My Christmas Caller, or the Prescription of Sieur Asmodeus

Civil and Military Gazette, 25 December 1885

Attribution: Sussex Scrapbooks 28/1, p. 41

*Le Diable Boiteux* — the limping devil — is from the romance of that name by Alain René Lesage, published in 1707. Named Asmodeus, he performs for the hero of the novel the same sort of services that he does for Kipling’s narrator. ‘The Land of Regrets’ is the title and refrain of a poem by the Indian civil servant, Sir Alfred Lyall.

‘I am strictly proper now’ said a voice from behind the big almirah which forms the principal ornament of my bachelor dining-room.

Now it couldn’t have been the Bearer, because in the first place he doesn’t speak English; and in the second, if he did, even he dare not utter so huge a fib. This was on Christmas eve, yesterday — a day of all days in the year I detest because it makes me homesick, and morose and irritable. That’s why I always keep within doors and reflect on all the unpleasant things I know — the disgusting ingratitude of the Punjab Government to an able and efficient officer among others.

‘Strictly proper, and immensely improved since Le Sage’s time’ repeated the voice from behind the almirah. ‘May I come in?’

‘Come in’ said I shortly, for my thoughts were not pleasant ones. As a rule, I dislike men dropping in uncalled for.

‘Thanks many. Will you make room for me at the fire — your almirah’s rather draughty.’

It was Le Diable Boiteux. I recognised him even before I read the card which he presented. As he said, he was wonderfully improved from Le Sage’s inimitable but somewhat coarse original. A neat dress suit, studs, a rose in his button-hole, and
a pair of immaculate pumps had converted him into a very pleasant gentleman of the nineteenth century, with a slight — a very slight — limp. He pulled an arm-chair up to the fire, and stretched out his feet to the blaze.

‘Hope I haven’t inconvenienced you in any way, Smallbones?’ he said.

‘Not in the least I assure you mon ami. I’ve had the pleasure of knowing you so long by name, that it’s almost like meeting an old acquaintance.’

Le Diable Boiteux did not seem pleased: — ‘You knew me at once then’ he said. ‘On my honour I shouldn’t have thought it. I’ve changed so — improved I may fairly say — of late years.’

He adjusted the rose in his buttonhole with a look of ineffable complacency. ‘Le Sage — old Alain René you know — evolved me in the first instance; and since then I’ve been marching in the van of progress. I hope you understand that my moral improvement is on a par with my physical. I’m a reformed character. One of these days I may even lose my tail!’

He must have tucked it into his inexpressibles, for never a sign of a tail could I see.

‘You were much nicer as you were, I think’ said I judicially. ‘Reforms are bad things.’

‘Don’t generalize. In your department perhaps. In mine, never. Just conceive me if you can, knocking about the back streets of Madrid with a vagabond student! I wonder how I could ever have been so low. But I’ve used my opportunities well, haven’t I?’

‘I don’t know. It seems to me you’ve spoilt, if you’ll pardon my saying so, a really superior — ahem — Devil to make a very every-day English gentleman.’

‘Spoilt!’ retorted Le Diable Boiteux, ‘I’ll show you whether reform has curtailed my executive powers. By the head of the great God Mammon I can strip off a roof as neatly as ever! Would you like to see me do it?’

‘I beg your pardon a thousand times’ I said ‘but I really thought from your appearance you had taken your place permanently with us.’

‘Say no more about it’ returned my guest courteously. ‘I’m of an exciteable nature — easily roused, but over in a flash, you know. And it was hard to call my powers in question, just when I’m going to give you a sample of them — a first class