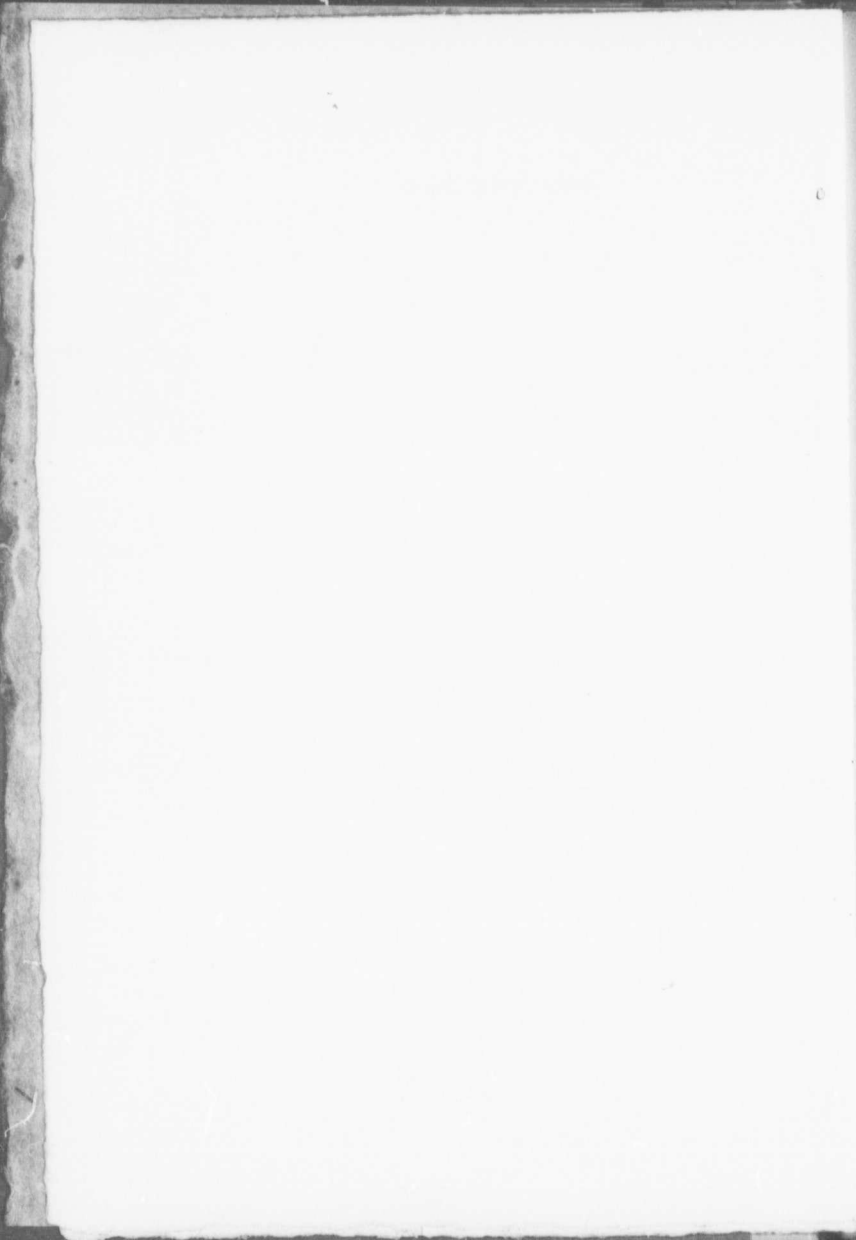


MERRY
CHRISTMAS

The text is centered within a double-line rectangular border. Surrounding the text are embossed illustrations of four animals: a reindeer in the top left, a sheep in the top right, a cow in the bottom left, and a pig in the bottom right.



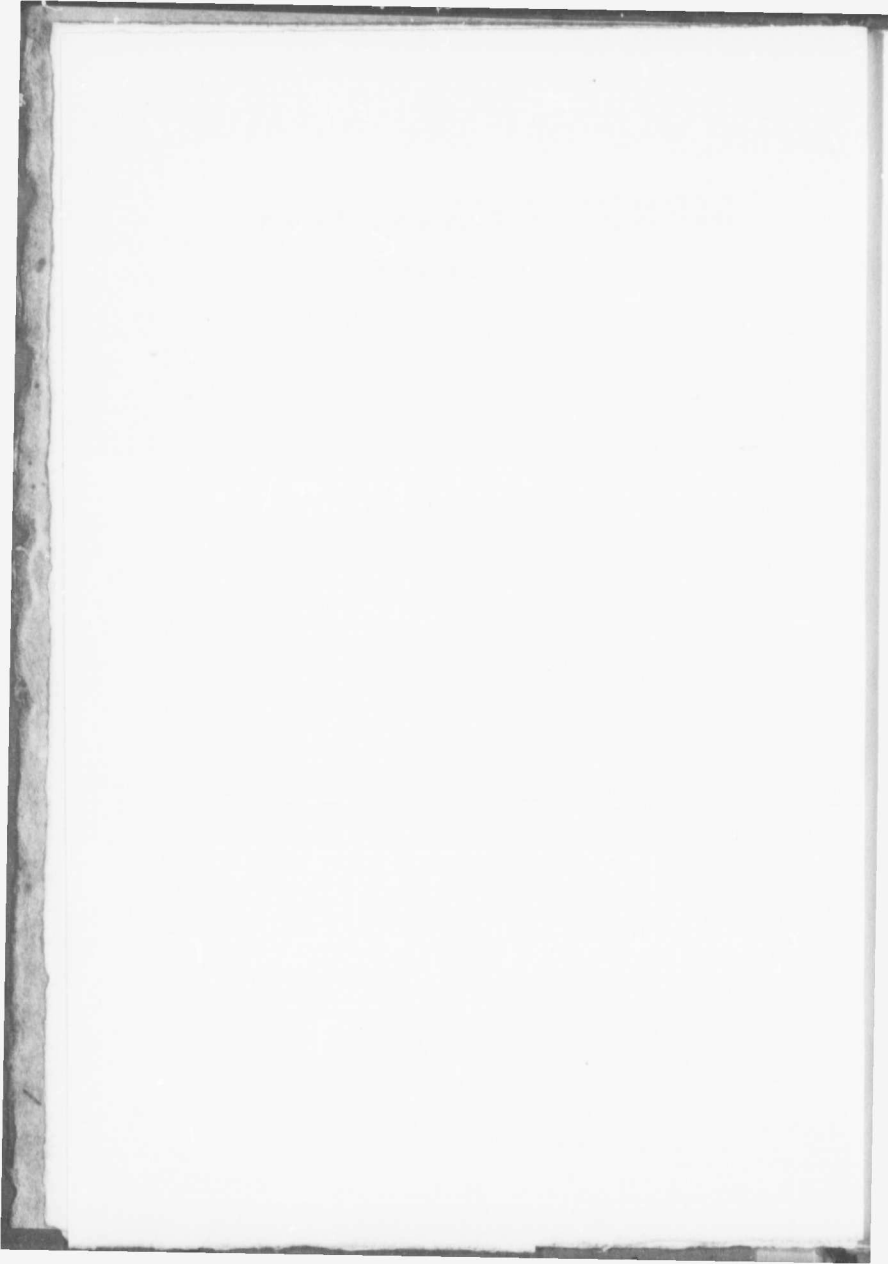
MERRY CHRISTMAS



MERRY CHRISTMAS

By STEPHEN LEACOCK

Courtesy of Hearst's Magazine



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“MY DEAR YOUNG FRIEND,” said Father Time, as he laid his hand gently upon my shoulder, “you are entirely wrong.” Then I looked up over my shoulder from the table at which I was sitting and I saw him.

But I had known, or felt, for at least the last half-hour, that he was standing somewhere near me.

You have had, I do not doubt, good reader, more than once that strange, uncanny feeling that there is some one unseen standing beside you—in a darkened room, let us say, with a dying fire when the night has grown late, and the October wind sounds low outside, and when, through the thin curtain that we call Reality, the Unseen World starts for a moment clear upon our dreaming sense.

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"*Young* friend," I said, my mind, as one's mind is apt to do in such a case, running to an unimportant detail. "Why do you call me young?"

"Your pardon," he answered gently—he had a gentle way with him, had Father Time—"the fault is in my failing eyes. I took you at first sight for something under a hundred."

"Under a hundred?" I expostulated. "Well, I should think so!"

"Your pardon again," said Time, "the fault is in my failing memory. I forgot. You seldom pass that now-a-days, do you? Your life is very short of late."

I heard him breathe a wistful, hollow sigh. Very ancient and dim he seemed as he stood beside me. But I did not turn to look upon him: I had no need to. I knew his form, in the inner and clearer sight of things, as well as every human being knows by innate instinct the unseen face and form of Father Time.

I could hear him murmuring beside me: "Short

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—short, your life is short,” till the sound of it seemed to mingle with the measured ticking of a clock somewhere in the silent house.

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“How do you know that I am wrong?” I asked.
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“Yes,” I admitted, “that’s what I said.”

“And what makes you think that?” he questioned, stooping, so it seemed to me, still further over my shoulder.

“Why,” I answered, “the trouble is this: I’ve been sitting here for hours, sitting still goodness only knows how far into the night, trying to think out something to write for a Christmas story. And it won’t go. It can’t be done—not in these awful days.”

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"My dear boy," he interrupted gravely, "don't you know that there has always been Christmas?"

I was silent. Father Time had moved across the room and stood beside the fireplace, leaning on the mantel. The little wreaths of smoke from the fading fire seemed to mingle with his shadowy outline.

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“It was but yesterday,” said Father Time, and his voice seemed to soften with the memory of bygone years. “I remember it well.”

“Ah,” I continued, “that was Christmas indeed. Give me back such days as those, with the old good cheer, the old stage-coaches and the gabled inns and the warm red wine, the snapdragon and the Christmas tree, and I’ll believe again in Christmas, yes, in Father Christmas himself!”

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MERRY CHRISTMAS

He looked about him, as it were, with a new and kindling interest.

"A pleasant room," he said, "and what better, sir, than the wind without and a brave fire within!"

Then his eye fell upon the mantelpiece, where lay among the litter of books and pipes a little toy horse.

"Ah!" said Father Christmas, almost gayly, "children in the house!"

"One," I answered, "the sweetest boy in all the world."

"I'll be bound he is!" said Father Christmas, and he broke now into a merry laugh that did one's heart good to hear. "They all are! Lord bless me! The number that I have seen, and each and every one—and quite right, too—the sweetest child in all the world! And how old, do you say? Two and a half all but two months except a week? The very sweetest age of all, I'll bet you say, eh, what? They all do!"

And the old man broke again into such a jolly chuckling of laughter that his snow-white locks shook upon his head.

"But stop a bit," he added. "This horse is broken—tut, tut,—a hind leg nearly off. This won't do!"

MERRY CHRISTMAS

He had the toy in his lap in a moment, mending it. It was wonderful to see, for all his age, how deft his fingers were.

"Time," he said, and it was amusing to note that his voice had assumed almost an authoritative tone, "reach me that piece of string. That's right. Here, hold your finger across the knot. There! Now, then, a bit of beeswax. What? No beeswax? Tut, tut, how ill-supplied your houses are to-day. How can you mend toys, sir, without beeswax? Still, it will stand up now."

I tried to murmur my best thanks. But Father Christmas waved my gratitude aside.

"Nonsense," he said, "that's nothing. That's my life. Perhaps the little boy would like a book, too. I have them here in the packet. Here, sir, Jack and the Beanstalk, a most profound thing. I read it to myself often still. How damp it is!" Pray, sir, will you let me dry my books before your fire?"

"Only too willingly," I said. "How wet and torn they are!"

He stood bowed over his little books, his hands trembling as he turned the pages. Then he looked up, the old fear upon his face again.

MERRY CHRISTMAS

"That sound!" he said. "Listen! It is guns—I hear them!"

"No, no," I said, "it is nothing. Only a car passing in the street below."

"Listen," he said. "Hear that again—voices crying!"

"No, no," I answered, "not voices, only the night wind among the trees."

"My children's voices!" he exclaimed. "I hear them everywhere—they come to me in every wind—and I see them as I wander in the night and storm—my children—torn and dying in the trenches—beaten into the ground—I hear them crying from the hospitals—each one to me, still, as I knew him once, a little child. Time, Time," he cried, reaching out his arms in appeal, "give me back my children!"

"You see?" said Time. "His heart is breaking, and will you not help him if you can?"

"Only too gladly," I replied. "But what is there to do?"

"This," said Father Time, "listen."

He stood before me, grave and solemn, a shadowy figure but half seen though he was close beside me. The firelight had died down, and through the curtained windows there came already the

MERRY CHRISTMAS

first streaks of dawn. "The world that once you knew," said Father Time, "seems broken and destroyed about you. You must not let them know—the children. The cruelty and the horror and the hate that racks the world to-day—keep it from them. Some day he will know"—here Time pointed to the kneeling form of Father Christmas—"that his children, that once were, have not died in vain: that from their sacrifice shall come a nobler, better world for all to live in, a world where countless happy children shall hold bright their memory forever. But for the children of To-day, save and spare them all you can from the evil hate and horror of the war. Later they will know and understand. Not yet. Give them back their Merry Christmas and its kind thoughts, and its Christmas charity, till later on there shall be with it again Peace upon Earth, Good Will toward Men."

His voice ceased. It seemed to vanish, as it were, in the sighing of the wind.

I looked up. Father Time and Christmas had vanished from the room. The fire was low and the day was breaking visibly outside.

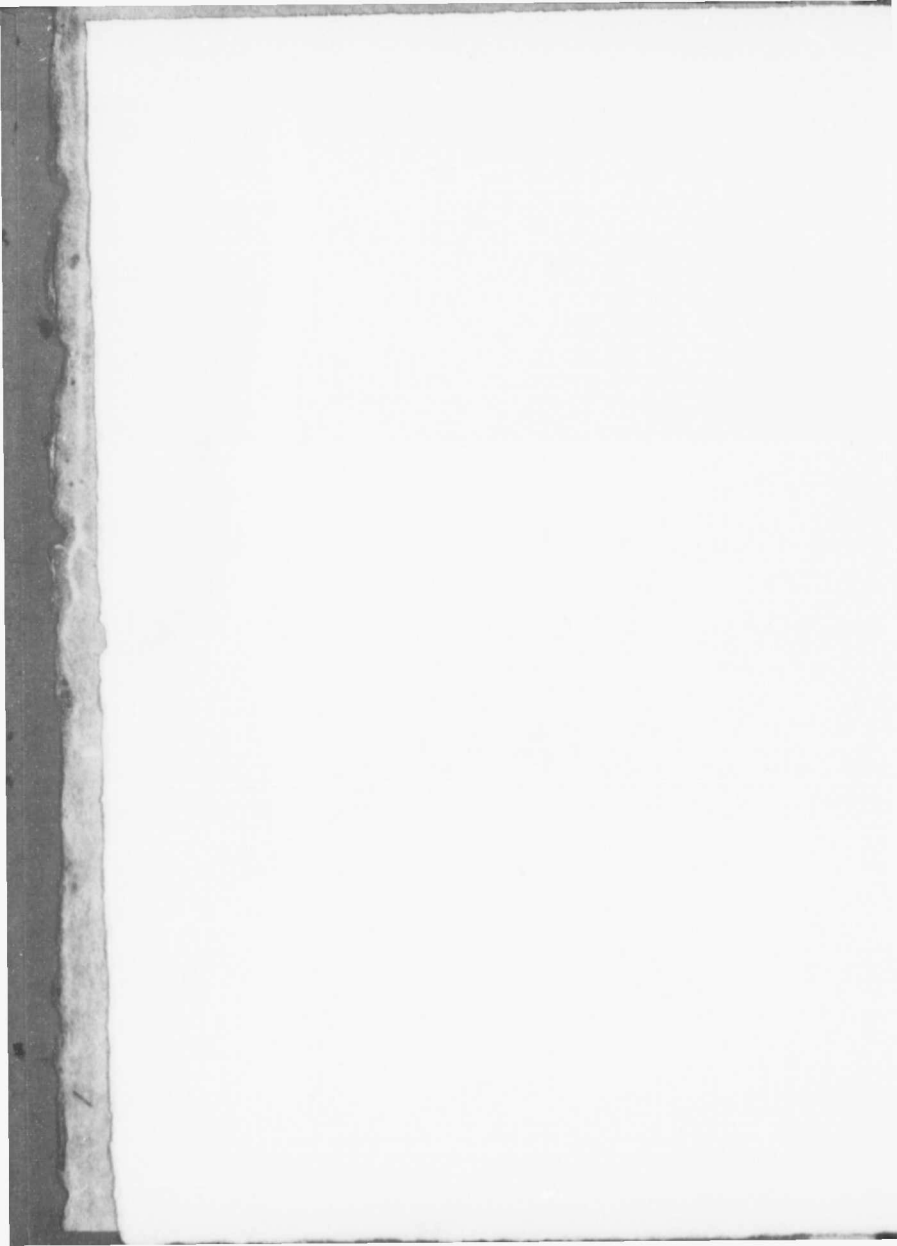
"Let us begin," I murmured. "I will mend this broken horse."

Two hundred copies printed in the
shop of WILLIAM EDWIN RUDGE
for his friends. *Christmas, 1917.*



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MERRY CHRISTMAS

He had the toy in his lap in a moment, mending it. It was wonderful to see, for all his age, how deft his fingers were.

"Time," he said, and it was amusing to note that his voice had assumed almost an authoritative tone, "reach me that piece of string. That's right. Here, hold your finger across the knot. There! Now, then, a bit of beeswax. What? No beeswax? Tut, tut, how ill-supplied your houses are to-day. How can you mend toys, sir, without beeswax? Still, it will stand up now."

I tried to murmur my best thanks. But Father Christmas waved my gratitude aside.

"Nonsense," he said, "that's nothing. That's my life. Perhaps the little boy would like a book, too. I have them here in the packet. Here, sir, Jack and the Beanstalk, a most profound thing. I read it to myself often still. How damp it is!" Pray, sir, will you let me dry my books before your fire?"

"Only too willingly," I said. "How wet and torn they are!"

He stood bowed over his little books, his hands trembling as he turned the pages. Then he looked up, the old fear upon his face again.

MERRY CHRISTMAS

"That sound!" he said. "Listen! It is guns—I hear them!"

"No, no," I said, "it is nothing. Only a car passing in the street below."

"Listen," he said. "Hear that again—voices crying!"

"No, no," I answered, "not voices, only the night wind among the trees."

"My children's voices!" he exclaimed. "I hear them everywhere—they come to me in every wind—and I see them as I wander in the night and storm—my children—torn and dying in the trenches—beaten into the ground—I hear them crying from the hospitals—each one to me, still, as I knew him once, a little child. Time, Time," he cried, reaching out his arms in appeal, "give me back my children!"

"You see?" said Time. "His heart is breaking, and will you not help him if you can?"

"Only too gladly," I replied. "But what is there to do?"

"This," said Father Time, "listen."

He stood before me, grave and solemn, a shadowy figure but half seen though he was close beside me. The firelight had died down, and through the curtained windows there came already the

MERRY CHRISTMAS

first streaks of dawn. "The world that once you knew," said Father Time, "seems broken and destroyed about you. You must not let them know—the children. The cruelty and the horror and the hate that racks the world to-day—keep it from them. Some day he will know"—here Time pointed to the kneeling form of Father Christmas—"that his children, that once were, have not died in vain: that from their sacrifice shall come a nobler, better world for all to live in, a world where countless happy children shall hold bright their memory forever. But for the children of To-day, save and spare them all you can from the evil hate and horror of the war. Later they will know and understand. Not yet. Give them back their Merry Christmas and its kind thoughts, and its Christmas charity, till later on there shall be with it again Peace upon Earth, Good Will toward Men."

His voice ceased. It seemed to vanish, as it were, in the sighing of the wind.

I looked up. Father Time and Christmas had vanished from the room. The fire was low and the day was breaking visibly outside.

"Let us begin," I murmured. "I will mend this broken horse."

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