

ACT II

Hell. The Chief of the Devils sits in the highest place. The Devil's Secretary sits lower down, at a table with writing materials. Sentinels stand at each side. To the right are five Imps of different kinds. To the left, by the door, the Doorkeeper. A dandified Imp stands before the Chief.

THE DANDY IMP. The whole of my booty for the three years has been 220,005 men. They're all in my power now.

THE CHIEF. All right. Thank you. Pass on.

The Dandy Imp goes to the right.

THE CHIEF [to the Secretary] I'm tired! Is there much business left? Whose reports have we had, and whose are still to come?

THE SECRETARY [counts on his fingers and, as he counts, points to the Imps to the right. When he mentions any Imp, the one referred to bows] We've had the Gentlefolks' Devil's report. He's captured 1836 in all. And the Tradesmen's Devil's with 9643. From the Lawyers', 3423. The Women's we've also just had: 186,315 married women, and 17,438 maids. Only two Devils are left, the Officials' and the Peasants'. There are altogether 220,005 souls on the list.

CHIEF. Well then, we'd better finish it all to-day. [To the Doorkeeper]
Let them in!

The Officials' Devil enters, and bows to the Chief.

CHIEF. Well, how have you got on?

OFFICIALS' IMP [laughing, and rubbing his hands] My affairs are all right, just as soot they are white! The booty is such that I don't remember anything like it since the creation of the world.

CHIEF. What, have you captured a great many?

OFFICIALS' IMP. It's not so much the quantity. Only 1350 men in all, but such splendid fellows! Such fellows, they might shame any Devil! They can embroil people better than we ourselves can. I've introduced a new fashion among them.

CHIEF. What's that new fashion?

OFFICIALS' IMP. Why, in former times lawyers were in attendance on the judges and deceived people. Now, I've arranged for them to do business also apart from the judges. Whoever pays most, is the one to whose business they attend. And they'll take such trouble over it that they'll make out a case where there is none! They and the officials between them

embroil people far better than we Devils can.

CHIEF. All right. I'll have a look at them. You may pass on.

The Officials' Imp goes to the right.

CHIEF [to Doorkeeper] Let in the last one.

Enter the Peasants' Imp with the chunk of bread. He bows to the ground.

PEASANTS' IMP. I can't live like this any longer! Give me another appointment!

CHIEF. What appointment? What are you jabbering about? Get up and talk sense. Give in your report! How many peasants have you captured this week?

PEASANTS' IMP [crying] Not one!

CHIEF. What? Not one! What do you mean? What have you been doing? Where have you been loafing?

PEASANTS' IMP [whimpering] I've not been loafing; I've been straining every nerve all the time, but I can't do anything! There now, I went and

took his last crust from under the very nose of one of them, and, instead of swearing, he wished it might do me good!

CHIEF. What?... What?... What are you mumbling there? Just blow your nose, and then speak sensibly! One can't make head or tail of what you're saying.

PEASANTS' IMP. Why, there was a peasant ploughing; and I knew he had brought only a chunk of bread with him, and had nothing else to eat. I stole his crust. By rights he should have sworn; but what does he do? He says, "Let him who has taken it eat it, and may it do him good!" I've brought the chunk of bread away with me. Here it is!

CHIEF. Well, and what of the others?

PEASANTS' IMP. They're all alike. I could not manage to take a single one.

CHIEF. How dare you appear before me with empty hands? And as if that were not enough, you must needs bring some stinking crust or other here! Do you mean to mock me? Do you mean to live in Hell and eat the bread of idleness? The others do their best, and work hard! Why, they [points to the Imps] have each supplied 10,000 or 20,000, or even 200,000. And you come with empty hands, and bring a miserable crust, and begin spinning your yarns. You chatter, but don't work; and that's why you've lost hold of them. But wait a bit, my friend, I'll teach you a thing or two!

PEASANTS' IMP. Before you punish me, listen to what I'll tell you. It's all very well for those other Devils, who have to do with gentlefolk, with merchants, or with women. It's all plain sailing for them! Show a nobleman a coronet, or a fine estate, and you've got him, and may lead him where you like. It's the same with a tradesman. Show him some money and stir up his covetousness, and you may lead him as with a halter. And with the women it's also plain sailing. Give them finery and sweets--and you may do what you like with them. But as to the peasants--there's a long row to hoe with them! When he's at work from morn till night--sometimes even far into the night--and never starts without a thought of God, how's one to get at him? Master, remove me from these peasants! I'm tired to death of them, and have angered you into the bargain!

CHIEF. You're humbugging, you idler! It's no use your talking about the others. They've got hold of the merchants, the nobles, and the women, because they knew how to treat them, and invented new traps for them! The official one there--he has made quite a new departure. You must think of something too! You've stolen a crust, and brag about it! What a clever thing to do! Surround them with snares, and they'll get caught in one or other of them. But loafing about as you do, and leaving the way open for them, those peasants of yours have gained strength. They begin not to care about their last crust. If they take to such ways, and teach their women the same, they'll get quite beyond us! Invent something! Get out of the hole as best you can.

PEASANTS' IMP. I can't think how to set about it. Let me off! I can stand it no longer!

CHIEF [angrily] Can't stand it! What do you think, then? Am I to do your work for you?

PEASANTS' IMP. I can't!

CHIEF. Can't? Wait a bit! Hollo, there! bring the switches; give him a thrashing.

The Sentinels seize the Imp and whip him.

PEASANTS' IMP. Oh! Oh! Oh!...

CHIEF. Have you thought of something?

PEASANTS' IMP. Oh, oh, I can't!

CHIEF. Give him some more. [They whip] Well--thought of something?

PEASANTS' IMP. Yes--yes, I have!

CHIEF. Well, tell us what it is.

PEASANTS' IMP. I've invented a dodge that will bring them all into my grasp, if you'll only let me take a labourer's place with that peasant. But I can't explain what it is beforehand.

CHIEF. All right. Only remember, that if you don't atone for that crust within three years, I'll flay you alive!

PEASANTS' IMP. They'll all be mine in three years' time.

CHIEF. All right. When the three years are past, I shall come and see for myself!

Curtain.