

THE CHRISTMAS PUDDING

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Dearbournes Scriveners

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The Christmas Pudding

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CHAPTER I

*...Turn it out! It's all set at last!
Stir-up Sunday's long been passed
Silver thimble and wishbone hid
These five Sundays, beneath the lid*

*The Angel candle wavers tall
Its brethren, guttered, join the Ball
Prophet, Bethlehem, Sheppard prance
Around the Advent wreath they dance*

*Tear up the pudding cloth complete!
So treacle-black and heavy sweet
Black as all Arabian nights
Just light it up and put out the lights!*

*Brandy-doused and purple flamed
A spray of holly once it's tamed
Drizzle it with the Brandy butter
Down mountain tops sugars flutter...*

...His pudding fancy had jumped right into the thick of his gloomy thoughts, with no warning at all, but then the dour reality came back again and squashed the pudding summarily. He had just been separated from his situation on this very Christmas Eve. He was ungraciously put out, his dreams of quiet retirement had been blasted, and his self-love, shattered to pieces. He came out of his establishment that Eve with a fog inside the head – one colder and thicker and more impenetrable than any fog that had ever

cloaked the narrow mews in which he found himself.

This dilemma spawned some dismal consequences for himself and his bountiful family. There was the instant and important decline in his self-esteem because he had always believed his profession – and his contribution to it – to be critical to the correct functioning of the social order – more critical than the Lord Mayor's, for example, or the Archbishop's or the Beetle's or even the Town Crier's, or, God forbid, should he have dared to be (and he was) so presumptuous, the Lamplighter's. In the very short-term and most significantly to him – since he was a singularly shortsighted fellow – it signified the loss of his Christmas bonus, upon which he and his family wholly relied to land the Christmas day buffet.

'How will I tell my darling Jenny?' he lamented to himself. 'How will I break it to her? No Goose or potatoes or mincemeat pie, only her plum pudding – for seven hungry mouths, seven cringing bellies. She's always so cheery on Christmas Eve, fussing over her plum pudding.'

How much money did he have on account? Next to nil, he reckoned. How much severance? None again because he had been too meek to inquire of it as he received his discharge. How much money in his pocket? Just a thrupenny bit or two jangling at the bottom.

'A talking to yourself again, Mr. Newbigging?' said a voice, which startled him.

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‘Chauncey,’ he replied, recognizing an erstwhile work associate.

‘Lucky you, to get to leave at four?’ said Chauncey.

‘Not lucky, friend,’ he said with tears welling up in his eyes. ‘I didn’t leave of my own accord. I’ve been put out!’

Young Chauncey’s perpetual grin sagged on hearing the dismal news, his shoulders drooped and his face assumed a pained expression as if the misfortune had befallen him personally. ‘So sorry, old man,’ he said. ‘To be sacked anytime is a bad thing, but today? Old Barmy has no heart. I’ll go talk to the old miser and set him straight.’

‘You? a messenger boy? You, who just started this September? Don’t end your career before it starts, poor boy. Just go on your way, son, and leave me to my misery.’

‘Not before I treat you to a ½ pint, friend – a little grog.’

‘You’ll be sacked too if you tarry. Just go.’

‘I’m gone to Lincoln’s Inn. There’s a little grog shop on the way, old man, unless you’re in a hurry to get home.’

‘In a hurry to get home, a bearer of bad news, instead of a Turkey and presents? No, I can stop for a little nip, if you’re sure you want to, that is.’

‘As sure as eggs is eggs!’ exclaimed young Chauncey, passing an arm through his and leading him on.

The innkeeper greeted the young man by the name of ‘Chance’ when they both entered the inn. ‘Chance,’ he said, ‘your regular

spot,' after which he grasped him by the wrist and led him to the back and Mr. Newbigging followed. He bade them both to sit and asked them what their pleasure would be, keeping his hand on the young man's shoulder all the while, sometimes stooping to whisper in his ear and share a laugh, pressing his entire burden, which was substantial, upon him till he flinched from the weight.

Chance shouted: 'Muster for rum!' with insuperable gusto and then laughed. 'The works - sugar, lemon, lime and cinnamon!' The big man withdrew a couple steps, countered with a laugh of his own, barked 'Righto!' and walked off.

'You seem very close, the two of you,' remarked Mr. Newbigging.

'As close as a Father and Son can be, I reckon.'

'Your father?' replied Mr. Newbigging, looking at the big man waddling off.

'Yep. I was his lucky child. That's why he calls me Chance.'

'Lucky that you need not pay for these drinks?'

'Oh no, Sir, I pay. I always pay my way. That's the way we both like it, him being an enterprise owner who needs to collect money to keep his business going, and me being a man with a paying job. I bring him luck, that's what I mean. The day I was brought into this world he won the raffle. Last week I brought him the latest *All Year Round* and that very afternoon none other than Boz himself came in for a libation and sat right where you're sitting, to take a rest from one of his famous strolls.

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Poppa says he might be putting up a plaque just to celebrate that event. That's why I'm lucky, and that's why he touches me for luck every time he sees me – grabs me by the shoulders, 'cause that's where it resides – the luck that is.'

'Who says so?'

'I say so.'

'Then let me give it a squeeze,' pleaded Mr. Newbigging, feigning to reach out towards the young man but then withdrawing his arm limply. 'Why am I so tested?' he continued, gazing gloomily into his grog, as if he were expecting a Sybil to emerge from it and tell him why. 'Like Job.'

'You're asking someone who ain't got the wisdom to enlighten you,' replied the young man. 'All I know is that some is better off than you and some is worse off.'

'That isn't a comfort to me. It's my situation that concerns me.'

'You talk like you lost it all. You have an excess of blessings – a wonderful wife and wonderful children and your health and...'

'Blessings can turn into burdens pretty quick...'

'Don't say such things. Don't test the Fates...'

'I'm not a superstitious man.'

'Don't matter. It's bad luck. Like leaving an umbrella open inside the house. You got to take it back.'

'Take what back?'

'What you just said about your blessings being burdens. Take it back.'

'Nonsense,' replied Mr. Newbigging, languidly dismissing the young man with a wave of the hand.

Chance sprang from his bench and pounded the table with both fists. His jollity and blitheness had vanished instantly. There was not anger proper on his face because such a tender face could never show anger; but there was an air of determination in it that was redoubtable to see. 'Take it back,' he repeated calmly but resolutely, 'or you'll bring ill luck upon yourself. Take it back.'

'Alright boy,' rejoined Mr. Newbigging after pushing his chair back and gazing into the young fellow's eyes in amazement. 'I take it back, Chance. I take it back.'

The young man recovered his usual jovial mood again, even quicker than he had misplaced it. He tossed off the rest of his grog in one long guzzle and wiped his mouth over his sleeve. 'Got to run, old man!' he cried out. 'Don't get up on my account. Finish you pint and then go home. Have a Happy Christmas and God Bless!' He loped across the room, patting the entire length of the bar on his way to the door, and after a quick wink to his father, he was out.

Mr. Newbigging observed his exit woefully, begrudging him his good humor, and also wishing he had taken the time and effort to touch him on the shoulder. After dropping one of his own coins for another $\frac{1}{2}$ pint and after downing it sullenly, he left the inn. It was very dark by now and very snowy. The streets may have been still quite full of souls but the snow fell so thick that he could hardly spot a

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single one of them till there were upon him and passed.

A gang of raggedy urchins were gathered round a streetlamp, brazenly begging for money from passersby, and pelting those that rebuffed them – which were the majority – with any lump of ice they could break off the lamppost, because the snow had become too cold and gritty to roll into projectiles. When they accosted Mr. Newbigging and sent a salvo his way, he failed to notice them altogether, despite being touched on the derby by an ice chunk.

He walked on and on, without seeming to get any closer to his abode. The streets had thinned out to a few stragglers when he heard the tolling of the 8th hour. Those urchins that had mothers and homes were summoned by the shouts of those same mothers. The motherless ones and the homeless ones retreated to whatever refuge they could find to weather the cold lonely night. The mournful chant of the carolers drifted off. He fell back into his reverie – of pudding, and his rocker by the fire, and his rum punch. When he shoved his hands into his pockets to warm them and felt his last three pence at the bottom, he began to despair again and lament aloud.

‘What should I do?’ he asked himself. ‘Should I throw myself at my ex-superior’s doorstep and beg him to reconsider? No, that would be unseemly on this night – to fall in prostration before him and beg him to reconsider, with his wife and children watching at the window. No, that would be ill mannered? Should I abscond from this place, abandon my

kin and run off with the gypsies or the circus. Should I pitch myself off London Bridge to end my misery? That is out of the question, because of my fear of heights. Should I hang myself? How much rope could a three pence buy and what are the chances of finding a rigging dealer still opened so late on Christmas Eve? Should I haul myself and my family to debtor's prison directly?

'How much money do you have in your pocket, good sir?' interjected a voice nearby.

'Uh,' replied Mr. Newbigging abstractedly, under the pall of his somber ruminations.

'Money, good sir?' asked the voice again.

'No money here, brigand!' shouted Newbigging. 'Would you steal my last pennies on earth?'

When he cast an eye upon the interloper he was spellbound on the spot, and stood agape. The intruder was a Gypsy. His fantastic attire seemed improbably gauzy to be of any use in this biting cold air, but he seemed wholly indifferent to the elements, sitting blithely upon a barrel under a streetlamp. With his legs lazily crossed one over the other, with an elbow propped up on one knee, he was carelessly bowing a long rasp - with broad and rhythmic sweeps, as though he were playing a fiddle - over the pointed nails of his left hand. When he spoke and expelled a plume of cold vapor, and when the glow of the lamplight cast embers upon his pupils, he looked every bit a dragon. His face was browner than a roasted acorn; his mouth was curled into a rakish smile; and his nose - his nose

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was like no nose he had ever seen. With the mound of snow that was collecting at the tip, it was the snow-capped Matterhorn on a moonlit winter night. In its breadth and length, it was a shadowy African forest of ebony or mahogany - in the middle of the rainy season.

'Do you have pudding on the brain?' asked the Gypsy.

'The brain?'

'Or do you have it in the pot, good sir?'

'The pot?'

'Yes, the pot? You were thinking of a rich Christmas plum pudding weren't you, Mr. Newbigging?'

'How do you know my name? How do you know what I'm thinking? Mind I don't hail a Bobby, miscreant,' said Mr. Newbigging, whose face scowled in anger.

'Your nose is getting ruddy, sir,' said the Gypsy, laughing. 'You had better rub a little snow over it before it freezes and falls off. Why be so crabby on this Night of nights?'

'Why should I dignify you with an answer, Roma?'

'Just a little sociable inquiry, my friend. Is there any harm in that? Do you see any others here offering you a little goodwill just now?'

'There's no one about to compete with your bonhomie, friend,' replied Mr. Newbigging. 'They have all retired to their homes to usher in Christmas.' His anger waned quickly upon saying these words and he hung his head.

'Yet *you* remain outside, wandering the streets like a Christmas ghost?' opined the gypsy.

'Even a ghost could be no lighter than I in the pockets tonight, stranger,' said Mr. Newbigging, taking on a far more genial turn in mood.

'Penury of the body can be repaired and is not as dire as penury of the soul and the mind. And your mind is rich, my friend. I can tell because it was in profound contemplation when you were passing by.'

'You have misjudged me, friend, and as a result are a pretty poor mind-reader - if that's what you are - because I was mired in the mundane, worrisome reflections on how to survive the battle of life.'

'With a few crumbs of pudding thrown in now and again,' said the Gypsy smiling.

'Perhaps,' replied Mr. Newbigging, as he smiled in return, despite his best efforts to resist. 'I love plum pudding.'

'And plum pudding you'll have, friend, of the choicest kind!'

'Plum Pudding, I've already got!' shouted Mr. Newbigging. 'Won't you throw in roast goose and rib of beef with Yorkshire pudding and dressing and potatoes? And mince meat pie, turkey, ham, suckling pig, oysters and cranberry pie while you're at it...' he scoffed with an ironical tone in his voice, '...for good measure, to round out the meal?'

'You'll have all your heart's desire,' shouted the Gypsy as he stood up and pointed to a darkened alley at the end of the street. 'Come,' he continued as he lunged towards the gentleman, grasped him by the hand and began to drag him towards it.

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Mr. Newbigging felt himself become fleet of foot all of a sudden, which was a genuine surprise to him as he had always judged himself to be a foot-dragger. He noticed that his boots no longer touched the ground but were gliding just above it, with the tips skimming over the new-fallen snow and leaving trails such as mice might leave. He was about to shout 'let me be' but the words were smothered in his throat as he glanced up ahead and saw that he and his guide were heading directly into a brick wall. Where to had the darkened alley gone? Now his hijacker was bearing him headlong into the cold stone to smash his bones.

CHAPTER II

He had closed his eyes, had tucked his head down into his chest and had said 'Amen' in expectation of the imminent collision, but no collision came, only a burst of arctic air. When he opened his frosted eyelids everything was a blur, as if he were caught in a state of extreme quickening. He was not in the ether nor was he in any hard corporeal stuff, but in something between the two; everything went past him and even through him in a haze: nebulous impressions of walls and lines of brickwork; medieval chapels with their moldy graveyards in the back; decaying, uncared for gravestones glowing with variegated mosses; windowsills and church belfries with bats inside.

In the next instance his guide and he were soaring high above the city. There was a letup in the snowfall and he could see the metropolis, now bathed in the blue darkness of night. This perspective was new to him as he looked down onto the slumbering city. It was a point of view he had never experienced before, never having been a balloonist or a mountain climber or even a lowlier chimney sweep and having never been above the second floor of anything. He didn't feel the gloomy giddiness or the wrenching feeling at the pit of his bowels he suffered when he tried to climb beyond his measure, only a blithe rapture, as he took in the snow-flocked roofs, the desolate streets, the glistening streams of new ice in the gutters and the lamplights flickering, tiny as firefly tails and diffused by the falling snow. He gazed up into the night sky just long enough to see the shy moon wink at him through a hole in a billowy, purple cloud, for a second or two, as it painted a ring of light around the rim so that there appeared to be a halo in the middle of the heavens. But the halo was quickly extinguished when the cloud closed in on itself as another deluge of snow discharged from another gigantic cloudbank.

He was drawn precipitously downward in the next instance and only then did he recall that he was not aloft on his own wings but in the clutches of a demon and he was overwhelmed with trepidation again. They plummeted so quickly and so vertically that he tried to shout a quick amen, expecting to be dashed upon the pavement stone directly and

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barely could get the words out as the wind strove to drive them back into him.

His headlong dive was checked instantly as his guide turned a full ninety degrees in an instant, and was now dragging him through a broad boulevard, only inches from the ground. He narrowly missed a statue of the Lord Protector in the middle of a roundabout. But the wide, well-illuminated venue narrowed quickly and became a closed, narrow, sullen side-street with ramshackle shops frowning at him with their dingy windows, showing off their dismal wares inside, wares that had remained unsought and un-bought on this Night of all nights.

The Gypsy spoke to him very animatedly when he looked round and saw his passenger closing his eyes to avoid the unpleasant sights. 'Don't shut your eyes, my friend,' he exclaimed in his loudest voice, to get heard above the rush of the air stream. 'Some of the sights in these poor, lowly windows might not be so foreign to you! Look, will you!'

Mr. Newbigging was loath to open his eyes but something inside impelled him to do it. He turned and looked to his right at the blur of shop windows flitting by and they became clear to him as they seemed to suspend in time and place. The hoarfrost melted away and the grime beneath dissolved to show him scenes that no longer looked alien to him, but seemed familiar inmates of his memory, some of them from long ago, others from the recent past.

There, in the window just passed, he could see none other than himself, though younger in the face and livelier in the arching

of his back. What is he doing there? By God, he is holding up his newest babe, another blessed gift, and on Christmas morning – a Christmas child – miracle of miracles! Did he always greet the birth of a new child with the expected joy and tenderness? Is that an ambiguous look on his face as he holds up the newborn, eking out a grin while the beaming mother lies just behind him? Is it just another mouth, another burden to bear? Is that a heartfelt smile on his face, one of happiness and thankfulness for having been blessed with another fruit of their devotion, or is it the twisted smirk of irony and mockery and bitterness?

That window retreated and not soon enough to suit his peace of mind, but another scene in another window presented itself and made him cringe even more. There is his aged, stricken father consigned to a charity hospital, alone, unattended, with a broken down wheelchair for a prison. Are his father's deep brown eyes haunting him, staring into his soul, mutely censuring him for calling on him only once before he died in solitude? In the window next to that one, the old man is now reconciled to his deathbed. What are the son's only words to him as he lies expelling his final breaths? 'It's time to let go, Old Man.' No 'I love you' or 'Good journey, dear old soul' or 'May we embrace again when we meet on the other side'. In a small porthole nearby he can see himself kneeling by his father's unmarked grave. Is that little token, the tiny amethyst stone he is depositing on the cheap little plot - because the old man had been a devout,

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amateur mineralogist - a feeble and pitiful attempt at making amends?

There is Jenny again in another window, finishing up the plum pudding and hanging it in the hearth. Why is there a shadow insinuating itself beneath the blush of her cheek. Why is her dress so tattered? Does he tell her that he loves her every day?

His eyes filled up with tears but were they the tears of agony or merely the wind making his chafed eyes weep? The Gypsy saw him weep. 'Well, good sir...?' he said, leaving his question hanging.

'When will you take me away from this place?' bewailed Mr. Newbigging. 'What purpose can it serve? Take me away. Do with me as you will but end this ordeal.'

'Ordeal?' replied the Gypsy. 'Since when is reviving bygone episodes of ones life an ordeal unless they make up a life poorly lived. Do you not enjoy looking at them? Pray, tarry here at bit, to patronize all the little shops you built for yourself in life. They are full up and looking for patrons. Do you deny them, Mr. Newbigging? Do you deny the Lane of Forsaken Memories? If you don't covet them, Mr. Newbigging, then who will?'

'Why do you browbeat me so?' cried Mr. Newbigging, as he put out his free hand in supplication towards his tormentor. 'You promised me riches this night, not punishment.'

'Very well, I'll take you away from here. But remember how much you have now, Mr. Newbigging before you yearn for other things.'

'I'll remember. Now take me away!'

CHAPTER III

His guide bore him straight up again into the heavens with such energy that Mr. Newbigging felt his arm would tear away from his shoulder, and he let out a shriek in pain, which only elicited a token turn of the head from his conductor and a mischievous grin.

'Ayeeee,' he squawked, 'not high up again. My mortal fear of heights!'

'Were you affrighted a moment ago, when we were soaring as we are now?' replied the Gypsy.

'Tis true. I'd forgotten,' replied Mr. Newbigging as he opened his eyes and surveyed the sleeping city once more. The Gypsy was correct. He felt no panic at looking down, but on the contrary seemed instantly bemused by the charming vistas offered by the grand city. Everything looked so fantastic from these heights – a sparkly, winter idyll. The snows had stopped and winter winds were scattering the clouds westward, and silvery moon-daggers cut out swatches of light from the facades of the great Abbey. 'Look,' he squealed with the delight of an infant as he saw that he was being carried straight above the River. 'There's Vauxhall,' he chirped, pointing his finger to the so named bridge, shutting his right eye as if he were taking aim, 'and then there's Westminster and then Waterloo and then Blackfr...' but his effusions were cut off instantaneously as he was rudely dragged down again, straight towards the murky waters of the river.

'I can't swim!' he shouted.

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'And you can't fly either but look where you are,' replied the Gypsy.

'Only through your assistance, friend.'

'I could drop you now if you wish and see if you can fly on your own wings!'

'God no!' pleaded Mr. Newbigging.

'Then stop your wailing and don't despair.'

At these words the flying Gypsy leveled out in flight, just over the water, skimming just above it, so close in fact that his passenger could feel the chilly spray coming off the waves. They finished their tour of the bridges under them instead of above them and this view proved much less agreeable to Mr. Newbigging's inquisitiveness.

'We take a left at the Tower,' cried the Gypsy with infuriating zeal as he darted skyward again and made straight for the towering structure.

They took a hard left, so close to the west tower that Mr. Newbigging swore he spied a pack of tower ghosts in one of the transoms, grinning at him mawkishly and reaching out to grasp his legs, which were swinging radically in their direction from the momentum of the turn. Another sudden drop in height brought them once again just above the ground, careening through narrow streets.

'Not again,' lamented Mr. Newbigging.

'Do you think the wish I offer you easy won?' said the Gypsy.

'A wish that doesn't come easy isn't a wish at all, but a trial,' replied Mr. Newbigging.

'Well put and quite true, friend,' replied the Gypsy, waxing abstracted all of a sudden

and placing a finger to the cleft of his chin. 'I shall drop you here then, so good night and Merry Christmas!'

'Please no!' shrieked his passenger as he looked down over the rough stones that were rushing past in a blur. 'I'll be dashed,' he cried as he wrapped his free arm round both the Gypsy's legs.

'Very well. We won't be long.'

The street broadened at the next corner and opened out onto a vast courtyard. The spectacles therein left Mr. Newbigging bereft of words. Instead of the obscured, blue-shadowed streets, clad in snow, with the streetlight torches scarcely breaching the rampant ice fog, a sprawling, fabulous extravaganza was revealed to him. No more nocturnal blues or sepulchral grays or stark, knifed-edged silver tones, but a bacchanal of blazing, molten hues at the hottest side of the spectrum: feverish crimsons and pungent, passionate golds and incandescent oranges, with every color aflame from all the towering bonfires that blazed at hand. The colors had movement and seemed to rush in large swaths around the breadth of the courtyard. Then all the sounds were revealed to him: a cacophony of clamorous speech and unbridled mirth intermixed with the voices of a thousand strings and woodwinds. Mr. Newbigging took a lot of time before he could resolve that this havoc was actually a throng of humanity.

The Gypsy alighted softly in the middle of it all, yet he drew no attention in any way as if the sight of humans coming down from the heavens was an ordinary and uninteresting

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occurrence in these parts. Mr. Newbigging felt so light-headed and light-footed when he touched the ground that when his guide let go of him, his legs nearly buckled. It felt to him that he was walking for the very first time. This earthbound sensation, after having felt as slight as a sparrow, filled him with a vague unease and made his legs cumbersome.

'My God!' he exclaimed, crossing himself and screwing up his nose as he encountered a strong, overcooked smell. 'Have you brought me to Hell?'

'Hell?' cackled the Gypsy as he slapped his guest on the back. 'This is Heaven, good sir, Gypsy Heaven. Come and I'll give you a tour,' he exclaimed as he took him by the hand again. 'Don't fret, my friend, this one will be a walking-tour.' And the Gypsy let out a short, strident laugh.

The Gypsy pulled his timorous guest through the snarl of men and beasts and conveyances of every sort, as if he were walking through the most organized little metropolis. To Mr. Newbigging it was an unqualified conundrum. Had he been left alone he would certainly have been irreversibly lost. He would have tumbled over the first wagon hitch lying across his path or been trampled by the first mule he encountered or been skewered by the gauntlet of fiddle bows crossing his path at every moment, but in the hands of his guide he was led through it all without injury. He sensed a sudden - and necessary he felt - friendship towards his conductor and became very amicable indeed, addressing him so:

'Do, do... do you have a name, friend?' he inquired, as he looked around at the general tumult with an anxious look.

'We are getting familiar now, are we?' retorted the Gypsy, arching his brow.

'I'm not a mind reader, like you are, friend, and so must communicate in the mundane way,' he chirped, chortling anxiously afterwards.

'Well, if you need to know, I'm Paschasius the Gypsy-King, in these parts at least. In others, I'm neither Paschasius nor am I a Gypsy-King. Oh the vagaries of living among the barbarians,' he mused, drawing a long, contemplative breath. 'Now, my friend, before we come to your wish for your own Christmas Miracle, look upon mine own, good sir, and cast you eyes upon the miracle that is the life of my people.'

With an ample and elegant flourish the Gypsy-King swept his arm out over the courtyard as if he were pulling away a curtain from the eyes of his guest, and Mr. Newbigging saw grotesqueries of the most poignant sort revealed to him and extravagances of human nature that left him mute with awe and sympathy.

The Gypsy-King led him to the middle of the courtyard, at the foot of a crumbling fountain, where he saw a covey of thieves gathered in tight rings gloating over their day's harvest. Beside them cardsharps practiced their sleight of hand and tossed single cards so adroitly that they cleaved the air like knives. He saw blind beggars grow eyes so they could

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count their alms and legless ones grow legs so they could stretch them.

Next he led him to the venue where all the vendors, who were shambling in from every quarter of the city, were stationing their wagons for the night. Hawkers of every kind paraded their “precious” commodities – like exquisite gold pocket watches and rarified fossil specimens and priceless china dolls. Some traded in stuff that defied categorization or credulity, like the one who traded exclusively in hourglasses filled with living gnats instead of sand and the other who only sold shrunken hands. There were sellers of crazy ointments, magical balms, powders and potions; their wagons were shut up for the night but garish billboards pitching this or that rarity were posted on their outsides. *‘Get them fresh,’* read one of them. *‘Powders ground from the teeth of freshly hanged men!’* *‘Get it here!’* read another. *‘A potion prized above all. Cures low virility, colic, shingles, and mixed with cloves guaranteed to chase away a demon. Get your Witches’ Pimple Pus!’*

Buskers of all sorts were gathered in another corner of the courtyard. Though it was fast growing late many were still outside tending to their craft: jugglers were tossing their several balls or machetes or even scythes; knife throwers were sharpening their knives, flipping them skyward and judging their heft; fire-eaters were imbibing their torches from enormous oil pots; sword swallows were ranging their swords; and the stilt walkers towered over them all.

Thence the Gypsy-King led him to the encampment of musicians who had their carts ringed in a circle with a bonfire raging in the middle. Mr. Newbigging spied two gaudily clad dwarf musicians - twin drummers beating ferociously on two elongated drums. Their faces were bathed in shadows but he noticed how swarthy they were and how deformed their lower jaws appeared. He also saw how horribly bowed and spindly their legs were and it filled him with compassion. In the middle of a particularly jarring drum duel they broke into a wild song, in perfect time, sung in the strangest tongue he had ever heard. His compassion was replaced with awe instantly and his eyes rounded out to alarming proportions at such an astonishing show of virtuosity.

'The likes of these, I've never seen in any music hall, your Highness. They are a wonder!' he exclaimed to the Gypsy-King.

'Music halls you say?' replied the Gypsy-King with a look of censure. 'Perhaps you've spent a little too many evenings there?'

'Nevertheless, your Highness,' he replied, lowering his eyes and his voice. 'They are extraordinary men. That's for sure.'

'Come and see them clearer,' said the Gypsy-King as he grasped a torch hanging nearby and waved it toward the twin drummers, revealing their faces entirely. Mr. Newbigging's heart almost stopped with astonishment. He reeled back and only a timely grasp from his guide kept him from falling over.

'Yes, Mr. Newbigging. Your eyes don't lie. They are two monkeys!'

'But such astounding...'

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'For sure. They are gypsy monkeys.'

'Such dexterity and such a passion for such low creatures.'

'Not so low maybe, Mr. Newbigging,' interjected the Gypsy-King with a wink. 'Perhaps they were not monkeys all their lives. There are many forms of malediction, good sir, and perhaps...'

Just then a pathetic caterwauling interrupted the Gypsy-King. 'Ah, Old Maurice...' he said as he led his guest around a covered wagon, to the back and bade him to look inside. An old man, sitting with legs crossed in a lotus posture, was playing a remarkable fiddle. It had a long, helical neck, ornately carved in the shape of a serpent, terminating in a fearsome snakehead scroll bearing four fang-shaped turning pegs. An uncountable number of strings ran the length of the neck, crossing over a bowl-shaped sound box covered in brown animal skin still clad with isolated tufts of fur. Mr. Newbigging swore he saw the fur grow out when the old man raced over a *Vivace* and grow in again when he dawdled over an *Adagio*. A tangle of horsehair dangling from his bow thrashed his face ferociously as he played and would have surely slashed him in the eyes were he not keeping them shut tight the entire time.

The Gypsy-King unexpectedly shed his genial look and glowered over the horde with a severe countenance. 'Enough!' he bellowed, but no one paid him any mind.

'Qui-i-i-i-et,' he bellowed again, even louder than before, but again his call was ignored.

In a fit of exasperation he shot straight upward into the air, and spinning frenetically on his own axis, hurled jets of sparks out from his eyes, till he was entirely enfolded with brightly swirling rings, like a living astral body. Next he let out a deafening, prolonged shriek, which resounded over the breadth of the courtyard, caromed off every facade and multiplied into a thousand echoes just as strident as the original scream. Everyone quieted straightaway and looked up with rapt attention. The Gypsy-King floated back down softly as the rings dispersed over the crowd and went out, having replaced his harsh expression with a benevolent smile. By the time he landed he was perfectly genial and eyed his community with paternal affection. Only then did his rabble divine him for who he really was and they prostrated themselves appropriately at his feet.

‘Oyah! Oyah,’ hailed the Gypsy-King to his subjects. ‘Gather ye all round me, my children! Come and meet this mortal friend o’ mine!’ he shouted, drawing his arm around Mr. Newbigging’s and pulling him gently forward to present him. They greeted him with resonant shouts of welcome. Everyone turned to the new guest with absolute attention. They rushed en masse to meet the foreigner: the jugglers came headlong towards him still lobbing their trappings into the air; the cardsharps strode up to him, waving their card-fans to his face to show off their best dissimulations; the blind beggars parted with their eyes again and stumbled over and the legless ones lost their legs again and stumped over, flailing their

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brass cups crazily; the fire-eaters came together in a troupe, whirling their fiery torches over his head, then swallowing them whole and spewing out their dragon breath into a single ring of fire, nose-high, all around him; the stilt walkers leapt back onto their stilts in one fell leap, stampeded towards him, encircling him and forming a palisade around him with their stilts; the monkey drummers rolled over atop their drums, screaming and cackling and bearing their jagged yellow teeth; the old fiddler broke from the thrall of his playing, sprang up from his seat in his wagon and charged towards him without losing one note of his tune. And thusly they piled around him till they well nigh smothered him and the Gypsy-King was, for a moment, powerless to beat them back because they had become so bemused with the stranger. No stranger had ever visited their sphere before. They wanted to heap as much welcome as they could manage upon him but the poor stranger took it the opposite way, convinced that they were pouncing on him to possess him with devils, or pour vile liquors down his gullet, or strip him nude to tar and feather him, or bleed him dry to fulfill their pernicious blood libel, because such stories were rampant in the world in general. Poor Mr. Newbigging cringed in terror and all the blood drained from his face. Just as the mob threatened to drown him, the Gypsy-King rallied round again. Screaming till his voice became hoarse, he heaved them away in a body with an unseen power seeming to exude from his outspread hands and they fell back as if driven away by a phantom wave.

‘Suppress your love a bit, my children, lest you kill the poor man,’ he remonstrated to them, firmly but without a tinge of hostility because he knew full well that their passion had gotten the better of them all. ‘You know how poorly these Saxons tolerate affection. Give him a little breathing space. Then you can all pay your respects properly. Forgive them, friend,’ he said to his guest, in a softened tone of voice and gracing him with a broad smile. ‘Forgive them for being beside themselves with passion, but it’s in their nature – their nature.’

Mr. Newbigging was forthcoming enough in forgiving his newfound worshippers as it seemed his best and only choice at the time. He cracked a doleful grin as he gathered himself up again, then proffered a deferential nod to the Gypsy-King, then humbly paid his respects and thankfulness with a silent bow and a demure closing of the eyes to the throng, which waited on his caprice in a tension-filled hush. He peered into each swarthy face, each pair of blazing eyes and every row of serrated teeth, becoming besieged by a deep sentiment. Having lived a life as a nameless drudge, unadorned, un-thanked, un-medaled, the beneficiary of no kind of praise or admiration, little more than a dusty piece of furniture in the office corner and a mere shadowy fixture in his own hovel; this sudden and all-encompassing adoration made his withered heart engorge with self-love. No one spoke for the longest time so he decided to speak:

‘Why certainly,’ he warbled and then smiled. ‘Certainly your Highness, I forgive their passion, though it’s sorely misplaced on a poor

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humble soul as me.' He bowed very low towards the Gypsy-King.

Before the Gypsy-King could answer the crowd broke into rapturous cheering and applause and each threw himself into his specialty again to impress the guest, with more fervor than ever till it became pure bedlam. The Gypsy-King could only marvel in silence at the extraordinary transport of his subjects and shake his head and smile. 'You've really made an impression, Mr. Newbigging,' he said. 'Have you ever held a kingly position before, good sir? Because you certainly have a royal bearing about you that seems perfectly innate, unassailable from a moral standpoint and totally without pretense or affectation - very impressive!'

'No,' replied Mr. Newbigging, blushing with the blush of vanity, though lowering his eyes graciously to feign humility. 'No, but perhaps in another life, and another kingdom...' He hesitated and appeared set to finish his statement but then only donned a modest smile and, after a regal pause, demurred to finish altogether.

'Be that as it may, Mr. Newbigging,' pronounced the Gypsy-King, 'be ye commoner or king in the outside world, in our little word, you enjoy the highest standing.' Having said this he took his guest by the waist and pulled him up aloft again on his invisible wings. He bore him over the ravening throng which was now utterly hysterical and deaf to his commands. 'Time now to leave, Mr. Newbigging!' he screamed into that gentleman's ear, because anything less would not have

sufficed to get heard above the Babel which carried on just below their heels. 'Before their passion pushes them too far.'

'Certainly,' replied Mr. Newbigging anxiously and without the least inclination to discover what 'pushes them too far' signified. He nodded mechanically and held fast to his transporter, as the two rose up and gently alighted on the rooftop of a large tower at the very end of the courtyard. The Gypsy-King threw open a door to a tiny cabin that jutted out the roof of the tower and led his guest inside. Though from the outside the cabin appeared no larger than a vendor's cart, on the inside it appeared limitless, with the penumbra invading and obscuring the place before any walls or windows could be distinguished. Mr. Newbigging was left aghast from the irreconcilable paradox.

A table sat in the middle of the room, if that was indeed the middle, but for Mr. Newbigging it had to be; otherwise he would have lost his grasp on truth completely. On that table he saw a small apparatus dimly lit by a small candle close by, and he was drawn to it but knew not why. The closer he got to it, the more it mesmerized and bewildered him.

The Gypsy-King did not utter a word, only smiling obliquely at his guest's rising stupefaction. He stood mute nearby, twisting the one end and then the other of his oily moustache as he watched the gentleman creep warily and wonderingly to the table. It evoked for him the behavior of lower animals moving towards an object completely foreign to their nature and so vastly above their intellect:

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hunched over and mincing gingerly, then vacillating in dumb confusion for a moment, then haltingly starting up again till the object is within reach.

Mr. Newbigging approached it in rapturous wonder. But what was it? He managed to divine its true, astonishing nature just before he got to it. His head swam, his heart leapt from his breast. It threw his world topsy-turvy, more than anything that had transpired till now, if that was possible. Two small brass dolphins, joined together on an axle and fixed to a set of wheels, rolled to and fro, slowly, the length of a small arcuate trackway, rolling up to one end, then down to the bottom middle, and after quivering a second or two, rolling up to the opposite end, with no apparent means of propulsion save some form of perpetual and magical impetus. Could it be the angle of the arc imparting the motive force to the wheeled dolphins? How was that possible?

'I never would have believed it,' he turned to the Gypsy-King and said. 'A Perpetual Motion Machine! My dear father spent a lifetime...' his voice broke off at this instant and he burst into tears and fell to his knees by the table. After gently sobbing for several minutes he stopped abruptly. Wiping his eyes on his coat-sleeve, he gazed perplexedly at the small miracle-engine again and watched it on its little course, to and fro, to and fro, listening to the barely audible sound of the wheels rapping upon the trackway as they moved. 'All his life he dreamt of Perpetual Motion Machines. Oh what contraptions he

devised, all of them utter failures,' he said to the Gypsy-King and then paused to smile for a moment. 'How many hours he spent tinkering tirelessly, holding me in his lap and whispering things in my ears about the infinite wonders of Nature.'

'Now my friend, you see he was right in dreaming,' said the Gypsy-King.

'What he spent a lifetime dreaming of, I'm living in one evening, me, of all people, who believe in nothing but worldly things, who only frets over bank accounts and past due accounts and accounts arrears and money spent and money earned and money unaccounted for. What do my personal accounts show: love and honor and filial respect? I fear not.' Mr. Newbigging fell to weeping once again.

'That will do you no good, my friend – no good,' said the Gypsy-King sternly without an iota of compassion in his voice.

'But I am not worthy.'

'Worthy – worthy of what? Come now, my friend, stop now, because we have a business to tend to.'

'Business? What business, your Highness?'

'Please stop calling me your Highness. Nobody calls me Highness. Look, you wanted a rich Christmas dinner for you and yours and I promised you one and am ready to make good on it.'

'But I was merely being facetious, your High.... I mean Pasch... I mean Sir. The wonders you've showed me tonight more than suffice.'

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'Do they now?' boomed the Gypsy-King who flushed with anger instantly, beetled his woolly brow and seemed to grow a foot in stature. 'It may suffice for you but how about the family that awaits you at home? What will *they* have tomorrow?'

Mr. Newbigging fell to crying again and doubled over clutching his belly. 'Why do you browbeat me so,' he lamented breathlessly between fits of weeping. 'I was alone with my thoughts on the street, minding my own affairs.'

'But what of the affairs of your nearest and dearest?' interrogated the Gypsy-King, breaking into a crafty smile. 'Are they not entwined inextricably with yours? What of them?'

Mr. Newbigging prostrated himself before the Gypsy-King. 'As you wish,' he said meekly. 'I await your caprice.'

'Look to the table,' blared the Gypsy-King, 'beside your little miracle machine and see that small gilded snuffbox?'

'Barely, in this low light.'

'Bring it to me, and open it!'

Mr. Newbigging arose from his knees with difficulty because he was an awkward man, shuffled off to the table and returned with the small box, holding it up to the King without looking at him.

'I said open it,' boomed the King.

He opened the snuffbox, and a light - a blinding white light - brighter than any sun that had ever shone him in the eyes poured out into the room and lit it up so intensely that the table and he and the King looked to be aflame

and crystal clear, glowing through and through like the finest illumined crystal, with each curve and contour on their persons like gleaming facets blazing forth stars of Bethlehem. He closed his eyes but the light seemed just as bright, so he covered them over with both his hands yet the light seemed not to dim in the least.

'Reach into it!' shouted the Gypsy-King in his loudest voice but it barely rose above the deafening hum that rose and rose – a hum that emanated from that same tiny snuff box and pulsated in time with the intense light. 'I said reach into it!' he cried again. Mr. Newbigging opened his eyes just enough to see and squeezed his thumb and first finger into it, barely managing because the aperture was so small. After fumbling a second or two he grasped the edge of something inside, which felt like the corner of a piece of paper.

'It's too small!' he screamed back to the Gypsy-King.

'Try harder!' hollered Paschasius. 'Try harder or lose your chance forever. Hurry before all the light escapes from it!'

Mr. Newbigging tried as hard as he could, pushing his thumb and finger apart but losing hold of the object. Though he could not believe it his arm - his entire arm - slid down into the tiny snuffbox as if it had opened its maw to receive it. He opened his eyes fully to see though he was convinced the powerful light was duping his eyes. His entire arm up to his shoulder was contained inside the snuffbox and therein his fingers fumbled for the object that was so stubbornly evading their grasp.

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'Your last chance!' wailed the Gypsy-King.

With one last, frantic grab Mr. Newbigging got hold of the object by the body and wrenched it out from the snuffbox. He pulled it out with such impetus that it flew out of his grasp and across the room.

'Close the box. Close the box,' screamed Paschasius, 'before it's too late!'

'Too late,' echoed Mr. Newbigging as he flipped the cover of the snuffbox closed with the palm of his hand and then promptly dropped it on the floor. It fell with a hollow clink but the lid remained closed. The light turned to pitch darkness and the hum died out instantly, leaving the two in perfect obscurity and perfect quiet.

The Gypsy-King relit the small candle which had blown out and restored the low light of beforehand. 'Bring me the parchment, friend,' he said to Mr. Newbigging. 'Look man, over in there, ten paces away.'

It took a moment for Mr. Newbigging to accommodate his eyes to the low light again. After looking to the spot to which his guide had pointed he shuffled in that direction, tumbling several times over various knots in the floorboards, and took hold of the object in question, which was a fat, supple roll of parchment. It gave so easily in his grasp one instant, only to push out against it in another as if it were exhaling. 'Is there nothing ordinary in these parts?' he whispered to himself.

'Hurry, good sir,' urged the Gypsy-King. 'Time is pressing on. No time for muttering. Bring it to me and unroll it.'

Mr. Newbigging unrolled the parchment as he approached the Gypsy-King, this time not taking a single tumble, and began to skim over it. He quickly frowned in confusion. 'What's all this gabble?' he asked. 'And was does it have to do with me? Let me get that candle...'

'Just bring here, good sir, and I'll read it to you.'

'But I'd like to read it my...'

'To what end? It's gibberish to you anyway,' answered the Gypsy-King, taking the parchment from his guest, 'for it's writ in my mother tongue, Romany, which you can never comprehend. Come I'll read it to you.'

'To me? What has it to do with me?'

'It's our little covenant between you and me, a standard agreement between gentlemen of good conscience, Mr. Newbigging.'

'Agreement?'

'Why yes. You are a man of business.'

'You mean I *was* a...'

'As I was saying, as a man of business you can appreciate this little agreement that we must sign to close our deal.'

'But why must I sign anything? Is not a wish free of any encumbrances or obligations on the side of the receiver? A wish is a wish is a wish; at least so say the genii of the Arabian Nights. I am not an ignorant man, Paschasius.'

'Times have change,' snapped the Gypsy-King, more than a little miffed by his guest's doggedness and a little startled by his acumen. 'Look, am I expected to get nothing from this? I ask for little. A small favor sometime in the future, perhaps, at your convenience. Do you find me a dubious

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character, me, who has bared my heart and the heart of my people to you, who has given you a tour of this city on the invisible wings of a Gypsy-King and has shown you things no mortal man has seen before, even the depths of your own soul? Have I not opened your eyes for you, Mr. Newbigging? And to boot, I'm ready to offer you the most glorious Yuletide repast you and yours could ever wish for. In exchange for what? Just a modest little covenant beholding you for next to nothing – a small service in the future. Do you still protest now, Mr. Newbigging?’

Mr. Newbigging blushed with shame and lowered his eyes.

‘If you doubt me still, look behind you,’ intoned the Gypsy-King.

Looking behind him, Mr. Newbigging saw a giant crimson sack, bursting at the seams and drawn tight with a thick, braided drawstring sprinkled with gold dust.

‘All that’s in there is yours,’ said Paschasius holding up a quill and an inkpot.

His guest vacillated for a while, looking at the Gypsy-King, then at the giant crimson sack, then over to the table at the small Perpetual Motion Machine. He opened his mouth to speak but instantly checked that urge. He put a hand to his chin and scratched it and gazed at Perpetual Motion Machine once more. Spinning adroitly on one foot, he undid the drawstring of the crimson sack and looked inside. All the while the Gypsy-King strove to keep his poise but his smile was straining beyond the endurance of even a Gypsy-King and his temples were beginning to throb.

An amber glow oozed out of the crimson sack and bathed Mr. Newbigging's face with the jaundiced light of greediness, rendering his pudgy, amorphous features as sharp and as twisted as those of the gargoyles sullenly perched on the pediments of the old Abbey. He creased his forehead with ugly furrows, narrowing his eyes and cracking a baleful grin. 'Oh my, yes,' he muttered to himself. 'This will do nicely - very nicely,' he chortled. Turning to the Gypsy-King, he said, 'This will do quite well, but...'

'But what? Hurry and speak up.'

'The machine?' chirruped Mr. Newbigging.

'That thing? If you want, take it too. Now do we have a bargain?'

Before answering the Gypsy-King Mr. Newbigging raced to the table, embraced the precious apparatus, carried it ever so carefully to the open sack and put it inside, after which he drew the string and briefly hugged the top of the bag with a most unseemly expression of cupidity. He ran to the Gypsy-King and wrested the document from him. After feigning to skim over it, because he had mislaid his reading glasses, he snatched the quill from the Gypsy-King's hand and scratched off his signature.

'You did not want for me to read it to you?' asked the Gypsy-King archly.

'Unnecessary. There, the deal's done,' replied Mr. Newbigging with a self-possession and a petulance that were quite astonishing for him.

'Very well,' barked the Gypsy-King. He rose into the air, and grasping his new

business associate by the waist with one hand and stretching out his other one to supernatural lengths to grasp the weighty sack, he ascended straight up. Bursting through the roof of the cabin as if it were made of paper, he jetted heavenward into the bitter, wintry night...

CHAPTER IV

‘Just where do you think you’re going?’ snapped the Gypsy-King to Mr. Newbigging as the latter gentleman was about to rap on his door with the most self-satisfied smile and a warm, loving sentiment swelling in his heart. Even with the door closed he imagined the gratifying familial scene about to transpire – of him banging heartily on the door, enough to send it crashing down, hailing to his wife and progeny to open up before he froze to death, and the door flinging open and his Jenny, rosier and lustier than ever, and his brood in tow, piling over the threshold to clamber atop him and cover him with balmy caresses. He dawdled there with his knuckles at the ready, fleetingly held in the thrall of his dream-reunion and screwed up his eyes with joviality and chortled under his breath. He tightened his grasp on the crimson sack and lowered his fist to strike the door which was only an inch or two away, but never struck it.

Instead it struck something calloused and leathery and yielding a muted thump. A dusky, gnarly hand had interposed itself at the last instant and had stifled the knock. He followed that hand up the arm to the clavicle, to the face of the Gypsy-King, though he hardly looked the Gypsy-King anymore. Mr. Newbigging sprang away into the middle of the street to take in the new startling appearance his transporter had assumed all of a sudden. He had had a brown complexion before but at least it had been a hale and hearty looking one; but now the Gypsy-King's face was as dusky and cindery and tortured and twisted as a charred old lava-stone, with a sooty excrescence of black slag, which appeared to be some species of goatee, growing out of his spiked chin. His smile had been a jaunty and impudent one but at least it had had a certain amiability about it that made it tolerable, but now it was pure malevolence with the thin, livid, crevassed lips almost parting the bottom half of his face – because the smile had extended to twice the width than before, almost touching the one and the other earlobe. He had lost his multicolored gypsy outfit: the bright orange fez with the fair-haired tassels was gone, supplanted by a jungle of scraggly red hair; the patterned Turkish waistcoat and the billowy gold pants had rotted into an ashy, desiccated carapace and Mr. Newbigging could not tell if the new raiment was detached from the creature or if it was part of his hideously scaled hide.

‘Leave the bag, friend,’ the creature rasped in a cutting, diabolical voice that made

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Mr. Newbigging's nape-hairs stand on end. 'The bag stays, but you come with me.'

'Fiend! What have you done with the Gypsy-King? Paschasius!' cried out a desperate Newbigging as he scanned the length of the narrow lane.

'The Gypsy-King has served his purpose,' croaked the creature. 'Now you serve yours.' Here the creature scowled dreadfully and from his horrid lips he ejected a line of black sputum which alighted with a crackle upon the snow. He drew a hand from behind his back and dangled that strange parchment before the other's face. 'Our agreement, good sir, remember?' he hissed. 'Time to make good on it.'

'What?' screamed Mr. Newbigging, reeling. 'A token accord, to be fulfilled sometime in the future, a small service, as you had said on the tower, but on Christmas Eve?'

'I ask for it now, on this night especially, and you can't refuse me.'

'But my wife and children?'

'They have that big bag of goodies to see them through; they'll not mind your absence so much, eh! You were little else than a slug, a sloth wallowing by the hearth anyways so you won't be missed - much. You should have read the fine print Mr. Newbigging, so come and away with me now!'

Mr. Newbigging began to say, 'I'll never...' but was cut off summarily as the creature lurched towards him, swinging a studded shackle at the end of a chain. It clasped the shackle upon his wrist and then jerked him up into the air by the chain. The

creature rose not by invisible wings this time but by leathery bat wings that emerged from orifices in its shoulders. Mr. Newbigging did all he could to keep his arm from being wrenched from its socket, because the creature was bearing him up so brutally. He managed to grab onto the chain with his other hand to relieve his imprisoned one from his entire weight. He gave a last despairing look between his dangling legs to the ground below, to the peaceful little lane, to the threshold of his door and to the cozy yellow light that streamed out of his kitchen window. Just as his tormentor was pulling him up and around a high edifice he saw a head with a bonnet on top emerge from his very door. 'Jenny,' he moaned because in the throes of his present agonies he lacked the strength to manage anything better. But she never looked up.

CHAPTER V

Jenny heard a thumping at her door but when she opened it and peered outside she saw nothing save the stirring of a small cloud of snow in the middle of the street. 'Deary! Oh Charlieeeeeee,' she called out tentatively, but only her tuneful echo resounded through the deserted street. She looked up to gaze at the full moon and at that very moment saw two tangled silhouettes flitting across it and took them for some ravens cavorting. She shivered and her teeth chattered, so she pulled her

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threadbare shawl higher up over her shoulders. Turning to go inside, she bumped into it, wallowing in the shadows: a giant crimson sack, bursting at the seams and drawn tight with a thick, braided drawstring sprinkled with gold dust.

Had she not been such a stout person by nature she would have doubtless been curtly rebuffed by the meddlesome sac and would have been knocked down; but as it stood, the altercation ended in a standoff - the lady having stood her ground and the sac having not moved a whit either. She glowered at it and then looked in all directions to see who could have deposited this payload at her door, but the street was deserted. After looking skyward and eliminating that direction as a provenance, she glowered at the sac again, crossed her arms just underneath her bosom, uttered 'umph' and tilted her head to one side. She determined to lay hold of it and drag it inside but after another futile scuffle with it, during which she got quite flushed and perspiring, she desisted and retired a few paces to glower at it some more, as if she were staring down an unruly child. With her hands on her broad hips, akimbo, she curled her delicate brow into as grave a scowl as she could manage - which was not very grave at all because her face possessed too much natural and unthinking gaiety to be amenable to any harsh lines she tried to etch upon it.

'Lewis,' she shouted, 'come outside and help your mother!' But Lewis never came. She put her head inside the house and shouted 'Leeewwwiiiiissss!' but again he did not

condescend to make an appearance or even answer her second call. 'Meriwether Lewis Newbigging,' she uttered slowly and deliberately, not shouting at all this time, 'come now and help your mother or they'll be no pudding or eggnog for you at midnight, that's for sure.' And the so-named was at her side before she was done with the last syllable, with no coat and no shoes.

'You'll catch a death. Put on some shoes and a scarf at least,' she said.

'What's up old Jenn old mum?' he replied with an impudent smile.

She could not settle on what irked her more about his cheeky reply, whether it was being called by her Christian name by her own child or being called 'old' – twice. Either way she chided him in her own temperate fashion. 'Dear boy,' she said, 'if you call me that one more time...' and she spun him around and with a pat on the rump sent him back inside. He was out again in a wink properly shod, having wrapped one of his father's decrepit scarves round the neck right up to the eyes.

'Here, son,' she said while wrapping the loose end of the drawstring round her forearm, 'get below and behind it and push while I pull.' So he pushed and she pulled but the sac still balked. It huffed and grunted and jiggled its big belly like a tired old sow too sluggish to get up but scarcely moved ahead. 'If it won't drag, maybe it'll roll,' she said, straining. 'Think of it as a giant snowball.' So they got behind it, planted their backs against it and pushed with all the strength their legs could muster. They managed to heave it up the two steps onto the

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threshold and inside the small portico where it became almost wedged in; but they were able to free it and tumble it down the two more steps that led to the kitchen, where it spread out over the floor with a final, heavy groan.

'Mum,' said Lewis after throwing his scarf off, 'was that you making those noises?'

'Noises?'

'Noises, Mum, like a honking sound, then a gurgling. Was it you? You know how you can rip a few sometimes when you exert yourself.'

'Why you saucy boy! How can you say such to your dear mama?'

'Sorry, Mum. But maybe it came from the big sack, 'cause now that I remember rightly, they were the clearest when I had my ears pressed to it. And I swear something from inside knocked me on the head.'

'Knocked you on the head!' echoed Jennie worriedly.

'Let's open it up to see inside,' replied Lewis, poised over the sac to open it.

'NO!' she shouted. 'No dear,' she repeated, much gentler this time. 'Who knows what could be inside? A wild animal perhaps?'

'A wild animal!' shouted Lewis with delectation. His eyes starting from the thrilling prospect of letting loose some feral creature, he attacked the drawstring with alarming ferocity to let it out and watch it rampage.

'Lewis. I said NO!' shouted Jennie, so much louder this time that she woke little Permalia with a start and almost pitched her from the rocker wherein she had dozed off. The dozing old tomcat lurched into wakefulness

with a full-bodied spasm and leapt onto the mantelpiece. Littler Jessamine came tripping in bleary-eyed from the communal bedchamber, dragging her headless dolly by a footless leg and finally the toddler twins began to screech in perfect concord.

‘Are you happy now, ragamuffin!’ scolded Jennie to her firstborn. ‘You made me wake the whole house.’

‘Let them wake then, mum. Are we not all to celebrate the coming of Christmas? It’s past ten now. Past ten and still we haven’t begun the festivities.’

‘We have to wait for Papa. We can’t start without him. He’s coming with all the goodies, soon. I won’t argue with you now. What a quarrelsome little monkey you are. Tend to Jessamine, will you, while I fetch the twins. And find Crissy’s head!’

Thankfully, Crissy was not a live child in the family but an inert one. And though she had mislaid perhaps the most distinguishing part of her anatomy, she remained not a bit less loved by her devoted mommy, who, having just heard the word ‘head’, promptly burst into a crying fit. Lewis rushed to take Jessamine up into his arms to console her. ‘Let’s find Crissy’s head,’ he chanted over and over again in his raspiest and cheekiest voice and with a mocking smile - and to the tune of one of the Season’s most beloved and sacred carols, the name of which, gentle reader, I dare not reveal to you lest you be too distressed to keep on with this story.

Little Permalia had somehow, amidst all the turmoil, managed to fall asleep again as

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soon as the rocker had settled down. When Mum came back from the bedroom with the twins and their howls mixed with Jessamine's whelping and Lewis' raucous singsong, she still remained fast asleep.

'Jessamine won't stop bawling,' cried Lewis. 'Make her stop.'

'You just keep on rocking her, you wild boy, and stop that infernal singsong. Sing if you must but sing something pleasant. Go sit with her by the hearth. You know she likes to watch the flames dance in it - and check on my pudding.'

How vexing any child could be was amply demonstrated next as Lewis stopped being Lewis for a little while and became a doting brother. Having stopped his jarring little song, he started into *Hark the Herald Angels Sing* in his best and merriest tone, sometimes stopping briefly to deposit a small kiss on his sister's cheek and improvising on the song by inserting 'Jessamine' into its lyrics at the strangest places, to make her giggle amidst her tears. Then he grasped her small hand and waltzed with her gracefully in an arc about the fireplace, whispering into her ear, sometimes nuzzling her about the neck to make her giggle even more and duping her into forgetting about the crying and the wayward head all at once.

Mrs. Newbigging could only wonder over the paradox that was her eldest; his little show was not lost on her even though she was sorely occupied placating the twins. She gazed at him fondly as he cautiously raised the pot-lid with an oven mitt and directed his little sister to look down into the pot. 'What a boy,' she

whispered to herself, heaving a sigh, 'too much his father in some ways, and not enough in others.'

'Oh Mama,' effused the young boy, pulling his head away from the pot, all teary eyed from the warm vapors rising. 'It's hissing famously Mama and steaming like a dragon's mouth that's been just put out.'

'Such an imagination,' she replied. 'Where do you get it from? Your Grandpapa most likely, because your Dada certainly...'

'Can we have some pudding now?' he pleaded in his most affecting voice.

'Now? But your Father...'

'I'm hungry. Can I have a snack then? I'll share with Jessamine.'

'Very well, my little urchin,' she replied lovingly. 'Fetch the bassinet for the twins so I can go scrounge the cupboard for something to nibble on.'

Lewis set Jessamine on the rocker by her slumbering sister, rushed into the bedroom and came back with the dilapidated bassinet, depositing it by his mother and then holding out his arms to receive the toddlers.

'Bring them by the fireplace dear,' she cooed in her softest voice, pinching his cheek lovingly. 'Let's all gather round it for our little nibble and you can sing us your *Hark the Herald* to all of us.'

'Can I put your name in it mum, like I did Jessamine's?'

'You are the minstrel, my love,' she replied with tears gathering at the corner of her eyes. 'So you can do with it what you like. I give you license.'

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While Lewis cautiously bore the bassinet to the hearth Mama went to the cupboards but she went tentatively. When she opened the first door she found only two mealy potatoes and a jarful of ground rosemary. She turned to cast a morose, sidelong glance back to her brood cozying up by the fire. When Lewis returned her look with a smile she turned away and lowered her head. 'When is your father...' she whispered as she opened the second door and pushed aside her finest crockery, advantageously placed at the very edge of the shelf to hide the barrenness behind it. She found only three dried prunes, one half of a cabbage, one near-empty jar of cacao and half a pot of chicory. 'My, my. What am I to do make of this?' she lamented and for a minute or two sulked with her head inside the cupboard to conceal her sorrow.

'Want me to help, mama?'

'No, Lewis I can manage.'

Wiping her eyes with her apron, unseen behind the open cabinet door, she recomposed herself as best she could and began to gather the food together. 'Hmm, I can boil the cabbage with a little sea-salt. I can mash the two potatoes. Well, not enough cacao for all but I can cut it with the chicory. Yes that'll do. What can I do with the prunes?' she murmured with a grin. The more she engineered this little miracle-feast the more she regained her courage and her good humor. Very soon she was cheerful and energetic again and bustled about the kitchen with more alacrity than if she were Head Cook at Buckingham.

CHAPTER VI

Mr. Newbigging fancied he saw the man in the moon sneer at him as his captor dragged him through the heavens. The hills, ridges, fissures and craters on that lifeless orb, which had seldom merited his notice because he was not one to look up at the stars, seemed to come together into the semblance of a face momentarily and that face appeared to scoff at him. By some curious optical effect it seemed so close to him, close enough to touch, that he stretched out his unfettered arm to latch onto it. He had reached out to it for succor but the face dissolved and became the knotty, barren lunar surface once more.

His captor took a sudden hard right and Mr. Newbigging was scarcely able to get his free hand back onto the chain. A blast of icy wind ran up his legs, and when he looked rearward to his lower extremities he was horrorstruck to see his trousers hanging for dear life, down around his gaiters. He blushed in deep embarrassment in being exposed to the wide world in his drawers. 'Am I to perish pant-less?' he pined. 'Oh, this final indignity is too much! One more such turn and I should be bottomless altogether!' He began to pray. 'Oh Father, who art in Heaven, please don't let me meet you compromised...'

'Ah cease your groveling!' screamed his winged devil, as he stopped abruptly. 'Your wretched existence is nowhere near ending. You've a long time yet, though you little deserve it. Dead, you'd be no good to me and our little bargain would be null and void. Alive,' he said

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as he coughed and then launched another gob of spittle by one of Mr. Newbigging's Newgate Knockers, 'you are priceless.'

'What are you going to do to me now? For pity's sake release me,' pleaded Mr. Newbigging, as he now dangled from his chain beneath his tormentor, trying to hoist his drooping trousers by wriggling his legs about and jerking up his knees which were fast becoming livid from exposure.

'Stay still, vermin,' cried the demon.

'But my pants!'

Exasperated, the demon glowered at the sagging pants, snapped his bony fingers and the recalcitrant garment slipped back up the uncovered legs and cinched themselves neatly round their proprietor's waist. 'There now, stop your infernal thrashing. You're cutting off the circulation in my wrist. Mind I don't undo my shackle. Remember, cockroach, which one has the wings amongst the two of us.'

Mr. Newbigging became very still and quiet and shut his eyes.

'Look to the west,' rasped the demon. 'Look and watch your destiny approaching. Look,' he repeated, shaking the chain forcefully when the gentleman at the end of it was too slow in heeding him.

When Mr. Newbigging gazed out to the west he spied a dark, fantastically shaped cloud cluster coming his way. It seemed very restless indeed for an inanimate object whose only driving force was a winter breeze. Distorting itself in very systematic ways, it appeared completely inconsistent with the random caprices of wind-driven clouds,

thrashing out myriad limbs at regular intervals, the whole structure diving down then rising up with metronomic regularity. But the phenomenon was yet too distant to be accurately resolved. Batting his eyes to work the tears out of them, Mr. Newbigging swore he saw a fleet of roman galleys coursing on turbulent seas with the full compliment of oars rowing in time. After squinting furiously and focusing again he saw a legion of sorceresses astride extensive broomsticks, flying in formation like a gaggle of wild geese. Shaking his head vigorously to shake out the stupor he was convinced was spawning these illusions, he examined it again now that the object was almost upon them and the moon was shining full upon it, defining its every contour. Had he not been hanging in the air and been standing the revelation would have surely knocked him off his feet in amazement. It glided by slowly just beneath his feet and he descried it thoroughly.

He saw pass beneath him - like an immeasurable, endless train - a convoy of enormous sledges, tethered together by long, articulated hitches which allowed each sledge in the convoy almost unlimited liberty of movement from the other. Some of the sledges overflowed with enormous sacks; others brimmed with passengers, many of whom were engaged in very vigorous activity. The conveyance was drawn by an incalculable number of giant elk, tied four abreast and galloping blithely though the air. The incredible convoy made a wide, sinuous turn moon-wards then came around again. This time Mr.

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Newbigging examined the lead sledge again because it was even more striking than the rest. It looked like an enormous, blazingly crimson galleon with a pointed bow with the bowsprit carved into an effigy he could not recognize, and a large, rounded stern with rows of small round transoms, each of which emanated a beam of yellow light. Along her length three high masts held gigantic sails aloft that bellied out and fluttered noisily. At her bow a team of men grappled with a colossal steering wheel, hard-pressed to steady her in the wind. At her stern, on a massive, high-backed throne sat a fat, old man clad in a robe colored in crimson just like the body of the ship, and were it not for his expansive white beard that flowed to the ground it would have been quite impossible to set him apart from the vessel; he seemed to be a part of it, remaining so immovable and impassive. He made a movement though when the demon hauling our hero let out a shrill whistle and thumbed his nose at him. Lifting an arm slowly, and with considerable exertion, as if his ponderous robe was weighing it down, he waved at the demon.

After jerking his chain to rouse his stupefied captive the demon dived directly towards the fat old man and alighted right by his feet; Mr. Newbigging was quick to follow, smashing into the deck with bone breaking cruelty. The sight of the poor fellow piling ignominiously into the floorboards made the fat old man burst into a roaring, stentorian laughter which reverberated through the heavens; a chorus of gravelly, discordant

chuckling emanating from behind him joined in as a counterpoint.

'I was about to consider you delinquent, Krampus,' said the fat, old man to the devil. 'I was about to send my trackers out for you.'

'It took longer than I thought,' replied the devil, casting a glance at his captive still sprawled on the deck, 'but I finally managed.'

'A willing one I hope. You know the rules.'

'The rules. We devils are experts in matters like these. All's been done to the letter and the spirit, Nick.'

'That's Saint Nick, to you especially, Miscreant!' yelled the old man, in a sudden and most fearful show of anger, waxing a dark crimson and beetling his snow-white brow. He brandished a scourge from between the whorls of his robe and lashed the Devil across the face.

The Devil lurched towards the old man to avenge the affront. Hissing, he lashed out his split-tongue and opened his maw wide enough to swallow a man whole. The old man seemed utterly blithe to the devil's counteraction. He sprang from his throne with an incredible nimbleness for a being of his proportions and thundered towards him, swinging his scourge in circles over his head. But the face-off was a short one because the Devil sprang away directly, cringed piteously and cracked a scornful grin.

'Remember your curse, Krampus. You are bound to me for five thousand years,' said Saint Nick.

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'Forgive me, Saint Nick but this malediction can test the patience of even the most redoubtable demon.'

'And redoubtable you are,' replied Saint Nick with a sudden fatherly and forbearing tone of voice, 'but nowhere near a match for me. Now let's have a look at your stand-in,' he continued, eyeing Mr. Newbigging with condescension.

'Stand-in?' said the so mentioned, now just rising and emerging from his stupor and favoring his bruised extremities.

'Yes, stand-in,' echoed Saint Nick resonantly.

'Yes, stand-in,' parroted another in a high-pitched squeal, which came from a paunchy, scrawny-legged gentleman, clad in a plaid waistcoat and variegated pantaloons, sporting a lime colored pointed hat that bowed at the middle and drooped down till it almost touched the ground. He had just emerged from behind the throne and a number of other beings, even shorter than he was, minced up cautiously in a rank behind him. Our hero could only assume that they were the elves.

'Yes, stand-in, Aelfdene,' repeated Saint Nick, looking at the elf who had spoken.

'Stand-in,' chimed all the other elves in concert, after which they all chuckled.

'I'm sure you'll prosper in the situation and will surely add your personal touch,' said Saint Nick, smiling and going ruddy over his nose and cheeks in the most delightful manner.

'Situation?' whimpered Mr. Newbigging, taking a long, loud gulp and then rounding out his eyes.

'I've got the covenant here,' said Krampuss to Saint Nick, 'properly signed and witnessed by yours truly,' The swarthy demon bowed low and presented the document to Saint Nick, who grasped it gingerly with thumb and forefinger as if he were reluctant to touch hands with him. He unrolled it, held it at arms length, because he did not have his spectacles, squinted and began to peruse the document, sometimes reading aloud, sometimes mumbling under his breath and sometimes even throwing in a snigger or two. 'Hmm...' he went on. 'Yes, quite in order. "I, the aforesaid ...do covenant to ... merchandise in exchange for future non-remunerative obligations..." Yes, truly. Everything is in order. Time to take up your new post, Mr. Newbigging.'

'New Post?'

'We'll have to start at the bottom strata but I'm certain, being the enterprising fellow that you are, you'll progress nicely enough and with seven full years you'll have ample time to perfect your craft.'

'Seven Years! Seven Years of what!' screamed Mr. Newbigging.

'Of service to me, in my enterprise, dear sir, as a substitute for that fine fellow over there,' replied Saint Nick, pointing to Krampuss, 'as per your agreement. You read the agreement before putting your name to it?'

'It was in Romany. I can't read Romany.'

'But the fine print, Mr. Newbigging, did you not read the fine print? It's in your native tongue.'

'But he assured me...I - I relied on...'

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'I'll take that as a 'no' Mr. Newbigging. Pity. Buyer beware!' said Saint Nick with a shrug of the shoulders. 'See here,' he continued, 'footnote 3.1.1: "I do covenant to engage in the service of the first party,"' here he nodded to Krampuss, "in indenture, for a period of no more than seven years, to perform whatever tasks determined by first party". It's all explicit here, dear sir. And you are obliged to make good on it.'

Mr. Newbigging fell to his knees in abject misery and lamented. 'Seven years!' he bawled. 'I have a life, a family! Seven years.' He wept so bitterly that he began to gag for air.

Krampuss came up behind him and slapped him smartly on the back to give him his wind back. 'Bear up, old chap,' he croaked. It's not so bad. Seven years will pass quick enough. You lost one situation this day, only to hit upon another one! Now how's that for a Christmas miracle? Bear up and do me proud. You'll come out of it a better man!' He punctuated his encouraging words with a wink and a broad, devilish grin.

Krampuss unshackled himself from his captive and clasped the empty shackle to a big loop bolted to the deck. 'I'm off,' he shouted to Saint Nick in a boisterous voice, thumbing his nose at the old man. His leathery wings emerged from his shoulders and lofted him up.

'Mind you return within the appointment time, you scoundrel!' shouted Saint Nick as he waved a fist at him.

'You have the word of Krampuss.'

'Enjoy your little holiday, you rapscallion!' rejoined the great man. 'I expect

your return this night, seven years hence, without fail or my minions will seek you out, and then woe betide you!’

‘Woe betide me. Woe betide me,’ repeated Krampuss as he turned away, spread his gray wings and dashed off straight into the moon and seemed to vanish into it. Mr. Newbigging watched him disappear, speechless, overflowing with the profoundest despair.

At that moment the lead sledge took a sharp turn to the right and everyone aboard had to lay hold to the nearest thing to keep from getting pitched from the deck. Old Saint Nick, caught more off guard than the rest, was hurled violently starboard and was only spared a tumble over the side when he got entangled in the rigging coming down from the main mast. A throng of elves rushed to his aid, but they had the greatest difficulty in extricating the great man, who proved less than agreeable to be rescued, as he thrashed about frantically, pummeling many of his would-be rescuers and sending many of them flying. Aelfdene succeeded in quieting the old fellow well enough to untangle him and marshaled whichever elves that still had enough of their wits about them to bear him back, unceremoniously and with extreme exertion, to his grand throne. Once back on his throne, Saint Nick scornfully shoved aside those who still fussed over him.

Mr. Newbigging, on account of his shackle, was the least affected by the steep turn and gazed in awe at the pandemonium of the moment. He looked forward to the bow and

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marveled at the legions of giant elk engaged in a sharp turn to the right. Only then did he apprehend how numerous they were – hundreds of them, he reckoned, as he could see the formation from the side.

‘Saints alive!’ bellowed Sainted Nick to his team of drivers at the wheel. ‘Keep it steady for Heaven’s sake. Are you conspiring to kill me before the night is done?’

‘We’re egregiously late, Father Christmas,’ piped a lean, aged elf who stood by the wheel, holding a sextant in one hand and an oversize pocket watch in the other.

‘By God, a little warning would have been in order,’ grumbled Saint Nick. ‘Poor old Valandil,’ he went on, looking to his other elves, ‘I think he needs to be retired.’

‘But, Dear Saint Nick,’ replied the so named diffidently, ‘it’s our normal course since time immemorial. We take a sharp turn at that bend in the Thames.’

‘Very true, old fellow,’ replied Saint Nick after a moment of contemplation. After another pregnant pause he turned to his minions and commented: ‘Perhaps ‘Tis I who needs to hang up my boots, eh?’ Then he winked at them ironically and they all retorted with anxious laughter.

‘We did our best to soften the turn, Holy Father,’ said old Valandil, ‘but you know the beasts follow their own minds more often than not.’

‘Those animals can be obdurate at the best of times and enormously difficult to control, especially when they number in the

several thousands,' roared Saint Nick in agreement.

'Several thousands!' repeated an incredulous Newbigging, addressing Saint Nick.

'About that, yes, though I myself don't keep an exact count. A special cadre of my underlings handles that. The one in sledge no. 19, I believe?' Saint Nick replied, casting a questioning look at a dark-complexioned elf close by to get confirmation of that fact.

'Yeth Father, thledge 19,' the swarthy elf lisped back.

'I thought there were only eight?' continued Mr. Newbigging. 'So says the legends.'

'Balderdash! Which legends say eight? Eight!' repeated Saint Nick, 'to pull this enormous sledge-train? Eight to draw all the presents to all the present seekers of all the worlds?' He seemed so baffled and so amused by Mr. Newbigging's eight reindeer that he grasped his enormous girth with both hands in expectation of the belly laugh to come.

'Eight,' repeated his elves-in-waiting, each of them poised to laugh.

'Yes, eight, sir,' replied Mr. Newbigging, deferentially to Saint Nick. 'Dasher, Dancer, Vixen...'

'What in heavens name are those?' interjected the old man.

'Their names.'

'Their names?' bellowed Saint Nick, his eyes now weeping copiously and his cheeks distended. 'Who would take the trouble to name reindeer? You truly are misguided, my

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friend.' Then he broke into booming peels of lusty laughter: 'HO-HO-HO-HO-HO'.

Everything our hero had hitherto experienced aboard the vessel had been so terrible and so incongruent with everything that Christmas conjured up for him that this hearty laugh was one comfort he latched onto instantly, to save him from utter despondency. He almost smiled as he witnessed Saint Nick's unrestrained jollity.

CHAPTER VII

Four elves helped him to his feet, undid his shackle from the big loop on the deck and girded him around the waist with a large manacle. They led him across other sledges by passing through the tethers that joined them, which were hollow and served also as conduits from one sledge to the next. A pleasant, roomy tunnel for an elf, for Mr. Newbigging it proved a rather tight fit and he was obliged to navigate through them on all fours, with his guides only too eager to urge him along, two at the front hauling him by the ears and two in the rear pushing him onward on the backside. If he got wedged on a ridge or in a fold of the bending conduit, they made sure he was dislodged right quickly.

So they conducted him through a succession of lower decks of several sledges, each of which were piled with towering mounds of packages, their ceilings strung with a

convolution of rigging and cordage wherefrom hammocks hung like chrysalides, pitching and yawing from the shifting of the vessels. Besides the creaking of the ropes and rafters, he perceived the muffled sounds of men whimpering and moaning inside these hammocks, as if their slumbers might be very troubled ones.

They pulled him up a constricted man-way, flung open a trap door and led him onto the deck of a sledge filled with men - full grown men as himself, his own brethren - all sitting at the margins on a narrow bench that lined the periphery of the vessel and shackled to a rail running just above, looking very downtrodden, ragged and utterly wretched, like hopeless galleys slaves. After seating him on an empty place on the bench and fettering him to the railing, three of the elves departed. 'My name is Elwë,' said the elf who remained with him. 'I'm to be your taskmaster for a while, at least as long as you are aboard my sledge.'

'Will you treat me as roughly as all the rest?' lamented Mr. Newbigging.

'Be dutiful and I'll treat you no worse than any other drudge, most likely better.'

'Better? For that,' replied Mr. Newbigging with a mellifluous, appreciative tone of voice, 'I am very grateful, because I've been through more trials tonight than any mortal man can endure.'

'Be ready for more before you prove yourself worthy of the one you've replaced, because his rank here was of the highest, and he enjoyed the respect, though begrudging, of all of us. You have very big shoes to fill, Mr.

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Newbigging – very big. Learn this first lesson well and you'll rise quickly enough in the ranks, perhaps as high as the station your predecessor achieved. Krampuss does not choose frivolously. Doubtless he saw real worth in you when he engaged you. And the great old man himself must have important designs on you. But everyone must learn at the beginning and here it is.' Elwë pointed to the several men around him. 'And do as they do tonight. You must experience every facet of the work here before you ascend to the loftiest positions, and I'm sure you'll do famously well and be a credit to your precursor.'

Unbelievable as this may sound to you, gentle reader, owing either to his incredible vanity or ineffable stupidly or acutely narrow view or a combination of all three, our hapless hero suffered a baffling spell of pride when he listened to the elf praising him as a man of some merit, though he knew not what that merit was or what other travails he would have to endure to show it off; and at that moment he did not care, so intoxicated was he by even the lowest flattery, driven by a primal impulse to devour with visceral delight any and all accolades that came his way. He felt a shiver of conceit inside the head, which manifested itself outwardly by a simpering smile, an uncomely elongation of his fleshy neck and an imbecilic puckering of the eyes. He made for a most repulsive image, and would have led any witness to swear to all the Gods that nothing and no one on this earth could ever consent to be devoted to and esteem such a creature. Even Elwë the elf gazed at him, repelled and

astonished by his perplexing manner, and was set to shake him out of his rapture when a trumpet sounded.

'Behold for a while, drudge,' said Elwë, 'so that you may get an idea of how it's done. Observe well because your turn will come soon enough.'

If our hero had been airborne once more and had been flying alongside the vessel, he would have noticed that, like a formidable sailing warship, its gunwale was outfitted with ports that opened onto the gun deck and its heavy artillery. At the trumpet call, the port hatches flew opened with a strident creak and then a sharp whack as they knocked loudly against the hull. Whoever might have expected to see the appearance of the cannons, baring their mouths towards the enemy, would have been startled by what came out in their stead. Long, writhing tentacles, segmented similarly to the tethers joining the sledges, only much thinner and much lithier, lashed out of every open port, in perfect concord, rose up and toward the deck with amazing nimbleness, each of them coming to a sudden stop just above the head of a drudge shackled to the railing; there each tentacle waited silently, but agitatedly, as a cobra might wait to seize upon its victim, every sinew wound to the breaking point, waiting to release its lethal impulse in one fell strike. A momentary, eerie stasis reigned as the mechanical limbs stood at bay with their four-clawed pincers poised and their allotted victims sat impassively just beneath. Mr. Newbigging shut his eyes to avoid the massacre he was convinced was imminent and

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sure to include the cracking of heads, the breaking of bones and other sundry barbarities. 'Look. Mr. Newbigging,' commanded Elwë, 'for your own good because you'll be next.'

'Next? Have mercy!' wailed Mr. Newbigging folding his face into his hands. 'Why must I see this misery? What good can be gained from seeing my brethren die?'

'Die?' replied the elf. 'Who's going to die? Open your eyes so that you may see how it's done and may learn and live through the experience yourself.'

But our hero kept his eyes closed nonetheless and would have kept them so had not another phenomenon, an outlandish sound, come within his hearing: a low grating growl that shook the whole deck. When he opened his eyes he saw the deck split asunder at the middle and from the widening gap a heap of presents rise up slowly. The heap rose to such heights that it began to collapse, with avalanches of parcels tumbling down its steep sides, falling at the feet of the drudges. At the automatic unshackling of his wrist, each man awoke from his torpor. As soon as the first bundle of presents came within reach he wrapped his arms around it, rounded his shoulders and clenched his eyes as if preparing for an impending jolt. Each mechanical limb clasped his drudge by the manacle around his torso, and whipped him up brutally in the air, lashed away from the vessel, and dove precipitously downward. Mr. Newbigging followed the course of a particular one and saw it stuff its gift-bearing drudge straight down

into chimney, and the poor beggar vanished with a swish and a puff of cinders. Not more than half a minute transpired when the tentacle pulled up and out of the chimney, hauling out its drudge - coughing and black with soot - and depositing him neatly back onto his seat without letting him go. The drudge seized another bundle of gifts and the procedure was repeated.

He looked down onto the sleeping city and saw the process multiplied innumerable times, more than his eyes could take in and his thick head comprehend. One might well envision that the sky was disgorging giant, wriggling octopuses instead of snow because so many tentacles were bearing down with their payloads from every sledge in the train, assaulting every chimney the metropolis offered heavenward. There was an eerie, balletic harmony to the entire affair as the great limbs and their unfortunate partners rose and fell with uninterrupted gracefulness, accompanied by a hushed chorale of swishes and flurry of black cinders. But wait! Didn't our hero just spy a little *faux pas* not far from him? One of the limbs, after its ingress into the chimney, seemed to quiver more than the rest, then shudder and strain for a minute or two and then pull up suddenly - without his drudge at the end! The tentacle drew back up to the sledge man-less and thrashed about restlessly, waiting for a new slave.

'My God!' screamed our hero. 'Where's the man?'

'Some men never come out,' replied Elwë the elf matter-of-factly. 'But that's rare

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enough. If the apparatus feels more resistance than usual, for a moment or two, it signifies that the man is stuck inside the chimney. They are let go - are not retrieved and are left to themselves. The chimney may be too soot-choked and not as wide as the year before. Perhaps it has been renovated or enhanced with extra flues or breathers. It cannot be that our men have gotten too fat. That can never happen on the strict regimen we keep them on. For some it spells a fortuitous release from their drudgery as perhaps they might extricate themselves and return to their families, and that's fair - like not subjecting a man to a second hanging if he survives the first one. For others it means a discharge from life altogether.' Elwë looked at Mr. Newbigging, shook his head and said: 'Pray, my friend. Pray that you chance upon some very wide chimneys tonight!'

'Can you not use elves?' asked our hero, in a fit of inspiration. 'Would not their much smaller size be more amenable to those narrow chimneys?'

'Elves?' replied Elwë in a sudden shock, recoiling and holding a hand to his breast as if our hero had smote him directly on the heart. 'Oh, no, no, no, Mr. Newbigging,' he said with a conceited titter. 'That would never do. We are much too precious to be engaged in such a hazardous endeavor. We possess arcane, indispensable knowledge accrued since time immemorial which is crucial to the smooth operation of this Holy enterprise. Besides, though we are of great age, we propagate very poorly and are rare in numbers. The Great

Saint could not afford to lose a single one of us. No, no, no, Mr. Newbigging. And how long do you think we would labor if we were under the yoke?’

‘You mean as I and these poor men are? You are no better than we, with all due respect.’

‘That, good sir, is an arguable point. Besides, all your brethren joined of their own free will, as you did. They all signed accords, all lawfully witnessed and on the record. I can show you if you doubt me, sir, though not tonight.’

At that moment a limb rose into view again and cut their little dialogue short. It deposited its drudge just a few seats from them and both men gazed at him. He was a singularly wan, lanky fellow and so wilted he appeared to be near death. His eyes were so sunken in that they appeared as shadowy holes beneath his jagged brow. He wore the tallest stovepipe hat our hero had ever seen and had secured it to his cranium with a frayed, scarlet bandage wrapped around his hat and head and fastened with a coarse knot under his meager chin.

‘Such vanity, for a man in his present station,’ pondered Elwë. ‘Ever the prideful man!’ You see,’ he went on, bending over our hero and whispering confidentially into his ear, while nodding toward the lanky gentleman at the same time, ‘an undertaker he was in life and he still wears his accoutrements with distinction. On his deathbed, one Christmas Eve, he made a bargain and won another seven

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years of life – life here, Mr. Newbigging. How's that for irony. Tonight, his contract ends.'

'How very sad,' commiserated our hero.

'Do not weep for him or the rest of these mortals because they have chosen their own fates. They hankered for things that they should have shunned and shunned things that they should have embraced – things that are the natural and godly things that men of scruples should pursue. Look, Mr. Newbigging,' said the elf, again pointing to the old undertaker who had just laid hold of another bundle, 'he chose *this* over a dignified death seven years past. Tell me, Mr. Newbigging, was it worth it? We both know how and when this man will perish and so does he. Is this better than the unforeseen, blissful demise that the Lord wishes for all his children? Bid him adieu for mercy's sake because he may not come up again. Courage, dear old Mortimer!' cried the elf to the old mortician before he was yanked away again.

'Courage, dear soul,' cried Mr. Newbigging in as earnest a tone as he could muster, while giving him a shabby wave of his shackled hand.

After the old man had disappeared beneath the vessel again, Mr. Newbigging wept bitterly till he was out of breath. He could not help but imagine this poor man's fate and he could not help but think of his own poor father, whom he had abandoned to a fate scarcely better than the old mortician's. His spirits picked up, unaccountably, in the next instant – perhaps inspired by the anger that always

seethes below great distress - and he addressed his taskmaster with a surprising indignation.

'But this is all so unconscionably heartless,' he exclaimed, 'to use men so and to leave them to perish. Christmas is a time of caring and kindness and charity and love, not cruelty and burden and pitiless abandonment - heartless!' he wailed.

'Is it heartless?' rejoined the elf. 'Is it heartless to demand that one fulfills one's obligations in return for services rendered or goods given? It's not heartlessness or cruelty at work here but good organization and expediency. We need to sustain this pace. All endeavors carry risk, good sir. If we lose a man or two, then so be it. This is a production line, my friend. The sledges must keep moving all the time. The delivery can never stop or else we can never meet our commitments. We cannot linger on the small troubles. Avarice, Mr. Newbigging, is a demanding, unthinking, voracious brat which must be fed...'

'Cannot the limbs deposit the presents by themselves?'

'You mean just drop them down the chimney and into the ashes? Oh no, that would not do. The Human touch, Mr. Newbigging, the human touch is required here. These automatons have no eyes or feeling or thought and are merely agents for transporting our couriers. The presents have to be placed by the tree and the tree has to be found, Mr. Newbigging, and our great arms, be they ever so formidable looking, cannot do that, at least not yet. A few fully automatic prototypes are being tested but they've met with only middling

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success. No, good sir, it will be some time before Man is taken out of this equation!' Elwë expressed this last notion with a look of genuine relief. 'Now, ready yourself,' he went on, grasping a large sack of presents and handing it to our hero. 'Remember to let the sac suspend beneath you because if you enter the chimney together you might get wedged in. It's time, so brace yourself!'

But Mr. Newbigging did not brace himself because he was still in a shock from all that was transpiring. When he accepted the sac, he did so with languor, limply grasping it and letting it slump down in between his legs. Even when he saw his shackle fall away from his wrist, his eyes remained glazed over. He had not learned a whit from watching his brethren perform their tasks: he did not buttress himself or tense his muscles up or round his shoulders or lay hold of the sac smartly. It was a poor, pitiful display of zeal. When the tentacle, the one he had seen abandon its previous associate, grasped him by the waist and grasped him brutally - because its ferocity seemed to have doubled after having lost his first man - his body succumbed like a bag of jelly. He went boneless on the spot as every limb folded up together. His body bent in half about the middle as the limb wrenched him away with inconceivable thrust, and were it not for his considerable paunch getting in the way his chin would have surely knocked against his knees. Not so much as a scream came out of him, just a long mournful exhalation, as the mechanical limb planted him

into a vertical dive, driving directly towards the maw of a big smokestack atop a mansion.

He instinctively wrapped his arms around the sac instead of letting it hang down beneath him, faithfully defying the elf's caution to make himself as thin as he could. It compressed itself forcefully next to his body from the rush of the wind, making his person even wider. The ample chimney swallowed them both but just barely as it appeared to swell out to accommodate them with even its brickwork shuddering and shaking off some loose mortar. It went utterly dark and silent for Mr. Newbigging in his tenebrous dance with his sac. They were joined together in body and purpose, he envisioned, and for an instant he embraced the thing as something human that could reciprocate, to gain succor from it and to bond with it, as if the two were plummeting to a common place and to a common fate. Inasmuch as he expected the destination to be a fiery one, he expected the flames to rise up to meet him and scorch the obscurity but the obscurity prevailed as the chimney seemed to be a very extensive one indeed.

He plunged into a deep oblivion, only to re-awaken again, standing in a dark dinner suit with tails, sporting a stovepipe hat and holding an exquisite derby-handled, gold-collared mahogany cane in his gloved right hand. He stood dignified on the sidewalk of a broad metropolitan venue lined with streetlights so brilliant that they blotted out the stars and turned nighttime into daylight. And day remained but the grand cityscape vanished, save the sidewalk which now divided

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a pasture of tall wheat that stretched to perpetuity on both sides and sent up a murmur as it was awakened by a breeze of deep summer. He started into a decorous and nimble stroll down the sidewalk, swinging his cane out now and again over the wheat plants like a foil, beheading scores of them with an abstracted elegance that was inspirational to see. One of his flourishes sent up a cloud of white fuzz which came from a row of dandelions growing at the edge of the sidewalk. They looked droopy and disheveled, very much out of season, with their stalks bending limply over the pavement and their heads now almost bald. Some had died and detached themselves from their roots and were lying curled up on the sidewalk, several of them far in, as if they had dragged themselves a distance before expiring. He poked them with the end of his cane and smiled but a profound melancholy took hold of him and he began to weep. He touched one of the coiled up stalks with his forefinger, and it writhed with new life, because it had turned into a long pink maggot. He wept even harder till. So drained was he from his melancholy, that he collapsed to his knees and threw up a cloud of abrasive ash. He had just emerged from his dream state, sprawled in the middle of the hearth with his sac underneath him. A determined nudge from the tentacle at his back pushed him out of the grate and sent him tumbling to the edge of a tall Christmas tree.

Another nudge from his mechanical taskmaster roused him enough to induce him to draw open the sac and another smart little

tug backwards to intimate that time was running short stimulated him into unloading the presents around the bottom of the towering tree. Once the sac was emptied, Mr. Newbigging felt his every fiber dislocated by a tremendous backward pull as he was wrenched away from the idyllic Christmas scene before him and yanked up the chimney again.

If the push down had not elicited a word out of our hero, the pull up surely did because as he was spooled up the chimney, this time fully conscious, he shrieked louder than any mortal had ever shrieked before, never stopping as he was hoisted back up to his sledge and then dumped on the very place whereon he had been seated with all the decorum of a bag of potatoes. And every crow slumbering in its spire, every dove cooing away to its young nestled around them, every hoary great gull settling for a sleep under the sky-scraping Dome, was jolted out of its gentle repose from his shriek and became genuinely miffed by this improper disturbance upon such a quiet Christmas Eve. Only the bats on their nocturnal frolics answered his resounding call with their own squeals and then congregated in thick flocks around Saint Nick's vast Christmas Train.

CHAPTER VIII

So when our hero was again pointed ground-ward and hurtling for another chimney,

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bearing another bag of gifts, he spied the chimney-hole and despaired over its smallness. His eyes bugged as big as eggs and his lower jaw dropped as if the sinews connecting it to his upper one had been summarily cut. His open mouth strived to scream yet not a sound came out. In a last, startling moment of cool-headedness, he cast off the bag just before his entry in the vent.

But dropping the bag was too small a measure because the chimney narrowed even more and stopped his descent violently as every chimney-brick seemed to jut out its aspersions to check his plunge summarily and bruise his body. The fit became such a tight one that even in the throes of agony his poor lungs had not the room to swell and send out a call for help. It did not help that the flue had not been cleaned for ages and was lined with a quagmire of oily, congealed ash that reeked like rot. He cursed every chimney sweep that had ever plied his inglorious trade and condemned to limbo the neglecter who had never called for one.

He was wedged tighter than a sausage in its skin, upside-down, his head being the only appendage he could move. The tentacle took a hard pull or two, hesitated for half a minute and then pulled again. After the second failed attempt at extricating him, it released him and withdrew hastily without so much as an acknowledgement of their venture together. Our hero could not decide whether he should celebrate his release from his bondage and his contract or bewail his abandonment to this vertical tomb.

Though his large ears were sorely lacerated over the brickwork, he was able to swivel his head downward to the grate, expecting to see a fire coming up to meet him but no fire came. Only a few curls of smoke rose up to bedevil his nostrils. A big gray cauldron hung on a bar across the grate and he could feel the moist exhalations rising from it. A brawny, stout forearm wielding a ladle came into view to raise the lid and dip the ladle inside. When the lid was lifted a brandy-laden, full, fruity bouquet rose up like a balmy Chinook and flew up his nostrils and filled his mouth with the most blissful, celestial aroma he had ever experience. His terror turned to pure bliss and his thoughts turned to pudding. 'Ah,' he thought, taking in as much of the glorious fumes his squashed lungs could admit. 'If I'm to die, let me nose the wonderful scent of what I love so much: plum pudding and not fire and brimstone. If only I could taste my Jenny's before I expire.' He shed a tear which fizzled amidst the cooling embers.

'What in heavens name?' he heard a voice say at the bottom, a voice so familiar that his ears, despite being under such duress, pricked themselves up. 'God knows what is caught up in there,' it said. 'If only your father could tend to...Goodness knows, I wouldn't be shocked if bats made house up there. My, My! Will you get some more coal, my dear? This fire is dead.'

'Right smartly, old Jenn old mum,' replied a boy's voice. 'I'll have to go the common coal bin but I need a duce...'

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Mr. Newbigging's heart leapt up or should I say down into his mouth and cries tumbled down his throat, but with no room and no air to utter them the cries came out no better than a wheezing cough, hardly human sounding. He tried to squirm and wriggle in his prison-bore; he whelped mutely and spastically, like a debarked dog; he hissed and gulped as loudly as he could; he gagged and he gasped but all to no avail.

No one would ever deign those utterances to be of human origin, if they could hear them that is, and Jenny hadn't. The twins and begun to bawl again, waking little Jessamine who began to scream frantically for her mislaid doll's head. After a dutiful go at the pudding, she left it to tend to her brood. With no Lewis to help her, pacifying them became her chief concern.

'Back already mum!' shouted Lewis, flinging open the door, scarcely more than a moment after he had gone out, swinging the empty coal pail in one hand and with the other holding up the collar of a big green bag cracking at the seams with all sorts of protuberances and square corners jutting out all over. 'Look what I found on the doorstep!' he hollered. 'Guess Father Christmas couldn't fit *this* down the chimney!'

Little Permalia lurched out of her deep slumber and leapt from her rocker; littler Jessamine's wailing turned into cries of elation as she fancied the sac bursting with dolls-heads. Poor mama threw up her arms in hopelessness and began to cry.

‘Cheer up Mummy,’ cried Lewis as he let go the pail and hurried to his beleaguered mother as best he could, dragging the big green bag and his two little sisters who had jumped upon it to embrace it. ‘Our prayers, have been answered, mummy! Two big wonderful sacks! Don’t cry. Let’s open them now, eh!’

But mama cried even harder. ‘There is no Christmas without your poor Papa,’ she wailed. ‘Where could he have gone to?’

‘Gone, Mama? He’s been running round tonight rousting up all these wonders for us! Oh Dad’s a clever one, waiting to the last to make a grand entrance. Perhaps he’s a-coming bedecked like St. Nick! That’s it. I’m scaling the roof to wait upon his coming, mum.’

‘Silly boy. No one’s climbing the roof, Lewis,’ said mama as she suppressed her tears.

‘But who else could have engineered this mama, besides Father? Surely it’s been a long time coming because...’

‘Watch your words, my boy,’ she rejoined, looking a little pensive. ‘Could it be?’ she murmured to herself, grinning and scratching her chin abstractedly.

‘Let’s open the bag with the wild animals in it first, mum,’ demanded the young boy.

‘Wild animals?’

Lewis was already lunging for the big crimson bag when a knock came at the door.

‘There’s Daddy,’ shouted Lewis, doing an about-face and running to the door.

‘Your father,’ said Jenny, heaving a sigh.

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Before the boy could reach the door a throng of garishly dressed, brown-faced men, with their smiling mouths baring their snow-white teeth, piled into the kitchen. Lewis froze in his footsteps and eyed the men with utter absorption, his eyes rounded to a frightening extent and an unnatural grin parting his lips. 'Gypsies!' he howled. The two little girls ducked under their mother's petticoat and yowled; and their mother brandished the ladle she still held towards the ravening horde. 'Run out the back door for a Blue Bottle!' she shouted to Lewis. He did not budge but only repeated 'Gypsies' as he beheld all the knife-throwers and sword swallows and fiddlers and fire-eaters and shrieking monkey drummers and stilt-walkers – who had to make a special effort because the ceiling was so low – overrun the cramped, little kitchen.

'Fear us not, dear madam,' said an old fiddler with a strange fiddle who stepped forward ahead of the mob. 'Your dear husband has enlisted us tonight to regale you and fill you up with Yuletide cheer.'

'Hurrah, Hurrah to Mr. Newbigging,' exclaimed the horde in one voice, 'our Honorary Gypsy King!'

'You're not opening your gifts, dear woman?' asked the old fiddler. 'Open the crimson one first. It comes from us directly with sincerest Christmas wishes to you and yours!'

'Where is my husband?' asked Jenny with an air of suspicion and an impressive, cool composure amidst such hubbub.

‘On the way, ma’am,’ replied the old fiddler, ‘on the way! In a bejeweled sedan chair our own Gypsy-King has ceded to him for this special night. Come, dear boy,’ he continued in his oiliest, most winningly jovial voice, beckoning to Lewis. ‘Come little ones. Come from under your dear mum’s undergarment and help us break open the sack.’

Before Jenny could object her girls scuttled from under her skirt and climbed up into the waiting arms of the old fiddler, and Lewis grasped him by a leg. The old man carried them handily over to the big crimson sack. ‘We lay out the repast first,’ he said, ‘before we heap the presents beneath the tree.’ Looking to the tree, he curled up his thin lips and scowled. ‘Your tree needs a little dressing up, ma’am. Leave that to us. Why there’s enough bobble on a single Gypsy to trim a boulevard’s worth of trees.’

Before Jenny could take exception to the deprecation of her skills as a decorator, every Gypsy in the lot had cast one of his jewels upon the naked, scraggy evergreen. Large oblong earrings dangled from every bough; brass trumpets and silver French horns were strung together and festooned round and round it. The twin monkeys shed their bright crimson vests and tossed them in as accessories. Emeralds and jades and diamonds on every branch changed the gloomy, little tree into a scintillating beacon.

‘Who wishes to draw the string?’ asked the old fiddler to the three children as they stood around the great crimson sac. All three skirmished with each other for the honor.

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'Come now, boy, you're a little man now. Defer to the young ladies,' piped in the old fiddler in a most gentlemanly manner, gazing respectfully at Mrs. Newbigging and then offering a courteous wink to her. After a momentary hesitation, during which Lewis eyed the old fiddler with disdain and then eyed his mother with conceit, he relented. 'Go ahead,' he said to his two little sisters haughtily. 'Open it, will you.'

The two girls tugged at the gold-dusted drawstring till a small opening was made but before they could enlarge it further a life goose-head burst out of it, let out an impudent hiss and the head - and the body to which it was attached - leapt out. A fat duck leapt out after him and the two fowl fluttered about the kitchen till they were subdued and slain. The two girls, and Lewis for that matter, were so taken aback that they remained petrified with astonishment for a moment. 'Come brethren,' hailed the old fiddler to his cohort. 'Help our little friends lay out the dinner.' The horde encircled the crimson sack and began hauling out countless suckling pig and racks of beef and headcheese and potatoes and tumblers of heavy gravy and rashers of cold bacon and baskets holding large hams, skewered and armored with golden pineapple rings, and pie upon pie upon pie. Soon the three mystified children came to and jumped into the melee with even more ardor than any of the Gypsies. The matriarch looked on, utterly besotted by the happenings. The twins, despite all this bedlam, had managed to fall asleep again.

The old table was so heaped up with victuals that its legs were set to come apart. Lewis had sprung atop it and was wrestling with the greasiest of the suckling pig, which was not helping the situation.

'The pudding, the pudding! Your vaunted Christmas pudding so prized by your esteemed husband!' shouted the old fiddler. 'Oh, he went on right grandly about it, Mrs. Newbigging and it must occupy the focal point of the cornucopia!'

'My pudding!' lamented Mrs. Newbigging. 'It grows cold.'

'Your fire has died, mum!' hollered one of the fire-eaters who stood near the cold hearth. 'Here mum, let's feed it,' he went on. So instead of swallowing his flaming torch he lowered it and held it just above the pile of ashes beneath the cauldron. 'A little aid if you please,' he said, raising his head and addressing a colleague nearby who held an oil pot at the ready. As his colleague emptied the entire contents over the ashes, he bent down into the grate even lower with his torch and was spotted by our poor hero, who had by now squirmed so vigorously that he had shaken loose a brick or two. He had tried to scream again and had emitted a howl that should have shaken and awakened all the Templar buried beneath the Round Church, but amidst the pandemonium going on below it had melded within the din and was lost. He had howled till he was hoarse, till he could howl no more and when he looked despairingly at the man now bearing down to light the fire he had gone mute once more. He dropped a gob of spit to distract

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the man. Looking up, the man saw him. Mr. Newbigging's eyes lit up with hope because he determined he was saved but the swarthy fiend gave him an arch smile and bent down again to light the fire.

'God help me,' he started to pray upon realizing that there was no saving him. 'Forgive me for my transgressions. Perhaps this is a fate I deserve. Yes – just deserts for a life poorly lived, and to avenge a sweet, doting family poorly served. Consumed by my own base avarice, I am now to be consumed by the cleansing, retributive fires. Get used to this paltry flame, miscreant,' he remonstrated to himself. 'There's a lot worse to come.' He closed his eyes and crossed himself figuratively because he was much too constricted to go through the hand motions.

Mr. Newbigging prayed with a full heart; and the fire-eater was stooped to set the hearth afire again with a wicked heart. The gypsy horde, pressing the Newbigging family on all sides, having irreversibly dragged it along in its frenzy, had pounced upon the green gift-bag that our hero had dropped before entering his chimney and was set to tear it open.

Another knock came at the door and should have been completely inaudible amid the raucous, but somehow it pierced through the noise and tore it apart. The door swung open and a wind extinguished the torch about to light the oil in the hearth; and blew away the shiny bobbles in the tree which became a scraggy bush again; and turned the food-laden table into a barren one again; and turned all the revelers into specters and chased them

away through every window, which had opened by themselves, and through every chink and hole in every nook and cranny; some escaped up the chimney, passing through our hero like an arctic gale, turning all his hair snowy white on the spot.

Mrs. Newbigging stood in the middle of the empty room, coddling her terrorized brood. She bemoaned the disappearance of the magical repast as she looked to the empty old table; she wept for the miserable little tree; and she was powerless to console her babes weeping piteously around her, numbed and grief-stricken from having lost their Christmas bounty.

'I'd look up the chimney, dear Lady,' spoke a voice that pulled her from her stupor. 'Listen,' it said. 'Can you not hear a faint voice?'

She saw a raggedly dressed gentleman walking quietly into the kitchen holding up a crucifix, followed by an old man, even more ragged than the other, with a ragged, stump-winged goose perched on his shoulder, babbling away. The first gentleman spoke again: 'Listen.'

Everyone ceased what he or she was doing - be it moaning or weeping or regretting - to listen in and they all heard that faint voice which they followed to the hearth. Everyone heard the faint cry: 'worse to come, worse to come'. Jenny was the first to look up the grate. After setting her pudding pot aside she put a candle up the chimney. She gasped in despair and puzzlement at the onset but then seeing that her spouse was up there, giving her the

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most imbecilic smirk and sending a shower of thankful tears down onto her, she grew incensed quickly enough, the way only a loving matriarch could. Her heart was bursting with so much joy at seeing her poor benighted husband, she felt she needed to balance it with a little maternal reproach or else she feared her it might crack open altogether.

‘By God, what in Heavens name are you doing up there?’ she shouted up the chimney.

Her husband did not reply; he could not reply.

‘Be easy on him, ma’am,’ said the ragged gentleman. ‘Save your admonishment for after we’ve extricated him or perhaps he might just prefer staying up in his little roost,’ he said with a smile.

‘Is Father Christmas stuck up the chimney?’ asked little Permalia.

‘Can he not bring all the food back?’ inquired littler Jessamine, wearing a frown that was apt to turn into a cry at any second.

‘I’ll fetch Dada down,’ said Lewis, who was set to spring up the chimney.

‘No one’s climbing up that chimney!’ shouted the matriarch. ‘It’s enough that there’s already one Newbigging lodged up there. We don’t need another.’

‘Please mum,’ said the ragged gentleman softly, placing a hand on her shoulder.

‘If you please!’ she answered with a scowl but her face soon softened when she looked into his gentle eyes.

‘A little lard would be nice, to reduce the friction, and some rope.’

'Be so kind, sir, as to give me your name and the other one's too,' she asked, looking to the older man who had taken the liberty of sitting on the rocker.

'I am Paschasius, good lady, the Gypsy-King, and that old fellow is my Great Uncle.'

'Great Uncle,' rasped the old man on the rocker.

'Please ma'am,' begged Paschasius, 'some lard? And some rope of any kind.'

'I have some lard but rope? Would an apron string do?'

'Not quite,' replied the Gypsy-King, putting a finger to the cleft in his chin. 'Hmm – mind boy. See that red sac with that rope,' he said to Lewis as he pointed to the great crimson sac lying limp on the floor. 'Pull out the rope. That should be thick enough.'

So the lard was got and the rope was got and our hero's release became a group endeavor. Lewis was hoisted up on the upturned palms of the Gypsy-King high enough to reach his dear Papa; the matriarch scooped the lard with her ladle, which she passed to the boy who lubricated as much of the area around his entrapped father as he could, shoving dollops into any crevasse he could find between his father and the brick; the two little girls stood ready with rope in hand, though they managed to steel a little game of tug-of-war when the others were not looking; and the Great Uncle, astride the old rocker, doled out dollops of wisdom on how the enterprise should best be carried out, though he seemed to be directing his lecture out the kitchen window and not towards those most in need of his

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counsel. Finally the man was properly greased and the rope run under his armpits and up around his shoulders, not a trivial accomplishment by Lewis it must be emphasized. Then the pulling began and everyone who could pull did.

How many men could boast to have been born twice? To be squeezed and compacted and mired in sludge, and then wrenched out and into the light of the World – hopefully a better World the second time around – and a better Newbigging too. The brick released its erosive grip with a raspy huff and the gummy quagmire gave way, but begrudgingly, stretching its glutinous fingers down till they finally drew out to filaments and vanished. And our hero came down, squealing like newborn piglet, in a final undignified headfirst dive into the cold ashes. He rolled out of the ashes and ended up on his feet on the hearthrug. His eyes started when they fell upon the Gypsy-King.

‘You!’ he screamed, having miraculously recovered his voice again and then wrapping his arms around his entire family to shield them. ‘You’ll...you’ll never...’

‘Hold on, dear friend,’ replied Paschasius, holding up both his hands and retreating a few steps.

‘You Devil! You’ll never get me to go back. Jenny, run! Fetch the Holy Water!’

‘Holy Water?’ said Jenny, deeply puzzled because such a thing had never made its way into this house.

‘Please, sir,’ replied Paschasius, ‘do not judge me before you know me.’

'Know you!' rejoined our hero. 'Knowing you almost cost me my life. Get away!'

'You judge me harshly, friend. I am not the man you think I am. Was I not the one who came just in time to chase away those demons and free you? Did I not save you from an early demise in your own private Hell? Would I save you now to kill you later?'

'You mean to enslave me,' snapped our hero. 'That's your ruse, to enchain me to a fate worse than mortal death. You're a clever one, dressed in your amiable façade, but you won't dupe me again.'

'I am what you see here, friend, nothing more and nothing less. And I am no Devil but a good Christian, as you are or leastwise I try to be.'

'Good Christian,' parroted the Great Uncle on his rocker.

Mr. Newbigging recomposed himself, scared up whatever courage he could find and approached the Gypsy-King, but on the way he took a quick step toward the grate, snatched the poker from its hook and resumed his advance. The Gypsy-King did not recoil or even raise a hand in defense but stood placidly with his arms crossed.

'Parry or fly, abomination!' cautioned Mr. Newbigging, holding the poker up.

'From banker's clerk to Bludger in a single evening. Well-well-well. Do what you need to do, friend,' replied Paschasius with an air of resignation that was inspiring to see.

A hush and common sigh swept over his family and his wife uttered softly: 'No

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Charlie. A Devil would never let itself be immolated so. He must be a good Christian.'

Our hero stopped barely far enough to get a good swing in and looked the Gypsy-King in the eye. 'Turn around,' he said to him.

'Can you not bear to look me in the face when you slay me?'

'Then don't turn.'

Jenny rushed to her husband and tried to wrest the poker from his hand but he held fast. 'My Dear, let me do what I need to do,' he said to her. 'I need to act like a proper Father and a proper Husband and a proper Man. Let me protect my brood and my home in my own way.'

'But Dearest...'

During their little connubial tussle the Gypsy-King slowly turned his back to his attacker and cast an insolent look over his shoulder. 'I'm ready, sir. I await your caprice,' he said.

After pushing off his spouse ever so gently Mr. Newbigging approached the Gypsy-King with his poker still held up. With his free hand he pulled the Gypsy-King's ragged waistcoat down to his elbows to pin them and then cut two gashes along the shoulders of his coarse undershirt with the point of his poker; next he shoved a hand inside.

'A doubting Thomas, I see, Mr. Newbigging,' retorted the Gypsy-King, appearing exceptionally amused for a man in his predicament. 'Looking for wings perhaps? Angels' wings, I hope.'

After rummaging under his shirt and not finding any wings or pouches or sacs or

orifices to encase them, or any other anatomical anomalies for that matter, our hero spun the Gypsy-King around and began to tug at the skin of his face.

'That will only give so much, my friend. Try the old man's. His has a lot more stretch to it.' The Gypsy-King laughed heartily and so did his Great Uncle.

Our poor befuddled hero backed away slowly, with his eyes now moist with tears; he let the poker fall to the ground and then fell to his knees. His family hoisted him up and helped him to a chair by the grate. 'Not here, not now,' he said, seeing how close they had placed him by the hearth. 'I think I've had enough of that place tonight.' So they helped him into a chair by the table.

Paschasius approached him very nobly, sat close by him and put a hand on his shoulder. 'You had mistaken me for another, my friend, but not another man, but a Demon perfectly disguised as me, and as me he had been roaming the streets tonight in search of someone to dupe. For a brief time the world saw two of me. I had a double, an unlucky event for you, but for me it's a dooming one because my time on this earth is now short. And I have to use that short time as best I can.'

'Well friend,' replied our hero, 'you have saved a life, my own that is. Is that not something?'

'My greatest achievement in life yet, Mr. Newbigging. Yet I have an even more auspicious one, which is saving the life of my entire people. Besides coming here to see you saved, not an easy feat, because I had a Devil

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of time – pardon the expression – tracking you down. I was on the heels of that Devil when I saw him take you away. Your hat, Mr. Newbigging, you had dropped your hat.’

‘My hat?’ said Mr. Newbigging feeling his naked head.

‘You were meant to be tested and saved, my friend. I found it in Covington square by the old fountain. It had your address monogrammed inside.’

‘He mislays it all the time,’ piped in Jenny. ‘That is my handiwork.’

‘You found it in the Gypsy Kingdom?’ blurted out Mr. Newbigging.

Paschasius laughed. ‘Kingdom, my friend? We have no kingdom there. In the middle of the metropolis? That is too droll,’ he said, looking to his Great Uncle who was laughing even harder. ‘Poor man, you were sorely duped tonight. That was all an elaborate fiction, friend, an illusion spawned by the one who tried to enslave you.’

‘You mean no fire-eaters or sword swallows or hanged men’s powdered teeth or witches pimple puss?’

‘You seem very downcast, Mr. Newbigging. I think you found it all too entrancing,’ opined Paschasius.

‘And the goose and turkey and suckling pig and pies,’ said young Lewis as he seemed ready to weep.

‘I’m afraid yes, as were those extravagant creatures that came here to bedevil your family – all a phantasm.’

‘The Perpetual Motion Machine, was that a fake too?’ inquired Mr. Newbigging. His

heart sank when he gazed upon the empty crimson sack, bedraggled on the ground.

Looking harder upon the sac he spied a small bump at the bottom so to it he bolted. Stuffing his entire person inside and after wrestling therein for many minutes, he came out again, bearing his broadest smile and holding in his grimy hands his little Perpetual Motion Machine, still going to and fro, to and fro, completely unconcerned to all that had transpired, so intent was it to fulfill its predestined prerogative. Mr. Newbigging cupped it lovingly. He walked across the kitchen with the entire assembly gazing at him in stunned silence and deposited it carefully atop the mantelpiece beside a picture of his departed father. 'Here Father,' he said with a trembling voice, all teary-eyed. 'You were right, Dada, all along and here's the proof. My present to you, Dear Father, on this...' he paused to gaze lovingly upon his family, '...this - the Happiest Christmas in all my life!'

His last effusion proved too tear-jerking for his brood. They all fell upon him in a deluge of tears and squeezed, embraced, kissed, even bit him and wallowed about him till they were as black and greasy as he was. Such a touching show but such a paltry audience to appreciate it: just the Gypsy-King, who seemed to have had enough of it all and seemed pressed to leave, and his Great Uncle who was still castigating whoever was on the other side of that kitchen window.

In all the fanfare no one had noticed that the other bag, the green gift-bag, still remained unopened and lying on the kitchen

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floor. 'Look', said the Gypsy-King, the first to notice it, and very eager to cut short this episode of familial gushing so he could get going. 'This one remains and is real enough. Go children and discover it wonders!' The three youngsters went dry-eyed on the spot, tore themselves from their parents and assailed the gift-bag with terrifying avidity, like a gang of honey badgers pillaging a bee's nest. 'Enjoy it, my children!' shouted Paschasius. 'That one was hard won,' he continued, lowering his voice and gazing straight at our hero, 'and richly deserved.' He approached the couple and embraced them both. 'Please, dear Mrs. Newbigging,' he whispered to the matriarch as he deposited a small peck on her temple, 'go and join your children. I've business with your husband. But first, take this crucifix, ma'am. It's a special one and will defend against any more intrusions like tonight.' He handed her a crucifix of black wood with an ivory Savior nailed upon it. She meekly accepted it, put it in her apron pocket and ran to free her children now hopelessly caught up inside the bag.

The Gypsy-King took Mr. Newbigging aside and addressed him soberly: 'Look, good sir, it appears things will not turn out so badly tonight. True the repast will be a meager one.'

'We always have Jenny's pudding.'

'True friend, true, and those treasures you won for your family should allay some of the pangs, I hope.'

'So will mine, friend,' replied our Hero, gazing fondly at his Perpetual Motion Machine.

'Look, my friend,' said the Gypsy-King as he came so close to our hero that their

breaths commingled. He stared him deeply in the eye and grasped him by the shoulder just above the clavicle, digging his thumb into it till our hero winced. 'Now, Mr. Newbigging, my other reason I rushed here. As I said previously I came here on another mission even more pressing than the saving of you!'

'The life of your people, you said?' said Mr. Newbigging.

'The spiritual life – and the collective art and knowledge and history of an entire race – all contained in an apparatus that makes your miracle machine pale in significance. A snuff box, Mr. Newbigging.'

'Snuffbox?' echoed Mr. Newbigging, gulping loudly.

'A small gilded one - ornately carved.'

'How big?'

'How big, Mr. Newbigging?' replied the Gypsy-King, more than a little puzzled by the question and more than a little miffed, 'the size of a... of a... a snuffbox, sir, a snuffbox. When the Devil purloined my rucksack, because he needed to steal an article of mine to gain the power to counterfeit me, it was inside.'

'What of it? How can a mere trinket like a snuffbox mean so much?'

'Who are you to qualify it as mere, sir? Because of its dimensions? There are many wonders in the universe, Mr. Newbigging. This snuffbox might be tiny on the outside but dare you look into it, you would see unfathomable knowledge, inscrutable mysteries and the compounded wisdom of an entire people. Size is an illusion, dear sir, as are many other physical qualities. Surely, from all you've

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experienced tonight, you are able to appreciate that.'

Mr. Newbigging remained taciturn for a bit, contemplating the Gypsy-King's last contention; and after briefly reliving everything he endured this night he nodded in agreement.

'What makes you think I have it?' he asked a little petulantly.

'You were close to him. Did you not see it on his person? Did he show it to you and tempt you with it?'

'I saw no such object,' said our hero, curtly.

'No snuffbox.'

'No snuffbox – which signifies that I can pronounce with even more authority that I do not possess it.'

The Gypsy-King's shoulder's drooped and the passion vanished from his dark eyes. After a long pause, during which he let go Mr. Newbigging's shoulder, he spoke very softly and with tender resignation. 'Then Krampuss must have it. He must be found.'

'If it's any help,' said Mr. Newbigging with a zeal than was most surprising and even a tad equivocal. 'When he flew from Saint Nick, I saw him go north toward the Lake District.'

'The Lake District,' parroted the Great Uncle.

'Lake District,' repeated the Gypsy-King.

The Great Uncle looked fixedly to his nephew and smiled; and his nephew reciprocated.

'Did you hear, Uncle?' said the Gypsy-King. 'All is not lost yet. We have a trace. To the Lake District we go.'

‘But on Christmas Eve?’ said Mrs. Newbigging, who was just done extricating her children and was now helping them line the bottom of their shabby old tree with all the presents. ‘Please stay a bit and share what we have – a bit of pudding, as soon as it’s good and warm again, and some humble libations. Please grace us with your company on this special Eve. And the night is so cold.’

‘A touching offer, dear lady, and tempting one,’ replied the Gypsy-King, bowing. ‘But we must be off. Krampuss must be found. We cannot tarry a moment longer. Come Great Uncle, wake your goose!’

‘The goose can stay,’ spoke the Great Uncle to everyone in the room, ‘and round out this poor family’s dinner.’ The scrawny, stumped-winged old goose lurched out of his doze on the old man’s lap at that moment and rattled whatever frazzled plumage he had left. Then he eyeballed everyone in the room.

‘A gracious offer, Uncle,’ said the Gypsy-King.

‘And one we cannot accept,’ spoke Mr. Newbigging in his noblest tone of voice. ‘It’s obvious that the poor beast has a special attachment to your dear uncle.’

‘Verily,’ agreed the Gypsy-King, ‘they’ve lived through much travail together. His age would surprise you.’

‘I think not, Your Highness,’ rejoined our hero very ironically. ‘Not by the look of him. Besides, my friend,’ he said, addressing the Great Uncle, ‘I think he’ll serve better at your side. So thank you, no.’

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The Great Uncle nodded in deference to Mr. Newbigging and bounded from his rocker with his old goose on his shoulder. The Gypsy-King crossed over to him, put an arm through his, leading him through the small portico and out the door, but before disappearing into the night he balanced himself on one leg handily upon the threshold, turned to Mr. Newbigging and tipped his hat to him. Then he melted into the darkness.

All the cheer of the moment seemed to fly with the departing gypsies; a yawning emptiness filled the small kitchen for a brief moment and everyone in the house had an empty place in their hearts. Mr. Newbigging broke the pall with a heartfelt 'Merry Christmas' proffered to the departing men but a little too late for them to hear it and reciprocate. His family took the greeting to be meant for them and their dour faces brightened directly. 'Merry Christmas!' he shouted a second time, seeing that the first one had gone off so well. His family replied with a chorus of 'Merry Christmas' and 'Happy Christmas' and they rushed en masse to surround him with their love and regard. Even the twins paraded their holiday spirit by letting out the merriest shriek in perfect unison, to which the others replied with a barrage of Christmas wishes in their direction.

'Daddy,' said Jenny to her husband, 'time for some pudding and some eggnog. Lewis, bring your father's rocker so he may lounge by the tree.'

'Not tonight, my dear. I won't sleep through this Christmas Eve and none of those

to come. Gather round me, my dears, and I'll regale you with the wildest, most grotesque Christmas adventure you could ever hope to hear.' Every one responded with a hearty cheer. 'Then,' he continued, getting ever jollier and ever ruddier about the cheeks, 'we'll all sing the choicest carols to usher in this Holy Day and we'll open our presents as the clock strikes twelve.' Everyone turned their eyes to the old cuckoo to see how many minutes were left to the tolling of midnight and cheered even louder. 'Gather round the pretty tree. Mum, will you stoke the fire to warm your wonderful pudding? Lewis, fetch my little Miracle-Machine and I'll show you a wonder of wonders!'

And so we depart this joyful little place. We leave Dad amusing his son with his miraculous Perpetual Motion Machine. We leave Mum to get the firing roaring again and her pudding bubbling, while she looks on at her two little girls tussling and giggling beneath the tree, shaking this or that parcel to guess at its content. We leave the twins dozing by the chimney corner. We leave this happy home and homely fireside, to let its lodgers enjoy the Season as best they can. We can wish them no better circumstances than these.

Follow me now to the outside where none but two stragglers occupy the deserted streets. They are getting chillier by the second yet they press on, with their old goose trailing behind and plowing a furrow through the newly fallen snow with his lumbering, waddling fluff.

'How far will we go tonight?' asks the old one. 'My left knee is aching badly.'

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'Courage, Great Uncle,' replies the other. 'I can drop you off at the Hospice at Cripplegate if you like.'

'And leave a King without his steward?' rejoins the old man, laughing.

'A steward a little past his prime?' replies the other, a little snidely.

'A Pauper-King can expect no better than Pauper-Steward,' says the old man.

'And no worse,' replies the other.

The two men stop briefly to exchange a look and a good laugh and press on.

'Did you believe him regarding your precious snuffbox your Highness?' asks the old man.

'I can only take a man at his word.'

'Sometimes words betray the true nature of the man.'

'Not for me to judge, Great Uncle. Besides, sometimes a man's word is the only thing he can be proud of. And that man was in dire need of pride, however low it may seem to others.'

'Well spoken, lad.'

'When I butted his petulance while grilling him about my snuffbox, I was very much tempted to break the truth to him. But I hadn't the heart. It gave him so much joy. It seemed to make all the difference to him, which I found moving. I hadn't the heart to reveal to him the two tiny concealed magnets actuating his Miracle-Machine.'

'Perpetual Motion! Ah!' says the old man. 'He's not the first to fall for that little sham.'

'And he won't be the last,' responds the Gypsy-King.

'You've a grand heart, dear Nephew – a grand heart. Pity you'll never have a grand retinue.'

'Who can tell, good Uncle?'

'I swear that this old stump will carry me no further,' carps the old man as he rubs his left knee.

'Here, I'll carry you for a while. Up on my back, old man,' and before the old man can protest the Gypsy-King has already heaved him atop his back. The two struggle onward, with the old man swaying perilously, threatening to be thrown off with every step the Gypsy-King takes. Their exertions have taken away their will to converse, so the old goose has taken up the banter, honking and jabbering at their heels.

THE END