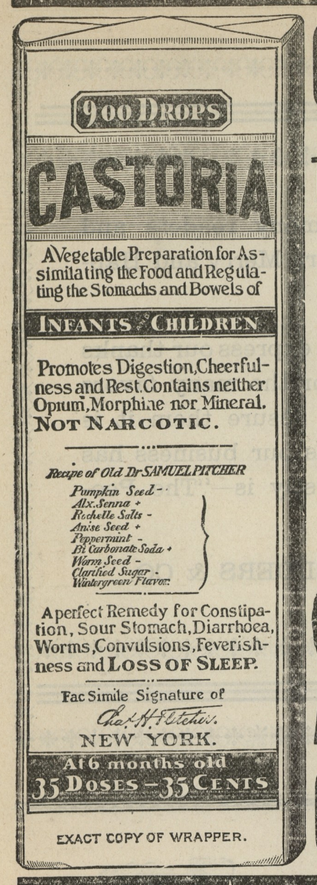

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THE BANQUET AT THE HOME.

BY HOWARD FIELDING.

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Philosophers prove the infinity of space by asking you to think of the end of it as a wall with nothing upon the other side. This is declared to be unthinkable. There can be no final place, no wall with a void beyond.

I know better, for I have seen that wall. I came to it in October, 1899. There was nothing on the farther side and very little on the nearer. It was not an end, but a continuance, that was inconceivable to me.

My business had come to an end. No philosopher could deny that. My nervous system was done for. I seemed to see it taken out of my body and tacked up on that final wall like the skin of a squirrel on a barn door.

I was 30 years old, and I felt 130. When my friends asked me what I was going to do, I simply yawned at them.

It was at this time that some one recommended me to Miss Glendon. People have absolutely no conscience in such matters. The young lady was informed that I was a trustworthy and efficient man, a victim of misfortunes that would have been too much for anybody, and she credited the tale.

Miss Glendon was an orphan 24 years old and very pretty. Her income is somewhat more than a dollar per minute, and there are 525,600 minutes in a year. She is said to give about 12 hours a day to charity.

The gentleman who mentioned my name to Miss Glendon persuaded me, at her request, to go with him to call upon her. I was too feebleminded to resist. To the best of my recollection, I did not clearly understand where I was going until I found myself in the lady's presence.

The sight of Miss Glendon produced a considerable effect upon me. She possesses magnificent health and reveals, even to such eyes as mine were then, the energy of a noble and finely balanced nature.

I forgot for a few minutes that the unthinkable wall stood in front of me, and I was conscious, with a mild surprise, of talking like a living and rational human being.

After half an hour of generalities Miss Glendon asked me if I would undertake the management of her children's home, a very admirable charity which she had established about a year before. She had heard that I had had charge of a boys' school in Massachusetts for a couple of years after concluding my college course and that I had done wonderful work. She knew that I held a medical diploma, though I had practiced but little. The knowledge would be of great advantage, in her opinion. Altogether she spoke of my desultory and purposeless career as if it were the very thing she had been in search of, and she apologized with great delicacy for venturing to offer me a position in which pecuniary reward would not be at all equal to my deserts. Then she named a really handsome salary and paused for my reply.

THE SIGHT OF MISS GLENDON PRODUCED A CONSIDERABLE EFFECT ON ME.

Now, the fact is that I would have welcomed such a haven, and, above all, I would have sacrificed much for the sake of sharing any sort of work in which Miss Glendon was engaged, but I am honest in the main, and this thing was not possible. I told Miss Glendon frankly that I was fitter to be an inmate of her home than the head of it; that I was utterly broken down and prematurely in my second childhood and that, in brief, the institution could not fall into worse hands than mine if the manager were chosen by chance out of the directory.

It appeared that my friend had prepared her for this reply. He had told her that I was a bit the worse for past anxiety and unwisely worried about my health, but that there was really nothing the matter. All I needed was a little encouragement.

Accepting this view, Miss Glendon proceeded to encourage me. She told me how well I was looking, and, as a matter of fact, I actually did look as rugged as an ox. In earlier years I was very strong, and the muscular shell still stood, as the bark of a tree will sometimes stand when the heart of it is dust. Fifty times while she was talking to me I had to shake my wits together and with a spasmodic effort remember where I was and what had happened, yet I talked as straight as a tight string, as my friend informed me afterward, "except," he added, "for that foolishness about your health."

The upshot of it was that I became the manager of that institution, and my act was a crime. I was no more fit for it than a deaf man to lead an orchestra. However, the novelty of it buoyed me up for a few days, so that none of my subordinates knew that I was out of my wits.

The work was really extremely attractive to one who had come out defeated from the selfish strife of money winning, and if I had been only a little less battered and worn I would have been a fairly efficient person. Even as I was, the force within me might have proved sufficient but for the increasing rush of work incident to the coming holidays.

Miss Glendon had high ideas of the Christmas time, and her plans for making it memorable in the home were well considered, but exceedingly comprehensive. Moreover, she looked to me for suggestions, and I was becoming increasingly eager to serve her well.

But when a man's mind is in such a condition that he can't depend upon remembering his own name if asked for it in a hurry there is little use in expecting him to lay plans or even to carry out those of another person. I began to worry about the matter, to dream of it and to talk aloud about it, to my own great shame.

Then I resigned and was laughed at by Miss Glendon, who assured me that my success had passed her utmost expectations. So nothing remained but to go on, a wooden automaton that must run its course and then drop where it stood.

And it didn't want to break down! Let me assure you that I had no appetite for such a performance. I strove hard against it and wore out in striving the very strength I needed.

On Christmas day I was at my very worst. I wandered from room to room, giving orders that others seemed to think were rational, though I had little understanding of them myself. We had many visitors, and I greeted them, and they said pleasant conventional things, as if they noticed nothing amiss in me.

And then, as it seemed to me suddenly, we were in the long dining room. The children were taking their places; the visitors lined the walls, enjoying the sight of so much happiness.

There were 60 children, and they looked to me like 600. The room seemed to stretch away a mile at least to where Miss Glendon sat at the far end of the table with her eyes upon me.

I had risen to speak, but why I did not know. Every one was waiting.

I could not remember what I had meant to say nor why I had decided to speak at all. I merely knew that this was the end of me, and the tears came into my eyes.

Then in the stillness I heard a strange cracking sound. I felt a slight jar. There was a faint cry from among the densest crowd of visitors. One of the children near me screamed in a shrill voice, "The floor's sinkin down!"

"MAGNIFICENT!" SHE SOBBED.

Far away I could see Miss Glendon's face as white as paper. I was mildly interested, half awakened. It came to me like a commonplace that the cellar extended only half the length of the house.

"Sit still," said I in a tone of ordinary conversation. "There is no cellar under us."

Rather the tone than the words reassured them. The rush that had been imminent did not come. Some of the more nervous visitors edged away by the two doors that were available. I saw Miss Glendon whispering to some of the girls, who went out quietly.

The housekeeper standing in the door said, "I want ten of the biggest boys to help me with something."

I told them off mechanically, with my pointing finger, and they went out. By this time there were not more than half as many people in the room and scarcely a third as much weight as formerly upon the floor.

"We have decided to serve dinner in the other room," said Miss Glendon in a clear, high tone.

Then there was a rush, but not what might have been. I walked as in a trance to the door where she stood while the last child passed out. Then she closed the door and clasped her arms impulsively around me.

"Magnificent!" she sobbed. "The finest lie God ever put into a man's mouth!"

"Eternal heaven," I cried, "it's this end of the house that the cellar is under! I—I had forgotten!"

But she would never believe it. She said it was my modesty. She got an opinion from the carpenter that the floor must have fallen and cost a dozen lives and no man knoweth how many broken bones but for my coolness and ready wit.

It is all nonsense, but I can't prove it, and the less readily because I began upon that day to recover. I don't know why. Perhaps it was the natural course of the malady; perhaps Providence had no further need of me in the character of a lunatic. At any rate, I am well today and should be more than happy but for the false halo that I wear in the eyes of the woman I love.

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