

The Professor and the Plutocrat

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Professor Bugsby was an old man at fifty! Externally nothing much was the matter with him; his cheeks were rosy, and his dreamy blue eye was soft and kindly as ever; but his nervous system, and especially his will, had broken down under the strain of his long fight with Plunks the banker. Bugsby had started out with all the gaiety of youth; he had thought it simple enough to win the fight; he had merely to prove the wickedness of Plunks, and the folly of mankind in allowing him to rob them, and they would rise and end not only Plunks himself, but the system that made Plunks possible. Alas! he only found himself in a welter of intrigue. He was forced to fight fire with fire, to scheme, to agitate, to cabal — and it was all in vain. Time and again he had been on the brink of success at least partial. It was all arranged for him to become President of his University; from this vantage he could bombard Plunks more easily; but at the last moment the long arm of the billionaire had moved a pawn, and blocked the check.

So we find poor Bugsby in Chicago in January, 1917. He had attempted to form a triple entente of Chinese laundrymen, drug store clerks, and sundial adjusters, which would frustrate the enormous shipping combine which Plunks was supposed by the Sunday newspapers to be meditating.

But the Milkless Milk Company (a mere alias for Plunks, as Bugsby knew only too well!) had stepped in, and by a series of adroit manoeuvres had alienated the laundrymen from the movement.

Bugsby, his life's work ruined, turned into the Blackstone. Wrong was triumphant — so be it, then! He would have a last dinner, write a last paper of protest, and seal his witness with his blood.

But, as he reached the lobby, who should he see but Plunks himself! By his side was his confidential secretary, Grahame, a villain only slightly less abandoned than his master. A sinister grin of open triumph was on the face of the billionaire. The monster had thrown off the mask! Bugsby had never before seen him in the flesh. He jumped at his opportunity. Walking straight up to the plutocrat, he began, without a word of preface, his harangue.

"Vampire!" he cried, "at last I confront you! Liar, thief, murderer, for twenty years we have wrestled in a death-grip. To-day it seems as if you had won! Railroad wrecker, Wall Street gambler, cornerer of wheat and oil and copper, steamship pirate, land grabber, lobbyist and grafter, in all you have succeeded — so it seems! Seems! Seems! To the philosopher you are but a doomed man. Had you my Weltanschauung, you would know it too. The economic forces which I lead, invisible though they may be, are rising to unseat you. The exchange system is tottering; the financial oligarchy crumbles; my Distanzliebe is as lebendig as your Pattvereinigungungen is starr!!!" The professor paused for breath. "Forgive me," said the anarchist. "You have the advantage of me. I know your name perfectly well, of course, but I can't remember your face."

"Tremble not!" replied the professor, "tremble not, although my words sear your corrupt brain as with a white-hot shaft of steel. Tremble not! you triumph over me, for I am beaten. Behold in me your sworn, your life-long enemy! I am the man whom you have fought these twenty years, whom you have kept from the presidency of my university; it is my works that your subsidized publishers have turned down; I am the man whose courage and address have time and again come

nigh to hauling you from your bloodstained throne — I am Professor Bugsby of the University of Muttville!”

Plunks interrogated his secretary with a glance. A slight shake of the head was the reply.

“Bugsby!” said the billionaire, kindly; “of course, of course! Upon my word, my dear fellow, this is very distressing. I hadn’t the least idea of all this. Why on earth didn’t you come to me direct? Well, well; never too late, you know; I’ll found a university for you, and make you president, and we’ll get out all your books for you, and you shall knock me as hard as you can for the rest of your natural life. (Just put that through tomorrow morning, will you, Grahame?) Then you’ll come and lunch with me here, won’t you, my dear Bugsby, at one sharp, and we’ll sign the papers. Where are you staying? I’ll send a car for you.” “I’m staying right here,” said the professor.

And when he had brought his grip over, and dined luxuriously, and retired for the night, his dreamy blue eye sought inspiration from the mirror as he adjusted his nightcap. “I wonder what frightened him,” said the professor, meditatively.