



By William Banks, Jr.

CHRISTMAS Eve:—It was a very trying day in the great departmental store and as a consequence the employees were not in a happy frame of mind. In the first place it was uncomfortably warm for December; secondly, the store was thronged with people; thirdly, the "grand" orchestra, hired for the occasion, were "murdering" their limited repertoire. Nevertheless, one of a dozen girls in charge of the counter at which the holly and mistletoe were sold, seemed quite contented. Several times she glanced at the big clock on the wall behind her. At last one of her companions remarked in an injured tone "I'm sure I don't see how you can keep so calm, Lena, when the rest of us are just flurried."

Then, abruptly, "I have it. You're going to lunch with him to-day."

Lena blushed and nodded in the affirmative.

"Lucky girl," said her companion, "but," admiringly, "he couldn't help loving you."

"Hush, you foolish child," answered Lena, softly.

She glanced at the clock again. It wanted just fifteen minutes to the noon hour.

An overgrown boy, clothed in rough garments, his face and hands covered with grime, walked up to the counter. Lena knew him. He was an apprentice in the machine shop where her lover, Phil Langden, was employed, and had several times brought messages from him, but never at such an hour. A sudden fear stole into her heart as the lad handed her a small sheet of note-paper. On it in Phil's bold handwriting were the words: "Accident at the works. Cannot see you as arranged. Will call to-night. In haste. Phil."

"An accident," she said aloud.

"Yes'm," answered the lad.

She looked at the note again and then with a curious sharp note in her voice, asked: "What is the matter with Mr. Langden?"

"Nawthin'," the boy replied, somewhat startled by the question, "he ain't hurted. It's Jimmy Manson."

"And what's the matter with Jimmy?"

"He's kilt; dat's wot."

"Killed," the tears sprang to her eyes.

"Yep, and Mister Langden's gone to tell de wife."

"Why did they send him?"

"Becos he's the mos' nicest man in the shop," was the reply, and the boy walked away.

"The mos' nicest man in the shop," she mur-

mured, "yes and in all the city and all the world," and she smiled contentedly.

Of course it was disappointing but then he would call to-night and that would make up for it, and on the morrow he would spend the day with her. 'Twould be such a merry Christmas.

So she lunched alone, at the little restaurant across the way. When she had finished her meal and was about to rise a matronly woman accosted her. "Lena Douglas—well I declare."

Lena looked up in surprise, then held out her hand saying as she did so, "Mrs. Darlington—where did you spring from?"

Before replying Mrs. Darlington clasped Lena's hand warmly, then sitting by her side said, "Left my husband at home and came in on the morning train to do some shopping. Why," she continued, "it's nearly three years since we said 'good-bye.' Let us have a talk, dear."

They chatted away about things in general for a little while and then Mrs. Darlington said: "You are to be married soon, I hear. Who is the happy man?"

"Mr. Langden," Lena answered, "did you ever meet him?"

"Not Phil Langden," incredulously.

"Yes—. You know him?"

"Know him. Goodness, Lena," she stopped; the other was gazing at her with a frightened expression in her grey eyes.

"Know him. My dear girl I ought to tell you. I will tell you, though believe me I would be the last person in the world to say anything to mar your happiness." And, as evidence of her sincerity in making such a statement, she told a story that paled Lena's cheeks and blotted out in a few moments the sweet joy of three years' of trusting love.

At one o'clock they parted and Lena went back to the store.

During the afternoon she went about her work with so great a pain at her heart that she wished she might die. The motto, "A Merry Christmas," framed in holly and mistletoe, hanging close by the big clock, seemed to look down upon her in bitter mockery. She could never be merry again.

Six o'clock—closing time—came at last. On her journey home she recalled her first meeting with Phil; just after she had come to the great city with her mother and father. It was such a wondrous change from the little country town wherein she was born and had lived until her twentieth year. Her home was a quiet one, and not very bright, for it had felt the pinch of poverty. Then Phil had come into her life and somehow city skies shone brighter and life's roadway seemed smoother. The years had gone by swiftly, happily. A certain day, not long since past, stood out with a clear joyous glow; the day when Phil told his love and had slipped on to her finger the "dearest" engagement ring.

Sometimes she had wondered why Phil, who had come to the city shortly after herself, spoke seldom of the years intervening between his early manhood and the time he met her. She had not doubted him for that, but now she understood.

In a vague way she tried to assure herself that Mrs. Darlington's story was not true. But Mrs. Darlington had more than once proved a staunch friend, and her story, together with shadowy misgivings which had troubled her at times despite Phil's strong love, convinced her and hardened her heart.

When Phil called that night she did not meet him at the door as was her wont. Mrs. Douglas showed the young man into the little parlor and, excusing herself, left him alone. Phil waited and wondered why Lena did not appear.

Presently she came, her dark hair disarranged, her features contracted by mental suffering. In

her arms she bore a number of books, some photos, and dainty bric-a-brac. Phil, who had risen on her entrance, recognized them as presents he had given her. She placed them on a little table by the window.

"Dear heart," he said, "what is the matter?"

She laughed hysterically. Phil was pained and mystified. "What does this mean?" he asked.

"Take them away," she answered wearily, "I never want to see them again." She sat down in a chair by the table.

"What does it mean?" he demanded again, hoarsely.

She did not answer. He stood looking at her. When she became conscious of his gaze she averted her head.

"Go away. You are hurting me." Her tone was one of entreaty.

"You have no right to treat me in this fashion," he said hotly, "and," stubbornly, "I will not go before you offer some explanation."

She took the engagement ring off her finger and pressed it to her lips.

"Lena, Lena, in God's name don't," he pleaded.

She laid the ring on the table. "Now go," she muttered.

"I will not." He took a step forward, with hands outstretched.

"Don't touch me," shrinking, "I could not bear that."

"You are going too far," he said roughly. "What have I done to deserve such treatment?"

Minutes elapsed before she answered him. Then "Mr. Langdon," he bit his lip at this. She rose as she uttered the words and stood facing him. "Mr. Langden," she repeated, "did you ever know one Tom Darlington?"

"Yes," he answered wonderingly. "What has he got to do with this?"

"How long ago?" she asked, ignoring his question.

"I haven't met him since I knew you," he returned.

"Before then he was quite good enough for you—"

"Lena," gently.

"Don't interrupt," she broke in. "A good woman saved him. You were a gambler then?"

His face paled as he answered slowly, "Yes."

"A professional gambler, I believe," she went on, "a drunkard, too."

"Not that," he cried, "I swear—"

"Ah! you only drank occasionally. Your calling demanded a clear head and a steady hand."

"Since I have known you—" he began.

Again she cut him short—"But you generally managed to get the men you played with intoxicated."

"That will do," he murmured, "I will go."

He turned to leave the room.

"Not yet," she commanded, with strange inconsistency, "You shall hear me to the end."

He faced her again.

"The police knew of you."

"I never—"

"Figured in the police court," she added quickly, "I know that. You took good care to avoid such notoriety."

He was grimly determined now. "Go on," he said.

"You were a blasphemer."

"God forgive me," he answered reverently.

Her courage failed her. She sat down again and covered her face with her hands.

"You do not deny it," she sobbed, "and I would have believed you against the world. Oh! Phil, Phil! how can I trust you again?"

He let her cry for a while, then when she seemed calmer he asked. "Do you remember the night we first met?"

"Yes," she answered, almost inaudibly.

His voice was steady and dispassionate as he

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