

WILLIE HOLT'S LAST CHRISTMAS

—THE GENERAL'S STORY—

The general was sitting at his fireside reading when we went in. He was a fine specimen of manhood, in spite of the fact that his grey hairs and wrinkled face showed plainly that time and experience had combined in an effort to affect his appearance in his old age. Despite his years, however, he still had that erect carriage which had made him the admiration of all who knew him in the days of his activity. The general always had an interesting story to tell, and it was not long before he started in to relate one of his numerous experiences.

"Christmas day never comes around," he said, "without my mind going back to what was perhaps one of the strangest and most touching experiences I have ever had. It was during my Indian service, stirring times, they were, too, ripe with mystery and murder.

"At that time I had in my regiment a little bugler. I had often noticed him as being too delicate and fragile for the life he had to lead, but he was found in the regiment and was bound to me as the best of him. His father, as brave a man as ever lived, had been killed in action, and his mother had drooped and died six months later. She was a delicate, refined creature, the daughter of a Scripture reader, and had brought the boy up strictly according to her ideas. She was very much liked and respected by the men of the regiment, and the boy was the image of his mother, but, as he preferred her company to that of the men, he was not popular, and suffered from many a coarse taunt and mocking joke.

"After his mother died—I heard all this afterward—his life was made a misery to him by the scoffing sneers and ribald jokes of the men whose butt he was.

"About two years later, when Willie Holt (for that was his name), was four years of age, the regiment was bivouacked some miles from camp for rifle practice. I had intended leaving the boy behind, thinking him too delicate for such work—the ground was swampy and unhealthy—but my sergeant-major begged hard to be allowed to take him along.

"There is mischief in the air, Colonel," he said, "and rough as they treat the lad—and they do lead him a life—his pluck and business tell on 'em, for the boy is a saint, sir, he is indeed."

"I had a rough lot of recruits just then, and before we had been out a fortnight several acts of insubordination had been brought to my notice—those were foolish times—and I had sworn to make an example of the very next offender by having him publicly flogged.

"One morning it was reported to me that, during the night, the butts, or targets, had been thrown down and mutilated and the usual practice could not take place. This was serious, indeed, and on investigation the rascally work was traced to a man or men in the very tent in which Willie Holt was billeted, two of them being the worst characters in the regiment. The whole lot were immediately put under arrest to be tried by court-martial, when enough evidence could be produced to prove conclusively that one or more of the prisoners were guilty of the crime. In vain were they appealed to produce the men, and at last I said: 'We have all heard the evidence that proves the perpetrator of last night's offense to be one of the men of No. 4 tent—' then turning to the prisoners I added, 'If any of you who slept in No. 4 tent last night will come forward and take his punishment like a man, the rest will get off scot free; if not, there remains no alternative but to punish you all, each man to receive in turn ten strokes of the cat.'

"For the space of a couple of minutes, which seemed like hours, there was a dead silence; then from the midst of the prisoners, where his slight form had been almost completely hidden, Willie Holt stepped forward. He advanced to within a couple of yards from where I sat, his face was very pale, a fixed intensity of

utterly was I taken by surprise; then, in a fury of anger and disgust, I turned upon the prisoners:

"Is there no man among you worthy of the name? Are you all cowards enough to let this lad suffer for your sins? For that he is guiltless you know as well as I! But sullen and silent they stood, with never a word.

"Then I turned to the boy, whose patient, pleading eyes were fixed upon my face, and never in all my life have I found myself so painfully situated. I knew my word must stand and the boy knew it, too, as he repeated once more—'I am ready, sir.'

"Sick at heart I gave the order, and he was led away for punishment. Bravely he stood with back bared, as one, two, three strokes descended. At the fourth a low moan escaped his white lips, but while the unwilling hand of the sergeant was bringing the whip down for the fifth time, and ere yet it had touched his bleeding back a hoarse cry—almost a roar—burst from the group of prisoners, who had been forced to witness the terrible scene, and with one bound Jim Sykes, the black sheep of the regiment, seized the scourge as with choking, gasping utterance he shouted:

"Stop it, colonel, stop it! tie me up instead. He never did it, I did, and with convulsed and anguished face he flung his arms around the boy.

"Fainting and almost speechless, Willie lifted his eyes to the man's face and smiled—such a smile. 'It's all right now, Jim,' he whispered, faintly; 'you are safe now; the Colonel's word will stand.'

"His head fell forward—he had fainted. The next day, Christmas day, as I was making for the hospital tent where the boy lay, I met the doctor.

"How is the lad?" I asked.

"Purpose stamped upon every line of it and his steadfast, shining eyes met mine, clear and full.

"Colonel," he said as he saluted, "you have passed your word that if any one of those men who slept in No. 4 tent last night comes forward to take his punishment, the rest shall get off free. I am ready, sir, and please may I take it now?"

"For a moment I was speechless, so 'Sinking Colonel!' he said quietly, 'startled beyond words.'

"Yes, the shock of yesterday was too much for his feeble strength. I have known for some months it was only a matter of time. This affair has only hastened matters." Then he added, gruffly, "he is more fit for heaven than earth," and, with a suspicious moisture in his kind old eyes, he stood aside while I passed into the tent.

"The dying lad lay propped up on the pillows, and, half kneeling, half crouching at his side, was Jim Sykes. The change in the boy's face startled me; he was deathly white, but his eyes were shining with a wonderful light, strangely sweet.

"The kneeling man lifted his head, and I saw the drops of sweat standing on his brow as he muttered, in a hoarse voice: 'Why did ye do it, lad? Why did ye do it?'

"Because I wanted to take it for you, Jim," Willie's weak voice answered, tenderly. "I thought if I did it might help you to understand a little bit why Christ died for you."

"Why Christ died for me?" the man repeated, listlessly.

"Yes; He died for you because He loved you, Jim. I only suffered for one sin, but Christ took the punishment of all the sins you have ever committed. The punishment of your sins was death, Jim, and Christ died for you. He has poured out His precious life blood for you. He is knocking at the door of your heart. Won't you let Him in? Oh, you must, and then we shall meet again."

"The lad's voice failed him, but he laid his hand gently on the man's bowed head.

"A choking sob was the only answer,



and for a few minutes there was silence. Standing there in the shadow I felt my own heart strangely stirred. I had heard of such things once, long, long ago. Thoughts of the mother I had idolized came floating back, out of the dead past, and the words seemed a faint echo of her own.

"How long I stood there I know not, but I was roused by a hoarse cry from the man, and then I saw that Willie had fallen back on his pillow, fainting. I thought he was gone, but a few drops of cordial from the table at his side roused him. He opened his eyes, but they were dim and sightless.

"Sing to me, mother," he whispered. "'Sing 'The Gates of Pearl.' I am so tired."

"In a flash the words came back to me. I had heard them often in the shadowy past, and I found myself repeating them softly to the dying boy.

"Through the day he never so long, it ringeth at length to erasing. And the weary worker goes to his rest. With words of peace and pardon blest.

Though the path be never so steep, And rough to walk on and hard to keep, It will lead, when the weary road is trod, To the Gates of Pearl—the City of God.

"Thank you, Colonel," he whispered. "I'll soon be there."

"His tone of confidence seemed so strange to me that I said, involuntarily, 'Where?'

"Why, Heaven, Colonel. The roll-call has sounded for me; the gates are open; the price is paid."

"Then, softly, dreamily, he repeated, as if to himself:

"Just as I am, without one plea, But that Thy blood was shed for me, And that Thou bidst me come to Thee, Oh, Lamb of God, I come."

"Then he lifted his dim eyes to mine. 'You will help him, sir?' he breathed, faintly, laying his hand feebly on the head of the man at his side; 'you will show him the way to—the Gates—of—Pearl?'

"As each word fell haltingly, fainter and yet fainter came the breath of the dear boy. Suddenly a glorious light flashed into his dying eyes, and, with a radiant happy cry, he flung out his arms, as if in welcome, shouting:

"Mother! Mother!"

"His voice rang out, thrilling the hearts of every man who heard it. Then gradually the weak arms dropped; the light faded from the shining eyes, and the brave spirit of the martyred boy fled to God.

"Such, my friends, was the strangest

and most pathetic Christmas experience I ever had, and one which I would rather die than have to witness again," said the Colonel, wiping the tears from his clear, blue eyes.

We said nothing, but the story will remain with us as long as we live.

Dressing a Christmas Tree

A Christmas tree ought to be selected with special reference to the space it is to occupy; one of those with branches firm, not too broad, and quite tall is best. The upper branches should be decorated before the tree is set up, in case they are too tall to be reached by step-ladders. This can be managed by undoing the strands that confine the upper branches of the trees as prepared for market, then tying upon the tips of the boughs white cotton-battening snow balls, short loops of popped corn, strings of cranberries, glittering ornaments, etc. The decoration of the tree may be more or less elaborate, as desired. To save expense, yet at the same time to insure a brilliant effect, it is a good plan to hang the gifts so that bright, contrasting colors may set off the tree. Bundles done up in brown paper are never pretty; but dolls, bright covered books, gayly painted toys, bright silk handkerchiefs and white scarfs, sleds, wagons, etc., should be placed in prominent view.

When the gifts are all nicely arranged, take a liberal quantity of frost powder and a dozen, more or less, packages of gilt and silver fringe (these are sold at one dollar per dozen). Spread the fringe to ornament as much space as possible and cover lightly the front and sides of the tree with it. Then sprinkle the glittering frost powder upon the tree branches. Under a brilliant light the tree becomes a veritable creation of fairyland. Santa, as a dispenser of candy bags and bonbons is always welcomed by the little ones. If he has a fund of Christmas rhymes, stories and songs to mingle with his gifts, he is all the more welcome.

MAKING IT EASY.

Daughter—Ma, I think you'd better let me smoke in the house.

Mother—I should like to know why?

Daughter—Every Christmas we have trouble trying to find a present for him—everything is so expensive, you know; but we can always get very pretty ash trays at 25 cents!

Children at Christmas

(By Arthur Stringer.)

We watched the trooping children play
About the old house, once so gray
And still, then darkness fell,
And one by one they said farewell.
The music and the laughter stopped,
The play was done, the curtain dropped,
The waning lamp of mirth burned low
With each last cry across the snow.
And we, Old Friends, were left alone!
What was it lost, that we had known?

Old Friend and True, must even we
Find nevermore what used to be?
Man lives by change; through ebb and flow
The new lives come, the old lives go;
We lose and gain, yet year by year
The aging heart grows more austere.
It may be that the strain and stress
Of our mad times tempt joylessness;
It may be that our feverish days
Forget the old more genial ways;
It may be, too, the ashes of
Dead hopes and dreams have smothered love!
But plain it stands, no more we hold
Earth's fond good-fellowship of old!

Yet thanks to one small spark, Old Friend,
As down the Dusk of Things we trend,
Age shall not strip our very heart
Of all its old congenial art!
Aye, thanks to each small voice and light
That lent its youth to us to-night,
And thanks to that strange fugitive
Enduring Love by which we live,
Thro' childlike eyes and childlike act
We yet shall hold our youth intact!
And thanks to one still jovial day
We still, Old Friend, shall make our way
By thought and Memory through the snow
To Youth, and that lost Long Ago,
Where Laughter holding both his side
Made all our days seem Christmas days!

Christmas Among the Negroes

An indispensable factor in the old-fashioned Christmas celebration on a southern plantation was a part contributed by the colored folk on the place, and it is a matter for present day congratulation that many of the veteran retainers of the days 'before de wahn' have, with their children clug steadfastly to the old estates, and are thus in a position to render invaluable assistance in a revival of old conditions that is now in progress. No person can enter more zealously into all that pertains to a Christmas jollification than the care-free, pleasure-loving negro. To the race in the southland it has ever been the pre-eminent holiday of the year.

Just at the outset of any mention of this subject, it should, perhaps, be explained that the present resumption of the lavish open-handed hospitality which was characteristic of the baronial estate in Dixie and before the war is largely due to the fact that during the past few years moneyed men of leisure from all parts of the country have been buying up the splendid private estates of the south and resorting thereon, as nearly as possible, the conditions of ideal American country life.

In Virginia alone millions of dollars have lately been invested in this class of property by wealthy northerners, who, attracted by the mild winters, the magnificent saddle horses, the excellent hunting and other advantages, plan to make the old dominion their home for at least a portion of the year. Now the late autumn and the early winter is one of the most alluring seasons of the year in a goodly portion of the south and it naturally follows that Christmas is a great rallying time. The new owners of the colonial manor houses bring down great parties of guests, and find one of their chief sources of amusement in the holiday article of the old-time, unspoiled darkeys.

As has been explained the present day owners of southern plantations have found ready to hand on every estate a large population of the colored folk. Despite steady migration northwards of numbers of southern negroes, there yet remain, mayhap as squatters, a liberal representation of the blacks and the twentieth century "country squires," who are seeking to restore the atmosphere of the old plantation days, have been enabled to enlist as retainers not a few former slaves and veteran house servants who are competent to carry out the preparation for the Christmas dinner, but with the proverbial tendencies of the race they make play out of work to as great an extent as possible. Especially is this true in connection with the butting, which is likely to be a preliminary of the feast, since wild turkey is esteemed more highly in many southern households than is the tame fowl, and possum is a delicacy so highly regarded by a considerable portion of the population.

Encouraged by their employers, the plantation darkeys give over four or five days at Christmas time to feasting. The tables are heavily laden with rib, sausage and crackling, savory products of the fine arts of hog killing, coon and corn pone, possum fat and hominy, to say nothing of gingerbread, boiled chestnuts and cider. There is much cracking of walnuts and the roasting of apples at the capacious open fireplaces in the cabins of the colored folk, and each night during the Yuletide season the floor of the largest cabin is cleared for a dance and the jig and breakdown, the pigeon-wing and juba go bolsterously forward to the accompaniment of the hand clapping and the jiggling of a fiddle.

big brother of modern cannon cracker must be done immediately before it is fired, but the logs are usually chosen day beforehand and rolled from the woods to a clearing, where the noise will spread. Great care must be exercised in the selection of the logs for service as home made firecrackers, for where as a sound hard section of a tree trunk will give a clear, sharp report, a rotten log yields a muffled sound that is as much a disappointment as is the fizzer firecracker to the average small boy. On Christmas eve or on Christmas night there are displays of fireworks of greater or less proportions, and for weeks before the holiday every cross roads store carries a stock of sky rockets and Roman candles and pin wheels, just as does the northern merchant prior to Independence Day.

The game of "catching" Christmas gifts has from time out of mind been highly popular among the plantation darkeys of the south, who delight in practicing it upon the less wary white folk. According to the rules, whoever meets you between midnight on December 24 and midnight on December 25, and calls out 'Christmas ere' you have had time or presence of mind to say the same thing has a right to demand a gift, great or small. There is a disposition on the part of the younger members of each plantation community to keep up the practice during the whole of Christmas week, when there is much visiting back and forth on the countryside. Absolute democracy is observed in so far as participation in this game is concerned, master and servant being on a plane of perfect equality; and it must be admitted that the noiseless negroes are usually victors in any such contest between the races.

The colored help on the southern plantation has to bear the brunt of the work of preparation for the Christmas dinner, but with the proverbial tendencies of the race they make play out of work to as great an extent as possible. Especially is this true in connection with the butting, which is likely to be a preliminary of the feast, since wild turkey is esteemed more highly in many southern households than is the tame fowl, and possum is a delicacy so highly regarded by a considerable portion of the population.

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CHRISTMAS COMING.

Christmas is comin'! I hear it a-bum-min'
Up thru their chimney-place outer their fire!
Turkeys are smellin' it, old hens are tellin' it,
Everyone's feelin' it plumb thru and thru!
Rub up their andirons—keep 'em a-shinin'—
Scour up the pewter, an' copper an' brass,
Fetch up their kettle with porcelain linin'—
An' pick up their quinces to turn into nass.
Lock up their Christmas green, hang up the holly,
Nail up their mistletoe over their door,
Jest as we allus hev done heretofore,
Jest as we allus hev done heretofore.
'Tain't no use thinkin' of trouble an' sorrow,
'Tain't that gone by ain't no place in our hearts;
Christmas is comin' a week from ter-morrow,
An' right from this minnit ther frolick-in' starts.

BEANO! NEW GAME! IT'S GREAT.



PLAYING THE NEW GAME, BEANO.

Beano! Beano! Rah! Rah! Rah!
This isn't a new college yell, neither is it the name of a new hashery, but it's a new game, a new Christmas game, if you please.
England is so stuck on Beano—not just plain beans, but the Bean-OH thing—that even the budget is well-nigh forgotten by all but some of the peers and David Lloyd-George.
Now as to the game itself. You have to have a hot plate, the larger the better, and of course the plate must be warmed frequently. Then get as many carpeccas saltitans, or toasts its toes all 13 feet, get into action, and then the bean begins jumping.

The plate having been previously circled to resemble a target, the efforts of the players are directed toward getting their beans to jump into the centre, the player owning the bean that hops nearest the centre wins the game.
The peculiar bean which is used in the game ripens in August. It has a worm inside, a worm that has 16 feet and lives until the following May, when it succumbs to the infirmities of old age. This worm when its feet are cold is entirely in repose. But when the hot plate begins to toast its toes all 13 feet, get into action, and then the bean begins jumping.

THE MESSAGE TO SANTA CLAUS.



"Now we'll write to Santa Claus," said Gertie, pen in hand, as by her elbow, Tom, her brother, took his anxious stand. "This letter will have room enough for what we both demand."
Then Tom commenced to name his wants, and this is what he said: "Put down a pair of roller skates—ball bearing ones; a sled; a electric engine, sword an' gun—gu n that shoots real lead.
"Get all of those? Well, add a drum, a knife or two, And box of—What? That won't lea ve room for you? I'm sorry, Sis, but you loss out. I 'm only half way through."

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