

The Message of The Bells

Written for the Western Home Monthly by M. Eugenie Perry

SLEIGH bells, ringing merrily through the frosty air, bring ever to the mind memories of Christmas—pictures of Christmas, mad, sad, or glad, that crowd the gallery of memory's hall.

Bell Faire, more familiarly known to her friends as Bluebell, owing to the extreme blueness of her eyes, raised her head to listen to the cheerful jingle; then the disturbing sounds in the outer office of typewriters clicking, and voices raised in argument, faded away. Had some message reached her from the bells? Tugging at her heart she felt a strange lure, the lure of wild places, and silent—silent save for the wind sweeping through the Christmas trees; an owl calling plaintively to his mate; or a prairie wolf, lonesomely howling.

Not from her familiar gallery of Christmas scenes, this haunting vision came—for those centered chiefly round a red brick house, set snugly in a trim acre, which hovered picturesquely on the edge of a small Ontario town—the home where her parents had lived and died—the birth-right which her brother had exchanged for a mess of pottage, in the form of a cheerless shack, on a bleak Saskatchewan farm. For the call of the West had drawn him as a magnet, and Bluebell, too, had followed the long trail.

So not from her past the sleighbells' dream-scene came—and it had come before—some weeks before, when holding in her hand the letter which her kindly aunt had sent, to bid her share the Christmas feast with them—the first gay winter bells had cleft the air, and brought with them the vision of the wilds.

"Oh, fair Miss Faire, 'tisn't fair, I declare

To hear my heart with an 'I don't care,'

To my dearest hopes don't sound the knell

For I'm yours to a fare-ye-well, Bluebell."

Still those palpitations, reader mine, this is not the hero approaching, merely a "cut" reporter, named Tommy Hurley, who fancies himself clever, and persists in warbling this ditty to an unfeeling Bluebell, on sundry inopportune occasions, causing dreams and visions, and such-like profitless trifles to vanish, leaving one confronted by such prosaic, but board-paying realities, as a society column which had to be edited to the satisfaction of an unfeeling public.

"Hah, she dreams—as if a Christmas edition were neither imminent nor impending—prithce tell me—wood sprite, does your vision embrace whole galaxies of gaily silken-clad maidens, tripping the light fantastic through the Christmas balls?—I wish mine did."

"(Who does he want to embrace, now?)" asked a jeering voice from the outer office.

Bluebell looked up at the office humorist, as he stood in the doorway: "Silken-clad maidens, is it?" she exclaimed bitterly, publicity-seeking matrons, you mean—and the ones we want to write about, won't be written up, and the ones we wish to ignore, eternally besiege our door—and some complain because we tell too much about them, and some because we do not tell enough—oh, the tribulations of the poor society editor on a Manitoba paper.

"Quite so," agreed the young man, "As it should be when women step out of their own sphere, and corral the jobs that should be supporting the poor down-trodden men, are you aware, my dear young lady, that woman's place is in the home?"

"Well I've heard the fact mentioned, once or twice, and I'm some little house-keeper myself when occasion requires—if I do say it as oughtn't—but what I want to ask is—where is the home?"

"Why, this is so sudden," simpered the young man, and the jeering voice beyond the doorway was heard to enquire, with apparent irrelevancy:

"By-the-way, has anyone had any news of the Black Douglas?"

A bright flush crept over Bluebell's fair face, and came to rest 'neath her aura of fluffy brown hair, as she applied herself industriously to her scribbling.

"Yes, has anyone heard of Douglas?" asked the assistant-editor who happened to come into the main office at that moment, "he's the best special reporter we've had in this office for years, I wish some of you fellows had his brains. I'll be willing to give a raise in salary to the man who tracks him into his lair, and brings him back on a tether."

Bluebell wrote feverishly, but between the sentences which described a brilliant society function, scenes culled from the fast fading year flashed across her brain.

Jim Douglas, sturdy Scotch-Canadian, had returned from France shortly after the signing of the Armistice, apparently in good health; but who returns from that terrible maelstrom of war without some strange quirk in the brain, great or small—no one returns quite normal; and certainly on the mind of one who has behind him a long line of temperamental Scottish ancestors, who has inherited the gift of insight and the curse of a passionate heart, the sights and the sounds, the hardships and horrors, the cruelty and crime, in that land of agony, fighting for very life, must have left some terrible searing wounds.

Therefore, while his brilliant gift of writing was quite unimpaired, Jim Douglas came back to his old position, a changed man, nervous, morose, quick to take offense, and the way he glowered under his black brows, when anything

Continued on Page 12



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