



HE knew, long before he turned the bend in the road, that she would be waiting for him. Indeed, he could not remember a single occasion since Jack Pennington had left with the first contingent, that she had not been standing beside the letter box, watching . . . watching with a look in her eyes which always impelled him to stop and chat with a kindly though exaggerated cheerfulness when he had no letters for her.

"Writin' to his other girl," he would say, winking heavily and knowing full well that the joke sounded hollow. No one could make a joke in view of those hungry, disappointed eyes.

Rural Mail Delivery Postman James Bolton—to explain him fully—had become better acquainted with Mrs. Pennington than with any other person on his very rural route. He had grown familiar with the changes of expression on her delicate, pale face; they reminded him of sunlight and shadow tipping a faded but still fragrant rose leaf. He learned to know before she told him, when Jack was having a rest behind the lines, and he could have anticipated her very words when he went back into the trenches. "My Jack," she always called him as though he were the only Jack in the world.

"The way she's wrapped up in that boy is—is well, it's kind of religious," Jim Bolton confided to his apple-cheeked wife. "I've thought considerable about the workin' of Providence since I've seen such a lot of Mrs. Pennington. It hardly seems right, now, if—if, well, hang me, you know what I mean—if anything should happen, and her a widow and all alone."

He passed his cup across the table and hesitated a moment before speaking his more intimate thoughts. "I used to feel a power of disappointment because I didn't have a son." He was conscious even without looking up that a cloud passed over his wife's face. "But I see things clearer, now. I couldn't have had one and kept him home, and, by heavens, Missus, I couldn't have sent him overseas, if it meant seein' that kind of a look in your eyes when I come home of an evenin'. So, as I drive along a-thinkin' of her, I sez most pious-like, I sez 'Thank God for the son that was never born to us' . . . A leetle more sugar, please!"

To observe that Mrs. Pennington loved her son, is foolish. Jack was all she had. She was wrapped up in him; she was wrapped all about him. He was his father reincarnated, so to speak, with the same endearing manner, the same sunny nature, the same irresistible ways. He was an abominable tease and had no respect for his mother's gray hairs; he would pick her up bodily in his great strong arms and carry her about the house, shouting lustily, "I love to see my dear old mother work!" And he was most inconsiderate, too. He would pretend to be so sound asleep that she would have to shake him well to rouse him, bending over him until the miniature of himself when he was a baby, which she always wore, would tickle him. Then with a terrifying whoop he would sit bolt upright in bed, seize his astounded mother and smother her startled cry with hugs and kisses.

"You should not frighten your mother, so, John," his aunt Matilda scolded. "You might give her heart disease."

But bless you, Mrs. Pennington's heart had too much healthy work to do to have disease, and she adored her Jack—But, try to describe a mother's love! It cannot be described; it can only be expressed.

Mrs. Pennington's did not centre itself in her boy. It was not like the ray of sunlight from a powerful magnifying lens which concentrates upon an object only to destroy it. It was diffused, rather, like the radiance from an enormous searchlight, which gathered an increasing number of people into its glow.

She knitted innumerable pairs of socks, but they were not all for her Jack. She sent pounds of cake and maple sugar and boxes of smokes to boys who had no mothers to think of them. Heaven knows



"He knew, long before he turned the bend in the road that she would be waiting for him with refreshment."

WITH THE HELP OF PANDORA

A Christmas Tale of War-Time Love and Happiness

By MADGE MACBETH

Illustrated by M. McLAREN

how many letters of courage she wrote to chaps in prison camps and how many letters she wrote (and they were full of courage too), to mothers who had no need to write themselves, any more!

Yes, she was always doing something for some one and

she never forgot Jim Bolton, either. On days when icicles clung to his horse's nostrils, he was sure to find her waiting with hot coffee in a Thermos bottle; on days when a merciless sun dried up the sponge in old Molly's bonnet before he had been half over the route, he could depend on a glass of buttermilk, cider, raspberry vinegar, or even cold water from the spring for man and beast. And when he protested, she would always reply:

"Oh, but you must not scold me for being selfish. I have to take care of you in my small way. Aren't you a link between me and my Jack?"

And in all her loving absorption, she never seemed to lose sight of the fact—incredible though it seemed—that other people had interests of their

own and these did not always concern that which was nearest her heart. She did not trust her Jack down people's throats. Indeed, she was almost timid about speaking of him and his achievements. One had to encourage her to make her talk.

Edna Jarvis, who, everybody knew, was wild about Jack Pennington, felt that she didn't talk enough, and she drew invidious comparison between her and other mothers who laid tiresome emphasis upon the activities of "MY" son.

"It's 'MY son's Colonel said thus and so,' and 'MY son's company got this or that,' she complained to Jim Bolton one morning. "You'd think the silly things had picked their own Colonel or ordered their own companies, wouldn't you?"

To which he heartily agreed. "Now Mrs. Pennington's different," Edna went on. "She says 'my Jack,' of course, but she says it as if it made her feel kinder toward all the other boys, and not as if Jack rose up and overshadowed them. And I think she ought to read some of his letters to the Red Cross or something—you just should hear them, Mr. Bolton, they are—epics!"

Jim Bolton did not know exactly what an epic was, but he had heard scraps from some of Jack Pennington's letters and agreed that they certainly were great.

THERE was one in particular which Mrs. Pennington read to him on a scorching July day more than a year ago, now, while he gratefully sipped a glass of sweet apple-cider.

"What do you think," she had asked after watching his first thirsty attack on the foaming glass, "Jack has joined the Flying Corps!"

"Flying—?" "Yes. He tells me all about it in the last letter you brought me." Her hand travelled pathetically to her pocket and her eyes asked an eager question.

"Well, well!" ejaculated Bolton. "I'm that surprised, I'm dumb. And what does the boy say, Mrs. Pennington? Does he like reeling about the sky in one of them crazy airship inventions?"

It seemed that he did, that he loved it. It seemed that he was sorry for any of the poor infantrymen, plodding along on sore feet and standing up to their knees in mud.

"This is the life," he wrote joyously. "I've been in training for some time and was so stupid about the blooming machine I was afraid to tell you for fear I wouldn't pass my tests. But now, I am able to state that I am a full-fledged observer, and I am entitled to wear two little white wings on my left breast as well as the two I have always worn on my shoulder blades under my coat!"

("God grant that they don't grow any bigger," murmured Jim Bolton to himself as she read.)

The letter explained with alternate bursts of jocularity and seriousness how

much safer he was than when in his old company. One began to doubt, while listening, that the Germans ever brought down an aeroplane, or if they did, one felt that somehow they missed messing up the observer.

"There were times, mother," Jack wrote, "when I had a fit of trembling under my coat on account of you, for it looked like a safe bet that your handsome son would remain over in these parts indefinitely and perhaps after many years bloom only as a rose bush. But now, good little plucky mother, I know I am going to get back to you. I know it in every atom of me. No matter what you may hear, you can bank on that—I'm coming home!"

"Well, well!" said Jim Bolton, stupidly again, when she had finished and challenged him with moist and shining eyes. "Well—seems as if a flying machine wasn't so substantial—that there were two or three different kinds of danger—though, of course—"

"Not at all," she contradicted with conviction. Jack had explained everything. She hadn't much exactly, but he put most of the accidents down to carelessness.

"And, as you know yourself, Mr. Bolton, my Jack was never the boy to be careless."

For more than a year Jack's care had evidently stood him in good stead and then Jim Bolton left the post office to make his twenty mile route with a letter marked O.H.M.S. It was franked from the Militia Department, and was addressed to Mrs. Pennington.

"Doggone his carelessness," he kept repeating to himself, looking out upon the golden fields where here and there women were taking in the hay.

"Doggone—but maybe he's just only wounded!" Slower and slower he drove. Emboldened by his abstraction Molly stopped altogether and browsed along the road side. A dinner horn roused Jim and he, in turn, roused Molly, wishing that the next bend in the road were miles behind him.

There! He knew it! She was not only waiting for him but actually walking down to meet him, carrying a bottle of something under her arm.

"Oh," she waved a welcoming hand, "I am so glad you are not ill! A heavy mail, I suppose . . . but you have never been so late, except at Christmas. Have you something for me?"

They had met. She looked up at him smiling and holding out a refreshing draught in exchange for letters.

"Yes, ma'am, I've got something here for you." He fumbled and kept his head bent low. "Much obliged to you, Mrs. Pennington, but I can't stop to drink anything this mornin'—I'm so doggone late a'ready. G'long, Molly, you lazy cuss!"

With one and the same motion, he flung the letter at her, and gave Molly a sharp blow with his whip. The faithful animal, stung to indignation, shuddered a single instant, then plunged forward with a suddenness which nearly unseated her driver. Bolton did not look back. He was conscious that a gentle "thank you" was borne along beside him as he raced, and then a merciful curve in the road hid her from his sight.

ANNE PENNINGTON turned the long, official-looking envelope over several times. It was so white and bare. So unlike the small, bulky letters which came from Jack—letters which bore a wealth of news even on the outside, dabbed all over with Censor's strips and field post marks. This hadn't even a stamp.

She stood so still that a venturesome wildbird, more curious than polite, perched on top of an overhanging branch and looked over her shoulder at that large O.H.M.S. on the envelope.

Anne Pennington drew a deep breath, passed her hand mechanically along her face, down over her throat and pressed it hard on her heart. Then she slowly tore the flap and pulled out a single sheet.

"We deeply regret to inform you"—the letters showed very clear and very black—"that John Pennington is reported killed in action August 20th, 1917."

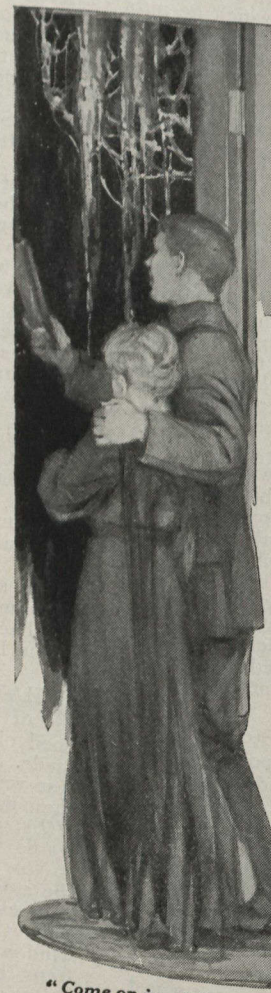
"Director of Records," "George Williams,"

She did not feel as though a blow had been struck her. She did not note that the fields of golden grain and the apple trees swam in a tangled blur. Everything

was exactly as it had been before she read the letter. A little more beautiful, perhaps. The big maple over against the fence

flaunted a great cluster of scarlet leaves among the green, and the bed of

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"Come on in, girls and boys! We're going to have an old-time Christmas party."