

THE GAS-ACCOUNT MAN.

“It’s the gas-accoont man,” said Mattie to her husband, Robin Rough, a blacksmith in the old Calton of Glasgow. Robin—honest, hard-working man—had just come in from his day’s work, and was up to his twa een in his usual evening bowl of brose.

“Great sticks!” he cried, starting up “is that the gas-account man again? Bring him ben.”

Now, the blacksmith was a famous hand at a joke. His mind was made up in a second. Mattie, decent woman, had been bothered for the last fortnight to the very end of her judgment—which did not stretch very far—by that same collector’s importunate calls. The situation had been getting tight, and the blacksmith had promised to look round at the Gas Office and pay the account that very afternoon, and lo, and behold! here was that confounded collector again! Now, the blacksmith had indeed been round at the Gas Office and faithfully paid the account according to promise, and wicked was the cunning laugh he chuckled as he suggestively fingered his waistcoat pocket wherein the receipt of payment was securely lodged. He for once had that rashly importunate collector in his power, he well knew, and he would at once proceed to humorously joke him.

“Yes, bring him in, Mattie,” said the wily blacksmith; and presently debtor and creditor stood face to face.

The blacksmith looked critically at his man, judging him to be a highly interesting subject to joke with, as he very pompously stood before him, pencil and paper in hand, extensively spectacled, and attired generally in his small authority, as largely as strong assertion and high pegged-topped boots would admit of.

That same collector, in fact, was authority personified. He looked, and there was authority in his stern official gaze. He coughed, and there was authority embodied in his formal hoast. He sneezed, and there was decided authority even in his official ah-chee! Physically, he was a little man, with a large and placid opinion of himself. In the matter of business, however, his formal audacity had made him an overpowering success. He had been sore upon Mattie in consequence of the too long delayed payment

of the gas account, and now that the blacksmith had him so neatly in his power, it seemed but a fair Roland for an Oliver that he should dish up for him a repast sharpened with his own rather smart official sauce. And that humorous resolve the blacksmith at once proceeded to put into effect.

"I—I—I called for that overdue gess account," the collector rather smartly said on entering the house.

"Eh? What say ye?" said the blacksmith, reaching his left ear to within a foot of the collector's nose, pretending thereby a deafness which, of course, did not exist.

Mattie, douce woman, looked genuine surprise, which look of surprise her husband met by a counter-wink, imposing silence as plainly as a wink of the eye could do. So Mattie, decent woman, marvelled much and said nothing.

"I called for that overdue gess account, I was saying!" cried the collector, raising his thin, keen voice a full octave higher.

"Eh? What say ye?" again asked the blacksmith. "Raise yer vice abune a whisper, my chiel, for I've got a bit deafenin' cauld in my heid;" and hitching himself still closer, he narrowed by nearly twelve inches the single foot of space which separated his left ear from the collector's nasal organ.

The astonished collector sprang back fully three feet, as if his whole facial frontispiece was in extreme danger of abuse.

"Y—Y—You didn't particularly inform me of the fact that your husband was deaf," the collector remarked, addressing himself to Mattie, who looked innocence personified.

"He's waur the nicht than ever I kent him to be," very truthfully replied the guileless Mattie, with just the faintest possible glint of a smile.

"As deaf as a bed-post!" added the flustered collector; then inhaling a long breath, he shouted aloud, "It's the gess

account! the gess—account I have called for!” vigorously tapping his papers with the head of his pencil, by way of adding an official climax to his words—“it’s the gess account!—the gess account!”

“What? Parnassus Mount?” echoed the blacksmith, as if a new idea of the collector’s mission had dawned on his obtuse senses. “Oh, that’s it, is it? Ye’re a poetry chap, are ye? Na, na, my man, I canna subscribe for your book. I can ring a wheel, shae a horse, or discuss politics wi’ the best o’ them; but as for poetry, be hang’t! I never cood get it owre my craig. Oh! ye needna fume about it, my man. Poetry and Parnassus Mount are a’ guid enough in their place; but as for me, I’ll stick by plain brose an’ Ben Lomond.”

The distracted collector danced about for a few moments quite picturesquely, and clutching desperately at the back of a chair for necessary support, he lifted up his voice and cried aloud—

“Confusion and stupidity! I want you, old man, to clearly and finally understand that I have called here for payment of your gess account, overdue ages ago! And that to pay it now, to me (tapping his breast), without impending expenses, will be, on your part, an act of prudential propriety.”

“The Prudential Society!” exclaimed the blacksmith. “Ah! I see clearly what you’re after noo. I’ve been labouring under a misapprehension a’ along. Ye want me to jine the Prudential Society, div ye? But let me inform you that we’re already in the ‘Scottish Legal’—Mattie an’ me, an’ yae burial society’s quite enough to be connected wi’. Ye surely wadna hae us to dee twice, wad ye?”

“As deaf as Ailsa Craig!” said the excited collector. “My good woman,” he added, addressing the guileless Mattie, “do, I beseech you, try to get your—your—your excruciating husband to understand the nature of my

business here. This is shocking! I—I—I feel quite exhausted—positively weak!”

“A penny a week!” broke in the blacksmith—“waur an’ waur. Na, na, my chappie; nane o’ yer penny-a-week funeral societies for me.”

At this juncture Mattie stepped towards her husband, and, placing her mouth close to the left side of his head, she cried ben his ear—

“D’ye no understan’ that the daicent man wants payment o’ the gas accoont? He’s gettin’ hoarse wi’ roarin, an’ perfectly blue in the een.”

“What, Mattie?—a shooin’ machine? Oh, I see, I see; it’s a shooin’ machine that the man wants me to buy. Na, na, my fine fellow, I want nane o’ yer shooin’ machines at present. An’ let me quately tell you this, my man: ye canvass owre mony articles to succeed weel wi’ ony.”

“Oh, preposterous! preposterous!” yelled the maddened collector, turning right round on his heel in an excess of anger. “Why, sir, such gross and impregnable deafness looks like a libel.”

“What?—wad I no look at a Bible? Catch me. Na, na; I hiv mair auld Bibles an’ Psalm-books than I’m ever likely to use. You’re a book-canvasser, I noo plainly see; an’ while on this point, I may jist forewarn you, as against a yiseless waste o’ win’, that I’ll neither be coaxed nor cajoled by you or ony ither man into a purchase o’ ‘Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress,’ nor ‘Baxter’s Saint’s Rest,’ nor ‘Livingstone’s Travels,’ nor ‘Burns’s Works,’ nor ‘The Franco-German War,’ nor Singer’s shooin’ machines, nor patent mangles, nor domestic wringin’ machines, nor American watches, nor——”

“Stop! stop! stop!” pleaded the collector, holding his ears in despair; “deplorable! deplorable! Why, you’ve kept me, for the last five minutes, howling aloud to you all to no purpose, like a fox on the hills.”

“What?—buy a box o’ pills? Great sticks! dae ye also deal in doctor’s pills. Gor, that’s maist extr’or’nar’; it bates cock-fechtin’. Sir, you’re beyond question a man o’ very wide commercial enterprise, an’ should mak’ a fell big fortune yet.”

“Oh, the deuce take you!” retorted the distracted collector, putting past his pencil and papers preparatory to effecting a retreat.

“It’s the gas accoont, man,” said Mattie, placing her mouth once more against her husband’s ear, and, guessing that the joke had gone far enough, she knowingly nudged him with her elbow as she spoke.

“Oh! I see, I see,” said the blacksmith, a light breaking over his grimy countenance. “Why didna ye say that at first?”

“Yes, the gess account—the gess account!” thrust in the now relieved collector, grasping at the opportune opening thus effected. “And let me distinctly tell you, sir, now that I have at last gained the hearing of your obtuse head, that if the account is not paid to-night, you’ll be compelled to pay it with expenses—with expenses, remember—and within three days from this date.”

“Eh, me, we’re in a fine pie noo!” forebodingly said Mattie, indulging a sudden sigh, which very nearly sucked in her match-strings.

“Yes,” sententiously added the collector, by way of a finishing climax, “pay your overdue account to me now, or stand the immediate consequences.”

“It’s peyed, man; it’s peyed!” retorted the blacksmith, indulging in a broad and hearty laugh, which nearly connected the two sides of his mouth with his ears. “I’m jist back frae the peyin’ o’t at the Gas Office. Read that.” And handing the nonplussed collector the receipt, he coolly awaited the issue.

The collector grasped at the receipt, glanced over it,

looked unutterably blue, and the next moment fled—papers, pencil, spectacles, authority, and all.

“Weel, he nicht o’ bade us good-bye,” laughed the blacksmith when the collector had fairly gone; and for a full half-hour his honest face was just one vast, substantial smile.

That same enterprising collector has lately applied for and obtained a new district.
