made the heart-breaking mistake of getting down to work forty minutes too soon. Such a thing as Mr. Bingle getting down forty minutes too late was infinitely more improbable than that all the rest of them should have reported that much too early.

The tardy one was conscious of the concentrated stare of sixty eyes as he slid onto the stool in front of his desk and began to fumble with the pens and blotters. The man at his left elbow said "well, well!" and the man at his right elbow said "st! st! st!" with his tongue in a most reproachful manner. They could understand Mr. Bingle's absence for three whole days, having got wind of a death in the family, but, for the life of them, they couldn't see what he meant by spoiling a perfectly clean record for punctuality when he might have remained away for the entire day, just as well as not, instead of upsetting a hallowed tradition in the bank by coming in forty minutes late.

Moreover, Mr. Bingle was confident that all of the high officials in the bank, from the president down to the seventh assistant cashier, had noticed his tremendous shortcoming, and that they were even now whispering among themselves that he ought to be discharged forthwith. He could feel people glaring at him from behind; he could feel the president's eyes, and the four vice-presidents' eyes, and the chairman of the board's eyes and all of the directors' eyes boring holes through the partitions to fix their accusing gaze upon him as he bent nervously over the huge ledger and tried to shrink into invisibility. He had committed a heinous, inexcusable, unpardonable offence. He would have to pay the penalty. After all these years of faithful service, he would be kicked out in disgrace; some one else would be sitting in his place after luncheon and some one else would be hanging his coat and hat in the locker he had used for fifteen years without—His eyes grew misty as he bent a little closer to the page and tried to focus his thoughts on what was actually before him.

What difference would it make to these heartless plutocrats and overlords when he told them that his wife was ill and that he could not leave his home until the doctor had come to reassure him? What did they know about connubial happiness and connubial obligations? They would stare at him coldly—or perhaps laugh in his face—and say that the fate of a great banking institution could not be put in jeopardy just because Mrs. Bingle happened to be critically ill. Mr. Bingle, for the first time in his life, began to appreciate his own importance. He began to realise that in all likelihood the bank would go to pieces as the result of his failure to appear at his desk at the appointed minute. He recalled having seen the first vice-president and the cashier in close conversation as he slunk through the little passage behind the latter's office, and he remembered also with sickening clearness that they stopped talking and stared at him as he hurried by. And, now that he thought of it, the first vice-president had smiled pleasantly and had said something that sounded like "good morning, Mr. Bingle," although it certainly couldn't have been that. It was regarded as especially ominous when an official of the bank said good-morning to a clerk or a bookkeeper. It meant, according to tradition, that his days were numbered. It was a sort of preliminary sentence. Later on, there would come a summons to appear at the "office."

Mr. Bingle sat on his stool, his feet hooked rigidly in the stretchers as if prepared to resist any effort to yank him out of the place he had held for fifteen years, and all the while he was listening for the voice of the messenger at his shoulder, ordering him to step into Mr. Force's room.

The trip to Syracuse had been too much for Mrs. Bingle. The railway coaches were cold; she shivered nearly all the way up and all the way back, notwithstanding Melissa's furs and the extra suit of flannels she had donned at Mr. Bingle's suggestion. She came home with a frightful cold and a temperature that frightened her husband almost out of his boots.

She was not in the habit of taking long journeys by train. As a matter of fact, she had never been farther away from Manhattan Island than Hartford, Connecticut, and that experience befell her in the middle of an extremely torrid June. Perhaps a half-dozen times in the fifteen years of her married life she had gone to Peekskill to visit her mother and a married sister, but always in warm weather. Not that she was too poor to make the trip to Peekskill as often as she liked, but her mother and sister made it unnecessary by coming to New York for frequent and sometimes protracted visits at the Bingle apartment, and usually without first inquiring whether it would be convenient or otherwise. She very sensibly realised that Mr. Bingle saw quite enough of his wife's relatives in this way, and refused to drag him into the country to see more of them. He had better use for his Sundays, and as for his vacations, they were always spent at home in the laudable effort to save a little money against the rainy day that people are always talking about. So Mrs. Bingle stayed at home, and contrived to love her good little husband more and more as each narrow day went by, winter and summer, year in and year out, and not once did the iron of discontent enter her soul. Some day, when they could really afford it, they were going away for a month's fishing-trip in the wilds of Maine, but all that could wait. It was something to look forward to, and there is a lot in that.

Neither of them had ever dreamed that Syracuse was so near to the North Pole, nor had they the remotest idea that the weather could be so cold anywhere on earth as it was in the upper part of New York State. The coldest days they had ever known in New York City—and they had always believed that nothing could be colder—were balmy when compared with that awful day on the outskirts of Syracuse—that bleak, blighting day in the wind-swept graveyard where the mother of Thomas Bingle slept.

They fairly shrivelled in their skins as they stood beside the open grave and saw, through blurred eyes, the last of Uncle Joe. Both of Mr. Bingle's ears were frozen quite stiff. A much be-furred undertaker's assistant rubbed snow on them with what seemed to be unnecessary vigour and told him to have 'em looked after when he got back to New York. They were ugly things, those ears of his, and Mr. Bingle was acutely conscious of their size and colour as he sat at his desk and waited for word to come to "the office." A sudden and almost insupportable itching of his heels filled him with fresh alarm, and for one ghastly moment he forgot his ears and his crime. Were his heels frost-bitten? If so—then, what was to become of him?

"Get your uncle buried all right?" inquired his left-hand neighbour, suddenly speaking out of the void. Mr. Bingle's reply was a guilty, bewildered start. The man went on: "What did he die of?"

"Oh," said Mr. Bingle hazily, "most assuredly."

"I said, what ailed him?"

"Why, he was dead," said Mr. Bingle, vaguely surprised by the other's obtuseness. "That's why we buried him."

"I see," said the questioner, after staring hard for a moment. He edged a little farther away from Mr. Bingle and shot a swift glance of apprehension in the direction of the door.

"I couldn't help being late," ventured Mr. Bingle, his first apology in fifteen years. "My wife is sick, Jenkins—mighty sick. The doctor couldn't come at once, so I had to wait. She—"

"Say," said Jenkins nervously, "the old man didn't die of anything catching, did he?"

"Catching?"

"I mean contagious. Your wife hasn't caught anything from him, has she? If she has, you oughtn't to come around here carrying—"

"He died of old age," said Mr. Single stiffly.

"Sure?"

"Of course."

"Well, we all catch that if we live long enough," said Jenkins, considerably relieved. "How old was he?"

"Seventy-three."

"Leave anything?"

Mr. Bingle was suddenly bereft of all power of speech. Three men were standing just outside the long bronze caging that enclosed the bookkeeping-department, and they were looking at him with a directness that was even more pronounced than the stare of utter dismay with which he favoured them. There could be no mistake: they were discussing him—Thomas Bingle! And they were discussing him with unquestionable seriousness. His heart flopped down to his heels and his poor ears burned with a fierceness that caused him to fear that they were on the point of bursting into flames. The first vice-president was pointing him out to the president, there could be no doubt about that; and the pompous president was bobbing his head in a most extraordinary manner, there could be no doubt about that either. The third man of the trio was the chief watchman, and he was looking at Mr. Bingle as a cat looks at a captured mouse. It was all over! They were

about to arrest him for embezzlement or murder or something equally as heinous. Mr. Bingle turned colder than he had been at any time during his stay in the ice-bound city of Syracuse.

Then the trio abruptly turned away and left him sitting there, frozen to the marrow. He tried to swallow, but his throat was paralysed.

"Gee, that looks bad, Bingle," whispered Jenkins, pityingly. "That was the old man. What—what the dickens have you been up to?"

Mr. Bingle's stiff lips moved but no sound came forth. He was to be discharged! In fifteen years he had been late at his desk but once, and he was to be discharged! What would Mary say? What would become of Mary? What would become of Melissa, now that they couldn't afford to keep a servant?

"You been here longer than any one, too," went on Jenkins. "How long has it been, Bingle?"

"Fifteen years," gulped Mr. Bingle, in a strange, unnatural voice.

"That's longer than the old man himself," said Jenkins. "He's been president less'n twelve years. Say, Bingle, I'm all broke up over it. I—I hope it ain't as bad as we think. Maybe—oh, I say, it's your EARS! That's what it is. Mr. Force was showing him your ears. And say, take it from me, Bingle, they're worth going a long way to see, too. Good Lord, what a relief!" Mr. Bingle actually took hope. Could it be possible? Were frozen ears so rare a sight that the president of a great bank—But even as he grasped at the straw he became convinced that it was very likely to prove his salvation, for, to his amazement and confusion, the cashier and the fourth vice-president strolled up to the caging and regarded him with the gravest interest. He bent his head to the task before him, hoping against hope that it WAS his ears and not his tardiness. And, when he looked up again many minutes afterward, other officials of the bank were looking at him from various points of vantage, and all of them were staring with the most amazing intentness, quite as if they had never seen anything so strange as the man who had sat unnoticed in this very spot for fifteen years and more. Messengers took a peep at him as they circled from window to window; patrons of the bank sauntered past and squinted vaguely in his direction.

Vice-president Force came back a second time and actually pointed him out to an utter stranger, at the same time waving his hand at Mr. Bingle in a most friendly and engaging manner!

The poor bookkeeper reeled on his stool. He laid his pen down, removed the green shade from over his eyes, placed his blotters neatly in the rack, and turning to Jenkins, said:

"I can't stand it, Jenkins. I've—I've just got to know the worst. I'm going to the office."

"With—without being sent for?" gasped Jenkins.

"There's no use putting it off. I—"

A dapper little page appeared at Mr. Bingle's elbow, interrupting him with the curt remark that Mr. Force wanted to see him when it was convenient.

"Convenient?" murmured Mr. Bingle, his eyes bulging.

"Well, great—" began Jenkins.

"That's what he said: convenient," said the page loftily. "Gee, where did you get them ears?"

Mr. Bingle got down from his stool slowly, painfully.

"I guess I'll go now," he said. "It's just as convenient for me to get out now as—"

"I can't understand that 'convenient' business," broke in Jenkins, wrinkling his brow. "Well, good luck, Bingle. I'm sorry."

Sixty wistful, sympathetic eyes followed Mr. Bingle as he made his way out to the passage. The word had gone 'round that "old Bingy" was to get the sack, and every one was saying to himself that if they discharged a man like Bingle for being late it wouldn't be safe for any one to transgress for even the tiniest fraction of an instant.

Half-way down the narrow aisle leading to the offices, Mr. Bingle stopped to wipe his brow and to pull himself together for the coming ordeal. A high-and-mighty young man who had been elevated from a clerkship to the post of third assistant foreign teller, and who no longer deemed it proper to associate with his erstwhile companions in the "galleys," emerged from his cage and, coming abruptly upon the shivering bookkeeper, blinked uncertainly for a moment and then said in what was unmistakably a polite and even respectful tone:

"Good morning, Mr. Bingle. Pleasant day, sir, isn't it?"

If Mr. Bingle had been in a condition to notice such things as miracles, he might have been struck by this one, but he merely said it WAS a pleasant day and resumed his way, utterly oblivious to the fact that a human being had been completely transformed before his very eyes. A few steps farther on he encountered an even mightier force than the third assistant foreign teller: the bank detective.

"Good morning, Mr. Bingle. Nice day, sir," said the bank detective, somewhat eagerly, and stood aside to let the lowly bookkeeper pass without being jostled—as was the custom.

"Morning," said Mr. Bingle, still unimpressed. It seemed to him that every one was evincing a singular interest in the fact that he was about to be discharged on a pleasant day.

Mr. Force was seated at his desk when Bingle entered the room and found himself in the presence of the man who was certain to become president when "the old man" died—an event that would have to occur if the first vice-president's dream of elevation ever came true, for there wasn't the remotest likelihood that he would have the sense of decency to resign, no matter how old or how senile he became in the course of time.

Now, Mr. Force took himself very seriously. Having married an exceedingly wealthy woman after a career in which liveliness had meant more to him than livelihood, he assumed that if he treated the world at large with extreme aloofness it would soon forget—and overlook—the fact that he had never amounted to a row of pins in the estimation of those who knew him as a harvester in Broadway. Shortly before his marriage—at forty-three—he abandoned an extensive crop of wild oats in the very heart of New York City—announcing that he intended to retire from active business and go to work.

Going to work meant stepping into a bank as its third vice-president the week after his return from a honeymoon spent with a bride who held, in her own right, something over one-half of the entire capital stock of the institution. Her wedding present to him was the third vice-presidency and the everlasting enmity of every director and official in the bank. He accepted both in the spirit in which they were given. To the surprise of his enemies and the scorn of his friends, he promptly settled down and made himself so valuable to the bank that even his wife was vindicated. He managed in one way or another to increase her holdings and soon was in a position to dictate to those officially above him. He dictated so effectually in the case of the first and second vice-president that they preferred to resign rather than to continue the struggle to keep him in his place. Before he had been in the bank a year, he was its first vice-president.

It was generally conceded that the president himself would have been in jeopardy but for the fact that he was the father of Mrs. Force and therefore exempt. In order to clarify the situation, it is necessary to state that the bride inherited her extensive holdings from a former husband, who, it appears, died of old age when she was but twenty-six. It would also appear that her father owed his position as president to the influence of Mr. Force's predecessor, or rather to the influence that his daughter exercised over an old gentleman in his dotage. Be that as it may, the present chief executive of the bank was immune for life. To quote the directorate, he couldn't be FORCED out of office. His son-in-law would be obliged to wait. He could afford to wait. He was forty-four.

It has been said that Mr. Sydney Force was seated at his desk when Thomas Bingle sidled into the luxurious office. It must now be added that he did not retain his seat for more than a second after Mr. Bingle's entrance. In fact, he fairly leaped to his feet, frightening his visitor into a sudden, spasmodic movement of the hand in search of the door-knob and a backward shuffle of both feet at once. The little bookkeeper's alarm was groundless. Mr. Force came forward, beaming, his hand extended.

"How are you, Mr. Bingle? Come right in. Well, well, this is splendid. Too good to be true, 'pon my word it is." He was wringing the little man's hand violently. "I confess that I am surprised that you considered it worth while to come down to the bank at all, sir."

Mr. Bingle was batting his eyes furiously. He was also having a great deal of difficulty with his knees.

"I—I couldn't help it, Mr. Force," he stammered. "I really couldn't. It is the first time in all the years of my connection with—"

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Bingle," interrupted Mr. Force, with a somewhat sweeping wave of the hand that took in practically all of the office and yet no spot in particular; "this is Mr. Sigsbee." He then stood aside and permitted Mr. Bingle to discover Mr. Sigsbee, who came hastily out of the whirling background.

"Glad to meet you, sir," said Mr. Sigsbee, giving Mr. Bingle's hand a tremendous squeeze. "I should have known you, Mr. Bingle, anywhere on earth from the description given to me."

Description! Poor Bingle's blood congealed. Description? That dreadful word could have but one application. It was never used except in connection with people who were wanted for crime. The man was a detective!

"Sit down, Mr. Bingle," said Force, with shocking amiability. "Will you smoke?"

"No, thank you," said Mr. Bingle, doing his best to pull himself together and failing completely. "As I was saying, Mr. Force, my wife—"

At this juncture, the door to an adjoining room was thrown open and the bank's president stood revealed. At his back was the chairman of the board and also the cashier, while somewhat indistinctly associated with the sombre elegance of the room beyond were the figures of a peeping stenographer and an open-mouthed secretary whose neck was gallantly stretched almost to the point of dislocation because he was too much of a gentleman to push the little stenographer out of his line of vision.

"Well, well, Bingle!" exclaimed the president, somewhat gustily as he hastened forward. "How are you? That this should happen to you! It is unbelievable!" He was pumping Mr. Bingle's arm. "I don't see how in the world we are to get along without you. You ought to be ashamed of yourself. Why don't you—"

"Wha—what in the name of heaven am I accused of doing?" blurted out Mr. Bingle abjectly. "This is some awful mistake. I—"

"Accused of doing?" exclaimed Mr. Force, frowning perplexedly.

"What say, Bingle?" inquired the president, who wasn't quite certain that his hearing was what it used to be. "What say?"

Mr. Sigsbee interposed, staring hard at the little man. "Haven't you been notified of—Oh, I say, you have at

least seen the morning papers?"

"Have they printed anything about me?" gasped Mr. Bingle, sitting down very suddenly. "It's a lie, gentlemen—a lie, I tell you! I haven't done a thing—"

"Do you mean to say—" began Mr. Force, glaring at the shivering little man.

"I'll bring an action against 'em," shouted Mr. Bingle from the depths of the huge chair. "I'll sue 'em for all they're worth if they've—"

"Haven't you seen the newspapers?" demanded Mr. Sigsbee, bending over the occupant of the chair in what that individual mistook for a menacing attitude.

"I—I didn't have time to look at the paper," mumbled Mr. Bingle. "My wife was so miserable that—"

"Well, by Jove!" exclaimed Mr. Force, and then, to Bingle's astonishment, the five other occupants of the room were overtaken by a simultaneous impulse to shout at the top of their voices, all of them crowding close about him and barking unintelligible exclamations into his very teeth, so to speak.

The strangest part of it all was that they were in high good humour and laughed like maniacs. He hadn't the faintest notion what it was all about, but he began to laugh shrilly. He couldn't help it. He certainly didn't feel like laughing. The president was slapping Mr. Force on the back and shouting things that fell upon deaf ears, for Mr. Force was shouting manfully on his own account. The cashier stumbled over a chair in trying to get at Mr. Bingle to grasp his hand, and the chairman of the board began pounding the helpless bookkeeper on the shoulder with a hand that had all of the weight and some of the resilience of a sledge hammer.

It was Mr. Sigsbee who finally settled down to a succinct, intelligent question, and at once had Mr. Bingle's attention.

"Didn't you receive my letter in the morning post?" he demanded.

Mr. Bingle no doubt intended to repeat the word "letter," being vaguely impressed by its significance, but what he uttered was a mystified, syllable-less "le'r?"

"I wrote to say that if it suited your convenience to come to our offices this afternoon at three, I would see to it that the other heirs were present, Mr. Bingle."

"My wife's illness—" began Mr. Bingle hazily, and then brought himself up with a jerk. Heirs? What in the world was the man talking about? "I—I beg pardon, sir. I didn't quite catch that. What—"

Mr. Sigsbee held up his hand, silencing him. Then he turned to the other gentlemen and said in a strained, excited voice:

"I suspect, gentlemen, that it would be better if I were to have a few minutes alone with Mr. Bingle."

"Right!" exclaimed Mr. Force, regarding the bookkeeper with what seemed to be infinite compassion in his eyes. "Stay right where you are, Sigsbee. We'll get out," and he literally shoved the others out of the office, closing the president's door behind him.

"Now, Mr. Bingle," said Sigsbee, drawing a chair up close to the little man's knee, "I want the truth. Have you no—"

"Before heaven, Mr. Sigsbee, I—I swear I am innocent of—"

"Have you no inkling of what has befallen you?" concluded the other.

"No, sir, I haven't," declared Mr. Bingle with conviction.

"Well, my dear sir," said Sigsbee, laying his hand upon Bingle's knee and speaking with grave impressiveness, "your late and lamented uncle, Joseph Hooper, in his will, devises that you are his principal—I might almost say, his sole heir. He has left practically everything to you, sir. I—I pray you, be calm. Do not allow this astonishing, this prodigious—"

"Oh," exclaimed Mr. Bingle, with a huge sigh of relief and a sudden relaxing of all his taut nerves, "I know all about THAT, Mr. Sigsbee. Is that all?"

"All?" with a stare of amazement.

"We often joked about it, poor old Uncle Joe and I. He seemed to enjoy a chuckle once in awhile, in spite of the way the world had used him."

"I now realise that you are quite ignorant about the whole matter, Mr. Bingle. My letter would have enlightened you, of course, but as you did not receive it, I fear that—"

"I didn't open my letters this morning. Quite forgot 'em, sir. You see, Mrs. Bingle came down with a fearful—"

"Yes, yes," interrupted Mr. Sigsbee. "Perhaps it would be well for me to describe myself a little more clearly to you, Mr. Bingle. I am of the firm of Bradlee, Sigsbee & Oppenheim, lawyers. We have been acting for Mr. Hooper for the past six months, or, in other words, since his return to New York City. Our relations were or a—er—a somewhat Secret nature, I may say. He made the somewhat Extraordinary demand upon us, at the time we were Retained, that we should conduct his affairs with the Utmost secrecy. Especially, ser, were we required to Keep you in the dark as to the real—"

"Just a moment, sir," interrupted Mr. Bingle, sitting up very straight, and staring. "May I ask one questions?

Are you sure you haven't got my Uncle Joe confused with another Joseph Hooper? To my certain knowledge, he had no transactions with lawyers while staying at my house. You've got the wrong man, sir, I—" "I've got the right man, Mr. Bingle," said the lawyer, with a smile. "Your uncle was a strange man. Have you never heard of Joseph H. Grimwell?"

"Certainly. Every one has heard of him."

"Well, your uncle was Joseph H. Grimwell, the millionaire mine-owner and lumber king. For fifteen years the name of Joseph Grimwell took the place of—I beg your pardon! I did not mean to put it so abruptly, sir. Calm yourself! I—"

"All right," said Mr. Bingle, suddenly collapsing into the chair after struggling to his feet, his eyes bulging. "All right. I'm—I'm calm. Go on with the story. You can't expect me to believe it, however. How on earth could poor old Uncle Joe Hooper, who was actually starving when he came to me last—"

"That is the best part of the story, Mr. Bingle," said Sigsbee, settling back in his chair and linking his plump hands benevolently across his expansive and somewhat overhanging waistcoat. "That is the best part of the story, sir."

CHAPTER V — THE STORY OF JOSEPH

Mr. Bingle went home in a taxi-cab, completely done up.

. . . . . .

Back in 1885, Joseph Hooper, disgraced, disowned by his family and as poor Job's turkey, made a brief but sufficiently explicit will in which he named his beloved nephew Thomas Singleton Bingle as his sole heir. He drew it up on the surface of a fresh, unused postal card, and had it properly witnessed by the bailiff who came to Bingle's apartment to demand his appearance before a court to show cause why he should not consider himself in contempt for having disregarded the order to pay monthly sums in the shape of alimony to his late but unlamented wife.

In looking about for the second witness, he observed a levying deputy sheriff in the act of carrying off his last and only possession of value, to wit: a gold-headed cane that had been left to him by his father. With a fine sense of irony, he persuaded the aforesaid deputy sheriff to affix his signature to the will, and then remarked with deep sarcasm that he had "put his house in order" so far as it was in his power to do so. Inasmuch as the deputy sheriff was making way with what looked to be his entire estate, saving the clothes upon his back and the post-card (which he had taken the precaution to address to his lawyers, thereby securing its protection by the United States Government), Mr. Hooper's last will and testament as uttered on the 16th day of October, 1885, was necessarily brief and succinct. It merely said:

"I hereby revoke any former will I may have made prior to this date, and now bequeath to my beloved nephew, Thomas Singleton Bingle, my entire fortune, which at this time appears to be not my face but my figure. I therefore bequeath to him my physical person, and vest in him the right to chuck it into the river, or to dispose of it for medical purposes, as he may see fit, provided however that I shall first have been declared sufficiently dead by competent judges. I also bequeath to him any property, great or small, that may be in my possession at the time of my demise, even though it be no more than the collar-button with which he so kindly supplied me this morning, and which I shall always retain as a mark of his devotion, knowing well what it means for a man to deprive himself of a cherished belonging."

This was written in a very fine, cramped hand, and there was ample room at the bottom for his own signature and those of the witnesses, although it must be said that the elegant symmetry of the document was destroyed by the bulging scrawl of the bailiff, whose name was Abraham Kosziemanowski and who had to turn the final two syllables down at a sharp angle in order to get the whole of his signature on the card.

Bradlee, Sigsbee & Oppenheim, on the receipt of this jocose instrument, immediately communicated with their once magnificent client, who laconically instructed them to put it away in a very safe place as it might come in handy some time. To their own and to his subsequent surprise, they DID put it away in a safe place, but forgot all about it until he walked in upon them fifteen years afterwards and revealed himself as the great and only Joseph H. Grimwell.

Having once disinherited his children, he was then in the mood to reconsider his act, being alive to the fact that his days were numbered. But he went about the business with the sagacity of an old dog who has been kicked hard by some one who was not his master. Instead of proclaiming himself to be the Midas-like Joseph Grimwell, he appeared before his son and daughters, as poor old Joseph Hooper, their long lost father, as poor—nay, even poorer than when he went away, for he had lost the rugged health that was his only possession at the beginning of his vicissitudes.

Assuming a condition of abject, though genteel poverty, he went to each of them in turn. He wanted to give them a chance to reconsider, as he had done. But they would have none of him! Vastly dismayed by the failure of his nice little scheme to trick them into filial responsibility, he was on the point of shouting his

denunciations from the house-tops when he suddenly remembered Tom Bingle: he wondered if Tom would receive him—an old derelict—with open arms.

He presented himself, with his battered valise, at the door of Thomas Bingle's apartment—and was given a warm, even hearty reception!

And it was on that day—at that very hour, so to speak—that Thomas Bingle became a fabulously rich man without the slightest effort or intention on his part.

Mr. Hooper one day recalled to mind the postal-card will. If his memory served him right there was something jocose and undignified about it—something that would not look well in the public prints. He visited the offices of his lawyers, recovered the amazing instrument, and forthwith set about to make a new will, bereft of certain grewsome stipulations but quite as sweeping in purpose as the other had been. In fact, he left his fortune—as he had done before—to his beloved nephew, Thomas Singleton Bingle, with three precautionary bequests to his son and daughters, providing against the contests that were sure to follow. He bequeathed the sum of one thousand dollars to each of his children, and he signed his name once more as Joseph H. Hooper—for the first time in fourteen years.

His wanderings as a tramp—in his own account of himself he used the word "tramp" with a shocking lack of pride—led him inevitably into the far Northwest. Men were doing things up there. The country fairly seethed with the activity of live, virile men who were taking the first staunch grip upon the tricky wheel of fortune and were turning it to their own account. Every man was building; no man complained of conditions, for conditions were so new and so ready to hand that he who found fault was merely lessening his own chance to secure his share of the vast resources that spread before him, welcoming the greedy fingers of him who courted the future and shunned the past. All men lived in the present out there in the great stretches, and all men were strong and eager.

Joseph Hooper caught the fever that infected the West. He shook off the fetters that bound him to a far from enchanted East, and began to squirm with the first tickling sensations of an ambition that had never really made itself felt, even in the old days of successful achievement among men who were content to tread the beaten and commonplace highway toward riches. The spirit of the West gripped him in its great, enveloping hands, picked him out of the slough and set him down again, plump upon his two feet, high and dry, prodding him violently all the while with a spur that would not permit him to stop or to take a step backward, with the natural result that he moved forward—slowly, dazedly at first, and then with a mighty rush.

He had one advantage over most of the men who were being driven helter-skelter by the grateful lash of the West: he was a trained money-getter. Back of him were generations of shrewd business men, while dormant in his own being was the half-stunned thing called natural ability. The simple shrewdness of Joseph Hooper, combined with a certain hitherto unconfessed lack of respect for the Golden Rule, to say nothing of a vain-glorious desire to kick the world that had kicked him, soon produced opportunities that paved the way for his rehabilitation.

Without a dollar to his name, with nothing in the shape of resources save a self-sufficient nerve and an infinite eastern contempt for these struggling westerners, he began to promote things!

The field was fresh and fertile. Inside of two years he reaped a half-dozen harvests—and replanted as he went along! First, he promoted a street railway in a place called Mockawock; then it became necessary for some one to establish reasons for the existence of such a thing as a car-line in a town that could be traversed on foot, from one end to the other, in less than eight minutes; so he began to promote the organisation of a wagon factory at one extreme and a pickle works at the other, possessing the far-sightedness to put them so far away from each other that if one wanted to go to the pickle works from the wagon factory, or vice versa, he would have to go by trolley unless he possessed the hardiness of an ox and was not dismayed by the vastness of the city limits. For like all towns in the great Northwest, Mockawock had its limits and they were wide enough to make New York or Chicago appear cramped by comparison. One could walk for hours in a straight line south from the public square in Mockawock and still not be "out in the country," figuratively speaking, although he might not see a house or a human being—unless he turned his head—after the first ten minutes. He could also walk west or north in the same futile effort to get out of the "city" into the "country," but he could not walk east for more than two city blocks. Mockawock happened to be situated on the shores of Lake Superior and not even the most boastful citizen would have contended that the city limits reached far in that direction.

And, having successfully promoted such enterprises in Mockawock as would tend to convince the citizens that some day the city limits would have to be extended, he very wisely took the gains acquired in the sale of options, the disposal of franchises, the surrender of equities, and all such, and slipped away to the vast forests in the north, where he bought timber-land by the section.

Another town required stirring up by this time, so he descended upon it, backed by the reputation gained at Mockawock and, before the citizens could say Jack Robinson, he had skilfully promoted a number of enterprises, including a belt railroad, an electric lighting plant, and a new evening newspaper, all of which fairly set the town by the ears and made him one of the most important figures in the upper Lake region.

Once more he slipped off into the forests and took unto himself additional sections of virgin timber at inconceivably low prices. Other men made much of the wheat-field and the town-lot, but Joseph Hooper saw fortune in the forests. Again and again he increased his timber land holdings. People thought he was buying up town-sites and smiled smugly among themselves as they discussed the dreadful shock he was to have when the time came for him to begin clearing away the timber!

All this time he was known as Joseph H. Grimwell. There was no such person as Joseph Hooper. That

discredited individual had died, so to speak, by the wayside, a vagabond. New York had lost track of him; his family believed him to be dead—or in prison! It is barely possible that he ought to have been incarcerated for some of his skilfully manipulated enterprises, but that has nothing to do with this narrative. It is relevant to dwell only upon the contention that riches come swiftly to him who makes use of both hands without caring whether the left knows what the right is doing or the other way about. At any rate, Joseph Grimwell was a better man than Joseph Hooper ever had been, and he was a wiser man in many respects than Solomon the historic.

In brief, there came a day when his timber turned to gold. The name of Grimwell became a household word. It even penetrated to the secret crannies of Wall Street. Men who did not know oak from soft pine began to plead with him to be "let in on the ground floor." Gentlemen who sat in mahogany offices and worshipped at unseen shrines, took notice of this man of the West who was getting more than his share of the pillage. Promoters sought him out and haggled with him—haggled with the prince of promoters! They tried to let him into the secret of making money!

Fortune may not always favour the brave, but it continues to do a little something every now and then for the bold. In Joseph Grimwell's case, it overlooked the fact that he was neither brave nor bold but rewarded him for being interestingly tricky. Out of sheer respect for his cleverness in acquiring all of the timber land available, Fortune set about to outdo him in productiveness. It suddenly remembered that it had placed three rich copper deposits in separate and distinct parts of his land and kindly directed him to the spots.

Now, copper can be turned into gold quite as readily as ice, or beef, or hops, or any of the products of man's experimentation, just as one can make hay while the sun shines, even though his field of activity lies at the bottom of an oil-well. Mr. Grimwell made gold out of his copper, just as he made it out of oak and pine and ash, and when he came to be three score years and ten he had so many dollars that, like Old Mother Hubbard, he didn't know what to do with them.

It suddenly dawned upon him that there was no one to whom he could leave this vast accumulation unless he made peace with his past.

He sold out all of his holdings, reducing everything to coin of the realm, and once more became a wanderer in search of a place to lay his head. With fourteen or fifteen millions of dollars in his purse, so to speak, he slunk into New York, a beggar still and hungrier than he had ever been in his life.

Then he tried out the plan that failed. His lawyer and his doctor alone knew that Joseph Grimwell and Joseph Hooper were one and the same person, and they were pledged to secrecy. One of them drew up his will and the other made death as easy as possible for him. His nephew, poor wretch, buried him in a grave alongside a devoted sister, froze his ears while doing so—and lost his job in the bank besides!

The new will was read in the offices of Bradlee, Sigsbee & Oppenheim on the day following Mr. Bingle's first ride in a taxi-cab. The heir was too bewildered to attend the meeting arranged for the same afternoon, and it had to be postponed. As a matter of fact, he sent word to the lawyers that his wife was too ill to come down that afternoon but would doubtless be better on the following day. When informed that his wife's presence was unnecessary and that his cousins were even then on their way down town and that there was no way to head them off, he blandly inquired if it wouldn't be possible to postpone the whole matter for a week or two, assuring the gentlemen that he wouldn't, for all the world, disturb Mrs. Bingle, who appeared to be sleeping comfortably for the first time in twenty-four hours. In fact, he informed them that he thought it would be a mistake to break the news to her while her cold was so bad; as for himself, he didn't mind waiting a week or two—not in the least—if it was all the same to Mr. Sigsbee.

It was Melissa who broke the news to Mrs. Bingle, and it was at once apparent that it was not a mistake to do so. The good lady improved so rapidly that she sent for the expensive Dr. Fiddler, dismissing the cheap Dr. Smith, and by seven o'clock that evening declared that she had never felt better in all of her life.

"I suppose you'll fire me now, Mr. Bingle," Melissa had said dejectedly. "With all that money, you'll be wanting high-priced servants."

"Quite so," said Mr. Bingle magnificently. "Much higher-priced, Melissa."

"You'll never find any one that loves you more than I do," began Melissa, on the verge of tears.

"Allow me," interrupted Mr. Bingle, with a sweep of the hand. "The highest priced servant in our employ is to be Melissa Taylor, which is you, my girl. We shall probably keep two or three servants—if we can find anything for them to do—but none of 'em shall receive as much as you, Melissa. Put that in your pipe and smoke it."

"I—I wasn't asking for a raise, sir," murmured Melissa, in considerable distress.

"You get it without asking," said Mr. Bingle. It should be remembered that he was still very much dazed and bewildered.

"Maybe you'll be having a butler and a regular chef. They come pretty high, sir," advised Melissa, spilling a little of Mrs. Bingle's tea on the counterpane. "Oh, excuse me, Mrs. Bingle."

"Never mind, Melissa," said Mr. Bingle. "I guess we can afford to spill a little tea if we like. I've no doubt that a butler would spill a great deal. It doesn't matter what we have to pay him—if we have him—you shall have five dollars a month more than he gets. That's settled."

The least important person at the "reading of the will" was the little man who sat hunched up in a chair and gazed about him with perplexed eyes, occasionally touching his sore ears with tender fingers, and always regretting the act for the reason that it called the attention of his cousins to something that appeared to

gratify them a great deal more than the actual business at hand. In fact, he never quite got over that miserable hour of inspection on their part. He never ceased to regret the condition of his ears on that stupendous occasion. What might have been a really impressive hour in his life was spoiled by the certainty that every one was paying more attention to his misfortune than to his fortune.

Of course, the conditions of the will were pretty well known to the three children of Joseph Hooper, hours before they were read to them. They knew that their detestable father had practically disinherited them, but they were not prepared for the staggering baseness employed by the old man in giving his reasons for cutting them off. To their chagrin, mortification, even shame, they were compelled to listen to at least a dozen letters that they had written to their father during the period covered by his supposed degeneracy. The originals of these letters, stained, dirty, frazzled but incontrovertibly genuine, were attached to the instrument, and were referred to in certain specific recommendations incorporated in the body of the will itself.

Old Joseph had preserved the letters of his children. They were emphatic evidences of their attitude toward him from first to last. There was no such thing as going behind them. It might be possible to produce proof that the testator was unsound of mind, but it would never be possible to wipe out the written declarations of his mentally perfect son and daughters. In these delectable missives they completely disowned him as a father; they raked him fore and aft; they riddled him with a hundred shafts of scorn; they repeatedly said that they never wanted to see his face again; they put him out of their lives and urgently requested him to put them out of his; they expected nothing of him and they certainly did not want him to expect anything of them; and so on and so forth. And in spite of all these bitter rebukings, old Joseph had come back to New York ready and willing to let bygones be bygones if they would only meet him half way.

Geoffrey declared in so many words that his father had played a scurvy trick on all of them. He managed to give utterance to this violent opinion before his attorney could check his unnecessary eloquence. After that, Geoffrey, subdued and desolate, kept extremely quiet and suffered considerably under the convicting gaze of his sisters and their husbands, all of whom were inclined to disown him there and then as a brother for his reckless implication that their father was as sane as any of them.

Thomas Singleton Bingle was to receive, in round figures, fifteen million dollars under the will of his uncle, after the funeral expenses and all just debts had been paid. It was really quite staggering. If Thomas Singleton Bingle had not been so completely wrapped up in his ears, it is certain that he would have acted as any other intelligent human being would have acted at a time like this. He would have gone stark, staring mad.

But wait! After all, he DID become a bit daffy. Observing the desolated, crushed attitude of his three cousins, his honest heart smote him sorely. He piped up from the depths of his chair and announced that all he wanted out of the estate was the amount that he had actually expended in caring for Uncle Joe during the past few months. He would be satisfied with that and—But he got no farther. Mr. Sigsbee hastened to remind him that he hadn't anything to say about it. He didn't have a voice in the matter. And then Angela and Elizabeth scornfully observed that it was a pretty time to talk about that sort of thing, after he had so skilfully succeeded in influencing their poor, mentally unbalanced father to make a will like this one.

Right heroically, Mr. Bingle declared that he was willing to give all of his inheritance to any deserving charity, or charities, reserving, if no one objected, a sufficient amount to enable him to purchase a little farm on which he could spend the rest of his days and not have to go on forever as a bookkeeper in a bank.

"Bosh!" said Geoffrey Hooper, glaring at his rich cousin.

"Ridiculous!" cried Angela and Elizabeth, transfixing Mr. Bingle with glittering eyes.

"Very well," said Mr. Bingle, arising hastily. "Let it be bosh and ridiculous, just as you like. I would have been willing to take this small amount, just as I have said, and, what's more, I might have been willing to divide the estate into four equal parts—if Mr. Sigsbee would let me do it—but now I'll be damned if I'll do anything for either of you. You don't deserve a nickel, not one of you. You had your chance and you didn't take it. I fed and clothed and housed your father and I stood ready to spend my last dollar to make his last few days on earth comfortable and easy. I buried him. I went to his funeral. I took the chance of losing my job by doing so. I froze my ears—oh, look at 'em! I don't care. And now you—you three! You can go to the devil, with my compliments as well as Uncle Joe's. Come along, Mary! Let's get out of this. We've got fifteen million dollars coming to us, and we don't have to sit here and be insulted by people to whom we have offered charity. Good day, Mr. Sigsbee. If you want me for anything, you'll find me at the bank. Now, be sure you wrap your throat up carefully, Mary. Don't take any chances. You look as though you were overheated."

Mr. Sigsbee followed them into the corridor, where he shook hands with the indignant heir.

"Your troubles have just begun, Mr. Bingle," he said, with a genial smile.

"How's that?"

"We'll have a long, bitter fight on our hands, but—we'll win. There will be a contest, you see."

"All right," said Mr. Bingle, his eyes snapping. "I'm ready. I stood by Uncle Joe when he was alive, you can bet your last dollar I'm not going back on him now that he's dead."

That evening, sitting over the crackling grate fire, Mr. Bingle broke a long period of silence by remarking to his wife:

"I dare say we can afford to adopt one or two, Mary, with all this money we're going to have."

CHAPTER VI — THE HONOURABLE THOMAS SINGLETON BINGLE

Time flies.

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It is another Christmas Eve, ten years later than the one described in the opening chapter of this narrative. The Honourable Thomas Singleton Bingle is preparing for his annual reading of "The Christmas Carol." The sentiment which influences him on this occasion is the same that inspired the habit in his days of long ago, but the surroundings have changed. Now the vast drawing-room in the home of Mr. Bingle provides the setting for an elaborate observance of a custom that has become almost historic to those who have studied the life and habits of Mr. Bingle. An imposing English butler, assisted by two able footmen and the head gardener of the estate, are employed in the final decoration of the huge room. For seven or eight years they have performed these Christmas Eve duties in the mansion on the Sound. Melissa, a trifle more buxom than in the days of the lower West Side apartment but quite as capable despite her secret knowledge that she receives a greater salary than the mighty Diggs, is superintending the hanging of a row of stockings along the mantel-ledge, stockings of variegated hues and distinguishing sizes.

There are eleven children in the family now. They range from one year up to twelve. Kathleen and Frederick divide the distinction of seniority, both being twelve. There is some doubt as to the actual age of Henrietta and Guinevere, but for the sake of policy, Henrietta, who came first, is down in the family records as six, Guinevere as five, although Mrs. Bingle herself confesses that they came but six weeks apart, and at a time when a few weeks, either way, make little or no difference in the computation. This was the nearest that Mr. and Mrs. Bingle ever came to being blessed with twins. For awhile they hoped that they could make twins out of these infants, but, as the children grew older, the impracticability of such a thought—or ambition—became clear to them, and they reluctantly abandoned the project. Henrietta revealed all the characteristics of being of Italian extraction, while Guinevere was unmistakably Irish.

If you were to take a motor-ride along the North Shore of Long Island Sound and feel your way back into private lanes that appear to lead nowhere in particular, they are so deviously circuitous, you would pass by the lodge gates of two magnificent estates. One of them belonged to Mr. Bingle, the other to Sydney Force—or, more strictly speaking, to Mrs. Sydney Force. It is worthy of mention that Mr. Force lived up to his theory of regeneration by selling to Mr. Bingle, at a tremendous profit, one hundred acres off of the least desirable end of his late father-in-law's estate, thereby proving to himself that the early bird is a much smarter creation than the one which is satisfied to possess a mere nest-egg. Of course, the selling of that "parcel" of land was provocative of most acrimonious disputes between Mr. and Mrs. Force. Mrs. Force, while not averse to the sale of the land, was frightfully cut up by the fact that she was to have the impossible Bingles as neighbours, and Mr. Force, who was the prince of snobs, berated her soundly for petty snobbishness.

"Bingle is such a hopelessly common name," she said.

"It happens to be a proper name," remarked Mr. Force, resorting to a rather lame sort of wit.

"If it only had been Mrs. Bransone or Mrs. Mortimer," she sighed. "They are awfully smart, don't you know. One meets them everywhere."

"We couldn't have sold that piece of land to either one of 'em," said he. "They are much too smart for that."

Mr. Bingle erected a very costly and magnificent house, much against his will, and spent a great deal of time thereafter in wishing that he was back in the five-room apartment where he could put his hand on anything he wanted without having to call for a servant to tell him where to find it. He was so stupendously rich and so completely awed by the importance of being acquainted with Mrs. Force that he became a most desirable neighbour, from that lady's point of view. She experienced a great deal of pleasure in association with a man who could be made to feel as small as he gave every sign of being when in her august presence. It was really a joy to her. With all his money, he could not induce his wife's gowns to hang as Mrs. Force's hung; he could not make her boots fit as neatly, nor her hats sit as naturally; he could not buy style or majesty for Mrs. Bingle. So he was the kind of neighbour to have. Any woman will tell you that.

Diggs was telling Watson, the footman, just where to put the mistletoe. Watson's position was precarious. He was at the top of a step-ladder, struggling to reach the lowest crystal pendant on the enormous chandelier, and the ladder was wobbling.

"It's all tommy-rot," muttered Watson, apropos of nothing that had gone before.

"Wot's all tommy-rot?" demanded Mr. Diggs severely.

"Christmas Eve," said Watson. "I have no objection to Christmas morning, but 'ang me if I can see any sense in Christmas Eve. What's it good for, anyway?"

"You'd better get a taller ladder," said Mr. Diggs. "It's getting on towards 'alf-past eight. We can't be all night 'anging that bunch of mistletoe, you know."

Melissa paused in her work long enough to devote an appraising look upon Watson.

"You look very handsome up there, Watson. It gives you a very good height. Straighten your legs out a bit. If you stand up as straight as you can you'll be as tall as Mr. Diggs THINKS he is."

"See here, my fine lady," began Diggs, annoyed.

"Oh, I beg pardon, Mr. Diggs," cried Melissa. "I didn't see you."

"You'll get your walking papers if you don't keep your place," said Diggs ominously.

"And I'll keep my place if I don't get my walking papers," retorted Melissa, airily.

"And what's more," went on the butler, "you'll get the sack anyway if you don't stop filling the kids up with them yarns of yours. The nurses were telling Mrs. Bingle that the children didn't go to sleep for hours last night, they were that scared."

"Seeing ghosts, dragons and goblins all night long," said Hughes, the second footman, shoving a big chair into position. Chairs from all parts of the house had been brought to the drawing-room and arranged in a semi-circle in front of the huge fireplace, at one corner of which stood Mr. Bingle's reading lamp, accurately placed at the edge of a costly little Italian table. There were big chairs and little chairs, soft chairs and hard ones, chairs of velvet and chairs of silk, chairs of ancient needle-point and chairs that could not be sat upon.

"I didn't tell any ghost stories yesterday," said Melissa. "I told 'em about robbers and kidnappers."

"Get the ladder, Watson," said Diggs. "What are you standing there for? Do you think it's a pedestal you're on?"

"I just wanted to say that three of the kids saw sea-serpents and crocodiles in their dreams—"

"Don't lay it to me, Watson," broke in Melissa. "I'm not to blame if they had delirium tremens. I didn't give them anything to drink."

"I—I shall have to speak to Mrs. Bingle about you, Melissa," exclaimed Diggs severely.

"Do! She is always complimented when you condescend to speak to her, Mr. Diggs."

"Don't scrap," put in the gardener mildly. "Remember it's Christmas Eve."

"Oy-yoy!" groaned Watson. "We've all got to listen to Mr. Bingle read Dickens again. It will be the sixth time I've 'eard The Christmas Carol in this 'ere room." He departed in quest of the tall step-ladder, banging Hughes on the shins with the small one as he swung past.

Hughes said something under his breath and then, with a quick glance at Melissa, went on: "I will say this for the old boy, he makes Christmas a merry one for all of us."

"Must I remind you again, Hughes, not to speak of the master as 'the old boy'? Please remember that you were engaged as a TRAINED servant."

"Well, I'd have you to know, Mr. Diggs, that I'm not one of your bally English servants. I'm as good an American as any one, and I say what I please."

"You were engaged as an English footman. I distinctly told you that at the intelligence office when I engaged you. You may be as American as you please on your days out, but while you are on duty in this 'ouse, you've got to be as English as I am, or—"

"Oh, I can drop 'em as well as any one, Mr. Diggs," said Hughes scornfully. "'Ulloa! 'Ere comes the lidy governess!" He was peering into the hall, the corners of his mouth drawn down in the most approved English fashion.

Whatever may have been Mr. Bingle's taste in the selection of rugs and furniture, he could be charged with no lack of it in his choice of a governess for the young Bingles. Miss Fairweather was as pretty as a picture. In fact, you would go a long way before you found a picture as pretty as Miss Fairweather. Her serene beauty was disturbed, however, by a perplexed frown, as she hurriedly entered the room and paused just inside the door for a furtive, agitated glance down the hall.

"Diggs, who is in the library with Mr. Bingle?" she inquired, unconsciously lowering her voice as if fearing the sharpness of distant ears. It was a very pleasing, musical voice, a fact which no one appreciated more than Diggs, who boasted of his ability to know a lady when he heard one.

"A newspaper chap, Miss Fairweather. To interview Mr. Bingle about the—" (here he sighed faintly) —"about the Christmas jollities."

Miss Fairweather sent another futile look in the direction of the library. She was plainly distressed by her failure to see through the walls that intervened.

"What—what name did he give?"

"I can't say, Miss. I didn't quite catch it myself."

"But you must have announced him. He gave you his card or—something, didn't he?"

"No, Miss. He announced 'imself over the telephone this afternoon. It sounded like Blinkers, or, even more nearly, on his repeating it, like Rasmussen. At any rate, Mr. Bingle was expecting 'im, and came out into the 'all before I had the chance to learn his name proper, so to speak, Miss."

She bit her lip, annoyed. "Was it Flanders, Diggs?"

Mr. Diggs reflected. "It was," said he. "Now that you mention it, it was. Richard, I think."

Miss Fairweather lowered her eyes suddenly and grasped the back of a chair as if to steady herself. The next instant, she had recovered, except that a queer, hunted look had settled in her eyes.

"Thank you, Diggs. Please say to Mrs. Bingle that I shall not be down again this evening. I have a splitting headache." She moved rapidly toward the door.

"Won't you be here for the reading, Miss?"

"No. I always cry when I hear about Tiny Tim." "Beg pardon, Miss, but as this is your first Christmas Eve 'ere, you'll excuse me for saying that the entire 'ousehold is expected to be present for the reading. It is a rule, Miss. Even the cook comes up."

"Thank you, Diggs. Please give my message to Mrs. Bingle."

"Very good, Miss."

"By the way, is this Mr. Flanders tall and fair, with dark grey eyes, a rather broad mouth and just the tiniest sort of a wave in his hair—especially above the ears? And a small white scar on his left thumb?"

Diggs arose to the demands of the occasion, as he always did. "Yes, Miss. Quite accurate, I'm sure. And a very pleasant voice, I may add if you don't mind."

"Thank you, Diggs," said Miss Fairweather for the third time, and then scurried across the hall and up the broad staircase, accelerating her speed materially as the library door was thrown open and lively masculine voices came booming up from behind her.

"Sounds like a scene from a novel," said Melissa to Diggs, "A mysterious stranger appears to disturb the peace and quiet of our heroine. She runs off and hides in her room, shivering with dread lest this spectre out of her dark past—-"

"Rubbish!" said Mr. Diggs.

"Sure," said Melissa. "That's what most novels are. It's my opinion that that young lady's been on the stage, Mr. Diggs. She acts just like an actress. I've noticed that in her from the beginning. And the other day she had a letter from a theatrical manager. I saw the name on the envelope."

"I dare say," observed Diggs, inattentively. Watson appeared with the tall step-ladder. "Be a bit lively, Watson. I 'ear Mr. Bingle in the 'all. Go and open the door for Mr. Flanders, Hughes."

Melissa happened to be standing directly beneath the mistletoe. Hughes took advantage of an opportunity that has become historic. Then he passed swiftly out of the room, followed by Melissa's astonished: "Oh, you!" Watson came nimbly down the ladder and emulated the example of the astonishing Hughes quite before Melissa could recover herself. He received a resounding smack in return, but from the young woman's open hand.

"Don't stand under it," he grumbled ruefully, "unless you want to play the game."

"I'll stand under it as long as I please," said Melissa defiantly, planting herself firmly on the spot from which Watson had hastily removed the ladder. She faced Mr. Diggs.

Mr. Diggs coloured. He cleared his throat and then glared at Watson, who went grinning from the room. Melissa was a very pretty, rosy young woman, and her eyes flashed dangerously.

"It's a fine old custom," said Mr. Diggs persuasively. "In merry England we hobserve it—er—you might say religiously, and without fear of future complications. It can be done in a dignified fashion if—"

"I don't want to have it done in a dignified fashion," protested Melissa, lifting her round little chin and pursing her lips invitingly. "Do it as if you liked it, not as if you wanted to be religious."

Mr. Diggs became human at once. He laid aside his austerity, and was no longer a butler but a good-looking chap of thirty-five who had the "very Old Nick" in him. It was the sort of kiss that has nothing in common with mistletoe—the sort that DOES lead to future complications. It proved something to Melissa, and she uttered a little sigh of happiness. Mr. Diggs kissed her because he was in love with her.

Unfortunately, Mr. Bingle entered the room at the very instant of least resistance, and coughed.

"Oh, I—I beg your pardon!" exclaimed Mr. Bingle, genuinely distressed. It is worthy of note that it was the good little man who apologised, not Diggs.

As the master was accompanied by the tall young newspaper chap, who grinned abominably, both Diggs and Melissa forgot their moment of bliss and fell from a great height. Needless to say, they were speechless.

"It's quite all right, Diggs," said Mr. Bingle, affecting a vast geniality. "What's a mistletoe for if not to—yes, yes, Melissa, it's quite all right. Ahem! Don't you agree with me, Mr. Flanders?"

"Thoroughly," said Mr. Flanders with conviction. "And what's more, Mr. Bingle, I agree with Diggs."

Melissa, crimson to her throat, fled. Mr. Diggs passed his hand over his brow, as if to clear his brain, and then stammered in a voice that strove hard to regain its former impressiveness:

"Yes, sir, it—it is all right, sir. Quite all right, sir. As right as can be, sir."

"Right as rain," proclaimed Mr. Bingle, resorting to a habit of imitation that had marked his progress during

the past few years of observation. He had heard the imposing Diggs say it, many times over. It was quite the proper thing to say, of course—apparently on any and all occasions—but, for the life of him, Mr. Bingle couldn't grasp the significance of the simile. "And now, Diggs, THAT being settled, is everything else all right?" He surveyed the great, gaily bedecked room with an eye that took in the smallest detail.

"I think so, sir," said Diggs, slowly recovering. "You will hobserve, sir, that I have added the necessary new chair—the 'igh-chair over here, sir, for little Miss Him—Imogene."

"I see. We make it a point, Mr. Flanders, to get a new baby at least once a year. The first year, as I explained, we had three. Two or three years ago, one came in May and another in September."

"Mental arithmetic gives you twelve in all," said young Mr. Flanders.

"Eleven. We lost one in 1906. Little Harriet."

"Eleanor, sir, begging your pardon," corrected Diggs.

"Right. Thank you, Diggs. Malnutrition. We never should have had her. There goes the door-bell, Tell Mrs. Bingle that Mr. and Mrs. Force have arrived, and give Mr. Force a drink before she comes down."

"Very good, sir." Diggs retired with gravity.

"President of our bank, you know. Mr. Sydney Force," explained Mr. Bingle.

"I know. The husband of Mrs. Sydney Force," said Flanders, a twinkle in his grey eyes.

"Sit down, Mr. Flanders. I'd ask you to have a cigar, but the nurses say that smoke isn't good for the children. Force always smokes here. I can't tell him not to, you see. He wouldn't come again." In that bit of ingenuousness, Mr. Bingle exposed the family state of mind in respect to their aristocratic neighbours. "Now, this is where we have the reading. Permit me to call your attention to the way we arrange the—er—the auditorium, you might say. That's where I sit—over there. I'm glad you've decided to stay and hear The Christmas Carol. It will do you good, Mr. Flanders. You'll be a better man for it. There is a train in at nine-fifty-five. We'll not be interrupted here, so fire away. I'm ready to be interviewed."

They seated themselves on the broad, luxurious couch that marked the precise centre of the semi-circle and was evidently intended to be the section of honour. Mr. Bingle leaned back, stretched out his slender legs, crossed his feet, and looked over his tortoise-shell glasses with a fine assumption of tolerance. He was still trying, after many years, to enjoy his own importance. Sad to relate, he still expected to wake up and find that he had but half an hour in which to eat his breakfast and get across town to the bookkeeper's stool he had occupied the day before. He sometimes felt of his ears reminiscently, for they seemed in some way to clearly connect him with his last waking hours. He never quite got over listening for the alarm clock.

At fifty-three, he was no older in appearance than when he was forty-three. If anything, he seemed younger, for the harassed, care-worn expression had disappeared, leaving him bland, benign of countenance, although the same imperishable wrinkles lined his pinched cheeks. He was just as careless about his sparse hair as in the days of old. It was never by any chance sleek and orderly. The habit of running his fingers through his thatch still clung to him, significant reminder of the perplexities that filled his daily life over the ledgers and day-books. In all other respects, however, he was a re-made man.

His trim little frame was clothed in expensive garments; his patent leather pumps were the handiwork of the most fashionable of bootmakers, and quite uncomfortable; his hosiery was of the finest silk and his watch-chain was of platinum; there were pearl studs in his unpolished shirt front and four shining black buttons on his neat white waistcoat; his clawhammer coat had a velvet collar and fitted him about the shoulders as if it had been constructed for a man who possessed much more of a figure than he; and his trousers were primly pressed. Not the same old Bingle outwardly, you will say, but you are wrong. He was, and always will be, like the leopard.

A certain briskness of manner, inspired by necessity, had come to him in these days of opulence. His position in life made its demands, and one of the most exacting of these denied him the privileges of familiarity. He would have liked nothing better than an hour or two a day of general conversation with Mrs. Bingle and Melissa—say while the latter was tidying up the library—but that was utterly out of the question under the new order of things. He was compelled, by virtue of exaltation, to be very crisp, succinct, positive in his treatment of the most trivial matters; as for conversing amiably with a single servant in his establishment, something told him more plainly than words that it would not be tolerated—not for an instant. He would have given a great deal to be able to just once shout a glad, cheerful, heart-felt "good morning" to Diggs—or to any one of the servants, for that matter—but custom and the surprising dignity of his employees compelled him to utter the greeting in a casual, bored manner, quite as if he did it automatically and always as if he was on the point of clearing his throat. He sorely missed Melissa's spontaneous, even vulgar "Morning, Mist' Bingle," and the rattle of cutlery and chinaware. Melissa had acquired a fine but watchful dignity. She now said "good morning, sir" in the hushed, impersonal voice of the trained servant. She never "joked" with him, as of yore, although he was by way of knowing that she bubbled over with fun in the regions "below stairs."

"I haven't heard The Christmas Carol since I was twelve years old," said Richard Flanders. He had his note paper on his knee. "What I want, Mr. Bingle, is a good Christmas story from you. We shall play it up, of course, and—well, it ought to be good reading. Your own story, sir, from the beginning. All about the Hooper millions and the children that just grew."

"Something stranger than fiction, eh?" mused Mr. Bingle. "But, my dear sir, it's such an old story, this yarn about me. The newspapers have worn it to shreds. Suppose we leave out all reference to the Hooper millions.

If the public is as tired of those millions as I am at times, Mr. Flanders, we'll be doing an act of charity if we leave 'em out. You will get your best story, as you call it, by observing what happens here to-night. No one else has ever done it for a newspaper. You are the first, my dear sir. I am a simple man. I don't like to be in the newspapers. The long and tiresome litigation over my poor uncle's estate has kept me more or less in the limelight, as you fellows would say, and there have been times when I willingly would have given up the fight if my lawyers had allowed me to do so. But a lawyer is something you can't get rid of, once you've got him—or he's got you, strictly speaking. My lawyers won't allow ME to quit, and I have every reason to suspect that they won't allow the other side to quit. However, I believe the matter is nearing an end. The United States Supreme Court will pass on the issue just as soon as the lawyers on both sides reach a verdict—that is to say, a verdict acknowledging that it won't pay them to delay the business any longer. The case of Hooper et al vs. Bingle has been going on like the Jarndyce matter for nearly nine years. We've licked them in every court and in three separate hearings, and my lawyers are confident the Supreme Court will sustain the findings of the lower courts. I am a tender-hearted lunatic, Mr. Flanders. I have made an arrangement whereby the son and two daughters of Joseph Hooper are to be paid one million dollars each out of the estate, just as soon as I know definitely that I have beaten them in the court of last resort. I guess that will surprise 'em, eh?"

Flanders' eyes glittered. "Don't forget, Mr. Bingle, that you are speaking to a newspaper man. That last statement of yours would make a sensation, sir."

Mr. Bingle sighed. "I am sure you will not take advantage of me, Mr. Flanders. I have made a similar statement to every newspaper man who has interviewed me, and every one of them has promised not to use it in his paper. So far not one of them has violated his promise. I am sure, sir, that you are no less honourable than the rest of the boys."

"I have given no promise, sir."

"Nevertheless I shall trust you not to use the statement, Mr. Flanders. And now, let us get back to the important part of the interview."

Flanders stared hard for a few seconds, unable to comprehend the serene faith that this little but exceedingly important man reposed in his fellow-man. He appeared to take it for granted that this startling piece of confidence would not be betrayed, no matter to whom it was extended. There was something actually pathetic in his guilelessness. Mr. Richard Flanders admittedly was staggered, and yet somewhere down in his soul he knew there was a spark of fairness that would become a stupendous obstacle in the path of his news-getting avarice. Of course, he was no less honourable than the rest of the boys!

"You would be more generous toward your cousins, I fear, than they could be toward you," said the reporter, twisting his pencil nervously. After all, it WOULD create a sensation, this remarkable statement of Mr. Bingle.

"Oh, they would cheerfully see me rot in the poorhouse," assented Mr. Bingle composedly. "I am not deceiving myself in regard to Geoffrey and Angela and Lizzie—I mean Elizabeth. You won't mention what I have just confided to you, will you, Mr. Flanders?"

Flanders sighed. He had hoped that the petition would not be put into definite form.

"Certainly not, sir—if you—er—if you'd rather I wouldn't," he managed to say with a fair show of alacrity. "But, gee!" The half-muttered ejaculation spoke volumes of regret.

His host smiled complacently. It was settled, so far as he was concerned. Mr. Flanders was to be depended upon.

"Still snowing when you came in?" he asked, quite irrelevantly but with interest.

"Yes, sir—hard."

"Good! We'll have bob-sledding on the terrace for the kiddies to-morrow. I suppose you'd like to know how we happen to have such a large and growing family. Well, it's all very simple. It is our practice to acquire a new baby at least once a year. On occasions we have felt called upon to make it two, and even three, but of late it seems the more sensible plan to limit ourselves to one. It is our idea to keep up the practice until I am seventy-five, if God permits me to live to that age. So, you see, we will have reared a family of thirty-three children by that time, and we will never be without little toddlers and prattlers. I am fifty-three now, Mr. Flanders. We are reasonably sure to have twenty-two additions to the family. The pitiful part of getting old and decrepit lies in the fact that one's children grow up, get married, leave home—or die—and that is just what we are trying to guard against. On my seventy-fifth birthday, there will be a fine, healthy two-year-old babe crying and goo-gooing for my especial benefit, and by working backwards in your figuring you can also credit us with a three-year-old, a four-year-old, and so on up the line. Naturally we will have lost a goodly number of the first-comers, but we provide against a deficit, so to speak, by this little plan of ours. Some of the girls may not turn out as well as we expect, however, so there is the possibility that they may remain with us to the end, enjoying single-blessedness. The boys, of course, will marry."

"It is splendid, Mr. Bingle," said Flanders enthusiastically. "You are a wonder."

"Not at all, not at all," protested Mr. Bingle, with a deprecatory gesture. "I'm a selfish, conniving old rascal, that's what I am. We've always wanted children, Mrs. Bingle and I, and we never—er—never seemed to have 'em as other people do, so we began to look for children that needed parents as much as we needed children. That's the whole thing in a nut-shell. We are a bit high-handed about it, too. We never have a child until it is past the teething age and can walk a little bit and talk a little bit. So, you see, we manage to have 'em without the drawbacks. That's where we are selfish and—"

"I think you're quite sensible about it, Mr. Bingle," interrupted Flanders politely. "They say teething is awful."

"That's what they say," said Mr. Bingle, a slight frown of regret on his brow. "Still, I should have preferred —ahem! Yes, yes! Most annoying, I'm told. The nurses seem to know. We began adopting our children as soon as we came into possession of my Uncle Joseph's money. Up to that time, we had hesitated about having other people's children on our hands and minds. Of course you'll understand that poverty could never have stood in the way of our having children of our own. God simply did not choose to give them to us. The old saying, 'a poor man for children,' did not work very well in my case. Mrs. Bingle is ten years younger than I. She is a strong, normal woman. I never could understand why—er—and neither could she, for that matter. As soon as we came into this fortune, or, more accurately speaking, after we had returned from our first trip to California and a short visit to Chicago, we adopted Kathleen. She was the daughter of a young woman who—but, never mind. We sha'n't go into that. She was about two years old. At once it occurred to both of us that it would be a fine idea to have a boy to grow up with her. So we called in the stork. He happened to have a splendid, left-over, unclaimed two-year-old boy in stock, so we took him. That was Frederick. Then, a friend of mine—a widower who worked as a bookkeeper alongside of me, chap named Jenkins—died very suddenly, leaving a little girl just under eighteen months of age. That's how we got Marie Louise. And so it goes, Mr. Flanders, right up to date. Henrietta and Guinevere are almost twins. Six weeks between 'em. They—"

"You mean in respect to age or—"

"In respect to their arrival. Guinevere came much sooner than was anticipated, you might say. Little Imogene came the twenty-sixth of last September. She cries a good deal. I am inclined to think she's getting her wisdom teeth."

"Naturally, Mrs. Bingle is keen about the idea. Saves a lot of bother."

"It's got to be such a joy having children in this way, when we please, as often as we like, and being able to determine sex to our own satisfaction, that we really look forward to the arrival of a new one. There's always the pleasure of picking out blondes or brunettes. We try to equalize as much as possible. I am—or was—a blonde, Mr. Flanders—quite a decided blonde. Mrs. Bingle is still a brunette."

"And now, may I inquire, do they all regard you as their real father?"

"In a measure. There are times when they look upon me as a sort of truck-horse. But real fathers have told me that that is customary. They call me daddy, if that's what you mean. Once in a while they seem to recollect that there was another man and woman in their lives, but not often. Generally people who used to beat them, I gather. I will say this for our children: they were all thoroughly spanked before they came to us. It takes 'em a long time to get used to not being spanked."

"Do you never punish them?"

"Frequently. If they're bad I have them locked in a closet. We've got a very large closet with windows and other comforts. Usually there are three or four of 'em in at the same time, so they don't mind."

"God will surely reward you, sir, for being kind to all these poor little kiddies. May I—ahem!—May I express the hope, sir, that some day you may me blessed with—er—"

"No use, sir. Thank you, just the same. It will never happen."

"How many nurses have you in your employ?"

"Four at present. We also have a school-teacher—I mean, a governess. Excellent young woman. Teaches 'em French and German. Curiously enough some of the children take to foreign languages quicker than the others. Force says that Reginald is a Hebrew. He was supposed to be Irish."

"Very interesting. All of them strong and healthy?"

"Absolutely. You'd think so if you could see 'em fight occasionally. They've had the whooping cough and chicken-pox. My doctor is the renowned Dr. Fiddler. You know of him?"

Mr. Bingle proceeded to dilate upon the activities and achievements of Dr. Fiddler. There had been broken arms and prodigious bruises, cuts and gashes of every conceivable character, and in every instance Dr. Fiddler had performed with heroic fidelity. In the middle of a particularly enthusiastic tribute to the doctor's skill as a fish-bone extractor, Diggs appeared in the doorway, coughed indulgently, and then advanced.

"Beg pardon, sir. Mrs. Bingle says the children are getting nervous. They happear to be—"

A series of shrill screeches descended the stairway, followed by the sudden slamming of a distant doorway and the instantaneous suppression of bedlam.

"Quite so, quite so," exclaimed Mr. Bingle, springing to his feet. "Dear me, it is past the hour. Forgive me, Mr. Flanders, but—but I really can't delay the—er—Yes, yes, Diggs, tell Mrs. Bingle that we are all ready. Keep your seat, Mr. Flanders. Don't mind me. I must run upstairs and see if—Quite so, Diggs. They MUST be nervous. Where is Miss Fairweather?"

"She has a 'eadache, sir, and says she can't come down—"

"Stuff and nonsense! It will cure her headache. Send for her, Diggs. She's our new governess, Mr. Flan—"

"What was the name?" demanded the reporter, pricking up his ears. He leaned forward with a new interest in his lively grey eyes. But Mr. Bingle was gone, his coat-tails fairly whisking around the heavy portieres.

"Fairweather, sir," supplied Diggs. "Miss Hamy—I mean to say, Amy—Fairweather."

"Good Lord!" fell from the lips of Richard Flanders. Then he proceeded to behave in the most astonishing manner. He sprang to his feet and grasped the retreating Diggs by the arm, literally jerking that dignified individual back upon his heels. His eyes were gleaming. "Dark brown hair and soft grey eyes? Fairly tall and slend—" The sly grin on the butler's face served to check the outburst. He abruptly subdued his emotions. "Excuse me for grabbing you like that. I—I was just wondering if—"

Diggs had recovered his urbanity. "She is the same Miss Fairweather, sir. I recognise her from your description. It may interest you to hear, sir, that she acted just as queerly as you when I told her that you—"

"What did you tell her?" demanded Flanders, seeing that Diggs hesitated.

"That you had a scar on your thumb, sir. By the way, HAVE you?"

"I have!" exclaimed the young man. "Well, by George! Will wonders never cease? Where is she? You say she isn't coming down—but, of course, not! She couldn't think of it, knowing that I am here. I say, will you—will you see that she gets a message from me? Wait a second. I'll write it now. Just slip a note to her—Great Scott! What's that?"

The house seemed to be clattering down about his head.

"That, sir," responded Diggs, drawing a deep breath, "is the charge of the light brigade. Hinfants in arms, you might say. There's no stopping them now. 'Ere they come."

And down the wide stairway streamed the shrieking vanguard of the Christmas revellers—seven or eight unrestrained youngsters who had snatched liberty from the nurses the instant Mr. Bingle opened the play-room door at the top of the house. Down the steps they came, regardless of stumbles and tumbles—an avalanche of joy.

Diggs, from the doorway, raked the stairway and its squirming horde with an exploring eye.

"She is coming, sir. Fairly tall and slender, sir, and—"

"Good Lord!" gasped Flanders, helplessly. "This is more than I can stand. Diggs, do—do men ever faint?"

There was no reply. Three sturdy youngsters collided with Diggs. There was nothing he could say—with lucidity.

CHAPTER VII — SEARCHERS REWARDED

Miss Fairweather bowed gravely to Flanders as she passed. Diggs observed her closely. He was conscious of a sensation of disappointment. He had counted on a scene—an interesting scene. Circumstances justified something more thrilling than a mere nod of the head, his intelligence argued, and it was really too bad to have it turn out so tamely.

Mr. Flanders, looking a trifle dazed and bewildered, contrived to hide his emotions in a most commendable manner. A keener observer than Diggs, however, would have detected a strange pallor in the young woman's smooth cheek and an ominous shadow between her finely pencilled brows. Even Diggs might have observed these symptoms but for the fact that she kept her face rigidly averted. Mr. Flanders, from his position near the door—he seemed to have taken root there—was favoured with no more than a glimpse of the tip of a small ear and the faintest suggestion of a cheek's outline. His own face, entirely visible to Diggs, was scarlet—quite frankly so.

Four nurses appeared, carrying infants. Miss Fairweather assisted in the task of placing the sleepy-heads in their high-chairs and in the subsequent occupation of entertaining them by means of sundry grimaces and motions, keeping them awake—and quiet—against the arrival of Mr. Bingle, who, it appears, had gone to his room to substitute a pair of far from fashionable carpet slippers for the smart pumps he had been wearing. There was a great deal of excitement attending the placing of the children, but it passed unnoticed by Mr. Flanders. He was staring hungrily, pleadingly at the unfriendly back of the new governess.

Once she gave him a swift, perhaps unintentional look. It was too brief to be described as significant, but it served to revive his interest in the proceedings. He sprang forward and offered his aid to the nurses. If he was clumsy in his attempt to jiggle a chair into position, an explanation may be instantly provided. Miss Fairweather, after a brief stare of indecision, favoured him with an almost imperceptible smile. He happened to be in the act of pushing a high-chair under the wriggling person of Imogene. That smile caused the momentary paralysis of his whole being, with the result that the nurse came near to depositing Imogene on the floor. Every one—except Imogene—squealed. Mr. Flanders was reminded of his own existence. The arrested chair shot into position and Imogene came down rather soundly on the seat of it, and then every one giggled—except Imogene.

"Amy!" he whispered, as she turned away from the little group. He was at her side in an instant. She faced

him, and there was no trace of the departed smile in her eyes.

"How dare you speak to me?" she said in low, intense tones. Her eyes were cold, unfriendly.

"I've been searching for you—" he began, eagerly, but her disdainful laugh cut him short.

"Go away, please. I don't want to see you. There is nothing more to be said between us. It's all over, Dick. Don't speak to me again. I—I don't want the Bingles to know that I—"

"I must see you, Amy," he persisted. "It isn't all over. Now that I've found you, I'll see that I don't lose track of you again. We can't talk here. Where can I see you alone—"

"Sh!" she cautioned, and he respected the appeal in her dark, distressed eyes. Mr. Bingle had entered the room, and was greeted by a shout of delight from the children. The governess moved swiftly away from the young man's side, mingling with the nurses by the fireplace.

Mr. Bingle, hurrying toward the semi-circle of youngsters was surprised by a genial slap on the back from the visibly excited Flanders.

"Wonderful!" exclaimed the young man, his face radiant. "Wonderful!"

"Aren't they?" cried Mr. Bingle, pleased.

"I don't mean the—Ahem! They certainly are, Mr. Bingle. I expect this to be the most beautiful Christmas Eve in all my life, sir. I shall never be able to thank you for—"

"Tush, tush! Now come along. I want to introduce you to the young ladies and gentlemen. Imogene, my dear, this is Mr. Flanders. Kathleen, shake hands with—oh, I beg pardon, I ought to have presented you to the Fairy Princess. Miss Fairweather, just a moment, please. I want you to meet my friend, Mr. Flanders, of the Banner. Well, well, are we all here? Let me see: one, two, three—no, hold up your hands as I call the roll. Strict attention, Mr. Flanders, and you'll know which is which—I say, Flanders, would you mind looking this way, please? Children first, on an occasion like this, sir. Grown-ups don't count. How is your headache, Miss Fairweather? Now, speak up, children. Answer to your names—and how to Mr. Flanders, while you're about it."

Planting himself in front of the row of eager children, grasping Flanders's arm with one hand, and employing the other in a sort of counting-off process, he called the roll.

Kathleen, exquisitely dressed and radiant with joy, a dainty miss who looked to be fourteen but was said to be twelve, curtsied to Flanders, who bowed low, his roving eye unwilling to relax its interest in the flushed face of the governess. Then came Frederick, a sturdy youngster; Marie Louise, a solemn-eyed ten-year-old; Wilberforce, Reginald, Henrietta, Guinevere, Harold, Rosemary, Rutherford, and last of all Imogene, who whimpered.

"There!" said Mr. Bingle proudly. "They did it very nicely, didn't they, nurse?" He addressed the four nurses, who beamed as one. "Diggs, you may summon the servants. I hear Mrs. Bingle and our guests in the hall—or is it the—er—ahem!"

"The servants 'ave congregated in the 'all, sir. It is them that is whispering," said Diggs, who had been scowling in the direction of the door. "I shall speak to them, sir. They should be made to understand—"

"Don't lecture them to-night, Diggs," broke in Mr. Bingle hastily. "Not on Christmas Eve. Let 'em whisper. Tell 'em to come right in. You see, Mr. Flanders, we have the servants in to hear the Christmas Carol. It's my rule. They enjoy it. They—Ah, my dear! Here we are! This is Mr. Flanders, Mary—my wife, sir. Come right in, Mrs. Forced. Permit me to introduce my old friend Flanders of the Banner. Mr. Force, shake hands with Mr. Flanders. Now—er—ahem! All right, Diggs—call 'em in."

The servants—a horde of them—stalked into the room, each one being formally, but perfunctorily announced by the butler, and each one flushing painfully in return for the attention. There was Delia, the cook, and Christine, her assistant; Swanson, the furnace man; Lockhart, the chauffeur, and Boyles, the washer; Cora, the laundress; Georgia, the scullery-maid; Edgecomb, the gardener, and his four helpers; Beulah and Emma, the upstairs-maids; Bliss, the lodge-keeper, and Jane, his daughter; Frank, the pony-cart driver, and Joe, the coachman; Matson, the stable-boy; Fannie, the seamstress; Rudolph, the carpenter; Miss McLeish, the stenographer and telephone operator; Throckinorton, the dairy-man; Scott, the stockman; John Butts, the handy-man; Melissa, Watson and Hughes. The four nurses escaped official announcement because they had been clever enough to anticipate the formality.

Awkward, ill-at-ease in Sunday garments, and almost sullen in their efforts to appear impressed, they formed an amazing group as they clumsily ranged themselves in a compact fringe outside the more favoured guests of the evening, who occupied what may be described as the "orchestra." They remained standing.

"Ever see the play called 'The Admirable Crichton'?" whispered Mr. Bingle to Flanders while the servants were crowding into their places.

"Yes," said Flanders. "I recognise the setting, but I miss the grown-up daughters. Diggs is shorn of his opportunities, sir."

"That play gave me an idea. It was written by a fellow named Barrie. He also wrote 'Peter Pan.' That is the greatest play ever written."

"If one believes in fairies, Mr. Bingle."

"Well, I do," said Mr. Bingle.

"So do I," said Flanders, his gaze wandering. Miss Fairweather was caught in the act of staring at him. She lowered her eyes.

Mr. Force arbitrarily had settled into the chair next to little Kathleen. His hard, impassive face wore a softer expression than was usually to be observed there, and his voice, ordinarily brusque and domineering, became ludicrously soft and wheedling.

"Come here, Kathleen. Sit on my knee. I've—I've got something pretty for you."

Kathleen instantly lost her joyous, happy expression. Her eyes fell and her manner betrayed unmistakable aversion to the august petitioner.

"Thank you, Mr. Force," she muttered, and was guiltily conscious of impoliteness. Frederick snickered. "I—I don't want to," she went on, spurred to defiance by her brother's action.

"Why not?" demanded Mr. Force coaxingly.

"Oh—because," said Kathleen, almost surlily.

"Don't you like me, Kathleen?"

"Yes, sir," said she, but without enthusiasm.

"Would you like to see what I've got for you? All for yourself alone, you know."

Kathleen couldn't resist. She betrayed the greediness that overcomes all feminine antipathy. "What is it?" she asked guardedly.

"Sit on my knee and I'll put it around your neck," said he, fumbling in his waistcoat pocket.

The child flushed painfully and her eyes fell again. "I don't want to," she repeated.

Force got up from his chair, muttered something under his breath, and moved away. He almost collided with Bingle.

"What's the matter with these kids of yours, Bingle?" he began irascibly. "Why don't you bring them up properly? Teach 'em politeness. Teach them how to behave toward—"

"My dear Force, has—has Kathleen been rude?" said Mr. Bingle in distress.

"You are not to reprimand her," said Force hastily. "I wouldn't have you do that for the world. She'd always have it in for me if she knew that I—but, what nonsense I'm talking. They are little ingrates anyhow—all of them. Good Lord, Bingle, I can't understand what you see in the brats."

"I know you can't," said Mr. Bingle mildly. "That's just the difference between us."

"There's only one in the whole lot that I'd have as a gift," said Force, with a sidelong glance at Kathleen, who was joyous once more. "That girl has got some class to her. Why is it, Bingle, that she dislikes me? All the rest of 'em are friendly enough—too friendly, if anything—but she won't even look at me."

"That's the woman of it," said Mr. Bingle.

"What's the woman of it?" demanded Force gruffly. "What do you mean by 'woman of it'? Don't be silly, Bingle. She's a mere child."

"She'll come around all right," said Mr. Bingle gaily. "Give her time, old fellow, give her time."

"Good heavens, what a racket they're making," growled Force. "Have you no control over them, Bingle? I'd send the whole lot of them to bed, hang me if I wouldn't."

"On Christmas Eve? Oh, no, you wouldn't, old—Where are you going?"

"I'm going into the library to smoke," said Force. "I can't stand the row."

"Now, don't do that," pleaded Mr. Bingle, grasping his arm. "Wait a minute. I'll speak to Kathie. She—"

"Do nothing of the sort," snapped Force. "She doesn't like me, and that's all there is to it. I've taken a fancy to the child, Bingle—I never liked a kid before in all my life. I've got a little present for her, but—oh, well, never mind. I'll put it in her stocking, if you'll tell me which is hers. But I say, why doesn't she like me, Bingle?" He was staring at the back of Kathleen's brown, curly head, and his eyes were filled with perplexity.

"Bashful—just bashful," explained Mr. Bingle.

"Do you really think so?" demanded the other eagerly.

"Sure," said Mr. Bingle, delighted. "All girls go through that stage of development. I don't mind saying to you, Force, she's my favourite. It's a dreadful thing to say, but I'd rather lose any one of them—or all of them—than to lose Kathie. I love her with all my heart."

Flanders was shaking hands with the small boys, Mrs. Bingle looking on with placid approval.

"What's your name, my little man?"

"Abraham."

"Ahem!" coughed Mrs. Bingle, with a violent start.

"Reginald, sir," gasped he whose memory was still faithful when under the pressure of excitement.

"I see," said Flanders, smiling down into Mrs. Bingle's embarrassed eyes. "Lapsus linguae, Mrs. Bingle."

"My French is very—" began Mrs. Bingle plaintively.

"Do you like Santa Claus, Reginald?" interrupted Flanders.

"I like him better'n I do Dickens," confessed Reginald with considerable positiveness. "Say, what's your name?"

"My name is Dick."

"Gee! Deadwood Dick, the road-agent? The feller Melissa is always telling us about? Hey, kids, here's—"

"Sh!" hissed Flanders, clapping his hand over Master Reginald's mouth. "Never mind that!"

"Did I understand Mr. Bingle to say, Mr. Flinders, that you report for the Banner?" It was Mrs. Force who spoke. She was inspecting the young man through a bejewelled lorgnette, held at an angle which was meant to establish beyond dispute the fact that she was looking down upon him from a superior height. She was a tall woman and she had been married to Mr. Force for twelve long years. Looking down on him had become such a habit that it was quite impossible for her to look up to any one of his sex.

"Yes, Mrs. Force, the Banner."

"Can you tell me who put that disgusting item in the paper about my little gathering last week?" She regarded him with severity.

"Gathering? Oh, I daresay it was one of the hospital reporters, Mrs. Force," said Flanders suavely. She spent the rest of the evening in cogitation.

Three words describe Mrs. Force. She detested children.

Joe, the coachman, and Watson were waiting for an opportunity to speak to Mr. Bingle. They appeared to be crowding each other.

"I beg pardon, Mr. Bingle," began Joe, hurriedly, as the master turned in response to Watson's cough.

"What is it, Joseph?"

Watson succeeded in speaking first. "If you please, sir, my grandmother is dying in the city. I've just been sent for, sir. I think it is possible for me to catch the eight-forty—"

"I beg pardon, sir," broke in Joe. "I've just heard that my sister is expecting a baby to-night, and I thought I'd speak to you about getting off—"

"Just a moment," said Mr. Bingle, blinking rapidly. "Wasn't your grandmother dying last Christmas Eve, Watson?"

"No, sir. It was Hughes's grandmother."

"Did she die?"

"She did, sir," said Watson, with a pleased smile. "Hughes can attend to my—"

"And your sister, Joe: didn't you get off last month for three days to attend her wedding? Your only sister, I think you said."

"Yes, sir. Poor girl," said the coachman, without shame or conscience.

Mr. Bingle looked hard at the two men. They coloured. "Very well. You may go, both of you, but don't let it happen again. I am sorry that you will not be here to receive your Christmas presents. I shall distribute the envelopes to-night. By the way, the grandmother season ends about the middle of October, Watson. Good night, and—a Merry Christmas to both of you."

"Beg pardon, sir," stammered Watson, sheepishly. "I'm ashamed of myself, sir. It shan't 'appen again, not so long as I'm in your service." The coachman shuffled his left foot uneasily and appeared to find something of great interest in the rug on which he was standing. At any rate, he scrutinised it very intently. Mr. Bingle smiled as he turned away.

Miss Fairweather suddenly leaned over and whispered into the ear of young Wilberforce. He paid no attention to her, so she shook him gently by the arm. A moment later, obeying an unspoken command, he sheepishly removed two large wads of cotton from his ears.

"Don't you want to hear about Old Scrooge and Tiny Tim?" she whispered.

"I wish I'd thought of doing that," lamented Mr. Force audibly. He had witnessed the little incident.

"I'd sooner hear about Melissa's pirates and sea-cooks," whispered Wilberforce shrilly.

"Order, please!" commanded Mr. Bingle, taking his place at the reading-table. "Please be seated, Mr. Force. Hi! Look out! Not on top of Rosemary."

"Good heavens! I might have squashed her—or him. What are you? A boy or a girl?"

"I'm a woming," piped up Rosemary from the depths of the biggest chair in the room.

Mr. Bingle cleared his throat and adjusted his spectacles. Then he benignly surveyed the audience. The row of servants bobbed their heads and shifted from one foot to the other.

"Friends all," began the master, "I give you greeting. On this glad evening no line is drawn between master and man, no—What is it, Delia?"

The cook had stepped forward. "Excuse me for interruptin', sor, but for sivin years I've stud through the Christmas Carol, from ind to ind, and I'm sivin years older than whin I began. I'm no longer young and hearty. I'm—"

"Well, why do you hesitate? Go on. Do you mean to say you don't want to hear it again?"

"God knows, sor, I'm willing to give up wan evenin' to society. We all are, for that matter. But it takes an hour an' a half to read the blissed story. If we could only sit down during the recital, sor, it—it wouldn't be so bad. But as it is, sor, we have to stand and only our legs and feet can go to sleep. If—"

"I see!" cried Mr. Bingle. "You put me to shame, Delia. I never thought of it in that light. You must have chairs. We will delay the reading while you go to the dining-room and—"

"It's all right, sor. We've got the dining-room chairs in the hall. It was me as thought of thim, sor. Go wan wid yez now, lads, and rush thim in."

Mrs. Bingle took advantage of this unusual delay—or respite—and explained to Mrs. Force that she would never go back to Madame Marie for another gown. All one had to do was to look at the dress she was wearing to-night for the first time. "It has just come and it cost—well, you know what a gown like that would cost at Marie's! And just look at it!" Mrs. Force did look at it—commiseratingly—and said she would be pleased to take Mrs. Bingle in to see her dressmaker, and so on and so forth. Mrs. Bingle expressed some doubt as to any modiste's ability to make her look like Mrs. Force and Mrs. Force pooh-poohed graciously.

Mr. Force bit off the end of a cigar and glumly watched the revivified servants arranging the chairs. Occasionally he sent a puzzled glance at little Kathleen.

Mr. Bingle rubbed his spectacles, while Mr. Flanders confined his attention solely to the slim, graceful head and neck of the new governess. He wore the look of one who has much to do to contain himself in patience. As for Miss Fairweather, a warm glow had settled upon her fair cheek and her eyes were bright.

"I always cry when any one reads aloud about Tiny Tim," she said to Mr. Force, who, for obvious reasons, failed to hear her above the chattering of the children. But Flanders heard.

"Tiny Tim always makes me cry too," he said, very distinctly. He was rewarded by a slightly increased colour in the young lady's cheek.

"I cry my eyes out over Tiny Tim," Miss Quinlan was saying to Miss Stokes, and at the same instant Miss Brown was telling Miss Wright that Tiny Tim was always good for a bucketful, so far as she was concerned.

Imogene was sound asleep, and there were faint sobs in her breathing.

"Before we begin, Swanson," said Mr. Bingle, addressing the furnace-man, "you might put a couple of fresh Yule logs on the fire. Pick out good, big ones while you're about it."

"Will dose har fance-post do, Mast' Bingle?" whispered Swanson hoarsely, as he held up a chunk of firewood for approval.

The fire was crackling merrily by the time the servants were seated and Diggs had turned out the ceiling and wall lights from the switch, leaving the big room in semi-darkness. The blazing logs sent a bright, nickering glow into the faces of Mr. Bingle's auditors. He bowed gravely and took up the cherished well-worn book.

"My dear friends, we have once more reached a milestone in the march of Christendom. As you know, children, it comes but once a year, like New Year's and Fourth of July."

"Hear! Hear!" volunteered three or four of the men-servants diffidently.

"We are all servants of the Lord whose anniversary we celebrate. We gather here about a warm fireside, with the historic yule log blazing—er—figuratively speaking, of course. These logs, naturally, are not historic. They—er—ahem! Ahem!" He floundered. "Still, we gather about them, just the same, warm and snug and full of good cheer. Outside, the night is cold and blustery. The wind howls around the—"

The door-bell jangled in the distance. Mr. Bingle hesitated for an instant and then went on:

"Howls around the corners with the fury of the wintry—ahem!—blast. And it snows. 'It snows, cries the schoolboy!' You remember the verses, children. You—See who's there, Diggs. Perhaps it is some neighbour come to wish us—and, Diggs, no matter who it is, ask him—or them—to come right in here. I'll—I'll wait a few minutes. Hurry along, please." Resuming his address he beamed upon the row of wriggling children. "We have before us eleven little ladies and gentlemen, all eager for the Christmas dawn. See the stockings? To-morrow morning you will find that Santy has filled them to the top. Next year Santy will come provided with gifts for twelve, an even dozen. How many are eleven and one, Reginald? Speak up. Eleven and one. Good! That's right, my lad. The year after he will bring gifts for fourteen. We shall avoid the unlucky number thirteen. Remember, children, that next Christmas you are to have a little brother. You—"

"I want a sister," shouted Wilberforce.

"Sh!" said four nurses at once.

"As for you, my faithful servitors, it will not be necessary for you to hang up your little stockings. Santy will find a way to—What is it, Diggs?"

"If you please, sir, may I speak with you for a moment?" said Diggs mysteriously, from the doorway. He appeared to be under the strain of a not inconsiderable excitement.

Mr. Bingle hesitated. "If it's your grandmother who is ill, Diggs, I'm afraid—"

"It's a man, sir, who says he must see you at once," said Diggs, lowering his voice and sending a cautious glance over his shoulder.

"If he is seeking food or shelter, do not turn him away. Give freely from my purse and larder. It is Christmas Eve. We—"

"I'll step out and see him, Bingle," volunteered Mr. Force, with some alacrity. "Go ahead with the reading."

"He says he must see you, Mr. Bingle," said Diggs. "He isn't after halms, sir."

"Ask him to come in and hear the story. I've no doubt he would be benefitted—"

"Go and see what he wants, Thomas," said Mrs. Bingle. "It may be important. I am sure Mr. and Mrs. Force will not mind the delay. Will you?"

"Not at all," said Mrs. Force resignedly.

"I shan't mind, if the rest don't," added Mr. Force, turning an ironic eye upon the row of servants.

"Well, I'll just step out and see what it's all about," said Mr. Bingle reluctantly.

"Better see that the chap isn't a bomb-thrower, come to demand money of you, Bingle," said Force. Mr. Bingle waved his hand airily as he threaded his way among the chairs. "Does he look like a black-hander, Diggs?"

"No, sir," replied Diggs. Then he let the truth slip out. "He says he is from a detective agency, but I couldn't catch the name of it."

Mr. Bingle halted. "Detective agency, Diggs?"

"So he said, sir."

Flanders arose. "Perhaps you'd like to have me go with you, Mr. Bingle. I know most of these fellows. If I can be of any assistance—"

"Thank you, no," said Mr. Bingle nervously. "I—I think I'd better see him alone. Now, Mary, don't look frightened. I haven't the remotest idea what he wants, but as I haven't been up to anything—ahem! Keep your seat, Frederick!"

"I want to see a detective," pleaded Frederick. "Is he disguised, Diggs? Has he got on false whiskers? Please, daddy—"

"Maybe it's old Santy," cried Wilberforce in a voice that thrilled.

Mr. Bingle left a pleasant atmosphere of excitement behind him when he disappeared between the portieres. At once the company broke into eager, speculative whispers that soon grew to a perfect storm of shrill inquiry. Every one was guessing, and every one was guessing as loudly as possible in order to be heard above the clamour. It might have been observed that at least three or four of the servants shot furtive glances in the direction of the hall, and appeared to be anxious and uncomfortable.

While the excitement was at its height, Flanders deliberately planted himself at Miss Fairweather's elbow. She looked up into his face. Every vestige of colour had left her own. Her eyes were wide with alarm.

"Come with me, Amy," he said in a low tone. "I must have a word with you. Make believe that you are showing me the—the pictures. We can talk safely in that corner over there."

She arose without a word and followed him to a far corner of the room, where they would be quite free from interruption.

"Oh, Dick!" she murmured, in great distress.

"Do you know anything? Who is this detective? Has he come to—"

"Sh! Why, you're actually shivering! Here, sit down in the window seat—behind the curtain, dearest. What have you to be afraid of? You've done no wrong."

She sank down on the window seat. The thick lace curtain shielded her agitated face from the view of all inquiring eyes save those of the tall, eager young man who sat down beside her.

"They don't know that I was on the stage, Dick. They wouldn't have me here if they knew that I've been an actress. I—Oh, I hope—"

"Brace up, darling! This detective isn't interested in you. What motive could he have in looking you up? Bingle is in the dark, so it's evident he hasn't hired any one to investigate your past. Forget it! That isn't what I want to talk to you about. I've been half-crazy, dear, for the past eight months. Why did you run away without giving me a chance to square myself after that miserable night? Don't get up! I've found you and I'm determined to have it out with you, Amy. You've just got to hear what I have to say." His hand was upon her

arm, a firm restraining grasp that checked her attempt to escape. Undismayed by the look of scorn that leaped into her eyes, he leaned closer and spoke in quick agitated whispers.

Fully half an hour elapsed before Mr. Bingle returned to the room. His face was noticeably grey and pinched, and all of the ebullience of spirit had disappeared. His wife eyed him anxiously, apprehensively. Slowly, almost with an effort, he made his way to the reading-table, purposely avoiding the gaze of the inquiring assemblage. His hand shook perceptibly as he took up the book and cleared his throat—this time feebly and without the usual authority, it might have been observed.

"Anything wrong, Bingle?" inquired Force, regarding him curiously.

"Nothing, nothing at all," said Mr. Bingle, vainly affecting a smile that was meant to put every one at ease. "No crime has been committed, so don't be nervous, any of you. Just a little private matter of—of"—

His gaze went swiftly to the eager, uplifted face of little Kathleen, and he never completed the sentence. As he turned his face away, ostensibly to find his place in the book, his lower lip trembled, and a mist came over his eyes.

The dramatic enthusiasm with which he was wont to read the Dickens story was sadly lacking. He read lifelessly, uncertainly, and at times almost inaudibly. There was a queer huskiness in his voice that made it necessary for him to clear his throat frequently.

Under ordinary conditions, he would have observed the singular aloofness of Miss Fairweather and the reporter who was there by virtue of an assignment. They retained their somewhat sequestered position in the window seat, effectually screened by the curtains, and whispered softly to each other, utterly oblivious to the monotonous drone of the reader, quite in a little world of their own.

Flanders was pleading earnestly with the rigid-faced girl. Her cautious, infrequent responses were not of an encouraging nature, that was plain to be seen, but he too was obdurate. He held one of her slim hands in a grip that could not be broken, as she had discovered to her dismay. Mr. Bingle read on, ignorant of the little drama that went on under his very nose, so to speak, and those of his auditors who were not nodding their heads in frank drowsiness, were so completely wrapped up in extraneous thoughts concerning the visit of the detective that they had eyes for no one except the person who could explain the mystery.

Mr. Bingle's voice began to quaver much earlier in the story than usual. He was always moved to tears, but as a rule he was able to suppress them until along toward the end of the story. But now he was in distress from the beginning. He choked up completely, in a most uncalled-for manner and at singularly unexpected places. He managed to struggle through the first twenty or thirty pages, and then, seeing for himself that he was nearing the first of the weepy places and realising that he was sure to burst into tears if he continued, he deliberately closed the book, keeping his forefinger between the leaves, and announced in a strained voice that he would skip over to the final chapter if the audience did not object. He gave no excuse. It is doubtful, however, if he was gratified by the profound sigh of relief that went up from the group of listeners.

At last, he came to the end of the story. He had no voice at all for the concluding paragraphs: a hoarse, grotesque whisper, that was all. When the servants had departed and the children were scampering off to bed, thrilled by promises of the morrow, Mr. Single's arm stole about his wife's shoulders and she was drawn suddenly, even violently close to his side. He avoided her puzzled, worried gaze and resolutely addressed himself to Mr. and Mrs. Force and Mr. Flanders. Miss Fairweather had disappeared.

"That man was a detective," said he, without preamble. "His agency was employed nearly a year ago to discover the whereabouts of a certain child, whose father, repenting a wrong perpetrated years ago, desires to do the right thing by his luckless offspring. After all these months, this detective has located the little girl. She is in this house. She is my favourite—and yours, Mary, God help us."

"Kathleen?" whispered Mrs. Bingle dully.

"Kathleen?" repeated Sydney Force, staring blankly at the little man.

"Yes," said Mr. Bingle, and sat down suddenly in a big arm chair, burying his face in his hands.

No one spoke for many minutes. Flanders had the grace to turn away from the group. He was an unusual type of newspaper reporter. Here was something that would make a splendid "story," and yet he was fine enough to turn his back upon the opportunity that lay open to him.

Mr. Force's hands were gripping the back of a chair so rigidly that the knuckles were white and gleaming.

"For a year, did you say, Bingle?" he questioned, steadying his voice with an effort.

"Almost a year," gulped the little man, looking up through streaming eyes. "Her mother died when Kathie was about a year old. The father never saw his child. He had deceived the woman. He cast her off and—married another, I take it, although I am a bit hazy. I was so upset that I—I scarcely remember what the man said. Now the—the father wants to find his child. He—he wants to give her a home—Oh, Lordy, Lordy! I can't bear the thought of it. Sh! Don't cry, Mary. Maybe he'll let us keep her. He is married. Perhaps he can't afford to acknowledge her as his child under the circumstances. I—I put it up to the detective. He actually grinned in my face and said he was quite positive his client would be as sensible as most men have to be in similar straits."

"Are you sure that Kathleen is the one he is looking for, Mr. Bingle?" inquired Mrs. Force. "They sometimes follow false clues, or something of the sort. I once heard of a detective who—"

"No such luck," groaned Mr. Bingle. "He has Kathie's history from the day she was born. There—there isn't any chance for a mistake. She is the one. Our eldest, our loveliest—Oh, Mary!"

Force shot an unmistakable look of alarm at the newspaper man who stood in the doorway, staring out into the hall.

"Do you know the mother's name, Bingle?" he inquired. His voice sounded so strange and unnatural that his wife glanced at him sharply.

"Yes. I know her real name. On the records at the hospital she was known as Mrs. Hinman. But, you see, she wasn't married. Her name was Glenn."

Sydney Force's face was bloodless.

CHAPTER VIII — THE AFFAIRS OF AMY AND DICK

The affairs of Amy Fairweather and Richard Flanders require explanation. When two good-looking young people meet as these two met, and betray such surprising emotion, it goes without saying that at least one episode in their joint history deserves the undivided attention of the onlooker, who, in this case, happens to be you, kind reader. It must be perfectly clear to you that Miss Fairweather and Mr. Flanders were, at one time in their lives, more than moderately interested in each other. That part of their story does not require elucidation. Indeed, only an intelligence of the most extraordinary denseness would demand the bald, matter-of-fact declaration that they had been in love with each other. What we are concerned about, therefore, is an episode of the early spring in the present year of our story.

It is quite simple, after all. We have only to go back a year to get to the bottom of the matter. Miss Fairweather and Mr. Flanders were fellow lodgers in a boarding-house not far removed from Times Square. She was playing a small part in one of the Broadway theatres and was known on the programme as Amy Colgate, the customary sop to "family feelings" causing her to abandon her own name during the neophytic period of her career. This was a temporary concession, however; she intended to make the family name famous as soon as she got a "part" that would give her a real chance. Flanders was on the newspaper, but his aspirations were quite as lofty as any one's: he was writing a play. He had already written two novels, both of which remained unpublished.

At the outset, his play was intended for Miss Barrymore, but after the second week of his acquaintance with the attractive Miss Colgate his ambitions proved fickle: he discarded Miss Barrymore and substituted Miss Colgate for the star part in the piece. Fortunately he had written but six or eight pages of the first act, so the transfer was not a deleterious undertaking. He could see no one else in the part; he could think of no one else as he dreamed of the play's success. Moreover, Miss Colgate was as pleased as Punch over this flattering tribute to her magnetism—for the part, as described, was one that would not "get over" unless created by an actress of pronounced magnetic appeal—and lost no time in falling deeply in love with the manly playwright. They were serious-minded, ambitious young people. It is of small consequence that he was an untried, unskilled dramatist, and of equally small moment that she was little more than an amateur. They saw a bright light ahead and trudged steadily toward it, prodding themselves—and each other—with all the vain-glorious artifices known to and employed by the young and undefeated. The young man's dramatic aspirations were somewhat retarded, however, by the fact that he was so desperately enamoured that he couldn't confine his thoughts to the play; so the growth of the first act was slow and tortuous. Under other conditions he would have despaired of ever completing the thing. As it was, his despair was of an entirely different character and had to do with the belief that Miss Colgate loved some one else instead of him.

But even doubt and uncertainty possess virtue in that they often lead to rashness, sometimes folly. In this case, Mr. Flanders proposed marriage, albeit he couldn't, for the life of him, see how he was going to manage on a salary of twenty-five dollars a week. That was the rashness of it. Miss Colgate attended to the folly. She said she would marry him if it meant starvation. So there you are.

After that, ambition revived and worked smoothly, rapidly. In the middle of the second act, however, the play failed—that is to say, the play in which Miss Colgate was appearing on Broadway. (It failed in the middle of Mr. Flanders' second act, lest I appear ambiguous.) The young actress found herself out of employment and without much prospect of getting an engagement at that season of the year—a bad year it was, too, if you will remember what theatrical people had to say about it. Now, she was not obliged to work for a living. She could have gone back to her family in Connecticut. But she was not made of that sort of stuff. She could have gone back home and married the most desirable young or old man in the town. She could have given up the stage and devoted herself to the teaching of music, French or wood-carving, in which pursuits she was far less of an amateur than at play-acting. But she was a valiant, undaunted little warrior. She announced that she was ready to do anything that offered, even chorus-work.

And one evening she told him that she had found a place in the chorus of a "road show." She tried to hide her mortification under a somewhat quivering jauntiness, but Mr. Flanders went rudely to the bottom of the matter. She argued that she could change her name and no one would be the wiser. She would positively refuse to appear in tights. Then came the episode. Mr. Flanders flew into a scornful rage. He said a great many things that he was afterwards ashamed to recall. Among other things, he said he'd be hanged if he'd

marry a chorus-girl; as for tights, she wouldn't have any choice in the matter, once the manager set his mind to it. She had not been in love with him long enough to submit to bullying, so she sent him about his business. Moreover, she coldly informed him that their engagement was over and that she never wanted to see his face again.

Inasmuch as it would be quite impossible to remain in the same boarding-house without seeing his face once in a while, she moved out the very next day.

The "road" was not what she had expected, nor was the life of a chorus-girl as simple as it had seemed from her virtuous point of view. Before the first two weeks were over, she deserted the company, disillusioned, mortified. It HAD come to a matter of tights.

She returned to New York and bravely resumed her visits to managerial offices and to the lairs of agents, in quest of an engagement not quite so incompatible with her sense of delicacy and refinement as the one she had just abandoned. But there was nothing to be had. More than once she was tempted to write to Flanders, begging him to forgive her and to forget, if he could, the silly mistake she had made. But love and loneliness were no match for the pride that was a part of her nature. She resolutely put away the temptation to do the perfectly sensible thing, and, woman-like, fortified herself against surrender by running away from danger.

She had heard of the Bingles through a woman playwright who wanted to dramatize the Bingle enterprise. Nothing, said this enthusiastic person, could be more adorable than a play based on the Bingle methods of acquiring a family.

One day, in Central Park, she saw Mr. Bingle and seven of the children. He looked happy but inadequate. A grinning park policeman enlightened her as to the identity of the bewildered little man. A single glance was all that was necessary to convince her that Mr. Bingle was having his hands full.

He had lost all control of the little ruffians. (The park policeman was the first to call them ruffians, so I may be pardoned.) They insisted on playing games that Mr. Bingle couldn't play, and he was beginning to look worried. Time and again he tried to herd them into the big station 'bus in which he had brought them over from Seafood (the Bingle estate), and always with so little success that he was getting hot and tired—and farther away from the conveyance all the time. Still he smiled cheerfully and gave no sign of losing his temper.

They were frolicking in the neighbourhood of the lake at the north end of the park, and Miss Colgate was sitting on one of the benches not far removed from the scene of activity. She began to feel sorry for the little foster-father. He was having a time of it! The first thing he knew, one of the little insurgents would tumble into the lake and—well, she couldn't imagine anything more droll than Mr. Bingle venturing into the water as a rescuer. At last, moved by an impulse that afterwards took its place as the psychic capstone in her career, she arose and resolutely went to his relief. He was panting and perspiring, for the spring day was warm.

"May I help you to gather them up?" she inquired.

Now, Mr. Bingle was not accustomed to seeing girls as pretty as the one who accosted him so amiably. At first, he said no, he was very much obliged, he guessed he could manage 'em, thank you. He wasn't quite sure that it was right for him to "take up" with a strange and beautiful young woman in a public park. One never could tell about these well-dressed women who sit on park benches, and yet appear to be perfectly free from tuberculosis. But Miss Colgate insisted, and Mr. Bingle, taking a second look at her, said he would be grateful if she'd stay and watch the littlest ones while he rounded up the big ones. She shook her head, smiling, and gently ordered him to sit down and cool off a bit while she gathered in the recalcitrants.

"You look so hot and tired," she said, and her smile was so frankly sympathetic, so commanding in its sweetness, that Mr. Bingle promptly sat down and said that it beat all how hot the weather was for early May. Perhaps they WOULD come for her, he went on shyly; if she didn't mind calling Frederick, that would be sufficient. Frederick was the rebel leader. He ought to be spanked. She smiled again, and Mr. Bingle said to himself that he'd never seen anything so nice. As she walked away, bent on rounding-up the three boys and Kathleen, he was impressed by the slim, graceful figure and the manner in which she carried herself. Nothing ordinary or common about THAT girl, said he; nothing bold or immodest. Out of the goodness of her heart she had proffered assistance, as any gently born person would have done. His heart warmed toward her. It wasn't often that one encountered a pretty girl who was considerate, sweet-natured and polite to her elders, especially in New York City. He almost forgot Henrietta and Guinevere in his contemplation of this extraordinary phenomenon. Indeed, Henrietta's blubberings went quite unnoticed for some little time, and it was not until Guinevere sent up a sympathetic howl that he remembered the "littlest ones" and hastily took them upon his knees, dropping his hat in his haste.

He was considerably amazed by the swiftness with which his ally "rounded-up" the five roisterers. She went about it sweetly, even gaily, yet with a certain authority that had an instant effect on the youngsters. Almost before he knew what had happened, she was approaching him with the flushed, mischievous "kiddies" in tow. They were staring at the strange, beautiful young lady with wide-open, fascinated eyes. They were abashed, puzzled; meek with wonder. When she extended her hands to Kathleen and Marie Louise, they came to her shyly and then, without so much as a glance at the three boys, she calmly led them back to the marvelling little millionaire. It was a crafty way of bringing the boys, to time. Their curiosity, cupidity, envy—what you will—brought them scurrying up to the group, and not a face was missing from the ranks when she stopped before Mr. Bingle and said:

"And now that we have them, bound hand and foot, what are we to do with them? Put them in a dungeon and feed them on bread and water?"

"I don't see how you did it," said Mr. Bingle. "It was really quite wonderful. Perhaps it was because you are

so very pretty. I think, if you don't object, I'll put 'em in the 'bus, take 'em home and feed them on milk and honey and jam. Thank you, thank you ever so much."

"I love children and I believe that children like me," said she, her fingers gently caressing Kathleen's brown, tumbled locks. "That explains it, I am sure. Now, boys, run on ahead and tell the chauffeur your father is coming. And, listen to me: your father is tired and very, very warm. You must not cause him any more distress. I am sure you won't, will you?"

Then she wiped the tears from the cheeks of the "littlest ones," straightened their bonnets, and, in the end, proposed that she should carry one of them to the 'bus.

Down in her heart, she was coddling the wild, improbable hope that Mr. Richard Flanders might be somewhere in the neighbourhood, watching her with proud, but remorseful eyes!

Mr. Bingle turned to her after the children were safely stowed away in the 'bus and ready for the long ride home. He had his hat in his hand and he bowed very low, with the old-fashioned courtesy that time and environment had failed to modify.

"My dear young lady, you remind me of the fairy princess that I knew so well as a boy. You spring up out of the ground and—Whist! you perform deeds of magic and enchantment. I am sorry that we cannot have you hovering about us forevermore. We are all enchanted."

"Thank you," she said, with her gay smile. "Do you still believe in fairies?"

"I do," said he.

"And witches?"

"Absolutely," said he, with boyish enthusiasm. "And wizards, too—and, I'm ashamed to admit it—ghosts. Good-bye. Thank you for the spell you've cast upon us. I think it has done all of us a lot of good. I undertook a task that was beyond me, bringing these youngsters here for a lark. But you see, I had promised them the trip, and I don't believe in going back on a promise. The governess left us yesterday, most unexpectedly. She said her sister was ill, but—well, I shouldn't say anything unkind. Perhaps her sister really is ill. So, then, I brought them all by myself. Mrs. Bingle is in the city looking for a new governess. She—"

"Would you consider—" began Miss Colgate eagerly, and then flushed to the roots of her hair, What had come over her? Was she on the point of applying for a position as governess in a family of—But why not? Why not? She was tired, discouraged, and a failure at the work she had tried so hard to perform.

"Yes?"

She laughed confusedly. "It was nothing, Mr. Bingle, nothing at all. Good-bye. I hope you'll get them home safe, sound and—intact. They are dears."

Mr. Bingle surveyed his brood. Every eye was riveted on the face of the strange, lovely lady, and in each was the look of complete subjugation.

"You've hypnotised them," said he, wonderingly.

She looked away. After a moment's hesitation, she cast the die—urged by the queerest impulse that had ever come over her.

"Would you consider me, Mr. Bingle, for the position that has just been given up by the—the woman whose sister is ill?"

He heard, but he could not believe his ears. "I—I beg pardon?" he said.

She faced him, now resolute and eager. "I am not a fairy princess, I am not a witch. As a matter of fact, I am a very commonplace person who is obliged to earn a living one way or another, and it isn't always a simple thing to do. Tip to this instant, I hadn't the remotest thought of becoming a governess. I don't know what came over me unless it was loneliness, thinking of my little brothers and sisters at home. When I first saw you and the children nothing was farther from my mind than the thought that has just come into it. I DO love children. I want work, Mr. Bingle. I am self-supporting. No matter what may have been my ambition up to five minutes ago, I am content to put it aside, I am willing to undertake—"

"My dear young lady," broke in Mr. Bingle, who had been slow to grasp her meaning and even slower to recover from his stupefaction; "you—you really have knocked me silly. I hadn't the faintest idea—"

"May I apply to Mrs. Bingle to-morrow?" she asked nervously, interrupting him with unintentional rudeness. "I have no references to give as a governess, but I—I think I can convince Mrs. Bingle that I would be quite capable. Do you think there would be a chance for me if I—"

Mr. Bingle broke in once more, this time with acute enthusiasm. "Don't wait till to-morrow," he exclaimed. "Do it to-day! To-morrow may be too late. Harkins, drive to the nearest public telephone. We will call up the intelligence office and see if Mrs. Bingle has been there yet. If she hasn't—"

"Is she looking for a governess in an intelligence office?" cried Miss Colgate, in dismay.

"Certainly! Where else? Oh, I see," he made haste to add, sensing her expression; "it isn't the place to find high-grade governesses, eh? Well, all the better for us! We'll head her off. Climb in, Miss—Miss—"

"Fairweather, Mr. Bingle," said she, and it was the first time in two years that she had called herself by that name. Of all the millions of human beings in New York, but one knew that her name was Fairweather—and

she had quarrelled with him. She had told Dick Flanders. He was the kind of man that women tell things to without reserve or without considering the consequences.

"Move up, Frederick," commanded Mr. Bingle. "Make room for Miss Fairweather. She's going to be the new governess. Lively, Harkins! The nearest telephone. No! Not that saloon over there. Tackle an apartment house. Well, well, Miss Fairweather, this is just like a fairy story after all. I told you that I believed in fairies, didn't I?"

And that is how Miss Fairweather came to be governess in the Bingle family, a position for which she was suited by nature but for which she was utterly unqualified when it came to experience. And that is how she managed to disappear so completely that Richard Flanders, love-sick and repentant, could find no trace of her. There were days—and long, long nights—when she ate her heart out in the hunger for him, but she could not bring herself to the point where starvation made it imperative for her to go begging. There was always before her the distressing fear that he might have ceased, to care for her—ay, that he might have gone so far as to transfer his affections to some one else as the result of her stupid notions concerning independence.

No doubt he was going his way without a thought of her, pleasantly forgetting her or, at best, merely remembering her as one who had proved a brief but satisfactory blessing, as many a passing sweetheart has been to a man in his flight through time. No, she argued in conflict with her inclinations, it was not to be thought of, this senseless desire to go back and begin all over again. Everything was over between them. She had made her choice on that never-to-be-forgotten night and she had gone out of his life. There was no use bewailing the fact that she was in the wrong and that his contentions had been justified. She had made her bed, and she would lie in it. The fault was with her, not with him—and yet she could never quite forgive him for being right! She couldn't forget how angry she was before she realised that his judgment was better than hers. As a matter of fact, she couldn't help being a perfectly normal woman: she enjoyed misery.

It must be recorded that she imposed upon the Bingles in one respect: she did not mention the fact that she was or had been an actress. On the other hand, she did not deceive them as to her lack of experience as a teacher of young children. She confessed that the work was new to her, but she confessed it so naively, so frankly, that they were charmed into overlooking the most important detail in the matter of engaging a governess. In fact, Mr. Bingle very properly said to his wife that as she was expected to devote her time to children who had no pedigree, "it wouldn't be along the line of common sense to exact references from her." Besides, said he, she was so sure to be satisfactory. It was only necessary to look into her honest eyes to feel sure about that. And Mrs. Bingle, who was just then in the throes of adopting Imogene, agreed to everything that Imogene's prospective father had to say.

In the meantime, Mr. Flanders had remained doggedly constant. He had surrendered, as a man will, to reason, and had set about to find the girl of his choice, determined to make his peace with her. But nowhere was she to be found. He laid aside the unfinished play. What was the sense of writing a play if there was no one to play the principal part? He was disconsolate. He cursed himself for the stupid thing he had done. He had wrecked his life, that's what he had done—poor fool!

And then came the unexpected meeting in the home of Thomas Singleton Bingle, and the detached scene in the shelter of the window-nook.

Mr. Bingle experienced a second shock just before Flanders darted out of the house to jump into the waiting automobile which was to take him to the station for the 10:17 train.

"Well, good night, Mr. Bingle," cried the tall young reporter, sticking his head through the library door in response to the host's invitation to "come in." "Thank you for the greatest evening of my life. It's just like a fairy story. Oh, yes, before I forget it: I want to tell you how much I enjoyed 'The Chimes.' I never knew that Dickens could write anything so—"

"'The Chimes'?" cried Mr. Bingle, abruptly leaving the little group at the fireplace and bearing down upon the unconscious offender. "What do you mean? It wasn't 'The Chimes' that I—"

"Certainly not," exclaimed Mr. Flanders, glibly. "Of course, it wasn't. I never think of 'The Christmas Carol' without first thinking of 'The Chimes.' Thank you for getting the automobile out to take me to—"

"No trouble at all, my dear fellow," cried Mr. Bingle, shaking hands with the departing guest. "I wish you a Merry Christmas."

Flanders' face was glowing. "It will be the merriest Christmas I've ever known, Mr. Bingle," he said, his voice husky with emotion. "I owe it to you, too. By Jove, sir, I believe I am the happiest man in all the world." He almost shook the little man's arm out of its socket.

Mr. Bingle's smile was meant to be beaming. He made a valiant effort to rise above the catastrophe that was to make his Christmas the most miserable he had ever known.

"Come to see us every Christmas Eve, my boy, if it puts you in such good spirits to see the—the kiddies—" his voice quavered a little—"and to hear the 'Carol.' You will always find the latchstring out."

"No other Christmas Eve will be as glorious as this one, sir," said Dick, gently dragging his host into the hall and lowering his voice to a thrilling undertone. "Not in a million years. Why, it is positively bewildering. I wonder if I'm awake. Is it really true? I—I can't believe that it really happened. Take a good, long look at me, please. You DO see me, don't you? I am really standing here in your house—"

"What in the world are you talking about?" gasped Mr. Bingle, drawing back a step or two. Mr. Flanders grabbed him by the arm. "Ouch!"

"I beg pardon, sir—I didn't mean to be rough," cried Flanders. "I'm so excited I don't know what I'm doing,

that's all. A man may be excused for a lot of brainstorm antics when he's going to be married again. It—"

"Married again? I thought you said you'd never—"

"What I mean is this: I was going to be married once and now I'm going to be married again. See? Oh, you know what I mean. I'm just driveling—simply driveling with joy. We fixed it all up fifteen minutes after we got together. You might congratulate me, Mr. Bingle."

"God bless my soul! Congratulate you on what?"

"I'm going to marry your governess."

CHAPTER IX — THE MAN CALLED HINMAN

Bright and early on Christmas morning, Mr. Sydney Force walked slowly, even irresolutely up the broad avenue leading to Mr. Bingle's stupendous door-step. The snow had been cleared off of the narrow footpath, but the president of the great city bank was so deeply engrossed that he failed to take advantage of this singular demonstration of worthiness on the part of Edgecomb and his assistants so soon after the break of dawn. As a matter of fact, he had forgotten that it was Christmas morning. He walked in the middle of the roadway, in four inches of snow, and kept his gaze fixed rather intently on the big house at the top of the avenue.

Mr. Force had not slept well. Indeed, he had not slept at all. The shock he had received early in the evening was of the kind that shatters one's peace of mind to a degree but little short of calamitous. A plunge into ice-cold water would have failed to produce the deadly chill that crept over him when he heard the name of Glenn. How he succeeded in controlling himself so well that his profound agitation escaped the attention of the others, he could not explain. He was amazed to find that he had managed it so well. For, it must be confessed, Mr. Force's habitual equanimity had undergone a strain that came so near to resulting in a collapse that only a miracle—(it may have taken the form of stupefaction, or a kindly paralysis)—only a miracle could have kept him from betraying the one great secret of his life.

Ordinarily, he would have put off calling on the Bingles for a month or six weeks, being that scornful of social amenities; but he could hardly wait for the approach of sunrise to be on his way to Seafood on this brilliant Christmas morning. It was not a brilliant, shimmering day for him, however. He saw nothing beautiful in the steel-blue sky: to him it was a drab, unlovely pall. He saw no beauty in the snow-clad foliage, no splendour in the bejewelled tree-tops, no purity in the veil of white that lay upon the face of the earth. He saw only himself, and he was a drear, bleak thing as viewed introspectively.

Nor is it to be taken for granted that Mr. Bingle slept well on this night before Christmas. Neither he nor his wife went to bed until far along in the wee sma' hours. The great house was as still as the grave, save for the occasional crack of shrinking woodwork and the rattle of dislodged icicles on the window-ledges outside. The wind had died away. It seemed that all nature, respecting their mood, had hushed its every noise in order that they might think, and think, and think on without hope or a single sign of promise in this time of despair.

They were to lose Kathleen. The man had been somewhat vague about it, but the situation was clear to them, even though it was not so to him. Their claim to the child—the one they loved best of all—was no longer undivided. A real father had turned up to assert his rights. They might dispute his claim and make the affair so awkward and so unpleasant for him that he would withdraw, but what would be their gain? The man existed. He was the real father. Kathleen was the flesh and blood of this tardy penitent, this betrayer of women, this coward. Never again, so long as she lived, could she be looked upon as theirs. Even though she remained with them, and in perfect contentment, there would still be the sinister shadow lying across the path—the shadow of a man hiding, of a man who dared not come out into the open but whose everlasting presence was a threat.

They did not know this man, they did not know whether he was a blackguard or a gentleman. He was a destroyer; that much they knew. He had wrecked a human life. The detective had declared to Mr. Bingle that his client was a man of means, married, and eminently respectable, but then a detective's idea of respectability is not always a safe one to go by. Every man is respectable until some one is hired to prove that he isn't.

When Mr. Force rang the front door-bell, Mr. and Mrs. Bingle were seated before the fire in the library. Kathleen sat upon the former's knee. The rest of the children had been sent off to the huge playroom on the top floor, and their distant shrieks, muffled by the thicknesses of many doors and walls, came faintly down to the fireside. With the subdued, even refined jingle of the door-bell, the two Bingles straightened up in their chairs and looked into each other's eyes, suddenly apprehensive. Who could be calling on them at such an early hour? Was it some one in connection with this unhappy business? Could it be possible that they had come to take Kathleen away so soon?

"Better run upstairs, now, Kathie," said Mr. Bingle, abruptly. "Skedaddle! Go up the back way, dear." He thought of the back-stairs just in time. It wouldn't do for her to encounter the strange, perhaps unfeeling emissaries in the main hall. No telling what they might do. They might even take forcible possession of her

and be off before help could be summoned.

"I want to stay here with you, daddy," protested Kathleen, resolutely clinging to her perch on his knee—and was not to be dislodged. Before Mr. Bingle could utter another word, Diggs appeared in the door and announced Mr. Force. Instantly Kathleen's manner changed. She released her grip on Mr. Bingle's arm and slid to the floor. "Oh, I hate him! I don't want to see him."

"Kathie!" cried Mrs. Bingle, distressed. "You should not say such things. Mr. Force is very nice to you. He likes you—"

"He gives me a pain," said Kathleen succinctly.

"Good heavens!" gasped Mr. Bingle. "Where did you learn such language as that?"

"It isn't language, daddy," said Kathie. "It's just slang. Everybody uses it. Don't people give you a pain sometimes?"

"Never!" said he. "I don't believe in slang," he added, as if to fortify himself against a conviction. "You needn't go, deary. Stay and see Mr. Force."

"I don't want to see him. I want to see Fairy. Oh, daddy, what are you going to let her get married for? I know Freddie will commit suicide if she marries that old Flanders."

"Freddie? What business is it of his?"

"I mustn't tell," she said, suddenly realising that she had been on the point of betraying a grave secret. An instant later she was off like the wind, whisking out of one door as Mr. Force entered by the other.

"Dear me, dear me," sighed Mr. Bingle, staring at his wife helplessly; "what do you suppose has happened to Frederick? A boy of his age talking of suicide is—Oh, good morning, Mr. Force. Merry Christmas! 'Pon my word, you're an early bird. Come up to the fire. You look half frozen. Why, by George, your teeth are chattering. Diggs! Throw on a couple of logs, will you, and get the whiskey. We keep it for medicinal purposes and—"

"Not for me," broke in Mr. Force hastily. "Not a thing to drink, old man. I'm quite all right. It is a bit snappy outside. Good morning, Mrs. Bingle. How are you feeling since the—I beg your pardon, Bingle, I really don't want a drink. Silly of me to shiver like this. You'd think I had a chill, wouldn't you? But I'll be all right in a minute or two."

He stood with his back to the blazing logs. His teeth were chattering, but not because of the cold. Every nerve in his body was on edge; his physical being was merely responding to the turmoil that filled his brain. Could they have seen his hands, clasped behind his back, they might have wondered why the fingers were locked together in a grip so fierce that the cords stood out in ridges on his wrists.

"You don't know what you miss, not having children about you on Christmas morning," said Mr. Bingle, planting his small figure alongside that of the tall man and attempting to spread his coat tails, an utter impossibility in view of the fact that he had no tails to spread, being incased in a dressing gown that reached almost to his heels when he stood erect but unmistakably touched the floor if he permitted his dignity to sag in the least—and he was having some difficulty in maintaining his dignity on this doleful morning, it may be said. "It would have done your heart good, Force, if you could have been here this morning—say at half-past six—and seen the circus we had. Well, sir, it was—"

"Half-past six? My dear man, you don't mean to say those little rascals got you out of bed at that ungodly hour. Why, I would have—"

"Just the other way 'round," said Mr. Bingle, sheepishly. "We had to fairly yank 'em out of bed. We are the rascals, Force—Mary and I. We couldn't wait, don't you see? But, of course, you don't see. You couldn't see unless you'd been counting on Christmas morning for months. You—But, what's the matter, Force? 'Pon my word, you DO need a bracer. Mary, dear, won't you see if—"

"See here, Bingle," blurted out Mr. Force, in desperation, "I want a few words with you alone. It is—imperative. Hope you will excuse me, Mrs. Bingle. I'm a bit upset—yes, considerably upset—over something that has come up in the—er—that is to say, quite recently. I—I want your husband's advice on—on a matter of grave importance."

The Bingles stared at him for a moment in speechless concern. Then Mr. Bingle managed to give expression to the fear that entered his heart as Force concluded his amazing remarks.

"Anything—anything wrong at the bank?" he inquired, swallowing hard. Was the man about to tell him that the bank—the great bank—was going under, that there had been defalcations, that—but even as he pictured the collapse of the bank there shot into his brain another and still more ghastly thought: had the Supreme Court decided against him in the long-fought case of Hooper et al vs. Bingle?

"Certainly NOT," exclaimed Mr. Force, with sudden irascibility. His nerves WERE at a high tension, there was no denying that. "Nothing whatever to do with the bank, sir. What the dev—what could have put such a thought into your head, Bingle?"

"You looked so—so blasted serious," said Mr. Bingle, with surprising heat.

"Thomas!" cried his wife, aghast.

"Beg pardon, Force," muttered Mr. Bingle, very much ashamed of himself. "I didn't mean to be profane. I guess I'm a little nervous myself."

"Can't I look serious without putting the bank on its last legs?" demanded Mr. Force, glaring.

"Certainly," Mr. Bingle made haste to assure him. "Look as serious as you please, Force. I know it can't hurt the bank. Don't go, Mary. Mr. Force and I will slip up to my study. We are less likely to be interrupted there."

"I trust Mrs. Force is well," said the lady of Seawood, and there was a note of anxiety in her voice. There HAD been a queer taste to the lobster a la Newburg. She remembered mentioning it to Mr. Bingle after the company had gone.

Mr. Force was guilty of an uneasy start. What was the woman driving at? What put it into her head to mention his wife? Why SHOULDN'T his wife be well?

"Quite well, thank you," he said at the end of a deep exhalation. Indeed he was quite without breath when he came to the "thank you." It would have been better if he hadn't tried to be so courteous. "Quite well," would have been sufficient. He realised, as he wheezily filled his lungs, that the "thank you" was entirely superfluous. In any event, it wasn't so important that he should have gone to the pains of upsetting his dignity in order to say it, no matter if it was the proper thing to say. He always hated anything that caused him to become red in the face.

"It's quite a relief," said Mrs. Bingle, brightening. It would have been dreadful if anything HAD been the matter with the lobster.

But Mr. Force knew nothing whatever about the suspected lobster and being in considerable doubt as to just how much of Miss Glenn's story the Bingles had learned, very naturally believed that the good lady was concerned about Mrs. Force's peace of mind rather than her state of health. He grew perfectly scarlet and mumbled something about his wife sleeping like a log, and then hastily followed Mr. Bingle out of the room.

"Troubles never come singly, do they, Force?" said Bingle as they mounted the stairs. He sighed deeply.

"So they say," said Force, also sighing. He was thinking of the interview that was to come. He was wondering just how he was going to explain things to Mr. Bingle.

"She isn't to be married till spring, but—Oh, well, I suppose I shouldn't complain." Mr. Force stopped stock-still on the stairs. "Mar-married?" he gasped. "Are you crazy?"

"Almost," said Mr. Bingle promptly. "If anything more happens, I'll be wholly so. Come in, Force. Now, old chap, what's on YOUR mind?" They had entered the study. Mr. Bingle faced his visitor after closing the door carefully behind him. "Out with it? Don't keep me in suspense. Has—has the case finally gone against me?"

"Who is going to be married in the spring?" demanded Force, wiping his brow.

"Miss Fairweather. I thought you knew."

"Oh, the devil! Of course not! What do I know about Miss Fairweather's affairs?"

"Flanders is the man. He's the lucky dog. An old affair, Force. Tremendously romantic story back of—"

"Needn't mind, Bingle. I don't care to hear it at present. I've got something a great deal more important to think about—dammit." He sat down heavily, and began fumbling for his cigar case. His forehead was dripping wet.

"It must be serious," said Mr. Bingle slowly, "or you wouldn't be swearing as you do, Force. I've never heard you swear before."

"It is serious. Of all the improbable, dime novel, hellish—But tell me, Bingle: how much do you know?"

"How much do I know about what?"

"Didn't that fellow blab anything to you last night?"

"Bla—blab?"

Force pointed to a chair. "Sit down. Are you sure no one can hear what I'm saying?"

"No one but yours truly," said Mr. Bingle, assuming a jauntiness he did not feel. He sat down, his back as stiff as a board.

His visitor leaned forward, his hands grasping the arms of the chair. "Well, I'll tell you something, Bingle, that will paralyse you. I—I didn't sleep a wink last night."

"That doesn't paralyse me. Neither did I—"

"This is no time to be funny, Bingle," said the other roughly. "Do you want to know what kept me awake all night, suffering the torments of the damned?"

"I do," responded Mr. Bingle, casting a quick glance at Mr. Force's jaw. He knew what it was to have a toothache.

"Well, it was that miserable business about—about Kathleen," said Force, a querulous note creeping into his voice. Mr. Bingle did not think it worth while to tell him that it was the same miserable business that kept him awake. "Now, I want the truth, Bingle. I want to be sure before I go ahead. It means a great deal to both of us. Was Kathleen's mother named Agnes Glenn?"

"It was," said Mr. Bingle, his eyes narrowing with the dawn of comprehension.

"Did you ever see her?"

"Once, just before she died."

"Describe her, Bingle."

"I can't. Good Lord, man, my eyes were blind with tears all the time I was—"

"Never mind," broke in Force. "We won't go into that, after all. Did she tell you anything about herself, her past life, her—her trouble?"

"Not a word. She was just about to enter the future life, Force. She hadn't much to say. Simply said that she hoped I'd be good to her little baby, that's all. Go on, man."

Mr. Force appeared to be lost in bleak abstraction. The curt command brought him out of it with a start.

"She went by the name of Mrs. Hinman, you say. No other name was mentioned, then or afterwards?"

"No."

"I can tell you something about her, Bingle. She lived for three years as the wife of a man who called himself Hinman. She wasn't his wife and that wasn't his name. She'd been on the stage. She went to live with this man as his wife. She was a good girl up to the time she met this man and fell in love with him. Her home was in the West. Her parents were respected, God-fearing people. They never knew that she—that she took up the life she led with—Hinman. Don't interrupt me, Bingle. If I don't get it out now, I'll never have the courage to try it again. No man was ever in such a desperate plight as I find myself in to-day. I'll come straight to the point. I am the man called Hinman and—this child you've got here with you is—mine."

He might have had the grace to exhibit some sign of shame or compunction, but he did nothing of the kind. He merely looked defiant, as if expecting Mr. Bingle to say something that he could resent.

But Mr. Bingle sank deeper into his chair, his chin buried, his eyes fastened in a sort of horror upon the face of the President of the great bank. He was incapable of uttering a word.

After a little while Force went on: "Blood will tell. All this accounts for the peculiar, inexplicable attraction that Kathleen has held for me. It is like a chapter out of an impossible novel. It—"

"And perhaps it accounts for the antipathy the poor child has for you," said Mr. Bingle, his voice a trifle shrill and uncertain. He did not take his gaze from the face of his visitor. "It now seems quite natural to me."

"Nonsense! The child had no means of knowing or even suspecting that I—"

"She had a birthright, Force. You can't take that away from her. The hatred for her father was born in her. God wouldn't let her hate the wrong man, you know."

Force got up from the chair, tremendously moved all of a sudden. A piteous, pleading look came into his eyes, and his face, once arrogant, was now haggard with despair.

"Bingle, I—I want you to help me. For God's sake, do what you can for me. Put into practice your beautiful Christmas Carol teachings. I—I want her. She must be made to understand that I love her, she must be made to feel that she is everything in the world to me. She looks like her mother. I thought it was fancy on my part, but now I know. Good God, little did I know where fate was going to lead me when I employed those fellows to find the child of Agnes Glenn. Little did I know that it would lead me to your door, Bingle."

Mr. Bingle arose. He was very pale and shaken, but he managed to control himself with remarkable fortitude.

"I have not told you that Agnes Glenn died of starvation—and carbolic acid," he said slowly. "Have your detectives told you that?"

"Carbolic acid?" whispered Force, with staring eyes. "Starvation? Good God, man—not that!"

"Yes—THAT! The Society found her when she was about gone. I was notified. We were looking for a child. This baby of hers was then about two years old. Mrs. Bingle and I went to the poor little flat where they had found her, after the neighbours had told the police of her plight. She was sick unto death. I said that we would care for her baby as if it were our own. Then I made arrangements to have her removed to a hospital at once. While we were out of the room, she took the carbolic acid. That's the way it happened, Force. That was the end of Agnes Glenn. She was a splendid character, Force. She did not betray you. She stuck by you to the very end. She protected you a great deal better than you protected her."

"See here, Bingle, I don't like your tone. It sounds preachy. You don't know anything about life, so you can't understand. That sort of thing is—well, it happens to a good many men and no one thinks much about it. I daresay that half the men you know have had just such an experience. It's part of the game here in New York. The girls understand it. They have no illusions. They know that these men cannot—or will not marry them. So, as you don't know anything about life as it's practised now-a-days, I'd advise you to go slow with your platitudes."

"All right, Force," said Mr. Bingle quietly. "If that's the way you feel about it, there's no use wasting time over nothing. I can't resist saying, however, that I didn't think it was in you to be so damned cold-blooded."

"Cold-blooded over what? The Glenn girl? Why, my dear man, that was nearly thirteen years ago. I am sorry that she had to go the way she did, but, good Lord, I can't go through life in sackcloth and ashes because she died—as a lot of people do, every year, you know. Hers was not an uncommon case. There are thousands just

like it happening every year. It's the price we all pay, men and women. There's no use being sentimental about a perfectly commonplace—I might even say legitimate—transaction. Agnes Glenn was like the rest of her kind: she had a very sharp pair of eyes open all of the time, you may be quite sure of that. I will say this for her, poor little devil: she was no blackmailer. She got down and out when the time came and she never squealed. That's more than most of 'em do, Bingle. 'Pon my soul, old man, I came here to see you this morning fairly trembling in my boots. I had an idea it was going to be a hard, nasty business talking it over with you, but—by George, it isn't. Now, we can get down to rock-bottom, Bingle. My plan was to—"

"Just a minute, please," interrupted Mr. Bingle, quite steadily. "Did you know that she was going to become a mother?"

"Certainly. You don't suppose I'd be looking for the child if I hadn't known she was to be born, do you? I'd be a nice fool, hiring detectives to unearth some other man's child, wouldn't I?"

"I must agree with you in one particular, Force; you are not finding it as hard as you thought it would be. I've never seen a man change more than you have in the past four minutes. You were shaking like a leaf when you came up here, and now—well, 'pon my soul, you are as brave as a lion. That certainly proves one thing."

"What's that?"

"That your conscience is clearing."

"Now, don't get it into your head, Bingle, that I'm not dreadfully sorry for the way that poor girl came to her end. She was really a brick. She deserved something better."

"Knowing that she was going to bear your child, Force, you have every reason, I am sure, to say that she was a brick. I, too, say that she deserved something better than being the mother of your child. What happened? Did she leave you of her own accord?"

"In a way, yes," said Mr. Force coolly. "In the customary way, of course. You see, I was about to be married, Bingle. When I explained the situation to her, she understood. She knew that I couldn't go on leading the sort of life I'd led before—"

"You hesitate, Force. Why couldn't you go on leading the life you'd led before? I should say it was quite as decent at one time as another."

"By Jove, Single, I hadn't the remotest idea you were so simple. I thought you at least knew SOMETHING about life. You amaze me. You are positively refreshing. Let me ask you, Bingle, would you have gone on leading the old life as—now, man to man, Bingle—would you?"

"Yes," said Mr. Bingle simply. A queer unexpected little smile flitted across his face—a wry smile, perhaps, but still a sign of humour. "You see, Force, I love children."

Mr. Force stared at him without comprehension. What the DEUCE had that to do with it?

"Oh, well, you can't understand, of course. To make it short, she was extremely reasonable. As a matter of fact, when I went up to see her the day after I had told her that I was to be married, hang me if she hadn't cleared out. No scene, no tears, no maledictions—just good, hard sense, Bingle, that's what it was. Not many of them would have been so decent about it. They usually make a bluff or something of the sort—money, you know, regular blackmail. But she didn't. She got out as quietly as a mouse, left no trace behind, no regrets, no complaints. Just a note saying she understood and wishing me luck. Rather fine, eh?"

"And you married right after that?"

"Six weeks afterward."

"And, of course, the present Mrs. Hinman knows that she's got a step-daughter?"

"The present Mrs. Hinman? Step-daughter? Good Lord, Bingle, I didn't know you had that much sarcasm in you. But that delicate remark of yours brings me back to the main issue—the matter I really came over to see you about. Naturally Mrs. Force knows nothing of—of this story I've been telling you. Now, what I want to get at is just this: how can we manage it about Kathleen without causing my wife to suspect? Put your mind to it, Bingle. How am I going to take the child under my wing, so to speak—take her into my home, without—"
"Wait! We'll look at it from another point of view. Suppose this detective of yours had found your child in the slums of New York, a street waif, a beggar—what then? Was it your intention to take her into your home in that case? Wasn't it your idea to provide a home for her in some respectable family, educate her, give her a secret allowance—and let it go at that? Can you honestly say to me, Force, that you intended to adopt her—as you are now thinking of doing?"

"Confound you, Bingle, isn't it only reasonable that I should have wanted to see the child before I made any definite plans for her future?"

"And now that you've seen her, and found her to be an adorable, lovely, even high-bred little creature, you think it's all right to take her into your own home—into her father's home?"

"Don't be hard on me, Bingle. Can't you understand that I've got a father's feelings after all? Can't you credit me with—"

"I'll go back a dozen years, Force, and ask you this question: did you make any effort to find this child and provide for her when she was a tiny baby? Did you do anything toward helping the mother in her time of trouble?"

"I tried to help her, Bingle, before God I did," cried Force earnestly. "I'm not such a rotter as all that. Agnes

wrote me a brief note when the baby was born. I happened to be off on my wedding-journey at the time. She said she merely wanted me to know that she had a little girl baby, and she went on to say that she'd starve before she'd take a penny from me for its support. That's the truth, Bingle, I swear it. When I got back from California, I tried to find Agnes. I wanted to do the right thing. I wanted to make the rest of her life easy and comfortable. But I couldn't find her."

"Did you hunt very long?"

"Long enough. A year or so later I heard that she was dead and that the child had been taken into a good home. There was nothing more for me to do. I dropped the matter. Then, recently, I began to think about the child. I began to want her. I engaged detectives to—"

"We know all about that," interrupted Mr. Bingle crisply. "And now I think we understand each other clearly, Force. You want Kathleen. So do I. There's only one way for you to get her, and that is to have Mrs. Force intercede for you. If your wife comes to me and says that SHE wants Kathleen, I'll give her up, even though it breaks my heart. What have you to say, Force?"

Force had lost all his lofty confidence. He was shaking again, as with the ague. This was not at all what he had bargained for. Who would have dreamed it of Bingle?

"Come now, Bingle, let us get together—"

Mr. Bingle interrupted him in no uncertain manner. He planted himself squarely in front of the big man—in fact, almost under his nose—and snarled:

"There's only one way for you to get Kathleen away from me, Force, and, darn you, I don't believe you'll undertake it. I shall give her up to you only on condition that you acknowledge her to be your daughter."

Force's jaw dropped. "Are you crazy, Bingle?" he gasped. He lifted his head the next instant in order to avoid the agitated finger that was being shaken under his nose.

"I don't intend that you shall say to the world that she is a child of shame. Not at all, sir! That would be the height of cruelty. But you've got to tell your wife the story you've told me if you want to take Kathleen away from me. She has got to know that the child is yours. You can't come any adoption dodge over me, Force. She's already adopted. She—"

"But, great heaven, man, my wife wouldn't have her in the house if—if she knew the truth about her," exploded the wretched Force. "No woman would stand for that."

"Then, by the eternal Moses," shouted Mr. Bingle, "she'll stay right here with Daddy and Mammy Bingle."

"But she's mine! If, as you say, she is the daughter of Agnes Glenn there isn't the slightest doubt that she belongs to me. I want to do the right thing by the child. I want to—"

"No use talking, Force. There's but one way."

"But, damn it all, I CAN'T go to my wife with all this! I can't—"

"Then Kathleen stays where she is," said Mr. Bingle firmly.

"Great Scott, man, what difference can it make to you? You can adopt another child to-morrow and fill her place. It isn't as if she were your own child. You don't know what it is to have a child of your own—your own flesh and blood. You CAN'T have a father's feeling for—"

"That will do, Force! You've said enough. The matter stands as it is. I'll tell you something else though before we part: I don't want you coming to this house annoying Agnes Glenn's child. I shall tell my wife all that you have told me and I'd advise you to tell yours, because I don't want you to put your foot inside my door until you can come here with Mrs. Force and humbly—you notice I say humbly?—implore us to give up that which belongs to us by virtue of that old law of salvage. I have already wished you a Merry Christmas, Mr. Force. Now permit me to bid you good morning."

He strode to the study door and opened it. His chin was high and his eyes were uncommonly bright. The hem of the dressing gown was farther from the floor than it had ever been during his ownership.

"I'll think it over, Bingle," muttered Mr. Force, very red in the face as he stalked past the little man and started down the stairs. "Good morning!"

"Good morning!"

CHAPTER X — MR. BINGLE THINKS OF BECOMING AN ANGEL

Flanders was a constant visitor at Seawood. In the fortnight immediately following the all-important

Christmas Eve, he appeared at the Bingle home on no less than ten separate occasions.

"I see that Mr. and Mrs. Force are sailing for Europe to-morrow," said he on his most recent visit.

"You don't say so!" exclaimed Mr. Bingle. "It's news to me."

There was every reason in the world why it should be news to him. He had neither seen nor heard from Force since that Christmas morning ultimatum. Purposely Mr. Bingle had stayed away from the bank, where, as its first vice-president, he was wont to spend much of his time looking after the comfort and advancement of the bookkeepers and clerks. He never overlooked an opportunity to help his old comrades in the "galleys." The board of directors were compelled to fight him constantly in order to keep him from putting through his plan to raise all wages, and there came near to being a catastrophe when they voted down his ridiculous scheme for providing fresh air for the lungs of the workers in the "pen." He made certain comparisons in which Russia was frequently mentioned and three or four of the directors afterwards referred to him as an "undignified little ass."

But now he hesitated about going to the bank. Somehow, he could not quite bring himself to the point of encountering the president of the bank in his capacity as head of the great and reputable concern. Never again would he be able to look upon Sydney Force as the right man for the place. He could only think of him as "a man called Hinman." Being a charitable soul, however, he stood ready to overlook much that was obnoxious in the character of the man if the time ever came when he openly revealed a contrite heart and a disposition to make amends in the proper way.

"To be gone for three months, I hear," said Flanders, looking at his watch. "I say, Mr. Bingle, doesn't it seem to you that the afternoon lessons are a little longer than usual? It's five o'clock. I have to be back in town before half-past six."

Mr. Bingle did not reply. A sudden cause for rejoicing had sprung up, occupying all of his attention. For three months, at least, he would be free to call Kathleen his own, and for three months he could go to the bank without being disturbed by the workings of his own conscience—for after all, a visible Mr. Force would be something of a tax upon his sense of honour.

Flanders waited for a moment and then began winding his watch.

"Ahem!" he coughed.

"News to me," repeated Mr. Bingle, rising above his reflections.

"By the way, sir, it may interest you to know that I'm getting along nicely with the play."

"Good! I'm glad to hear it. They tell me there is a great deal of money to be made out of a good play."

"There's a lot to be made out of a successful play. It doesn't follow that it has to be a good one, you know," said Flanders, didactically. "I am terribly keen on finishing it and getting a production as soon as possible. It means a—well, you know what it means to me, sir. These managers are a rum lot. Four-fifths of them don't know a good play from a bad one. I suppose I'll have a hard time placing it, because I don't believe it will be bad enough at the outset for them to accept it on sight. I understand it is a theory among managers that if a play is unspeakably bad they can hire some one else to rewrite it from beginning to end, and make a success of it. Adversely, if it should happen to be a good play, they don't know what it's all about and will have nothing to do with it."

"I'm sure your play will be a dandy," said Mr. Bingle warmly. "The plot is tip-top. Even a manager ought to be able to tell what it's all about."

"I can't tell you how much I appreciate your kindness in listening to all I've had to say about the piece. I'm afraid I've bored you terribly."

"Not at all, not at all. I've always been interested in the theatre. I'll confess to you that I've always wanted to know a real actor or actress. Now that our dear Miss Fairweather turns out to be—er—to have been on the stage for some time before she came to us, my interest in the profession is intensified. I really am quite thrilled over knowing a real, flesh and blood actress."

"We were a little afraid you wouldn't look at it so generously, Mr. Bingle."

"I know. Miss Fairweather has told us of her sleepless nights, worrying over the supposed deception. She might just as well have slept comfortably, Dick. She may have been a bad actress but she wasn't a bad woman, so no harm has come of it. Do you think she is qualified to play the leading part in your show? It strikes me that it is a very difficult part. I should think it would take some one like Modjeska or Julia Marlowe to play it properly. She is—" "My dear Mr. Bingle, Amy is just the woman for the part of Deborah. I am sure of it—positively. The trouble is that I'm afraid the managers will insist on putting in somebody with a name—like Ethel Barrymore or Nazimova or Maude Adams. That's going to be the rub, you see. Of course, I shall not give in to them. It is Amy Colgate or no one." He looked very rueful despite this firm and dauntless speech.

Mr. Bingle stared at the fire for a few minutes, his lips pursed in an expression that spoke of calculation.

"I have been thinking, Dick," he said at last; "thinking very seriously of taking a little flyer in the—er—theatrical business." Immediately upon uttering this astonishing remark he became very red in the face and shifted his gaze to the remote upper left-hand corner of the room.

Figuratively speaking, Mr. Flanders fell upon his neck. Inside of thirty minutes, Mr. Thomas Singleton Bingle was in a position to regard himself as a producing manager and Miss Amy Colgate, one of America's most promising young leading women, was on her way to become a star, to say nothing of the ascendency of

Richard Sheridan Flanders as a playwright. The difficulties were all swept away. A Broadway theatre was no longer a hope; it was a certainty. Mr. Bingle could buy all the "time" he wanted in any house along the Great White Way. It wouldn't be necessary to squabble over the relative drawing powers of Ethel Barrymore or Maude Adams, nor was it anybody's business who Amy Colgate was or where she came from—to use the words of the elated dramatist—and it didn't make a bit of difference whether the second week's "gross" was smaller than the first. Mr. Bingle was back of the play and that settled everything.

"I have great faith in the play," admitted Mr. Flanders, with becoming modesty.

"So have I," agreed Mr. Bingle enthusiastically. He had been dazed, yet vastly impressed by the unintelligible phraseology of the stage as it ran from the glib lips of the eager young man. He was flattered by Dick's assumption that he was perfectly familiar with the theatre from box office to "gridiron."

"And what's more," added the playwright, "I have faith in Amy."

By this time Mr. Bingle had unbounded faith in the young actress, and said so with considerable fervour. Whereupon, the jubilant author suggested that they send for Miss Fairweather at once and acquaint her with the glorious news. But Mr. Bingle shook his head.

"No, we can't do that," he said, looking at his watch. "Lessons are not over yet. Ten minutes left, I see. She's still a governess, Dick. One job at a time. The stage can wait."

Mr. Flanders sighed but smiled. Then, for no especial reason, he slapped Mr. Bingle heartily on the back and laughed aloud. He had no words to express his accumulative joy, so he laughed—and there were tears in his eyes.

"We'll have the best production that money can buy," said Mr. Bingle, swelling ever so slightly, after the manner of practised managers. "An all-star cast, and scenery by Sargent."

Later on, in the privacy of Miss Fairweather's schoolroom, the author and the star discussed the great sensation, and you may be surprised to learn that there were two sides to the discussion. Miss Fairweather was a sensible young woman, although amazingly beautiful, and she took a most extraordinary view of the situation.

"It isn't right, it isn't fair, it isn't playing the game, Dick," she protested, resolutely releasing herself from his embrace after listening for a long time, with throbbing heart, to his song of triumph. "Poor, dear Mr. Bingle! He is doing it out of the goodness of his heart. I am not a 'star' and I am not 'big' enough to be featured on Broadway. It would be a sin to let him put his money into a certain failure. I will not listen to you, Dick. Much as I love you, I still have a conscience and it will not allow me to sacrifice that simple soul. Why, don't you know what would happen? The critics would go into convulsions over the attempt to foist a silly little—"

"But, hang it all, Amy, you've got it in you to surprise New York," he cried earnestly. "I KNOW you can do it. Good Lord, I wouldn't take a nickel of Mr. Bingle's money if I didn't believe you could make good. Why, I've got a conscience too, much as the confession may surprise you."

"You are carried away by excitement, dear," she said softly, patting his cheek. "Just stop and think for a minute. Who am I? What have I ever done? Where have I—"

"But can't you see that the PLAY will be the making of you? The part is a wonder. You can't help creating a sensation with such a role to carry you along. Now, I'm not conceited—not a bit of it—but I do know this much: this play and this part are going to turn Broadway upside down."

"I could agree with you, dear, if you had some one like—oh, well, if you won't allow me to talk, I—please let me say it, Dick." His kisses had played havoc with her ideas. "Now, DO listen to me! It's all very well to SAY that I am qualified to turn Broadway—"

"Of course, we don't have to 'star' you at the outset," he interrupted, suddenly resorting to reason. "We needn't feature any one at the start. If you make good—and I know you will—why, the papers will see to it that your name goes up in electric lights over the little old front door. I daresay you're right in going slow, dear. I am so excited that I don't know whether I'm on my feet or my head. Now, let's talk it over calmly, sensibly, sanely. The upshot of the whole matter is this: my play is to be produced and you are to play the part of Deborah. We don't have to ask any beastly theatrical manager to read the play and we don't have to go down on our knees to get a job for you. Mr. Bingle is going into this thing with his eyes, open. He tells me he has faith in the play and in you, and as he happens to have a great many millions of dollars we ought to have faith in him. He will put the piece on in bang-up style. He realizes that there is a chance for failure, but so does every man who puts his money into a theatrical production. It is part of the game. It is up to you and me, Amy, to see that Mr. Bingle comes out of this thing a winner. He—"

"Wait, dear," she interrupted, her fair brow-clouding. "What of Mrs. Bingle? What will she say to this exploit of his?"

"Isn't he the master in his own house?" demanded Dick loftily. Still, a spark of dismay leaped into his eyes.

"He is a good man, Dick. He never permits himself to forget that she is its mistress. She will have something to say on the subject, you may be sure of that. I am not quite certain that she approves of the stage, and I've heard her say that actresses must be dreadful creatures if one believes all one hears about them smoking cigarettes and stealing young boys out of college. That was before she knew of my late lamented past. She has been perfectly lovely to me since, however, and I believe she is pleasantly excited by my 'gossip of the footlights,' as she calls it. She asked me the other day if it is true that chorus girls are more sinned against than sinning."'

"She did?" he cried, grinning. "And what did you say to that?"

"I said it was quite true," she said flatly.

"Well, it won't hurt her to think that they'd all be angels if they had their way about it. Now, let's get back to facts, dear. I've told Mr. Bingle that the play can be finished in a month or six weeks. He is for putting it on at once, but I don't believe it's good business to risk trying it out at the tail end of a very bad season. Things are bound to be better in the fall. My idea is to begin rehearsals late in the summer, play a couple of weeks in the tank towns to whip the thing into shape, and then go into New York some time in September. I'll begin getting a cast together this spring—none but the best, you understand—and that will give us a fair chance to go into Broadway with a corking production. Who do you consider to be the best leading man in the business to-day?"

Now, Mr. Bingle WAS having quite a time of it with the mistress of the house. In his new-found enthusiasm, he went to her at once with the word that he had decided to make a subrosa invasion of the mimic world to help out poor Flanders and to lay his hand against the prejudice and ignorance that seemed to be throttling the theatre.

She listened to him in speechless amazement, not quite sure of her ears.

"Of course, I sha'n't permit my name to be mentioned in the matter," he explained hastily. "That would be foolish, my dear. I shall have it clearly understood that Dick is backing the thing himself—on borrowed money, if needs be. Now, you see, Miss Colgate is a very clever young leading woman and—"

"Leading woman?" queried Mrs. Bingle, blinking. She had laid down her embroidery.

"Stage expression," said he loftily. "It means one who plays—er—plays leads. Ahem! That is to say, one who takes a principal part in the show. Miss Colgate is regarded as—"

It was then that Mrs. Bingle found her voice. After ten minutes, he succeeded in changing the subject. In all his acquaintance with his wife, he had never known her to be so scathing in the matter of words. She succeeded in causing him to feel extremely small and sheepish, for after all there was a world of justice and common sense in what she had to say concerning his inspired offer to engage in an enterprise that was as far from his understanding as the North Pole is from the South.

"But," he managed to insert, weakly, "it's only to help Dick out, to encourage genius, to—"

"Genius your Granny!" she exclaimed. "Don't you suppose that these regular theatre managers know genius when they see it?"

"Some of the best plays ever written have never seen the light of day," said he.

"Then how does any one know that they were good plays, if they never were played? Tell me that, Thomas Bingle."

"My dear, I am only repeating what history tells—"

"Well, answer this question then: what do you know about a play? Where do you get your wonderful knowledge of dramatic composition?"

"I think you will acknowledge that I know my Shakespeare pretty well," he said stiffly.

"But Richard Flanders isn't Shakespeare, Thomas. He's a reporter on a daily paper. Now, for goodness' sake, be sensible. Don't make a fool of yourself, dear. I know what's best for you. I—"

"I'm merely proposing to FINANCE the thing, Mary," he argued. "I'm doing it because I like Dick and I want him to succeed. I do not set myself up as a real manager. I'm what Dick calls an 'angel.' He says—"

"Well of all the—Do you mean to say that big, strapping fellow called you an angel?"

"Theatrical expression," he said.

"I shouldn't have been surprised if you'd said that Miss Fairweather called you an angel, but when it comes to—Oh, dear, what an awful thing for one man to call another!"

"Now, see here, Mary, you don't under—"

But she interrupted him again and he sat back limply to wait for an opportunity to get in the statement that he wanted most of all to make to her—which, when the time came for him to speak, was this:

"Well, well, dear, we'll let the matter rest for a day or two. I only thought you'd be interested in the experiment—you and I together, you know—something new and thrilling. We could have a lot of fun planning and secretly watching the play grow from day to day, and discussing costumes and scenery, and meeting real actors and actresses, and seeing the inside workings of the stage, and the green room—and the dressing-rooms, and all that, you know. It's something we used to talk about and wonder about, don't you remember? Remember how we used to sit up in the balcony and wonder what was really happening behind the—"

"Indeed I do!" she cried, and her eyes sparkled. "I've always wanted to have a peep behind the scenes and —" She had the good sense to stop before she compromised herself beyond recovery—but she looked extremely guilty.

"We'll talk it over to-morrow," said he. "It might be a relief to us to have something like this to occupy our thoughts in case we—we actually have to give Kathleen up to—By the way, Dick tells me he is sailing for Europe to-morrow. I wonder what it means."

"Mr. Force? Is she going with him?"

"Yes. For three months."

She reflected. "I'll tell you what it means, Tom," she said, leaning forward to lay her hand upon his knee. "He has told her everything."

"I don't believe it!"

"You mark my words, Tom. He has told her. They are going abroad to thrash it all out, that's the long and short of it."

"I wonder," said Mr. Bingle, wide-eyed and sober. Long afterward he came out of his reverie, and said: "I forgot to tell you that Swanson spoke to me yesterday about his sister's latest. I was awfully sorry for the poor chap, my dear. He seemed most anxious to see the child comfortably settled. His sister is a scrub-woman in the Metropolitan Life Building. It appears that she has been supplying families with children for the past ten or twelve years. Her husband is a most unfeeling brute. He says that the babies interfere with her work, and so she has to either give them up altogether or let the charity institutions take care of 'em for her. She goes on faithfully having 'em every year, and he goes on objecting to them. Swanson says she has managed to keep two of the older ones, but the last five or six she has been obliged to dispose of. Now, this new one is a bright little thing, he says—quite the flower of the flock. The woman's husband, it seems, has been out of work for seven years, and curses dreadfully about the child. The poor woman spoke to Swanson last week, asking him to see if we wouldn't take this one to raise. Swanson is sure that if we took it now we could be practically certain that it would never acquire the Swedish dialect. Of course—"

"You did not give him any encouragement, did you, Tom?" she cried sharply.

"Well, not—er—exactly," he said, looking away.

"Well, don't!" she exclaimed. "You know I have my heart set on having a French baby next."

"So you have," he said brightly. "I'll not forget it, my dear. As a matter of fact, I spoke to Rouquin, our foreign exchange manager, about it not long ago. He is quite French, my dear. He says there will be no trouble about it. It will be no trick at all to get a French baby. He says he already knows of a half-dozen actual descendants of the nobility, aged from one year up to ten, any one of which we can call our own by simply saying the word."

"He shall be called Richelieu. Dick for short," mused Mrs. Bingle.

"I thought we contemplated a girl," said he.

"It is always possible for us to change our minds, isn't it, Tom?"

"Certainly, my dear. We'll have a boy if you like. In a pinch, we can always change the gender at the last minute. Let's not give it another thought. I'll take it up with Rouquin the first time I'm in town. As for Swanson's sister's child—well, never mind. We sha'n't have it. He says its name is Ole at present but I suppose it could be called Richelieu if taken in time. Still that's neither here nor there. I've been thinking lately, my dear, that we ought to call our next boy Joseph—after his grand-uncle, don't you see. We owe that much to poor old Uncle Joe. Will you bear it in mind?"

"We COULD call the next one Josephine," she said.

He grinned. "Uncle Joe would turn over in his grave," said he.

That evening Mr. Force telephoned to Seawood.

"That you, Bingle?" came in rather muffled tones over the wire.

"Yes, this is Mr. Bingle."

"This is Force. We are sailing to-morrow for—"

"I can't hear you. Stand a little closer to the 'phone, please."

"I say we are sailing to-morrow for Europe. I'm standing close to it, Bingle. There's some one in the next booth. I can't yell, you know. I—"

"Where are you?"

"At the Plaza. I just wanted to tell you that I've fixed everything up with the detective agency. Not a word of that little matter will ever become public. Their lips have been sealed."

Mr. Bingle's heart swelled. "Do you mean that the matter is—er—permanently closed? Are you going to let me keep her?"

"Certainly NOT! What kind of a father do you think I am? Now I'll tell you what I want you to do. I want you to be particularly careful about that child while I'm away. Don't let anything happen to her. Take the best of care of her, Bingle. I shall hold you personally responsible. And see here, there's another point on which I want to be especially firm. I don't want her to be thrown with the other children any more than can be helped. I—What's that?"

"Nothing. Go on."

"Some of those kids of yours are not precisely what I would call thoroughbred. See what I mean? No reflection, of course, Bingle. I wouldn't say this if they were your own, understand, but—well, they're not, so

that's all there is to it. I shall have to ask you to engage a special companion for Kathleen, and I have arranged with a Madame Dufresne to—"

"See here, Force, I—"

"—to call on you this week. She is an excellent woman, refined and a lady of very good family in France. She is a friend of Rouquin's, in the bank. He knew the family in Paris. I took the liberty of telling him that you wanted to engage a French LADY to act as companion to your eldest child. I trust you will see to it that Kathleen is not allowed to romp about with the rest of those—er—the other children. This Madame Dufresne will—What's that?"

Mr. Bingle had recovered his breath. His voice was high and shrill with indignation.

"You will oblige me, Force, by permitting me to run my household as I see fit. If this Madame What's-her-name comes out here to see me, I shall pack her off to town again so quick her head will swim. We have brought Kathleen up as if she was our own child, sir, and I don't care to have any suggestions from you, sir. What's more, I must say—although it's against the rules of the telephone company—you are a damned fine man to be giving advice to me about the raising of your child. You—"

"Sh! For heaven's sake, Bingle, don't shout like that! Be careful, man!"

"Well, you leave Kathleen to me, that's all I've got to say. She shall play with the rest of the children as much as she likes, Force. So far as we are concerned, she's no better than the rest of them, understand that, sir. She isn't going to be contaminated a darned bit more than she was before you discovered that she was yours. And, as for that, she isn't yours until I see fit to give her up. Understand that, too. Now, if—wait a minute! I'm still talking. Now, if you think you can give me any pointers on how to bring up children I want to say to you that you are barking up the wrong tree. Don't you dare to send that woman here, and don't you dare to dictate to me how—"

"Wait a minute, wait a minute, Bingle," came Mr. Force's agitated voice through the transmitter. "For heaven's sake, don't fly off the handle like this. I—I thought I was acting for the best interests of every one. I was only trying to help you out in—"

"I don't need any help," said Mr. Bingle crisply. "Have you told your wife?"

"Yes, I have," said Force. "That's—that's why we are going abroad for a few months. She—"

"Mrs. Bingle was right, then. She usually is. What is her attitude?"

"Devilish bad, Bingle—devilish, that's all I can say. I can't talk to you over the telephone about it. I'll—I'll write you from Paris. I'm—I'm working with her, that's all I can do at present. I believe she'll come around all right in the end. I'm sure she will. I'll—I'll let you know."

"Says she won't have the brat in her house, is that it?" said Mr. Bingle, with a queer rasp in his voice.

"I can't talk to you over the telephone. Didn't you hear me say so a minute ago?"

"You can say yes or no, can't you?"

"She's pretty much upset over the business."

"Speak up! I can't hear you."

"I'll drop you a line in the morning. Now, Bingle, you will take good care of the child, won't you. She—"

"I shall take good care of all of them, Force."

"And now about this Madame Du—"

"She is out of the question, Force. Good night!"

"Just as you say, old man. I sha'n't insist if you are opposed to—"

"Good night!"

"But I will feel a great deal easier in my mind if she isn't allowed to come in contact with the rest—"

Mr. Bingle hung up the receiver.

CHAPTER XI — A TIMELY LESSON IN LOVE

The Forces returned from Europe late in February. They cut their visit short because Mr. Force's jubilant cablegram to Mr. Bingle drew from its recipient a reply so curt and effective that there could be no mistaking his stand in the matter of Kathleen.

Toward the end of the first week in February, Mr. Force cabled: "Everything smoothed out. Rejoice. Wife

keen about K. Insists on having her with us over here. Send her over at once with Dufresne. Never was so happy in my life. Force."

The reply was: "Come and get her, but bring your wife with you. Bingle."

"I am not sure that I trust Force," said Mr. Bingle to his wife as they discussed the banker's message. "Like as not he wants to get the child over in Europe and leave her there with strangers until she grows up, or something of the sort. What proof have we that he has told his wife? How do we know that she is keen about Kathie? She never has been. As a matter of fact, she brags about her hatred for children. Openly says she despises 'em. Prefers her dogs and cats, and all such rubbish as that. No, sir, Mary; I don't pack Kathie off with a strange Frenchwoman, destined for heaven knows what, and that's all there is to it. The thing looks fishy to me. Maybe it's, a plot—a dark, cruel plot to get the child out of the country. If he wants me to believe that Mrs. Force is keen about Kathie, she'll have to say so herself, in so many words, and, blame me, Mary, I don't believe I'll let her say 'em by telegraph either."

"But he is the president of the bank, Thomas," said Mrs. Bingle, as if that were all that was necessary to put him above suspicion.

"I am not dealing with the president of the bank, my dear," said Mr. Bingle stiffly. "I am dealing with my next door neighbour, and I have a mighty poor opinion of him. The boy is waiting. I'll just write an answer to his cablegram and get it off at once."

The day after they landed in New York, Mr. and Mrs. Force paid a formal visit to the Bingle mansion. They came out from town by motor, arriving at four in the afternoon. Mr. Bingle was expecting them. They had telephoned, saying they could stay but a short time and made it quite clear that it wouldn't be necessary to serve tea. They were staying in town for a few days before going on to Florida.

At five o'clock they motored swiftly away from Seawood. The ordeal was over. Kathleen was to go to Mr. and Mrs. Force. The wife of a "man called Hinman" was to mother the child of Agnes Glenn.

It was to be very simple and easy for the Forces; like their kind, they left the hard part of the bargain to Mr. Bingle. He was to tell Kathleen of the great change that was soon to take place in her life. He was to tell the happy, loving little girl that she was no longer to call him daddy, that she was to go and live with the man she feared and disliked. That was the part of the bargain left to the one who loved her best of all and who would not have given her an instant's pain for all the world. He was to deliver her, with scant excuse or explanation, into the hands of strangers—cold, unfeeling strangers. It would be the same as saying to the child that he did not care for her any longer, that he did not love her, that he was willing to give her up to Mr. Force without so much as a pang of regret. For he could NOT tell her the truth. She was never to know about the carbolic acid and the days of starvation. She was only to know that Mr. Force was to be her daddy from this time forward and that Mr. Bingle could never be anything more to her than Uncle Tom.

But after he told her, he cried.... Still, they were not to take her away until the end of the week, and that was five days off.

An unsuspected astuteness in the character of Thomas Singleton Bingle reveals itself in the declaration, now to be made for the first time in this present history of the man: he never allowed his wards to look upon themselves as his own children. They were taught to call him daddy and to look upon him as a substitute supplied by God to take the place of a real father, and by the same token Mrs. Bingle became mother to the brood, but they were safe-guarded against the surprise and shock of future revelations—revelations that so frequently spoil the lives of those who have lived in happy ignorance. Mr. Bingle, gentle soul that he was, had the heart to look ahead in this pleasant game of his. He saw the cruelty of a too loving deception. He foresaw the desolating results of a too great faith in chance. So his children were taught to regard him in the light of a protector who was satisfied to have them feel that he was under obligations to them instead of the other way round. It was his joy to be called daddy, and in return for this simple tribute he lavished upon them all the love and tenderness of a true father and a great deal of the consideration that a child deserves, but seldom gets, from its own pre-occupied and self-satisfied parent.

Kathleen knew that she was not the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Bingle. She had always known that she was the daughter of a Mr. and Mrs. Hinman, both deceased. In the case of Reginald—and, in a way, Harold also—there was some uncertainty. As the former advanced in years and characteristics, it became more and more apparent to Mr. Bingle that his fifth-born was not of Italian descent, despite the fact that the authorities at the Foundlings' Home had him down on the records as the offspring of a Mr. and Mrs. Vanesi, lost in one of the factory fires in the city of Brooklyn. Mr. Bingle was convinced, as time went on, that the tags on certain infants had been accidentally misplaced by careless attendants, and that Reginald's nick-name, bestowed by Frederick and Wilberforce in their frivolous wisdom, was not so far out of the way as it might have seemed if he had not been possessed of his own vague misgivings. They called him Abey. As for Harold, he was unmistakably Irish, although the hospital people declared that he was German to the core when Mr. and Mrs. Bingle went there to pick out a healthy Teuton to add to their collection. They were positive that they wanted a German baby; nothing else would do, they announced clearly and positively to the superintendent in charge of the maternity ward. The superintendent was most gracious about it. She said they could return little Fritz if he didn't come up to the mark in every particular. What more could a German fancier desire than a child whose name alone stood for all that one could possibly seek in Teutonic research? Fritz Bumbleburg:—that was the infant's name and his father's name before him. Surely Mr. Bingle wouldn't demand anything more German than that. Moreover, Fritz's mother was German-American and she had been the wife of Fritz's father for a matter of five years or more. Still, in spite of all this, Fritz (re-christened Harold while he was still too young to raise a voice in protest) was unmistakably Irish, or at least part Irish. It is also worthy of note that Mrs. Bumbleburg ran away with an Irish policeman some weeks after the infant Fritz's advent into the world, which would go to show that the mother, at any rate, had Celtic inclinations if nothing more.

Kathleen took it very hard at first. She was inconsolable until the desperate Bingle began to dilate upon the wonders of Florida. Miss Fairweather was called in to corroborate all that they had to say about the gorgeousness of that southern fairyland, and as a group they did very well when one stops to consider that not one of them had ever been south of Washington, D. C. The child cheered up a bit. She began to take some interest in the matter of dress. Following that, she revealed considerable enthusiasm over the prospect of going south in a private car with a personal maid of her own, and could have a change of frock twice a day for a week at a stretch, to say nothing of being allowed to eat in the public dining-car if it pleased her to do so. That thing of eating in the dining-car was a master-stroke on the part of Bingle. It was the greatest inducement he could have offered to the child in support of the claim that she ought to be the happiest creature on earth, going away with Mr. and Mrs. Force like this.

Frederick and Wilberforce openly declared—in the presence of Mr. and Mrs. Bingle—that you bet they'd go in a minute if they had the chance to see the land where Melissa's pirates and smugglers did most of their plundering—an attitude that created an unhappy half-hour for Melissa later on in the day. Any one else but Melissa would have received her walking-papers.

The frocks, the personal maid, the prospect of the dining-car and the assurance that it wouldn't be necessary to call Mr. Force "daddy" until she became a little more accustomed to seeing him around, brought Kathleen to a proper way of thinking. She became quite eager to go!

"Well," said Mr. Bingle to his wife, after the storm, "I fancy we'd better make an appointment with Rouquin as soon as possible. I am really quite enthusiastic, my dear, over that idea of yours to have a cute little French baby. The sooner we get it the better, I say. It is going to be pretty lonesome for awhile. Somehow I hope we find one that cries a good deal. It would cheer us up considerably, I'm sure, if we had something like that to annoy us, especially at night. We shall probably lie awake anyhow."

Frederick was causing them no little anxiety. The boy wasn't eating well. He was beginning to look a bit peaked. Dr. Fiddler was puzzled. He could not discover anything wrong, and yet could not account for the listlessness that had come over the lad during the past few weeks.

As a matter of fact, Frederick was in love—quite desperately in love. The object of his adoration was the beautiful Miss Fairweather. No doctor in the world could have properly diagnosed the youngster's case, for the simple reason that Frederick's disease was a perfectly healthy one, and when you confront a doctor with anything in the nature of health you stump him completely. He doesn't know what to do about it. Nevertheless, Dr. Fiddler—being a great man and entirely ignorant of Frederick's complaint—gave him castor oil.

Now this same Dr. Fiddler undoubtedly had been in love at the tender age of twelve. What man is there to-day who was not desperately afflicted at that age, and who is there among us that has forgotten the experience? Who is there among us, past the age of thirty, who cannot tell without an instant's hesitation, the name of the mature young lady who first assailed his susceptibilities? Who can honestly say that he doesn't remember the school-teacher, or the choir-singer who taught the Sunday-school class, or the lady who came to visit mother and went away engaged to a friend of father's, or the nurse who queened it over the house when mother was ill and who devoted entirely too much time to the new baby? There is always one full-grown, lamentably old young lady in the life of every boy, and her name is imperishable. It is invariably MISS Somebody-or-other. No man can recall the Christian name of his first love for the very good reason that he never knew it. The universal lady is always MISS So-and-so. Even the most ardent of twelve-year-olds never forgets that his heart's desire is a lady whose years demand the most respectful consideration. Dr. Fiddler, having loved and lost, should have appreciated the tender passion that took away Frederick's appetite and made of him a melancholy sufferer. What Frederick needed was the moral support of a physician who would recommend and supply a quick and deadly poison with which Mr. Richard Flanders could be permanently squashed.

Melissa was his only friend and comforter. The children, and the servants who were not too busily engaged with their own affairs, openly scoffed at the love-sick young gentleman. Wilberforce sustained a bloody nose in retaliation and Watson, being a special offender, met with a painful and unaccountable accident one day while passing between the kitchen and the milk-house. A full-sized brick dropped from heaven knows where—(it must have come from heaven judging by the way it felt)—and as Watson's hat happened to be directly in the path of its descent the unfortunate footman was unable to tease Frederick for the better part of two days immediately thereafter and had to have six stitches taken in his head besides. Oddly enough, the only place from which a brick was found to be missing was in the walk leading to the stables, and Butts, being a thrifty soul, filled up the vacant spot with the heaven-sent substitute, having found on investigation that it fitted the vacuum perfectly. It was Melissa who kept Watson from taking out a warrant for young Master Frederick. She spoke very sharply to the damaged footman about something that had completely escaped the notice of Mr. Bingle, who, being no smoker, wouldn't have missed them if Watson had taken a whole handful of cigars a day instead of two or three twice a week the year round.

The privileged maid had read love stories from the time she was ten years old up to the beginning of her affair with Diggs the butler. The pleasant discovery that the mighty Diggs had taken a shine to her quite destroyed all of her interest in romance as it is written. She was not long in finding out that the people who write love-stories are not to be depended upon for accuracy in the depiction of passion. Diggs gave her an entirely new idea of manly devotion. Instead of adhering to the well-known and well-preserved formulas set down by the fictionists he behaved in a perfectly astonishing manner. He became acutely bashful and apprehensive, so much so, in fact, that for a while Melissa imagined that Mr. Bingle had given him notice because of the mistletoe episode on Christmas Eve. The poor fellow seemed to be dodging her all the time. And when she came upon him suddenly or unexpectedly he always began winding his watch and talking about the extraordinary resemblance she bore to a girl he had once known in England. The shock, therefore, was tremendous when Diggs asked her if she thought she could ever learn to care for him in THAT way. It was

almost a week before Melissa could think of an answer to this astonishing question. It was "yes."

And so, having but recently suffered the surprise of her life, Melissa rushed to the succour of young Frederick. She whispered words of encouragement into the ear of the despairing youngster, and urged him to stand by his guns.

"You never can tell what is going to happen," she said. "Look at me, for instance. What could have been more miraculous than the thing that happened to me, Freddie? Who could have ever dreamed of Mr. Diggs falling in love with me? An important person like him falling heels over head in love with the likes of me! Can you beat it? Well, that's what I mean when I say you never can tell. You just keep a stiff upper lip, Freddie—and grow a little, of course—and it wouldn't surprise me in the least if you conquered the proud Miss Fairweather's haughty heart. Nothing—NOTHING on God's earth would surprise me now. Go in and win, Freddie. Of course, she is about twelve years older'n you are at present, but as time goes on she'll be getting younger. We always do. By the time you are thirty you will have caught up to her, I can tell you that. Take Mr. Diggs, for instance; he thinks I am only twenty-six. He says it's a crime for a man of his age—he's thirty-seven—to be making eyes at a soft young thing like me. He knows I'm only twenty-six, but what he don't know is that I was born nearly ten years before he even starts to counting. Now, in a very few years you will be twenty. Well, by that time she will be only eight years older than you are. You see, women don't put on years as rapidly as men. It's a peculiar trick of nature. I don't suppose there is another living creature in all God's dominion that lives as long as a woman does before it can get past thirty. Take Miss Stokes, the nurse, for instance. She's been nearly nine years going from twenty-seven to twenty-nine. So there you are. You just keep on growing up, Freddie—you needn't hurry, either—putting on a year every twelve months, and before you know it you'll be six months older than Miss Fairweather. Then—"

"Yes, but how about this big Flanders?" protested Frederick. "He's already grown-up and—"

"Nothing to it," said Melissa, "He hasn't got any money. He can't give her diamonds and fine raiment. He's got to ask her to wait till he's able to marry, hasn't he? Well, while she's about it, why shouldn't she wait for you? It all amounts to the same thing. You'll be able to marry her just as soon as he is. Now, don't be discouraged. Cheer up."

"You're awfully good, Melissa," said Frederick gloomily.

"And what's more, don't let 'em guy you about her. Mr. Diggs don't let any one guy him about me, you can bet. And say, if you can manage to sneak one of Mr. Bingle's razors out of his room some day, I'll shave you. There's nothing like getting your whiskers started early."

"Gee, Melissa, will you?"

"Like a shot. Let me feel your chin. Why, I swear to goodness, there's something there already. It's—"

"Honest, Melissa? Do you really mean it? I thought it was only fuzz."

"Fuzz your granny," said Melissa stoutly. "In a couple of months you could get a beard like a billy goat if you shaved regular."

"I don't want chin whiskers. I want a moustache."

"And in the meantime," went on Melissa with rare diplomacy, "you may see some one else that you like better than Miss Fairweather. That very frequently happens to a fellow when he's busy trying to get a beard."

"Do you think she likes Mr. Flanders, Melissa?" A great deal depended on her answer. That was to be seen by the expression in his young blue eyes.

"Certainly," said she promptly. "Everybody likes him. I like him. So does your ma and so does your pa. That's nothing to go by. Why, I'll bet you like him yourself. He's a fine fellow."

"Do you think he's very good looking?"

"In a way, yes," said Melissa, musingly. "I shouldn't call him quite perfect, however."

"Do you think he's as good-looking as Diggs?"

"I used to think so, but—Now, that reminds me: if you ever say a word to anybody about Mr. Diggs and me being enamoured of each other, I'll have nothing more to do with you—not a thing, d'you understand? It's a secret. Your pa and ma are not to know about it until we get ready to announce our engagement."

"I'll never tell," promised the young lover.

"And here's another thing: Don't you ever let on to Mr. Diggs that I'm over twenty-six. If you do, I'll tell your pa that you're using his razor, and—well, say, that would be a mortification for you. Miss Fairweather would never get over laughing at you. Do you know, I'm awfully sorry for Mr. Flanders. He is a fine fellow, and it will break his heart if you get her away from him, Freddie. It seems too bad for a rich young gentleman like you to be pitted against a poor, struggling newspaper man whose heart is afire with—"

"Oh, gee, Melissa, don't talk like that," cried Frederick in distress. "I DO like him, and I don't want him to ever be unhappy."

"That's the way to talk," she cried warmly. "That's regular nobility. Let's give him an equal chance, Freddie. If he can win, all well and good. We'll take our medicine. If he loses, why he can take his."

"I wish I was as old as he is," mourned Frederick.

"Poor fellow," sighed Melissa, wiping an imaginary tear from her eye. "I DO feel sorry for him. I hate to see a fine, honourable gentleman's heart busted as you are likely to bust his for—"

"Oh, goodness!" gulped Frederick, his soul filled with pity for the unfortunate Flanders. He suppressed a sniffle, and then, after a moment consumed in re-ordering his emotions, went on brightly: "Of course, if she loves him, Melissa, I shall be the first to wish him joy. That's the kind of fellow I am."

"I wonder," mused Melissa, "if that's the kind of a fellow he'd be if some other fellow won his lady love away from him in a fair contest?"

It so happened that Mr. Flanders placed a diamond-ring upon the third finger of Miss Fairweather's left hand that same afternoon, and it also happened that the starry-eyed young lady submitted to a tender embrace immediately afterward. But a fortnight passed before Frederick, pale and wan with the anguish that lay in his young soul, could command the courage to go up to his big rival and wish him joy. For two weeks his heart had bled, for, be it also recorded, young Frederick happened to be lurking unseen in the library when the ring was passed. He saw the big man take the slim, adored princess in his arms, and he saw her face upturned to greet the lips that came down to meet her's in—Alas! Poor Frederick!

Right bravely he accosted Mr. Flanders one day as the brisk young man came swinging up the drive on his way from the railway station. Flanders usually came at three in the afternoon. This habit was known to Frederick. He also knew that the tall conqueror spent an hour with Mr. Bingle before Miss Fairweather descended from the school-room. In fact, every movement of Mr. Flanders from the instant he appeared on the estate to the moment he left it in a dash for the train, was known to the small victim of the green-eyed devil.

On this momentous occasion he resolutely laid in wait for Mr. Flanders near the lodge-gates. He had steeled himself against the bitterest moment in his life.

"Hello," he said, suddenly stepping out of the shrubbery and confronting the pedestrian, who brought himself up with a jerk.

"Hello," said Richard. "Getting the air?"

"I want to speak to you, Mr. Flanders," said Frederick, with immense gravity.

"Come along then, lad, because I'm in a rush. I have to catch the five-ten in to-day."

"I wish you wouldn't take such long steps." Flanders obligingly reduced his stride so that the boy was not forced to run to keep up with him. "I cut lessons, sir, to have a word with you. I just want to wish you good luck and joy, Mr. Flanders. You have won the heart and hand of the fairest lady in the land."

Flanders stopped in his tracks. "I say, youngster, that's—that's corking of you." He was blushing. "I had no idea that you children were on to us, so to speak. Thank you, Freddie."

"I have been on to you, Mr. Flanders, from the beginning. She is the loveliest lady—" he swallowed hard —"in the world, and I just wanted to tell you that if you don't treat her well I'll—I'll—well, you'll see."

Flanders was not smiling. He understood boys. He laid his big hand on the little fellow's sturdy shoulder and said, very seriously:

"I consider myself most fortunate, old chap, in having the advantage of you in years. If you were my own age, I should have stood small chance of winning the loveliest lady in the world. Shake hands, Freddie. I shall treat her well, my lad. If I fail in any particular I hope you'll take a shot at me on sight. I'm sorry, too, my boy."

"That's all right, Mr. Flanders," said Frederick bravely. "I bend the knee to a worthy rival, sir. I—I—" The words trailed off into indistinct murmurings, for he had completely forgotten the rest of the high-sounding sentences supplied for this very encounter by the helpful Melissa. She had written them out for him and he had learned them by heart. And now they failed him!

Flanders allowed his grip to tighten on the boy's shoulder. "You will get over it, Freddie. I had a similar affliction when I was your age. It was pretty rough, but I pulled through."

"I shall never love any one else, Mr. Flanders," said Frederick solemnly. "I shall never be untrue to her."

"Well, it's fine of you to take it in such a manly fashion, old chap. It's great. Not many fellows could have done what you've done. I'm sure I couldn't. It took grit to come out here and tell me this. Shake hands again, my boy. And I now promise that I shall keep her happy if it lies in the power of a human being to do so. You may depend upon it, Freddie."

"Thank you, Mr. Flanders. I have great confidence in you. I trust you. If you should ever require the support of a strong and willing henchman in time of dire trouble or conflict with merciless—merciless—" He stopped in distress. Once more Melissa's well-turned sentences went back on him. For the life of him, he couldn't remember the all-important noun.

"Scoundrels," supplied Mr. Flanders kindly.

"No, that isn't the word," said Frederick, thinking hard. "Merciless—merciless—Oh, yes—renegades! If you should ever require the support of a strong and—"

"All right," cried Flanders. "I understand. I'll call on you, you may be sure."

"There was something more I wanted to say, but the—the words don't seem to come as they ought to."

"It's this beastly weather," said Flanders. "I never can think well in cold weather. I seem to freeze up."

Frederick was relieved. "I guess maybe that's it. When are you going to marry her?" The last was a genuine, unrehearsed inquiry and completely summed up the situation so far as he was concerned.

"It isn't quite settled. A great deal depends on circumstances."

"Money?"

"In a way, yes."

"What does she say about it? Is she willing to wait eight or ten years for you?"

"She says she will wait forever," said Flanders, a bit puzzled by the new turn.

"Well, that's all right, then," said Frederick and to Richard's amazement he squared his shoulders and heaved a long sigh, as of relief. "Excuse me, please, I've got to hustle. Melissa—" He stopped in painful confusion. It had been on the tip of his ingenuous tongue to blurt out something that would have spoiled all that had gone before. It had to do with Melissa's present whereabouts and her oft-repeated claim that if Flanders kept Miss Fairweather waiting long enough he'd lose her, sure as a shot!

An amazing thing happened to Frederick that evening, just before bedtime. Miss Fairweather kissed him sweetly, not once but thrice, full on the lips, and told him that he was the nicest little boy in all the world.

CHAPTER XII — THE BIRTH OF NAPOLEON

Mr. Bingle saw Monsieur Rouquin again. The excellent manager of the foreign exchange assured the vice-president that he could now guarantee to procure the most adorable of French infants at a moment's notice, an infant that he could personally recommend in every particular.

"Sir," said Monsieur Rouquin, "it is impossible to imagine a more perfect child, let alone to create one. I have seen thousands, millions of babies, M'sieur Bangle, but not one so—"

"Bingle," corrected the vice-president.

"It is my abominable, unpardonable dialect," deplored Rouquin, who spoke English without a flaw. "Millions of babes have I seen, but not one so wonderful as this one. It is a—ah—it is a perfect specimen of—"

"You say 'it,' Rouquin. Am I to understand that its gender is unknown to you?"

"No, no!" cried Rouquin. "To be sure I know the sex of this adorable infant. I know the parents—"

"What is it? A boy or a girl?"

Rouquin closed an eye slowly. "Ah, M'sieur Bang—Bingle, may I not leave the question of sex to the child itself? What could be more beautiful than to present to your notice a perfect example of humanity, without uttering a single word to aid you in your speculation as to the gender, and then to sit calmly back and relish the joy you will reveal when you find that you have guessed correctly the very first time, as the boys would say? That would be the magnificent compensation to me. You will need but one glance at this wonderful specimen. One glance will be sufficient. You will instantly exclaim: 'What a monstrous fine boy—or girl!' as the case may be. Ah, sir—"

"I must have a boy," said Mr. Bingle.

Monsieur Rouquin looked relieved. He permitted a roguish light to steal into his eyes. "I still implore you to keep your mind open, Mr. Bingle, until you have seen the child I have in mind. Permit me this little, silly, boyish pleasure, sir—the pleasure of hearing you exclaim—out of a clear sky, so to say—'Ah, what a monstrous fine—'"

"All right, Rouquin," broke in Mr. Bingle. "Only I warn you that if it isn't a boy, it will be a case of love's labour lost on your part."

"M'sieur, I beg your pardon," said Rouquin, a trifle stiffly. "Does M'sieur mean to imply—to insinuate that—"

"Nothing of the kind," said Mr. Bingle hastily. "It's a saying of Shakespeare, Rouquin. Of course, love's labour is never really lost. It's a figure of speech."

"Ah!" said Monsieur Rouquin, smiting himself on the forehead. "I should have known. Have I no brain? Listen! I tap my head. Does it not give out a hollow sound, as if entirely empty? Say yes, my dear sir. I shall not be offended. To have misinterpreted the polite—Ah, but, it is of no consequence. Pray proceed, sir." "Proceed?" muttered Mr. Bingle, frowning. "There's nothing more to the quotation, Rouquin, so far as I know. Merely 'love's labour lost,' no more. But I would like to ask a question or two. Are the parents of this child quite respectable people?" Rouquin rolled his eyes upward. "Utterly," he said, with deep feeling in his voice.

"Healthy?"

"Parfaitment!"

"What does that mean?"

"Perfectly, my dear Mr. Bingle."

"Oh! And are they married?"

"Mon dieu!" cried Rouquin, turning scarlet. "Absolutely, sir—incontestably."

"I mean, to each other."

"Monsieur jests," was all that Rouquin could say. He wiped his brow, however.

"Well, when may we see the child? When can we talk it over with the parents?"

"That is for you to say, sir."

"To-morrow afternoon?"

"I shall so arrange it, sir. Will not you and Madame Bang—Bingle honour me with your presence at a little tea-room—quite an excellent and refined place that I know of—before we go to inspect the child? It will give me the greatest pleasure if—"

"See here, Rouquin, that's most kind of you, but I'd prefer to have you take tea with Mrs. Bingle and me. Do you know of a nice, but thoroughly typical French restaurant where we could—er—get a bit of the atmosphere, don't you know? We are figuring on taking a trip to Paris soon and we'd like to—well, you know what I mean? Quiet, respectable place, you know. Nothing rowdyish."

Rouquin's eyes sparkled. His joy was great. "Ah, I know of such a place. But it is not a tea-room, in the strict sense of the term. It is a cafe where one has the finest table d'hote dinner in all New York for one dollar per person, wine included. Ah, if Monsieur would only condescend to dine there, AFTER we have seen the child, I am sure—"

"I'll telephone you in the morning," said Mr. Bingle, his eyes gleaming. "I shall have to speak to Mrs. Bingle about it first."

It was left that they were to visit the infant and its utterly respectable parents at four on the following afternoon. Rouquin had already assured Mr. Bingle that only the direst necessity made it possible for the wretched father and mother to even THINK of giving up their greatest treasure, this marvellous infant. In fact, it was only because they loved the child so dearly that they were content to see it pass out of their lives. For, said Monsieur Rouquin, they were so poor and so proud that suicide was the only thing left for them in this terrific struggle with adversity, and what was to become of the child if they killed themselves? They would not murder their adored one, and, while it was quite possible for the father and mother to destroy themselves, one really couldn't expect a fifteen months old child to take its own life by involuntary starvation —which was unspeakable. And, said he, they couldn't consider suicide without first making sure that their beloved was safely provided for. After that—well, they could then go about it quite happily, if needs be. Mr. Bingle was deeply distressed.

Rouquin had quite a surprise for them when they called at the bank for him. As he settled himself gracefully in the seat beside Mrs. Bingle, he announced that he had arranged with the heart-sick parents to fetch the babe to his humble apartment at half-past four, where at least one could be sure of avoiding the unfriendly presence of a too-persistent rent-collector, to say nothing of the distressing odours of extreme poverty. Indeed, said Monsieur Rouquin, it was not improbable that they might find the excellent Rousseaus in the apartment on their arrival there, as he had given directions to the janitor to admit them without question. He couldn't bear the thought of poor little Madame Rousseau standing outside in the cold hall with that adorable infant in imminent peril of freezing to death because of insufficient apparel.

"Are they descendants of the great genre painter?" inquired Mrs. Bingle. There was a small painting by the great Barbizon artist in the Bingle drawing-room. She had been reading up on Rousseau, and Miss Fairweather had told her how to pronounce genre.

"That I cannot affirm, Madame," said Rouquin, with infinite regret in his voice. "It is possible, even probable, that Monsieur Rousseau is a direct descendant, but I am not in a position to say so with authority. I shall make it a point to repeat your question to him."

"It would be most interesting to have a descendant of Rousseau in the same house with one of his masterpieces, and under the conditions we face, don't you think, Mr. Rouquin?" Mrs. Bingle had never been quite secure in her pronunciation of monsieur, so she avoided the word.

Monsieur Rouquin agreed that it would be amazingly interesting, and then went on to say that he had known Madame Rousseau while she was still petite Marie Vallamont, but his acquaintance with her husband was of short duration. In fact, he knew little about him except that his great grandfather had been beheaded at the time of the revolution, which was in itself sufficient proof that he was descended from the aristocracy if not the nobility of France.

"You are aware, of course," said he, "that only the aristocracy had their heads cut off during those eventful days."

"Oh, yes, indeed," said both Mr. and Mrs. Bingle so promptly that Monsieur Rouquin at once changed the subject. He realised that they knew quite as much if not more of French history than he.

As he had suspected, the Rousseaus were awaiting them in the apartment. They were very nice looking

young people, rather shabbily attired in garments which, though clearly the cast-off apparel of more prosperous owners, were still neat and remotely fashionable. Madame Rousseau was quite a pretty woman, with a soft, restrained voice and a tendency to say "Oui, Madame," with great frequency and politeness. Her husband, poor as he was, sustained the credit of aristocracy by smoking innumerable cigarettes, with which he appeared to be most plentifully supplied. "You found my cigarettes, I see. That is good," said Rouquin, shortly after the introductions. He spoke somewhat tartly, as if an idea had just occurred to him. He shot a furtive glance at Mr. Bingle as he made the remark.

"Oh, yes," said Rousseau, after an instant's hesitation. "I beg Madame's pardon. Does the smoking annoy?"

"Not at all," said Mrs. Bingle. "I am used to it. Mr. Bingle smokes a pipe."

"Well, where is the baby?" said Mr. Bingle, declining the cigarette which Rousseau proffered in the absence of hospitality on Monsieur Rouquin's part.

"Oh," said Madame Rousseau, "it sleeps. I have put it into Monsieur Raoul's warm bed. Such a cruelty it would be to awake the baby, M'sieur."

"I think I'd like to see what it looks like while asleep, Madame," said Bingle, with the air of a shrewd bargainer. "You see, I've become quite an expert on babies. I don't believe there is a better judge of—I beg your pardon. I forgot to inquire if my English is quite intelligible. Do you follow me?"

"Your English is perfect, M'sieur," she assured him, brightly. "May I say that it surprises me. I have been in your America for five years and I have not before this hour heard an American speak the English language so perfectly—"

"Ahem!" coughed Rouquin, and Madame Rousseau completed her estimate of Mr. Bingle's English by spreading her hands in a gesture which signified utter inability to express herself in words. "Shall we peep into my bedroom?" went on the foreign exchange manager.

"Said the spider to the fly," came quite distinctly from Monsieur Rousseau.

"Remember," cautioned Rouquin, his hand on the door-knob, "you are to guess what it is, Mr. Bingle."

"I suppose I'm to have two guesses," said Mr. Single, with a chuckle.

"Certainly," said Rouquin. "Provided your first guess is wrong."

Stealthily the group entered the bedroom of Monsieur Rouquin. The window shades were down. The room was quite dark. On the bed was a dimly distinguishable heap.

"Sh!" whispered Madame Rousseau, putting a finger to her lips—which in the light of the sun were singularly red and unstarved.

"Sh!" echoed her husband.

"Sh!" said Rouquin.

On tip-toe they all advanced upon the heap, now resolved into a pile of pink blankets. Mr. Bingle leaned far over the heap. Then he put on his spectacles.

"Where is it?" he whispered.

"Mon dieu!" gulped the young mother, in consternation. She whipped the blankets off the bed. There was no baby. A second later she darted through a door on the opposite side of the room, slamming it violently behind her. Monsieur Rousseau started to laugh but cut it short and sputtered Mon dieu three or four times in a choked voice.

"What does all this mean?" demanded Mr. Bingle. "God bless my soul!"

In the meantime, Madame Rousseau was confronting a motherly looking person in Monsieur Rouquin's bath-room, down the little hall. The motherly looking person was holding a fat, yellow-headed baby on her lap and to the mouth of the fat, yellow-headed baby was attached the business end of a half-emptied milk-bottle.

The conversation was in whispered French, and of exceeding bitterness on one side. It is not necessary to repeat what was said. It is only necessary to explain that the motherly looking person was the infant's grandmother—in fact the mother of Madame Rousseau. From certain disjointed explanatory scraps that fell from the motherly person's lips it might have been divined that the baby awoke some time before the arrival of the great philanthropist, and that grandmere deemed it to be the part of wisdom to feed it thoroughly before submitting it for inspection. No one takes to a howling brat, she protested. Besides, what was she there for if not to look after the child of her ungrateful, selfish daughter who had not the slightest feeling of—But, all this time, Madame Rousseau was informing her mother that she was a meddlesome, stupid old blunderer, and that the fat was in the fire. She snatched the baby from the old lady's arms. The bottle crashed to the tile floor and painted a section of it white, its pristine hue. The infant was too surprised to cry. It maintained an open-mouthed silence even as its mother whisked out of the bath-room and brought the door to with a bang, leaving grandmere in the centre of a pool of white, still whispering shrilly that even though a wise father might by chance know his own son, a mother never could hope to know her own daughter.

Messieurs Rouquin and Rousseau were talking loudly, rapidly and very excitedly to each other—in French, of course—when Madame burst into the room with the infant. Mr. and Mrs. Bingle, still staring at the unoccupied bed, had nothing but blank bewilderment in their honest faces.

"Ah!" shouted the two Frenchmen joyously.

"That stupid servant!" squealed Madame Rousseau, hugging the baby to her breast in frantic relief. "Oh, what a fright I have had. Take the baby, Jean. Mon dieu! Do not let it fall! Oh, m'sieur, madame, you will never know how I was anguished. I thought I had lost my darling, my adored one. The black-hand what-you-call-him—non, non, the kidnapper. My baby! Jean, Jean, do not let it out of your sight again—never, do you hear. Now, madame, will you not be kind enough to look at my baby? Come, m'sieur, to the window. Jean, pull up the shade."

Jean almost dropped his precious burden in his eagerness to do as he was bidden, and might actually have done so but for the timely intervention of Monsieur Rouquin, who sprang to the window and sent the shade up with a crash that caused Mrs. Bingle to jump with alarm.

"See!" shouted Rouquin, stepping back and pointing proudly at the baby.

"God bless my soul!" exclaimed Mr. Bingle.

"Oh, the darling!" cried his wife, and tried at once to take the sunny-faced youngster from the arms of Monsieur Jean. But Jean held on very tightly, apparently awaiting orders. It may have been the unusual fervour of the father's clasp that caused the child to whimper, or it may have been that it never had seen such an expression in its parent's face before. At any rate, as it looked up into Jean's swarthy countenance it began to cry; where upon Madame Rousseau exclaimed shrilly:

"Can't you see, Jean? Madame would hold my baby to her breast. Quick! You big simpleton! Ah, madame, my poor Jean is so sad, so broken-hearted over the thought of losing his child that he—There! See! See the lovely smile once more?"

It was true that the instant Mrs. Bingle received the plump wriggler in her arms, the beaming smile was restored. Jean moved quickly into the background, and turned his miserable face away from the scene.

The Rousseau baby WAS adorable, there could be no mistake about that. In previous experiences, Mr. and Mrs. Bingle had encountered half-starved, unhappy, whining infants. This was the first time they had come upon a lusty, apparently over-fed specimen, and they were at once filled with the joy of covetousness. Thick yellow curls, bright blue eyes, and cheeks that would have shamed the peach's bloom—and a nearly completed row of tiny white teeth—such was the Rousseau applicant at first glance. Moreover, its clothing was clean, soft and sweet-smelling of fabrics that do not often find their way into the houses of the poverty-stricken.

"Wait!" exclaimed Rouquin, fairly dancing with exuberant joy. "Wait! Now, Mr. Bingle—now for the guess, sir. I give you but one guess. What is it—a boy or a girl?"

Madame Rousseau clasped her hands ecstatically upon her bosom. "Oh, as if my baby could be anything but —"

"Sh!" hissed the master of ceremonies.

So much whirlwind excitement as all this, so much radiant joy over the disposal of a baby, had never entered into any previous negotiation, and Mr. Bingle was quite carried away by the novelty of the situation. Never before had the ceremony resolved itself into an enigma, a puzzle, so to speak, in which it was his privilege to make one guess.

"It's a boy," said he, with conviction, whereupon the mother, the father and Monsieur Rouquin filled the room with joyous exclamations and the baby, imitative little beggar that he was, crowed with delight.

Madame Rousseau could not get over the despicable behaviour of Rouquin's servant. She kept on berating the creature and advising Rouquin to dismiss her, until at last Mrs. Bingle announced that the poor thing undoubtedly had acted for the best and out of the goodness of her heart. She also said that she would like to see the woman.

Monsieur Rouquin being of a mind to dismiss the presumptuous domestic, Mrs. Bingle blandly declared that, if her references were all as good as the one Madame Rousseau was giving her, she wouldn't hesitate for an instant to engage her to look after the child in case it joined the Bingle collection. There were voluble protests in French from both Madame Rousseau and Rouquin, and then Monsieur Jean announced in English that the old servant was like a mother to Rouquin and that he would as soon think of cutting off his right hand as to allow her to go out of his life. Rouquin glared at him for this, and the shabby-genteel Jean had the audacity to close one eye slowly.

Madame Rousseau's mother was permitted to remain in the bath-room, and no further reference was made to her.

"Well, let's get down to business," said Mr. Bingle, presenting his forefinger to the babe for inspection. Monsieur l'Enfant promptly seized it and conveyed it toward his earnest mouth. "No, no!" cried Mr. Bingle reprovingly. "Mustn't do that. Naughty, naughty! The microbes will get you if you don't watch out. Dear me, what a strong little rascal he is! By the way, what is his name?"

"It has been Napoleon," said the mother. "But he can be made to forget it, m'sieur, if you desire."

"Napoleon Bingle," mused Mr. Bingle, and then sent a sharp, questioning glance to his wife. She gravely nodded her head. "Not at all bad. Ahem! Shall we return to the other room? Naturally there are a great many questions to be asked and answered. Rouquin, will you oblige me by getting a pad of paper and taking down all of the—er—statistics?"

It developed that Napoleon Rousseau, now sitting bolt upright in Mrs. Bingle's lap and staring wide-eyed at the interesting face of Jean Rousseau, was a trifle over fourteen months of age, born in New York City, the

son of Jean and Marie Vallemont Rousseau, persons lawfully wedded in the city of Paris by a magistrate—(Madame explained that while the certificate with all of Jean's paintings had been destroyed in the fire which wrecked their tiny apartment soon after their arrival in New York, a copy could easily be obtained if M'sieur et Madame insisted on going into such small details)—and of sound health so far as could be known at this time. He had survived the heat of one summer and had actually thrived on the frigidity of this, his second winter, notwithstanding the fact that he had frequently slept without covering in their poor, wind-swept attic.

"Splendid!" said Mr. Single, casting an admiring glance at the rubicund Napoleon. "A hardy chap, by Jove. Of course, Madame, you understand that it will be necessary for you to appear with us before the proper authorities and sign certain papers, and so forth, before the baby can be legally adopted by Mrs. Bingle and myself. The law provides that you and your husband shall release all—"

"Mon dieu!" muttered Madame Rousseau, and as she had uttered the expression no fewer than twenty times in the past half hour, Mrs. Bingle was less favourably impressed with her than at the outset. To Mrs. Bingle "Mon dieu" was blasphemy. "Is not my word sufficient, m'sieur? I freely give my child to you. I am its mother. No one else has a right to say what—"

"Ah, but you forget its father," interrupted Mr. Bingle.

"Yes," said Monsieur Jean, amiably. "Has the child's father nothing to say about—"

"Be quiet, Jean," broke in his wife severely. Then to Rouquin: "You did not so inform me, M'sieur Rouquin. You told me nothing of this going into a court or what-you-call-it. I am aghast. Why do you not tell me of this, M'sieur Rouquin? Is it not enough that I give up my beloved Napoleon? Am I to be humiliated by revealing my misery, my despair—"

"Now, now," broke in Mr. Bingle kindly, feeling extremely sorry for the unfortunate Rouquin, who, after all, was trying to befriend the woman. The face of the foreign exchange teller was quite livid, no doubt from the effect of a suppressed indignation. "It is really nothing to be worried about, Madame. We merely go before a magistrate in Chambers and swear to certain things—both of you, of course—and that's all there is to it. You must declare that you, as the mother of Napoleon, voluntarily relinquish all claim to him in favour of his foster parents, and we, in turn, swear that—well, that we will bring him up as our own, and—er—don't you know. That's quite simple, isn't it?"

"Quite," said Rouquin.

"And you, Mr. Rousseau, will be obliged to swear that you, as well as your wife, forfeit all claim, present or future, to this child, and do so without force or duress. Of course, I shall ask my attorney to explain everything to both of you, so that you may not act without complete understanding. Before we go before the Court, you will be instructed in every move you are to make. And now, Madame, will you be willing to take oath that you are the mother of Napoleon and as such will henceforth cease to regard him as your son in case we conclude to adopt him as our own?"

Madame Rousseau looked from Jean to Rouquin and then from Rouquin to Jean, quite helpless in the face of this requirement. Rouquin and Jean looked at each other, and Jean's jaw was set rather hard and there was an anxious, uncertain look in his eyes—a look not far short of being rebellious. The young mother covered her face with her hands and began to sob violently. For some reason, Jean's jaw relaxed.

"Oh, my poor little Napoleon!" she moaned. "How can I give you up? My angel Napoleon!"

"See here," exclaimed Mr. Bingle, touched by this sudden aspect of misery, "I'm a very tender-hearted man. If you will permit me, Madame, I may be able to arrange a way for you and your husband to find a means of living comfortably on good wages, and you may then be in a position to keep little Napoleon—"

"No, no!" cried she instantly—almost fiercely. "I could not think of it, M'sieur. I cannot consent to any—"

"Pardon me," interrupted Rouquin blandly. "Allow me to propose a—"

"I shall not listen to any proposition that may include Jean and myself in—"

"In other words," said Rouquin, turning to Mr. Bingle, "she will not accept charity for herself or her husband. They are very proud, Mr. Bingle. They would die before accepting charity from—"

"A thousand times!" blurted out Monsieur Jean, wiping his brow. "Count me out!"

"Dear me, dear me!" exclaimed Mr. Bingle.

Napoleon began to cry. He had a lusty pair of lungs. Almost instantly, the motherly looking person appeared in the doorway. She had been waiting for Napoleon's signal.

"See!" she cried, holding up a bottle of milk. "I have it! To the dairy-lunch and the chemist's I have been while—"

Rouquin leaped forward and snatched the squalling Napoleon from Mrs. Bingle's arms, and an instant later deposited him in those of his maternal grandmother, who in almost the same instant was pushed rudely out of the room. The door was quickly closed. Napoleon's howls receded.

"Now," said Rouquin, "we may talk in peace. My faithful old servant, Madame," he went on, turning to Mrs. Bingle with his rarest smile. "I do not know what I should do without her. She has gone out for the milk and—Ah, what a treasure she is! Mon dieu, how I appreciate that wonderful Fifi! That is her name, Madame—Fifi. Ah! Sublime—"

"She didn't look like a servant, Mr. Rouquin," said Mrs. Bingle, recovered from her surprise.

"You speak of her dress, Madame? Has she not declared but now, this instant, that she went out to the chemist's, to the dairy-lunch? Catch Fifi on the street in her servant's dress! No, no! She spends her wages on dress, vain creature. She would no more think of venturing upon the street in—but, we waste time. Of what interest can be the foibles of my poor old servant to you. Madame? Come, Marie—you see I have known Madame Rousseau these many years, M'sieur—come, let us assure Mr. Bingle that he need have nothing to fear if he decides to do you—and poor old Jean here—the honour of adopting your most fortunate baby."

Madame Rousseau dried her eyes upon a singularly pretty little handkerchief, and then smiled beatifically.

"M'sieur need have no fear. I shall take the oath for my grand, my adorable Napoleon's sake. After that, what shall I care what becomes of me. He shall be safe. That is enough."

"Good!" cried Mr. Bingle. Then he turned to the silent, glowering Jean. "And you, my good man. Will you also take oath that Napoleon is your son and that you, as his lawful father—"

"I say, Rouquin," began Jean in a far from amiable tone. Rouquin at once took him by the arm and led him into the bedroom, whispering fiercely all the way.

"My Jean is very proud," explained Madame Rousseau, dabbing her nose and eyes with a bit of a powder rag. "He is so obstinate, too. But M'sieur Rouquin will talk sense into his head, never fear."

There was an awkward silence. Finally Mrs. Bingle spoke.

"Is your husband a descendant of the painter?"

Madame Rousseau looked surprised.

"He IS the painter, Madame."

"The—impossible! I refer to the great Rousseau of the 1880 school."

"Oh, I see. No, no—he is not that one. Jean was not yet born. Mon dieu, was there another Rousseau?"

"There was," said Mrs. Bingle tartly. "Jean is the painter of to-day. He is great, he is splendid, he is magnificent. But, la la! he is so poor!"

"That seems to establish him all right," said Mr. Bingle.

Rouquin and Jean reappeared. Both were smiling cheerfully. Jean affected a somewhat degage manner and a perceptible swagger.

"Very well, M'sieur," he said. "I'll swear to it."

"Then I shall leave the details to my attorney, who, you will discover, is a most conscientious, dependable person. In the meantime, when will it be convenient for Dr. Fiddler to examine Napoleon?"

Rouquin explained at some length in rapid French, and Madame Rousseau was once more consoled. Jean appeared to be somewhat bored. He yawned, in fact.

"And now," cried Monsieur Rouquin in a great voice, "I have a plan. Let us celebrate the birth of Monsieur Napoleon Bingle by dining together at Pierre's. This day he is born again—or, at least, prospectively born. Life for him really begins to-day—the sixth of March. It is my treat! I shall be the host on this memorable occasion. Pierre shall give to us the best duckling in his larder and the rarest bottle of—"

"But my dear Rouquin," began Mr. Bingle.

"I implore you, kind friend, to honour me with your presence this evening. The greatest day of my life shall be this one if you but consent to grace my board with your lovely lady. And poor Madame Rousseau and her amiable husband shall not be the ghosts at the feast, as one might suspect, but joyful spirits. To them we will drink a toast of good will and better luck next time, and they may drink to you, madame and sir, the health of one grand Napoleon Bingle, in whose past they both shared but whose future can only be a—"

"Oh, I say, Rouquin," broke in Monsieur Jean languidly, "why not make it 'many happy returns of the day'? That's the real issue."

Rouquin coughed violently, and, upon recovering himself, went on with a slight modification of his rapture: "Whatever should come of this day's work, we should all drink deeply to the health, prosperity and fame of a future president of the United States—Napoleon Bingle! Come, Madame Bingle, you cannot refuse to join your humble servant and petitioner in one jolly, epoch-making—though absolutely respectable—celebration in honour of our little Napoleon. And you, M'sieur—Ah, you, sir! Have you not in prospect the alliance of your own honoured name with that of the most notable Frenchman of recent times? Napoleon! Bingle! Ah, think of it! Bingle—Napoleon! We can afford to overlook the fact that Napoleon was a Corsican and not a—real Frenchman. We can—"

"Just as we must overlook the fact that little Napoleon is a Rousseau and not a Bingle," said Mr. Bingle drily.

"Quite so, quite so," agreed Rouquin hastily. "Napoleon Bonaparte was the adopted son of France, and Napoleon Rousseau is the adopted son of the great Thomas Bingleton Single—" "Singleton Bingle," corrected Mr. Bingle, as Rouquin hesitated in evident appreciation of his mixed consonants.

"I am sure Madame Rousseau will not feel like joining in a feast at this time," said Mrs. Bingle. "It is hardly an occasion for jollification—"

"Ah, Madame," cried Madame Rousseau, with sparkling eyes, "it is not for myself that I would jollify, but for the adored Napoleon. It is for him that I would rejoice. Is he not to become rich and honoured, and is he not to be given by law a name that he can never be ashamed of as long as he—"

Rouquin broke in again, hastily and somewhat apprehensively. "Let us save our fine phrases for the banquet board. Ah, I can see it in M'sieur Bingle's face! He will accept my little hospitality. He will come with Madame to Pierre's. He will make me to be forever honoured among men. He—"

"I'll come on one condition only, Rouquin."

"And what is that, M'sieur?"

"That I may settle the bill."

Rouquin was amiable. He shrugged his shoulders and beamed. "I should be the last to say no to any demand of my guests. If it would give you pleasure, sir, to pay for my dinner, I shall not protest. I am the most courteous of hosts. The smallest wish of my guests must be gratified. However, sir, I reserve the right to order the dinner which I am giving. You will not deny me that, I am sure."

"By no means," cried Bingle. "Order whatever you like, Rouquin. I've never been able to order anything from a French bill-of-fare but pate-de-foi-gras. It's your dinner, Rouquin, not mine. But, we are going ahead too fast. We have not yet heard from Monsieur Rousseau. Will he be willing to join us?"

"Sure," said Monsieur Jean.

"And what about the baby? Is it right for us to take a small child to a public cafe where there may be drinking and—"

"My dear Mrs. Bingle," cried Rouquin, "pray have no thought of Napoleon's comfort on this occasion. I shall insist upon Madame Rousseau leaving him here—in my humble dwelling—until called for. That is to say, in charge of my wonderful Fifi, who will care for him completely during her absence. He shall have a stupendous supper and he shall be put to bed happy. For once in his poor little life he shall have abundance of food and the joy of a warm nest to lie in. Ah, it is a great day for Napoleon!"

Needless to say, Mr. and Mrs. Bingle stepped into a new and hitherto unsuspected world the instant they entered Pierre's. They stepped out of it at ten o'clock that night and into a very commonplace, humdrum sort of automobile and were whisked homeward by an astonished, unbelieving chauffeur. They had drunk the health of Napoleon the present, Napoleon the past, and Napoleon the future, and they had done it from cobwebby, mouldy bottles out of the uttermost depths of Pierre's cellars. They were pleasantly, agreeably conscious of going home, and they talked a great deal of the vivacious, though heartbroken mother of little Napoleon, who, despite her shabby frock, was the life of the party. And Monsieur Jean—he, the great artist and stricken father—he too was gay and amusing. He sang a wonderful little French song that was applauded violently by people at the nearby tables, and he drew wonderful caricatures of the musicians, the head waiter, the shockingly bad soprano, and of Mr. Bingle himself. Rouquin alone was nervous and uneasy, but of course only on account of his illustrious guests. He was constantly imploring both Madame and Monsieur Rousseau to reflect before speaking, and they obeyed him by reflecting in a thoroughly audible manner so that he might not be left in the dark as to their intentions.

Mr. and Mrs. Bingle said good night on the sidewalk in front of the restaurant. As the latter shook hands with little Madame Rousseau, the mother of Napoleon suddenly fell to shivering. All of the gaiety fell from her like a discarded mantle. Her piquant face became drawn and pinched and her fingers clasped those of Mrs. Bingle in a fierce, almost painful grip. She drew the elder woman apart from the group.

"Oh, Madame, you will be good to my little boy," she whispered, beating her breast with her free hand. "I am not gay. I am unhappy. I would not give him up but his father insists it is for the best. I may see him some time, may I not? I love him. He is my joy, my everything. To-night I sing and laugh, but my heart is not light. Non, non! It is like a stone, like ice. Oh, Madame, I implore you to be good to my little boy!"

She was crying softly. Mrs. Bingle put her arm about the bent shoulders and drew the young mother close to her side.

"Don't you worry, my dear. We'll make a fine man of your little Napoleon. Some day you will look with pride upon him and say: 'I'm glad I brought that man into the world, even though he doesn't know it.' And I am glad that you have cried. It makes another woman of you. I would say 'God bless you,' Madame Rousseau, if it were not that he has already blessed you."

Later on in the night, Rouquin and his two companions paused at the foot of a Sixth Avenue Elevated station.

"Good night, old fellow," said Rouquin, giving Jean's hand a mighty grip. "You are a true friend."

Then Jean said good night cheerily and walked off down the street, whistling gaily, as one who has completed an honest day's work.

I think I have neglected to mention that Rouquin was an exceedingly good-looking, fascinating chap of twenty-eight or thirty, and unmarried.

CHAPTER XIII — TROUBLE, TROUBLE, TROUBLE!

This chapter thirteen is an unlucky one for Mr. Bingle. Many unpleasant things are crowded into the space devoted to this division of the narrative, although in the matter of time we leap from early March to the fifth of July with all the swiftness of one who races at break-neck speed to get away from consequences, or to put a disagreeable task as far behind as possible.

In the first place, Kathleen was permitted to remain with the Bingles far beyond the date set for her departure in the custody of a new set of parents. It so happened that on the very day selected for her departure, which was early in March, Rutherford and Imogene came down with a fever and a rash. Dr. Fiddler was summoned from the city. Just as he entered the broad portals at the front of the house, two of the nurse-maids, Stokes and Brown, walked swiftly down the back stairs with their suitcases and bandboxes in their hands.

Mr. Bingle was notified that they wanted to see him at once in the library. They appeared to be in a great hurry to catch a train for the city. From time to time, while they waited for the master of the house, they cast nervous, apprehensive looks in the direction of the door through which they had entered the room. Their apprehensions apparently were justified by the abrupt arrival upon the scene of Wright and Quinlan, the other nurse-maids, both of whom were hot and flushed and still in a state of frowsy preparation for a journey. They too had their suitcases and bundles and they too were trying to balance unfastened hats upon the top of agitated heads.

Mr. Bingle came into the room just in time to hear each of the four accusing all of the others of trying to sneak off and leave her with the bag to hold, or words to that effect. With his entrance, however, each of the hasty nurse-maids was reminded of a dreadfully sick relative in town and of the necessity for instant departure. What they wanted of Mr. Bingle was their pay—and a reference.

The poor gentleman was flabbergasted. He wanted to know what had happened. They told him in one voice that it was nearly train-time and that nothing had happened, and would he please hurry. When he suggested that they should wait and see Mrs. Bingle, they asked him to say good-bye for them, and made for the door, crowding one another rudely in their eagerness to be off. Brown saved the situation for herself and her companions by shrilly declaring that she would drop him a line from New York, advising him where to send her money and the reference, and for him not to bother now, she would trust him, of course. And then they all trooped out of the library and rushed for the front door. Three of them reached the outer air and were gone forever, but one of them, Miss Stokes, was turned back by the determined Watson, who clutched her by the arm and whispered a few sharp, convincing sentences into her ear. She set down her suitcase and began to cry, whereupon the footman kissed her and said that he'd despise her if she didn't stand by Mr. Bingle now that he needed her so much; and Stokes said that she was crying because she hated herself for even thinking of leaving and that the other girls were the scum of the earth, take it from her.

Well, it turned out that the two children had scarlet fever. Brown happened to know that Imogene had been exposed to the disease during a surreptitious visit to the cottage of the station agent, whose wife it appears was a close friend of the nursemaid, and whose baby thrived immensely on the rich foods from the Bingle establishment. So the instant the rash appeared, Brown began packing her suitcase and trunk. She tried to get away without letting the other girls into the secret, but they suspected. What might have been a dignified resignation on Brown's part, became a stampede.

That afternoon the Force automobile came for Kathleen. Mr. and Mrs. Force were confronted by Diggs as they came up the steps. He gave them the news.

"The deuce you say," said Force, backing down the steps. "Has she been exposed?"

Mr. Bingle appeared in the doorway. "Come in, please," he said, covering his bare head with a newspaper. "Got some bad news for you."

"What the devil do you mean, Bingle, by running around among the riff-raff of all New York, picking up germs and bringing 'em out here to a house full of children? See what you've done, gallivanting around with Rouquin's cheap—"

"Oh, come now, Force! Don't blame poor little Napoleon. It takes ten days or so for a case to develop and I saw Napoleon only two days ago. Come in, won't you? I can't stand here in the—"

"No, thank you," exploded Mr. Force. "I've never had the infernal thing, and it's usually fatal in adults. I wouldn't expose myself to it for a million dollars. Shut the door, Diggs, confound you! Do you want to have the microbes blowing out here into my very face? Get back in the car, dear! Lord, what a nice mess it is. Hang it all, Bingle, didn't I tell you in so many words not to let Kathleen play around with all those little—"

"Kathleen hasn't got it—yet," said Mr. Bingle hotly. "Only two of 'em have shown—"

"We cannot consider taking her away with us now," said Mrs. Force, with decision. "You can't expect us to expose ourselves to—"

"No, you can't, Bingle," broke in Mr. Force. "It's not to be thought of. She's got to stay here until—until the thing's over."

"That is to say, until she gets well or dies," said Mr. Bingle, raising his voice.

"Oh, I'll send out a good doctor and a couple of nurses. And, see here, I don't want this child cooped up with all the rest of 'em. I want her placed in a separate room, as far as possible from the—"

"By jingo!" cried Mr. Bingle. "I believe it would be a good thing for the child if she caught it and died. Good day, Mrs. Force. Better move rapidly, Force. You see, I've been exposed—and so has Diggs. We're alive with microbes."

And that is why Kathleen did not go South early in March—not until late in April, for that matter, when she had completely recovered from a particularly stubborn illness, and long after all of the others, except little Imogene, were up and about. Imogene died.

Miss Fairweather was the angel in this season of tribulation. She was true blue. Day and night she gave up to the care of the sick ones, and when it was all over the roses in her cheeks were missing, but the light in her eyes was bright.

Then Kathleen went away. Mr. Force, considerably humbled, apologised to Mr. Bingle for as many things as he could remember, and Mrs. Force, after all, did condescend to introduce Mrs. Bingle to her own exclusive dressmaker. Napoleon came. Mr. Bingle watched the newspapers for an account of the suicide of Monsieur and Madame Rousseau, but no such event was reported. No doubt the approach of spring deterred them. They would probably wait until cold weather set in again.

In order to encourage the struggling Rousseau, he bought, through Rouquin, a rather startling painting by the young artist, in which a herd of red cattle partook placidly of the skyline and a pallid windmill dominated the foreground. Later on, an expert informed him that the red cattle were rocks on the edge of a pool and the windmill was a lady making ready to dive into the water for a lonely swim. The painting was signed, but the name was not Rousseau. It was Fauret. Rouquin explained the discrepancy. He said that young Rousseau preferred to paint under an assumed name—in truth, it was his maternal grandmother's name—rather than to have his canvases confused with those of the academic, old-school Barbizon painter. He was above trading on a name that was fast becoming obsolete!

Then there came the astonishing disappearance of young Frederick. The third day after Kathleen's departure, Frederick turned up missing. A week passed before the detectives found him in Washington, penniless, half-starved but valiant. He had run away from home to find Kathleen, for, in his fickle heart, he had come to realise that it was she whom he loved and not old Miss Fairweather at all. Extreme hunger and an acute attack of home-sickness dampened his ardent regard for the distant Kathleen, for the time being at least, and he was quite content to return to Seawood, where, after all, he could have all he wanted to eat and at the same time reflect audibly on the fact that he was a real hero.

Envy induced Wilberforce to run away a few days after Frederick returned with his great tales of adventure, privation and gallantry. He got no farther from home than White Plains, and was back at Seawood before nine o'clock at night on the day of his flight, yet he had enjoyed so many hair-raising experiences, rescued so many lovely girls from all manner of perils, and soundly thrashed so many unprincipled varlets, that even Melissa's narratives became weak and puerile when put up against the tales he told to his pop-eyed brothers and sisters. He did not mention the sound thrashing that he sustained at the hands of Mrs. Bingle, however, nor did he attempt to account for the bitter howls that began to issue from behind the closed library doors almost simultaneously with his return to Seawood. These howls, it may be added, had a great deal to do with the decline of enthusiasm among the other boys. Wilberforce's adventure in the library was the one that made the deepest impression on them.

And this summary paddling of young Wilberforce, in direct opposition to the wishes of his foster-father, who would have punished him in a less drastic fashion, brings us to the gravest of Mr. Bingle's worries: the curious change in Mrs. Bingle's attitude toward the children.

From being a loving, kind, sympathetic mother she lapsed into the opposite in every particular. Her querulousness, impatience, even antipathy became more and more marked as the summer advanced and Mr. Bingle, in dire distress, consulted Dr. Fiddler. She scolded incessantly, spanked frequently, complained from morning till night, and suffered headaches, neuritis and kindred ailments to such an extent that the good doctor might well have been pardoned for looking a bit wiser than ever before and suggesting a change of scene and environment for the lady, whose nerves undoubtedly had been affected by the troubles of the past few weeks.

Every one about the place observed and secretly commented on the amazing change in the mistress of the house. The calm, serene, level-headed manager of Mr. Bingle's household had developed into a cranky, dyspeptic tyrant whose pleasure it was to be unfailingly displeased with everything, and who, despite the fact that she was not yet forty-three, declared that she was a broken old woman without the remotest hope of ever seeing a well day again in her life. She was quite positive that she suffered from a dreadful and incurable malady. She knew the symptoms, she had every one of them, and no doctor in the world could convince her to the contrary—so she said. Her greatest desire was to go to Peekskill, where she could find peace and quiet and unutterable relief from the annoyances caused by the little nuisances that Mr. Bingle had taken under his wing. In Peekskill her mother and sister still lived the simple life, and that was what she wanted more than anything else.

Mr. Bingle's gentle argument that he could not go to Peekskill with her met with a petulant response. She made it plain to him that she realised his preference for the children and that she was no longer of any use to him as a companion or helpmate. For her own part, she'd like to see them all in Jericho—meaning the children, of course. All of which shocked and distressed poor Mr. Bingle beyond expression.

"What is it, Doctor? Physically she seems to be all right. Can it be that she is going to pieces mentally? Why, she's always been the most loving, gentle—"

"Nerves, Bingle—plain nerves. She'll be all right in a little while, I'm sure. I'll have a look at her again next week. In the meantime, don't pull such a long face. She is as sound as a dollar physically, as you say. Leave her to me, old fellow. Don't cross her, don't let her see too much of the children, and don't object to her going to visit her mother in—where is it?—if she wants to do so. By the way, Bingle, I wouldn't adopt any more children at present, if I were you. Wait for a year or two and see how she feels about it."

"Would you advise a trip to Europe? We've been contemplating it for the past ten years, but—I'm ashamed to admit it—we're both scared out of our boots when we think of being out there on the Atlantic with two or three miles of water under our beds every night and icebergs floating all around us. We want to see Paris and London, of course. Every one ought to see 'em if he can afford it. If you think it advisable, I'll take her across this summer. Maybe if she got to Paris she'd forget she ever wanted to go to Peekskill."

"I'll let you know what I think of it later on, Bingle. We'll see. I've never seen your garden looking better than it looks this summer. You have a treasure in that man Edgecomb. Come, let's stroll down to the Italian —"

"Not just now, Doctor," said Mr. Bingle hastily. "I think Miss Fairweather and Flanders are down there enjoying the shade and the music of the fountain."

The servant question was another bothersome thing for him to contend with. They were dissatisfied and on the point of leaving, especially the new nursemaids. A general increase in wages served as a temporary restraint, and a second increase was plainly in sight. For the first time in his life Mr. Bingle possessed a secret unshared with his wife: he did not tell her of the raise in wages.

Flanders announced that rehearsals for the play would be started early in July. The company had been chosen and a theatre taken in his own name. Mr. Bingle preferred to remain a silent and unrecognised instrument in the enterprise. He remembered in time that he was a deacon in the church hard by, and was sorely afraid that while his own conscience might be perfectly clear in the matter it wasn't by any means certain that the congregation possessed the same kind of a conscience.

It became necessary, therefore, for Miss Fairweather to give up her place and prepare for the task ahead of her, especially as her role called for a bit of dancing in the second act, demanding considerable preliminary work under the instruction of a teacher. Mrs. Bingle was rather glad to see her go. Secretly she was beginning to mistrust the young lady's intentions where Mr. Bingle was concerned. It was her recently formed opinion that one can never trust an actress, no matter how closely she is watched or how frankly she looks you in the eye while you are watching.

Mr. Bingle called Miss Fairweather and the good-looking Flanders into his study a few days before the time set for her departure. He closed the door carefully behind them and then crossed over to glance out of the window into the garden, where Mrs. Bingle was chatting earnestly with Dr. Fiddler in the shade of a glorious oak. Mr. Bingle had had something on his mind for a long, long time. The fate of Agnes Glenn was at the back of it.

"When do you two expect to be married?" he asked bluntly, taking them both by surprise. They turned quite red and looked at each other in evident dismay.

"Why, we—er—really, Mr. Bingle," began Flanders, "we thought we'd wait until we see how the piece gets over and then—" He looked to the embarrassed Miss Fairweather for help.

"If everything goes well, Mr. Bingle," she said, nervously, "we sha'n't hesitate an instant. Of course, if it is a failure, we'll—well, it really would be wise to wait for a little while until—"

"That's just the thing I want to get at," said Mr. Bingle. "Don't put it off, my friends. Get married here, Miss Fairweather, to-morrow, next day. I am your friend, and yours, Dick. My wedding present shall be—well, I must ask you to leave it to me. I love you both. You have meant a great deal to me. There is nothing I would not do for you, nothing I would not shield you from if it lay in my power to do so. So, I ask you, my friends, to be married here in my house before—" Emotion choked him. He had been standing near the window at the beginning of his disjointed remarks. As they progressed, he approached them with his hands extended.

The young couple grasped his hands and Flanders spoke.

"We can't do it, Mr. Bingle. It is out of the question. I'm sorry—terribly sorry. You are a corker, sir. I—"

"For goodness' sake," began Mr. Bingle, imploringly.

"We would jump at the chance, Mr. Bingle, to be married here, if it were not for one thing," went on Flanders, and then looked at Miss Fairweather.

"And what in the world can that be?" cried Mr. Bingle.

"We were married two months ago, Mr. Bingle," said Mrs. Richard Flanders guiltily.

It was some time before they could make him believe it. She revealed her wedding ring—suspended about her neck—and then Mr. Bingle kissed her very soberly and with tears in his eyes.

"Two months ago!" he said, waveringly. "And God bless my soul, you spent your honeymoon nursing a lot of sick children! Well, well, it beats all! It isn't too late for a wedding present. I'll—"

Flanders interrupted him. "It is too late, sir," he said firmly. "We only ask for your blessing and your good

wishes, Mr. Bingle. You have already given us too much. We shall never be out of debt to you. The play, the theatre—"

"Ah, but I haven't spent a nickel on the play, you blundering booby," cried Mr. Bingle heartily. "That is still to come. I want to do something NOW."

"It will come soon enough, sir," said Flanders firmly. "We can't abuse a friendship like yours."

"By George," cried Mr. Bingle; "you are a fine fellow, Dick, as I've always said. You are a gentleman."

"Thank you, sir," said Flanders simply, for he was a gentleman.

On the first day of July the incomparable Diggs gave notice. It was like a clap out of a clear sky.

"My goodness, Diggs, you don't—you CAN'T mean it," gasped Mr. Bingle.

"I do mean it, sir, I'm sorry to say, sir," said Diggs. "It was on my mind to mention the matter last spring, sir, but the hunfortunate quarantine made it quite out of the question. I wish to state, sir, that I would not 'ave left your service at a time like that. You 'ave been the kindest, most thoughtful of masters, sir, and I trust I shall never be the man to go back on a gentleman who—er—I mean to say, sir, a gentleman who deserves the best of treatment from his servants."

"I'm sure I appreciate your good opinion, Diggs. But, tell me, is it a matter of wages? If it is, I think we may be able to arbitrate the question."

"No, sir. Wages has nothing to do with it, sir. My wages 'ave been quite satisfactory, as my savings will prove. As a matter of fact, Mr. Bingle, I 'ave laid by a very neat little sum, which I took the liberty of investing in a small business before giving notice, sir, the hopportunity presenting itself while you were so worried over the sickness that I felt it would be quite wrong to disturb you with my affairs. We 'ave purchased a green-grocer's business in Columbus Avenue—you might call it a sort of general business, fruit, vegetables, hegg—eggs, coal, firewood and vinous liquors, sir. We hexpect to take possession in a fortnight, sir."

"We? Have you a partner?"

"Yes, sir. Watson, sir."

"Watson? Is—is he leaving me, too? Upon my soul, Diggs—this is TOO bad!"

"Yes, sir, it really is. I happreciate what it means, sir, as I told Watson when he gave notice to me. I says to him, says I: 'Watson, Mr. Bingle will 'ave a time of it getting any one to fill your place,' and Watson says to me: 'And what about you, Mr. Diggs?' And I says 'Pooh!'"

"Watson gave notice to you, did he? When did this happen?"

"Yes, sir. The servants usually give notice to the butler. He did it the day we bought out the business, sir," said Diggs, surprised that Mr. Bingle should have asked so simple a question.

"I see. Well, Diggs, I can't tell you how sorry I am to have you go. You have been here for eight years. You are the best butler I've ever known—and the only one, I may as well add. I wish you the best of luck. Shake hands, Diggs. It may interest you to know that I look upon you as the best friend I've ever had. You are the only man I've known in the past ten years who has really treated me as an equal. You've done this, Diggs, knowing full well that by rights I am nothing more than a bookkeeper and never will be more than that, no matter how many millions I may possess. You have made it your business to live down to me, and so I am your debtor. Everybody else, from Mr. Force to the telegraph operator over in the railroad station, looks—but, why go into all this? You are going, and I wish you the best of luck. The same to Watson, too, if you please!"

"I shall mention it to Watson, sir. He will be very much gratified."

"And I may be able to throw quite a little business in your way, Diggs. We shall make it a point to buy our supplies from the firm of—is it to be Diggs & Watson?

"No, sir. It is to be called the Covent Garden Consolidated Fruit Company, sir. There is another little matter I'd like to speak about, Mr. Bingle." Diggs was quite red in the face. "Ahem! I am also compelled to say that Melissa has given notice, sir."

"Melissa! Impossible! Not MELISSA?"

"Melissa Taylor, sir."

"Why, she is the last one that I—" Words failed him. He looked quite helpless in the face of this staggering blow.

"I 'ad a great deal of difficulty, sir, in persuading 'er to leave your employment. She was most determined about it at first, sir."

"You—YOU, Diggs, persuaded her to leave? 'Pon my soul, that was rather a shabby thing to—"

"Oh, I trust you won't look at it in the wrong way, sir," cried Diggs in distress. "Melissa 'as merely consented to become my wife, sire. No offence intended, I hassure you. No underhanded work on my—"

"God bless my soul!" cried Mr. Bingle. "Melissa is going to marry you?"

"Yes, sir. Next Thursday week, sir. And also, sir, I am obliged to announce that Miss Stokes, the first nurse-maid, is to become Mrs. Watson on the same day."

Mr. Bingle sat down again. "My gracious!"

"She also gives notice, sir, through me. Did I thank you, sir, for your generous offer to trade with us when we take over the business? I was that rattled, sir, I fear I forgot to—"

"It is taken for granted, Diggs. And you—you all leave us on the fourteenth of July?"

"If quite convenient, Mr. Bingle."

"The anniversary of the fall of the Bastile," mused the distressed master of the house.

"Oh, I hassure you, sir, that really had nothing to do with it," said Diggs.

"Well, I suppose I shall have to train a new lot to take your places."

"I would suggest that you advance Hughes to the place of butler. He is a very competent man."

"We'll see. And now you may say to the other three members of the Covent Garden Fruit Company that I accept their resignations with regret, and wish all of them joy."

"Thank you, sir. I shall speak to Watson and Miss Stokes, and I shall ask Watson to carry your message to Miss Taylor."

"Can't you attend to that part of it yourself, Diggs?"

Diggs stiffened. "I regret to say, sir, that Miss Taylor and I 'ave had a—what you might describe, sir, as a bit of a tiff. She hasn't permitted me to speak to her since yesterday morning. It will be quite all right, however, to 'ave Watson 'andle the matter. Thank you, sir."

The fifth of July, as usual, came close upon the heels of the one day in the year that men with large families of growing children feel perfectly justified in characterizing as All-Fools' Day. The Bingle youngsters, regardless of their missing antecedents, celebrated the day as unqualified American citizens. They set fire to the stables, shot Roman candles into the kitchen, bounced torpedoes off of the statuary in the gardens, hurled firecrackers great and small at one another, and came through the day with one thumb missing, four faces powder-burnt, and one arm fractured in two places. (Rutherford fell off of the balcony while being chased by an escaped pin-wheel.)

"But," said Mr. Bingle, after relating the horrors of the day to Dr. Fiddler on the morning of the fifth, "I am glad to say that we got through with it alive. How did you find Mrs. Bingle? She was pretty well done-up by the noise."

"She's all right, Bingle. Don't worry. Who is this coming up the drive in such haste?"

Mr. Bingle peered intently over his glasses.

"That? Why, 'pon my soul, Fiddler, that is Mr. Sigsbee. My lawyer, you know. Now, what in the world can be bringing him out here? By George, I—I wonder!" He leaned against a porch pillar, assailed by a sudden weakness.

"You wonder—what?"

"I wonder if the Supreme Court sits on the day after the Fourth of July."

"The Court is late this year in arriving at the summer recess, that much I can tell you. Are you expecting a decision in the case of Hooper et al. vs. Bingle?"

"I am," said Mr. Bingle, mopping his brow, which was wet with a very chilly moisture.

CHAPTER XIV — THE LAW'S LAST WORD

Mr. Sigsbee remained for luncheon. He did not return to the city until late in the afternoon. All day long an atmosphere of gloom, not altogether attributable to reaction from the Fourth, pervaded the house. By that strange, mysterious form of contagion described as "sensing," the servants became infected by the depression; questioning looks were answered by questioning looks; conversation was carried on in lowered tones and confined almost exclusively to matters pertaining to the work in hand; furtive looks were bestowed upon the door of Mr. Bingle's study and, later on, directed with some misgiving upon the closed transom above Mrs. Bingle's bedroom door. To the certain knowledge of the oldest servant on the place, this transom had never been lowered before.

This much was known to three persons: the butler, one of the footmen and Melissa: shortly after the strange gentleman entered Mr. Bingle's study with the master, the mistress and Dr. Fiddler, Mrs. Bingle was led to her room by the doctor and her husband, moaning and wringing her hands. The trained nurse who had come down to take care of Rutherford was hastily summoned to the bedroom, and later on Diggs was instructed to telephone to Dr. Fiddler's office in town with an order to his assistant to send out a second

nurse without delay.

At dinner, Mr. Bingle was singularly pale and preoccupied. His doctor and his lawyer talked of the attitude of the Administration at Washington in regard to the Mexican question and other problems in which a keen observer would have remarked that they were not at all interested—and in which Diggs and Hughes certainly had no present interest. They ate quite heartily, as doctors and lawyers are prone to do when the opportunity presents itself. Immediately after dinner they repaired to the study and closed the door. All evening there were telephone conversations with New York and Washington, and frequent visits to Mrs. Bingle's room by the doctor and Mr. Bingle.

At ten o'clock Mr. Bingle walked out upon the moon-lit lawn and gazed about him in all directions, taking in the terraces, the park, the gardens, and last of all the splendid facade of the great house itself. Head gardener Edgecomb approached and to him Mr. Bingle said:

"It was a beautiful place—a beautiful place, indeed," and then straightway returned to the house. Edgecomb, slack grammarian though he was, made note of the fact that he spoke of the house in the past tense, quite as if it were a thing that had ceased to exist.

The children had had their supper when Melissa came down from Mrs. Bingle's room, whither she had been summoned in some haste at five o'clock. She promptly announced that they were to skip off to bed at once as their mother's head was that bad that she was not to be disturbed by the slightest sound. To the inquiries of her fellow-servants, Melissa curtly replied that it was none of their business what had happened and if they had any business they'd better attend to it instead of snooping around the halls trying to find out something that did not in the least concern them.

Melissa knew what had happened. Before eight o'clock that night Miss Fairweather knew, and Flanders also. The great Bingle dream was not the only one to be shattered by the news that the day brought forth.

For the first time in two days, Melissa addressed herself to Mr. Diggs. Her lip trembled and there were tears lying close to the surface of her eyes. She told the butler, in smothered tones, that she had decided to remain in the employ of Mr. Bingle as long as he needed her services, and that she would have to return his ring. She could not marry him—at least not at present, nor for a long time perhaps. The children refused to go to bed unless Melissa told them a story. She collected them in the nursery—the lame, the halt and the half-blind—and very meekly inquired what kind of a story they would have.

"The one about Peter Pan," said Henrietta.

"No! Tell us a new one about the piruts," cried Wilberforce.

"A ghost story, 'Lissie," chimed in Harold, aged five. "Scare me good and hard, so's I can sleep with Freddy to-night."

"It's not the right kind of a night for a ghost story," said Melissa, her eyes going over the group with a strange, sweet compassion in their depths. "The wind ought to be howling with blood-curdling glee and the will-o'-the-wisp ought to be a-hoppin' in the swamp. There ought to be a graveyard close by—and some skeletons standing just outside the winders, trying to look in upon us through their eyeless sockets."

"Let's imagine 'em," said Frederick.

"I want to huddle, 'Lissie," lisped Rosemary. "It's fun to huddle."

"You'll be discharged if you fill these kids up with any more of those yarns of yours," said Stokes, the nurse-maid, languidly looking up from the book she was reading.

"I guess not," said Melissa, rather grimly. "My job's safe, no matter what I do or don't do. Go on with your reading, Miss Stokes. Your worries are almost over. Mine are just beginning. Huddle up close, Rosemary—I'm going to begin."

"I'm huddled," shivered Rosemary, crawling under Melissa's sheltering arm.

"Now, this is a true story," began Melissa wearily. The children had drawn close about her. "It's an honest true one about a ghost that used to ha'nt my great-grandfather. My great-grandfather owned a beautiful castle in France not far from Nice." She pronounced it with the long sound of the vowel, and was promptly corrected by Marie Louise. "I said it was my great-grandfather, not my niece," said the storyteller sharply. "Well, onct upon a time he was engaged in a war—the Communism war, I think it was. In the heat of battle one day he cut off a great general's head, just like that. Goodness, don't jump so, Rosemary! It rolled down a hill, bumpety-bump, swearing all the way. You see, he was a very great general and was allowed to swear all he pleased. He got his head cut off, so there's a warning for you boys never to swear. Well, Grandpa got off of his fiery steed and looked everywhere for the corpse's head. He had the body all right, but what good was a body without a head? He couldn't find it anywhere. The rest of the army came up and helped in the search, but 'twasn't any use. That general's head had disappeared as if by magic. At first it was thought they might trace it by the cuss-words it was uttering, but you see by this time everybody was swearing, so it was like looking for a needle in a haystack. They kept on hunting for nearly a week, because Grandpa wanted to send that feller's head to his widow, so's she could give it a decent burial and also get the insurance. He—"

"And so's she could get married again," broke in Frederick.

"Exactly. Well, after the war was over, Grandpa he went back to his castle to rest up for the next war, and to have his sword sharpened and his petard fixed. One dark night he was a-setting in his ante-room pondering over the past and wondering what had become of that feller's head—and also what had become of his widder, who was a most bewitching creature and would make any man a most desirable wife, especially if he didn't

have one already—which Grandpa didn't. All of a sudden he heard a voice speaking to him as if from a graveyard. It said 'Good evenin', Duke!' Did I tell you my great-grandpa was a duke? Well, he was. 'Good evenin', Duke,' said the voice, coming from nowhere in—"

"Did it say it twice?" demanded Reginald.

"Four or five times," said Melissa; "because Grandpa wasn't sure he heard it the first time. He looked everywhere. Finally he saw it. It was perched right there on his knee—a awful, horrid, bluggy head with its moustache twisted up like Swanson's on Sunday. It—Oh, Lordy!"

Mr. Bingle entered the nursery. The children stared at him as if at the long-expected ghost, open-mouthed and wide-eyed. His sandy, greyish hair which of late had been trained to lie quite sleek and precise across the widening bald-spot, was now in a state of wild disorder. It stood out "every which way," according to Melissa's subsequent description, and lent to his appearance an aspect of fierceness that was almost inconceivable. Somehow they were all surprised when this sinister figure spoke, for his voice was kind and gentle, and not at all what one might have looked for in a maniac.

"Well, well, here we are. Isn't it time you all were in bed? Off with you, like good boys and girls. Daddy won't be able to come up to see that you're tucked in to-night. I'll say good night to you now. Melissa, will you and Stokes come down to the library as soon as you've got them to bed? And please tell the other nurse-maids to come also. I don't happen to see them about anywhere. I suppose it is a general night out. I have something important to say to you all. Please be as spry as possible. I want to get it over with."

Half an hour later, Mr. Bingle received his servants in the library. It was to be noted that his hair was smoothly brushed. With him in the room was a young man who was recognised by a few of the servants as Mr. Epps, a clerk from the lawyers' offices. From Diggs down to the boy whose sole duty it was to feed the robins and squirrels in the park—all were there, a curious and strangely depressed assemblage.

The master, in a quiet, unemotional voice at once stated the object of the meeting. He had called them together for the purpose of giving them the required two weeks' notice, and also to pay them in full their wages up to the twentieth of the month. They were at liberty to go, however, as soon as they liked, but he desired them to know that it would be with his best wishes for their future. A letter of recommendation would be found attached to each pay envelope. He regretted exceedingly that it was not in his power to supplement this last payment by the addition of a well-deserved present to each of his faithful servitors. Circumstances over which he had no control made it impossible for him to give them more than the stipulated amount. In concluding a brief, simple tribute to their loyalty as servants and an expression of his sincere regret that they were so soon to part company, Mr. Bingle said:

"You see before you, my friends, a man who is poorer than any one of you. Yesterday I was a rich man, to-day I am as poor as Job's turkey. Poorer, if anything, for Job's turkey at least possessed a home, such as it was. To-morrow I shall receive official notification that Seawood and all that goes with it, real and personal, is no longer mine. The law has said so, and I must abide by the decision of the highest court in the land.

"The Supreme Court has finally handed down its decision in the case of Hooper et al. vs. Bingle. I am not the rightful heir. Joseph H. Hooper was not acting within his rights when he disposed of his privately acquired fortune. His children were acting within their rights when they disowned him, scorned him, kicked him out of their lives. It has been decided that my uncle was not competent to dispose of his property, and that I, his conniving nephew, influenced him by craft, wiliness, duplicity and so forth to such an extent that he gave his money to me instead of to those who should have received it. The Supreme Court declares that all of the lower courts erred in not admitting testimony to prove that my uncle DESIRED to leave his fortune to his children, even after he had made his last will in my favour.

"It may interest you to know that 'The Christmas Carol' had a great deal to do with the decision. The lower courts refused to hear evidence to the effect that after making his will he wrote a letter to each of his children, over his own signature, in which he stated that upon reading the carol he was so impressed with the sermon it preached that he was more than willing to let bygones be bygones and to give to his children all of his fortune, in equal shares, expressing the hope, however, that they would be governed by the same noble book in compensating his beloved nephew, Thomas Bingle, and so on and so forth. If they would take him back into their lives, he would forget and forgive. Of course, no attention was paid to these letters at the time, because he was supposed to be penniless. They only went to show that he was mentally unbalanced. In the original trials, these letters were introduced. The Christmas Carol was also offered as one of the exhibits, and it was allowed to stick. When the story was read in open court, every one sniffled, even the judge. The jury almost bellowed. 'As it was allowed to remain in the record, I've no doubt the Supreme Bench wept a little over Tiny Tim. In its decision the Supreme Court refers quite freely to the story and its effect on the old gentleman. I shall not go into the history of the case. It would not be of interest to you. It is only necessary for me to repeat that I shall be penniless. Seawood must be turned over to the rightful owners. I don't mind admitting that I have never really felt that it belonged to me. I have always thought that Joseph Hooper's millions belonged to his children, mean as they are.

"But that is neither here nor there. My lawyers would not consent to my believing anything that they didn't want me to believe. I don't own a dollar in the world, however, except the wages due to you, my faithful servants. These wages are to be paid to you to-night by Mr. Epps, who has cashed my last check against the Hooper fortune, in order that you may receive your due. To-morrow my check, I fear, would not be honoured. If I have done wrong in withdrawing money to-day for the purpose of paying you for honest labour, I shall certainly never permit it to disturb my conscience. As soon as Rutherford is able to be removed, I shall leave Seawood forever. In conclusion, I may say that all I have left in the world are ten small children. As usual, they turn out to be the poor man's fortune. Mr. Epps, will you be good enough now to distribute the pay envelopes? I shall say good night to all of you, and to you, Mr. Epps, as well. To-morrow at any hour you may

select it will give me pleasure to go with you to see the little flat you have described as the most desirable in your list of apartments. I was not aware, Mr. Epps, that you acted as a renting agent in addition to your duties with Bradlee, Sigsbee & Oppenheim."

"Yes, sir," said Mr. Epps. "I find it quite a profitable side issue, Mr. Bingle. Clients of ours are constantly being reduced to the necessity of seeking cheaper—ahem! I shall be pleased to show you the flat at any hour YOU may select."

"Thank you, Epps."

Without going more deeply into details, the foregoing explains the situation. Thomas Singleton Bingle was to be deprived of the Hooper millions. His ten years of possession, years of peace and plenty, had come to an abrupt termination. Poverty, even darker than he had suffered before the windfall, loomed up ahead of him, for in the old days there had been no children to feed and clothe. Added to this was the certainty that a sick wife would take the place of that well, strong and encouraging Mary of the past. Despite the claims and assurances of his lawyers, Mr. Bingle always had felt that this day would come. He had never looked upon himself as the rightful possessor of Joseph Hooper's fortune in its entirety. So, when the time came, he was the least surprised by the shock, and would have been the first to smile had it not been for the dreadful effect the news had upon Mrs. Bingle. His wife collapsed. She sent for her mother and sister and declared openly that from that day forth she would make her home with them. And to add to Mr. Bingle's incalculable distress, Dr. Fiddler very resolutely said that he thought it advisable for her to do precisely what she wanted to do at this time. Later on, no doubt, she would look upon the situation differently, and would return to him sound in body, mind and affection. But for the present—well, said the great Dr. Fiddler, she'd be much happier with her mother and sister, away from Mr. Bingle and the children. He also advised Mr. Bingle in no uncertain terms to get rid of the children as soon as possible without seriously jeopardising their future welfare, "for," said he, "they will never cease to be a barrier between you and your wife, now that the dream is over and you are both awake to the cruel call of reality." The situation became desperate for Mr. Bingle when his wife took her extraordinary stand, and not before. He wilted like a faded flower in the face of this blighting calamity.

On the morning of the sixth of July, a pompous old gentleman rang the front doorbell at Seawood, and inquired for Mr. Bingle. He turned out to be the principal lawyer employed by Joseph Hooper's son and daughters in their fight for the Grimwell millions—a Mr. Hoskins by name. He might have been designated as General Hoskins, as a matter of fact, for he was in actual command of a small army of lawyers, now victorious after a long and bitter warfare.

"I am authorised by my clients, Mr. Bingle," said he, "to extend to you the customary amenities in such cases, wherein a contest ends so disastrously for one party or the other. We are not unmindful of the teachings of 'The Christmas Carol.' Indeed, we have all read it with great interest. Joseph Hooper's recommendations to his children in regard to you—"

"Just a moment, please," interrupted Mr. Bingle. "Say it straight out, Mr. Hoskins. Have they commissioned you to make provision for my future out of the funds they are about to acquire?"

"In a measure, yes," said Mr. Hoskins, prepared to sneer at Mr. Bingle's gleeful acceptance of charity. "Of course, nothing can be done in the matter until the opinion of the Court is—"

"Nothing at all can be done in the matter," said Mr. Bingle acidly. "I shall not accept a penny from them, Mr. Hoskins. They wouldn't accept it from me, and I'm damned if I'll accept it from them. 'The Christmas Carol' hasn't anything to do with the case. All I ask is a little time in which to straighten out the affairs of the estate, and not to be hurried in my actions. I promise you that I shall be as expeditious as possible. In a day or two my counsel and I will be able to get started on the work. It will be quite simple so far as I am concerned. I have only to turn over to you everything in the world except our wearing apparel—not all of that, you may be sure—and my part of the transfer is completed. I had nothing when Joseph Hooper's money came to me, so, you see, it will be quite easy for me to step down and out. I have only to walk out of the house with my wife and children, without a cent in my pockets, and the job is done. Everything else belongs to Geoffrey and his sisters." Mr. Hoskins was disconcerted. He had come prepared to be generous. "My dear sir, the fortunes of war have militated against—"

"Better say the misfortunes of war," interrupted Mr. Bingle, with a twinkle in his eye.

"I wish you wouldn't interrupt me every time I start to speak to you, Mr. Bingle," said the lawyer. "I'm not accustomed to being—"

"I beg your pardon," again interrupted Mr. Bingle, and, because he said it apologetically, Mr. Hoskins was not resentful.

"My clients are disposed to be fair and—I will not say charitable—generous in their hour of triumph. Last evening they met and discussed the problems confronting you, sir. They realise that you devoted a great deal of your time and much of your slender means toward securing the comfort of their lamented father—"

"And burying him," put in Mr. Bingle. "Don't forget that I buried him."

"—and they are prepared to settle a certain amount upon you for life, Mr. Bingle."

"Well, that's nice of them," said Mr. Bingle.

"The amount will be decided upon at some subsequent meeting. In the meantime, you are to accept from them the sum of one thousand dollars for the purpose of providing yourself with—"

"I've just got to interrupt, Mr. Hoskins. I do it for your own sake. You are wasting time and words. I shan't

take a penny, as I said before. I will not allow them to settle a certain amount upon me. That's flat, Mr. Hoskins. I know how to be poor a blamed sight better than I know how to be rich. It won't be a new thing to me. I'll get along, so don't you worry. I have kept the books for this estate ever since I came into control of it, just because I like to be busy at something I know how to do without asking the advice of the butler or anybody else. The books and accounts have been kept straight up to this very day. You can put your auditors and expert accountants at work on them to-morrow, if you like, and you'll find that they balance to a cent. So, you see, I've not allowed myself to get rusty with prosperity."

"Most extraordinary," said Mr. Hoskins.

"When the time comes, I shall be able to turn over the estate a good deal better than I found it. It has increased under my management. I could not have begun to spend the income from the investments. Your clients will find themselves in possession of an extra million or two apiece to recompense them for their long wait. I do not expect or solicit thanks for managing the estate while it was under my control. Please tell them so, Mr. Hoskins."

"My clients are not disposed to exact a complete, minute accounting from you, Mr. Bingle," said Mr. Hoskins, somewhat at a loss for means to meet the unexpected. "Naturally we, as their attorneys, are expected to ascertain the condition of the estate, and all that sort of thing. I am quite sure that we will find it —er—in excellent order."

"Before I forget it, perhaps I'd better mention one or two expenditures that I have made in the past twenty-four hours," said Mr. Bingle thoughtfully. "I have taken it upon myself to pay all of my just debts before the order of the Court takes effect. In other words, sir, I have settled in full with my attorneys, my doctors and my servants. They are paid up to the minute, Mr. Hoskins."

The lawyer stared. "Do you mean to say that you have paid out of the estate the fees—undoubtedly exorbitant—of these lawyers for the ten years' fiddling they have been—"

"My doctor's name is Fiddler, sir," interrupted Mr. Bingle, looking so hard into Mr. Hoskins' eyes that once more the interruption passed unresented. "I have paid them all in full, if that's what you are trying to get at."

"Don't you know that such an act is distinctly illegal?" demanded Mr. Hoskins.

"So my lawyers informed me."

"And yet they permitted you to hand over to them large sums of money in the nature of fees without waiting for an order of the Court, knowing full well that an opinion had been handed down? It is incomprehensible!"

"It shouldn't be incomprehensible to you, Judge Hoskins," said Mr. Bingle gently. "You are a lawyer yourself."

"Am I to infer that you—What do you mean, sir?"

"I leave that entirely to you, sir."

Mr. Hoskins coughed, although there was nothing to indicate that it was necessary.

"It is possible, sir, for my clients to bring suit against you for a full accounting of all monies that you have expended or misused in—"

"I wouldn't say that, if I were you, Judge Hoskins."

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Bingle. For all monies that belong or have belonged to the estate of their father. I say it is possible for them to do so—but not likely. You should not forget that this estate virtually has been held in trust by you for all these years, pending the final decision—a point agreed upon by my clients and yourself in the desire to increase the value of—"

"If they feel inclined to bring such a suit, Mr. Hoskins, I shall not combat it," said Mr. Bingle drily. "They may take judgment by default. They are used to waiting by this time, so it won't be anything new for them to wait a million years for what they'd get if they sued me. By carefully hoarding a couple of dollars a year for a million years, I fancy I could in the end be able to take care of the judgment. But it hardly seems worth while, does it? It is barely possible that your clients might die before that time is up, even though I should survive."

"I fear that you do not realise that this is no joking matter, Mr. Bingle," said Mr. Hoskins stiffly. He was not quite so pompous as when he entered the house.

"I fear that you did not realise it either, Mr. Hoskins, when you spoke of suing me."

"Ahem! And now, sir, when may we arrange for a conference over the transfer of all properties now in your hands, or under your control, as coming from the estate of the late Joseph Hooper?"

"You may call up my attorneys by telephone this afternoon, sir, and arrange anything you like. They are still in my employ, according to our agreement of yesterday. I've paid them to see that I have nothing left when they get through with me, so there's nothing to worry about. Confer with them, Mr. Hoskins, and when you are ready I'll come down and do whatever is necessary in the premises. In the meantime, convey my thanks to my cousins and say that when they refused to accept a portion of the estate from me ten years ago they made it impossible for me to accept anything from them now. What they were too proud to accept, I also am too proud to take. Thank you for coming out to see me, Mr. Hoskins. I know you are a very busy man, and I know it must seem like a prodigious waste of time to be interesting yourself in the affairs of a poor bookkeeper without a cent to his name. For that is what I am, Mr. Hoskins: a poor bookkeeper without a cent to his name but still a believer in 'The Christmas Carol.'"

"But that book actually was the cause of your undoing, sir. It—"

"It doesn't matter," said Mr. Bingle wearily. "It is a good book, just the same. If you will excuse me now, I must go to the city. I have an appointment right after luncheon with a man who is going to show me a flat."

Mr. Hoskins surprised himself at this juncture—undeniably surprised himself. "If you are going to the city at once, Mr. Bingle, perhaps you will permit me to take you up in my car."

Mr. Bingle's smile was quizzical. "You HAVE got something out of 'The Christmas Carol' then," he said, and Mr. Hoskins eventually had the grace to redden perceptibly. He was slow in grasping the connection, however.

The impoverished millionaire had a busy afternoon, and some annoying mishaps—if they may be classified as such. In the first place, he went to the bank and delivered his resignation as vice-president and director. He handed it to Mr. Force and at the same moment applied for his old job as bookkeeper. Mr. Force complimented him on his promptness in both emergencies. It appears that the newspapers had printed columns about the Bingle affair. Mr. Force was in possession of all the facts. He had been interviewed by all of the reporters who had failed to see Mr. Bingle and who had to be content with a statement prepared and delivered by Flanders.

"Your resignation comes just in time, Bingle," he said. "We have a meeting of the board to-morrow. And as for the position, I'm happy to say you can have it almost immediately. Ramsey is leaving. I thought of you this morning when my secretary mentioned the fact. And, by the way, I don't mind saying that we hope to have the Hooper heirs continue their holdings in the bank. The account, as you know, is a large one and we don't want to lose it. Besides, Geoffrey Hooper is the sort of a chap who will help the bank tremendously if we put him on the board. He stands very high socially and is hand in glove with the richest people in town. I am to see him at three o'clock. By Jove, it's nearly three. Excuse me, Bingle, if I appear to hurry you off, but—"

"I just wanted to ask how Kathleen is, Mr. Force," said Mr. Bingle, who had not been asked to sit down.

"She's all right," said Mr. Force. "Good-bye, Bingle. Tell Bashford I said you were to have Ramsey's place. And, by the way, if I can ever be of any service to you, Bingle, I wish you'd call on me."

"Thanks. The job will be enough, I hope, Mr. Force."

Force suddenly lowered his eyes. "I'd ask you to come and see Kathleen, Bingle, but—but we're trying to break the child of her homesickness, of her longing to see you. Time, of course, will do it. You will understand, of course, that it is better for her—and for all of us—if she doesn't see you."

Mr. Bingle's face shone. "She—she still loves me, then?" he cried softly.

Force compressed his lips, and then admitted: "Yes, Bingle, old fellow, she DOES love you. And, hang it all, why shouldn't she? I—I want her to love me and not you. I can't look at you without envy in my soul—eating my soul, do you understand?—and I could almost hate you for the start you got of me in those long years with her. Oh, don't laugh at me, Bingle. Don't stand there grinning like a hyena. I suppose it will please you to hear that the poor child cries nearly every night of her life because she—she misses you. I—"

"You can bet it DOES please me," shouted Mr. Bingle.

"Wait, Bingle! Don't go. What am I to do? How am I going to put sunshine back into that little girl's face? Lord, man, I—I can't stand it much longer."

Mr. Bingle pondered. Then he laid his hat upon the table and took a notebook and pencil from his pocket. While he scribbled, Force looked on in perplexity.

"There!" said Mr. Bingle, tearing out the sheet and handing it to the president of the bank. "You may read it, Mr. Force. Give it to her, and see if she doesn't brighten up a bit."

Force read the note. He read it aloud, as if that was the only way to get the full meaning of it.

"'Dear Kathleen: Your old daddy loves you. You must always love him, and you must make your new daddy fetch you to see him some day. Come and see Freddie and all the other kiddies. They will be so delighted to see you, for they all love you. And if your new daddy will fetch you to see your old daddy once in a while, I am sure you will come to love your new daddy as much, if not more than you love your old

"DADDY BINGLE.'"

"Give that to her, Force, and maybe she'll put her arms around your neck and kiss you," said Mr. Bingle, and went swiftly out of the room, leaving Force staring at the bit of paper as if fascinated.

As he hurried from the bank, he met Rouquin, the foreign exchange manager, who evidently had been lying in wait for him.

"How do you do, Rouquin?" said he, stopping to proffer his hand to the Frenchman.

"See here, Mr. Bingle," began Rouquin, in an agitated undertone; "I want a word or two with you about Napoleon. What is to become of that child, now that you are down and out? Will he be sent to some accursed charity home or—"

"Possess your soul in peace, Rouquin," said Mr. Bingle, drawing back to look more intently into the unfriendly eyes of the once amiable Rouquin. "Napoleon shall have the best I can give him, no more. He is as well with me as he could ever have been with his good-for-nothing father, and if I choose to get rid of him later on to the best advantage I won't be doing anything more despicable than his father and mother did

before me. Please bear that in mind."

"I shall see to it that he is taken away from you before he is a week older," cried Rouquin angrily. "You cannot expect me to leave that helpless child—"

"What have you got to do with it, Rouquin?" demanded Mr. Bingle sharply.

"I am his mother's friend. I promised her that he should have a fine home. I swore to her that he should never know want or hardship or—"

"There is only one way for you to take Napoleon away from me," said Mr. Bingle, as Rouquin floundered for words to express himself. "And that is to come up like a man and say that you are his father. Whenever you can do that and whenever you can show me that you and his mother are married to each other, I'll give him up to you, but not before, you scum of the earth!"

Rouquin went very red in the face and then very pale, and his thin lips set themselves in a ghastly smile.

"Good day, Rouquin," said Mr. Bingle, and went out of the bank.

Mr. Epps was annoyed because his customer kept him waiting for nearly half-an-hour. He was exceedingly crabbed and disagreeable as they set out to look at the flat which was to be the Bingle home, provided the rent was paid regularly and promptly.

CHAPTER XV — DECEMBER

The proverbial church-mouse was no worse off than Mr. Bingle at the end of the fifth month of his reduction. Indeed, it is more than probable that the church-mouse would be conceded a distinct advantage in many particulars. A very small nest will accommodate a very large family of growing mice; the tighter they are packed in the nest the better off they are in zero weather. Moreover, in a pinch, the parental church-mouse may stave off famine by resorting to a cannibalistic plan of economy, thereby saving its young the trouble of growing up to become proverbial church-mice. It may devour its young when it becomes painfully hungry, and not be held accountable to the law. With commendable frugality, the church-mouse first eats off the tail of its offspring. Then, if luck continues to be bad, the remainder may be despatched with due and honest respect for the laws of nature.

Now, with Mr. Bingle, it was quite out of the question for him to devour even so small a morsel as Napoleon without getting into serious trouble with the law, and it was equally impossible to obtain the same degree of comfort for his young by packing them into a four room flat. And then the church-mouse doesn't have to think about shoes and stockings and mittens and ear-muffs, to say nothing of frocks and knickerbockers. So he who speaks of another as being "as poor as a church-mouse" does a grave injustice to a really prosperous creature, despite the fact that it lives in a church and is employed in the rather dubious occupation of supporting a figure of speech. Look carefully into the present law of economics, if you please, and then grant the church-mouse the benefit of the doubt.

Mr. Bingle's flat could be found by traversing a very mean street in the lower east side not far removed from the Third Avenue Elevated tracks. Discovery required the mounting of four flights of stairs by foot, and two turns to the right in following the course of the narrow, dark hallway which led in a round-about sort of way to a fire escape that invited a quicker and less painful death than destruction by flames in case one had to choose between the two means of perishing.

Four rooms and a kitchen was all that Mr. Bingle's flat amounted to. The four rooms contained beds; in the kitchen there was a collapsible cot. In one of the rooms (ordinarily it would have been the parlour), there was a somewhat futile sheet-iron stove in which soft coal or wood could be used provided the wind was in the right direction. This was, in fact, the parlour. The bed, by day, assumed the dignity of a broad but saggy lounge, exceedingly comfortable if one was careful to sit far enough forward to avoid slipping into its cavernous depths from which there was no escape without assistance. Besides being the parlour, it was also the library, the study-room, the dining-room and reception hall. By night, it was the bed-chamber of Mr. Bingle.

At the beginning of the cold snap that arrived quite early in December, it also became the sleeping place of Rutherford, Rosemary and Harold, the tiniest of the children, who piled in with the uncomplaining occupant and kept him awake three-fourths of the night trying to determine whose legs were uncovered and whose were not. With six exceedingly active little legs wriggling in as many different directions in pitch darkness, it was no easy matter, you may be sure, to decide whether any two belonged to the same individual, and when it came to pass that three of them were exposed at the same time the puzzle was indeed a difficult one.

Napoleon's crib also made its way into the parlour when the cold weather came; and while Napoleon's legs stayed under cover pretty well his voice, like Chanticleer's, arose before the sun. Frederick, Wilberforce and Reginald slept in one room, Marie Louise, Henrietta and Guinevere in another. In pleasant weather, Rosemary joined her sisters, while Harold and Rutherford fell in with the other boys. There never was a time, however, when Mr. Bingle did not have a bed-fellow in the shape of one or the other of the two small boys.

The fourth room was occupied by the maid-of-all-work, and as it was primarily intended to be the servant's bedroom it is not necessary to state that there was space for but one full grown person inside its four walls. The collapsible cot in the kitchen represented the foundation of an emergency guest chamber. Up to the present it had not been called into use, but it was always there in readiness for the expected and unexpected.

It will be observed that no account is taken of Mrs. Bingle. The explanation is quite simple. She went to live with her mother and sister at Peekskill on the advice of Dr. Fiddler almost immediately after the Supreme Court's opinion was handed down. Later on, she came down to the city with her mother, who now received a small but sufficient income through the death and will of a fairly well-to-do bachelor brother. The old lady took a house in the Bronx and once a week Mr. Bingle journeyed northward by subway and surface lines to visit his wife. A smart little doctor from Dr. Fiddler's staff made occasional visits to the Bronx and looked the part of a wiseacre when Mr. Bingle appealed to him for encouragement. He smiled knowingly and refused to commit himself beyond a more or less reassuring squint, a pursing of the lips, and the usual statement that if nothing happened she would be as fit as ever in the course of time.

The cot in the kitchen was for Mr. Bingle in case Mrs. Bingle decided to come back to him in health as well as in person. He consoled himself with the daily hope that she would come dashing in upon him, as well as ever and in perfect sympathy with his decision to protect the helpless children they had gathered about them in their years of affluence.

He had stood out resolutely against all contention that the children should be cast upon the world once more. Harsh words were used at times by interested friends in their efforts to bring him to his senses. They urged him to let them find homes or asylums for the rapacious youngsters; they described them as so many Sindbads; they spoke of them as millstones about the neck of a man who could never get his head above water unless he cut loose from them; they argued long and insistently about his mistaken ideas of justice, responsibility, affection. He came back at them always with the patient declaration that he would stand by the bargain made by himself and his wife so long as God saw fit to give him the strength to earn a living for their charges.

"Why, confound you, Bingle," said Mr. Force to him one day at the bank, "one would think that you still regard yourself as a millionaire, the way you hang onto those kids. Cut them adrift, old fellow. Or if you won't do that, at least let some of us help you in a pecuniary way. Don't be so infernally proud and self-satisfied. It wouldn't be charity. It would be justice. Now, see here, I've argued this thing with you for three months or more and I'm getting tired of your everlasting serenity. I know you are hard put to find enough money to clothe and feed these kids, besides buying what your wife may need. You are beginning to look shabby and you certainly are thinner and greyer. What you ought to do, Bingle, is to turn those kids over to a Home of some sort and settle down to a normal way of living. Winter is coming on. You will have a devil of a time providing for ten small children and a sick wife on the salary you are getting here. Now, for heaven's sake, old fellow, take my advice. Get rid of 'em. You owe it to your wife, Bingle. She ought—"

"I owe it to my wife to take care of them alone, now that she is unable to do her part," said Mr. Bingle simply. "We took them as partners, so to speak. She is unable to manage her share of the liability. Well, I'll do her part for her, Mr. Force, so long as I'm able. The time may come when I shall have to appeal for help, or give up the struggle altogether, but it isn't here yet. I can manage for a while, thank you. Besides," and his face brightened, "we may have a very mild winter, and the new tariff is just as likely as not to reduce the cost of living, no matter what you croakers say to the contrary. I've talked it over with Mrs. Bingle. She says she can't come home until she is very much better, and I'll admit that the children would be a dreadful strain upon her nerves at present. But she says I'm to do just as I think best in regard to them. She thinks I'm foolish—in fact, she says so—but I think I understand her better than any one else. Down in her heart she knows I'm doing the right thing. We'll wait, like old Micawber, for something to turn up. If it doesn't turn up in a reasonable length of time, then I'll consider what is best to do with the children."

"Are you considering your own health, Bingle?" demanded Force bluntly.

"No," said Mr. Bingle simply. "I've lived a decent, sensible life, so what's the use worrying over something that can't be helped?" His smile was cheerful, the twinkle in his eyes was as bright as though it had never known a dim moment.

"You should accept the standing offer of the Hooper heirs," said Force. "They are disposed to be fair and square, Bingle. Three thousand a year isn't to be sneezed at."

"The Hooper heirs are sneezing at it, so why shouldn't I?" said Mr. Bingle cheerily.

"I suppose you'll read that ridiculous Christmas Carol on Christmas Eve," said Force sarcastically.

"Certainly," said Mr. Bingle. "That reminds me; I wish you'd let Kathleen come down to see us on Christmas Eve. I think she'd enjoy the reading."

"I'll do it, Bingle," said Force after a moment. "Since she has been allowed to go down to see you and those kids of yours, her whole view of life has changed. You were right, old fellow. I believe she likes me better as time goes on. At any rate, she is quite gay and happy, and she doesn't look at me with scared eyes any longer. She kissed me as if she really meant it the other day when I told her she could have Freddy up to tea. I'd like to suggest, however, that you see to it that the flat is thoroughly aired and all the germs blown out before she comes down again to—"

"You needn't worry, Mr. Force," said Bingle without a sign of resentment in his manner. "We can't help airing the flat. Our greatest problem is to keep from airing it. There isn't a minute of the day that it isn't being aired."

Besides Mr. Force, who was a friend by circumstance and not from choice, Bingle possessed two loyal and

devoted friends in Diggs and Watson, proprietors of the Covent Garden Consolidated Fruit Company of Columbus Avenue, Manhattan. They would have supplied him with vegetables and cured meats without charge if the thing could have been accomplished without his knowledge. They came often to see him, Watson bringing his wife, the former Miss Stokes, and many a night was made cheerful for the little man by these good sprites from another world.

Mr. Diggs resignedly awaited the day when Mr. Bingle's maid-of-all-work could see her way clear to become Mrs. Diggs, and the equal of Mrs. Watson, if not her superior by virtue of the position of her husband's name on the firm's business cards. But if Diggs was devotedly loyal to Melissa, Melissa was equally loyal to Mr. Bingle. Fifteen years of kindness had not been wasted on this extraordinary servant. She was as true as she was unique in this age of abominations.

The older children went to a public school not far away, and Melissa looked after the young ones through the long, slow days, relieved only from her self-imposed duties when Mr. Bingle came home from the bank. Neither Melissa nor Mr. Bingle had had a full day off in all these months, and neither complained. When Sunday came, he always urged her to spend it with friends, leaving him to attend to the midday meal and dinner, but she firmly, even arrogantly, refused to permit any one to meddle with her kitchen. She forced him to go to the Bronx every Sunday afternoon, whether he would or no, and demanded a staggering decrease in wages.

"Why, Mr. Bingle," she said, "you can't expect me to work for the same pay I was getting out at Seawood. Don't be silly, sir; wasn't I getting more out there than the butler got? And didn't I save nearly every cent of it for eight years and more? I was getting twenty-five dollars a week out there, wasn't I? And Mr. Diggs was getting only a hundred dollars a month, wasn't he? Well, how much could you afford to pay a butler now if you had one, sir? Two dollars a week at the outside, find himself. Well, I still feel I'm worth more to you than any butler you could get, so I'll have to insist on three dollars a week when convenient. I put away about eight thousand dollars while I was working for you at Seawood. It's in the savings banks now, every nickel of it, drawing three and a half and four per cent., or about twenty-five dollars a month, sir. Twelve and twenty-five makes thirty-seven a month, don't it? That's more than most girls are getting, and it's certainly more than any of 'em is worth, judging from what I've seen. So if you'll just consider that I'm getting thirty-seven a month out of you, Mr. Bingle, we won't argue any longer."

"But, my dear Melissa, we must consider poor Diggs. It isn't fair to keep him waiting. I fear I shall have to discharge you. It seems to be the only way to make you and Diggs happy. I shall discharge you without a recommendation, too. We can't have Diggs dying of old age while we are discussing what is to become of him. It is your duty to marry Diggs at once. You must remember that I do not want you in my employ. You must not forget that I told you so six months ago and that I even tried to lock you out. Now, you certainly do not care to work for a man who despises you, who doesn't want you around, who is doing his level best to get rid of you, who—"

"Oh, shucks, Mr. Bingle!" cried Melissa, with her comely grin. "Sit down and have your breakfast now. Don't worry about Mr. Diggs. He is having the time of his life courting me. At least, he acts as if he is. It won't hurt him to be engaged for a couple of years."

"But see how happy Watson is."

"I see all right," she said shrewdly; "and it won't hurt Mr. Diggs to see how happy he is, either."

"You are the most selfish girl I've ever known, Melissa," said he quaintly. "You won't let anybody else have a thing to say about it, will you?"

"No, sir," said Melissa. "I'm a perfect brute."

Mr. Epps was a regular visitor. He came once a month and never later than the first. The rent was twenty-two dollars a month. Mr. Epps was always expecting that it wouldn't be paid. He never failed to make a point of telling Mr. Bingle that he was what you might call a soft-hearted lummix and for that reason it always went hard with him to evict a tenant for not paying his rent on the minute. He talked a great deal about the people he had chucked out into the street and how unhappy the life of a renting agent could be at times. Once he gave Mr. Bingle a cigar.

"Sure I'm not robbing you?" said Mr. Bingle.

"No," said Mr. Epps. "I don't smoke."

There was one Broadway theatre in which it was impossible to obtain seats unless they were applied for weeks in advance. The leading lady in the company playing there was not so important a personage that she could deny herself the pleasant sensation of being a real woman, and the author of the play was not so high and mighty that one had to use a ten-foot pole in touching him.

Mr. and Mrs. Richard Sheridan Flanders paid frequent visits to the home of Mr. Bingle. The beautiful and popular Miss Colgate, the sensation of the early season and a certain candidate for stellar honours, never came to see the young Bingles without betraying a spirit of generosity which sometimes caused Mr. Bingle to sit up half the night treating stomach-aches of all ages and degrees. She brought candy and cakes and fruit for the children, and flowers for Mr. Bingle. She would have come laden with more substantial and less pernicious presents but for the gentle objections of her old friend and benefactor. In the face of his kindly protests, she abandoned certain well-meant, even cherished ideas, and was often sore at heart.

Dick Flanders had found a producer after all. His hopes, considerably dashed by the Supreme Court of the United States of America, were at a low ebb when a practically unknown manager from the Far West concluded that there was more to his play than the wise men of the East were able to discern at a glance.

With more sense than intelligence, the Westerner leaped into the heart of New York with a new play by a new author and scored a success from the opening night. Amy Colgate, an unknown actress, became famous in a night, so to speak. After the holidays, there would be a company playing the piece in Chicago, and another doing the "big stands" throughout the length and breadth of the land. So much for Mr. Flanders' play and Miss Amy Colgate.

Mr. Bingle never ceased congratulating himself and his two successful friends on the fact that he had not invested a cent of the Hooper fortune in the production. For, said he, if he had put a penny into it, the Hooper heirs would now be dividing the profits with Flanders.

"Luck was with us for once, Dick," he was prone to repeat. "A week later and we would have been desperately involved. I would have put up the initial ten thousand dollars for the production and you would have been saddled with Geoffrey and his sisters, perhaps for life—and I can't imagine anything more unnecessary than that. Yes, sir, the smash came just in the nick o' time. What at first appeared to you to be a calamity turned out to be a God-send, my boy. The Supreme Court behaved handsomely by you."

This always brought out a vigorous protest from Mr. and Mrs. Flanders. They stoutly maintained that Mr. Bingle was an original partner in the enterprise, and, when it came right down to tacks, had put quite as much capital into the business as either of them. They contended that he should have a share in the royalties, if not in the profits.

"As a matter of fact, Mr. Bingle, you made so many valuable suggestions in respect to the play—dialogues, construction and so forth—that you really ought to take some of the consequences," said Flanders. "It isn't fair to put all the blame upon me. For instance, who was responsible for cutting out that scene in the second act?"

"Mrs. Bingle," said the other promptly. "She thought it was too suggestive."

"Well, it certainly was you, sir, who advised me to make more of the scene between Deborah and the old gentleman in the last act. As you know, it is now the great scene in the play. You will not pretend to deny—"

"Advice is one thing, Dick, and following it is quite another. No, you can't make me believe that I did anything toward writing that play. A man who didn't know the difference between a cue line and a back drop can't very well be indicted for complicity. To tell you the truth, Mrs. Flanders, I don't know to this day what those initials, 'L. U. E.' stand for, and a lot of other initials as well. Pride kept me from inquiring. I didn't want to expose my ignorance about a thing that you and Dick talked about so glibly. What does 'L. U. E.' mean?"

"'Left Upper Entrance,' Mr. Bingle," said she with a laugh.

"Well, I'm glad the mystery is revealed at last. I've laid awake nights trying to conjure up words to fit those letters. 'R. U. E.' means 'right,' I suppose. Dear me, how simple it seems, after all."

"Now, see here, Mr. Bingle," Flanders would say, "you went into partnership with me last winter, that's the long and short of it. It wasn't your fault that you couldn't put up the money according to our agreement, but I want to say to you that if it hadn't been for your encouragement and advice I never would have finished the play and I certainly could not have scraped up the courage to get married when I did. Amy and I have always looked upon you as a partner in our success. Now, I'll tell you precisely what we've decided upon as a fair division of the royalties that I am receiving. You are to take the author's royalty from the number three company—the one that is to play the 'road' for this season and next. It is to be a three cornered arrangement. Amy helped to develop the play, so she is to have the royalty from the Chicago company, while I shall receive all that comes out of the New York run. This arrangement will hold good for two seasons. After that, we'll make a new arrangement, taking in the stock rights, moving pictures and—"

But Mr. Bingle would listen to no more. Always when Flanders got just so far in his well-meant, earnest propositions, the object of his concern would stop him in such a gentle, dignified manner that the young playwright would flush with the consciousness that he had given offence to an honest soul.

Mr. Bingle defeated every enterprise on the part of his few friends that had the appearance of charity. He accepted their good intentions, he delighted in their thoughtfulness and esteem, but he never permitted them to go beyond a certain well-defined line. The argument that he had been generous, even philanthropic, in his days of prosperity was invariably met by the quaint contention that while the Good Book teaches charity, the dictionary makes a point of defining it, and "you can't spell charity, my friend, with the letters that are allotted to generosity. So don't quote the Bible to me."

He put a stop to the cunning schemes of Diggs and Watson, who, with Melissa's connivance, began a regular and systematic attempt to smuggle bacon, eggs, butter and potatoes into the kitchen. This project of theirs at first comprehended vegetables of every description and fruits as well, but the sagacious house-maid vetoed anything so wholesale as all that. She agreed that the accidental delivery of a side of bacon, or a mistake in the counting of a dozen eggs, or the overweighing and undercharging of a pound of butter, or the perfectly natural error of sending a peck and a half of potatoes when only a peck was ordered, might escape the keen observation of Mr. Bingle, but that anything more noticeable would cause the good gentleman to take his trade elsewhere. As she said to the distressed Diggs one evening, after carefully observing that the kitchen door was closed: "When I order a half ton of coal from you for the parlour stove, there's no sense in you weighing it out by ounces. Guess at it, and then after you've guessed as near right as you know how, double the amount. Mr. Bingle isn't going to weigh the coal, you know. And when it comes to rice and hominy and cooking apples and all such things, just let your imagination do the measuring. If a pound of coffee happens to look like a pound and a half to you, don't forget the extra cups you used to have every afternoon at Seawood. And if I should happen to send for the cheapest tea you've got in stock, don't overlook the fact that there is an expensive kind. Once in a while you might make ME a present of a couple of dozen oranges,

some bananas and nuts, and you might sometimes ask Mr. Bingle to sample a new brand of smoking tobacco you're thinking of carrying."

"But we sha'n't carry tobaccos," said Mr. Diggs, who aside from being a good soul was also British.

"All the more reason why you should be THINKING of carrying 'em, isn't it, you stupid?"

Mr. Bingle saw the opening performance of the Flanders play and went behind the scenes afterward. He did this, he explained, so that he could describe his sensations to Mrs. Bingle. He was introduced to all of the players and they were so uniformly polite that he fell into a fine fury the next morning on reading the newspaper review in which they were described as "unintentionally adequate."

He knew as well as every one else that it would be impossible for him to keep the children on the salary he was receiving at the bank. He knew that the day was not far off when he would have to give them up. His fellow bookkeepers harangued him from morning till night. They made themselves obnoxious with their everlasting talk about being unable to support families one-fourth the size of his; and one or two slyly inquired whether he hadn't "salted away" a part of the Hooper money for a perpetual spell of rainy weather. In justice to the children themselves it would be necessary for him, before long, to set about finding suitable, respectable homes for them. It was this unhappy sense of realisation that put the new furrows in his brow and took the colour out of his cheek, the lustre from his eyes.

One day he was approached by Rouquin, volatile and cheery as in the days of old. The sprightly Frenchman was beaming with friendliness and good spirits. He conveyed a startling bit of personal news to Mr. Bingle without the slighest trace of shame or embarrassment.

"Well, Mr. Bingle, I have married her," he said shrugging his shoulders in a manner that might have signified either extreme satisfaction with himself or lamentation over the inevitable. "The day before yesterday. I am now a proud and happy father, old friend."

"Father?" murmured Mr. Bingle, bewildered. "You—mean bridegroom, Rouquin."

"So I do," cried Rouquin amiably. "But you forget Napoleon—little Napoleon," he went on gaily.

"You have married Napoleon's mother?"

"Le diable! But who else, M'sieur? The charming, adorable Mademoiselle Vallemont. Ah, my good friend, I am so happy. I am—"

"Vallemont? But Madame Rousseau—you seem to forget that she is the mother of Napoleon. You—"

"Nevertheless," said Rouquin, with a gay sweep of his hand before laying it tenderly upon his heart, "I have married the mother of Napoleon. Alas, my good friend, Madame Rousseau is no more. She died when she was but one day old. And her excellent husband, the splendid Jean, he also is a thing of the past. Now there is no one left but Madame Rouquin and me and that adorable Napoleon. Vive l'Emperor! Come, M'sieur, congratulate me. See! This cablegram provides Napoleon with a father. But for what this little bit of paper says, the poor enfant might have gone fatherless to his grave. See! It says here that my wife has died. Read for yourself, M'sieur. It is in French, but what matter? I shall translate. 'Raoul Rouquin: Blanche died to-day. Good luck.' See, it is signed 'Pierre.' Pierre he is my brother. He lives in Paris. Ah, so long have I waited! You may never know my despair—never, M'sieur. But my wife she has died, so all is well. The day before yesterday I was married. I take—"

"For heaven's sake, Rouquin," gasped Mr. Bingle; "not so fast! I don't know what you are talking about."

"Ah, it is so simple," sighed Rouquin, looking upon Mr. Bingle with pity in his eyes. "Can you not see? So long as my wife was alive I could not be married. Is that not plain to you? Then she dies. Quick! Instantly I am married. Voila! It is so simple."

Mr. Bingle comprehended at last. "I see. You have had a wife in Paris all these years, eh?"

"Mon Dieu! Yes, all these years," groaned Rouquin, rolling his eyes. "See! See what my brother Pierre says: 'Blanche died to-day. Good luck.' Good luck! Mon Dieu, M'sieur, is it possible that you do not know what 'good luck' means?"

"And you have married Madame Rous—or whatever her name is?"

"So quick as that!" cried Rouquin, snapping his fingers. "And now, M'sieur, when may I come to take little Napoleon home to his mother?"

Thus it came about that Napoleon was the first to go. Amid great pomp and ceremony, he departed from the home of the many Bingles on a bright, clear day in December, shortly after banking hours, attended by his own mother and father.

CHAPTER XVI — ANOTHER CHRISTMAS EVE

Christmas was drawing near. The Bingle children, accustomed to manifold and expensive presents, were in a state of doubt and hope combined. The older ones realised that while Santa would not pass them by without a sign, there was every reason to believe that he would not deliver the things for which they slyly petitioned, the things they most desired. They had been brought up to receive all that they expected and the prospect ahead for them was not reassuring from the viewpoint their intelligence forced them to take. There were secret lamentations and not a few surly discussions in the absence of Mr. Bingle.

Melissa took the older boys to task for some of the things they said about their foster father. Frederick was the chief offender. He knew that Mr. Bingle's pocket-book was the real Santa Claus, and he wanted a pair of skates and a hockey outfit. Something told him that he would be compelled to accept in lieu of these necessities a silly overcoat or a pair of shoes from the cheap department store up the street. He was too young and no doubt too selfish to admit that he was by way of outgrowing his clothes at least once if not twice a year, or that there is such a spectre as wear and tear. He became sullen, irritable and not infrequently rude to Mr. Bingle. Once when Melissa sharply rebuked him for his ingratitude, he came back at her with an argument that baffled her for the time being: he could not see why Mr. Bingle had been so good to Kathleen. Why had she been given a rich, happy home while he and all of the others were brought to a place like this? Melissa, finding no immediate response to this, boxed his ears.

The younger members of the brood were not involved in this graceless agitation. The complaints stopped with Guinivere. Harold, Rosemary and Rutherford were too young to realise the state of destitution into which the family had fallen. They were quite happy, contented and, so far, unaware of the gravity of a situation which was more or less apparent to their elders. Frederick, Marie Louise and Wilberforce formed the higher group of malcontents, and their mutterings reached the acute ears of a second and less formidable group composed of Reginald, Henrietta and Guinivere. The influence of the three older children, envied and imitated by the next three in order of age, was responsible for the inclusion of this second group in the general tendency toward unruliness and resentfulness.

Mr. Bingle sensed this unhappy condition of affairs. His soul was sorely tried. Was he doing the right thing by these children? He was doing his best, but was his best all that they were entitled to under the circumstances? Was he depriving them of a bigger chance in life? He had taken them out of the byways, but was he leading them to the highways? The whining, peevish submission on the part of the larger boys and girls; the unmistakable interrogation that always lurked in their eyes; the frequent outbursts of temper; the quarrels that came up every day among them—all of these went to prove they were sliding back into the byways. There was no gainsaying that, he would say to himself. Insolence, insubordination grew apace. Once Frederick, in the heat of passion over a well-deserved rebuke, called him a "damned old fool."

Moreover, was he doing right by Mrs. Bingle? Was it possible that she might never come back to him who loved her more than he could have loved even a child of his own? Would he be the one to blame?

And so it came about that he finally consented to listen to the suggestions of the cold and unemotional Mrs. Force.

The wife of the president of the bank was the sort of person who gets into the newspapers by all the hooks and crooks known to her sex. To begin with, she made charity a business. As Chairman of two or three organizations declaring for the betterment of society, high and low, she was quoted on nearly every question that came up for discussion in the public prints. She recognised the advantage in her day of being an anti-suffragist. She saw the value of associating herself with the movement to create and maintain a bureau for the distribution of high class literature among low class readers, and she belonged to a society which elevated the stage by giving Sunday night dress rehearsals for the benefit of destitute millionaires. She had a conspicuous box at the Opera, and encouraged the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals by appearing at the Horse Show in Madison Garden without spurs.

But it was as President of the Society for the Restoration of King Manuel to the throne of Portugal that she arose above the ordinary multitude of publicity seekers. This was a movement so unique and so suggestive of pomp that many of the prominent show-girls tried to promote themselves into royal notice by joining the society. They were almost unanimously in favour of the Restoration. Mrs. Force was constantly being interviewed about the hopes and designs of King Manuel, and she was always quoted as saying that the "time is not yet ripe for the unfolding of our plans or I would be only too happy to tell you everything—and I may be able to give you something of interest next week if you will call me up."

Soon after the Bingle disaster, she allied herself with a Society for the Relief of Incompetent Parents, and later on took up the cause of Children's Rights and Wrongs. Quite palpably it was Mr. Bingle's dilemma that inspired her to interest herself in these hitherto neglected enterprises. She began her duties as a member and supporter of the causes by at once declaring war upon poor Mr. Bingle. She put him into a state of siege before he even suspected that hostilities had begun, and then constituted herself Red Cross nurse, sanitary expert, peace intermediary, and everything else that she could think of at the time.

Operations began in November. She had Mr. Bingle brought into her husband's private office at the bank, and there she explained the motives and objects of the Society and talked unrestrainedly of the rights of little children, calmly assuming that the astonished bookkeeper had no rights of his own and therefore was not entitled to a word in the shape of interruption.

"Purely as a matter of humanity, Mr. Bingle, it is necessary for the Society to take these children away from you. We are taking children away from their natural parents every day and finding suitable homes for them, so it isn't reasonable for you to stand in our way, realising, as you must, that you are not the father of a single one of those poor innocents, all of whom are morally if not legally the property of this or kindred societies. We do not recognise the rights of a parent, so why should we consider those of one who attempts, through a mistaken idea of benevolence, to direct the future, the destiny of—ah—the destiny of—But surely you know

what I mean, Mr. Bingle. Now, I am not questioning the sincerity of your motives. I am heartily in accord with the original inspiration which led you to take these poor waifs into your home. But, don't you see, the idea works both ways. Charity begins at home, to be sure, but I submit that it all depends upon the character of the home. I do not call a four room flat a home. It may be all right for charity to begin there, in a small way, but it shouldn't drive out common sense, Mr. Bingle. The Society will take these children off of your hands. It will provide for them in every way. Come, now, give me a complete list of the little ones and—"

"I'll—I'll think it over, Mrs. Force," said Mr. Bingle desolately. "I can't be expected to see it from your point of view right at the start, you know. Let me go on for a year or two longer and then—"

"No," said she firmly, fixing him with a relentless eye. "We would regret exceedingly to be forced to call upon the authorities in the case, Mr. Bingle. Of course, you are aware that we can invoke the aid—"

"Oh, goodness no!" cried Mr. Bingle piteously. "You wouldn't think of taking them from me in that way, would you, Mrs. Force?"

"For your sake and for theirs it may be necessary," said she, and then wearying of her philanthropic labours, abruptly dismissed him with a curt: "And now, good day, Mr. Bingle."

Agents from the Society began to visit the little flat; others made a practice of seeing that the older children went to school every day, and, if they were absent, to pester Mr. Bingle with inquiries. Once when Wilberforce had a sore throat, a strange and extremely business-like doctor called and took a culture, at the same time making a note of the congested condition of the sleeping quarters.

Then Mrs. Force took to bringing fashionably dressed ladies to the flat so that they might see for themselves; and docile looking gentlemen in dark clothes and galoshes came to mutter over the extraordinary impropriety of allowing boys and girls to live in the same home together.

Soon after Napoleon was taken away by the bride and bridegroom, Mrs. Force came with her secretary and interviewed the children. The secretary took down notes while Mrs. Force put the questions to the older boys and girls. Mr. Bingle had been virtually ordered out of the room. Afterwards he was called in to hear the report which showed that Frederick, Marie Louise, Wilberforce and Reginald seldom had enough to eat, were always cold and unhappy, and were really quite eager to go into other homes, if it would help "poor daddy." The smaller children whimpered, but it was because they were overawed and frightened by Mrs. Force, who in the Seawood days had always been looked upon by them as the "bad fairy." Melissa, good soul, openly professed that she and Mr. Bingle could manage to take care of the "kids" all right, but in secret she prayed that the Society would take away a half a dozen or so of the little ingrates.

At last Mr. Bingle agreed to let the children go, but stipulated that they should be sent direct to private homes, and not go, like a flock of sheep, into an asylum or Orphans' Home from which they might be parcelled out singly to any Tom, Dick or Harry who came to look them over. He also insisted on having the prospective "bidders" apply to him in person. He would be the judge. He would look them over, and if they suited him, all well and good; if not, he would keep the children until the right and proper persons came along.

His stand was a firm one. He refused to recede an inch from this final position. In vain they argued that it would be the part of wisdom, in fact that it would be absolutely imperative to take them to a comfortable, commodious dormitory where the business end of such undertakings was attended to in routine order and not in the helter-skelter fashion that he advocated.

"I have just begun to realise," he said, "what it is to try to bring other people's children up for them, so, if you please, I submit that I know more about the business than this society knows or ever can hope to know. I have given them everything. I have loved them and they have loved me. In adversity I still love them, but I fear that I cannot say as much for them. They are not my flesh and blood. They know it, my friends—they've never been led to believe that anything else is the case. Now, I am ready and willing to carry out my obligations to them. I am prepared to do all that is in my power to bring them up in the right way, to make good men and women of them. I am not willing, however, to palm them off on other people without first telling those people what they are to expect. I do not blame these boys and girls for resenting what fate has brought them to. It is quite natural that they should feel as they do. I do not call it ingratitude. It is human nature. Even a small boy may reveal symptoms of human nature, Mrs. Force, if you get him into a corner. Now, I want to say to you and your friends here that I will let them go on one condition, and that is that each goes into a home that I personally approve of and only after I have told the head of that home all that I know about the child he seeks to adopt. I appreciate your interest in my behalf and I thank you for your untiring efforts. I believe that you are sincerely in earnest. But I ask you to do me the honour of permitting me to get out of my bad bargain in my own way and in my own time. There is no especial need of haste."

It was pointed out to him that many of those desiring to adopt children lived in distant states and cities, principally in small towns or upon farms. It might be impossible for them to come to New York to see him or the children. He still refused to give an inch.

And so the Society, satisfied that it had achieved a victory, set about to find fathers and mothers for the nine Bingles, and Mr. Bingle sat down to wait for the final struggle that was to come, or, more properly speaking, for the nine separate struggles that lay ahead of him. The children were told what they might expect in the near future, and Mr. Bingle's heart was sorely hurt by the very evident enthusiasm with which they received the news. The younger ones, swept along by the current, and less subtle than their elders, plied Mr. Bingle with a hundred eager, innocent questions, and every one of them seemed to look upon the coming separation as a lark! It was not unusual to catch two or three of the older ones slyly, but excitedly discussing the prospective change, and always they averted their eyes and dropped their voices when Mr. Bingle drew near. Once he heard Marie Louise say in anger to Wilberforce that she'd bet daddy would keep her to the last

because she was getting big enough to wash dishes and make beds!

The poor man was beginning to lose faith, not in human nature alone, but in himself. He grimly remarked to Melissa one day that "it isn't safe to count chickens even after they are hatched, especially when your eyes are smarting. I thought I knew more than God, Melissa, and if there was a bramble bush handy I'd jump into it in the hope that I might scratch my eyes back in again, as the saying goes."

"Well, anyhow, Mr. Bingle," Melissa replied, impressed by this confession of failure, "as soon as the kids have left we'll have Mrs. Bingle back again, and that's something to look forward to, sir. We'll go back to the old way of living, which was the best, after all, wasn't it? Just you and me and Mrs. Bingle."

Mr. Bingle hesitated for a moment. "When you and Diggs are married, Melissa, don't make the mistake of adopting a child."

"We won't, sir," said Melissa confidently. She twisted the corner of her apron for a few seconds and then ventured hardily: "Miss Stokes is expecting a baby, sir."

"You mean Mrs. Watson, Melissa. Dear me, that is good news. A boy or a girl? God bless my soul, what a silly question! You see, I'm so in the habit of choosing the gender in advance that I quite forgot myself. I meant to inquire WHEN."

"They've been married five months, sir," said Melissa.

Two weeks before Christmas, Mrs. Force came to the bank to report to Mr. Bingle that homes were in view for six of the children, in fact for all except Frederick, Marie Louise and Wilberforce. It appears that people hesitate about taking youngsters as old as these three, and as steeped in vice and ignorance as naturally might be expected in boys and girls of that age. She said, however, that the Society was making a point of telling people how nicely and how advantageously all of the children had been reared by the late Mr. Bingle. She smiled when she said the "late Mr. Bingle," for it was a capital joke and she had every intention of making the most of it.

It was proposed that the applicants should meet Mr. Bingle and the children at the offices of the Society on the Saturday before Christmas, which fell on a Thursday.

Mr. Bingle objected. He said he couldn't think of letting them go before Christmas. These people would have to wait until after Christmas Eve, and that was final. President Force, coming to his wife's rescue, ironically suggested to the little bookkeeper that it was barely possible that other people were in the habit of inflicting children with "The Christmas Carol." He flushed, however, under the mild stare with which Mr. Bingle favoured him, and proceeded to change his tune with considerable alacrity. A happy thought seemed to have struck him with some suddenness.

"By Jove, Bingle, I have a splendid scheme. What could be more fitting than that these child-seekers should receive just what they want on Christmas morning? That's the ticket, my dear," he said, turning to his wife. "Fix it so that a child is delivered bright and early on Christmas morning—in its own stockings, of course—and there you are! A Merry Christmas for everybody, and perhaps a Happy New Year. What do you think of it, Bingle?"

"Splendid!" said Mr. Bingle. "I wish I could have thought of that when I was in the business myself. It would have been great to have a new baby every Christmas morning. I will agree to that, Mrs. Force, provided I approve of the people I'm supposed to be Santa Claus for."

On the Saturday before Christmas he went to the offices of the Society with ALL of the children, for the industrious Mrs. Force had produced claimants for the three older ones, and when he took the brood home to supper long after seven o'clock that evening, homes and fresh parents were assured for all of them. To be sure, Frederick and Marie Louise objected to living on upstate farms, and Reginald howled bitterly over being promised to a Jewish family in West End Avenue. He had set his heart on being brought up as an Irishman. Some of them were to remain in New York City, one was to go to Philadelphia and another to Bridgeport. Harold, Rosemary and Rutherford were to undergo a complete change of name. They were going into families where for sentimental reasons, a John, a Betty and a Jeremiah were wanted. Guinivere stood in grave danger of being called Prue, after somebody's grandmother, and Henrietta was to be shortened to Etta.

It was understood that the agents from the Society were to call for the youngsters on Christmas Eve, so that they might be ready for delivery the first thing in the morning. The Society was prepared to attend to all of the legal requirements incident to the transfer. Mr. Bingle was to sign what he quaintly called a "blanket affidavit," covering the entire collection, and that was to be the end of the Bingle regime.

Christmas Eve came at last. The day had been bitterly cold, and Mr. Bingle coming in from his final walk with the four small children, who had been taken out to see the lighted shop windows before the last supper they were to have together, was blue in the face and shivering as with a chill. Melissa caught him in the act of removing his muffler from Rosemary's neck. He had already taken his thin overcoat from Harold's shoulders, so she missed that part of his personal sacrifice. She asked with considerable asperity if he was trying to get pneumonia.

"No," said Mr. Bingle, struggling to keep his teeth from chattering; "I'm not, Melissa. I'm trying to head off the croup."

"You'll probably have it yourself to-night."

"I think that would be rather jolly," he said. "I haven't had it since I was the size of Rosemary."

She thought he was losing his mind, and told Diggs so when he came in at six o'clock to help her with the

feast they were to have.

"Get away from that stove, Freddy, and you too, Marie Louise," she commanded. "Can't you see your daddy is shivering? Hustle now! Don't soak up all the heat in the room. Let him stand in front of the fire, you little—"

"Now, now, Melissa," said Mr. Bingle, reproachfully; "don't blame the kiddies. They're cold and—by the way, is there no steam in the radiator?"

"I shut off the measly thing awhile ago," she said. "There was too much cold air coming up through the pipes. Honestly, Mr. Bingle, if you happened to stand near that there radiator you'd feel a draft."

The children were dressed in their Sunday best, prepared for the coming exodus. They were neat and clean, and although six months had lengthened their bodies and shortened their garments, their patches and shreds were not so vindictive that they slapped Mr. Bingle's pride in face, if the metaphor is permissible.

"I hope," said he, with his thin shoulders close to the fire, "that we will have time for 'The Christmas Carol' before they—the—" his voice shook a little—"before the gentlemen come for you, kidlets. Perhaps if we were to hurry supper along a little bit, Melissa, we could manage it."

"I don't want to hear that thing again," said Frederick boldly. He appeared to be the leader of a movement to squash "The Christmas Carol."

"Neither do I," said Marie Louise and Wilberforce.

"I want to hear about Tiny Tim," piped up Rosemary, almost in tears.

"Well, you haven't heard it all your life like we have," said Frederick, scowling at the little one. "You've only heard it twice."

"Dear me," sighed Mr. Bingle, in evident distress. "Don't you want to hear 'The Carol' before you say good-bye to daddy—forever?"

"No," said Frederick; "and I'll bet they don't read it where we're going, either."

"Perhaps not, Frederick," said he slowly, turning a rather wistful face toward Melissa, who had come in with a pan full of coals. "There is one thing I quite forgot, Melissa."

"What's that, sir?"

"I forgot to stipulate that the 'Carol' HAD to be read on Christmas Eve in every one of these homes. Dear me, how could I have been so thoughtless."

"I wouldn't worry about that, sir. You're giving these people enough trouble without doing that to them. And as for you, Master Frederick, you'll probably find that instead of reading the 'Carol' to you they'll take you out in the woodshed and give you a touch of Dante's Infernal every once in awhile."

"I'll—I'll kill 'em if they do," cried Frederick loudly.

"Frederick the Great!" exclaimed Melissa with vast scorn. "Here now, you there, get to work and fetch the chairs and stools in from the bedrooms and put 'em up to the table. There's a couple in the kitchen, Wilber. Hustle out and—"

"Don't call me Wilber," snapped Wilberforce. "Haven't I always told you I hate it? Remember you're only a servant. Don't you go—"

"Tut, tut!" exclaimed Mr. Bingle, moving over so that Melissa could drop the coals into the stove. "Remember you are only a gentleman, Wilberforce."

"I'd like to know how I can remember it in a place like this," pouted the boy.

"It's all right, Mr. Bingle," said Melissa cheerily, "I don't mind being called a servant. It's better than 'hired girl.'"

There was a pathetic attempt at seasonable illumination and decoration in the crowded living-room, sprigs of holly, some tapers and tinsel, cotton snowballs and popcorn strands being in the least congested corners, and the table had ten candles standing in two sedate rows. These were not to be lighted until just before soup was served, and each participant at the board was to light his or her candle from the taper supplied by Melissa.

Over in one corner of the room reposed a small pile of packages, each neatly tied up with red ribbon. These represented the gifts of Mr. Bingle and Melissa to the palpably indifferent youngsters. Two bottles of milk stood on the radiator, which, according to Melissa, was infinitely colder than the ice box in the pantry. Incidentally, it is worth while to mention that in one of the bedrooms there were nine compactly wrapped bundles, each marked by a name, but not tied up in red ribbon. They contained the few belongings of the nine children, and they were all ready for the coming of the Society's agents. During the day Mrs. Force had sent her automobile and a footman to remove the toys and treasures left over from the reign of plenty, taking them to headquarters for future distribution among their owners. This was done while Mr. Bingle was at the bank. He could not have endured this part of the business.

The Christmas Carol lay on the mantelpiece behind the stove, with Mr. Bingle's reading glasses, both ready for use.

At six-thirty Mr. Diggs appeared, laden with bundles, and at his heels was Watson, carrying a tremendous basket. They were clad in huge fur overcoats, their faces were red from the cold, and their voices were vastly

cheerful.

"Merry Christmas, sir," said Diggs, and "Merry Christmas, sir," said Watson.

"I've taken the liberty, sir—I mean to say, Watson and I 'ave, sir—of fetching with us a thumping big Christmas dinner for you, seeing as you will be quite alone and—er—you might say at peace again, sir. Melissa, my dear, you will find hall the delicacies of the season in these 'ere parcels, and I defy hanybody to show a finer turkey than is in that basket. Wot say, Watson?"

"Fit to set before the King," said Watson with great pride in his voice.

"Wherefore I say 'Long Live the King,'" said Diggs, bowing elaborately before Mr. Bingle, whose eyes were shining as he went forward to shake hands with his old servants.

"God bless my soul, I—I—I thank you, gentlemen," he murmured. "But, I say, wouldn't it be better to serve some of these things to-night, before the children go away? What dif—"

"Yes, yes!" shouted the children.

"Begging your pardon, Mr. Bingle," said Diggs firmly, "but it is not to be thought of, sir. This dinner is for you, and not a morsel is to be served until to-morrow noon. These 'ere kids will 'ave their little stomachs crammed full all day to-morrow and we hinsists that yours won't be if we don't keep a pretty firm hand on you to-night, sir. Take the things out in the kitchen, Watson, and—and 'ide 'em safe."

"Well, well," said Mr. Bingle helplessly. "I don't know what to say, Diggs. What would you say, Reginald, if any one was as nice to you as Mr. Diggs and Mr. Watson are to me?"

"I'd say open 'em up to-night and not be stingy," said Reginald, following Watson with greedy eyes.

Melissa glared at him. "Just for that I ought to hold back your share of the chicken dumplings, young man!" Then she got quite red in the face. Mr. Bingle was looking at her in amazement.

"Chicken dumplings?" he murmured.

"Well, you see, sir," said Melissa, "I thought as how it wouldn't matter to you if I went out on my own hook and got a few things for a Christmas Eve dinner—just a couple of nice fat hens, and some asparagus, and parsley, and sweet potatoes, and—well, just a few little things like that. Thinks I, we can't afford to let these children go away without a bang-up meal in their little insides, so's nobody could think they was ever hungry in their lives, and so this morning I just stepped out and—oh, yes, I forgot, sir, I DID get a few hot house grapes and one or two other trifles, just to make it seem real, not to mention some celery and olives and fruitcakes."

"Quite the thing, Melissa," said Diggs approvingly. "Quite the thing, my dear. And did the men deliver the ham and firewood I—ahem! I beg pardon!"

"Are we to have firewood for dinner to-night, Diggs?" inquired Mr. Bingle, his voice trembling a little despite his good-natured smile.

"Oh, you stupid, blundering English," cried Melissa in a voice that shrivelled Diggs.

"That's it, sir, I AM a stupid, blundering Englishman right enough. Blooming fool, sir, if you please. I didn't hintend to mention anythink but the ham. The confounded firewood slipped in, sir. 'Owever, I trust you'll overlook it, sir."

"I'm not overlooking firewood in this weather, Diggs," said Mr. Bingle drily. "Won't you sit down? Excuse me for not—"

"Oh, no, sir, thank you. I 'ave my duties to perform. Really, sir, I—"

"Go out into the kitchen, Mr. Diggs," commanded Melissa sharply. "God gave you a tongue, but he didn't give you anything to hold it with."

"Quite so, quite so," agreed the flustered Mr. Diggs, edging toward the kitchen whence through the open door came sounds of rattling pans and the penetrating but comforting scent of stewed chicken.

"It is good of you and Watson to come down this evening, Diggs," said Mr. Bingle, speaking with difficulty. "This must be the busiest night of the year for you. How could you afford to get away?"

"Well, sir," said Diggs, after looking to Melissa for approval or inspiration, "we decided as how Christmas comes but once a year, and as the boys in the shop can manage very nicely without us for a couple of hours, we says to ourselves we would come down and 'ear the 'Christmas Carol' if you don't mind, sir, for old times' sake. Miss Stokes—I mean to say, Mrs. Watson, will be along presently, sir. She stopped for a spell, to relieve the cashier while she went to supper. And—"

"That's enough, Mr. Diggs," interrupted Melissa. "You'll spoil it if you go on."

"Oh, I say, Melissa—"

"Out to the kitchen with you, and get out of that fur coat. You are perspiring like everything."

Mr. Bingle called Diggs back just as he was on the point of disappearing through the door.

"By the way, Diggs," he said, smiling broadly, "have you heard the news?"

"The news, sir? Is—is Mrs. Bingle—"

"Sh!" hissed Melissa.

"The news about Melissa. She is going to be married in this very room two weeks from to-night, Diggs. How is that for news?"

"Married? Good God, sir!" gasped Diggs.

"Married to you, Diggs, and I am going to give the bride away!"

"Oh, pshaw, Mr. Bingle!" cried Melissa, covering her flaming face with her apron.

"Do—do you mean it, Mr. Bingle?" cried Diggs, with beaming eyes.

"I do. I'm getting tired of seeing you two around, so I'm going to MAKE you get married. Now, don't say you'll refuse, Diggs, for—"

"Refuse! God bless you, sir—I—"

"You see," went on Mr. Bingle, coming to the poor fellow's relief, "I have a notion that Mrs. Bingle will be home by that time, and—and we'll get along very cosily here in—but, run along, Melissa! Bring in the feast! Hey, children?"

The children shouted vociferously, and Reginald, pursuing Melissa to the door, implored her to take back what she had said about the dumplings. To his surprise, Melissa kissed him.

Later on, Diggs returned from the kitchen and approached Mr. Bingle, who was sitting beside the stove with his back to the door, holding Rosemary and Rutherford on his knees.

"Dinner is served, sir," said Diggs in his most formal, dignified manner.

Mr. Bingle looked up, surprised by a voice that came resounding down from the past. The children were already staring open-mouthed at Diggs, who stood attired in his well-remembered dress-suit, the imposing, self-contained figure of a butler of the most approved type.

"God bless my soul," gasped Mr. Bingle.

"Quite so, sir," said Diggs smoothly. He drew out Mr. Bingle's chair, and the little man, completely dazed, sank abruptly into it. The children found their places, chattering like magpies.

"Lest they forget," said Diggs, leaning over to speak softly in Mr. Bingle's ear.

Then came Watson, in braid and buttons, stiff as a ramrod, chin high in the air, and as supercilious as any footman in all the world, carrying the soup. After a long, dry-eyed stare at the familiar figure that had always seemed so unreal to him in the days when everything belonged to fairyland, Mr. Bingle dropped his eyes and began fumbling blindly for the bone-handled fork at his plate.

He heard Frederick cry out: "I don't want to go away now, Daddy! Hurray! We've got Diggs and Watson back!" And then came the eager cries of many other voices, all of one accord. They wanted to stay! He suddenly knew why.

Tears were streaming down his cheeks. Through the mist that covered his eyes, he saw the champagne glass that stood alone beside his plate.

CHAPTER XVII — THE LAST TO ARRIVE

Mr. Bingle was an optimist. It seems hardly necessary to make this statement, but for the purpose of giving him a fair start along a new line of endeavour we resort to the distinctly obvious, and then announce that he brushed away the tears and laughed as gaily as any of them over the surprises that followed the one which momentarily caused him to falter. He was not given to looking upon the dark side of things. Even as he sat there at the head of the long table, he jocosely remarked to Diggs that he would have to borrow a saw from the janitor the next day and reduce the size of his board by five feet at least. Moreover, he could practice a little economy by cutting the excess timber up into kindling wood, and no doubt something could be saved by putting the over supply of china and glassware on the top shelves of the pantry where it would be safe from demolition unless the house took fire or an earthquake came along. Also a great deal more room could be obtained in the flat by making firewood of the extra chairs, to say nothing of the prospect of making a library and conservatory out of the bedroom to be vacated by the boys.

"As a matter of fact, Diggs, this flat isn't so bad as might appear, and the location is excellent. Quite handy for the Elevated, and not far from the river in case one wants to take a sail in pleasant weather. The view from the kitchen windows is capital. You could see East River quite plainly if it were not for the buildings. My idea is to put some plants in the room over there—the conservatory, I mean—and I expect to get a dog later on. Mrs. Bingle is very fond of dogs. See that window over there? Well, by sticking your head out of it a little way you can see clear to heaven."

"THAT window, sir?"

"Yes, sir, that very one."

"Why, it opens into the airshaft, sir."

"To be sure it does. You have to look straight upward, of course, if you want to see heaven, you know. And speaking of the airshaft, I am reminded that it is really quite a picturesque one at times. The windows across the way are sometimes very interesting, provided the shades are up. Usually, however, when the shades over yonder are up, I see to it that ours are down."

"May I fill your glass again, sir?"

"Is it empty?"

"Quite, sir."

"If you don't mind, Diggs, I think I shall save the rest of the wine until after the children have gone," said Mr. Bingle, slowly.

Diggs reflected. "Very good, sir. A splendid idea, sir."

"And then I shall ask you and Watson and Melissa and Mrs. Watson to drink with me to Mrs. Bingle."

"Thank you, sir."

"It does my heart good to see the way these young rascals eat, Diggs. They haven't had a dinner like this in a long time. Have a little more chicken, Wilberforce—and some Brussels sprouts. And how about you, Rutherford? Anything more?"

"I'll have some more soup, daddy," said Rutherford from his high chair. He was just ending the third course.

"Bless my soul!" exclaimed Mr. Bingle.

Melissa had come in to see that everything was going along in proper order. She looked hard at Mr. Bingle's plate and then at the gentleman himself. He met her reproachful gaze with one of mild apology.

"I'm saving my appetite for to-morrow, Melissa," he explained.

"You're not eating a thing," said Melissa sternly. "Mr. Diggs, what kind of a lummix are you? Can't you see that he's stinting himself so's them—"

"Now, Melissa," implored Mr. Bingle, "don't say anything on Christmas Eve that you'll be sorry for afterwards. It's all right, I assure you. I'm not very hungry and—"

"But there's more than enough to go 'round," burst out Melissa wrathfully. "There's no sense in your acting like this, Mr. Bingle."

"Sh!"

"Watson, give him some more of that chicken—the white meat, do you understand? And where's the dressing? Mr. Diggs, get those rolls over here—lively! Did he have any soup and fish? Did he—"

"Melissa, what are you trying to do?" demanded Mr. Bingle. "Stuff me so full I'll die in the night?"

"And him lookin' that thin and pale and peaked," went on Melissa, glaring at the unhappy butler and footman. "What have you got them buttons and that striped vest for, Watson? Are you here as a spectator? Get a move on now, both of you. And as for you, Mr. Bingle, I'm going to stand right here and SEE that you eat. Do you suppose I got up this meal for a joke on myself? Not much! The mashed potatoes, Watson! Never mind, Freddy, you can have some more after your daddy's had all he wants. Gee whiz, I'm glad I happened to come in when I did!"

Presently the door-bell rang—a feeble, broken tinkle reminiscent of an original economy—and Mr. Bingle laid down his salad fork with a sigh. The children started violently and a scared, uneasy look went around the table.

"The Society's agents," said Mr. Bingle, closing his lips tightly to prevent their trembling. "Freddy, will you please go to the door?"

"Beg pardon, sir," said Watson, almost reproachfully despite his lordly air. Then, with stately tread, he passed into the little hallway and threw open the outer door.

"I don't want to go," Henrietta was crying, and even Frederic looked intently at his plate with eyes that were preparing to fill. The rest of them were ready to whimper. After all, a bountiful meal and a full stomach go a long way toward producing a reaction. They were not so keen to leave Mr. Bingle as they were before the meal began.

"Mrs. Flanders! Mr. Flanders!" announced the high-chinned Watson.

First of all, the new arrivals paused to stare in astonishment at the liveried footman, and then for an instant at the imperious Diggs, after which they turned their gaze upon the table.

"Great Scott!" gasped Flanders. "Is this a dream?"

"Not on your life," said Watson, completely forgetting himself in an ecstasy of delight.

There was a tremendous hub-bub, during which Diggs and Watson had a great deal of difficulty in keeping their places as old and well-trained servants. They were frequently on the verge of becoming prosperous green-grocers and joining in the jollification.

First, the gorgeous Miss Colgate kissed Mr. Bingle, almost smothering the poor gentleman in the wealth of furs which enveloped and adorned her. Then she kissed nine smart little cheeks in rapid succession, all the while crying "Merry Christmas" and "bless your heart," in chorus with every one else and her cheery-voiced husband.

"Just had to run down, Mr. Bingle," Flanders was shouting as he pumped the little man's arm violently up and down. "A year ago to-night it all happened, you remember. Celebrating the greatest of all anniversaries. How are you? Couldn't let THIS night go by without seeing you, sir—couldn't possibly. Can't stay but a minute, though. Due at the theatre at half-past seven. Amy goes on early in the first, you know—of course, you know, having ordered her on when I had her entering when the act was half over. How are you?"

"Fine! Fine!" gasped Mr. Bingle, almost speechless.

"And now," cried Amy Colgate, throwing open her fur coat, revealing a dazzling gown of black and silver, "now for the fun! Mr. Footman, will you admit the messengers from Humpty Dumpty land?"

In came four sprightly clowns, chalked and patched, clad in spots and spangles, dancing like mad and grinning from ear to ear. Whirling around the table, dodging the stove, vaulting the empty chairs, they stopped at last to deposit in a heap upon the floor a whopping pile of parcels and bundles, the topmost being a huge box of American Beauty roses. Almost before the wide-eyed, gaping youngsters could realise what had happened, the motley quartette vanished into the outer hall, the door banged to behind them and Mr. Flanders was shouting:

"How's that for high? Eh? That's the way we do things up at Forty-second Street. What have you got to say now, Mr. Bingle, on this Merry Christmas Eve?"

Mr. Bingle, quite as excited as any of the shouting children, sat down very suddenly in his chair at the head of the table.

"Sit down, Dick, and you, Amy, and—and have something to eat. I—I—" He stopped short, realising that he did not know what he was saying, but vaguely hospitable in spite of himself. Then his arm went up to cover his eyes.

"We haven't time," began Flanders, but caught a warning look from his pretty wife.

"We will have dessert and coffee with you, Mr. Bingle," she said, coming over to lay her hand upon his arm.

"Tha—that's fine," gulped Mr. Bingle with a mighty and partially successful effort to regain control of his flitting senses. And it was some time after that before he could trust himself to join in the merry, excited chatter. He kept on repeating "God bless my soul," in response to nearly every remark that was directed to him.

"You are not to open a single package until after we are gone," commanded Amy Colgate later on, confronting the eager, covetous children as she arose from the trunk which served as a chair for both herself and Mr. Bingle in Diggs's hasty readjustment of the seats at table. "The roses are for you, dear Mr. Bingle, with my love—my real love. I know that you will take them to Mrs. Bingle to-morrow, but they are for you to-night. Give her my love and wish her a Merry, Merry Christmas from Dick and me. Please God she may soon come back to you and be as she used to be." She peered intently, questioningly into his glistening eyes, and then put her arm suddenly around his neck and cried softly in his ear: "Oh, you dear, dear old goose!"

"Where is Melissa?" whispered Flanders to Diggs as that functionary was helping him into his greatcoat.

"Almost on your very 'eels, sir," said Diggs, as nervous as any one else.

"I say, Melissa," said Flanders, turning upon the beaming hand-maiden, who stood in the kitchen door with Watson's wife, "let me have a look at your kitchen." He fairly pushed his way into the kitchen, dragging her after him. "Hush! Don't interrupt me, my girl. He may suspect something and come hustling out here after us. Now, Melissa, I trust you as I would trust the Government of the United States. You are as honest as the sun, so I'm taking no chances in handing you this little package to be delivered to Mr. Bingle when he sits down to his lonely breakfast on Christmas morning. The kids will be all gone and he'll—well, he'll need something to brace him up a bit. Now, pay attention: this is a copy of the first edition of 'The Christmas Carol,' and stuck between the leaves is something that would cause this flat to be robbed to-night if the news got down to the Bowery. Are you listening?"

"I—I am, sir," gasped Melissa, gripping the small package tightly and shooting a look of apprehension at the kitchen window as if expecting to see a thief pop into the fifth story window.

"Well, there is a thousand dollar bill concealed in that book. Don't drop it! It won't bite you. Put it under your pillow to-night, and be sure he gets it for breakfast. The little note will explain everything."

"Goodness, Mr. Flanders, it's a dreadful thing to have in bed with a person. I won't sleep a wink."

"So much the better," said Flanders cheerfully. "Now, you'll not forget to have it at his place in the morning, will you?"

"If I live through the night, sir, it will be served with his coffee. I shan't even tell Mr. Diggs." She did not mean this as a reflection upon the integrity of her suitor, but, fearing that it might be taken as such, she made haste to add: "So if I'm found murdered in my bed, you needn't accuse him of doing it."

In the meantime, Amy Colgate had kissed all of the children again and was standing guard over the heap of presents, talking so gaily and so incessantly that, despite Mr. Bingle's glances in the direction of the kitchen, he was unable to satisfy his curiosity.

"You really are quite cosy here, Mr. Bingle," she was saying. "Have you anything new to show me?"

He pondered. "I think there's a new hole in the carpet over there, Mrs. Flanders. And I've taken a new lease on life. Dr. Fiddler dropped in at the bank yesterday to tell me that Mrs. Bingle may be able to come home before long, so you see I shall have to get busy fixing the place up a bit. She likes to have everything neat and tidy, you know."

"Is she still with her mother?"

"Certainly. Fiddler says she may have to go to the hospital for a while before coming here, but it's nothing to be worried about. A trifling operation, he says. He's like all doctors. You never can get 'em to commit themselves. I shall go up to see her to-morrow. I've got a little present for her, you know. I've sort of been expecting something from her to-night—a pair of slippers or a half dozen handkerchiefs or something like that—but perhaps they will come in the morning. She never forgets me. Of course, being sick and discouraged may have kept her from—and then again, on the other hand, she may have crochetted me a dressing gown or a fancy waistcoat and prefers to give it to me when I go out to see her to-morrow, not wanting to trust it to the Express Company, don't you know. Well, Dick, how do you like our kitchen?"

"Bully! Come along, Amy. We mustn't be late. See you soon, Mr. Bingle. You must bring Mrs. Bingle up to see the piece as soon as she's able. By George, we ARE doing business, though. Sixteen thousand dollars last week. Turning 'em away every night. Seventeen hundred dollars last night and—"

"Hush, Dick! Mr. Bingle knows you are an author. You don't have to act the part, you know."

"Right you are. It's getting to be a habit. I can't help contrasting this Christmas Eve with the one a year ago. I didn't have ten dollars to my name when I went out to hear you read 'The Christmas Carol,' Mr. Bingle."

"And now I haven't ten dollars to my name," said Mr. Bingle cheerily. "Luck is like the sun, Dick. It doesn't stay up all the time. Sometimes I look back upon the past ten years and wonder if they don't belong to the fellow who wrote the 'Arabian Nights' and not to me. They were not real, not a bit of it. And yet I can't remember ever having found a queer old jar at the seashore, nor having released a good geni from its smoky insides. So I suppose I really must have lived them."

"Don't let yourself get lonely, Mr. Bingle," said Flanders, gripping the other's hand. "Don't allow yourself to mope over the loss of these—ahem! They will all have nice, happy homes and grow up to be splendid—"

"Come on, Dick," called his wife from the little hall, where she was surrounded by a suddenly repressed group of children. She had been whispering something to them, and they were ashamed.

The door-bell gave forth its stuttering tinkle once more, and again the impassive Watson stalked to the entry. The next instant a white-furred figure bounded through the door, rushed across the room and precipitated itself forcibly into the arms of Mr. Bingle, who barely had time to prepare himself for the onslaught.

It was Kathleen. Behind her stalked the elegant Mr. and Mrs. Sydney Force.

There had been a time when Mrs. Force scarcely deigned to notice Miss Amy Fairweather. But there is a great difference between a poor governess and a popular goddess. The bright and shining star of Broadway, with a suite of rooms at the Plaza, a fascinating and much-courted husband, and a firm grasp on the shifting attention of the idle rich, was a person to be recognised even by the charitably inclined. And so Mrs. Force neglected to employ her lorgnon in scrutinising Miss Colgate, and made the most of an opportunity to release a long-suppressed effusiveness.

Later on, in a moment of quiet obtained by a somewhat imperative command to the noisy children, she announced to Mr. Bingle that she must be running along to a dinner and the opera, and that she hoped he would have everything ready when the agents for the Society called at half-past eight, so that there would be no delay in getting the youngsters off in a specially chartered Fifth Avenue stage. Then she turned sweetly to Miss Amy Colgate and said:

"May I take you up town in my car, Mrs. Flanders?"

Mrs. Flanders replied just as sweetly. "No, thank you, Mrs. Force. Our own limousine is waiting."

"We've come to hear the 'Christmas Carol,' Bingle," said Mr. Force after his wife and Mr. and Mrs. Flanders had gone. "Kathleen and I expect to come to see you on every Christmas Eve, if you'll have us. You've got us on your hands, old man, and you can't shake us off."

"God bless my soul," said Mr. Bingle, visibly moved. "I remember that you DID use it as an argument when you took Kathleen away from me. Still, I bear it no grudge."

"I love the 'Christmas Carol,' Daddy," cried Kathleen, snuggling close to him.

"Sh! You must not call me Daddy now, dear."

"I shall! You'll always be my daddy."

"And how about—" he pointed to Mr. Force.

"Oh," she said easily, "I call him father."

Then came the distribution of presents. A footman brought up numerous gifts from the rich Kathleen to her one time foster brothers and sisters. They had nothing to give to her in return, and Mr. Bingle afterwards said that it was greatly to their credit that they were able to look at him with an accusation in their eyes, for, said he, it went to prove that they were mortified over not being in a position to observe the old rule about giving and receiving. As a matter of fact, several of them tried to transfer to Kathleen the simple, inexpensive presents he had just given to them out of his own humble pile, all of which, he argued, went far toward establishing his point, notwithstanding the fact that they manifestly despised the very things they were so ready to give away. He overheard Frederick whispering to Kathleen that he hoped he was going to a place where he could have enough money to buy her the right kind of a present for her next Christmas, and that it was rotten luck to be as poor as all this. Mr. Bingle strained his ears to catch Kathleen's reply, and it was such that his face brightened; he afterwards sidled up to her and stroked her hair with loving, gentle fingers.

There was one rather large, cumbersome pasteboard box in the corner, which Diggs passed up to him the last of all.

"Don't open it till to-morrow, Mr. Bingle," said Melissa in a panic, whereupon Diggs jerked it away from him with more haste than good manners. It was marked quite plainly: "To Mr. Bingle from Melissa," and bright and early the next morning it turned out to be a fur lined overcoat.

Once more Melissa was dragged into the kitchen, this time by the furtive, uneasy Mr. Force. While they were out of the room a messenger boy came to the front door with a small package for Mr. Bingle.

"Ah, at last, something from Mary. I was sure she wouldn't forget me on Christmas Eve. She never has and I'm sure—Hello! This isn't her writing. 'Monsieur Thomas Singleton Bingle.' Now what can—"

"Open it, Daddy," cried Kathleen.

"Stand back! Maybe it's an infernal machine. These anarchists are blowing up all the rich men in town nowadays. This may be the end of me. Ah!" He had cut the string with a carving knife and now exposed to view a box of cigars. There was a card attached. With some difficulty he made out: "From your life-long friend, with best wishes for a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year." It was signed by "Napoleon."

Mr. Force had closed the door behind him. He spoke in a hoarse whisper, after a curt nod of the head to Mrs. Watson, who was vainly trying to wash the dishes and at the same time see all that was going on in the outer room.

"See here, young woman, I want you to give these two envelopes to Mr. Bingle when he comes in to breakfast in the morning." He produced two long blue envelopes and thrust them into her hand. "Not a word to him to-night, d'you hear? Put them under your pillow and sleep on 'em—with one eye open if possible."

"Good gracious," she said, with her broadest grin, "I shan't sleep for a week. They look terribly important."

"I'll tell you what they contain," said Mr. Force, after a moment. "You ought to know what you are guarding, my girl. This one contains Kathleen's present. Do you remember that pretty little cottage and farm just above my place in the country? The cottage with the ivy and the maples and the old stone wall? Well, this is a deed to that property. It is my daughter's present to her 'daddy,' the gentleman who made her the lady she is and who has just made a new man of Sydney Force. This—"

"Gee!" exclaimed Melissa, pop-eyed and trembling with joy. "What next? Now, I've got to sleep on a house and lot, besides—" She caught herself up in time.

"This envelope contains my present to him. It is an appointment as manager and superintendent of my estates in Westchester County and in Connecticut—for life, Melissa. You won't fail to give them to him for breakfast, will you?"

"God bless my soul!" gasped Melissa, unconsciously falling into a life-long habit of the man who loved everybody.

. . . . . .

The agents came at eight o'clock, a gloomy man in uniform and two kind-looking, sweet-faced women in brown.

. . . . . .

Mr. Bingle's voice broke occasionally as he read "The Christmas Carol" to a silent, attentive audience made up of Kathleen and Sydney Force, Melissa, Diggs and the two Watsons. Fortunately, he knew the story so well that he was not called upon to perform the impossible. It was seldom that he could see the print on account of the mist that lay in his tired, forlorn grey eyes.

Far below in the street outside, a half-frozen clarinetist was sending up a mournful carol from the mouth of his reed. Somewhere in the distance a high-voiced child was singing. And the wind played a dirge as it marched past the windows of the candle-lighted flat.

At last he came to the end. He laid the book upon the table, fumbled for his spectacle case, and contrived to smile as he held out a hand to Kathleen.

"You will come every Christmas Eve, won't you, Deary?" he said.

"Yes, Daddy," murmured Kathleen, between the sobs that Tiny Tim had drawn from her soft little heart. "Every Christmas Eve, Daddy?"

"Then it won't be so bad as it seems now," he said gently. Not a word said he of the nine children who had gone away.

Mr. Force had glanced surreptitiously at his watch at least a dozen times during the reading of the story. An anxious frown settled on his brow and an observer might have remarked the strange, listening attitude that he affected at times, such as the alert cocking of his head and an intense squinting of the eyes.

"Now, if my dear Mary could only pop in on us and—" but Mr. Bingle choked up suddenly and turned his attention to the stirring of the coals in the stove.

The door-bell pealed again, this time with surprising authority and decision. Mr. Bingle started as if shot. As he faced the little hall, his eyes were wide with an incredulous stare of wonder.

"Good God in heaven," he murmured, "can it be possible that—but no! It cannot be Mary. That would be too wonderful. Watson—Melissa, will you please see who's—who's there?"

As rigid as a post he stood over the stove, holding the poker in his hand, his eyes fastened upon the door as Watson sprang to open it. The cheerful voice of old Dr. Fiddler—the GREAT Dr. Fiddler—came roaring into the room ahead of its owner.

"By the Lord Harry, it's a cold night—Hello! What's this? Liveried servants again? Well, upon my soul, I—Ah, there you are, Bingle! How are you, Force?"

The next instant he was wringing Mr. Bingle's hand and booming Christmas greetings to every one in hearing—and out of it, for that matter, such a voice he had!

"Mary? What—how is she, Doctor?" cried Mr. Bingle, peering beyond the bulky form of the doctor as if expecting to see his wife in the little hallway.

"Fine as a fiddle," said Dr. Fiddler, using a pet and somewhat personal phrase.

"No—no bad news?" stammered Mr. Bingle. "You're not trying to break anything gently to me, are you?"

"Gently?" roared the doctor. "Does a rhinoceros break things gently?" He threw off his great ulster and began jerking at his gloves. "Just thought I'd run down to see you, Bingle. Christmas Eve comes but once a year. Hope I'm not too late for the Carol. I missed hearing it last year, and—"

"If you'll swear to me that Mary is all right, I'll—I'll read it over again," cried Mr. Bingle.

"I swear it on my word as a gentleman," said Fiddler, "but for heaven's sake don't read it over again. I'll take it for granted. Besides I always cry when we get to the Tiny Tim part, so—I say Force, don't you cry?"

"I did to-night," said Sydney Force, his face beaming.

"And you, Diggs?"

"Like a blooming baby, sir," said Diggs, and Watson blew his nose violently.

"Doctor, I thought for a moment that it was Mary at the door," said Mr. Bingle slowly. He was still trembling.

"Oh, she won't be here for a couple of weeks, Bingle—perhaps three. But she's coming, old man—coming with banners flying and bells on her toes. 'Gad, you won't know her when you see her to-morrow." He sent a quick, frowning glance around the room. "They're gone, eh? All of 'em? Good! I must tell you in advance, Bingle, that Mrs. Bingle will have to bring a nurse with her—for a while, at least. So, you see, we'll need all the room—"

"A nurse? Oh, my Lord!" gasped Mr. Bingle, dropping into a chair as his knees gave way beneath him. "Is—is it as bad as that?"

"Cheer up!" cried the doctor, laying a hand upon his shoulder, and suddenly giving him a violent shake. "Nothing to be alarmed over, I give you my word. She's as fine as a fiddle, I tell you. And now, give me a full glass of that amazing egg-nogg you make, Bingle. I'm frozen to the bone."

"Egg-nogg?" murmured Mr. Bingle, helplessly. "Why, God bless my soul, I—I never thought of it. Melissa, have we any whiskey in the house? No, of course not—and we have no cream, I fear, so—"

"Beg pardon, sir," interrupted Diggs, "we 'ave all of the hingredients. Watson 'appened to think of the cold trip 'ome, sir."

"Sit down, then," cried Mr. Bingle. "I'll mix the grog for you, Doctor, in two shakes of a lamb's tail."

He flew into the kitchen. Instantly Mr. Force had Dr. Fiddler by the arm. The others crowded close about the pair.

"How is it, Doctor? All right?"

"Wonderful!" whispered Dr. Fiddler. "She WOULD have her own way about it, and, by gad, I think she was inspired, now that it's turned out so beautifully. Half-past six this morning. She's a strong, perfect woman. I've got my car waiting downstairs and as soon as I've broken the news to him by degrees—don't want him to knock under completely, you know—I'm going to take him up to the hospital."

Melissa leaned forward, her eyes gleaming.

"Boy or girl, Doctor?" she whispered.

"A boy, God bless him," said Dr. Fiddler.

THE END

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