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Poetry.

THE GIFT I ASK. BY MRS. S. P. MESSERVAHAYES.

The gift I ask is a priceless boon, And for it I'm wandering through The weary maze of a thoughtless world— It's a heart that's warm and true.

Literature.

THE MAN-CAT: A LEGEND OF YORK.

"It is well known that, without absolutely taking the form of an animal, man has often the instincts of such, and, despite his outward casing of humanity, doth nourish a taste for blood; and with all a beast's unreasoning cruelty will destroy for destroying sake."

In my youth I chanced to make the acquaintance of an old violoncello player, engaged in the orchestra of the Adelphi Theatre.

He was a quiet, shabby-genteel personage, devoted to his profession from which he gained, poor fellow, when things were at the best, the meagre stipend of twenty-four shillings weekly.

The old musician greatly interested me. His superior in wordly means, I was enabled to render him many little services.

His thanks were always quietly and gratefully expressed; and such trifling pecuniary loans as I forced upon him when I knew the black ox to be treading on his foot, were returned when the better day came round without any solicitation on my part, and in such a manner that to have endeavoured to make the loan a gift would have been an insult.

It was a miserable night—a London night in December, when the streets were slippery with mud, and the damp, cold fog curled about the lungs like a wet snake. I had quitted the theatre after witnessing one of O'Smith's more than usually powerful performances, and no cab being immediately forthcoming, I turned into Bull-in-court and, entering the Nell Gwynn Tavern, called for a glass of stiff grog, to give me strength to face the inclemency of the weather.

I walked into the bar-parlour, in which a large sea-coal fire was blazing, and found its only occupant to be my friend, the old musician, Andrew Ticknapp.

Our conversation turned naturally upon the piece I had just seen, which, as far as my memory serves, was called the Man Wolf, or the Loup-Garou, its hero being an eccentric gentleman, living somewhere in the south of France, who, a model of propriety and good conduct in the daytime, played such fantastic tricks when night set in as must not only have made the angels weep, but the moon turn pale with horror.

To my surprise, I found my friend well up in that old-world superstition of lycanthropy, an idea described by Sir Walter Scott in his letters upon demonology and witchcraft.

There is no denying the apparent absurdity of such an idea, said Ticknapp, as, after stirring the fire, rubbed his thin, active hand over the blaze. Yet the characters of the lower grade of animals do seem sometimes to embody themselves in the higher form of man. I myself know an instance of a very terrible

kind, which, had it not been related to me by my dear father, long long since dead, I should have disbelieved as firmly as I have no doubt you will do.

Pray tell me, Ticknapp. This fire is far too jolly for either of us to be anxious to leave for an hour at least. We've got a room all to ourselves, and a story for your stories are always good ones—will freshen me up wonderfully.

The old man smiled. It is you who are a good listener, Mr. Ballour; and if I could only give you an idea for one of your— Oh! never mind about that. Let us drop the shop talk, old boy, and try simply to pass a pleasant hour. I know your favourite tap, and have rung the bell for a glass of steaming hot punch, which we know on the authority of Harry Fielding, is a liquor nowhere spoken against in scripture.

The punch was brought more than usual chattering merrily. Andrew Ticknapp commenced his story. My father, named like myself, Andrew Ticknapp, was an actor—a strolling player, nothing more, sir, one of the wandering children of Thespis, with whose life is a chaplet of small cares and petty miseries, which they endeavour to shake with a laugh.

It was on a Christmas eve, when the twilight shadows were gathering fast over the dreary landscape, that my father and the little troop of strollers, of which he then formed a part, came plodding along the road that led to the principal gate of the ancient city of York.

It was cold, a chill wind swept the highway, and from the marrow in their bones, "Tom Throstle, the gentleman, generally dressed in the bills as Mr. Throstle with a song, limped dejectedly in advance of the rest. After him came Mr. and Mrs. Stallwood, known as the heavies; then Midgely and his wife, a mere child whom some cruel chance had linked to his fortune; while, behind them, mounted on a small donkey, was Mrs. Euphemia Maw, the wife of the manager of the troop. She held an infant in her arms, while her lord and master, our manager and head tragedian, Mr. Octavius Maw, walked at the donkey's side, clad in a threadbare cloak, and with that stride and stop movement which is supposed to belong to the highest order of legitimate drama.

My father, who was general utility, brought up the rear. He was accompanied by a tall, seedy youth with weak eyes and light hair, known in the troop as Flamingo, supposed to have run away from somebody and somewhere.

The snow was beginning to fall fast, and the multitudinous flakes darkened more and more the heavy air, when my father, who, with Flamingo, had from sheer exhaustion dropped far in the rear of the troop, was startled out of a lethargy by the quick gallop of a horse.

The animal came along so rapidly that it was nearly upon and over them before they could draw aside. The rider reined in his horse just in time, pulling it back upon its haunches with a force that showed a hand of iron.

Hallo! Are you tired of your lives, you fools, that you go to sleep in the middle of the road. Flamingo, who was as timid as a girl, and as nervous as any teardrinking old woman, stammered out that he was very sorry; but my father, irritated at the man's tone replied, sharply—

I should like to know who you may be that you think you've a right to ride honest folk down on the king's highway. Honest folk! said the rider, with a sneering laugh. I dare swear you're little better than a couple of footpads, and I shall see you both strung up one of these days outside of York Castle.

My father was about to make an angry reply; but Flamingo, grasping his arm, whispered, imploringly—

Speak him fair, Andrew—speak him fair. Our companions are a good hundred yards in advance, and there's something in his face that chills me more than either the wind or snow.

What is that scarecrow muttering about? asked the man, with a quick movement of his right hand, which seemed like a menace.

Nothing, nothing, worthy sir, put in Flamingo, before my father could speak. We are only poor players journeying to York for the Christmas festivities.

Players! Well, I thought you were vagabonds of some kind, and was not wrong, you see. Take care how you behave yourselves, for the authorities in York are severe, and whip and pillory are both handy.

While the horseman was speaking, my father had ample time to examine his face and general appearance. Picture to yourself a large man, with a lithe, sinewy figure; thin, reddish, bristling whiskers, which advanced so close to the corners of the mouth that they looked like the commencement of a moustache; the head covered with a tight-fitting cap, made of the skin of some wild animal, descending to the ears, which, delicate and pointed, stuck out from the head; the eyes of a greenish yellow; the eyelids half closed; the forehead flat, and retreating from the brows; the mouth cruel; the teeth small, food, and pointed. Yet, with all this, when the man was not angry, nothing could be more softly deceitful than the general expression of his face. The eyelids drooped more and more over the eyes; the thin lips wore a sly smile, and a murmur, that was almost purr, showed, or was meant to show, the integrity of a pleasurable satisfaction.

It was the face of a cat—a cat that half slumbers in the sunlight, whose talons are sheathed—whose faintest sound is a sort of a sleeping caress. Yet, let a bird flutter near, or a mouse scamper by, and in a moment, the spirit of cruelty is there! The eye will flash with the lightning of death, and the claws dart forth to tear and to destroy.

We have no cause to be afraid of either whip or pillory, said my father, angrily; and, for what I know, you may be nearer to them both than either of us.

The man started in his saddle, and flashed upon my father such a look of malignant hate that he stepped hastily back, just in time to escape a savage cut from the horseman's whip.

You dog! he said, you play-acting dog! you shall die a dog's death yet!

Then, striking spurs into his horse's sides, he galloped off, and was soon hidden by the curtain of falling snow.

By my father's advice, Flamingo said nothing of this meeting to the rest of the troop. He dreaded the effect of an untoward prophecy upon their already depressed spirits and jaded nerves, and both by Flamingo and himself the rencontre was soon forgotten.

It was eight o'clock in the evening when they entered York, and made their way through the quaint but now slopy and dismal, streets to the hostelry of the Blue Boar at Castlegate.

Here the manager had secured lodging for the troop, and in the general room—a large apartment, with huge cross beams above the head, and a red brick floor beneath the feet—hungry and cold were forgotten, the first being appeased by a plentiful meal, and the second removed by a great wood fire.

It was not my father's first visit by many to the Blue Boar. His robust landlady had a niece, an orphan, whom she had taken in her employ. Her keep was not much. She served the guests, and saved her aunt money. The charity that began at home stopped there, and when Mrs. Mary McCubbin adopted Nelly Gomm, she did a thing that was very much to her own advantage.

I will just observe here, though it has nothing to do with my story, that Nelly Gomm became in time Mrs. Ticknapp, and was my mother rest her soul!

The old musician took another sip at the punch, checked himself in the middle of a sigh and smiled. I shall see her soon, he said. She was as gentle a creature as ever walked the earth. She thought no harm, and did no harm. It makes the threshold of the grave less dark, Mr. Ballour, when such beings have gone before, and are waiting for us.

Another sip of punch, and Andrew Ticknapp took up the dropped thread of his story.

My father, with Flamingo, was billeted in a garret—a queer little room, in one of the gable ends of the fantastic old tavern, which is situated, as perhaps you know, in one of the most picturesque, if not one of the most comfortable, quarters of ancient York.

Nelly showed my father and his companion their room, and stood chatting while they exchanged their soaked boots for carpet slippers, which she, for their special behoof, had provided.

What's the news Nelly? asked my father, speaking very distant, as before a third party he believed it proper to do. What has been going on since I was last in York? Nelly clasped her hands.

Awful goings on! The whole city is in a state of fear and uproar. From what cause? Every cause! Oh, Andrew! dreadful things have been going on in York since you left, though that is not more than two weeks ago. You had scarcely left the city when Mr. Peter Tomlinson, the great cloth merchant, was discovered early one morning, stabbed to the heart in his counting-house, where he had remained after the clerks had gone home in the evening. Two nights after, Alderman Kelly was found murdered in his bed; and the night after that the sacristan of All Saint's Church was killed while returning home, near Mickle-gate Bar. Since then, though some of the new officers have been sent down from Bow-street in London, there have been twenty-seven murders. No one sleeps easy of a night; for who can say when once he or she closes his or her eyes whether they will again open them in this world?

My father was much alarmed at this news, which threatened to materially interfere with the receipts of the company during its stay at York, few persons being so enthusiastic in their support of the drama as to risk a stad on their way home from the theatre.

Flamingo said nothing. His eyes and mouth were open with astonishment, and his always pale complexion grew livid with terror.

Everybody continued Nelly, is alarmed. The authorities are on the alert, and every person who is a stranger in the city becomes an object of suspicion and fear.

And they have discovered no clue? my father asked.

Not the slightest. But, most strange of all, whoever the murderer may be, he robs his victims of nothing but life. No article of value, either in silver or gold, is ever found missing from the person or purse.

Here the conversation was interrupted by Mrs. McCubbin shouting from the foot of the stairs—

Nelly! Nelly! am I to be waiting on the people myself? Where are you going to hussy?

Coming aunt, coming! and with a sly pressure of the hand for my father, and a pleasant smile for Flamingo, Nelly started down stairs like an arrow. The two poor players when she was gone looked in each other's faces with blank despair.

Bad news, indeed, said my father, folks will be afraid to stir abroad after nightfall. We shall make no money in York this Christmas.

Flamingo, still thinking of the dreadful catalogue, only murmured—

Twenty-seven murders. Why it's worse than a Jacobite rising! They descended to the general room, and after a substantial meal, during which no other subject was talked about by the guests, but the murders which had struck terror throughout York, they again retired to their airy bedchamber, in the stove, of which Nelly had secretly managed to make a small fire.

The light given by the flickering flames, for the friends had no candle, was anything but cheerful. It splashed the lattice panes of the garret windows and the dark oaken beams that traversed the low ceiling with red, which, to Flamingo's and my father's excited imaginations, appeared like blood. It sent great wavering shadows about the room; or, rather, seemed to draw them out of their lurking places in hole and corner, and set them dancing in a hundred grotesque and

ever changing shapes, like fiends at a witches' festival.

Outside of the window, irradiated here and there by the cold moonlight, stretched a forest of chimney-pots, deep gutters, and pointed roofs, through which a melancholy wind went moaning as it scattered frozen snow into silvery powder, that tinkled like needle-points as it struck against the garret window.

It was a sad night—a night when belated wanderers draw their wrappers closer about them, and hurry rapidly homewards, starting at shadows, and rarely glancing over their shoulders—a night when the very soul of man seems to be chilled, till it shudders with a drear foreboding in its fleshy casing.

No sound but the wind disturbed the oppressive silence, except, perhaps, at intervals, the sharp grind of a rat's teeth against the wood-work of the wall, and the scamper of mice over the floor-boards.

Let us get into bed at once, said Flamingo, beginning to throw off his clothes as he spoke. I don't know why, but I shan't be sorry when this night is over.

My father still remained by the window, watching the moon, as it passed in and out of the clouds, rushing wildly, like some hunted thing, from one hiding place to the other.

A quarter of an hour passed thus and then my father crept also into bed.

It must have been, by his calculation, about two hours after midnight, when he was startled from his first sleep by a noise of a peculiar character.

He first thought it the movement of some cat, stealing along the gutters and over the slated roofs; but as he raised himself and listened more attentively, he became convinced they were steps, cat-like and cautious, of a human being.

He nudged Flamingo with his elbow. The warning was unnecessary; he was also awake.

The fire had sunk down very low and cast but a faint light upon the walls. My father was about to rise to look out of the window, when, to his horror, it was opened by some one from without, and a man's head was thrust into the room.

First one leg and then the other was cautiously passed through the window, till the man himself without an atom of noise, stood erect beneath the roof of the garret.

Without glancing towards the bed, the intruder moved to the fire, which he regarded, as it appeared to my father, with some surprise, and, as the red light of the dying embers was reflected on his face, both the trembling occupants of the bed recognized in the strange the horseman who had accosted them so roughly on the road.

The cat-like face, the greenish, phosphorescent eyes, the snarling savage mouth, and thin, bristling whiskers, with ears pricked forward, listening and watchful, were indications there could be no mistaking.

Despite the excessive cold of the night, he was without a coat. His shirt-sleeves were turned up above the elbow of each arm, and a large broad-bladed knife glittered in his right hand.

My father gave himself up for lost, while Flamingo, speechless from terror, trembled so that he shook the bed under him.

As yet, owing to the slope of the roof, and the consequent shadow in which the bed was placed, the mysterious visitor was unaware of the movement of his presence.

He bent over the embers of the dying fire, as finding comfort in the heat; then the city clock chiming the hour, he drew a large and apparently old-fashioned watch from his pocket, regarded it attentively, and laid it on the chimney-piece.

As he did so, Flamingo's trembling became so violent that it reached the man's quick ears.

He started, and glanced round. His eyes seemed to penetrate the darkness, and, in their greenish glitter, to meet and fascinate those of my father. His nostrils seemed to inflate, his red whiskers to bristle, and his lower jaw to project forward savagely, as an animal about to spring.

Suddenly the voices of the city watch were heard in the street far down below, calling the hour.

Thank heaven! said my father, the terrible eyes were removed from mine; and the stranger, with swift, silent steps, crossed to the door, flung it open, and disappeared.

An invincible curiosity seized upon my father, and for the moment overcame even terror. Springing from his bed, he hurried out on the staircase; but already the stranger had descended to the corridor on the floor below, and a noise told my father that he was opening a window.

To be Continued.

MISCELLANEOUS. Some mortars captured at Magdala have reached Gosport; also some Abyssinian dogs of a curious variety.

Chat Moss, between Manchester and Liverpool, had been burning for several days, and many hundred head of game perished.