Mr. Bingle

George Barr McCutcheon

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MR. BINGLE

BY George Barr McCutcheon

**Author of "Graustark," "The Hollow of Her Hand,"
"The Prince of Graustark," etc.**

**With Illustrations by
JAMES MONTGOMERY FLAGG**

CONTENTS

CHAPTER

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.

[Illustration with caption: The "kiddies" kept their eyes and ears open and sat very still while he read to them of Tiny Tim and his friends]

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.

[Illustration with caption: That's the kind of a doctor to have," said Uncle Joe]

"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.

. . . . . .

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

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