

ed... I can make you several propositions, each one more advantageous than the other. For an annual premium of 100 dollars, at the end of thirty years, you are guaranteed... (The young clerk and the old clerk show plainly by their inattention and sudden scowls that they haven't the slightest intention of insuring their lives. The visitor perceives this.) Very well, you don't wish to insure... it doesn't astonish me... whenever I try to broach this little business of mine it's always the same story... consequently I don't earn much.

Old Clerk (in order to say something)—Times are hard and cost of living high!

Visitor—Yes, they are hard, and living is high, and that is why I envy you people so snug and smug and warm in your offices. You don't have to climb endless stairs and ring endless bells, only to be shown the door by people you wish to talk to about their death, under the pretext of a life insurance policy! (The two clerks let the conversation die out. Half-past four has just struck, which is the earliest moment they can leave the office. After careful preparation and some discussion as to whether it is raining or is going to rain, they bow politely to the visitor and go out).

Visitor (alone)—I'm beginning to find this tiresome, Marescot; it's already nearly an hour I've been waiting. (Looking about him.) After all I'm not too badly off here, warm and comfortable, and outside it's raining cats and dogs... I'm alone! ... what if I make myself at home and attend to my correspondence? (Takes off his overcoat and his hat, hangs them up, then seats himself at Marescot's desk.) I'm extremely cozy here... my back to the fire... abundance of letter paper... all with the departmental heading! I'll write to my manager. A good idea for him to see that if I don't bring in any business, at least I have a political connection. (He writes

with great application, when suddenly the door opens wide, and the messenger appears bowing very low before a stout, bald man, who comes in with an air of authority. Let us say at once that it is the Minister himself!)

Minister (to messenger)—You can go; I don't need you.

Messenger (bowing)—Very well, sir.

Minister—Just so, I wish to make my tour of the offices quite alone. I am the same sort of man as Haroun-al-Raschid... Don't you know Haroun-al-Raschid?

Messenger—Haroun! No, sir, he isn't in our department.

Minister—Well, never mind; he was a sultan something like me. A chap who used to walk about the streets of his capital in disguise, and wanted to see everything for himself; I, too, want to see everything for myself. I go through all the offices, but I find no one in them. (Sees the visitor, who, surprised by the Minister's arrival, tries to become invisible behind a pile of fyles.) At last! Here is a clerk,—the first one I've seen. (He approaches the desk.) And he is still working! That's fine! Simply great!! (To the visitor, who has risen and is endeavouring to get out.) Don't be afraid, my man, I repeat, I am like Haroun-al-Raschid, severe for the idlers, but just for the workers. You are a worker, I can see that at once. What is your name?

Visitor (in a strangled voice) — Gobergeois, sir; Gobergeois.

Minister—What branch are you in?

Visitor—I represent, sir, the Moon, a life insurance company.

Minister—That's bad, very bad; I don't want any clerk in my department to have any occupation except his work here.

Visitor—But...

Minister—Yes, I know beforehand what you are going to say; your salary is so small you are obliged to solicit life insurance on the side.