

The Spirit of Christmas

by Robert Stead

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THE Widow Stately's home lay in a nook in the foothills where the sun in mornings came blazing up from the east. At noon he poured down gently among the evergreens that clothed the hillsides of her little farm, and in the evenings, before time for sunset on the plains below, he faded out in yellow splendor over stark white peaks that guarded the widow's valley from the west.

The Widow Stately had been a widow even when she came into that little nook in the foothills with her son Frank, then a sturdy lad of fourteen or thereabouts. Here they had "dug in" with their little herd of heifers, and Frank had plowed the valley field for oats and potatoes, and, with the help of a carpenter, they had built the house of spruce logs where a mountain stream gurgled lullabies in the still nights.

At the end of six years they were on their feet. The fields had extended; the herd had grown; the cream cans went down to town three times a week; there was new furniture in the log house and a lilt of song in the widow's heart. But one new pang was hers; mother-love could not quite stifle the pang when her handsome Frank rode out with the yellow-haired Allison girl from south of the ridge.

At the end of that same six years came the War. And now the Widow Stately is doubly a widow, and the Allison girl is old before her time.

Down the valley a mile or more live the Freedmans. And Freddie Freedman, at fourteen, unhappily runs to mischief, as the sparks fly upward. Was it not Freddie who left the Stately gates open at Hallowe'en? Was it not Freddie who unbolted the reach in the widow's wagon? Who but Freddie transposed the front and rear wheels of her buckboard? Who but Freddie shot the wild geese which she was taming, and drank cream in her dairy when she had gone to town?

And to-night, as a blanket of Christmas snow carpets the foothills and the valley, the widow returns from town with her melancholy parcels for Christmas cheer. To-night will the log fire burn on her hearth and strange visions wax and wane in its embers; visions of the First Frank and the Second Frank, and a nightmare of horror Over There. The fire will die out, and Christmas will creep in, wan and cheerless and alone.

But as she drives up to the log house she sees a sturdy young figure at work in the woodshed, and—can she be dreaming?—the spruce logs at the end of the house have been cut and piled for the winter's burning. And the sturdy young figure comes out and takes her horses by the head.

"Let me put your team away while you go in and warm yourself, Mrs. Stately," said a voice. "See, I have started a fire for you."

So like Frank it seemed that she dared not break the spell. Without a word she sank in her rocker, while the tongues of flame from the spruce logs leapt up laughing, curling, fondling, at her feet.

But he was so long in coming that at length she went to the door. The sturdy figure was just disappearing down the road in the grey cloud of night.

"Who are you? Who are you?" she called after him.

"I am the Spirit of Christmas," he answered.

And then she knew his voice. "You're not!" she laughed. "You're Freddie Freedman!"



Friend Husband had had a busy day at the office. And Friend Wife had moped all day at home.

It seemed to Friend Wife that her husband took business demands upon his time altogether too complacently. That is, if they were business demands. For a time after they were married he was always home before six; now he was frequently late. And he didn't seem properly distressed over it. That was what worried her most.

So Friend Wife learned to mope a little, and to complain a little, and to wonder a good deal. And the more she moped and complained the less did Friend Husband hurry from the office. The office had become his retreat.

Moreover, there was the Party of the Third Part. Friend Wife had never seen the Party of the Third Part, but she could not doubt her existence. For a year back her husband had forgotten to kiss her when he went to the office, and when he came home. And on those rare nights when he stayed at home he read the newspaper, and yawned, and found the time heavy on his hands. So you see there must be a Party of the Third Part.

This fear gripped the little woman so deeply that one night she determined she would know the worst. Her husband had not come home to dinner; he had telephoned that he was very busy in the office. He would just slip out and have a bite. And he would likely be late—don't sit up . . . She would know the truth!

So she put on a long cloak, and a veil affair that she could draw over her face, and she went straight to his office in time to intercept him before he left for his appointment. A light shone through the frosted doors, but all inside was silent as the tomb.

"He has gone already!" she exclaimed to herself. Then she gently tried the door. It opened to her hand. Her eyes swept a vista of deserted desks. How forlorn and irksome they looked! But everyone was gone. NO! There at the end sat an oldish man. It was her husband! It had never struck her before that her husband was beginning to be an oldish man. He had not heard her. He was intent upon a statement with a long column of figures, and he was making calculations on a pad of paper before him.

From where she stood she could see the grey tinge about his temples, and the thinning hair on the top of his head. His brow was set in deep furrows. And suddenly Friend Wife found herself swallowing desperately at something in her throat. Suddenly she knew that there was no Party of the Third Part, and never had been a Party of the Third Part, and that she was a foolish, wicked woman.

She drew the door shut, gently and guiltily. In the basement of the building was a restaurant, where also was a waiter, who, for a consideration, would carry a meal to her husband's office. Quickly she gave the order, for two; it was to be a modest meal, not too expensive, but healthful, and garnished with love.

The waiter carried it in and set it down on the little correspondence table beside Friend Husband's desk. And a Beautiful Woman sat down beside it, and held out her hands to the troubled man with the long column of figures, and smiled.

"Who are you? Who are you?" he demanded.

"I am the Spirit of Christmas," she said.

"You are more than that!" he cried. "You are my wife . . . my . . . my love!"