

Miss Letty's Christmas Card

"I wonder if it would be very forward? But, after all, he's only a boy, and he need never know who sent it. Of course, I need put no name; I can just send it in an envelope. Yes, that is what I will do." And with a little flush of excitement on her thin face, Miss Letty slowly and carefully addressed a large envelope in a small, pointed handwriting to "Reginald Smyth, Esq., 40 Morton Crescent, S. W."

No. 40 Morton Crescent was where Miss Letty lived herself, and where she had lived for nearly ten years. She had two small rooms on the third floor, furnished simply and plainly, in which she spent the greater part of her days and nights. She never went away, and when she went out it was either on some mysterious errand to a large shop in the West End or on a visit to one or other of the wretched little homes where she was always hailed with a shout of welcome as "our Miss Letty!"

For Miss Letty was poor, and Miss Letty was an old maid. And these two facts will tell more about her than I could in a whole chapter. Besides there was very little else to tell about Miss Letty. She gave very little trouble, for she prepared her own simple breakfast tea, and Mrs. Wheeler, the landlady, sent up her dinner from her own meal for a very small sum every day. There

was always a great deal of white work about, and little pieces of lace and embroidery, but these had to do with the mysterious errands to the West End shop.

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She knew from Mrs. Wheeler that he was young, not more than twenty, that he had been laid up with a sprained ankle for nearly all the fortnight he had been there, and that he seemed very lonely and friendly.

"Poor young thing!" she said to herself, "perhaps he has no home and mother, and it will be lonely and dreary for him. Perhaps he used to have Christmas presents and Christmas cards, and perhaps he will miss it this year if he has none."

And she made up quite a romantic little story about Mr. Reginald Smyth on the first floor downstairs—a story that was quite unjustified by facts.

She had spent a whole twopenny for a card with a picture of men and maidens in old-world dress dancing a minuet in an oak-panelled hall. But when she had brought it home, she could not make up her mind whether it could be thought forward to send a card to a stranger without even knowing him by

sight. But at last her visions of his pathetic loneliness conquered her maiden shyness, and with a flush that only the old brown teapot say, she slipped the card inside the addressed envelope, and dipping a thin white forefinger in a saucer of water, she courageously sealed it up.

Then she put on her old worn four-lined cloak and second-best hat, and going furtively down the stairs, and though the very walls were balding up their hands in shame at her, she slipped out of the front door, round the corner, and, with a little gasp and a last anxious look around to see that no one was watching, she pushed the envelope inside the sturdy scarlet pillar.

But for all her care, Reginald Smyth knew the next morning whence the Christmas card had come.

For when Mrs. Wheeler went up to take him his midday meal, he showed her the men and the maidens dancing.

"Mrs. Wheeler," he said, solemnly, "I believe you've fallen in love with me, for all your pretence that you're an old married woman, for you're the only woman in London who knows where I am."

"Get along with you, Mr. Smyth!" said Mrs. Wheeler, with a broad grin on

Wheeler she must do him a favor. She must go upstairs and tell Miss Letty there was a sick boy in the house. "Be sure you say I'm only a boy," he impressed on Mrs. Wheeler—and that she would only be doing her plain and Christian duty if she were to come downstairs and talk to him.

"Well, I'll go, sir," said Mrs. Wheeler, dubiously, "but I don't believe she'll come. She's as shy and timid as a mouse."

"She must come. You tell her I'm a good little boy who wants—who wants to know how to knit socks! I'm sure she must be a kind old thing to have thought of sending me that card."

Mrs. Wheeler must have done her commission well, for an hour later there was a timid knock at the door and a very nervous, very trembling, very rosy Miss Letty appeared in answer to an eager

thought Reggie quickly to himself as he stood up, and, with the aid of a stick, hobbled from his couch to meet her.

"I say, this is awfully good of you, Miss Letty," he said, holding out his hand. "You see, Mrs. Wheeler has told me your name. I'm so horribly lonely, and I'm so sick of counting the roses up the wall and along the wall, and I thought if you weren't very busy you might give up just a little time to me as it's Christmas Day, you know."

"I'm only too pleased," said Miss Letty, in a flutter, succumbing instantly to the boyish charm of the eager white face. "I—I was rather lonely myself, but you see I've grown used to it. I've had ten Christmases quite alone now."

"By Jove! have you? This is my first, and I feel ready to talk to the chair leg! I say, Miss Letty, sit down

savage, and I wasn't quite sure I was ready to apologize."

"Oh, Mr. Smyth," said Miss Letty, looking at him earnestly, "write to him at once—to-night if you can. You—forgive me—you are so young, you don't know what terrible things may happen just from letting a misunderstanding go on. Why, a whole life may be wrecked and ruined."

The soft voice shook, and the little thin face quivered.

Reggie looked at her curiously. And then he got up and hobbled to the chair close beside hers in the circle of the firelight.

"You said that as if you know a sad story that had come about through a misunderstanding. Won't you tell me about it?" Then, as he saw her hesitate, he put out his hand boyishly, and

known, or so it seemed to her, but who had one great fault, a wild and hasty temper. He was a doctor, and he gave up the greater part of his time to working for love, pure love, among the very poorest of the large town where the girl lived. They met first in one of those dreary little homes, and—

grew to love the girl—he said he loved her from the first time he saw her; while to her he was a king, almost a god, and she worshipped him. Then one day he told her he was leaving that town, and was going to another a long way off, where he had taken a practice. And he asked her to marry him and go with him to his new life. And she said no.

"Good gracious! whatever for?" burst in Reggie.

Miss Letty's voice was very low. "Because she knew that if she left her father he would be utterly lonely and unhappy. And then she said that he should be lonely and unhappy too, and that he should go to her father and ask him if he would let her sacrifice her life for him. And then the girl grew frightened, for she knew what her father would say—that she must not think of him, but must do what was happiest for herself. Oh! it was very foolish, but the girl was very young, and

you come about eight, and promise to put on this same pretty dress?"

"Yes, yes, I will if you wish it. Shall you really wear me? You—you don't know how nice it is to think that someone does. It is like old days. Again, good night."

The following evening it was Reggie who was flushed and nervous, and who hopped about the room with a stick like a cat on hot bricks.

"Eight o'clock! Why ever doesn't she come?" She must be here—

There was a knock at the door, and Miss Letty entered.

"Ah! there you are! I'm so glad to see you. Now, may I look at you? Yes, that is really a very pretty frock, but your hair! Oh, Miss Letty, it's just as if you'd scraped it back! And you've such lovely golden hair. Couldn't you—couldn't you make it a lot looser and more careless-like in front?"

"You funny boy!" laughed Miss Letty, who looked younger and fairer to-night. She had put on the gray silk with the soft old face, and had fastened a bunch of violets at her breast, and her lips were smiling in anticipation of another pleasant evening. "I will pull it loose if you like, though I shall only make it look

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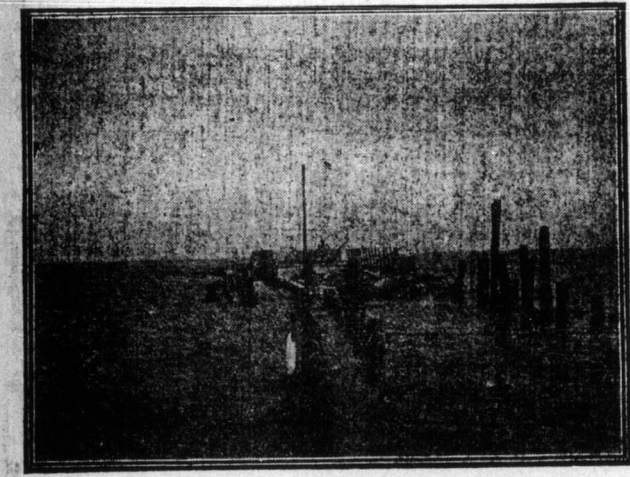
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The PURE MILK COMPANY, Ltd.



WRECK OF OLD PIER AT THE BEACH.

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her red, good-natured face, for she had indeed fallen a victim to Reggie's sunny smile and boyish cooing ways, that won over every woman he met.

"It's all very well to say 'Get along with you' but I'm sure that you must have sent me this very pretty Christmas card."

"What card are you talking about? Lord bless my soul! I ain't got time or money to spend on such rubbish."

"Well, if you didn't send it, who did? There is no name on the inside, but it's certainly a woman's writing on the envelope, and it bears the London postmark."

"Let me see. Well—laws a-mussy! if that ain't Miss Letty's writing!"

"Miss Letty—who's she?"

"An old maid—a poor, little, quiet, good-natured body as lives upstairs. She's heard me talk of you—but fancy her sending you that!"

"Oh, you won't tell her I know who it was, will you?" said Reggie, who had a womanly horror of hurting another's feelings. "She evidently did not want me to know, or she would have put her name inside. Promise you won't let her know I've found out."

And Mrs. Wheeler promised, with rough, homely skill putting fresh bandage on the sprained ankle the while.

It was the dullest, loneliest Christmas Reginald Smyth had ever spent, and he wasn't used to being dull or lonely. After he had finished tea he began to think he couldn't endure himself any longer, and that even a cat or a canary would be better fun to talk to than nothing. And then he had a brilliant idea.

He rang the bell and told Mrs.

"Come in." She had put on her very best frock, a soft gray silk that had been made in the days when she was young and had more money than she had now, and a piece of rare lace, soft and yellow with age, at her neck. She had not had such an interesting event in her life for over ten years as a visit to a young man, and the unwonted excitement had brought a flush that resembled that of youth on her soft, downy cheek.

"She isn't a bit like an old maid,"

here—it's no end of a jolly chair." And he tried to drag a large easy chair close to the roaring fire. For Reggie was a drawing-room-floor lodger, and was treated accordingly.

"Oh, please, you mustn't," said Miss Letty. "You ought to be lying down. Oh, please lie down again and let me put the cushions right for you."

And, nothing loath to be fussed over again, Reggie let her pat and drag the cushions with skillful fingers that had not done such work for ten long, lonely years.

"Now, you sit by the fire and let's talk." And in a few minutes the quiet little woman of forty years and the eager young lady of twenty summers were laughing and talking as Miss Letty had not laughed and talked for years. She even found courage to tell him of how she had sent him the Christmas card.

Confidence begets confidence, and it was not long before she heard the secret of Reginald's lonely Christmas, and, as she listened, the soft blue eyes filled with glistening tears. It was all so foolish and so young, and yet so pregnant with possibilities of future misery and last misunderstanding. "Just a quarrel with the governor—a quarrel in which Reggie, however, acknowledged that he now thought he was in the wrong."

"You know, the old dad's got an awful temper at times—and so've I," he admitted candidly. "And as we live alone together, for my mother died when I was a kid, we're bound to get on each other's nerves at times. Well, this time we had an awful row about—about a girl," looking up at Miss Letty from under quizzically raised eyebrows, "and I bounced out of the house and told the governor I shouldn't go back. But, of course, I knew I should, and pretty soon—and so did he. I came up to London and took rooms here, and then wrote and told the dad I should stay and have a good time for a bit. He wrote back—you've no idea what a polite letter it was!—to say he was glad that I should be having a good time, and he should be pleased to welcome me back in time for Christmas, or the New Year, or any time I liked, but to stay as long as I felt inclined."

"It sounds like a very kind letter," said Miss Letty.

"Yes—es, I suppose it was," said Reggie. "But the very day I got it I sprained my ankle and have been laid up ever since, so I've not had much of a good time."

"But why didn't you write and tell your father, and then perhaps he would have come and spent Christmas here, as you couldn't go to him?"

"I might have done it, but I know it would have been very hard for him to leave his practice just now, and besides, you see I was still feeling a bit

just touched her knee. "Please. It's Christmas night, you know, and the very time for stories. See, I'll turn the light down, and we'll tell tales in the dark."

But it was some seconds after the lamp had been turned down, and the only light in the room was the long, flickering gleams and golden sparkle of the fire, before Miss Letty spoke, and then her voice trembled sadly.

"I will tell you the story of a misunderstanding that ended—very unhappily for one person, just to try and persuade you to write to your father at once. It was many, many years ago, and—and a girl was living with her father in—in a large town in the north. He was a clergyman, and very poor and very unhappy, because the wife he loved as his own soul died when the girl was fifteen. She wasn't a bit clever or good really, but she gave up all her life and all her thoughts to helping her father in his hard and often depressing work, and to making his home as bright as she could. And then one day she met a man, the best and noblest she had ever

thought self-sacrifice the most beautiful thing in the world. And she told her lover that he must not do that—as she loved her father best; and that she had to choose between them she chose her father."

"But did she really love her father best, Miss Letty?" Reggie's eyes were shining, and his voice shook with eagerness.

"Didn't I tell you she just worshipped the other man? But she let him go away thinking she did not care for him. And the next thing she heard of him was that he was married—though whether happily or unhappily she never knew, for she never saw him again."

"And did she ever regret what she had done?"

"Aye, bitterly. Her father died a year afterward, and she was left alone in the world. For eight or nine years she lived with an old invalid aunt, and looked after her, and when she died she came to London, where she has been very lonely and very poor ever since. And she was wrong to let her lover go away, believing a lie."

Reggie put his hand on hers for a moment.

"Perhaps it is not too late for their now I know that—I mean the girl knows happiness even now?" His voice was very low and gentle.

"Too late?" with a little pathetic laugh. "Didn't I tell you he married nearly twenty years ago, and the girl is a plain old maid?"

"That she isn't—I mean I don't see why she should be. Do you know, I once heard of a story very like that before, only it was a man's story. It was the story of a man who loved a woman, and she refused him, though he had thought she loved him. And then in a foolish fit of pique he married, and he did his best to make his wife happy. But he never succeeded, for he never really loved her. And then when she died he tried to find his first love, but could not trace her."

"Ah, but there are not many men faithful like that. Now, I must go away. I had no idea it was so late. Good night, Mr. Smyth. And you will write?"

"I will write to-night, Miss Letty, or rather, I will write in the morning."

"Oh! I am so glad."

"But if I write, will you come and spend to-morrow evening with me? Will

untidy, and shall probably have to go and do my hair again."

"And she went to the glass and pulled out little bits of the soft golden hair that was almost as beautiful and rich as it had been twenty years ago, till it fell into tiny curls and waves over the white forehead, while Reggie watched her anxiously."

"Why, you look utterly different! You must promise me never to scratch it back like that again. Now, will you read me something?"

"Read? Of course, if you wish. What shall I read?"

Miss Letty's voice had a note of disappointment. She would much rather have talked.

"Will you read me the news? Sit here, then you'll get the light on the paper."

He pulled out a chair which was in full view of the door, but from which its occupant could not see the door without turning her head. And Miss Letty obediently sat down and began to read a long, uninteresting leader, of which Reggie did not hear one single word. His ears were straining for the sound of a step on the stairs and the opening of the door.

He had not to wait and listen long. In about five minutes there was a step outside and the door opened gently. Miss Letty did not hear either, so neither stopped her reading nor turned her head.

A tall, grizzled man stood in the doorway, as if petrified, with his hand still on the knob, and his dark eyes fixed on the little gray-clad figure, with the lamp-light shining on its ruffled golden head. "Letty!"

The paper fell from Miss Letty's nerveless hand and her face was the color of chalk.

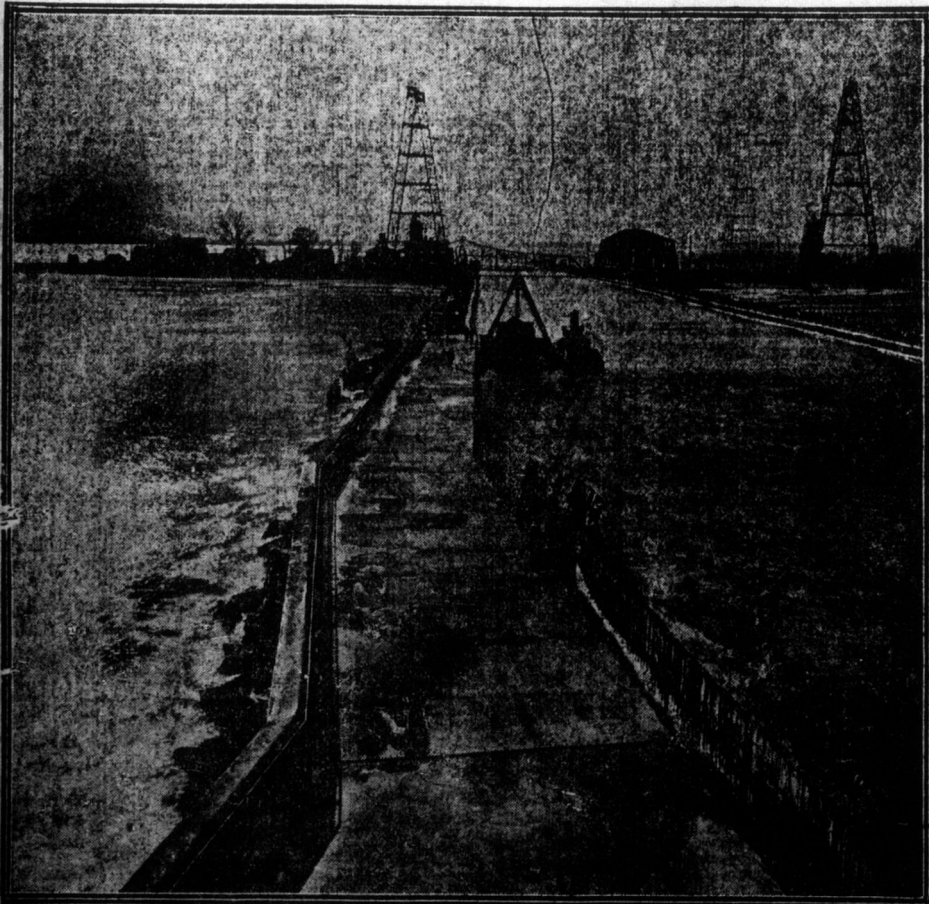
"Robert!"

There was a quick click of the door as it closed behind Reggie, who had not been seen or noticed by his father, who had come all the way from a Yorkshire town to see him. But Reggie was not hurt or annoyed. His boyish face glowed as he rubbed his hands and whispered to himself, as he limped up and down the passage:

"I wonder how long they'll keep me out here!"

On the other side of the door a man was holding a woman's trembling hands

(Continued on Page 11.)



VIEW OF THE NEW PIER AT THE BEACH. Showing finished cement work and temporary cribbing.



VIEW OF NORTH END IMPROVEMENT WORK. Showing a bit of the revetment wall and filling behind where a disease-breeding swamp used to be. Home for Incurables, House of Refuge and old Power House in background.