

CHRISTMAS JANE.

BY FRANK R. STOCKTON.



THEIR old-fashioned arm chairs before a bright fire on a cold December evening, sat David and Martha Rowley. They were a middle-aged couple, genial in spirits, prosperous in circumstances, and their home was bright, warm and cheerful.

"David," said Mrs. Rowley, "this is going to be the quietest Christmas we have ever spent together; none of your nephews, none of my nieces; just us two for the Christmas dinner and all that comes before and after it. It seems to me that it is scarcely worth while for us to have a home Christmas. Of course, we can go to church, but as to——"

"No, no, no, Martha, that will never do," interrupted David. "We are not going to give up any of the joys of our lives, simply because there are no young people, or any kind of people, to enjoy them with us. We'll keep Christmas just as we have always kept it."

"And hang up our stockings, I suppose?" remarked Martha.

David turned quickly toward her, his eyes brightening. "Of course we will do that," said he. "Ever since we have lived in this house there have been stockings hung up in it on Christmas eve, and they shall be hung up this year just the same."

"And you think Santa Claus will fill them, do you?" asked his wife.

"Think!" said David. "I am sure of it. Anyway we will try him."

Day after day, when David Rowley came home from his business, early in the afternoon, he found his wife sitting before the cheerful fire, busily darning stockings. Once or twice he fancied that as he entered the room, he saw Martha hastily stuff something under the pile of stockings in her basket. This appeared odd to him, for Martha very seldom did anything hastily.

One afternoon, soon after David came home, his wife was summoned down stairs to see a caller, and, hurriedly rising, she put down her work-basket and left the room. The basket was so near the edge of the table that Mr. Rowley, noticing that it was in danger of falling on the floor, rose to set it back. As he did so, his eyes fell upon something extremely bright and gay which lay within it. Impelled by curiosity, and having no conscientious scruples about looking at his wife's work, he took hold of the gay object and raised it that he might examine it. He raised and raised and raised, there seemed to be no end to it. At last he held up the gaudy thing at arm's length; it was a stocking, made up of horizontal stripes of black and red and yellow. It was not finished, for a great part of the foot was wanting.

"Heavens!" thought David Rowley. "What can that be for? Not for me, surely, for I wear socks; and not for herself! Oh no, that could never be!"

With both hands he held the stocking by the two upper corners and gazed at it.

"Ten inches wide!" said he. "It is all of that! And if it were finished, it would be,—yes, it would be a yard long! Who on earth could wear a stocking as big as that!"

As he stood staring at the exaggerated hose, an idea struck him. He was on the point of bursting out into a laugh, when he pulled it into a chuckle.

"It's like her!" he said. "It's just like her! I have told her she is as young as any of them. I believe she is younger. She is going to hang up this stocking for me to fill. That is what she has been trying to hide from me. I thought she had an unusual number of

stockings to darn. Lord! What a stocking!" he said, as he held it up once more.

"All right, Mrs. Rowley," said he, "Santa Claus will attend to you!"

And, as properly as he knew how, he rolled up the stocking and put it carefully under the other articles in the work-basket.

It was early on Christmas morning; everything was quiet in doors and out,—everything dark out doors and in, except for the dim light given out by a night lamp in the chamber of Mr. and Mrs. Rowley. The good lady was sleeping soundly; the more soundly, perhaps, because she had sat up the previous evening until her husband was in bed and asleep.

Mr. Rowley was not asleep, he was very wide awake,—awake with his eyes and awake with his ears. There was light enough for him to see his stocking which hung on the left side of the mantel piece, and he perceived that it looked very full and bulged out in many places. A lively curiosity burned within him, but he did not get up to examine his stocking. On the other side of the fireplace he saw an enormous stocking, gay even in the duskiest of the room, and hanging flaccid and empty. His wife had had faith that Santa Claus would come around again early in the morning.

Presently he heard a clock strike six, and at the sound he quietly slipped out of bed and dressed himself, with the exception of his shoes. Then, with his slippers in his hands, he stole down the softly carpeted stairs. In the hall he put on his slippers, struck a wax match, and made his way to the kitchen, where he lit a lantern. Very careful to make no noise with bolt or key, he went down into the cellar and opened the drafts of the furnace, an hour at least before the time at which this office was generally performed by the servant.

When he came up stairs again, Mr. Rowley went into the library with his lantern; then he walked noiselessly into the parlor. There he stood by the register a few minutes, and then he went back to the library. He sat down and listened. Several times he took out his lantern and looked at the clock. It seemed to him it took a long time for the hands to move to a quarter to seven.

Before the minute hand touched nine, Mr. Rowley rose and went into the hall. Very quietly he drew back the bolt to the front door, unfastened the chain and unlocked the door, ready to be opened. Then he listened intently.

Very soon he heard feet ascending the stone steps. He gently opened the door and admitted two noiseless figures. They were women. Without a word, Mr. Rowley conducted them into the library and shut the door.

After some minutes of whispered conversation, the three came into the hall. One woman held the lantern, so as to light the stairs, and the other with Mr. Rowley quietly ascended. She carried a bundle, and when they reached the chamber door, they stopped and listened. Finding that Mrs. Rowley was still asleep, they entered and approached the right hand side of the fireplace. The woman gazed at the great stocking which hung there, and as she did so, her mouth widened and her eyes sparkled, but she made no sound. Then she turned to Mr. Rowley and shook her head as if she said, "This will not do." He gazed back at her and raised his eye-brows as if he would ask: "Why will it not do? What is the matter with it?" She shook her head again and stood for a moment, thinking. She looked about her and seeing a cushion on a lounge, she motioned to Mr. Rowley to put it on the floor. When this had been done, she gently laid her bundle on the cushion. Now she approached Mr. Rowley and whispered in his ear the word "Scissors." He looked at her in surprise, but soon produced a pair from a work-table. Then she took down the great stocking, and before the amazed eyes of Mr. Rowley, she ruthlessly cut it from the top all the way to the heel, so that it could be laid open.

In reply to Mr. Rowley's look of horror, she whispered:

"Can't be helped, no other way. It can be sewed up again."

Kneeling down by the side of the sofa cushion, she opened the stocking to its utmost width. She laid it over the bundle, entirely covering it, and tucking it