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Article 7

Mene Mene, Tekel Upharsin

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Abstract

The bells had stopped ringing. The coughs, silent until now, began. Hacking, rasping...

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THE BELLS HAD STOPPED RINGING. The coughs, silent until now, began. Hacking, rasping. Well, he would just have to speak louder today. Old Jensen sounded like he was going to die of the croup. The Right Reverend Wilson folded his hands on the huge open book before him and wished that young McDonald girl would stop her incessant chattering. Every Sunday she sat right down in front, looking pious, and blabbering. She was the prime offender among the young people. The older members of his congregation screeched more loudly than the young ones during the hymns, but at least they gave more to the collection to make up for it. He cleared his throat.

“The Lord is in His holy temple, let all the earth keep silence before Him.” And that included that young Schwartz brat. Why didn’t they keep that howling young wolf at home when he didn’t feel well? They certainly wouldn’t be upset if they missed church from the looks of the pledge they had made towards the new annex.

Habit led him through the next few minutes as he mentally counted the congregation. Hmm, not bad. Eighty some. Ought to be good for about sixty dollars.

“The choir will now give their rendition of the Little Home Church by the Wayside.” And they rendered it just as he had expected. He tried not to suffer too much as Mrs. Bronski gave her all for dear old Jesus.

Finally it was over, and he got down to the serious business of giving a sermon. The Tower of Babel, Genesis 11:4 was his topic for the day. He read the usual story dramatically from his big Bible and then started using his notes. He swung from the mistakes made in olden times to the building in which they were sitting and their expansion plan. He stressed the fact that they must have it handled by someone who had the best interests of the church in mind. He began talking straight to Dick Sobel, the owner of the bank, and gave a description of the man who must handle

the building of the annex and the raising of funds to cover it. It sounded like a description of Old Dog Tray, he thought, but apparently Sobel was lapping it up and beginning to want the job for the prestige. Reverend Wilson wound up with a short pep talk about the necessity for generosity in their donations and then announced that the baptism of the Billings' new little boy would commence.

Jerry Corbin, his altar boy, strutted out with the paraphernalia for the baptism. One of these days he was going to walk out there, proud as a cat carrying a mouse, head up high in the air, and go flat on his face. He would probably throw the silver bowl full of water half way out into the congregation when he did it. Reverend Wilson winced at the thought and waited with outward patience while Jerry adjusted everything just so. He was either a perfectionist or a horrible dawdler. The latter seemed more likely.

When Jerry had finished, the Billings walked up slowly to face him across the bowl of water. Mrs. Pearson began some wailing melody on the brand new organ that they hadn't needed. At least, he had been able to save a few dollars by getting it from a friend of his in Chicago. The baby started crying. He hated babies. Especially when they drooled over themselves and screamed for no apparent reason other than just to be screaming. He grinned inwardly at a remembered comment of Doc Bergen's. Something about the Billings' new baby being the healthiest seven-and-a-half-month baby he had ever seen. Twenty-three pounds of screaming humanity. He thought, "Shut up for a minute so I can give the speech which legalizes you, not that can ever be done." He tried to outshout the baby but didn't succeed too well. Screaming little idiot, he ought to be drowned instead of baptized if he couldn't shut up. The Right Reverend Wilson sprinkled some water on little Donald Chauncey, thinking that there must be a rich uncle somewhere in the background to make them use a name like that. Little Donald Chauncey managed to cough some spit on his robe. The Right Reverend Wilson sprinkled some more water on Little Donald Chauncey and hoped he would catch pneumonia.

— *Nicholas Saum, S. Jr.*