

# Christmas For Rent

By Mary Carolyn Davies



A studio is half-way between a room and an apartment. To live in a studio one need not necessarily be an artist; one need only have an income half-way between the income of room dwellers and apartment dwellers, as Theodora had at times.

At other times she had nothing at all. Her chosen profession involved cheques, also long intervals of chequelessness. She had just lived through an interval. And to-day had come a cheque.

It was a stupendous cheque; stupendous, that is, to Theodora, for it was the largest she had ever had. As she was looking with round eyes at her cheque, somebody knocked.

She sprang to turn the key in the lock, but she was too late. The intruder had already entered.

He shook the snow off his hat into her fireplace.

"I saw the sign on your door 'Busy. Keep out,' so I came in," he explained easily.

"Because you knew that you'd be bothering me," she cried wrathfully. "Because I knew no one else would be here," he corrected. "There are nine men and tea here, every time I get away from work and come to call. One never sees you alone!"

"Douglas, I'm busy."

"Being an advertising man, I'm used to dealing with busy people who don't want to see me. Have a chair, Theodora."

Douglas adjusted a weird Russian purple and blue sofa cushion behind his own curly head. "Your house is ever so much more hospitable than you," he grinned as he settled himself comfortably. "But what's that in your hand?"

"Oh, I'd forgotten! Look! A cheque!"

He looked. "Thank the fates! You've been getting thinner all fall until now you're cadaverous. It's time you were getting something substantial to eat. I hope, Theodora," he added sternly as if warned by some memory, "that you won't spend this one foolishly."

"But it's never any fun to spend money the other way!" she declared. "Fun!"

"Besides," she stood up defiantly, "I know exactly what I intend to spend part of this cheque on, and nothing is going to stop me!"

"Nevertheless—"

"You may as well stop there, Douglas. It won't do you any good. I never did like any sentence that began with 'nevertheless.' And besides, I've decided what I'm going to have! And I'll never tell!"

"Why not?"

"You'd say it was extravagant!"

"Is it?"

"I want it!"

"Look here, Theodora—" he swung an arm argumentatively.

Theodora explained a little further. "I'm going to spend it selfishly. Do you realize that two weeks from tomorrow's Christmas? And, Douglas—" she hesitated, looked fearfully around, and then confessed in a gush of confidence, "I'm afraid of Christmas!"

"Afraid of Christmas?"

"Yes, just plain afraid," she said. "Any other day of the year I can work and laugh and talk. Any other evening of the year I can go to the Little Dutch Inn, or to the Diet Kitchen, or to the Brown-Betty, or to half a dozen other restaurants on Yonge or Bloor streets—and be happy. But on Christmas I can't be happy anywhere! On Christmas I'm homesick!"

Douglas couldn't speak. "Poor little kid," he thought. "It's tough to be an orphan, but to have always been an orphan, and to have no relatives nearer than third cousins and the Pacific coast?"

"Isn't this your home?" he asked.

"This? This is a battle-ground where I daily fight off the invading host of callers, so that I can get a bit of work done! Whoever heard of a home in the city at Christmas? Christmas doesn't happen in cities anyway; only in the country!"

"But—"

"I've always been afraid of Christmas in Toronto. Christmas hurt me last year and the year before. It isn't

thoughts or consciences alone that can torture. Days can. That day did. So this year I'm afraid of Christmas, and for a shield I'm going to get myself a Christmas present!"

He leaned forward, all attention. "I'm perfectly grown up enough to waste my own money!"

"Well, get yourself whatever you want for Christmas, child. If this weather holds out the ice will be great by Christmas Day."

Theodora drew her typewriter on its footstool toward her. "Give the door a little slam as you go out," she said. "There's something wrong with the lock."

"The ice will be fine by Christmas," Douglas repeated.

"I'm sure it will," she answered, sweetly interested.

"Will you go skating with me?"

"No, thanks," she said absently. "Will you marry me?"

"No, thanks."

"Perseverance brings success," he quoted.

"Does it?" she was quite willing to be convinced, but at the same time faintly ironical.

He flushed, then laughed. "Well, it hasn't seemed so far," he admitted. "But, Theodora! I can't go on like this! Don't you care at all? I've been a crazy fool to even wish for it—but I've had dreams of your marrying me some day—"

"You promised not to speak of that again."

"I know. I'm sorry. I'll be careful."

Theodora noisily inserted a piece of paper and began typing. As far as she was concerned he had already descended all the flights of stairs and was far down the street. Still he lingered.

"Anyway, tell me what you're going to buy," he insisted.

"A selfish Christmas present. Something I've wanted every Christmas I've been in Toronto—and anyway, I'm not going to buy it, I'm going to rent it."

"Rent it?"

Theodora X'd out a word with her typewriter and wished him anywhere else.

"Tell me!"

She whirled on him. "If I do, will you go away?"

"Gracious and hospitable hostess, I promise. What are you going to do with that money?"

"I'm going to rent a mother!"

"Rent? A mother?"

"By the day."

He clutched at a chair for support. "Just over Christmas. A mother and a farm and memories and a real Christmas, the right things to eat—I don't know what they are. How can I, when I've been eating Christmas dinners in restaurants so long? But old ladies in the country know. And a gray-haired mother to eat them with, and snow outside the window!"

"But where under the sun are you going to get them?"

Theodora looked at him in scorn for his ignorance. "Advertise," said she. He burst into a shout of uncontrollably merry laughter.

She regarded him with cool dignity, then turned again to her typewriter.

"Are you going to advertise?"

"Well, it really isn't the right way to do, she admitted. "I ought to have only to choose. They ought to advertise! There are hundreds of lonely old ladies in the country at Christmas. One reads about them in stories! They know how to make cranberry sauce. They have snow outside their windows. They should hang out signs on their front porches. 'Christmas for Rent!' They should put that notice in the papers, anyway; but they don't." She looked immeasurably grieved.

"So you're looking for a 'Christmas for Rent'?"

He still hesitated about going. "Then I shan't see you Christmas Day at all?"

"No. Will you take my ad to some newspaper or other?"

Theodora, you slave driver! Yes, I will." Douglas still had his hat in hand but did not seem at all anxious to use it.

She waved her hand toward the door. "I've a lot to do before I go home for Christmas!"

And when he had gone, she locked the door. Douglas was always about when she wanted to work, anyway. It was really annoying.

For the next few days Theodora hardly left her room, except to scurry round the corner to eat. In fact, she had her meals at places where she knew the coffee and the tablecloth were execrable, simply in order that she might get back to her room sooner and go on reading the letters. Even the postman was interested in the quantity of them. But when the real one came, she knew it. There was no doubt, no weighing of two or three favorites. She would rent Mrs. Ferguson or no mother at all! She wrote her answer, clinching the matter and settling the little questions of hours, and mailed the letter.

though she did not consider it necessary to tell him that it had anything to do with her Christmas plans.

These last two weeks before Christmas were radiant ones. She found she was actually looking forward to Christmas. She could see people wearing holly without feeling a pang of envy for their happiness. She was happy, too. She smiled at children, she sang as she worked, until the people next door, on both sides of her, banged on the wall.

Her chief worry was uncertainty as to what she should buy her mother for Christmas. She read lists published in magazines, she asked the advice of clerks, she even read Christmas stories to see what fictitious daughters did about it. She had quite gotten over any feeling that she was a fictitious daughter herself.

In between times she wondered what her mother, with the stipulated sum she had set aside for that purpose would buy for her Christmas present. Perhaps she would buy her mittens and mufflers and good stout shoes. There was no telling. Theodora really didn't at all mind what the present was. The point was that it would be a secret, and secrets are so necessary to Christmas.

There was only one thing that she really wanted, anyway. Douglas was the only person who knew what it was, and as it wasn't flowers or books or candy, of course it didn't do him the least bit of good to know. What Theodora wanted was a wrist watch, an infinitesimally small, queer-shaped, gold one. She had seen just the very one in a jeweler's window on Yonge street when she had been window-shopping with Douglas, and had pointed it out to him.

As Christmas came excitingly near, whatever Theodora might be doing with her hands and eyes, her brain was busy every moment thinking of the Christmas day to be. At first, in her anticipations, it seemed perfect; but soon, to her dismay, she found that there was something lacking. It wasn't quite a complete Christmas after all, this one that she had conjured up. What could it be that it needed? Snow, a farmhouse, a mother, what else should Christmas have? Why, the most necessary thing of all, of course—children! Why hadn't she thought of that before? She seized a hat and wraps and went tearing down the stairs.

She left Yonge street and walked up to the "Ward." Now she was on familiar ground. She had once done social service work in this neighborhood. She expected to find dozens of children she knew.

The trouble was, she did! Almost as soon as she appeared, little brown-eyed, black-haired ragamuffins darted out from nowhere and flung their arms about her. "Teacher! Teacher!" the adoring cry went up. To these children every woman from "the outside" was a teacher.

"Children! I'm not a teacher! I've never been a teacher! Didn't I use to tell you that three times a day? Hello, Mary! Hello, Tony! And here's Angela! My, how the baby has grown!"

Theodora soon resembled the middle bee in a swarm, or the undermost man in a football scrimmage. Children were clinging to each arm, to her skirts.

By a judicious questioning she found out which ones were to go to a Sunday school or settlement Christmas tree, which ones might have some other bit of Christmas, and from the remainder she chose, as she had intended, the ten that seemed doomed to be the most Christmas-less.

She accompanied each of the ecstatic

ten home to get the parental consent to her borrowing. She knew the mothers of this district as well as she did the children; and all the mothers proved willing, even anxious, to lend their children to Theodora. Everything was arranged. They were to be ready promptly, and she was to call for them Christmas morning. She wrote Mrs. Ferguson to explain about the children and to say that the cheque would be enlarged commensurately.

Christmas morning! And such a morning! Sun and snow all a-sparkle! If it was so lovely in town, what would it be in the country? Theodora marshaled her children and led them to the station. It wasn't so hard to get them into the train as she had feared, for the older children instinctively took possession of the younger and dragged, pushed, pulled and carried them into their seats. As the train started Theodora looked at her charges.

"Have you ever been in a train before?" None of them had.

"Like it?" asked Theodora.

"Wait till we get into the country! You'll like that even better."

Her prophecy was correct. There was a farmer neighbor at the station with a sleigh to drive them to the farm. How the children reveled in the sleigh-bells and marveled at the smooth fields of snow, and at the horses, and at everything they saw!

As they neared their destination, Theodora realized that she was frightened. What if Mrs. Ferguson shouldn't like her?

"Here's the place," the farmer pointed his mittened hand and almost at the same instant they stopped.

All the children were out at once. Theodora marshaled them into line and advanced upon Mrs. Ferguson.

"Merry Christmas! Merry Christmas!" the children shrieked. They had been Merry Christmas-ing the conductor, the other passengers and every one they had seen all morning.

"Merry Christmas, grandma!" cried out the most remembering one. And the others took it up.

"Yes, I told them you were to be their grandma to-day and they could all call you 'grandma!' announced the personal conductor of the group. "I hope you don't mind?"

For a moment Mrs. Ferguson gazed in stern consternation at her swarthy-checked progeny; then she melted. Suddenly all the stiffness went out of her and she beamed upon the invaders.

"Mind? I'll love it!" she said. Something of Theodora's happy-go-lucky fellowship with the comers seemed to have enveloped her already.

"How are you, daughter?" Mrs. Ferguson kissed Theodora as naturally as if she had seen her before. "Did you have a good trip?"

"A splendid trip. And how well you're looking, mother! You've gained since I was home last, haven't you?"

She lowered her voice, "How am I doing it? All right?" They laughed as gleefully as two schoolgirl conspirators.

"Would you children like to have a snowman? Would you like to build forts and have a snowball fight here in the yard? They may, mayn't they? It's not noon yet." Theodora turned to her mother.

"Just the thing! It will take them off our hands and they'll have a fine time. I'll get an old coat and a stove-pipe hat for the snowman!"

"It's good of you to take so much trouble!"

"Trouble! For my grandchildren!"



CHRISTMAS is the great occasion when we are all supposed to renew our allegiance to the Christ, to put the Christ teaching of the brotherhood of man in practice. Christmas ought to be a great heart-mellowing, affection-quickening, friendship-renewing occasion. It is the time of all others when we should realize that we are all brothers; that we are all members of the same great human family, children of the same great Father-Mother-God. It is the time, if ever, when we should recognize that though oceans and continents divide us, though we speak different tongues, may differ in race, color and creed, yet we are so closely related in thought and motive that our deepest, most vital interests are identical.

There was no doubt about it, Mrs. Ferguson had a sense of humor.

"How glorious Christmas is," sighed Theodora. "Since I've been in the city, I've wished it came once in ten years. Now I wish it came every month!"

She wished it more than ever, as the two women in the kitchen did the immortal last things to the Christmas dinner, with all the tastings and adventures of holiday cooking. Theodora was wearing a big blue apron of Mrs. Ferguson's and felt like a real woman, she explained, instead of only a city one. "I told some of the neighbors about the children coming," Mrs. Ferguson confessed, "and they all were very much interested. Several of them begged to come to the tree this afternoon, but I wouldn't let any of them; except that I did think that we should have a Santa Claus, so I promised one of the neighbors that he might be that."

"Splendid! I'd forgotten about a Santa Claus!" This last had been under their breaths, as the last child filed into the dining-room.

"Such a dinner! And such a din!" as Theodora said.

Turkey and cranberry sauce and mince pie and pumpkin pie and apple pie, and "everything" as the backset-eyed grandchild put it.

The borrowed children were having a wonderful time, and after dinner the wonderfulness increased.

"What would you like to do now?" asked Theodora.

"Fairy stories!"

"Tell us fairy stories!"

"Tell us a story, teacher!"

Theodora pounced upon the luckless tenth that had said "teacher." "I'm not a teacher, honey!" she protested. "But I'll tell you, since we're pretending to-day, let's pretend—how would you like to play that you're all my nieces and nephews and that I'm your aunt? You see, you can call me 'Aunt Theodora.'"

"You don't look like my aunt," said one. "It isn't so fat with you." Public school had helped the races to mingle their idioms bewilderingly.

But the children accepted the idea avidly. Most of them kissed her, and they all tried the new term on their tongues, and found it sweet.

Theodora loved the feeling of being surrounded by relatives. She was surprised at herself for loving it. She had thought she was happy, being independent, being alone. But this day was doing something for her. It was making her over, or at least trying to. She was in a fright lest it succeed.

After the twelfth fairy story, the rented mother answered Theodora's glance. "I think we might have it now," she said. So they all trooped into the parlor, where a beaming Christmas tree caught their breath with its glitter and color and the mysteriousness of its pendant packages.

"Oh, Aunt Theodora!"

"Look, grandmother! A Christmas tree!"

"A Christmas tree!"

"Oh, and a doll!"

At this moment there was the sound of sleigh-bells. They came nearer, they seemed to be on the side verandah. There was a loud whoal and a snowy person in red leaped through the window grandmother had opened in order to look out a bit worriedly.

"I was afraid he wasn't coming," she confided to Theodora. "He is a little late. It's the neighbor I told you about."

"Santa Claus! Santa Claus!"

"Look! He's got a pack!"

"Oh, oh!"

Then the real climax of the day was upon them, and the ten were delirious with joy. Santa showered candy and apples and oranges on them, he cut the strings of the packages on the tree, and handed about the packages at the foot of it, and each child found himself a bewildered little Aladdin in a cave of treasures.

Theodora was so busy winding up toys that would wind, and admiring dolls to order, that she had no time for anything else. For the moment, she almost forgot to give Mrs. Ferguson the polar bear bathrobe she had bought for her. When she had presented it and been duly kissed she untied the package which Mrs. Ferguson pressed into her hand. When she saw what it contained, she almost cried out. It was a wrist watch of precisely the queer shape that she had yearned for! But she had no time to puzzle over this, for the children claimed her again.

By the time the hubbub was over, they all suddenly discovered that it was alarmingly late and the winter dusk was upon them, so it was decided to give the children a light supper of bread and butter at once before they set out for their train.

Theodora herself wasn't hungry. "You sit here and rest, then," com-

manded Mrs. Ferguson "while I give them their supper."

Theodora rather gladly sank down into one of the plush chairs in the now almost dust-captured parlor.

"Merry Christmas!" said a voice from the dim corner of the room, from behind the Christmas tree, it seemed.

"What—who is there?" Theodora half rose in startled amazement.

Out of the dusk stepped Santa Claus.

"Oh!" she was relieved. Only the neighbor—but what was the matter with her? Was she imagining things? His voice had sounded so like some one else's.

"Merry Christmas!" repeated Santa Claus, coming a step nearer.

"Merry Christmas!" answered Theodora, "and thank you." Then, "Douglas!" she shrieked, as the neighbor took off his mask; for under the mask she saw the familiar, teasing face.

"You're welcome—Theodora."

"How did you get here?"

"Same train you did. Smoking car. Watched you."

"But how did you know? I didn't tell you where Mrs. Ferguson lived. I didn't tell you anything. How—"

"Are you angry?"

"Yes, I am!"

"It's just as Mrs. Ferguson says. I'm her neighbor or used to be about twenty years ago. You never happened to ask for the latitude and longitude of the farm I used to tell you about, where I lived when I was a youngster. Come to the window and I can point it out to you. Mrs. Ferguson was our nearest neighbor and I knew she still lived here. I wrote her and sent her your ad. I dictated her letter to you."

"Oh!" There was no other word big enough to hold her wrath.

"Why? Wasn't it a good letter? Wasn't it effective?"

"It was the best of them all," she groaned.

"It was meant to be. I saw my chance and I took it. What's the use of spending years learning to write an ad if you can't write a winning one at a pinch? You had no right to refuse to entertain a lonesome person on Christmas. So I decided to make you do it anyway, and I did."

"I hope you're satisfied," snapped Theodora.

"Not quite," snapped Douglas.

It had never been like this before. In town Theodora had always felt so capable of living alone for the rest of her life. She liked to be free; she liked to be "sufficient unto Theodora," and to need no one, not even Douglas. But here, in this snow-nestled farmhouse, where she had felt the pull of home and dependence, and had known the sweetness of some things she had forgotten for the last few busy years—here, it was different.

"Theodora?"

"O, Douglas!"

His arms were about her, and she put her head down on his shoulder with as much the manner of the traditional clinging vine as if she had never owned a studio or seen a city street. It was a complete surrender, and Douglas knew that his siege of many months was over at last.

The snowy silence without was broken by the quick passing of some festive team. At the sound of the bells, Theodora, startled, remembered the day.

She raised her head from his shoulder. "It's over, Christmas! And it didn't hurt me at all! I'll never, never be afraid of Christmas again!"

And together they went happily out into the dining-room where the rented mother and the borrowed ten were still reveling in the high tide of Christmas.

"Oh, oh!"

A good magazine of a good book is a fine Christmas present for the young folks, as well as the grown-ups.

In making your Christmas caramels, it is well to remember that a pinch of yeast powder put into caramels after they have begun to boil will make them smoother and more creamy.

To give gifts which are so elaborate that one must economize for a whole year afterward in order to square with the world, is a close sight of the true spirit of Christmas. Gifts should be appraised on the basis of their spiritual, not their material, valuation. Not even the high cost of living can rob Christmas of its true spirit if one's heart is right. The best part of Christmas is not the gifts which are given, but the love which gives.

Give me the hearthstone  
with the glow that warms  
the soul within;  
I choose the gift of kindly  
smiles, that wealth can  
never win;  
The laugh that ripples to  
the lips from hearts  
where peace sublime  
Reigns in the fullness of  
content to bless the  
Christmas-time.

## Christmas Carol

It is easy, O my masters, to find the best of ways  
To please the Lord in using the holiest of days.

"No!" says the rich man, "I am filled with care.  
Sables for my wife—diamonds fine and rare?  
Pearls for my daughters, swift cars for my sons?  
I shall be mad from worrying before the great Eve runs!"

"Ah," says his brother, "I know the Gift He gave;  
I know that He redeemed me—I was once a slave:  
I wish I had a chance set with rubies red  
As the blood of pigeons, or sapphires for His Head."

But—oh—seek out the sad man to whom all inns are closed,  
Who knocked in vain at every door where honest folk reposed.  
Oh, cheer the widowed woman and dry the children's tears,  
And drive away for one whole year the wolf the orphan fears!

It is easy, O my masters, to find the best of ways  
To please the Lord in using the holiest of days.

—Maurice Francis Egan.

