

What Christmas Day Brought the Convict

It was late in the afternoon of the day before Christmas. To the woman who waited for news and yet dreaded its coming it was the closing of the longest, wretchedest, dreariest day that she had ever known. She had been advised not to hope, yet she clung to hope, feeling that if she gave up entirely she must die. If the worst came she must live for the sake of the children, who were too young to know of the shadow that clouded their lives.

Often and often the woman went to the window and looked out at the dreary street. Once when a boy came down the walk with the blue uniform of a telegraph messenger she clutched at her throat and uttered a little moan of despair.

"What's matter, mamma?" asked the little girl that clung to her skirts. The woman could not reply until after the messenger had passed her gate. Then she caught the child in her arms and covered its face with kisses. Hope once more revived in her heart.

When she went to the window again the woman looked out and saw her husband coming. In the wave of joy that surged over her she did not notice that he looked old and hopeless and broken and bent and that there



HE'LL OPEN THE TELEGRAM.

was no elasticity in his step. She threw open the door and ran down the gravelled walk to the gate.

"John, oh, John," she cried, flinging her arms about his neck, "you are free! Heaven be praised for his mercies. You are free."

The man pressed her to his heart, unable to speak.

"I knew that they would not find you guilty—they could not," she cried. "My poor Grace," he murmured, stroking her hair, "you must be brave. I have been found guilty. Five years in the penitentiary."

"Then how is it that you are here?"

"The judge who sentenced me has given me a reprieve on my own recognition so that I can spend Christmas with you and the babies. I am in honor bound to surrender myself to the sheriff on the first of the year. It was a technical violation of the law only. They know I am honest, but the sentiment of the public is set so strongly against bankers that I could not get justice. Even my political friends dare not support me. It is an unexpected favor that I am allowed to be with you for a few days."

John Anstruther spoke bitterly, and his wife listened with tearful eyes. She controlled herself with an effort.

"John, the children!" she whispered. "They must not know. Let them have one more happy Christmas. They have been praying for you to come home. Let us smile and be happy with them for a few days. Let us forget the dread future."

Once during the evening she spoke of a pardon which might be asked of the governor.

"It is a vain hope, dear," her husband said. "We will not waste ourselves on it." And he relapsed into thoughtful silence.

But for all the shadow that hung over the home there was a Christmas tree, and the Anstruther babies were happy. Their convict father played the role of Santa Claus. Their mother laughed and sang, though now and then her voice broke and her eyes were wet with tears. A few neighbors called full of sympathy and yet timid about showing it. All the little town felt that it was best to let the stricken family enjoy their Christmas cheer without intrusion even on the part of those who loved and respected them.

When the children, surfeited with sweets and their arms still filled with precious toys, were asleep once more the mother was busy in her kitchen with her preparations for the grand Christmas dinner of the morrow—perhaps the last bountiful meal her children would have through all the dark years to come.

John Anstruther went to his room to look over his papers. In the drawer he suddenly found something that made his heart leap.

It was a revolver. He took the shining, cruel thing in his hands, and a sort of madness came over him. Here was his opportunity. Here was escape from the stripes, the dark cell, the ignominy of prison life. Here was provision for Grace and his babies. His \$20,000 life insurance still was in force, and he knew well that it was nonforfeitable even in case of suicide. A

sudden sharp shock and it would be over. Even for her it would be better than the five years of living death.

He pressed the cold muzzle to his forehead. His finger was on the trigger. He could hear Grace singing sadly, with a pathetic attempt to be gay in the kitchen.

"Coward!" The warning voice came out of the void, like the voice of the angel who spoke to Abraham on the mountain top. Perhaps it was only the cry of his own consciousness, made audible by his imagination. But he heard it distinctly. A revulsion of feeling swept over him.

"Oh, not that, not that, thank God," he murmured.

He put the weapon back in the drawer and went out into the kitchen, where Grace was dressing the Christmas turkey.

"Five years will soon pass," he said cheerfully, "and there will be a generous allowance for good conduct. I will have some sort of bookkeeping to do, and the life will be bearable, no doubt. Let us meet the future bravely, dear heart. God will not fall to send us comfort. And you—you dear, brave little woman—you will get along somehow. We have friends yet, thank heaven."

It was the first time he had ventured to speak of the life in prison, and she was comforted to know that he took so brave a view. That night they slept, and the next day their Christmas dinner was an occasion of joy to the children, and the parents, thankful to be together, simulated a cheerfulness that almost deceived one another.

It was late in the afternoon that a large number of their neighbors came trooping in with words of love and sympathy and encouragement. They promised to look after Grace and the children, and when John got back—they spoke of it as if he were going only on a little journey—they declared that the village would be at the train with a band to receive him.

"You will be a convict, but not a criminal, John," said the leading merchant warmly. "You can step into the best job in my store the day after you get home. I promise you that and call upon these neighbors to witness it."

John Anstruther rose to reply, but before he could speak the door was opened and a blue coated messenger boy appeared with a telegram. Anstruther tore it open with shaking fingers.

"The governor has signed your unconditional pardon as a Christmas gift to your wife and babies. He did it as an act of justice and in response to telegrams from hundreds of men throughout the state who know you are an honest man. Congratulations." The name signed to the telegram was that of the secretary of state.—Chicago Tribune.

Christmas Treasures

By EUGENE FIELD.

I COUNT my treasures o'er with care— A little toy that baby knew, A little sock of faded hue, A little lock of golden hair. Long years ago this Christmas time My little one—my all to me— Sat robed in white upon my knee And heard the merry Christmas chime.

"Tell me, my little golden head, If Santa Claus should come tonight, What shall he bring my baby bright, What treasure for my boy?" I said, And then he named the little toy "While in his round and truthful eyes There came a look of glad surprise That spoke his trustful, childish joy."



And as he lapsed his evening prayer He asked the boon with baby grace, And, toddling to the chimney place, He hung his little stocking there. That night as lengthening shadows creep I saw the white-winged angels come With music to our humble home And kiss my darling as he slept.

He must have heard that baby prayer, For in the morn, with glowing face, He toddled to the chimney place And found the little treasure there. They came again one Christmas tide, That angel host so fair and white, And, singing all the Christmas night, They lured my darling from my side.

A little sock, a little toy, A little lock of golden hair, The Christmas music on the air, A-watching for my baby boy, But if again that angel train And golden host come back for me To bear me to eternity My watching will not be in vain.

For This Christmas, Ye old time stave that peetheth out To Christmas revelers all, At tavern tap and wassail bout And in ye banquet hall—Whiles ye old burden rings again, Ad yet ye verse, as thine, "God rest you merry, gentlemen," And gentlewomen too! —James Whitcomb Riley.

Festal Day In Dixie A Carnival of Cheer

SOMEHOW there is a charm about a Christmas down in Dixie peculiarly fascinating. It savors more of the old English holiday when the wassail bowl was filled to the brim, when the Yule log glowed and the boar's head was borne into the banquet. It was in the good old days before the war that the folks of the south observed this joyous season with prodigality more lavish and hospitality more extensive than were dreamed of even in the annals of Bracebridge Hall.

Then came the true carnival of merriment. The old manor was ablaze with life and beauty. From the surrounding country all the belles and the beaux had gathered. Morning brought a meet at daybreak for the fox hunt, and nighttime called for "Old Uncle Ephraim," the plantation fiddler, whose reels were famous throughout the whole country. Feast followed feast, and the spirit of celebration extended from the master down to the field hands, each of whom received a jug filled with good whiskey when he called for his Christmas rations.

But these are the days that have gone, and with their going departed many characteristics which made the Christmas time down south so distinctive. While the fate of war and changed conditions have curtailed the prodigality of former days, most of the ancient customs remain, and in many instances Christmas in the villages and the country is but a mild repetition of antebellum observances.

A few of the large country homes still have some of the old servants who were with the family in slavery days. If these old family darkies have been away during the year they always reappear with the approach of the Christmas holidays and assume duties about the household. The old "mammy," although her services have been engaged elsewhere during the rest of the year, reports to make the fruit cake for Christmas dinner.

She alone knows the culinary traditions of the family kitchen. The ingredients of this wonderful cake have been handed down from generation to generation, and the spice and the brandy and the citron and all such things are compounded according to the proportions laid down years and years ago.

These fruit cakes bear the family name, and some time, through the courtesy of the season and the exchange of compliments of the day, a slice of Grantland cake is on the same plate with a slice of Dubignon cake. Not infrequently these cakes are cooked a year in advance, by which time they are fully seasoned and settled, although the cracks in the icing and its yellow tint mar the beauty somewhat. Its cooking can be entrusted to no hands except those of the antebellum family cook or her descendants.

Not alone this old cook, but all branches of the service in vogue during the days of slavery are usually represented about Christmas time. The son of your father's and your grandfather's coachman comes, and on rare days the old man himself hobbles to the house and spins out marvelous tales of the past.

These old darkies are all presented with gifts, and for each of their children a present of some sort has been prepared. This feature generally comes in the southern home before the rest of the family has been attended to. In the meantime the children have been keeping eager watch at the door of the room where Santa Claus has made his visit. No one is allowed to enter this sacred precinct until the paterfamilias gives the signal, but before this signal is given every member of the household must be dressed and ready for breakfast and the morning prayers must have been said.

When everything is ready the children are allowed to rush in and examine the contents of their stockings. Some of the largest children still have implicit faith in the wonderful personality of old Santa Claus. Forged notes from the old fellow, admonishing them to make their behavior according to the precept of their mother, are eagerly read and compared. The interchange of presents among the older members of the family usually takes place at the breakfast table, but in most instances they are allowed to mingle with the bounties of old Santa Claus and are plucked from the same holly tree from which his presents hang.

The hunt for the holly and the mistletoe, which is as exciting as the chase for the boar's head, is just as much a feature as that old English custom and equally enjoyable. Several days before Christmas eve a big wagon, filled with straw and brimming full of pretty girls and boys, too, is driven into the woods, where the search for the holly is carried on. It requires a most agile youngster to scale to the height where the mistletoe grows, and he is always sure of a generous reward of kisses from the girls below.

Christmas day is always quiet. Sometimes the boys and girls have been taught carols, which they sing at home or in the village chapel hard by. Night brings mirth and youthful jollity again when the darkies come once more and sing old songs or participate in outdoor games.

About it all there has been a quaint, old time flavor. Everybody is happy, and yet there is a tinge of sadness about it all, for the southern Christmas now is but a faint echo of days gone by.

The Joys of Christmas. Be merry all, be merry all; With holly dress the festive hall; Prepare the song, the feast, the ball, To welcome merry Christmas, —W. R. Spencer.

Celebrating the Day Anciently and Now

On Christmas eve the bells were rung; On Christmas eve the mass was sung. That only night in all the year Saw the stole priest the chalice rear. The dame! donned her kirtle shewn; The hall was dressed with holly green. Forth to the wood did merry men go To gather in the mistletoe. Then opened wide the baron's hall To vassal, tenant, serf and all. Power laid his rod of rule aside, And Ceremony doffed his pride. The heir, with roses in his shoes, That night might village partner choose.

So sang Sir Walter Scott of the glories of Christmas eve and of Christmas itself. And the world yields to him the palm for the best practical description of the season's dear delights.

Christmas with us is a day of giving and receiving, of good cheer and good feeling, and essentially it is one of religious significance. Hence it will sound strange to many to be told that a number of our Christmas customs come down to us from pagan times. Yet such is the fact. Traces of some heathen rites are found in England as well as here, and the cause of their survival lies deeper than theology. When the mother country, so called, was converted to Christianity the priests found her people wedded to many old customs. Not all of these were what they would have had them, but they had a practical work to perform and went at it in a practical way. The more revolting of these customs they properly uprooted altogether; the better of them they preserved, only ingrafting the rites of the church upon them.

Thus it came about that festivities which had their origin in the old Roman Saturnalia and had come into use among the druids survived in the grim mythology of the Saxons and are a portion of our inheritance today. Conspicuous among these are the burning of the Yule log and the hanging of the mistletoe bough.

Among all peoples who celebrate the day at all it has always been a day for eating and drinking, for singing and dancing and merriment of all kinds. Indeed, this has been the criticism of the church against the manner of observance—that its spiritual meaning was too often forgotten in the general tide of worldly cheer.

In England its observance is universal. The chroniclers tell us that in Cheshire no servants would work on this day, even though their failure to do so resulted in their discharge. The richest families were compelled either to do their own cooking on Christmas or eat what had been prepared beforehand, while dancing and merriment reigned. And the games that were played number nearly legion, the most of them, though, on Christmas eve. Run the streets in many places were filled with mummers.

ning in sacks, ducking for apples, jumping at cakes suspended by a string and trying to catch them between the teeth, drinking hard cider mixed with egg and spices, and a score of others—these claimed and still claim in Devonshire the time of old and young, the children themselves being allowed on this one night to sit up until the midnight bell tolls.

What has been aptly called "a beautiful phase in popular superstition," a very old belief, was that all the powers of evil lay dormant and harmless on Christmas day.

The cock crowed through the live-long night to drive all evil spirits away; the bees sang in their winter hives; the cattle, half human at all times, became wholly so at midnight and talked like human beings.

Bread that was baked the night before Christmas could not possibly become moldy. The streets in many places were filled with mummers in fantastic garb. Indeed, there were mummers in the days when Saturnalia reigned over even the Roman emperors, but they were not necessarily of the Christmas time. The love for masquerade is almost as old as the human race itself.

But as to the day itself, it was then, as it is now, a very merry day, with good fellowship bubbling even from hearts where theological nonbelief dwelt—a day sacred to the family, to the eating of roast turkey and cranberry sauce or roast beef and plum pudding and walnuts and the drinking of beer, ale and wine.

It has changed to some extent since the old day, but it is still the happiest day of all the year—at least where the shadow of misfortune does not cloud the sky.

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