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Songs at Christmas

By LAURA B. DURAND

"Proud and lowly, beggar and lord,
Over the bridge they go."

SOUNDS of gaiety heighten within the house as the twilight falls and the crunch of passing feet in the street becomes less frequent. From my corner in the window-seat I can see where in the western sky, still mellow from the gold of sunset, a mass of purple hangs, and above it, like a jewelled bow, the white young moon. All angles and ugliness of the closely clustering houses and the highway are shrouded in a veil of softest snow. It wreathes in festoons, graceful and fantastic, from the dark fir trees, and lies in downy drifts in near corners and upon the far-off sloping roofs of houses—a fair, strange world, peaceful and pure, through which belated travellers pass as shadows in a dream.

"Rags and velvet, fetter and sword,
Poverty, pomp and woe."

I turn from the window and parting the soft folds of the curtains that shield me from the observation of the Christmas gathering, see the long room brilliant with light, glowing in color, and filled with the melody of the subdued laughter of many voices. There in the centre hangs the green holly with the ripe, red berries gleaming between the spiked leaves.

"Then its ho, for the holly!
This life is most jolly!"

exclaims the school boy, his face as rosy and fresh as the shrub he admires.

"Yes, sir-ee," he is saying to the young sister who looks at him with adoring eyes. "Yes, sir-ee, that rhymes with jolly," and he laughs and thumps his vigorous thigh.

"Christmas comes but once a year,
Therefore happy be . . ."

the mothers are saying, the young mothers, with lines upon their brows and solicitous eyes—mothers that not the laughter curves about the sweet lips can make forgetful of their deep responsibilities.

"For I hold it one of the wisest things
To drive dull care away . . ."

wheeze the old men, nodding their heads together like the white tufted heads of thistles gone to seed.

"Forty years over let Michaelmas pass,
Grizzling hair the brain doth clear

Then you know a boy is an ass,
Then you know the worth of a lass,
Once you have come to forty year!"

thus say the strong men, arrogant in their prime, toying with their watch charms and winking their world knowledge to each other. And the slim youths hovering about the



"This is the children's day. Laughter belongeth to youth and the gods!"

maidens tender and gallant, abandon themselves to what seems the best thing in life, to look down into beautiful eyes, while the maidens upturn ecstatic faces.

"For she is young,
And he who loves her most of all, is near."

Here and there, with merriment, dimpled, eager, and loving, speed the children, and every hand they touch is yielded to them with grace, and lifted in blessing upon them. This is the children's day! Laughter belongeth to youth and to the gods! The one know nothing—the others all! It is the learning that is so grievous.

"Laughing, weeping, hurrying ever,
Hour by hour they crowd along,
While below the mighty river
Sings them all a mocking song."

Madeline is at the piano, her white shoulders rising above her gown. She takes life seriously, not even Christmas may escape a moral precept. Her flute-like voice conveys the instruction that "the moving finger writes." Now I see her and the room no longer, but in my corner musing, scenes that the words of her song suggest float before my sight.

How the music swells, drowning the chatter within and floating, floating out into the wide white world!

"Hurry along, sorrow and song,
All is vanity 'neath the sun,
Velvet and rags, so the world wags,
So the world wags velvet and rags."

The people are pushing and elbowing about crowded windows. The snow is trampled into

a hard coating upon the stone pavements and over it all slide and jostle in easy tolerance one of another. Two school girls, pressing closely arm in arm, are stemming the tide of this river, panting and merry, exclaiming in high-pitched voices:

"What shall we give mother?"
"I thought we'd decided on a book."
"Yes, but it's fun, let's decide over again!"
"Isn't it just too lovely!"
"Oh, if my dollar holds out!"
"Now, don't get me anything, Lou."
"No? don't you dare to buy me anything, then!"

What joy! what laughter! How they squeeze each other and resolve inwardly upon that sweet dispute. They gaze at the riches in the windows. "Oh, if we only had more money!"

Behind them a woman has crept up. She has scented them out, these good young hearts, as the lost dog scents the kindly-disposed in a crowd. She is meagre and very weary, her dress is worn and pinned tightly to keep out the sharp air pleasant enough to those wrapped in furs. She has in her hand a small basket. It is full of roses, hideous imitations, devised badly from cheaply-colored tissue paper. She takes out a spray and pushes it towards the young girls.

"Buy, lady, buy—I sell none dis night—no money—buy, lady, do."

"Sorry, I can't. Come, Lou!"

"Do you make them?" asks the sister, holding back.

"Not I—black lady make dem—she not go out able to—seek—much pain—I sell—sell none dis night—buy, lady, do!" Her lips tremble, her eyes implore.

"How much are they?" the child questions, with emotion.

"Lou! How can you! You can't spare a cent on those—things!"

Oh, the scorn of the voice. The woman gazes with wild eyes at the child.

"Ten—ah cent—I sell dem to you."

"Lou, you can't, I tell you."

"There is our car fare, sister."

"We can't walk home."

"I can."

"If you do, I will, so there!"

"Here is the money, poor woman. I would give you more—yes, and I will—I'll not send that card to Billy."

"Lou, you're dying to send it!"

"Thank you, thank you, the blessed Virgin keep you, lady!"

The children pass on.

"Throw them away, Lou."

"No, Betty."

"What will you do with them?"

"I will think."

A moment later a young mother approaches—little ones clinging to her side in a frenzy of fear and delight. Lou hails her, with joy in her voice.

"Would your children like these flowers?"

"Oh, how kind, how kind! Be careful, Jim;