

THE IMPERIALIST

desire for information, he asked her sociably one day, in the act of purchase, why the gilt was generally off her gingerbread. He had been looking long, as a matter of fact, for gingerbread with the gilt on it, being accustomed to the phrase on the lips of his father in connexion with small profits. Mother Beggarlegs, so unaccustomed to politeness that she could not instantly recognize it, answered him with an imprecation, at which he, no doubt, retreated, suddenly thrown on the defensive, hurling the usual taunt. One prefers to hope he didn't, with the invincible optimism one has for the behaviour of lovable people ; but whether or not, his kind attempt at colloquy is the first indication I can find of that active sympathy with the disabilities of his fellow beings which stamped him later so intelligent a meliorist. Even in his boy's beginning he had a heart for the work ; and Mother Beggarlegs, but for a hasty conclusion, might have made him a friend.

It is hard to invest Mother Beggarlegs with importance, but the date helps me—the date, I mean, of this chapter about Elgin ; she was a person to be reckoned with on the twenty-fourth of May. I will say at once, for the reminder to persons living in England, that the twenty-fourth of May was the Queen's Birthday. Nobody in Elgin can possibly have forgotten it. The Elgin children had a rhyme about it—