

Several times Sybil saw Elsie looking at her strangely. But Elsie said nothing, though she introduced Sybil to a new young man just back from building bridges.

He stayed by her all evening, but Sybil scarcely saw him. She felt a kind of bitter gratitude at last to slip quietly past the tall Christmas tree which guarded its great pile of gifts and climb the stairs to her room.

Now it was bleak morning and they expected her to come down. But why? She'd seen family Christmases before.

The children would yank the wrappings from the too-many presents and be caught up for a moment by excitement. Then, when it was done, they'd turn vaguely disappointed faces toward their parents because the tree hadn't yielded some great secret. And the parents, seeing their disappointment, would know that they had failed—what did children want? Then they'd get up and go to breakfast, and the light of the day would turn the bright tree tawdry, and it would stand in its loneliness, not magical at all, not at all.

Some small part of the storm was ascending the stair. The door opened and Alan, the youngest Marsden, entered, running.

"Aren'tcha gonna watch us, Aunt Sybil?" His wild climb had turned his voice breathless. "Didn't Mama call you?"

Alan had not been Sybil's favorite among the Marsden children before this, but now it seemed that he was. There he stood, wild with impatience to explore the marvels of the Christmas tree, yet wanting her enough to re-climb the stairs and stand there yelling: "Come on, Aunt Sybil!"

"I'm coming!" She buttoned her rose-colored wool robe with one hand, seized a hairbrush with the other, and fled after him down the stairs.

"The others will be all through," she shouted, "if we don't hurry!"

Sybil came to an abrupt halt. The tree, glorious in this moment of triumph, shed its colored lights into the gloom. The fireplace added its own flickering magic. And by the fire, turning to smile at her, and then again looking toward the tree, was Bob James.

**T**HE FLICKERING LIGHTS hid Sybil's blush. She sat down by Elsie and began brushing at her hair. Three children seemed a dozen. Their shoutings tinkled the ornaments and set the tree shivering in delight. What do I care if I look a hag, thought Sybil, I came down because of Alan.

She watched Paul and Elsie, their faces reflecting the children's excited interest. Elsie sometimes complained, "I wear myself out for those kids at Christmas time, and we spend twice as much as we can afford. I don't know why." Yet, seeing their faces, she knew why: it was for this moment.

Sybil brushed her hair and didn't look at Bob, but she said to Elsie in a low voice, resentfully, "What's he doing here?"

Elsie gave her a moment of attention. "Bob? He always comes here Christmas

mornings when he's in town. He hasn't any family, you know, and he's lonely."

A feeling of foolishness caught her. She hadn't thought of him as lonely.

He didn't look lonely, always laughing and asking questions that were none of his business. "Why didn't you tell me, Elsie? I could have combed my hair at least."

Elsie giggled, her eyes not leaving the children. "If I'd told you, you'd have come down looking calculated. He'd never have seen you. Besides, I take an interest in Bob. What if you weren't the kind of girl who'd get up just because it was Christmas morning and there were kids? Bob needs a real person. I hide it, but I'm a matchmaker."

Sybil felt more foolish than ever, but happier. Elsie was crazy—forgetting Nola Emerson—but nice, and Sybil loved her.

The search for the secret under the tree was soon over. Alan played at stacking the empty boxes, then pushing them over. The two others kept searching the branches of the tree as if they sought some last unopened package which would contain the fantastic, wonderful thing they never thought to ask for. But the tree yielded nothing more, and they went out to play.

"Kids!" Paul said impatiently. And Elsie announced: "The coffee's ready. Help me with the cups, Paul."

Bob moved over beside Sybil, his grin somewhat different from his newspaper smile. "When you're a kid," he said, "you keep looking for the secret of life under the Christmas tree. I guess when you're older you look for it in children looking for it."

He had almost spoken her own thought. "Is it because we don't understand that Christmas can't be contained in a material thing that we can't teach our children?"

"Maybe. Some things we can only half grasp. But it's human to keep looking."

"Maybe the secret is in the searching," said Sybil.

They smiled at each other, and Sybil thought of Nola Emerson, but the thought had no strength in it.

"Right now," he said, "it seems I'm close to the secret."

"Yes," she said.

"If we're wrong, Sybil, we can go on looking together. Can't we?"

"Yes," said Sybil.

Elsie came with the coffeepot and Paul after her, carrying the tray. Their moment of disappointment had passed. Elsie said, "Merry Christmas."

Bob and Sybil returned the wish together, to her and to each other, and Sybil looked at the tall tree emptied of its bounty—and it was magical still.

She wished desperately to be alone with Bob, to say that the answer lay in the heart; that only when you looked to the tree to supply what can be found only in the human heart did the tree become tawdry with barrenness. But of course, she had to wait. "I'll have cream and sugar," she said instead.

