

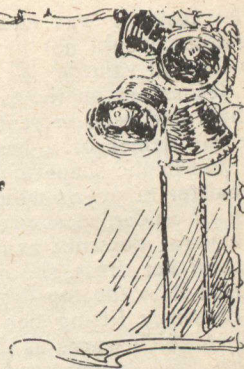


His Last Angel

A Story of Christmas Eve

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"**I** DECLARE!" exclaimed Miss Jane Hollowell, while her brows went up, as if they had a notion of running under cover of her loosely coiled hair. "Well, well! I do say!"

But instead of expressing what was in her mind, as she declared and said she would, Miss Jane simply sat back among the papers and books of her well-stocked study-table and stared. Backing up against the inside of her closed door stood a small boy. He might have turned the knob, but she had an uncanny feeling that he had come through the solid panels. He was as thin as a spirit.

On second inspection, however, the lady realized that many things about her visitor were very material. He wore the ragged, unravelled end of a toboggan-cap, drawn securely down over his head, and a tight, faded sweater-coat that enhanced the extreme slenderness of his figure. His hands were bare, while ugly, mis-shapen shoes, that scarcely clung to his feet, showed through gaping seams two rows of small, blue toes.

As one assured of his welcome, the child advanced into the room with a smile. Ah, it was his smile that had suggested spirits to Miss Jane! When his large, blue eyes lit up and his lips curved dreamily, his humanity became a threadbare cloak through which too much soul was visible.

Halting before Miss Hollowell's desk, with one hand resting confidently against its corner, he whisked off his ragged cap and commenced to sing:

"Christmas time has come again,
Christmas bells are ringing;
Let us join the holy songs
Angels now are singing.
Christ, the Lord, has come to earth,
Bringing peace to mortals,
God's great gift to men is given,
Heaven unbars its portals."

It was a startlingly sweet voice that glided away into the gloomiest corners of the big, silent room. There was a haunting appeal in its childish intonation, of which the guileless singer was entirely unconscious. He was so cold that it engaged all his powers to keep a tremor out of the notes. In places the tune went very high. He approached the note with a frown and an expression of dire anxiety, to be succeeded by a smile of triumph as he came safely sliding down the low notes with which the carol ended.

At the conclusion of the verse he had paused and eyed his audience dubiously. Receiving no rebuke, he essayed a second stanza.

"Raise the triumph loud and high,
Angels bending o'er us,
Heaven sings, let earth reply
To the exulting chorus.
Soon before our Father's face,
Tuneful praises bringing,
We shall walk in heavenly grace,
Ever gladly singing."

"It's Christmas eve," he ventured, as the song ended.

"So it is," responded Miss Jane, crisply.

"Don't you do anything special?" he asked.

Miss Jane's blue eyes looked keen and cold behind her rimless glasses.

"I wish you would go away, little boy. Don't you see I am very busy?"

He gave her a dubious inspection from under his drooping lashes. Gradually he appeared to grow more uncertain of his ground. The slender shoulders drooped in disappointment, and the eyes held mists of tears bravely forced back.

"I—I believe I came to the wrong place. You are not the one. I was looking for the lady who likes little boys and girls," he apologized.

MISS HALLOWELL listened to the uneven patter of his clumsily shod feet down the long hall of the big apartment building. Then she arose and closed the door.

"Singing for money, evidently," she remarked to

her desk, as she flung herself back to her work. "Something new for this town. A thing that should never be encouraged. It fosters the begging spirit."

The telephone at her elbow rang. A fashionable dame had called up to inquire whether it would be suitable to allow children to attend the meeting at which Miss Hollowell was to speak that evening. She declared through the instrument that her young people, along with all the children of the town, considered Miss Hollowell their own exclusive heroine, and that nothing affronted them more deeply than to be denied the privilege of hearing every word she had to say.

"The lady who likes little boys and girls!" Ah, the street urchin had made no mistake. It was so that Miss Hollowell had been featured in the city dailies ever since she had taken up the public playground work. She did love children. She did work for them. But an individual case—such as had confronted her a few minutes ago—well, she hardly had time to consider them. Her field was so very wide.

She dashed off a dozen words with her pen, immediately scratching them out.

"It's an odd thing," she muttered, in strong disgust, "that I cannot get my thoughts into shape once I have been disturbed. I might as well give up the attempt at making notes. It will come to me when I get on the platform, for I never was bothered with lack of something to say. I'll go and dress."

Miss Jane Hollowell occupied a suite of rooms in the Balmoral, a fashionable apartment building on a broad and beautiful avenue. In all she had taken five rooms, a large front office, and four elegant apartments in the rear for her personal use. Two doors opened into the public hall, one from the office, the other from the living-room. The

office was also connected with the living-rooms by an inner door.

This Christmas eve was a night of victory for Miss Hollowell. It marked the culmination of a very daring scheme, which for many months had been spurred forward by the point of her flame-tipped pen. There had been a covert disposition to sneer when Miss Hollowell announced in the drawing-rooms of the wealthy, where she was a spoiled favourite, that she intended taking up public work for poor children. But so cleverly had she turned the current of public thought, and so deeply stirred the consciences of her fellow-townsmen, that the most conservative critic was being forced to admit her influence in civic life. It was surely cause for self-gratulation to reflect how she had defeated those sapient sages on the city board, who, first, last, and always, had wet-blanketed her scheme. It was coming in as surely as the New Year. The next civic election would see the inauguration of the new system, because the people had declared in favour of more open spaces, more parks, more playgrounds, more pure air in the over-crowded districts of the city. Rich and poor were alike rising up and calling her blessed.

POPULAR praise was becoming a hashish to Miss Jane. It was with the dreamy complacency of one drugged by the sweetness of her own thoughts that she sauntered up to her dressing-table and surveyed herself in the polished depths of her mirror.

The elegant figure thrown back by the mirror's reflection was a fitting tenant for the sumptuous apartment. She had donned a gown of wine-coloured velvet, with rare old lace at the throat.



"He clasped his hands in an ecstasy of joy."