



OLD GRUBBLES.

THE streets were crowded with Christmas shoppers, coming and going, all enduring the shoving and pushing with holiday humor.

Old Simon Grubbles, making his way feebly through the throng, snarled and scowled as his corns were trodden on or a sharp elbow was thrust into his side, anathematizing the Christian fathers who first instituted Christmas as one of the high festivals of the church. He was tall, thin and stooped; the long skirts of his yellowish-green overcoat, which had done service for more than thirty years, flapped about his legs, which were encased in shiny broadcloth trousers. He wore a rusty silk hat, and a pair of sharp eyes as keen as a ferret's, a beak of a nose and a most aggressive chin were overshadowed by its frayed brim. There was no kindness of expression in his thin lips, and his whole countenance warned petitioners for his favor to expect little justice and less mercy from Simon Grubbles. The threadbare garments indicated poverty, which was not corroborated by the sign over the front entrance of an imposing commission house, or by the fat bank account and other cash in hand, known only to himself.

He took no interest in the gayly-decked windows, the festoons of dolls, the array of china and costly bric-a-brac, the webs of silks and velvet and lace, and the heaps of spicy carnations, the roses and lilies which the florist displayed in lavish profusion. He stopped but once, to buy the bluest, skinniest fowl to be had in the market, which, wrapped in a brown paper, he slipped into his overcoat pocket. As he stepped out upon the pavement again, he thought he saw one of his junior clerks entering a saloon, a few doors distant, and as he was very strict in his views upon the question of temperance, he determined to satisfy himself as to whether he was right in his suspicion. Just as he reached the door of the saloon, he saw a coin glittering at his feet, and thinking that it was a piece of gold, he stooped down, picked it up with something that resembled the ordinary human smile, and put it hurriedly into his pocket.

He was in the act of opening the saloon door, when a shrill voice shouted:

"Fork it out, old chap! That's mine!"

He started nervously and perceived standing before him a rare specimen of the Boston news-boy. "Here's the rest, yer see," he said, opening his hand, where four others like it were revealed to sight, by way of substantiating his claim. "Yer see my hands was so cold, I couldn't hold 'em and my pockets leak awful."

Simon regarded him suspiciously from under his bristling eyebrows, and then gave him the piece of copper, more willingly perhaps than he would have done had it been of greater value. "Thanks," said the urchin, touching his cap—a piece of good manners he had learned at the mission, which he patronized occasionally.

Then he said: "Buy this paper Sir, won't ye? It's the only 'un left. Ye see I want to git home with my Chris'mus dinner" pointing to a big, bulging, basket, which he had set down on the curb-stone, its contents carefully concealed by an old newspaper. "I stand in with the second cook at Young's hotel round the corner, an' he's sent all this grub to Blokey, with his compliments." "Who's Blokey?" growled Simon. "Well, as nigh's I can tell, he's my only blood relation in the direct line. We're parads beside. He's a layin' off now, cause he can't work. I'm a-humpin' fur both on us."

"He's a lazy little scoundrel, more likely, and is only glad of a chance to 'lay off,' as you call it."

"See here, one more word like that there, an' I'll lay yer at my feet a corpse," and the boy doubled up his fists with such a frown as he had seen upon the brow of a heavy tragedian.

"Still," he continued, "I guess mabbe I'd better 'scuse yor, for yer don't know what yer talkin' bout. Blokey can't work. He's sick. An' if yer think I'm lyin' to ye, ye'd better 'company me to the sky parlor where we both lives. We'd both be chawmed I'm suah, he sees so few visitahs these days," cleverly mimicking a low comedian.

Night had come; the electric light already glittered and

flared on the corners and before the hotel entrances, and there seemed to be a slight lull in the ceaseless roar of traffic which prevailed since daybreak.

One of those inexplicable impulses to which even the most matter-of-fact individuals yield on occasion, inspired Simon Grubbles to accept the invitation.

"I'll introduce myself first," said the gamin, flippantly. "My 'steemed cotemp'ries calls me Bluffer, but I've heerd tell summers that my reel nam's William Sherman Patts-Potts—a fine old pat-ron-y-mic," dividing the syllables carefully, and airing the big word with considerable pride.

The child picked up the basket and they started off together—a strangely assorted pair, the grinning ragamuffin and the sootling, miserly old man in his antiquated garments.

At last they halted before an old rookery, lifting its murky roof far above the net-work of telephone and telegraph wires below. The door hung on one hinge and was propped open with a brick, and they felt their way through the dark hall, up the rickety stairs, fetid with the rank odors of invisible filth.

"Here we air," said Bluffer, cheerfully, pushing the door open with ceremonious hospitality, stopping aside to let Simon enter first. The old man looked about him with some interest and a little curiosity while Bluffer placed the basket on a box in the corner, which served as a table. He had heard of such tenements, possibly numbered several among his own possessions, but his agents collected the rents, so he was not forced to come in contact with the occupants.

It was a long attic extending the entire length of the building. There were two smoko-blackened, cobwebbed windows



"BUY THIS PAPER, SIR, WON'T YE? IT'S THE ONLY 'UN LEFT."

in front and two in the rear. The upper end of the place was crowded with miscellaneous rubbish, while a space had been cleared in the end which Bluffer occupied. Lath and plaster there were none, and Simon could scarcely stand upright under the low rafters. A cheerful fire was burning in a dilapidated stove, a chair was drawn up in front of it, and opposite was a straw pallet, upon which lay the sick boy. His glittering eyes seemed unnaturally bright and large in the extreme pallor and emaciation of his face, and he picked with his clawlike fingers at the old blanket which covered him.

Everything immediately surrounding the miserable bed was as clean and orderly as it could be made, and a wreath that hung above his head, and two or three drooping chrysanthemums in a cracked cup upon the floor where he could see them, gave evidence that Bluffer had not been unmindful of the obligations of the season.

"Well, how do ye find yerself to-night?" he asked, standing by Blokey's bedside, and taking no further notice of Simon who had seated himself in the chair. "Better," said the sick boy huskily.

"That's right. Yer allers better. That's somethin'. Doctor been here?"

Blokey coughed frightfully, and when the paroxysm was over, smiled feebly, and shook his head.

"I'll settle his bill and discharge him in the mornin'. Meanwhile I'll look at yer tongue an' feel yer pulse, jest to keep yer spirits up till I can git the doctor here."

This dialogue was rehearsed regularly every evening, each going soberly through his part. To-night, however, Blokey seemed weaker than usual, and entered into it with little spirit. Bluffer appeared not to notice it, and said gayly:

"Ye jist ort to see the things I've brung ye. Tomkins give 'em to us."

He brought the basket to the boy's bedside, then he spread the paper on the floor and took out the fragments, one by one, with the utmost carefulness.

"I hope you'll 'scuse me for not payin' ye more 'tention," he said, looking up and nodding at Simon, who still sat in silence.

"Ye see I've got to nurse him. Hain't I, Blokey?"

There were bits of pie and cake, broken bread, rolls and slices, in which were the unappetizing scalloped prints of human teeth, remnants of flesh and fowl, the whole topped off by a bunch of Malaga grapes and an orange but slightly damaged. Blokey raised himself on his elbow with a painful effort, looked at the viands a moment, and then lay down again. "Ain't there nothin' that pleases ye?" asked Bluffer disappointedly.

Blokey shut his eyes and shook his head, while Bluffer slowly gathered up the scraps and put the basket in the corner again.

Simon felt a softening in that ossified organ which he commonly called his heart, a sensation that he had not experienced for many a long year.

He thrust his dry, lean hand into his pocket and fumbled cautiously among the loose change—no large sum—which he carried. But he prudently reflected that they did not seem to be in pressing need of money, they had shelter and fuel, so he withdrew his hand. Then he bethought himself of the attenuated fowl, and he felt gingerly of one cold, clammy drumstick that had broken through the paper-wrapping. But, with the supplies on hand, he concluded, they were not in need of food,

either. So, fearing that he might recklessly yield to a weak and foolish impulse of charity, he rose abruptly, and said he must go.

"Sorry ye can't stay longer, but I'm glad ye've seen Blokey, an' me character as an honest citizen is vindicated. Jist wait an' I'll show ye out." He lighted a tallow candle stuck in a bottle, and held it high over his head like a dusky caryatid, while old Grubbles stumbled down the stairs and made his way into the street, Bluffer shouting after him an invitation to call again.

The clock struck seven as Simon unlocked his front door and let himself in—an hour later than he usually reached home. As he stepped into the dimly-lighted hall, blinking his red eyes, a young girl came forward to meet him, with a troubled and anxious countenance.

"Why, unole, what makes you so late?" she asked. "I have been dreadfully frightened about you. I was afraid you had fallen in the street and had been run over. I didn't know what might have happened."

"Save your worry for them that need it," he answered gruffly. "I'm neither a dolt nor an idiot. I'm not superannuated, and shan't be yet for twenty years, however much it might please you, and I'm still able to come home alone without sitting down on a crossing to let a car run over me."

She was accustomed to his surly moods, so she quietly helped him off with his overcoat and made no reply. He took the precious pullet from the pocket, ordered her to take it to the kitchen and tell the servant that he was ready for his dinner. They sat down at the frugally spread table and ate in silence. Simon thawed out a little over his second cup of tea, and, with an unprecedented burst of confidence, he related his evening's strange experience.

"Did you find out what ailed the child, unole?" the young girl asked timidly.

"I didn't have to find out. He had consumption; that was plain enough to be seen."

"Well I hope you left them means to get what they needed," she said boldly.

"No, I didn't. That's just like a woman—spend, spend, spend. What good would money do them? They had a comfortable place, a fire and more to eat than there is in this house this minute," which, so far as quantity went, was undoubtedly true.

He had told her about where the two waifs lived, and as he froze up again behind his newspaper after dinner was over, the same old crustacean that he always was, Emily Rogers pondered over the possible ways and means of helping them.

She carefully noted down in her mind the street and locality her unole had mentioned, and thought from his description that she should have no difficulty finding the children. She would have ample time the next day, after morning service and before dinner.

Simon Grubbles had made an appointment with his head bookkeeper, John Merrill, to meet him at the office on Christmas morning, where they might talk over some important