



could scarcely bear even to talk of Christmas, and yet now he had returned with a cab full of Christmas things.

"Oh, what a turkey!" she exclaimed; "and such a lot of parcels! Why, Jim—Jim dear!"

"Take Dolly out of the draught," said Rutledge. "I'll pay the cabby and be with you in a minute, Jess."

He kissed her almost roughly. She went into the house with her little girl. A minute or two later Rutledge entered the room.

"Well, Jess," he said, "now begins our Christmas fun. Give us a big hug, Dolly mine."

"Has oo bwort Santa Claus wiv oo, daddy?" asked the little one.

"Yes, that's about it," said Rutledge. He laughed, to all appearance, quite heartily.

"Jim darling," said Jessica, when later on they sat at dinner, Dolly having been tucked cosily in her little cot upstairs. "Do tell me what has happened. You're a totally different man from what you were when you went out this morning."

"I was bothered with having to make up my mind on a certain subject. I have done it now, and I'm as right as rain. We'll have a jolly Christmas, you and I and the kiddie."

"'Tis nice to see you so happy," said the young wife, taking her husband's hand and pressing it against her lips.

"We must fill Dolly's stocking," Rutledge suddenly exclaimed. "I'll bring in the parcels, and you can fetch the biggest stocking you can find."

Jessica ran gaily out of the room. She glanced for a minute at the child who, in all her wonderful beauty, flushed with sleep, her dark lashes lying against her rosy cheeks, her golden hair tumbling about her head, lay like a little princess in a fairy dreamland.

"God is good!" thought the poor mother to herself. "After all, what does poverty matter if Jim is happy once more, and Dolly and Jim and I are together?"

Meanwhile Rutledge sat with his face buried in his hands. His heart was beating like a sledgehammer. He had given himself a task almost impossible to perform. Nevertheless, when Jessica's quiet step was heard on the stairs, she only saw a reflection of apparent happiness on her husband's face.

"Here's the stocking!" she cried, excitedly. "And I've been to peep at Dolly, and I never, never saw her look so lovely."

The stocking was filled with innumerable small gifts until it could hold no more. "Now I'll take it up and fasten it to the foot of her bedstead," said Mrs. Rutledge. "What fun we are having!" Her cheeks were blazing with colour. She looked as young as on the day when Jim had married her.

The next day Dolly was beside herself with delight over the contents of her stocking. She looked as charming as he had anticipated in her fluffy white coat and little hood to match. The sun shone brightly, and the Rutledges spent most of the day in the country. They came back in time for dinner in the evening. Dolly was to sit up for this famous Christmas dinner. There was not a hitch anywhere.

The glorious day came to an end. Rutledge felt really happy. He had managed, by a superhuman effort, to cast away the thought of Boxing Day. Mrs. Rutledge's face glowed with happiness.

"I suppose you'll take us into the country again to-day, won't you, dear?" she said to her husband the next morning. "It would be such a pity to waste our holiday."

"I can take you anywhere you like, Jess, after one o'clock."

"Oh, but what a pity to put it off so late."

"I am sorry, but I have a little business to transact with Sachs. I have to see him at his office at twelve o'clock."

"Oh, well," she replied, "Dolly and I will be ready for you at one o'clock."

The man's heart seemed to stand still for a minute, but Jessica noticed nothing.

"As you are going to be busy this morning, darling," she went on, after a pause, "I will go and see Mrs. Chesterton. She is ill, and I may be able to cheer her up a bit."

Rutledge could hardly suppress a sigh of intense relief. This was the very thing to enable him to

carry out his design without acquainting his wife, or having terrible trouble, as he expressed it, beforehand. If the horrible thing had to be done, it must be done thoroughly. She would suffer, of course she would suffer, but at least the blow would fall before she knew anything about it.

"Shall I take Dolly with me?" she said.

"No, Jess. Leave her with me."

"You're so wrapped up in her, and no wonder, bless her!" said the wife.

Soon after eleven o'clock she went out, singing a song of thanks to God for His goodness. When she had gone Dolly clambered on her father's knee, nestled up in his arms, and chattered away merrily.

"I can't do it!" Rutledge said to himself as he looked at her. "She is worth twenty times five thousand pounds. And yet—and yet—Oh, this will break my heart! And yet—I must do it!"

"Mother has gone out," he said, suddenly, bracing himself up with a mighty effort. "Come upstairs with me; we'll put on your pretty things and go out for a walk too."

"My Kismas Santa Claus sings?" she asked.

"Yes, your Christmas Santa Claus things."

So arrayed, all in white, Dolly and Rutledge left the house.

They very soon reached Sachs's office. Dolly was not in the least a shy child, and when she entered the great business room, holding her father's hand, her dark eyes smiled, and her radiant golden curls were tossed about her face.

"Here, let's have done with the thing," said Rutledge, in a harsh tone.

He tried to unclasp his hand from Dolly's, without looking at her. Sachs got up quickly.

"That is all right," he said. "We will do our best, our very best, for the little one; and here's your receipt in full." He handed the man a paper as he spoke.

"There, now you are free—free as the air," said Sachs. "You don't owe anything else, do you?"

"Nothing else."

"Well, here's a hundred pounds for yourself, and—I have you in my eye—there'll be a vacancy soon in my office, and I'll put you into it. You're a brave man, Rutledge, and, though you may think me a brute, a fellow in my position will do more than this to save a woman's reason."

"I can't take that money," said Rutledge. "I'll manage. You will—you will give me the berth if you can? I—I'd like to be in London—if—if she is there. I don't want to say any more. Let me slip out."

Dolly's back was turned. She was intently examining something in a glass case. "See, farzer, see!" she cried. "Oo look—"

Rutledge heard, but made no reply. The door slammed behind him. He rushed downstairs, feeling like a madman. He had parted with Dolly; he had sold her for five thousand pounds. He was free now, and could begin the world over again. But for that horrible, most horrible aching in his heart, he ought to be almost happy.

He walked very fast. By-and-bye, he came to a telegraph office. He went in, and sent a wire to his wife: "Dolly and I all right, but can't be home at one o'clock." This wire, which Jessica received on her return from her neighbour's, puzzled her a great deal. She was not alarmed, however. Her nature was really one of absolute trust. But she was a little disappointed, for Jim had been so delightful, and yesterday had been so happy. But she would not waste her time. She went to the nursery, and put all Dolly's little nightclothes in order. Then she went downstairs to lunch. She found, however, that her appetite was gone, and scarcely touched the food. Tea-time arrived, and still she could not eat. It was just about then that Rutledge's latch-key was heard in the door.

"Ah, they've come!" thought the mother. "Now I shall be at rest. I can't imagine why I've had such a queer feeling over me; but he oughtn't to have kept the precious darling out so long, for the weather

is cold, although sunny." She ran into the hall.

"Jim dearest—here you are! And—why, where's Dolly?"

"I'll tell you in a minute," said Rutledge.

His voice was harsh. Jessica took his arm and dragged him into the dining-room.

"Where's Dolly?" she demanded.

"You must pluck up your spirit, Jessica. I have something to show you."

"I don't want to see anything except Dolly. Where is she?"

"You must look at this; you know how it has harassed me."

She stood perfectly still, her hands by her sides. Rutledge took the receipt for five thousand pounds from his pocket, opened it out, and laid it on the table.

"See," he said, "I have often told you that Sachs was the man I dreaded most on earth—that he could ruin me at any time. Of late I haven't been able even to pay interest on the money I owe him, and he became troublesome a little time ago; and don't you remember, don't you recall Mrs. Sachs coming to see us in the summer?"

"Yes, yes," said Mrs. Rutledge, "and Dolly sat on her knee, and Mrs. Sachs bent over her and cried. But where is Dolly? I don't care about that paper—where is my child?"

"Well, this debt is off my mind," said Rutledge, "and Sachs is to be my good friend in future. I have practically got a berth in his office in town. A berth in that office will make me—Oh, Jess!"

"What is it, dear? What is it, darling? I wish you would speak out. You terrify me by your look and—your words."

"I know you'll take it hard for a bit; but perhaps God will some day give us others—and—there was no way out. Mrs. Sachs wanted her—and—she is the price of that." He touched the bit of paper.

"You have—sold her?" said Jessica.

"Yes, that is it; I have."

"You have done this—and for—just for money!"

"Heaven help me; I can't explain. If you would but look in my heart, you'd know that I am nearly wild. But I couldn't face ruin for her and for you; I could not face bankruptcy. We'd have had nothing. We'd have had to go to the workhouse. There was no help for it, Jess."

"No help for it!" she said. "You have—sold her!"

She stood very still for a minute. He had sunk into a chair, and was watching her face. Her face was white, as though it had turned to marble. Then, without taking the slightest notice of him, she took up the piece of paper which represented the price of Dolly and went up to her room. She did not hesitate for a single moment. Dolly was her's as much as she was Jim's. She slipped the receipt for five thousand pounds into her purse, put on her shabby clothes, and went downstairs.

She never went near her husband; she hardly thought of him at this moment. As to the man himself, he was seated doubled up with pain, his eyes fixed on the glowing fire.

"I wish I hadn't done it," he said once or twice to himself. "If a man can't—*can't* do without five thousand pounds for the sake of a little creature like that, he isn't a man at all."

He was so dumb with misery that he felt quite stupefied. He heard the hall door shut as his wife went out, but he did not notice it, nor did he observe that the precious receipt, the price of Dolly, had vanished from the table. For a long time he sat thus; then he put on his hat and went out.

Meantime, Jessica found herself at the mansion where Mr. Sachs, the millionaire, lived. She felt a slight return of warmth coming into her heart as she reached the house. She rang the bell. A footman, with powdered hair and in full livery, opened the door.

"Will you kindly pay for that hansom?" she said, in a voice of such indifference that the man obeyed her without any hesitation. "I have come here to see—ah! there is Mr. Sachs!" she said. "That is all right. Thank you."

She sprang past the footman. Sachs was crossing the hall. He did not recognise Jessica, and supposed she was a friend of his wife's; but his wife was busy just now trying, vainly trying, to stop the ceaseless tears of a little child.

"I want to speak to you," said Jessica.

"Yes; what do you want?"

