



Max had been drudging along in the office of Mall and Erskeine for four years. He had started in as a clerk. He was still a clerk. Max was not lacking in ability. He had earned advancement several times over, but the head of the firm had found his work good where he was, and did not care to change. For Abraham Erskeine was not worried about the welfare of those who worked for him. If it suited his purpose to keep an efficient clerk slaving along at twenty a week, while he hired a stranger for an executive position at double or treble that amount, he did so. If the clerk wanted to quit, he could do so. There are always plenty of men to fill such positions—even if most of them are inefficient.

Max Martin raised up from his stooped position over the books, stretched his back and gave a long sigh. He was young, was Max. Scarcely over 25. Yet in his face there was a weary, disillusioned, world-worn look, better fitting the man of forty-five. For he had been a dreamer—one of those unhappy mortals to whom it is given to dream wonderful, beautiful, unselfish dreams; to whom it is given to toil all through life in a vain effort to bring to some sort of realization the ideals for betterment and for the furtherance of happiness among earth's unfortunate ones. On this night in particular, his face was drawn and haggard. Long hours of toil for many days in succession had reduced his vitality. His resistance to suggestion had reached the ebb. It is to the vast hoards of men such as he to whom society owes much of the crime which it so much deprecates.

"Hello, Max. Going out with the Girl tonight?" cheerily interrupted the office boy.

"No, Jake, I haven't any girl. Too busy here. Don't have any time to live, you know. Damn it all Jake, I some times wonder what it is all about. Why do men like me toil their lives out here in the city of seething millions—selling their lives for a pittance, while other men, like old Erskeine, pile up a hoard of wealth they can never use? It is enough to drive a man crazy, some times.—Oh well, I guess I'm tired. That's all I'll be all right in the morning."

"Aw, I know what's the matter with you, Max. You've been working too hard during this Christmas rush. Now it's over. Come on, Max. A bunch of us are going out for a joy ride tonight. Sort of Christmas eve blowout, you know. Join in the crowd. We'll show you the time of your young life, and make you forget the old office for a while anyway. Don't be an old man, Max—life is worth living, if you make it so. Come on."

And Max went. He was just a poor denizen of one of our big cities, whose playtime of life had been denied him. When the call of youth and pleasure came, he could resist no longer. It was a wonderful time they had that night. Four couples in a big car, out for a time. All of them, like Max, overworked victims of the Christmas rush season. Now that it was over they were celebrating with a vengeance.

Max asked no questions about the car. He didn't care. For the night he had let down the bars of reserve and convention. What did the world and its silly conventions and laws mean to him that night? He knew the crowd he was with. A poor, hardworking lot out for a spree. Whatever the cost, he could bear his share along with them. And the night wore on. Oh, what a night. It was worth a year of life such as he put in at the office. He said as much, and he meant it.

The dawn was just beginning to streak the east. What a beautiful Christmas morning. The gay party driving at breakneck speed down a suburban street in the early dawn called out a "Merry Christmas" to a few workmen they passed.

A motor cycle chugged up behind them.—Passed slowed up and ran along side for a short distance.

"Halt," bellowed the rider. He pulled back his coat lapel and showed a star.

"Where's your driver's license? Whose car yu' got here?"

Confusion reigned. Jake, at the wheel, faced the cop. "Say, old top, I aint got no license. I'm drivin a

friend's car. Be a bit easy on us, seein' as its Christmas."

But the policeman was obdurate, and during the palaver that ensued, all of the party made their getaway except Jake, and Max, who was too stupid to realize that retreat was the better part of valor in this instance.

At the trial, it developed that the car belonged to Erskeine, and had been appropriated for the evening by Jake. Abraham Erskeine, in the interests of property owners of his own class, felt it incumbent upon him to prosecute the case. Max and Jake were given two to fifteen years apiece in the state penitentiary. On account of his age, Jake was paroled upon good behavior. Max went over the road.

Four years have elapsed. The iron gates clang shut behind a few outgoing visitors who have been paying Christmas visits to their unfortunate loved ones. It is bitter cold outside, this Christmas eve. The guards mechanically pace the great stone walls, looking to neither right nor left. It matters not to them whether a man goes over the wall or not. Besides it is Christmas eve, and the man on the wall, poor uneducated, illy-paid for his irksome and uncongenial task, is quite as much dissatisfied with the world as the man he guards. Both alike have come to feel through long years of prison life, with all the unwritten hates and insults and cruelties which daily find their place in the community life, but find no echo in the official reports,—alike they feel the injustice of the system, though unable to frame a better one.

A shadowy figure creeps up to the wall. By means known best to the crafty, long-suffering prison inmates he scales the wall.

Pacing his beat on the wall the guard hears a slight sound behind him. He turns quickly, gun lowered. His own life is in continual danger. Death may be creeping up behind him. The shadowy form is some thirty paces away, crawling slowly away—toward freedom. It is the duty of the guard to shoot instantly—to kill, without question. He raises his gun—then lowers it, turns on his heel and continues his beat. Reaching the end, he turns to go back. No one is in sight. "Merry Christmas" he utters softly. "You have done your time, Max, and then some, maybe its all right and maybe it aint, but I'm damned if I'll plug you—on Xmas eve."

Half an hour later the guard fired his rifle four times in succession, and turned in the General Alarm. To the guards and officers who rushed to his assistance, he told a lurid story of how he had been attacked by an escaping convict and thrown from the wall. The chase immediately, but the dogs lost the trail.

The Captain of the Guard looked the ground over, sized up the situation, walked up to the guard on duty and shook hands, with a knowing wink. "Merry Christmas" he said, and walked away.

That night the safe of Mall and Erskeine was opened, by someone who evidently knew the combination, or had learned much about the technique of opening strange safes. They found no betraying fingerprints or other evidence to identify the thief. One thing only did they find. A nicely engraved card in the safe on which was printed the words, "Merry Christmas."

That night, also, there mysteriously appeared upon the doorsteps of the poorer people of the great city, in the mail boxes of the slums, and in many strange and unfamiliar crannies, a miscellaneous assortment of silver and gold coins, and bank notes of small denominations. A Merry Christmas, truly, for many a poor, starved human being, a new lease of life to many a derelict almost on the brink of destruction in the seething Maelstrom of modern city life.

Christmas morning there came to the prison gate a man who demanded admittance. At first he was refused, but when he showed his prison clothes beneath the overcoat, the gates opened hastily.

"Merry Christmas," he saluted the guard on the fence.

"Merry Christmas," cheerily responded the guard.

And when he murmured something under his breath, they did not know that he said, "God, I'm glad I didn't plug him."

