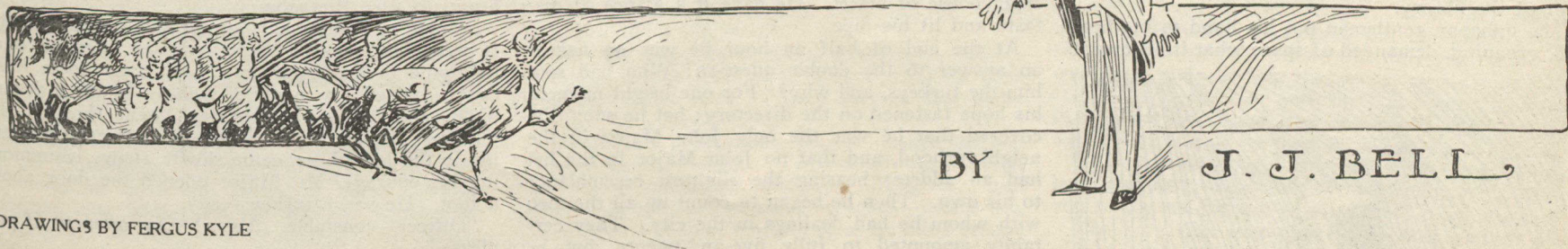


FIVE AND TWENTY TURKEYS



DRAWINGS BY FERGUS KYLE

I.

SOMEONE once remarked of Mr. Thomas Bulfinch that he suggested a Merry Christmas all the year round. And, in truth, he was so plump and rosy, so blithe and hearty, so frank and kindly, so good-humoured in all seasons and in all weathers, that the description was not, after all, a merely fanciful one.

Mrs. Bulfinch was a fit made for such a man, for while her stoutness of figure and goodness of heart were not exceeded by his, her discretion had on many occasions prevented his enthusiasm from running to sheer extravagance and, perhaps, positive folly. The Bulfinches were in comfortable circumstances—very comfortable circumstances, indeed—and Mrs. Bulfinch would have been the last to deny that they could afford to be generous; on the other hand, Mr. Bulfinch would have been the first to admit that his wife recognized the practical limits of generosity more clearly than himself.

They were getting on in years, as we say; their silver wedding day was past, and Mr. Bulfinch was beginning to take things easy at his office. His home was in Norfolk Square, where it had been since the return from the honeymoon. For a good many years now he had talked frequently of purchasing a little country estate, and his wife had shown all the interest to be desired in the subject. Yet each knew that the other had no real thought of quitting town for a new home; and when, of a morning, Mr. Bulfinch would express his intention of dropping in to see So-and-so, the estate agent, Mrs. Bulfinch would cheerfully approve, feeling sure that he would return in the evening without having made the call.

You would have said of the Bulfinches that they were the sort of couple who ought to have a dozen children. They had none. But they didn't mind other people having children. There were many people and many children who regarded Mr. Bulfinch as a kind magician, and Mrs. Bulfinch as a good fairy. There were, doubtless, persons, also, who said that it was a very easy matter to be kind and good when money was in plenty; and possibly they were right, for the Bulfinches did seem to give without the slightest difficulty. At the same time it might be remarked that a too close and constant admiration of the poor widow's mite may induce a certain spiritual short-sightedness.

On the 23rd of December Mr. Bulfinch came home a little earlier than usual, in order to enjoy a cup of tea with his wife, and to assist her in the dispatch of the last batch of Christmas gifts. He found her in the parlour immersed in correspondence, or at any rate in envelopes, five-pound notes, and postal orders.

"All the parcels are gone," she informed him.

"Good," said Mr. Bulfinch, rubbing his hands.

"And all the letters, except the anonymous ones, Thomas."

Thomas chuckled. "You've been working too hard, my dear. I expected to have to do my share."

"Well, we've still got the Christmas tree to get ready for to-morrow, and there's more to hang on it than ever."

"To be sure, to be sure. But I'd better give you a hand with the anonymous lot, Mildred." He chuckled again. "I believe we enjoy this part of it best of all."

"I believe we do, Thomas. But let us have tea first. Jane shall bring it here."

For a good many years it had been the custom of the Bulfinches to dispose of a hundred pounds through the post in sums varying from a sovereign to a five-pound note. The recipients were people to whom these mysterious money gifts would make all

the difference at Christmas, and the senders derived very considerable satisfaction from their innocent little game.

Mr. Bulfinch was still emitting intermittent chuckles when the tea arrived. "I think we must really try to increase the list next year," he said. "Another twenty pounds wouldn't ruin us—"

"We'll see, we'll see," said his spouse gently. "And did you meet your cousin to-day?" she inquired, as she removed the cosy.

Mr. Bulfinch stopped in the midst of a chuckle; his face fell slightly.

"Yes; I called at his office. But he wouldn't change his mind."

"Did you remind him that it was the twenty-fifth time he had declined our invitation?"

"I did. I fancied he seemed a little moved, but his regret was expressed in the usual cool fashion. I sometimes think that John Major has retired so far into his shell that he couldn't come out even if he wanted. It is extraordinary that a disappointment in love, all those years ago, should still leave its wound. Well, we have done our best, Mildred; we can do no more."

Mrs. Bulfinch sighed. "I hate to think of the man sitting alone on Christmas Day—even his house-keeper out with her friends."

"He has done it for a quarter of a century."

"Yes; but he is getting old."

"He's two years younger than I."

Mrs. Bulfinch smiled. "He is two centuries older, poor man. Is it no use making one more effort, Thomas?"

Mr. Bulfinch shook his head. "I've come to the conclusion that John really resents any little attempts at kindness. I suppose we are now the last to make any. I fancy all his old friends have given him up as hopeless. He won't, or can't, come out of his shell. At least, I can imagine no bait that would tempt him. Nobody can do anything for him."

"Won't he do anything for anybody?" said Mrs.

Bulfinch. "If he could only be induced to think of other people—"

"Other people don't seem to exist for him. Of course, if you were to go to him with a subscription list for a hospital or other charity, he would give you a fat cheque quite readily. But he wouldn't be the least interested in the people his money was going to benefit. And as for the human misery round about him—there's a good deal of it round his home—I don't believe he notices it."

There was a short silence.

"Well," said Mrs. Bulfinch, "you're letting your tea get cold, and why don't you smoke a cigar? I think we should send him an anonymous gift. It might set him wondering, and take him out of himself. I've a good mind to send him a turkey, Thomas."

"Good gracious, Mildred! A turkey! Of all the things to send John Major—"

"In one way," she interrupted quietly, "a turkey does not seem absurd; yet, you will admit it is a thing not easy to overlook. If your cousin got a turkey—"

"My dear, if you sent John a dozen turkeys—" began Mr. Bulfinch, and stopped short. The next moment he slapped his knee and chuckled violently.

"Thomas, you're spilling your tea. And, besides, I don't see anything to laugh at."

"You will presently," said Thomas, controlling himself. "You will presently! My dear, I believe you've given me an idea—the idea of my life! Listen to this."

Mrs. Bulfinch listened, frowning and smiling by turns.

"No, Thomas, you must not do such a thing," she said, when her spouse had finished, but her tone was not very firm.

"Why not? It's worth trying. In fact, we *must* risk it. Think again, Mildred. The possibilities are great. He is bound to do—*something*."

"Yes, but what will he do?"

"Let's try him and see. I'll promise not to spend more than twenty pounds, Mildred."

Mrs. Bulfinch threw out her hands. "Have it your own way, Thomas," she said at last; "have it your own way. It would be worth twenty pounds, but— Well, have it your own way."

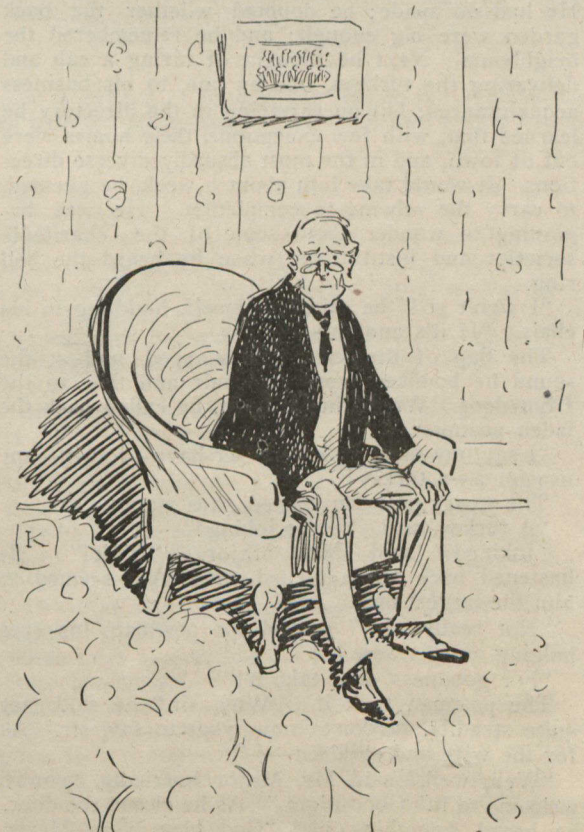
II.

ON Christmas Eve Mr. John Major left his place of business rather later than his wont. It was seven o'clock when he inserted his key in the door of the old house in the shabby terrace which he called home. It was a drizzling evening, but he was not more depressed than usual. Perhaps depressed is hardly the word for the man's normal state of mind; dulled would be better. Mr. Major's life was spent in his dingy office and his costly library. He had no interests whatever elsewhere. Albeit he had no quarrel with the world; he simply ignored it.

He pushed the door open, stepped inside, and closed it carefully. He remembered that his house-keeper had gone to her friends in the country for a couple of days. The thought did not disturb him; his creature wants were simple, and he was equal to meeting them with the aid of a gas-fire. He placed his umbrella in the stand, hung his coat and hat on their accustomed pegs, and went forward into the dim hall. There was a tiny peep in the hanging lamp, and he turned the tap on full. John Major was not a miser; only a recluse.

"Good gracious!" he exclaimed, and wheeled about. "Good gracious!" he repeated.

The hall seemed filled with turkeys, enormous turkeys. There were turkeys on the floor, reclining



"Who had sent him the turkeys, and why?"