

Let's hope you never knew it—may not know it now."

Then Dr. Weatherly went. Michael stirred in his sleep as his mother leaned over him and kissed his pale lips.

"Bethlehem—and he got growled up—and cured folks—" but Michael did not waken, or if he did, gave no sign.

"Talking in his sleep. What did he say, Striker? Did you hear him?"

Striker returned from outside the door where he had stood at call when the mother entered the room. "Yes'm, Mrs. Decatur, I heard him. He said Bethlehem, and how—"

"I won't have that nurse filling his mind with religious notions. It's not good for children."

"She only read from the Bible, Mrs. Decatur. The Christmas part, you know, and he said—the little fellow said as if he like to go to Bethlehem himself."

"Go to Bethlehem?" She smiled and laughed. "Rather an ambition for a little fellow, I should say, Striker."

He looked at her in pained amazement which he made no slightest effort to conceal, but she seemed not to notice it.

"Well," she instructed, "tell the nurse to show him how those electrical toys work—and that she'll find many boxes for him. There's one for her, too—in my room. Here's a remembrance and merry Christmas for you, Striker."

"Thank you, Mrs. Decatur."

He knew the remembrance. He always wished her merry Christmas in return. It seemed he could not tonight. Indeed it would have pleased him to tear the good-sized bill into tiny pieces. She had gone. The fragrance of violets remained. Striker decided he would never like Violets again.

"She's never been like a mother, really," he mused, "but she's never left before at Christmas. She's not even like a woman tonight."

When Sydney Everett had left the luxurious house which held her little patient, she found the sharp air good on her cheeks and the crunching of the snow as music. It was such genuine Christmas weather, and the stir and bustle in the crowded streets so heartening to jaded spirits. Even more heartening, however, as she walked hastily along, was the sudden, welcome voice which asked teasingly:

"Who's late, Miss Punctuality? I've walked up to your borrowed mansion twice and back two blocks, and am on the third quest as at last we meet."

Miss Everett laughed, a rippling laugh that seemed to take on a gray and yet a haunting music in the snowy atmosphere.

"Oh, Lawrence, so I did keep you waiting?"

"Long enough for me to make the millionth observation that you have it on all girls."

"Silly boy! Well, I was a little delayed."

"Poor little sick kid going to have all the gilded perquisites of the season, I suppose?"

"Oh, plenty of them," and the girl stamped a small foot noticeably as she fell into step with the tall young man at her side.

"And what's wanting?" he inquired. "Plainly something wanting to your exalted mind?"

"To my heart, rather. Don't talk of the child's mother to me please, Lawrence. It's wicked to feel as I feel towards her tonight."

"To my mind she's lucky that you think even darkly of her in your white thoughts, but what's her crime?"

"She leaves for St. Louis on the midnight—and tomorrow's Christmas."

"No! She's not choosing Christmas to leave the kid." The man spoke more in assertion than in question.

"But she is; for the first time she's done just that. I was there last Christmas evening, you know. She had a tree for him. Then, she merely ran upstairs, radiantly dressed and evidently radiant with happiness, and gave Michael a kiss and some of the table favors, but even that gave a few moments with his mother at Christmas."

At the trace of tears in her voice, her lover spoke anxiously.

"Don't you worry, Sydney," he said, the little fellow won't miss her. Children know where there's real love and where there isn't."

"That's it exactly, that's the tragic part," the girl almost sobbed out. "That he won't miss her—his own mother—and that some day she'll probably wretchedly wonder why. It will be too late then."

"And I suppose, due to the motherly mother's pleasure trip that you're going to try to make things up to the kid and I'm going to see you scarcely at all tomorrow?" he questioned.

"It might have been so, and you would have approved, too."

"I might have magnanimously consented," the man interrupted, to hear the calm reply.

"It would have been the same thing, really. But, listen, Lawrence. That perfectly splendid doctor has told me to take the entire afternoon and he will take care of Michael's pleasure. What do you think of that?"

"That he deserves your encomium and that—from me—is saying mighty much. And now will you listen, young lady." He turned her coat collar protectively up around her throat and continued in almost an awed voice:

"Do you realize that by another Christmas we shall be married, darling? I am getting where I can really count on taking proper care of you, my jewel."

They went along, absorbed as lovers are, whatever the season, and little dreaming that Dr. Weatherly was at the same moment planning a holiday for the crippled child in exactly the same spirit as that which held them enthralled, for all the beautiful thoughts and actions are each one wrought of love.

Dr. Weatherly had entered his lonely house in no gentle mood. "She is not even a woman," he reflected, as Striker had, and, as Striker, he decided he would never again care for the fragrance of violets.

But when he had settled himself in an easy chair, had sent away his man and had shaded the light to suit a mood for dreaming, the bitterness toward one apparently heartless woman was dissolved in memories of another woman like to whom, he told himself, there could be no other.

"And the child! She would be that boy's age now." He let his mind dwell on the first, cruelly lonely Christmas seven years before. Minutes passed, hours, without his heeding time. Then he pulled himself up. "This will never do! I must plan how to brighten the day for another lonely heart—a little one. She, my gay but tender Mary, would be glad. That's it, that's it exactly!" He quite exulted in the thought as the sound of the bells of old St. Philomena's rang clearly out in the crisp midnight air. "The creche!" The idea suddenly took form in his mind. "The boy has never seen one. He may think it is his Bethlehem. Living alone has babied him some ways and aged him in others. Wanting to go there, that fine nurse said. Poor little fellow!"

He was almost boyish himself as he planned how he would take the boy, how he would—yes, deliberately—let him, should he do so, think it was real. He would learn quickly enough whose child's heart had known almost nothing within its memory but sad stark realism of pain and helplessness, however luxuriously surrounded. If he realized, as was most probable, that the pious representation was only such, even that would be a pleasure and a partial satisfaction to his pitiful wish, if not, the doctor determined to tell him no untruth, but yet to leave the boy his dream apparently fulfilled.

Next morning Miss Everett and Striker bent loving endeavors to make a real Christmas for the boy who, having a mother, still, seemingly, to their outraged judgment, was motherless.

"There's a bit of Christmas in here, Miss," said Striker awkwardly after his first greeting, as he led the way to a beautiful tree.

"Striker!" cried Miss Everett, amazed. "Michael had had Christmas trees, conveniently ordered and conventionally trimmed, when his mother had been home. But this time she had forgotten. Probably she was remembering now and deciding that Striker and the nurse would make it all right some other way, since it was now too late for a tree. And Sydney, last night, had thought with sinking heart that there would be none. But the one Striker had achieved was such as even Sydney had never seen. Striker watched her eagerly, emotionally. She would know if it were exactly right. Her exclamation of pure delight left him in no doubt even before he turned on the electric current and caused a brilliant star to shine from the tiptop branch and a hundred vari-colored lights to twinkle gaily. Sydney danced around the tree like a happy child.

"But, Striker, how—when?" she asked wonderingly.

"It wasn't much, Miss Everett, to pick up the pretties, and the lights were easy enough on account of all the electric fixtures, but I wanted to be sure it was just right for the little fellow."

"Right? It's perfect! You're an artist, did you know it? But—it wasn't here last evening. It must have taken you all night."

"Mostly, miss, but it didn't seem long for hoping as the little fellow'd enjoy it. I just couldn't abide the thought of him without a tree, just because the missus—"

"Forgot," supplied Miss Everett, in a tone that expressed all the man was thinking. "You're a trump, Striker, that's all."

He blushed like a schoolboy and then went with her to bring Michael, who, from the next room, was imperiously demanding notice.

"I hope he didn't hear us. I want him to have the whole wonderful surprise," said Sydney.

He had not heard. He would not, anyway, have been surprised at a tree, but his wondering, delightful surprise at this particular tree to which they wheeled him was so numb, so poignant, that Striker loudly blew his nose and Sydney's eyes swam.

"Go!" the boy exclaimed. "I've never had a tree like that." He gazed long and joyously. He exclaimed over every tiniest feature of the truly beautiful tree. When the toys were brought to him they excited less though curious interest.

Both the nurse and Striker wondered if he would speak of his mother, and he suddenly announced: "Mother left the toys, and they're all right, too, but not like the tree is. Mother's gone away, I know she has. Dad would 'uv stayed if he was here. Mothers come when you're sleeping mostly, and kiss you, and you smell violets. That's what it was last night. She told me once what it was. I don't like violets. Show me again how that track and cars work, Miss Everett."

The sudden digression was most welcome, and the hours passed between joy of the tree and playing with toys and with no further reference to an absent mother. Michael looked ready for but fighting his nap when he was told it must be before dinner today.

"And after you and I have had Christmas dinner," said Miss Everett, smiling into the heavy but rebellious eyes, "I think Dr. Weatherly will be in to see you."

"He's all right," said Michael, failing to suppress a yawn. "Guess maybe I'll let him play with the mares and give him something off the tree. What'll I give him, Striker?"

"Anything you wish, Master Michael."

And Master Michael decided: "Guess one of the caramel cats. They're chewy and they last long."

After a nap and the Christmas dinner, which Miss Everett enlivened with wonderful stories suggested by the turkey and the turkey favors and the turkey and the turkey. And the lady had submitted her chronological exactness to Brother Isidore's large accommodation to the Kings.

Standing by and watching the utterly absorbed boy, the doctor thought, "The world is too much with us, and realized that to the child, as yet free of the world's sorrows, this was indeed the Bethlehem of his dreams. Deliberately he leaned over and lifted the slight form before the miracle of joy and certainty should be in any way dispelled."

"Going?" Michael's tone was regret itself, when the doctor had again back in the car, he continued, "I—I didn't want to come away. Will the Baby be there all night?"

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uppermost impression was still of trees and country when the doctor stopped before the old church of his choice, to which he had led so skilfully for the effect he wished to produce.

Parking the car, he lifted Michael in his arms and entered the building so dimmed by the early dark that its interior and furniture were almost effaced. The eye indeed was immediately and compellingly drawn to the creche above which a beautiful star hung low—the thrifty Brother Isidore, who was in charge, having decided enough people were present to permit of the electrical aid to a religious and picturesque if not perfect imitation of Bethlehem. Laid gently on a bench close in front, Michael was absorbed, oblivious to stares of curiosity and pity and whispered commiseration. He had come over to Bethlehem. He could almost touch the wonderful Baby, and the sweet young mother, the reverend St. Joseph, the ragged, rugged "shepherd feller," and the "animules." The Kings also were there, but if he noticed the discrepancy, it did not disturb him as it had an exacting lady to whose hypercritical Brother Isidore had replied crisply. "The Kings would have been there if they'd got there in time, as I put them in the time."

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would use for the salvation of the spirit the shrewdness which this man used for his bodily comfort, how many more would be converted to faith in the Kingdom!

He who is not converted in time will be cut down like the unfruitful fig-tree. And the conversion must be final, for falling from grace injures a man's soul a great deal more than repentance helps him. A man had an unclean spirit in him and succeeded in driving it away. The demon walked through dry places seeking rest; and finding none, he said: "I will return into my house whence I came out." It happens that this house, the soul of that man, is empty, swept and garnished so that it is hard to recognize it. Then the demon takes to him seven other spirits more wicked than himself and at the head of the band he enters into his house so that the last state of that man was worse than the first.

In the day of triumph laments and excuses will count less than the whispering of the wind among the rushes. Then will be made the last and irrevocable choice, like that of the fisherman who, after having pulled up from the sea his net full of fish, sits down on the beach and puts those fit for food into his baskets and throws away the others.

A long truce is given to sinners, that they may have all the time necessary to change their hearts, but when the day has come he who has not arrived at the door, or is not worthy, will remain eternally outside.

A good husbandman sowed good seed in his field, but while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares also among the wheat. When the blade was sprung up, the servants of the household saw the tares and came and told their master of it.

"Wilt thou then that we go and gather them up?" But he said, "Nay! lest while ye gather up the tares ye root up also the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest; and in the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, Gather ye together first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them: but gather the wheat into my barn."

Thus like a good husbandman Jesus waits for the day of the harvest. One day an immense multitude was about Him to listen to Him and seeing all these men and these women who were hungering after righteousness and thirsting after love, He was moved with compassion and said to His disciples: "The harvest truly is plenteous but the laborers are few; Pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he will send forth laborers into this harvest."

His voice does not carry everywhere, not even the Twelve are enough; others are necessary to proclaim the good news, that it may be carried to all those who suffer and who await it.

TO BE CONTINUED

CHRISTMAS NIGHT

At last Thou art come, little Saviour! And thine angels fill midnight with song; Thou art come to us, gentle Creator! Whom Thy creatures have sighed for so long.

Thou art come to Thy beautiful Mother; She hath looked on Thy marvelous face; Thou art come to us, Maker of Mary! And she was Thy channel of grace.

Thou hast brought with Thee plentiful pardon, And our souls overflow with delight; Our hearts are half broken, dear Jesus, With the joy of this wonderful night!</