

The Blow-Out at Jenkins' Grocery.

By ELLA HIGGINSON.

THE hands of the big, round clock in Mr. Jenkins' grocery store pointed to eleven. Mr. Jenkins was tying a string around a paper bag containing a dollar's worth of sugar. He held one end of the string between his teeth. His three clerks were going around the store with stiff prances of deference to the customers they were serving. It was the night before Christmas. They were all so worn out that their attempts at smiles were only painful contortions.

Mr. Jenkins looked at the clock. Then his eyes went in a hurried glance of pity to a woman sitting on a high stool close to the window. Her feet were drawn up on the top rung, and her thin shoulders stooped over her chest. She had sunken cheeks and hollow eyes; her cheekbones stood out sharply.

For two hours she had sat there; almost motionless. Three times she had lifted her head and fixed a strained gaze upon Mr. Jenkins and asked: "D'yuh want to shet up yet?" Each time, receiving an answer in the negative, she had sunk back into the same attitude of brute-like waiting.

It was a wild night. The rain drove its long, slanting lances down the window-panes. The wind howled around corners, banged loose shutters, creaked swinging sign-boards to and fro, and vexed the telephone wires to a shrill, continuous screaming. Fierce gusts swept in when the door was opened.

Christmas shoppers came and went. The woman saw nothing inside the store. Her eyes were set on the doors of a brightly-lighted saloon across the street.

It was a small, new "boom" town on Puget Sound. There was a saloon on every corner, and a brass band in every saloon. The "establishment" opposite was having its "opening" that night. "At home" cards in square envelopes had been sent out to desirable patrons during the previous week. That day, during an hour's sunshine, a yellow chariot, drawn by six cream-colored horses with snow-white manes and tails, had gone slowly through the streets, bearing the members of the band clad in white and gold. It was followed by three open carriages, gay with the actresses who were to dance and sing that night on the stage in the rear of the saloon. All had yellow hair and were dressed in yellow with white silk sashes, and white ostrich plumes

falling to their shoulders. It was a gorgeous procession and it "drew."

The woman lived out in the Grand View addition. The addition consisted mainly of cabins built of "shakes" and charred stumps. The grand view was to come ten or twenty years later on, when the forests surrounding the addition had taken their departure. It was a full mile from the store.

She had walked in with her husband, through the rain and slush, after putting six small children to bed. They were very poor. Her husband was shiftless. It was whispered of them by their neighbors that they couldn't get credit for "two bits" except at the saloons.

A relative had sent the woman ten dollars for a Christmas gift. She had gone wild with joy. Ten dollars! It was wealth. For once the children should have a real Christmas—a good dinner, toys, and candy! Of all things, there should be a wax doll for the little girl who had cried for one every Christmas, and never even had one in her arms. Just for this one time they should be happy—like other children; and she should be happy in their happiness—like other mothers. What did it matter that she had only two calico dresses and one pair of shoes, half soled, at that, and capped across the toes?

Her husband had entered into her childish joy. He was kind and affectionate—when he was sober. That was why she had never had the heart to leave him. He was one of those men who are always needing, pleading for—and, alas! receiving—forgiveness; one of those men whom their women love passionately and cling to forever.

He promised her solemnly that he would not drink a drop that Christmas—so solemnly that she believed him. He had helped her to wash the dishes and put the children to bed. And he had kissed her.

Her face had been radiant when they came into Mr. Jenkins' store. That poor, gray face, with its sunken cheeks and eyes! They bought a turkey—and with what anxious care she had selected it—testing its tenderness, balancing it on her bony hands, examining the scales with keen, narrowed eyes when it was weighed—and a quart of cranberries, a can of mince meat and a can of plum pudding, a head of celery, a pint of Olympia oysters, candy, nuts—and then the toys!

She trembled with eagerness. Her husband stood watching her, smiling good-humoredly, with his hands in his pockets. Mr. Jenkins indulged in

some serious speculation as to where the money was coming from to pay for all this "blow-out." He set his lips together and resolved that the "blow-out" should not leave the store, under any amount of promises, until the cash paying for it was in his cash-drawer.

Suddenly the band began to play across the street. The man threw up his head, like an old war-horse at the sound of a bugle note. A fire came into his eyes; into his face a flush of excitement. He walked down to the window and stood looking out, jingling some keys in his pocket. He breathed quickly.

After a few moments he went back to his wife. Mr. Jenkins had stepped away to speak to another customer.

"Say, Molly, old girl," he said, affectionately, without looking at her, "yuh can spare me enough out o' that tenner to git a plug o' tobaccoer for Christmas, can't yuh?"

"W'y—I guess so," said she, slowly. The first cloud fell on her happy face.

"Well, jest let me have it, an' I'll run out an' be back before yuh're ready to pay for these here things. I'll only git two bits' worth."

She turned very pale. "Can't you git it here, Mart?" "No," he said, in a whisper; "his'n ain't fit to chew. I'll be right back, Molly, honest."

She stood motionless, her eyes cast down, thinking. If she refused, he would be angry and remain away from home all the next day to pay her for the insult. If she gave it to him—well, she would have to take the chances. But, oh, her hand shook as she drew the small gold piece from her shabby purse and reached it to him. His big, warm hand closed over it.

She looked up at him. Her eyes spoke the passionate prayer that her lips could not utter.

"Don't stay long, Mart," she whispered, not daring to say more.

"I won't, Molly," he whispered back. "I'll hurry up. Git anything yuh want."

She finished her poor shopping. Mr. Jenkins wrapped everything up neatly. Then he rubbed his hands together and looked at her, and said: "Well, there, now, Mis' Dupen."

"I—jest lay 'em all together there on the counter," she said, hesitatingly. "I'll have to wait till Mart comes back before I can pay yuh."

"I see him go into the s'loon over there," piped out the errand boy, shrilly.

At the end of half an hour she climbed upon the high stool, and

fixed her eyes on the saloon opposite, and sat there.

She saw nothing but the glare of those window and the light streaming out when the doors opened. She heard nothing but the torturous blare of the music. After awhile something commenced beating painfully in her throat and temples. Her limbs grew stiff—she was scarcely conscious that they ached. Once she shuddered strongly, as dogs do when they lie in the cold, waiting.

At twelve o'clock Mr. Jenkins touched her kindly on the arm. She looked up with a start. Her face was gray and old; her eyes were almost wild in their strained despair.

"I guess I'll have to shet up now, Mis' Dupen," he said, apologetically. "I'm sorry—"

She got down from the stool at once. "I can't take them things," she said, almost whispering. "I hate to of put yuh to all that trouble of doin' 'em up. I thought—but I can't take 'em. I hope yuh won't mind—very much." Her bony fingers twisted together under her thin shawl.

"Oh, that's all right," said Mr. Jenkins, in an embarrassed way. She moved stiffly to the door. He put out the lights and followed her. He felt mean, somehow. For one second he hesitated; then he locked the door and gave it a shake to make sure that it was all right.

"Well," he said, "good-night. I wish you a mer—"

"Good-night," said the woman. She was turning away, when the doors of the saloon opened for two or three men to enter. The music, which had ceased for a few minutes, struck up another air—a familiar air.

She burst suddenly into wild and terrible laughter. "Oh, my Lord," she cried out, "they're a-playin' 'Home, Sweet Home! In there! Oh, my Lord! Wouldn't that kill yuh!'"

"When the Birds go North Again."

By ELLA HIGGINSON

Oh, every year hath its winter,
And every year hath its rain—
But a day is always coming
When the birds go North again.

When new leaves swell in the forest,
And grass springs green on the plain,
And the alder's veins turn crimson—
And the birds go North again.

Oh, every heart hath its sorrow,
And every heart hath its pain—
But a day is always coming
When the birds go North again.

'Tis the sweetest thing to remember
If courage be on the wane,
When the dark, cold days are over—
Why, the birds go North again.

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