



A MAID'S STRATEGY DISCOVERS A TRUE HEART

A Christmas Eve Contest for a Woman's Love

(By A. Z. W.)

"When a man makes himself scarce at the club; discards the odor of meerschaums for the perfume of bouquets; and writes poetry instead of briefs; it is all for one of the sex of whims and false hair, eh?"

"For a most esteemed lady, with nothing false about her but fortune hunting admirers, perhaps."

"Oh—oh—ah! You are smitten, indeed! Pray, what is she, a town beauty of a country blossom?"

"Both at her pleasure."

"Rich, then. And I needn't ask for an introduction."

"Not necessary; you know her."

"Hem, let me see. You—you don't mean Miss Engard, of Oak Hill?"

"The same."

"Confound your monosyllables, Holland, you are courting my affinity!"

"Indeed! And are you her?"

"Undoubtedly! It's the law of attraction, doubly irresistible to North, you perceive," laughed Frank North, conceitedly witty on the strength of his own name.

"Then, as the attracting object of countless other attractions, Miss Engard, possesses a particularly cold resistance to remain mistress of herself and Oak Hill; so, after all, Northern irresistibility rather repels your magnet. Do you perceive?"

"There was an embarrassing silence, during which Frank North, eyeing his friendly thorn with a breaking sensation, paced the floor in rapid strides. He stopped suddenly with clearing brow."

"Look here, Holland; neither of us will long stand a rival. So much unanimity isn't in the nature of our friendship, you know. Now, to prove this vacillating beauty's preference for me, and do the fair thing by you, I propose that each send her an invitation for a sleigh ride on the same evening. Whichever gets the note of declination will pocket it, without malice, as his walking-bail."

"For several reasons Paul Holland regarded the proposition favorably. It might assist the lady to determine the drift of her affection. It would put an end to his suspense and the chagrin of seeing deliberate flatterers for her fortune received as graciously as he. Then, there was the sweeter possibility. And the greatest of all satisfactions of a little chasement to the bragging confidence of his self-constituted friend, and possible riddance of him."

"He took the tempting bait with this proviso: that the invitations should be written, read and sent in each other's presence."

"Both sat down to their task."

DEAR CHRISTMAS BELLS

Dear are the sounds of the Christmas chimes, In the land of the ivied tower,

And they welcomed the dearest of festive times In this western world of ours.

Bright on the holly and mistletoe bough The English firelight falls,

And bright are the wreathed evergreens now That gladden our own home walls.

And hark! the first sweet note that tells The welcome of the Christmas bells.

They are ringing to-night through the Norway firs, And across the Swedish fells, And the Cuban palm-tree dreamily stirs

To the sound of those Christmas bells!

They ring where the Indian Ganges rolls Its flood through the rice-fields with;

They swell the far hymn of the Lapps and Poles To the praise of the Crucified.

Sweeter than tones of the ocean's shells Mingle the chimes of the Christmas bells.

The years come not back that have circled away With the past of the eastern land,

When he plucked the corn on the Sabbath day, And heeded the withered hand;

But the bells shall join in a joyous chime For the one who walked the sea,

And ring again for the better time Of the Christ that is to be;

Then ring! for the earth's best promise dwells In ye, O joyous prophet bells!

dren raised! Such shouts! They persisted in taking me for the old saint, who had got so fat and frothy that he brought his wife along to help him to the chimneys. Of course, Miss Engard's face was a rose-leaf of confusion. I confess, Holland, if I wasn't so sure of being preferred this time also, I wouldn't be so ready to share my chances with you."

"Your sentiment is reciprocal," was his companion's smiling reply as both began to write notes which were read and re-read the next day, with a perplexed little frown, by the mistress of Oak Hill.

With an estate tempting enough to make every admirer long to embrace it in the person of the owner, Miss Engard managed both to advantage with a shrewdness and tact which spoke equally well for heart and head. Like her acres, her acquaintances were cultivated to their required yield. And as she had not yet required a yield of hearts, she carefully avoided disturbing that tender soil. Admirers were always in a state of expectation, dreading in vain a painful antidote for their infatuation.

It was the necessity, brought by these notes, of exercising greater discretion than ever, and the suspicion, roused by the sameness in style and quality of paper, and color of ink, that they were written at one time and place for some underground purpose, which troubled the frown on Miss Engard's brow.

If she was the subject of a wager she would cut the stakes with a decided double "no." But if it was some contrivance of rivals to get rid of each other a decidedly delicate move

was required to check such self-exile, without showing compromising partiality. Because a woman had not chosen a husband in her twenty-fourth year and a half, it was no reason why she wouldn't in the other half, and one might as well have a variety to select from.

Determined upon this womanly providence, the main consideration was to make its workings all reaching, all satisfying, and non apparent.

Her first move was for a talk with Mother Ripley. She did not expect, like so many people, to apply the general views of experienced age to her particular case, and spoil it with moulty ill fitting precepts. There were always certain shrewd observations, and odd ideas in the toothless age which might furnish the cue for further action.

"Under the circumstances, what would you do?" she inquired of the old lady, after an account of the two notes in hand.

"Being an old woman, I don't know, but I would tell them to hitch their horses together and take me between them in one sleigh. But young folks manage to keep comfortably warm so one-sided, there's no telling them, than three heads are better than two at such a time."

"If the hostler was not sick I

"Never mind, you shall have the best substitute for your loss that can be purchased. And when I accept Mr. North's invitation for Christmas eve, he shall present it to you as his apology."

It was Mother Ripley's turn to apologize and recline on her wonted dignity of meditation, observation.

"I wouldn't tell you this, for I always believe in letting people find out for themselves. But when I think of the kind of politeness he has shown to an old woman and her mauling head, I came to the conclusion that, if he had so much gallantry for a young woman, he would have none left for her when she gets old. It's spent like money, and all I say is, beware of extravagant politeness."

Mother Ripley's piece of wisdom caused Miss Engard to wrinkle her brow in great concentration of thought. And the result of a day's deliberation were two notes, one of which Paul Holland kissed in raptures of delight, the other was triumphantly flourished by Frank North when he met his friend.

"Fold your wings, old fellow, and go to sleep over the holidays, the game is mine!"

"My invitation is accepted," replied Holland, with calm confidence.

Frank North echoed the same with still more confidence. Adding, "You didn't read right. These girls have a way of declining that one has to read twice before one knows that one isn't wanted."

The notes were exchanged with airs of "I'm all right."

"Confound it! She is worse than a coquette!" exclaimed North, reading his rival's unmistakable acceptance.

"What can it mean?" murmured Paul Holland, crushing the other note, equally plain, between his nervous fingers.

"It means that she is going to make fools of both."

"Miss Engard? Impossible! I am going, if only to prove that there is a mistake somewhere."

"So am I, if only to let you see how clumsy she has exercised her woman's wit. She knows nothing of our agreement, and we can confront the beauty in a manner that will be rather embarrassing to her."

Both agreed to arrive at Oak Hill with their sleighs at the same time, but Frank North no sooner left his rival than he determined to get there before him. As long as he was

pleasant thoughts, his scowling looks were fixed upon the speaker, shivering beside his sleigh.

"Get out of my way! Do you want to be run over! Out! I'll have better freight than you, or none. Another chap will be along presently, ask him. It will be about all he'll get."

With a crack of the whip, and a laugh at his witty remark on his rival, the sleigh flew past, and he, viewing the lights of Oak Hill, laughed at the idea of tolerating such a bundle of old age between him and Miss Engard.

The old woman, left paddling laboriously through the snow, wrapped her shawl tighter around her, and occasionally stooped to pick up a bundle that had dropped from her stiffened fingers.

Presently she heard more sleigh-bells. She could see this team, too, coming on at a furious pace. It was almost upon her. But with the previous rude rebuff ringing in her ears, she evidently had no courage to repeat her request.

The sleigh was stopped close beside her, however, and a cheery voice rang out:

"Want a ride, madam? Jump in quick—haven't much time—never mind your bundles, I'll fix them."

Paul Holland's strong arm quickly helped her to a seat beside him, and tucked the rich buffalo-robe around her, as he said kindly—

"It's not pleasant walking; but I suppose children are clamoring for their presents."

The old woman nodded her head, apparently too full of grateful emotion to utter a word. And the young man, fancying he heard a suppressed sob, turned abruptly towards his horses. With his own heart bursting under a sense of wrong, he required all his efforts at self-control not to sob with her.

He, too, watched the lights of Oak Hill, but with no such exultant feelings as his rival. And when he drove own tremble violently.

His companion's hands she felt his up to the gate and put the reins in. At the gate he paused. The next few minutes held the balance of his whole life's hope or disappointment.

And he tried to gather resolution by anticipating the agonies of the latter. But tremendous hope left him only giddy sensations and a hundred

FOLLOWING THE STAR

They followed the star the whole night through. As it moved with the mid-

night they moved too. And cared not whether it led, nor knew, nor knew.

Till Christmas day in the morning.

And just at the dawn in the twilight shad.

They came to the stable, and, unafraid, Saw the blessed Babe in the manger laid.

On Christmas Day in the morning.

We have followed the star a whole long year, And watched its beacon, now faint, now clear.

And it now stands still as we draw near.

To Christmas Day in the morning.

And just as the wise men did of old, In the lull of the winter dawning cold, We come to the stable, and behold

The Child on the Christmas morning.

O, Babe, once laid in the ox's bed, With never a pillow for thy head.

Now throned in the highest scene instead.

O Lord of the Christmas morning.

Because we have known and have loved that star, And have followed it long and have followed it far.

From the land where the shadows and darkness are, To find thee on Christmas morning.

Accept the gifts that we dare to bring, Though worthless and poor the offering.

And help our souls to rise and sing, In the joy of thy Christmas morning.

—Susan Coolidge.

this fool's errand, I can enjoy it! I suppose the servants told you the same fine tale: 'Miss gone to Mother Ripley—gentleman to meet her there.' Now, the only angel I can find here is a little black one in the capacity of a servant, who tells me that Mother Ripley is upstairs with the ache in her jaws—gossipped too much, I guess. So I thought I'd wait and see how you took the young lady's little game."

Paul Holland bit his lip. But before he had time to reply, his rival burst into a laugh.

"By all the fiddle-sticks! If you haven't brought the very woman who asked me for a ride, and I told her to wait for you. I congratulate you, old lady; my chum is much more obliging to elderly people than I am when he can't get."

"That he is, indeed!" squeaked a voice from the second-story window. "He wouldn't let me knock an old lady's bonnet down the culvert, mourning-beds and all. And because she got the neuralgia worrying over it, I guessed she gossipped too much."

Frank North's look of surprise at the nightcapped window picture changed to an embarrassed little laugh as he turned to the woman in the sleigh.

"Bless me, madam, aren't you glad you waited for him, then?"

"I am, indeed, Mr. North! And if you will be kind enough to take this new shawl and bonnet in to Mother Ripley, with my compliments, and your apology for the accident she just mentioned, I shall continue my ride with Mr. Holland, very much relieved," replied the old woman, with a ring in her voice quite electrifying to her hearers.

Divesting herself of the old woman's habiliments, the speaker revealed to her astonished suitors the graceful figure and mischievous face of the heiress of Oak Hill.

Placing the shawl and bonnet in Frank North's restless hands, while the little colored angel rapidly loaded her sleigh with bundles, she continued with a touch of apology in her voice:

"I accepted both your invitations, thinking one sleigh insufficient to hold all the goods I wished to distribute. And as a certain gentleman's carelessness about an old lady's lost bonnet obliged me to purchase one at the eleventh hour, the idea occurred to me, on the way, to test that gentleman's courtesy myself. I had determined that whichever accommodated an old lady one-half the way, should have the young lady the other half. I am confident that your friend will be equally attentive to the young lady that is, and the old lady that will be after many more merry Christmases. If the packages are loaded, you may drive on, now, Mr. Holland. We shall have to dispense with Mr. North's services and make two trips instead."

Leaving his crestfallen, stupefied rival with the two garments, which made the despised old woman hanging on his limp arm, Paul Holland drove away with his precious charge, not daring to look up for fear it was all a dream.

But when the lights of the first farmhouse gleamed on the road, it revealed Helen Engard leaning on his shoulder. And the merry sleigh bells rang out their whispered secret till the shouts of children, with arms full of presents, hailed their good St. Nicholas and his wife, no longer to Miss Engard's embarrassment.

Her Fears Allayed.

Suddenly a pale, agitated woman appeared before the genial landlord.

"Sir," she exclaimed, "there are strange noises in my room. I am afraid a burglar has hidden in the closet."

"Fie upon you, madam!" quoth the landlord, merrily. "This no burglar. 'Tis merely the spirit of a drummer who cut his throat in your room thirty years ago."

Whereupon the woman, abashed at giving way to idle fears, thanked the landlord, and returned calmly to her bed.—Indianapolis Sun.



ST. NICHOLAS, PATRON SAINT OF CHILDHOOD.

should make the distributing tour with my own double team. Mr. North's sleigh was rather overloaded last Christmas with the goods. Besides I would rather not be hailed again by the children as I was. Do you remember?" asked Miss Engard, gracefully ignoring the indelicate phraseology of unsentimental years.

"Yes, I remember. And am right glad that you don't want Mr. North to be the husband of Kris Kinkle."

"Indeed? Why?" and Miss Engard's eyes opened in wide surprise.

"Never mind. If old people's tongues wag with precepts they shouldn't with gossip."

Here was a prospect for enlightenment, and Miss Engard, knowing that persistent ineptness meant resistant moralizing from the old lady, changed her tactics.

"But Mr. North is a favorite in society. He is the most gallant of men."

"Not to old ladies," replied Mother Ripley, with a sharpness which showed that the string out of tune had been touched. "The other day, when I was in town to have the new mourning-beds put on my horse-bonnet, he knocked it out of my hand running for the train, and never even stopped to keep it from rolling down the culvert, mourning-beds and all, now!"

"It's a serious matter to miss the train when one has important—"

"Not as serious as my mourning-beds," interrupted Mother Ripley, indignant at her visitor's strange lack of sympathy. "There were other trains, but there ain't no more mourning-beds like them, no there ain't!"

certain of Miss Engard's preference, he could afford to give his rival a fair chance to get rid of him afterwards.

But now so much small matter as an agreement should make him risk his already slim chance. What did he care for Miss Engard's apparent duplicity? Her wealth was none the less solid, and half the world's matches were made by fraud.

With a motive differing widely from Frank North, Paul Holland came to a similar resolution. He loved Miss Engard sincerely enough to wish to spare the embarrassment with which his rival would have punished her. He would precede him, if possible, and quietly take his leave if not wanted. Yet that thought drove the flush of scorn and indignation to his temples.

Christmas Eve found Frank North at the livery stable, hurrying the work of harnessing his team half an hour before engaged time.

A fresh fall of snow had put the roads in splendid condition. And Miss Engard's admirer No. 1 vowed, by the merry jingle of the sleigh-bells, that if the heiress of Oak Hill was to be won at all he would win her. Rivals were getting dangerous.

Smoothly, swiftly he sped along the four-mile road which divided Oak Hill from the city. In the distance the lights already glimmered from its many windows, and he chuckled gleefully at the thought that she was even then putting the last touches to herself before the mirror.

"Master, couldn't you take a woman along a stretch, it's getting so dark, and these bundles are heavy!"

Angered at the interruption of his

disconnected thoughts, The Helen Engard he loved would not be displeased to have the old lady's company for a short distance. Had his rival preceded him? Was she gone?

He bounded up the steps, and the old woman covered deeper into her buffalo robes.

Presently he returned with languid steps. "My good lady," he said, smiling through his broken, husky voice, "it is a consolation to be of service to some one. But for you I should have gone on a fool's errand to-night. I will take you all the way to your home if you direct me."

She pointed straight ahead, and he drove his team wildly along under the moonlight, glad that something kept him a little while from home and himself.

Deceived and rejected, Paul Holland despatched himself and everybody except her who seemed most to deserve his scorn. True love always exonerates and defends its object, even under the crushing evidence of guilt.

Yes, she was lost to him. She could never have loved him, never. The sleigh bells shrieked out a ceaseless never, never. His chest heaved, and such a moan of anguish escaped him it made the woman start. She was about to lay her hand on his shoulder and speak, when she saw lights in the distance, and immediately sank back to her crouched position.

Driving up to the house at a moment from her, Paul Holland noticed Frank North leaning on the door, his face a mask of scornful satisfaction:

"Since I'm not the only one on