



AIR BOMBING

SUPPOSE we give the war a rest for a bit and talk about Christmas. We've all had more experience with Christmas, anyway. Other people—we can't always tell exactly who they are—make wars. The people everywhere, in all the homes of the world, make Christmas. Once a year in our childhood, in our youth, down into the years that fetch the backward look, we have opened for ourselves a magic gate into a world of beauty. It so happened that the time was winter for the part of the world where Christmas began, in the northern hemisphere; the time of the longest nights when the shepherds kept watch over their flocks and saw the magic star; in the holy silence of the snow, in the time of crackling logs and blazing fires, and spruce trees draped in white, when the stars palpitated in the clear air and down the road came the music of sleigh-bells.

Now my Uncle Dudley is going to read this far and then he will say,

"Poppycock! Slush! Here—darn you, young 'un, what are you making such a row in here over your bundle o' papers? Think you're the only star on Christmas Eve? Put the soft pedal on, or I'll chuck you out into the snow."

My Uncle Dudley is a newsdealer—including books, magazines, toys, sundries, newspapers and "Sundays." He has a staff of newsboys big enough to fill a streetcar, and they don't make him feel much like Santa Claus in his speech. For some years now he has been cross at Christmas. He says it makes him far too busy in his store. No customers are so cranky as Christmas customers. Half of them only maul over the things. Not much money in toys, anyway. Good toys hard to get. Not so plentiful since Germany quit sending us toys. As for books, magazines and papers, it takes a lot of people these days to make much in bulk of sales; small profits are a lot of handling. And on top of all this ram-bunctious newsies.

"Here, you, Barney—can that clack! I'll twist your neck!"

Barney plunges out with his cargo of Sundays, almost upsetting a man with a three-year-old boy who thinks he ought to take home all the toys he wants without anybody paying for them—a clear proof that Santa Claus is a fact and not a fiction.

The man and the child were jostled out. So they went along the crowded street just to get into the swing of Christmas. Clack and clatter, everybody pushing and jostling—the child thought it was immense. The man growled a bit. He wanted to get Christmas atmosphere. This wasn't it. All the shops were blazing with things to eat and wear, and read and to take for medicine. They all looked much as they had done every night in the year except for the few little Christmas decorations that began to peep out here and there. They were all made to look so in order that people might go in and buy. There was none of those shops where the poorest, raggedest child could have gone in and got something for nothing. Kris Kringle, as we used to call him in England, had never seen any of these shops.

Presently they came to a queer little front whose windows were covered with sale bills in three colors. On the next day there was to be a bankrupt sale of boots, shoes and rubbers. And of all places where the spirit of Christmas would not be the next day this was the first. The man could imagine the struggling, clutching crowds of women and children

THE CHILDREN

who early in the morning would be clawing over the footwear marked down to a price that always had a 9 on the end. No, the spirit of Christmas would not be in that.

But what was it that made the child and the man pause before that ugly little window when the man dreamed himself back into the world of Christmas as it used to be?

It was the sheets of colored paper with the light just oozing through. In the childhood of the man one thing that marked off the Christmas time was the festoons of colored papers which hundreds of children in a London school used to help weave into chains that hung upon the chandeliers and the windows and the doors. How they rustled and flashed and made color-music to the children! Just colored paper; cost next to nothing, and without them none of the things that took money to buy would have meant the same kind of Christmas. With those colored papers to look at the three-year-old and the man got the vision of Christmas, the London Christmas of Dickens.

—Little bits of paper; simple toys; a Christmas tree; a magic lantern; in the early morning the waits with their cracked and ghostly voices; before dawn the scramble from the long rows of beds in the white dormitory into the suits of corduroy and the white tunics; breakfast by gaslight; then the line-up in the courtyard in the dawn with a skiff of snow on the asphalt, yonder at the head somewhere the brass band, sometimes the fife and drum, ready to march out to the streets of great London, on and on and on till in the mellow haze of the day we found our straggled little two-deep line with the band at the head trailing through tremendous, holiday-making crowds, tramcars, horses, carriages and people. And by mid-morning we turned into a church somewhere, a great church with a huge organ at the far end, and we all took up the strain of "This is the day and this the happy morn."

Dinner—roast beef and hot potatoes and plum duff. Such a dinner. Bonbons at the plates. Crack! On with the paper caps and the aprons. Out to the yard, for games. At night the magic lantern, more carols and the unveiling of the Christmas tree, when each child got one little gift.

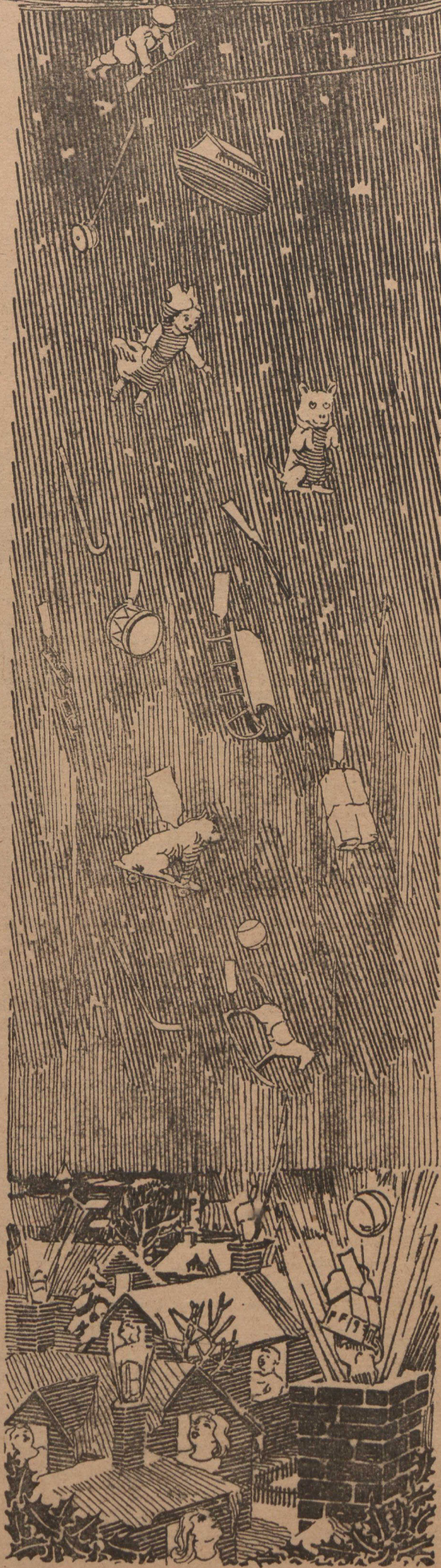
That was the Christmas when the spirit of Christmas ruled with kindness and magic, bringing joy that never could be outlived to hundreds of folkless children. Money? It cost little. We knew nothing of commercialized Christmas. Kris Kringle was in the offing; the saint who never buys but gives.

But that was all long ago—the Christmas that used to be. This child on the Canadian street, looking at the red, green and yellow papers, how could he ever have such a Christmas?

In the clatter of the street there was a shrill shout. "Oh, Daddy, Daddy! I'm finding Santa Claus!"

The lad had slipped away somewhere. Just for a few minutes, but so fascinated that he was not afraid, he had suddenly been picked up by a man who had on a false face, the mask of old Santa Claus. "Here's your boy," chuckled the voice in the mask. "I found him."

And when the lad pulled up the mask—it was the face of my Uncle Dudley who had just given all his newsies a box of goodies each. And the three-year-old had seen the spirit of Christmas; not the Christmas that used to be, but the Christmas that now is and must always be, or kindness perish from the earth.



AS IT NOW IS

CHRISTMAS