

A CHRISTMAS MESSAGE AT NIGHT

By ALICE E. ALLEN.

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It seemed to Ruth as she flew for the month time to her telephone that dreary afternoon of the day before Christmas that she had friends in the grim old city of which she had never known still then—true friends, even if they were humble and too poor to do more than telephone their good wishes.

This special message was from Ruth's proprietor. Could he call that evening? Ruth's "of course not, Mr. Mayne," was then "Could he take her out, then a dinner somewhere, the theater? Just this once, for Christ's sake?" Ruth's refusal was transmitted by the telephone wires all true and reliable. Ruth's eyes were dry and her face set in a stern line as she lay down in her chair by the window her eyes were weary.

"It will never do for the proprietor to call upon his stenographer," she said, with a sorry little smile. "To be sure, there was a time, when he was her father's clerk, but times have changed."

Perhaps because it was Christmas eve, when memories no matter how well behaved in other times and seasons, will walk abroad, perhaps because other things such as love, joy, peace and good will were thronging heaven and earth below; perhaps only because Ruth was tired and perplexed.



HER REFUSALS WERE FIRM AND RELIANT.

and lonely—whatever the reason sitting there in her little window looking down upon the street, with its throng of gay, good natured stoppers. Ruth did what she had sternly forbid herself to do—she went back over the years which had made such changes in her life. There was her father's business, followed by his death. Then came her own beginning in business. In spite of herself, Ruth smiled to think of what her old friends would say could they know what a capable little business woman necessity had made of her. But not one of them all knew where she was. Not one had traced her to this great city—that is, except Jack. Jack? As soon as Ruth admitted that name into her thoughts, it dominated all else. It brought back its owner—strong, manly, insistent—one of the won't-take-no-for-an-answer kind. Ruth found herself wondering—almost—Ruth had taken her no as final. Apparently he had. It had surely been as strong as she could make it. And he had gone away—and had not come back. With the many friends who had rung up to ask how she was and to say "Merry Christmas" there had been no Jack—Jack of the strong face, the loyal heart, the tender eyes and voice. How had she ever let him go?

"Some time you will want me, Ruth," he had said. Above the rush and roar of the great city Ruth heard the words again just as she had heard them every day and every night since Jack had gone away. "I could urge you now but I want you of your own free will. And you will come some day. I do not even need to use a promise—I know. What is out there, come to us, if we wait. I can wait."

That was three years ago. At first Ruth had half expected to return. But he never came. And he never sent her a word. Ruth was tired of waiting, she lay down again, laughing to herself. The telephone had been so busy all day bringing her messages that she had heard it in her dreams. It could not really be in her room. After a little she dropped off, only to hear its shrill jingle again and

again. It no longer waited for him. In her dream she went to the telephone, took down the receiver and listened. Out of the darkness and distance a voice spoke—Jack's voice. "Merry Christmas" was its only message. But so strong and clear were the words that when Ruth finally awoke to a sunny Christmas morning, she still tingled to their memory. Perhaps, when one first awakes, the heart has more control over one than the head. Anyhow, when Ruth sat up and looked out of her window at the already busy streets far below her, her heart was doing the talking.

"Jack is waiting for you—some where," it said. "And he belongs to you. Why not claim your own?"

After a minute Ruth's heart spoke again. "What if you are poor? What if he is not rich? Can't two work together better than apart? Why not give Jack a Christmas gift? The only one he wants?"

Ruth did not give her head time to argue with her heart. As soon as she was dressed she was at the telephone giving Jack's business number. After she had waited what seemed a long, long time her head did remind her.

"Why, of course," she said slowly, "he will be in country today." She was just about to hang up the receiver "Wait a minute," cried her heart. "Hearts do know things, especially at Christmas." And then—

"Hello," said a big, hearty voice out of the distance. "Oh, Jack?" cried Ruth. "Is it you, really you?"

"Yes, Ruth," said the voice. "Who else? You wanted?"

"To wish you a merry Christmas, Jack," Ruth faltered.

"Thanks, that's all?"

"Yes," said Ruth, listening to her heart. Then, "No—not quite, I—I want to hear your voice, that's all."

"Is it?" asked the voice. Ruth wanted to hear.

"You see, Jack," Ruth hurried on, "I dreamed about you last night. I—I thought you called me up, and—and it was only a dream."

"I came so near it," said the voice, "that I stood here by my phone for an hour. But it was late, and—well, Ruth, I wanted you to call me up this time."

"You're not in the country?"

"Not yet. We go tonight."

"Mother and I. She's spending part of Christmas in the city. But we miss the snow and the sleighbells and the home folks."

"It sounds lovely," cried Ruth, "and so Christmas. Give your mother my love, Jack, and wish her the merriest Christmas."

"She'll be glad to hear from you."

"We?"

"Sure, dear?"

Ruth's eyes were so full of tears that, as she said afterward, she couldn't see to talk.

"Sure, dear?" asked the voice again.

"That's all," she said bravely, "only—am you well?"

"Perfectly. And you?"

"Oh, yes! Wouldn't it strange I heard the bell when you didn't really ring up last night, Jack?"

"No," said Jack firmly. "Your heart heard mine, little girl. If only you would listen to it oftener."

"I can't always hear it," laughed Ruth. "My head is such a good talker."

"Time's up," said a strange voice somewhere.

"Goodbye, Jack, dear!" cried Ruth. But there was no answer.

The next minute she again took down the receiver.

"Get 'em again, quick!" she said.

"Hello," said Jack's voice.

"Is that you, Jack?"

"Of course. Something you forgot, dear?"

"No, I didn't forget. I wouldn't say it, but I must. Don't look at me, Jack."

"I've been ready, always, Jack."

but listen. I'm listening to my heart



SITTING IN HER LITTLE WINDOW.

Ruth, we've been talking of you. Anything else?"

"No."

"Sure, dear?"

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now. There is something I want, Jack."

"Yes."

"It's a big something. Guess. No; don't guess. Wait. It's you." Ruth hung up the receiver and ran to the chair by the window quite the other side of the room.

It was not quite a minute when the telephone bell rang shrilly.

"Is this Miss Hazen?" said the operator's voice.

"Yes," said Ruth.

"Message wasn't finished—wait."

"Hello!" came Jack's voice, big, strong, vibrant with happiness. "That you, Ruth?"

"Yes."

"Coming," said the voice, "mother and I, to take you up state with us. Can you be ready in an hour?"

"Yes," said Ruth. "I've been ready always, Jack."

What came next must have surprised even that long suffering, much enduring wife. Sure it is that Ruth's cheeks flamed like red holly berries.

And even before she ran to put her clothes in her suit case, to do her hair and to put on her one good gown, from above her bookcase she took a sprig of scarlet holly. With a red ribbon she tied it over the telephone.

"If ever anything deserved a merry Christmas," she cried, "you do!"

"KNECHT RUPERT" WAS GERMAN SANTA CLAUS

The Santa Claus idea has grown out of a variety of legends and customs. The festival of St. Nicholas, who was the especial friend of the children, was celebrated in Germany about the 6th of December. It was easy enough to make this coincide with the later and more general festival. The tangible Santa Claus was called "Knecht Rupert," and usually he was some member of the family dressed up to represent a beneficent gift giver. It was the custom to have a yew bough placed in the parlor of the German home, and on this all the packages containing gifts were placed. On Christmas morning the whole family assembled to claim the gifts, each having to guess the donor. "Knecht Rupert" distributed the gifts to the younger children, but he lectured them also on obedience and good behavior, and, if any one had been bad, instead of a gift he or she was given a switch that they might be punished. So the little Germans try hard to be very good before Christmas.

Bad Day For Birds. The day after Christmas, St. Stephen's day (boxing day in England), is celebrated in a queer way by some of the Manx boys, and Ditchfield says they feel privileged to stone wrens at this time because of a story to the effect that in days gone by a most dangerous siren was finally compelled to assume the form of a wren once a year (on the 28th and ultimately to be killed by mortal hands. Another tradition furnishes an excuse on the ground that it was a wren that weakened the guard of St. Stephen just as the latter was about to escape from prison.

Enemies of the Christmas Tree. Not every balsam nor every spruce is a Christmas tree. The expert cutter learns to tell at a glance if the branches grow in perfect rings, which give shape and symmetry to the tree. He must be sure, too, that the squirrels have not eaten the buds from the tips of the topmost branches, and that the cattle and deer have not sharpened their horns in passing.

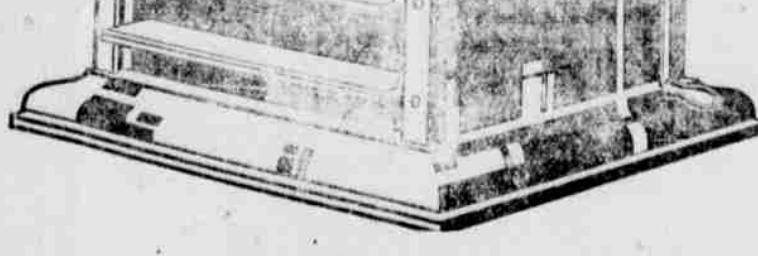
CHRISTMAS IN HOLLAND. In Holland Santa Claus pays his annual visit to all good children twenty days before he comes to this country. Dec. 5 is the feast day of St. Nicholas, alias Santa Claus. He has nothing whatever to do with Christmas, and his visit there is an Anglo-Saxon anachronism. As their patron saint, children were taught to look to Nicholas for care and protection. In England the custom was abolished with the worship of saints at the reformation and was re-established in the American guise of Father Christmas in the middle of the last century.

But in Holland Santa Claus continues to make his visits on the right day, Dec. 5. The Dutch children do not hang up their stockings, but place their shoes, filled with hay or straw for the donkey on which St. Nicholas rides, in front of the fireplace.

The Christ Child. An Irish legend tells that on Christmas eve the Christ Child wanders out in the darkness and cold and the peasants still put lighted candles in their windows to guide the sacred little feet, that they may not stumble on the way to their homes. In Hungary the people go yet further in their tenderness for the Child. They spread feasts and leave their doors open that he may enter at his will. Throughout Christendom there is a belief that no evil can touch the child who is born on Christmas eve.

A Custom Well Forgotten. Children used to be reminded in an uncomfortable manner that Dec. 28 was Innocent's day, for it was considered wholesome on that morning to take them a good cutting or other form of punishment, presumably to remind them of the sins which were not committed by the innocents whom Herod ordered slain on that day. Fortunately every vestige of this fashion is now lost out.

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CHRISTMAS IN MEXICO. A RELIGIOUS FESTIVAL.

CHRISTMAS celebrations in Mexico differ greatly from ours and usually last for several days. Bright lanterns suspended in the air proclaim the glad tidings of the holidays, and every Mexican jact, no matter how humble, puts out his lantern to light the steps of the Saviour should he perchance appear. The story of the birth of the Redeemer is annually portrayed in all Mexican towns and in a symbolic language which the most ignorant can readily understand.

The performance is given by fifteen players, consisting of Joseph and Mary and the infant Jesus, two archangels, Lucifer and three of his minions and a number of shepherds. The costumes are adapted to the Mexican conception of the characters and are novel in the extreme. All of the costumes are got up tastefully, and, while a strict conformity with the requirements of the first century might rob Joseph of his sombrero, still it is doubtful if the lesson which it is desired to instill in the minds of the people would be as effective if all the minor details of the early Jewish fashions were followed.

After the choir had sung hymns, among them "Christus Natus Hodie," Mary sang the first verse of the German song, "Joseph, dear Joseph mine, help me to rock my babe, that God may reward me in heaven—the Babe of the Virgin Mary." Joseph answered with the second verse of the song, "Gladly, my dear nurse, will I help thee rock thy babe, that God may reward me in heaven," etc. The servant sang: "Rejoice, Christian multitude. The King of heaven, who was born of the Virgin Mary, has taken on mortality."

And so the scene in the churches went on every Christmas.

A Sure Sign. Dr. Probe—I guess that Peterby doesn't intend to pay his bill this year. Mrs. Probe—What makes you think so? "I just got a Christmas present from him this morning."

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