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NERO-THEN.

(After Kipling's "Truce of the Bear.")

BY E. J. SALISBURY.

For The Public.

Yearly, with plow and oxen, the weary
toilers go
By the pass called Rentomiland, to till in
the fields below.
Yearly, at Rentomiland, he sits as the toil-
ers pass—
Godzerth, the palsied outcast, weaving his
mats of grass.

Bent with his years of labor, slow with his
weight of speech,
Begging a word with the toilers, whisper-
ing low to each,
Over and over the story—beckoning near
with his hand—
"Pay ye no tribute to Nero-now for tilling
the Lord's free land!

"Here, shut out on the mountain, I gather
this withered grass,
Offer these mats at a penny to toilers as
they pass,
Giving a word for a warning, telling a tale
of the lie
That shadows your lives in the living and
blackens them ere you die.

"I, at a great commandment—'twas many
years ago—
Went to the valley of Plenty—went where
you now go:
And Nero-then in the causeway, cried:
'Tribute! the pass is mine.'
I paid and went to my labor, he took and
turned to his wine.



"Then was this pass called Bondage—in the time when I went through—the And the tribute paid was service—the whole that man could do. And Nero—then, the master, was as cruel, heavy, and strong As Nero—now is dainty, with his blighting, blasting wrong. "I knew the times and seasons—the moods of earth and sky. I felt the strong arm's swelling, the strong soul's lust to try. My heart held joy for women, my hands held peace for men— But I stopped and paid all tribute to the hands of Nero—then. "I knew naught of his cunning—I know it now, and fear!— For I gave him hopes for heartaches, gave laughter for a tear! I tolled in the days of children, I tolled in the secret night! But Nero—then took nearly all, in his scorn—ing, sneering might. "He came when the greed—dash burned him—came and took what he saw, Carried it off to his castle—his passion his only law. He lived like a grim old robber, deep in a rock-walled den— Oh! Nero—now is an unlike man to the horrible Nero—then! "I tolled till the girls were women, I tolled till the boys were men; Then gathered we there and drove him out—drove Nero from his den— Cursing, crying, howling, maddened with anger and wine, He fought till the night was falling, but Nero—then was mine! "Splashed with the blood of the combat, His head we took for a trophy. We scattered his broken bones.

Back we went to the valley—back to the valley with Glee, And Godzerth then was happy, for then "But a year—and there came a stranger, Manzerth, the pleasing talker—Manzerth, your Nero—now! He praised the eyes of women, he stole the children's hearts; And they cast me here on the rockland—here where the mountain parts. "You pay now at the portal—at Manzerth's smiling gate. You give?—God's mercy to you! You get?—You wait and wait! You leave your goods at the Rent-house, you leave your strength in the field; I leave hope ere the harvest's ending, leave love as your hearts grow steeled. "You shudder at all my story, you dread as you pass me by, But I give you word of a warning—word of the Nero He—He of the rock-walled castle, or he of the smiling gate— He takes your goods and pleasures. He gives?—You wait and wait! Bent with his years of labor, slow with his weight of speech, Begging a word or a bargain, begging a time to teach— Godzerth, the palsied outcast, weaving his mats of grass, Begg a word with the toilers—begg it as they pass! There in the golden morning, there in the heat of day, There in the cool of evening, he tells the only way. He tells it o'er and o'er—beckoning with his hand— "Pay ye no tribute to Nero—now for tilling the Lord's free land!"