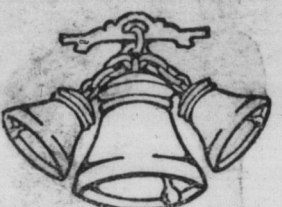


A Window Into Christmas

By L. Paul Suter



In pursuit of his regular calling, Andy Dugan left home shortly after midnight and began threading a tortuous way among the alleys and back streets of the city. Ordinarily, he would have spent Christmas Eve in bed, like other men, with perhaps a long enough interruption to deck an evergreen tree for the benefit of the younger Dugans; but he had not pulled off a good job for some time and funds were running low.

He had in mind a certain house toward the suburbs which bore the distinction of being a magistrate's. The fact that the magistrate lived there was incidental, though it had a vindictive interest for Andy; but a well-defined presumption that the household was supplied with plate and jewelry was of the highest importance. Andy figured that if he could effect an unobtrusive entrance, and could withdraw again without being perceived, the empty coffers of the Dugan family would be well on their way toward replenishment.

Strange what trifling temptations come to thwart one's plans! Andy was nearly at his destination. Another square, which had a convenient alley running through it, would have taken him there. But instead of completing the distance, he stopped behind a comparatively mean and insignificant looking house, merely because the window was open.

Open windows had a fascination for Andy. They were the signs and symbols of his calling. Perhaps a brother operator was at work within. Perhaps—and this was the thought which warmed his heart—the window had been carelessly left open, and a minimum of effort would secure something well worth the trouble. The second possibility was worth testing, anyway.

He placed both hands on the window sill, raised himself with the ease of muscles long trained to that sort of thing, and landed quietly in the room. Here he turned on his flashlight and paused to look around.

It was evidently a bedroom. The window had been left open for air, in spite of the sharpness of the night. The ray of light, traveling to and fro, glanced for a moment upon white bed clothes at the other end of the room. Andy thereupon shut it off entirely and proceeded to investigate the sleepers, with eyes which had some-what of a cat's faculty of seeing in the dark.

He stepped to the side of the bed, without making any sound. He saw two children in it—two little girls. They had kicked off the coverings, which lay in a heap partly at the foot of the bed and partly on the floor, and they were shivering in their sleep.

"Catching their death o' cold, too!" Andy growled to himself. "A nice mother they must have! Window open and blowing down their spines like a knife."

He laid the flashlight down for a moment and put the bed clothing back where it belonged, then passed out into the hallway. He was taking note, meanwhile, that the furniture and carpets were not of the costliest. This might be the magistrate's house in distance, but it was a long way from it in wealth. The hall had no carpet of any kind. He had to tip-toe with elaborate caution to avoid making too much noise. It was doubtful whether the view would be worth while, after all, but Andy made a rule of seeing his jobs through. Sometimes unlikely places held out a good reward to the diligent worker.

He had expected to find the grown folks' bedrooms next to those of the children. Instead, he blundered into the kitchen. The remains of a meal were lying on the table, which in itself was a bad omen for the wealth of the place. In the stove at the farther side some coals were still smoldering. Andy's quick eye caught three long, slender objects suspended beneath the chimney hole, and his flash brought back to him with a start the fact that it was Christmas Eve. The slender objects were stockings. Two of them belonged, evidently, to the little girls; he had just covered in their sleep; the other to another child whom he had not seen—probably a boy.

Andy recognized the importance of the find. What the children were getting for Christmas would tell him pretty well whether it was worth while to go on with the job.

The first stocking had a little popcorn in its toe, as he could tell by feeling, and a little candy atop of that. Above the candy was a brown-eyed doll, which he drew out carefully and replaced.

"Five-and-ten-cent store," was his verdict.

The next stocking was like the first, except that the doll's eyes were blue. The third, which Andy had sized up as belonging to a boy, bore out his surmise. It contained popcorn and candy, like the other two, but in place of the doll there was a top.

"A five-center," Andy appraised it, with easy skill. "Twenty-three for me! This ain't the place where Adam Worth stole the Geishaborough."

He crept back through the hallway, paused again by the bedside of the two little girls to ascertain that they

were still sleeping and covered, then dropped out of the open window as lightly as he had entered. Once in the alley, he broke into a noiseless dog-trot which brought him rapidly to the magistrate's.

He waited a moment before climbing the back fence, to make sure that no four-footed watchman were about. A few kicks against the boards, in imitation of a suppressed scuffle, convinced him that there were not. Any dog would have responded to such a challenge. So he clambered over and made his way quickly to the side of the sleeping mansion.

The kitchen window was locked, which meant that the other windows would be locked, too; but a few skillful prods of Andy's "outsider" brought forth a satisfactory click from within. He was about to throw his strength against the window when instinct told him that if he raised it a burglar alarm would go off.

So he went to work on the little cellar window in front of him. It was scarcely large enough to admit a man of average size, even with squeezing, but Andy was considerably below the average. Perhaps its narrowness had had the designer of the burglar alarm to consider it beneath his attention. At any rate, no alarm responded. Andy waited, to assure himself that no delayed buzz was coming; then, with a sudden effort, opened the window to its full extent and shot the rays of his flashlight right and left through the basement to pick out a landing place.

There was a pile of potato sacks underneath the window—a highly satisfactory condition. Andy squeezed himself through and lighted noiselessly upon them. While he was sliding off the sacks a tool of questionable use fell from his pocket, but he caught it neatly in time to prevent its clattering to the floor.

The door leading up from the cellar was locked, but a brief manipulation sufficed to open it. In a few minutes he stood in the darkened kitchen, beyond which all was clear sailing.

It was an axiom with Andy, born of long experience in his profession, that safety should never be taken for granted. Observing it now, he determined to inspect the entire ground floor of the house before getting down to business. He could have secured the plate from the sideboard, but some late member of the family, sitting up in the drawing-room or elsewhere, might have a peep through the keyhole and have investigated, with unpleasant results.

Therefore, he contented himself with a hasty examination of the plate, and proceeded into the hall. A broad staircase went up from his feet, surmounted by a gigantic moose head. The ray of light revealed a little marble statue on the stair post, which Andy contemplated with hurried appreciation. He glanced into two or three rooms leading from the hall, to find them all deserted and silent. Finally, he came to what was evidently the drawing-room.

The flicker of a fire in this room shone plainly on the polished floor of the hallway, so he peered cautiously around the corner before venturing within. No one was inside. The flicker came from a huge fireplace at the other side of the room, in which a log was still burning. A very faint aroma of cigar smoke tickled the nostrils, but it would hardly have been perceptible to one not in search of such traces. Andy considered it scarcely strong enough to be of real importance. The smoker must have left for bed fully an hour before.

He chuckled, however, at sight of three stockings hanging above the fireplace. They were well-made stockings, of fine texture, and they swung stiffly with an air of comfortable fullness, almost as if their wearers were inside them. Andy set himself to examine them with more interest than such things usually would have excited in him.

None of the stockings seemed large enough to contain all the presents which their possessors were to receive. Two of them had each a pair of large dolls lying on leather-covered chairs beneath—dolls which could not, to the grossest imagination, have suggested a five-and-ten-cent store. Beside them were sets of dolls' furniture, complete, one for each of the first two stockings. A mammoth bob sled, "knocked down," lay partly in front of all the chairs. There was a smaller sled, too, beneath the third stocking, with a pair of racing skates atop of it.

Andy inspected all these with gravity, and a slow smile lit up his weather-beaten features.

"I'm not the man to rob a kid's stocking," he said to himself. "But it strikes me that when these kids have all that pile of stuff, and then other kids ain't got nothing but ten-cent dolls and a five-cent top, there's robbery going on somewhere. For two bits I'd do something that Providence seems to have overlooked, and throw the rest of the job over."

He hesitated, and peered into the stockings themselves.

"Here's a fountain pen," he said; "and a stickpin—solid gold—and another pen. And this one's got a two-bladed knife, with a saw and screw-driver and a nail passer—I wouldn't mind having that, myself, but the kid ain't going to lose it through me. And I'll be pinched, here's pen number three. They're jealous kids, maybe, and if one gets a pen, they've all got to have it. I ain't grudging them a thing, but it don't seem right. Damn it, it ain't right," he concluded. "Here goes! I'm not feeling for the other job to-night, anyway."

With a sigh of relief, he set himself to the task of selection. A doll from each of the two chairs was set aside,

leaving one apiece beneath those stockings; and after judging gravely between the desirability of the sled and of the skates, he took the former, and put the dolls carefully upon it.

"That's plenty," he said, taking the three toys in his arms. "These kids won't miss it much, and if them other kids don't believe in Santa Claus after they get it, I'm no prophet."

For the moment, righteous satisfaction had overcome his usual caution. Had it not been so, he might have mislaid his eyes in time to revert a painful surprise. When he did look up, a big man stood in the doorway, quietly regarding him. The man was clad in Santa Claus costume, and his arms were folded on his breast.

Andy put down the toys with great suddenness, and drew his revolver.

"Up with your hands!" he said, in businesslike fashion.

The big man kept his arms folded.

"Are you going to put 'em up, or ain't you?" Andy demanded.

"When you come before me, Andy Dugan, I'll give you five years for this job!" was the reply. "A man is getting down to pretty small potatoes when he steals toys from children's stockings."

Andy replaced the revolver in his pocket with an air of resignation.

"I might have known you, Judge," he said sadly. "I've seen you often enough, but not in this rig. You say you're going to give me five years; then maybe you won't give me any more for speaking out and saying that if anybody's getting down to small potatoes, it's yourself when you have presents like these for your own kids and let kids within a block of you go with next to nothing. You think I was taking these things for myself. Well, I wasn't."

The big man stepped up fearlessly and stood in front of Andy.

"You're not drunk," he said, with a keen glance. "Are you crazy? If so, now is the time to prove it. I may save you a heavy sentence."

"I'm neither the one nor the other," Andy retorted, looking him in the face. "If I was, I wouldn't be trying this sort of thing. Maybe I'm a fool because I didn't go off with your plate when I had the chance. This is my second job to-night, Judge. I didn't get nothing at the first house, because there wasn't nothing to get. From all I saw there wasn't enough to eat, let alone to steal. They're neighbors of yours. They live in the same square. There's three kids, two girls and a boy—just like yours—but it's mighty little Christmas them kids are going to get! I looked into their stockings. They're getting two fifteen-cent dolls and a five-cent top, with some popcorn and a little candy thrown in for good measure. That's what they're getting. I was going to play Santa Claus for once in my life and take 'em something worth while when you came in."

"Do you mean to say you were taking those things for someone else?" the Judge demanded.

"For them kids, Judge, s'help me."

SMOKE OLD CHUM

The Tobacco of Quality

1/2 LB. TINS and in packages

The Judge turned toward the door. "We must go before any one catches us," he whispered nervously.

When they were in the alley again, Andy turned uncertainly toward his companion.

"How about the five years, Judge?" he asked, with anxiety.

There was some moonlight now, to reflect upon the hardened snow, and they could see each other plainly. The Judge looked thoughtfully at Andy for some time before he spoke.

"Andy Dugan," he said, softly, at length. "How does it come that a man like you should follow such a calling?"

Andy shifted his flashlight from one hand to the other and remained silent.

"Why don't you answer?"

"If I told you the truth, it'd hurt your feelings, Judge."

"Tell me the truth," the Judge replied, earnestly.

Andy wavered a moment longer; but something in the other's tone, rather than in his words, told him that it was safe to speak.

"I'm a crook, Judge," he began slowly; "because I fell down, and after that everybody held me down. I was sent up, and when I got out, they pinched me again on suspicion. You know how that goes, Judge. I didn't have a chance to do anything out of the way, but I got thirty days, just the same. After that I was sore, and I pulled off a job. You gave me a year for it. That's how it has been over since—in and out. Nobody wants to give me an honest job, and here am I with a wife and two kids to keep. What else can I do? I leave it to you."

EARLY CHRISTMAS MORNING.



The Light Divine.

How gracious and how fair a sight,
When on that first glad Christmas night,
The lovely little Jesus lay
Upon His bed of fragrant hay,
Within a stable stall.
The light divine about His head,
And all around His manger bed
The soft-eyed cattle, and anear
His mother Mary, quick to hear
And mind His slightest call!

O might we be as quick to hear
And to respond to that Voice clear
As Mary was that stillly night
When shone the star of peace so bright,
To point the shepherds' way!
The light that shone about His head—
The light divine—might we be led
By some such radiance to see
The path our feet unerringly
In faith should walk to-day!
—Louella C. Poole.

Christmas Coming.

Christmas coming!
Pine tree, holly,
Mistletoe and laughter jolly!

Christmas coming!
Air a-tingle,
Snapping logs in cozy ingle!

Christmas coming!
Santa puffing,
Turkey—sage and onion stuffing!

Christmas coming!
Joy exuding,
Mince pie, pumpkin and plum pudding!

Christmas coming!
Love its heaven—
Peace on earth! Give thanks to heaven!
—Maurice Morris.

The Christmas Road.

Whenever snowflakes float and fall,
I do not think of city street,
Where purity immaculate
Becomes the prey of trampling feet;
Ah, then, I feel an impulse steal
Along the heart-strings to my soul,
My thoughts turn westward with the wind,
My heart leaps up to roam again
A country road—a Christmas road—
Where round the turn I'm home again!

God wants the Open for His art,
And all along my country road
He shows a white magnificence
Of marble frieze in Grecian mode;
Ah, does He know I want to go
Away from all this pushing crowd,
Where mother's light is leading me,
Is guiding me to roam again
A quiet road—a Christmas road—
Where round the turn I'm home again?
—Wm. L. Young.

My Hand in Thine.

When baby eyes in mother's eyes
Their heaven found;
When baby feet first followed hers
In joyful round;
When baby lips from hers did learn
My Name divine—
How tenderly my mother placed
My hand in Thine!
—Jessie Colby.

Filling the Christmas Stocking

For little children everywhere
A joyous season still we make;
We bring our precious gifts to them,
Even for the dear child Jesus' sake.
—Phoebe Cary.

Where there are children the Christmas stocking should never be forgotten. Nothing can take the place of it, for nothing else arouses quite so much speculation and pleasurable anticipation as what Santa Claus will put into that homely article.

The general distribution of gifts may well take place after breakfast is out of the way; but no child can be expected to wait very long for the "feel" of something old Santa has left. If all his gifts are given immediately on waking, excitement will run high, and dressing and breakfast will be gone through with great difficulty.

Also, a considerable quantity of candy and nuts will have vanished before the morning meal is served, and with them will have disappeared all signs of an appetite.

As a means of avoiding these conditions the Christmas stocking serves a good purpose. Carefully filled, it will satisfy the child's longing for "Christmas the first thing in the morning," will give him a taste of Christmas goodies without destroying his appetite for breakfast, and will leave sufficient expectancy concerning the other things coming so that he will readily submit to being properly bathed and dressed.

An orange for the toe of the stocking, some especially desired toy which will prove of untold interest, some article of dress in which he can "parade around," a handful of popcorn, a small box of animal crackers and a stick or cane of pure sugar candy should make a stocking sufficiently enticing to please any child. All the food it contains can be consumed without continual warnings of "Don't eat too much now," or "Better save the rest until after breakfast." The toy and the one other gift will hold the child's interest until every one is assembled for the big distribution, which need not be hurried.

Christmas Candlelight.

A group of girls settled closely round the fire were putting the finishing touches to the Christmas gifts that they were making. One girl who had brought no working spoke in answer to a question.

"Last year I made a new friend in the town where I spent the fall. When I left for home just before Christmas, Anne came to say good-bye and brought me a tall red candle lettered in gold with a Christmas blessing that she herself had written. Then she told me that it was an ancient custom to light a candle on Christmas Eve just before midnight, to say a prayer and to open the house door wide to welcome the Christ Child as He went through the world looking for open homes and hearts that were truly welcoming."

"At home on Christmas Eve the family assembled to light Anne's candle. We opened the hall door so that the light shone out into the starlight as we said our prayer in silence and waited for the church chimes to strike midnight. As the last stroke died away we wished one another a merry Christmas on the first moment of Christmas Day, and we felt as if that little ceremony shared by all had given us a sort of right and fresh mood about Christmas—which means in spirit, doesn't it, the most welcoming, warm-hearted day of the whole year? So for this Christmas I'm going to give everyone of you a red candle. I've put Anne's Christmas verse on each, and you'll know that I am giving you her idea for Christmas."

This stanza was lettered on the crimson candles that came on the day before Christmas:

As in the blessed Christ Child's name
This sacred wax shall feed the flame,
So let my heart its fires begin
And light the Heavenly Pilgrim in.