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The Gift of the Manger

By Edith Barnard Delano

CHRISTINE'S frail body bent slightly forward to meet the force of the gale. She kept her face lowered, shielded by her muff; yet now and again she raised it for an instant to glance upward at Norwood, with a bright flash of the eyes and a gleam of teeth. Invariably he met the look and warmed to it as to a flame, smiled back, or shook his head. To speak in the face of such a gale was all but impossible, yet once or twice she bent close enough to call in her sweet, high tones, "I love it! I adore it!"

It was at such times that he shook his head. He was keen enough for adventure, good sport enough to meet it half-way, to make the utmost of it when it came; but this—the snow, the early fall of night, the upward climb over roads tantalizingly but half remembered—this was more than he had counted upon, and, truly, more than he wanted. He was beginning to wonder whether, even for Christine's sake, the journey were a wise one.

They had planned, weeks earlier, to take the noon train as far as River Junction, where his father, with the pair of sturdy grays, was to meet them for the eight-mile drive to the old home farm over the hills. But young doctors cannot always keep their best-laid plans, and Christine had waited in vain at the station while Norwood officiated at an entrance into the world and an exit therefrom—the individuals most concerned in both instances taking their own time. Christine, waiting beside the suit-cases, boxes, and parcels, whose number and variety of shapes unmistakably proclaimed Christmas gifts, had watched the express pull out of the station. Then, with a dull pounding at her temples and a barely controlled choking in her throat, she had gathered up the Christmas impedimenta and gone home. Norwood found her there an hour later, still dressed as for the journey, and sobbing wildly in a heap at the foot of the bed—his Christine, to whose courage during the past ten months his very soul had done homage many a time.

"I cannot bear it! I cannot bear it!" she had sobbed out at last, when the tenderness of his arms had begun to soothe her outburst of grief. "To be with your father and mother, to make Christmas for the poor old darlings, to work and keep busy all day—that was bad enough; but I could have done that—"

"I know dear, I know," he said, holding her firmly, his professional sense alive to every pulse in the racked body.

"But to stay here, where Teddy was last year—I cannot, I cannot!"

"Christine!" he besought her.

"Oh, Ned, I have seen him watch me tie up every parcel—I have heard him on the stairs—I have caught myself wondering which toys he would wish for this Christmas—and he isn't here! I cannot bear it! I cannot stay here without him! I want my boy, my little boy—my baby! It is Christmas eve—and I want my boy!"

And this was his Christine who, during the ten months since the child had died, had faced the world and her husband with her head held high, with a smile on her lips and courage in the clasp of her hand! Not once before to-day had he heard her cry out in grief or rebellion—his Christine!

"Then we will not stay here," he said. "We will go to the farm whether we have missed the train or not! We will go to the end of the world, or beyond it, if that will help!"

"Ned! What do you mean?" she cried, drawing back from his clasp to look up into his face.

"It is only a matter of sixty miles or so, and it isn't yet two o'clock; we can make it with the big car!"

She sprang to her feet with a choking laugh, her hands on her throat, her eyes shining like stars of hope.

"Hurry!" she cried; and in scarcely half an hour they were on their way, the multitude of the Christmas bundles tumbled, helter-skelter, into the tonneau, she fur-clad and glowing beside him.

The big "sixty" stood up to its task, and the first part of the journey was as nothing. It had been one of those winters when autumn prolongs itself into December, when people begin to talk of a green Christmas, and the youngsters feel almost hopeless about sleds and skates; but to-day, Christmas eve, the children's hopes had revived; a sudden drop in temperature, a leaden sky, an unwonted briskness among the sparrows—it might not be a green Christmas after all.

That was one of the little things that Christine talked about along the way; and when the first few flakes of snow came wavering down she held out her muff, as if trying to catch them all, and laughed.

"Oh, see, Ned! We'll snowball each other to-morrow!"

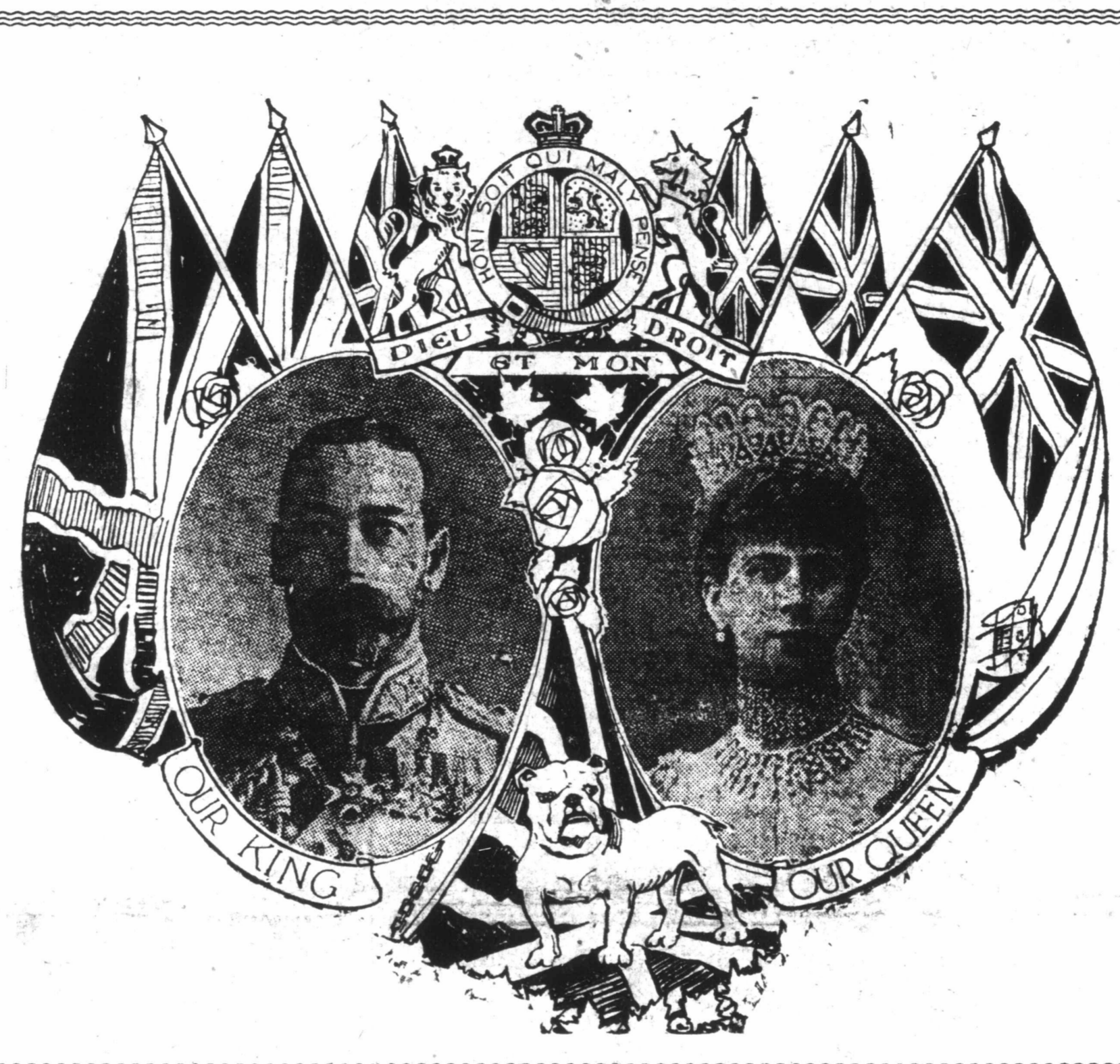
But he had replied, "Let's hope that we shall have to postpone the snow-balling until we get to the farm, anyway. By Jove! I had forgotten how steep these roads were!"

"Don't you remember them?" she asked. "Have you forgotten your way?"

He got the teasing note in her tone. "That's all right," he said, "but it has been many years since I came this way; and roadsides have a way of changing, even in Vermont; and with this storm coming along worse every minute, I am not anxious to negotiate them by dark."

"Fraid cat," she laughed, and then cried: "Oh, see! The snow is coming! It's coming, coming, coming!"

It had come, indeed, on the wings of a quick, wild gust; its particles cut like bits of ice, and presently flew in swirling eddies beside the car and in front of it, and, for all their speed, built itself into little



drifts wherever a curve or crevice or corner made a possible lodging-place. It pierced their barrier of windshield and curtains, and heaped itself on their fur wrappings, until swept away again by a new fierce breath of the storm. Then it was that Christine's cheeks flamed; but she bent forward to meet the force of the wind, and now and again turned to call up to Norwood that she loved it.

Night fell almost with the swiftness of a stage curtain, blotting out the distant hills, the pastures, the fields, and scattered houses; blotting out at last even the roadsides, its blackness emphasized by the ever-swirling, steadily descending snow. Once or twice Norwood stopped the car and got out to reconnoiter. Christine felt his uneasiness by means of that sixth sense of wifehood; yet all the while, by another of wifehood's endowments, she rested secure, serene in the feeling that all was well and must continue well with her man at the wheel; while side by side with his own feeling of uneasiness, Norwood was proud of his wife's courageous serenity, unaware in his masculine simplicity that her courage had its fount of being in himself.

Nobly the big car responded to their demand upon it, yet they had gone not more than a few miles beyond the last recognized sign-post when it began to show symptoms of reluctance, of distress. Norwood muttered under his breath, and once more Christine turned a laughing face toward him.

Christmas Fancies

WHEN Christmas bells are swinging above the fields of snow,
We hear sweet voices ringing from lands of long ago,
And etched on vacant faces
Are half forgotten faces
Of friends we used to cherish, and loves we used to know—
When Christmas bells are swinging above the fields of snow.

Uprising from the ocean of the present surging near,
We see, with strange emotion that is not free from fear,
That continent Elysian
Long vanished from our vision,
Youth's lovely lost Atlantis, so mourned for and so dear,
Uprising from the ocean of the present surging near.

When gloomy gray December are roused to Christmas mirth,
The dullest life remembers there once was joy on earth,
And draws from youth's recesses
Some memory it possesses,
And, gazing through the lens of time, exaggerates its worth,
When gloomy gray December is roused to Christmas mirth,
When hanging up the holly or mistletoe, I wis.

For life was made for loving, and love alone repays,
As passing years are proving, for all of Time's sad ways,
There lies a sting in pleasure,
And fame gives shallow measure,
And wealth is but a phantom that mocks the restless days,
For life was made for loving, and only lovings pays.

When Christmas bells are pelting the air with silver chimes,
And silences are melting to soft, melodious rhymes,
Let Love, the world's beginning,
End fear and hate and sinning,
Let Love, the God Eternal, be worshipped in all climes,
When Christmas bells are pelting the air with silver chimes.

—Ella Wheeler Wilcox, in "Poems of Power."

"It's a real adventure," she cried. "I do believe you are lost!" Norwood's answering laugh held no merriment. "You are not so bad at guessing," he remarked, dryly. "Suppose you try to guess the way!"

Her keen eyes were peering forward through the veil of snow. "Here we come! I think I see a house ahead of us," she said. "We can ask our way of the people who live there."

"They won't know," said Norwood, with a man's pessimism. "Probably foreigners. Half the old places around here are bought up by people who can't speak English and don't know anything when they can."

"Oh, you just don't want to ask questions," said Christine. "Men always hate to! I never can see why!"

The day had held many things for him; now his nerves were beginning to jump. "All right, we'll ask," he said, shortly.

The car, in its inanimate way, seemed glad enough to stop. "I will run in and ask," said Christine, and Norwood was already busy over some of the mysterious attentions men love to bestow upon their engines.

"All right," he said, without raising his head.

But in a moment she was back. "It isn't a house, Ned! It's only a barn!"

Still bent over his engine, he replied: "House probably across the road. They often fix them that way up here."

But in another moment or two she was calling to him, above the voice of the gale: "Ned! Ned! There has been a fire! It must have been quite lately, for the snow melts as it falls on the place where the house was! How horrible to think of those poor people, burned out just before Christmas."

At that he stood up. "Burned out, is it? They may be camping in the barn. We'll see if we can't rout them out."

He went back a step or two and reached over to his horn, sending forth one honking, raucous blast after another. "That ought to fetch them," he said.

There was, indeed, an answering sound from the barn—trampling of hoofs, the suffering call of an unmilked cow. Christine went toward the denser blackness which was the door.

"Hoo-hoo!" she cried. "Is any one here?"

She held a little pocket flash-light in her hand, and threw its light here and there through the interior darkness. Norwood, still busy with his engine, was not aware when she went within; he was busy with mind and fingers. But all at once he sprang into a fuller activity—the activity of the man who hears the one cry that would recall him from another world: his wife had called to him, had cried aloud a wordless message which held wonder and fear, bewilderment, and—a note of joy?

He ran around the car into the open doorway of the barn. The air of the vast space within was redolent with the scent of stored hay, the warm, sweet breath of beasts, the ghost of past summers, the promised satisfaction of many a meal-time. He could hear the movement of the animals in the stalls; the roof of the barn arched far above in cavellike darkness; in a quick flash of memory there came to him the story of another cage where patient beasts were stabled; and this was Christmas eve . . .

Far back in the gloom there shone a tiny light. He was curiously breathless. "Christine!" he called, a quick, foolish fear clutching at his heart, "Christine!"

She answered with another wordless call that was partly an exclamation of wonder, partly a crooning. Blundering forward, he could see the dim outline of a form—Christine's form—kneeling in the dimness that was sparsely lighted by the pocket-light which she had dropped on the floor beside her. It was scarcely more than the space of a breath before he was at her side, yet in that space there had arisen another cry—a cry which he, the doctor, had also heard many times before. He felt as though he were living in a dream—but a dream as old as time. "Ned, it's a baby! Look! Here, alone, in the manger!"

It was, truly, a manger beside which she knelt; and she held gathered closely in her arms a child which was now crying lustily. Norwood spoke, she answered, and together they bent over the little form. It had been wrapped in an old quilt; it was dressed in a queer little dress of brilliant pink, with strange, dark woolen undertakings the like of which Christine had never seen before. Its cradle had been warm and safe, for all the gale without, and it had slept there peacefully in the manger until the honking horn and this strange woman had brought it back to a world of very cruel hunger.

Norwood laughed aloud as its little waving, seeking fists closed on one of his fingers. "Good healthy youngster," he said; "three or four months old, I should say." Then he added, "Hey, old man, where are your folks?"

At that Christine held the baby more closely to her breast. "Oh, I suppose it does belong to some one," she said. "But, oh, Ned, I found it! Here in the manger—like the Christ-child! It seemed to me that I found something I had lost, something of my own!"

Norwood felt the danger of this sort of talk, as he mentally termed it, and hastened to interrupt. "Sure you found it?" he said. "That's just what the baby is trying to tell you, among other things. He cries as if he were starved. Can't you keep him quiet? Lord, how it yells!"

But Christine had sprung to her feet with the baby still held closely to her in all its strange wrappings. She was starting into the blackness of the barn. There must have been a new sound, for Norwood also turned quickly. (Continued on page 2.)