

bee again. He came for his paper in the mornings, if at all, and even the genial inquisitiveness of Bill Dakin, failing to discover any adequate reason why 'Gene's evening seat was vacant, applied itself to more important problems.

To Lois Holbrook alone her brother's altered ways brought perplexity and misgiving. On his "singing days," as she came to call them, he seemed almost jocose. He stopped people who were driving by the farm-house to talk with them, and his invariable theme was the possibility of the two churches uniting after all. He even called upon the minister of the Battlement, and had a friendly talk with him upon the safe topic of the ultimate restoration of the Jews. But the singing days were invariably followed by the silent, black-coated days, when he sat hour after hour reading the minor prophets, until Lois thought she should scream.

What ailed him? At first, remembering that strange look in his eyes on the night when he had dropped the Bible, Lois persuaded herself that he had had a partial "stroke." But his actions varied so persistently that she abandoned this theory, and came to believe that he must be "possessed." What she meant by this she did not know, but the vague associations of the word were those of terror, and her anxiety deepened as the days grew shorter

and darker, and the great snowdrifts began to heap themselves against the lilac-bushes and climb silently toward the window-sills, for the winter's siege. And indeed if an idea ever took possession of a man, dividing his affections from his will, summoning from the depths of a gentle nature all the wild daring lurking there, making some cause so alluring and one's self so paltry that self-immolation seems a joy, then Eugene Holbrook was possessed.

It was Christmas Eve. The sexton of the Minaret had hauled from John Richardson's upper pasture a great fir-balsam, symmetrical as a candle-flame, and more odorous than frankincense. Unaided, he had nailed it into place in front of the platform. It was one of his singing days, and he laughed more than once as he helped Lois and the minister's daughter hang the tree with gifts for the Sunday-school, and long festoons of threaded popcorn, and muslin candy-gags, cut stocking-shape and sewn with bright worsted.

Then the women went home for supper, but 'Gene stayed to tend the fires and light the lamps. At a quarter before seven he began cautiously to light the colored candles on the tree. He counted them, even: there were sixty—one for each year of his life and one over. In a sudden whim he plucked

off that sixtieth candle, and flung it under the tree. This was to be his night, his own great night, and it seemed to him that the years that came after did not count, even if they were many!

At seven, the Sunday-school children were pounding on the door, and by eight, the presents had been distributed and the Christmas hymns sung, and the minister's painful annual effort to be cheerful was concluded. The little company withdrew noisily, family after family piling into its sleigh and shouting "Good-nights" that were drowned by the sleigh-bells. Bill Dakin offered Miss Lois a ride down to the Hollow, as usual, and at last the sexton was left quite alone.

He locked the door stealthily. The colored candles had burnt very low; even Dakin had warned him not to let that balsam-tree catch fire. Catch fire? He laughed to himself at Dakin's prudence as he snatched up armful after armful of the loose papers in which the gifts had been wrapped, and heaped them under the balsam's low, resinous boughs. Catch fire? He began to pile the straw-filled seat cushions all around, working more and more swiftly with each moment, until he was fairly running. He jerked down the big windows from the top, studying cunningly the draught. It was just right—and the whole thing was just right—and it flashed over him that it had all been

foreordained before the foundation of the world.

He pulled a guttering candle from the tree and held it to the papers, watching them curl and leap upward with a rush of flame. Then he lifted the big gilt pulpit Bible reverently from its cushion, and walked steadily down the aisle toward the door. At the Holbrook pew he paused; there, at the farther end, were his own boyish initials, cut idly deep; here, at this end, the old deacon used to sit, upright and implacable. The son shook his head and went on, the Bible under his arm, the great balsam crackling behind him. He meant to go down to Bill Dakin and give himself up. It was arson; that meant the county jail for many a year—or else the asylum. For they would be sure to think him crazy if he told them that he had set fire to his own church on Christmas Eve, to bring peace and goodwill into the south township!

But the tree and the flimsy platform were making such a noise now! He unlocked the door and ran out, locking it again behind him, and tossing the key into a snow-drift. He meant to take no chances.

And all at once he was aware of little Polly Dakin, trotting breathlessly up to the church steps.

"Gene, I forgot my candy-bag!"

He stared at her, shaking his head.

"I left it in the front seat," she persisted, "right by the tree. And papa said he could hold the horses while I came back for it. My! What makes the church so bright?"

"You can't get it!" he cried. For the fire was already roaring like a wind-swept woodland, and the red light from the front windows shone on the child's face and the piled drifts of snow.

She tried bravely to choke back the tears.

"It—was—my—candy-bag!"

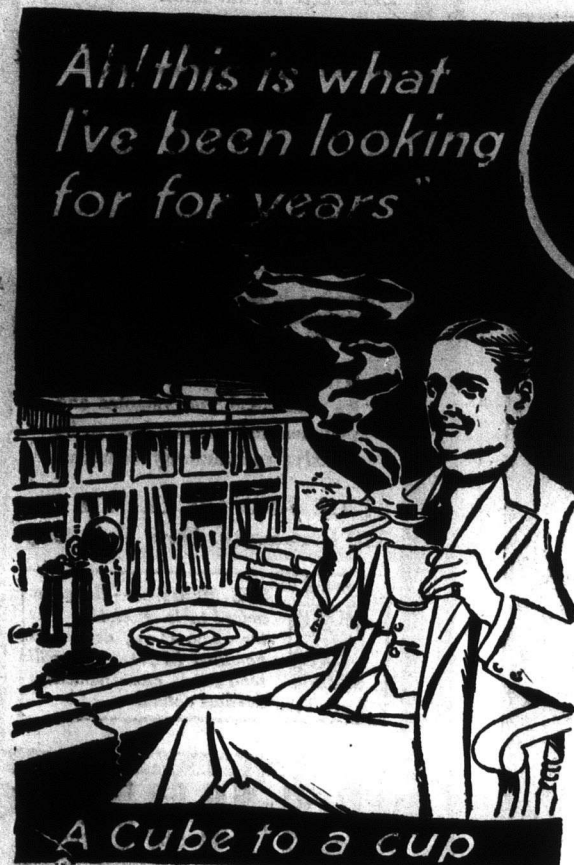
"Stay here!" screamed Holbrook. "I'll get it for you!"

He laid down the Bible and dashed into the snow-drift, snatching for the buried key. It was a minute or two before he grasped it, and though he sprang at the door then with tiger-like swiftness opened it and darted in, it seemed to the awe-stricken child as if the whole church were a fiery furnace. He ran straight down the aisle toward the flaming, swaying tree—and he must have stumbled.

She waited, too frightened to move or call—waited for 'Gene to come back. Her father, down on the Hollow road, saw the flames burst from the Minaret's windows, and wheeling his restless horses, lashed them to a run. From road to road around the hill-top hoarse cries rang over the frozen fields, and Bill Dakin's horses were not the only ones that were galloping. And still the little girl stood in front of the open door of the blazing church; and she explained to her father that 'Gene had gone in to get her candy-bag, and she was waiting for him to come out.

The Minaret was all aflame now, flaring up into the starlit night. And from somewhere in that quiet heaven came a breath of wind, blowing where it listed, and sparks from the Minaret, fluttering over the road, settled like gay-winged butterflies upon the Battlement, and in ten minutes more the two churches were striving to outshine each other once for all, tossing their angry red hearts higher and ever higher into the silent Christmas sky—the sky that was once brightened by a strange star and all agleam with shining wings and echoing with angelic voices.

'Gene Holbrook's secret remained his own. Dakin remembered warning him about the candles, but no one seemed to think that the fire was really the sexton's fault. "To get a candy-bag!" Lois kept saying. And she forgot her theory of "possession," and persuaded herself that her brother was a little touched, like their Uncle Joab. At Dakin's store it was noted, though not unkindly, that 'Gene didn't even get the candy-bag. Yet his death did something to dignify his memory, and the Rev. Salem Kittredge, preaching the first sermon in the new church, made a touching reference to the late Deacon Holbrook, who had lost his life to please a child after trying in vain to save the church of his fathers.



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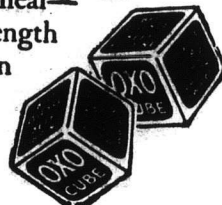
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