

When Santa Claus Got Lost—Amusing Yuletide Tale Of Modern New York.

A Christmas Surprise That Didn't Turn-out Just the Way it Was Intended But All's Well That Ends Well

BY BERTRAM LEBHAR.

Marion Kemp wavered the letter gleefully before her husband's eyes. "Good news, Richard! We're invited to eat Christmas dinner with the Smiths. Celia writes that she positively will not take no for an answer. She says that she and her husband are very anxious to meet you."

Kemp frowned. "It's very nice of them to invite us, of course; but if it's all the same to you, Marion, I'd rather that we declined that invitation."

His young wife looked surprised and disappointed. "It's not at all the same to me, Richard. I'm just tickled to death at the chance to spend Christmas in a home circle instead of having to dine at this dismal hotel. I thought you'd be delighted, too."

"Celia Smith and her husband are the most delightful couple you ever met, and they've got the sweetest children. I'm sure we'd enjoy ourselves immensely. What makes you disinclined to go, Richard?"

Her husband stroked his Vandike beard. "The Smiths are no doubt just as nice as you say, but, unfortunately, I've never met them and, therefore, it's bound to feel strange sitting at their table."

"You know my aversion to dining out with people I don't know well. I always feel uncomfortable eating among strangers. I'd ever so much prefer to have Christmas dinner at the hotel here."

"Nonsense," retorted his wife. "The Smiths are not strangers by any means. It is true that you have never met them; but I have known Celia ever since we were both in short skirts. We have always been almost like sisters, and you are bound to feel at home."

"Besides, I defy anybody not to feel at ease in their house. They are the most hospitable people. I'll guarantee that before you have been there half an hour you'll feel as if you were one of the family."

"If your absurd aloofness is your only reason for wishing to decline their invitation, Richard, I am going to write to Celia and tell her that we accept with pleasure."

Her husband shrugged his shoulders. "If you are so anxious to go, ahead and accept. I suppose I can stand it. I am sure, though, that I should be much more comfortable dining alone with you at this hotel on Christmas Day."

Marion lost no time in writing to her friend that she and her husband would be delighted to participate in their Yuletide cheer and, on Christmas Day the Kemps journeyed in a Subway train to the Harlem flat in which the Smiths lived, bearing with them numerous packages for the children.

When Celia Smith opened the door for them Marion detected immediately that her friend had been crying.

"I've just received a bitter disappointment," the latter explained. "My husband has telephoned me that he won't be able to be with us today."

"There's been a big railroad accident up-State and his editor has sent him up there to get the story. You can thank your lucky stars, Marion, that you didn't marry a newspaper man. It's something terrible the way they have to neglect their families."

"Just imagine having to eat one's Christmas dinner without one's husband—and all because of a railway accident up-State. As though that horrid old railroad couldn't have had their accident on any other day but Christmas."

"I don't care so much about myself," she went on tearfully, "but it makes me feel terribly bad on the children's account. They've been looking forward so to this day."

"We're to have a children's party this evening, and we have promised them that Santa Claus will attend in person. They're almost beside themselves with excitement at the idea."

"They thoroughly believe in Santa Claus, you know; and Jack had planned to disguise himself as Kris Kringle this evening and gratify their wish to see the old gentleman."

"Now, of course, all our plans are spoiled by Jack's untimely absence. There'll be no Santa Claus for the kids, and it will be a bitter disappointment for them."

"What a pity!" exclaimed Marion. "After all, Celia, why shouldn't the little dears have their fun just the same? I'm sure Richard will be delighted to take your husband's place and fill the role of Kris Kringle this evening—won't you Richard, dear?"

Her husband assented without enthusiasm. As became his position as instructor of Latin at a high school he was a very serious-minded and dignified man, and the idea of making a fool of himself (as he deemed it) at a children's party, did not appeal to him at all.

"Would you really, Mr. Kemp?" exclaimed their hostess, turning to him gratefully. "It will be a great load off my mind, if you'll accommodate us. I'm afraid it's asking too much of you, though."

"Not at all," he answered. "I shall be glad to do it."

He made a desperate effort to look pleased. "That's the kind of thing Richard thoroughly enjoys," declared Marion with a mischievous glance at her husband.

"I've got the costume all complete," declared Mrs. Smith. "Jack brought it home with him yesterday. It's a very elaborate affair—white beard, wig, red robe lined with ermine, a box of theatrical make-up, and a sack full of toys. You'll be so completely disguised, Mr. Kemp, that I'm sure the children will never suspect that you're not the real thing."

Marion clapped her hands with delight. "It will be great fun. And how will Santa Claus make his entrance, Celia? By means of the chimney?"

Her husband darted at her a look of horror and indignation which she acknowledged by a mischievous grin. She was always glad of an opportunity to upset his dignity, for she considered it absurd that even an instructor of Latin at a high school should take himself so seriously.

To Kemp's great relief, their hostess did not think well of the chimney idea. "Such a thing is scarcely possible in a Harlem flat," she declared. "Jack had planned to go to the home of a friend nearby to don his costume, and then drive up to the door of this house in a taxicab."

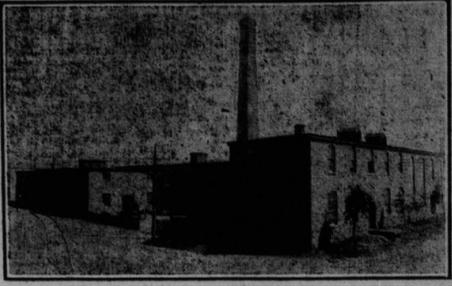
"Richard can go back to our hotel, put on the costume in our room, hire a taxicab at the door, and return here in half an hour. There is no reason why he shouldn't carry out the thing done."

"But, my dear," said Kemp, "surely you don't expect me to come down in the elevator of our hotel and walk through the lobby attired in that preposterous outfit."

"Why not? It is Christmas day, and nobody thinks anything of seeing a man dressed up as Santa Claus; and besides, you will be so effective that nobody will recognize you."

Kemp had to acknowledge the force of this latter argument, and his protests were further silenced by his wife's exclaiming indignantly: "Surely, Richard, you would not be so mean and selfish as to spoil the dear children's fun by refusing to do a little thing like that for them?"

"Very well," he agreed stiffly. "I'll do it; but if any of the faculty of the high school should happen to see me—"



The Amherst Foundry Company, Amherst.

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They welcomed this suggestion with noisy delight, and crowded to the two front windows, pressing their little faces against the panes with eager expectancy.

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"That's right, dearie," responded Mrs. Smith. "He's sure to come presently."

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"That may be the reason," agreed her friend. "If he doesn't come presently, I'm going to telephone the hotel. It's possible that he may still be up in our room. Richard is so absent-minded, you know. It would be just like him to have forgotten what he went up there for and to have gone to bed instead."

Another half hour passed, and still no sign of the missing Santa Claus. The children were ready to cry with disappointment and despair. Even little Marjorie Smith was beginning to lose confidence in her mother's assurances.

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Celia couldn't help speaking a little sharply. The disappointments of the day were beginning to get on her nerves.

Marion went to the corner drug-store, and got the hotel on the wire. "Hallo! Is this the clerk? This is Mrs. Richard Kemp talking. I want to know whether my husband came in this evening. Yes, that's right—room eight hundred and three. You say he did come in—about two hours ago? Well, what on earth became of him? Did you see him go out again? You didn't, eh? Then he must be upstairs still. Connect me with the room, please."

There was a grim look on Mrs. Kemp's face as she waited for the connection to be made; but it changed to an expression of alarm and horror when, after a long wait, the clerk informed her that he could get no answer from room eight hundred and three.

"No answer?" she gasped. "Then, something serious must have happened. He must be lying up there unconscious or dead. Maybe he has been murdered. Oh, my poor Richard! I'm sure something terrible has occurred."

"Calm yourself, madam," said the hotel clerk soothingly. "Everything is probably all right. It's more than likely that your husband is taking a nap. Shall I send a bell-boy upstairs and see if he can arouse him?"

"Yes, please, do. Tell him to hurry. Oh, dear me, I am so frightened. Mr. Kemp is such a light sleeper that I am sure the ringing of the telephone bell would wake him if everything were all right."

After a considerable wait the clerk informed her that her husband was not in his room at all. The bell-boy had been up there, and, failing to get any response to his loud and repeating knocking, had let himself in with a pass-key and discovered that the room was empty.

"Goodness gracious!" cried Marion. "Where could he have gone?"

"He must have gone out without notifying him, Mrs. Kemp," said the clerk. "Wait a minute and I'll inquire of the elevator man if he remembers taking him down."

Through the telephone Marion suddenly heard loud laughter and the clerk's voice saying chokingly, as though endeavoring to restrain his mirth:

"It's all right, Mrs. Kemp. The elevator man says that your husband did go out over an hour and a half ago. He was dressed up as Santa Claus, the elevator man says. Ha, ha, ha. Excuse me, Mrs. Kemp, but I can't help laughing at the idea of your husband in that rig. It's a good thing I didn't see him when he went out or I'd have had a fit."

"There's nothing to laugh at," declared Marion haughtily. "Mr. Kemp is doing it to entertain some little children. It's very queer, though, if he left the hotel an hour and a half ago, that he shouldn't have reached here by now. I wonder what could have happened to him? Will you please inquire whether he lived one (Continued on next page.)"

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