

any soup even. I've got you at my mercy an' you better behave yourself. Soup, I said; then a good old talk an' then—checkers. Eh? It's a great drubbin' I'll give you—"

"Haud y'r tongue! Ye know verra weel ye canna do ony sic' a thing!"

Hawkins only laughed as he bustled about the fireplace.

"I see you've forgotten the lickin' I gave you the last time at Fond du Lac," he chuckled.

"Ye cheatet me oot o' twa men i' the last game—I'm still thinkin' that," retorted MacQuaig, "and one o' 'em micht hae been a king, d'ye no ken? Onyway, hae ye forgotten the turrible lickin' ye got the time before last? Losh, mon, but I beat ye sae sair ye tuk to pullin' y'r snaw-white whuskers an' y'r face was fair red wi' shame. D'ye no ken?"

Hawkins grinned broadly as he swung the crane into the fireplace and broke out airily into his favourite ditty:

Oh, a doughty Admiral he would be,  
Yo ho, my lads, yo ho!

He made the coxswain pour his tea,  
Yo ho, my lads, yo ho!

"Hoots!" grunted MacQuaig, irritably.

In the rosy morn, too, if he choose,

The bos'n's mate shall shine his shoes;

He'll box the compass a round or two

To limber up, and when he's through,

Why, the steward shall make him a sou'west stew!

Yo ho! Yo ho! Yo ho!

"Haud y'r tongue, wull ye!"

The Factor of Rory's Hope thereupon turned his face sulkily to the wall; checkers was a serious subject to him and such levity was out of place. For perhaps a full two minutes he would not speak to the Factor from the Fond du Lac.

Outside, the storm gusts romped, swirled, drove. The powdered snow flew in clouds, hissed, drifted and smoked from the roofs of the wooden fort buildings. About the eaves of Rory's Hope the wind whistled and whined and threw the snow rattling against the parchment windows; from the forest came a dull booming like the sweep of turbulent surf

on some wild night along the far-off coast of Stornoway.

But within, where the fire roared up the great chimney, the two old "winterers" were oblivious of the storm, of everything but themselves and the joy of being together once more for the first time in three long years. The hours passed quickly; there was so much to talk about—old times, old homes and homefolk in the old land, their work. A faint smile played with the lines in the thin face of old Roderick MacQuaig. The excitement which the day had brought lent him unnatural strength; it glittered in his eyes and burned in the hollow cheeks. His voice was stronger now than it had been for days.

The sun had been muffled in the clouds all day and the dark came even earlier than usual. Hawkins lighted the big oil lamp with the rusty tin shade, got down the checker-board and dropped another coal into the bowl of his pipe. The Factor of Rory's Hope felt very tired; but he could not remember the time when he had been too tired for a game of checkers. They began to play and the game in the hands of these two past-masters was no give-away; every move was the subject of much careful deliberation and the wooden men changed hands very slowly. The sounds of the fire alone broke the silence of the game's absorption.

Time flew beyond all reckoning when John Hawkins was pondering over a checker-board; he could not have told just how long they had been playing. If he remembered correctly, they were in the middle of the fifth or sixth game when he looked up, after waiting a full two minutes for the other to make his move, and found him lying back among the blankets that had propped him up. Hawkins could scarcely believe his eyes at first.

"Well, 'pon my word, if he ain't gone to sleep!" he muttered in astonishment. "Gone to sleep in the middle of a game of checkers—well, sir-ee!"

He got up quietly, chuckling to himself. For a moment he stood there, enjoying the situation; then he leaned over the edge of the bunk and peered into the face of the Factor of Rory's Hope.

"Sleepin' like a top, by golly!" he chortled. And in the middle of a game of checkers—Lordy! Lordy! What a joke on MacQuaig this was! He'd never let him hear the end of this!

Quietly he gathered together the checkers and packed them back into their wooden box. He tiptoed across the room and put them on the shelf, grinning as he did so. He laid another log across the dog-irons, taking great care to make no noise. Then he went back and sat down on the upturned box beside the bunk.

"Tuckered out—clean tuckered out!" he muttered. "I might 've known."

He leaned over and drew the blankets closer. His eyes roved to something lying on the blankets in front of him and he reached out for it, smiling as he saw what it was. He stroked the smooth surface of the little English plum-pudding, firm and round in its protecting sack.

"Two years!" he murmured. "Two years an' he never et any of it! It was just like you, old friend—just like you."

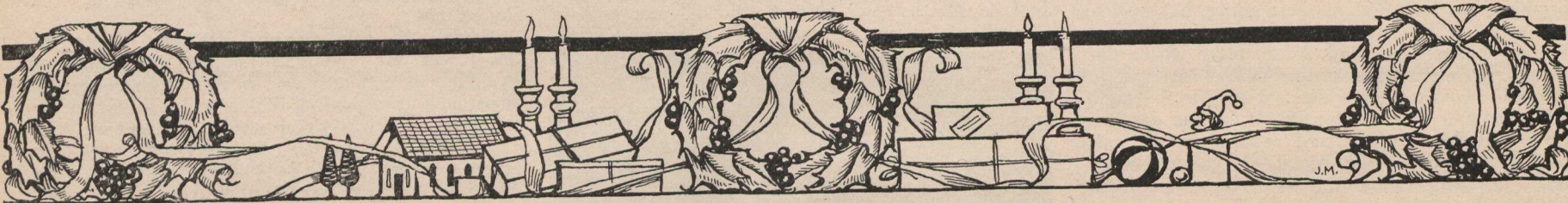
He patted the little sack wistfully and a mist came into his eyes—a mist that was filled with dim shapes of other Christmas times, long gone forever, when as a boy he had listened to the musical bubbling of puddings in the boilers and the home circle yet remained unbroken.

For a long time the Factor from the far-away Fond du Lac sat in the firelight. He grew drowsy after awhile and his head sank forward upon the bunk. One hand crept across the blankets and rested in that of the Factor of Rory's Hope; the other held close the little round sack.

Outdoors the storm was over. Everywhere for leagues and leagues the snow stretched in great white drifted piles. Overhead a vast dome of coldly glittering stars spread down and down to the freezing sky-line in the north.

But within the little wooden Fort was drowsy warmth and no sounds save the soft purring of the fire and the gentle breathing of the sleeper.

So Christmas passed out at Rory's Hope.



# JESSICA'S DILEMMA

By MRS. T. L. MEAD

"IT does not matter to me how you get into debt," said George Sachs, "but the fact that you owe me five thousand pounds, and that I require the money or the child, is self-evident. The child is your discharge of the five thousand pounds you owe me, Ruttledge. That is the only offer I can make you. You can take it or leave it. The debt is owing; the debt must be paid. I take the child. My wife never stops crying for her. She has a look of our little one who died in the spring. We will bring her up as though she were our own. She will want for nothing."

"And are we never to see her again?" asked Ruttledge.

"I can make no promises. You give her to me absolutely, and your debt of five thousand pounds is cancelled. She is my wife's fancy, and I mean to take her to my wife on Boxing Day or put you through the Bankruptcy Court, so you had best make up your mind."

"I have made it up," said Ruttledge, slowly. "There is no help for it."

"Well, that's sensible of you. I will tell my wife to-night that I will bring her on Monday. Now, good-night, Ruttledge. I'll be here at twelve o'clock on Boxing Day, and will expect you and the child."

"Good-night," said Ruttledge. He went slowly down the stairs—stone stairs, hard and cruel—from the great architect's office.

George Sachs was one of the greatest and most successful architects in the world. Ruttledge, in the same profession, with abilities quite as good as

those of Sachs, had been unsuccessful. The one man had money, and indomitable perseverance; the other had no money except what he had borrowed from Sachs; and although his genius often caused him to bring a commission to a satisfactory conclusion, he was never definite or decided in his dealings with his fellow-men. Consequently, he let valuable work slip by, and there came that terrible Christmas Eve when there was no way out of bankruptcy but by the sale of his little daughter Dolly. It was an awful thing to have to sell his child.

As James Ruttledge walked back to his little home in the suburbs of Birmingham he could not believe that he had done anything so dastardly; and yet he knew that he had. He could not allow his wife to go through the agony which would be hers if he were made bankrupt. He had no friend to help him. The offer must be accepted. The child must go. He would make it up somehow to Jessica. Jessica would be wise. She would see how good it would be in the long run for poor little Dolly to be the petted darling of a rich woman like Mrs. Sachs.

This was Christmas Eve, and a reckless mood came over him. He resolved to enjoy Christmas as much as possible.

He stopped at a toy-shop, and bought a large new Noah's Ark for Dolly. There was a great lump in his throat, but he kept back all outward sign of trouble. He would give his wife and his only child a happy Christmas Day, whatever happened in the future. He paid nearly ten shillings

for the Noah's Ark. He then entered another shop and bought a warm, knitted jacket of the whitest, softest wool for little Dolly, and a hood of the same material to frame her charming little face. He then purchased several presents for his wife, and ended by having so many parcels, including sweetmeats of different kinds, that he was obliged to have a cab to take them home.

"It doesn't matter," he kept saying to himself, "we will have one happy day together. If it's a bit fine to-morrow, I'll take Jessica and Dolly for a walk. We can easily get outside the town, and Dolly in a snowy white coat and hood will look like a snowdrop herself. I won't let out a word to Jessica. I'll have a happy Christmas Day, whatever happens."

The cab had scarcely drawn up at 5, Dynever terrace before the door was swiftly opened, and a tall, very slight girl with a beautiful face, dark eyes, and a wealth of black hair stood waiting for him. She was holding in her arms a winsome little child of four, who clapped her hands and called, "Dad, dad, dad!" The man felt as though an icy hand were contracting his heart.

"Still, I must go through it," he said to himself. "I will tell Jess all about it on the evening of Boxing Day."

"What a lot of sings oo's 'bwort, daddy!" said the little one.

"They're all for mother and you," he replied. Jessica's dark eyes began to shine. Her husband had been in terribly low spirits for days past. He