



By RENE MANSFIELD

He had seen them all leave the office, rather earlier than usual—Kinney, the manager with his wife on one arm and his small son tugging impatiently at the other; Murdoch laden with various awkward packages from one of which, through a break in the paper, a woolly lamb wagged a gleeful woolly tail; young Stimpson each pocket bulging with a neat box tied with gold cord, and O'Connor, grinning broadly above the big holly wreaths he had bought from the cripple boy who had peddled them through the building. O'Connor had stopped at his desk a moment.

"See here, Barton, why can't you come out to the house to dinner? Help us fix up the tree for the kids—the Madams would be delighted—"

He had cut him off almost sharply. "It's good of you, O'Connor. But I'm dining out this evening, thank you."

"Well, so long then, old fellow. A Merry Christmas to you!"

"Merry Christmas," he repeated politely.

He had heard O'Connor's big voice trumpet the same parting phrase to the elevator boy, and the boy's shrill, excited response came to him through the long hall.

"Merry Christmas, Mr. O'Connor. Thank you, sir. Merry Christmas to you. Merry Christmas!"

Then he was quite alone in the office. Indeed, there seemed to have been a general early exodus from the building, to swell the throngs of eleventh-hour shoppers, or of those hurrying homeward to holly-wreathed gaiety. Only the rumble of the streets far below reached him, which seemed somehow to be pitched in a different key than on other days, and the occasional faint echo of a "Merry Christmas," as the elevators passed up and down.

Barton closed the office doors and a window which had been slightly open and set himself to posting the ledger. This unnecessary labor finished he sought diligently through the files for an unimportant letter that had been misplaced. Then he sharpened all the pencils on his desk to miraculous points, and mechanically tore off the top leaf of his calendar pad.

"December 25th." There it was again. There was no getting away from it, no matter what one did. All day they had dinned it in his ears. Tomorrow would be Christmas Day. All the world would make a holiday—a holiday of family love and the thought of friends. And now it was Christmas Eve. Soon a million tiny candles would be twinkling on the glittering boughs of fir and pine trees. Soon small stockings would be hung from mantel shelf and bed post, and small persons tucked all unwillingly into bed.

To Hiram Barton Christmas meant none of these things. It meant a solitary dinner on Christmas Eve at Henry's, a cafe not of the first order, where he was in the habit of dining. It meant walking slowly to his room after dinner past brightly-lighted homes whose window wreaths seemed to grin at him mockingly; it meant walking on Christmas morning with only the desire to get the day over. The postman brought him no little gifts nor letters. Perhaps the landlady set a dish of fruit on his table. Perhaps she didn't.

Hiram Barton had no friends. It was not that he did not wish for friends,—it was that he did not know how to become a friend and that no one had ever had the patience to try to win his friendship. He was born incased in diffidence like a turtle in a shell. He had an unpleasant, frightened way of drawing back his head between his lean, stooped shoulders, at any friendly advances, so that no one ever noticed the glint of shy yearning in his pale eyes. Only once in his life had Hiram Barton asserted himself.

That was when the rose-color ambitions of youth had seethed to the surface and he had left the farm. But the braggart assurance of the city paralyzed him. He was not stupid, but he grew to underestimate himself because others did.

In five years he returned to the farm for the funeral of his parents. He had hoped to renew some of the barefoot friendships of his childhood. But neither had the old friends the time to pierce his shell of diffidence. So he returned again to the bookkeeper's desk in the city, a friendless man.

"December 25th." Barton crushed the sheet in his hand, and threw it into the waste basket. Then he put on his overcoat and closed up the office. He slipped an envelope containing a bill into the expectant hand of the elevator boy.

"Thank you, Mr. Barton. I wish you a Merry Christmas, sir," the boy said formally, with no trace of the easy camaraderie with which he had thanked O'Connor.

Out on the street in the good-natured, hurrying throngs Barton was like a withered bit of weed borne along on a riotous wave of joyousness. At the corner, where the crowd was dense, the spire of a small Christmas tree clutched in the arms of a big Irishman grazed his face and cocked his hat at an absurd angle. For a brief moment he had been drawn into the eddying spirit of the street. He straightened his hat and from habit drew back his head between his stooped shoulders.

"Loosen up, ye ould grouch! It's Christmas Eve! Ain't ye wise to ut?" remarked the Irishman, and strode on. He paused at a brilliant shop window. A woman with a shawl over her head and a child stood near him.

"Oh, ma, don't I wisht 'at O' Wiskers 'ud bring me a doll like that there one!" cried the child.

Barton reached into his pocket, and turned to the woman shyly. "If," he began.

"Come, Maggie, we must be gettin' home," said the woman taking the child's hand. And they passed on.

Barton took his usual seat at Henry's cafe at a table partially screened from view by a couple of dusty, artificial palms.

"Merry-Christmas-sir-soup?" inquired the waiter.

"Yes-and turkey-and-and-say, John, fix it up a little, will you—some holly or-or—"

"Yes, sir, I'll fix it up right for you," replied John, without enthusiasm.

Barton began almost to wish he had accepted O'Connor's invitation. But he knew that he would have been but a miserable spectator at a happy home festival. Too, O'Connor's boisterous efforts to put him at his ease troubled him.

Henry's was well filled. He hadn't thought it possible that so many should have no homes to dine in on Christmas Eve. He scanned the faces of the men and women at the tables about him. The men were for the most part flushed of face and loud of speech. Before them on the tables stood not only the bottles of cheap wine served with the table d'hôte, but siphons and bottles of whiskey to celebrate the occasion. Barton searched the place for the face of a woman whom he could imagine sitting up far into the night to dress a doll or fill a little stocking. There was not one among them.

Barton smiled grimly when the waiter brought in his turkey. At either end of the thick, white platter upon which rested thick, dark slices of meat, he had placed sparse little sprigs of holly, quite berry-less and with broken leaves.

"Thank you, John," said Barton, quietly.

As he was eating his desert he saw the nosegay woman come in with her

asket of flowers on her arm. She had been coming every night for a long time. Barton had scarcely ever looked at her although sometimes when she sought out his table he bought a little bouquet from her, and taking it home put it in his toothbrush mug where it brightened up his room a bit until the landlady dumped it out. Tonight there was something about the woman that held his gaze. Beneath her small, neat hat her brown hair rippled back to a tight knot at the back of her head. And her face was the face of a woman who would sit up far into the night to dress a doll or fill a stocking.

"O, that's all right," he said hastily. "This ain't no kind of a Christmas Eve, is it?" she added, her eyes sweeping the crowded room, and returning to the limp scraps of holly on the turkey platter.

"It sure ain't," agreed Barton.

"I don't like to stick around here," the woman went on, as though she might simply be thinking aloud. "But they ain't much to cheer a body in a cold little hall bedroom. Ought to be candles and fireplaces and children on Christmas Eve, oughtn't they?" She looked down into Barton's pale eyes.

"They sure ought," he said heartily.

"Ain't you got anything—anything like that?"

Barton wondered if she would seek

him out, behind the dusty palms. She passed his table without stopping, and he felt oddly disappointed. Then it may have been the dreary droop of his shoulders that she had noticed as she went by him, that brought her back. At any rate, she turned about and came back to lay a little nosegay on his table.

Barton's hand sought his pocket.

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"No, no, I have no family nor friends." He admitted simply to this kindly woman what had never passed his lips before.

"Me, neither," she replied. "Got no relations, and I ain't much of a hand to make friends. Kinda lonesome, times like this, ain't it?" She was covering over her basket carefully before going out into the frosty air.

It was then that all the loneliness of Hiram Barton's life seethed to the surface, as once before his youthful ambitions had done when he left the farm. All his longings for understanding, and a home and a mate had been lashed into an acute pain by the joys of the season around him. Perhaps it was the cheap wine that had made him a little giddy—perhaps it was the haze of cigar smoke that softened the plain features of Rose-Anna,—but it seemed to him that in her face was the fulfillment of these things.

"I wish," said Hiram Barton firmly, "I wish that you would marry me to-night. 'Twouldn't be so lonely—and we could have a Christmas."

Rose-Anna fingered the covering of her basket for a minute. Then she looked down into Barton's shy, anxious face.

"Perhaps I might," she said simply. The head waiter was ushering a man to the only seat left unoccupied in the cafe—the one opposite Barton, there behind the palms. Barton arose and put his coat on hurriedly.

"Come," he said softly to Rose-Anna. And together they went out into the festive street. Together they sought the office of the marriage license clerk. They picked their way through the throngs, speaking little to each other, although occasionally Barton seized the woman's arm as though he were afraid she was a wraith. Luck was with them. The clerk was at his desk, working late at some statistics he was preparing for the coming year. He made out a license for Hiram Barton, aged 42, not married before, and Anna Hagan, aged 43, also unmarried.

As, later, they stood on the steps of the home of the justice of the peace before entering, Barton took from Rose-Anna's basket that he still carried, the little nosegays that remained and tied them into one bouquet. From his pocket he took a bill and thrusting it awkwardly into the center of it handed the bouquet to Anna.

"For-for the bride," he stammered. "And-and you won't need the basket any more,—Anna," he added as he put it down in the corner of the porch. Rose-Anna had never dreamed that such chivalry existed.

After they were married they set out to buy a bit of Christmas cheer that should brighten up Barton's plain room. Gradually the constraint which had seized them both gave way to a delightful sense of companionship. Gradually the spirit of youth in them

was revived to meet the spirit of joy about them. Barton insisted upon buying a little Christmas tree and all the glittering appurtenances thereto. He hung holly wreaths on his arms, and stuffed his pockets with candles and nuts and little articles that Rose-Anna's eye had seemed to rest upon admiringly.

"I'd like to be buying you a surprise for to-morrow, Hiram," said Anna timidly, "if you'll just go and leave me for a minute."

"And I've just been wondering how I was going to get a surprise for you!" cried Barton excitedly. So they separated with great formality, to meet again soon in the great crowd of shoppers with unconcealed delight that their dream was not yet dissipated.

It was very late when they finished the decoration of Barton's room. They set up the Christmas tree on the table, with its ink-spotted spread, between the windows. They hung one wreath across the corner of the tarnished frame of the "Death of Lincoln." Anna put her bridal bouquet in the wash bowl in the hope that the wilted flowers might revive, and rearranged the furniture to her liking. The two surprise gifts they placed under the boughs of the little tree to await the light of Christmas Day.

Barton glanced about the transformed room that was eloquent of Christmas cheeriness. His wife's hat hung on a hook beside his,—her worn coat was thrown over the chair where he was wont to sit alone at night.

"It's home, Anna," he said brokenly. "Home, Hiram," she repeated thankfully. A clock some where in the house struck midnight. "And a Merry Christmas to you!"

"A Merry Christmas!" he echoed happily.



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