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F. MAGINNIS, MONTANA.

OUR CHRISTMAS.

By S. B. S.

[Written for the MINERAL ARGUS.]

The narrow business streets of Boston were so crowded on this night that, were it not for the white rays of electric lights from nearly every corner, from the fronts of shops and public buildings, the surging multitude might have been a creator of accident and destruction as well as a happy throng of purchasers and sight-seers.

For a few hours dark, heavy, clouds had been gathering over the "Hub" and State capital; the temperature had lowered several degrees and the wind howled and swept in fitful gusts through Washington street and across and down Tremont Row. There is nothing like the elements to disperse a crowd. Boston policemen are ridiculously dignified and very efficient, yet, on some occasions, far more effective than they, is a gentle April shower.

The wind blew stronger, the mercury sank lower and lower, the hour was late; purchases of gifts had been made, and the duties and pleasures of Christmas night of 187—had been for the most part, accomplished. The policemen again reigned supreme, for the streets were vacant, save for an occasional pedestrian who, belated, was hurrying home to some distant quarter of the city.

No, not wholly deserted was every place, for, gazing steadfastly into the magnificent holiday window of Messrs. Wadsworth & Co., on Washington street was a richly clad gentleman of almost gigantic proportions—indeed, so conspicuous and commanding his statue and presence that the great crowd had jostled, not intentionally, against him. He was a person none could fail to notice—clad from head to feet in seal—cap and overcoat of far greater value than ordinarily worn except by possessors of considerable wealth. Peering out from between the high turned-up coat collar and well pulled down cap, a pair of keen, gray eyes of yearning and sorrowful expression looked into that window from whence the illuminating rays were thrown out upon his bronzed face, lighting to view his clearly cut and classic features. At first glance, the gentleman might have been pronounced a foigner, yet he was of American—New England—birth.

Five years ago Clifford Lanier was the junior partner of one of the wealthiest and largest dry goods houses of Boston. About that date came Christmas eve of the year 187—; the decade to be followed by great financial disturbances in nearly every branch of business was drawing to a close, and it was soon afterwards supposed by the other members of his firm that Clifford Lanier had predicted the crisis one year at least before it spread its darkest gloom over the land.

Boston shops were not well stocked with goods at that time, for rumors of the dark days that soon followed were already afloat and merchants had become timid; yet the store windows were elegantly trimmed and filled with goods—in some instances a particular window contained the larger invoice of its house. It was noticed on that day that the country folk customers were more fully represented than City purchasers; thus showing that citizens of great towns keep more rapid pace with the times, extending their scrutiny further into the future, than do often their sometimes more virtuous neighbors of the rural districts. It will have been noted that on the date of this Christmas eve, business affairs were assuming a decidedly squally aspect, panfully apparent to business men throughout the country. Still the shop windows were aglow with light on the eve of Christmas, 187—; the private residences of the proprietors, however, were markedly less brilliantly illuminated in the spacious parlors than on previous holiday occasions with one particularly prominent exception, viz: at No. — Beacon Hill, the residence of Clifford Lanier, where the beautiful drawing rooms were ablaze with light from an almost innumerable number of gas burners of the candle chandeliers. Up stairs in a richly furnished boudoir was seated a lady of surprising beauty. Her dark, shining hair, artistically arranged, might have been the crown of twenty and eight years, yet one would have been reluctant in expressing the opinion that even twenty-three winters had passed since her birth. Her complexion was not quite brunette, not fair, certainly, but had the rich, glow-

ing tinge, indicative of perfect health; tolerably regular, indeed, quite common her features except for the full red lips of a very expressive mouth. Her dark eyes of great depth and tenderness, shaded by long lashes, were fastened on the page of a small volume resting in her lap, but were frequently raised and directed toward the door as if in anticipation of an arrival. Mrs. Lanier, for it was she, wore an exquisite evening toilet—one she knew to be particularly in accordance with her husband's taste. The musical ring of a dainty French clock told the hour of six, and just at that moment a latch key clicked in the hall door lock, a moment later a tall, handsome man had bounded up stairs, two steps at a leap, and stood in his wife's presence to be greeted with a loving kiss.

"Just on the minute, as usual, dear," cried Mrs. Lanier.

"Well, the tree is all arranged in the back parlor, the children have had their dinner and Marie has both of them caged in the nursery to prevent their running too near where Santa Claus has been at work. Do you know, I was thinking—"

"Pardon me for interrupting you, little wife," broke in Mr. Lanier, "but I am thinking we should dine, for I am as hungry as a bear."

"Why, yes, to be sure, I had quite forgotten that you were blessed with such a vulgar inheritance as an appetite," laughed Mrs. Lanier, "so, come along, and the inner man shall be satisfied."

Soup served, Mrs. Lanier resumed: "Clifford, I have been thinking quite seriously of what Mr. Wadsworth said to me last Tuesday when I met him at the bank."

"Well, what was it, dear?" questioned Lanier.

"Why, he told me that he thought the members of our firm should follow the example of other business houses and begin, without delay, to practice rigid economy in anticipation of a great financial crash which he thinks is sure to come; and a few evenings ago I heard you tell George Loring that you believed 'Black Friday' to be close upon us. Now, if such is, indeed, the state of affairs, oughtn't we to follow Mr. Wadsworth's advice? He said Mrs. Wadsworth would make nothing of Christmas this year, neither would she 'receive' on New Years. You are so good and kind, of course, to provide everything for our enjoyment, and yet I should, I assure you, experience no feeling of deprivation were we to curtail a few really unnecessary expenses, for the present, at least, or until there is a brighter outlook for business."

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed Mr. Lanier, "what a splendid little speech, to be sure; but do not be grieved because of my amusement; indeed from the bottom of my heart, I appreciate what you have said, but do you think I would permit my little wife to make a martyr of herself merely on account of old foggy Wadsworth's gloomy prognostications? Why, the old gentleman has annually predicted a failure of our firm ever since I have been a member. There is really no occasion for alarm; so let us talk about what you have been hanging on that tree for the children."

"Yes, dear," answered the wife, "but I think you should not speak so disrespectfully of Mr. Wadsworth, poor old gentleman, I dare say he may be growing a little childish, but you must not forget that he it was who was chiefly instrumental in having you admitted to the firm as junior partner. But to change the subject to Christmas trees—wait, there is a ring at the door bell. James, go into the hall and tell Andrew to admit no callers this evening, except Mr. Loring, and if that is he, have him shown into the library."

"I wish you had invited Loring to dinner this evening," remarked Mr. Lanier, "but there comes James. Who was it, James?"

"It was Mr. Loring, sir, and he would be glad to see you privately, at once, on a business matter of great importance."

"Why, whatever can possess Loring to want to talk business at this unearthly hour. However, excuse me, dear, and I will go immediately to the library," said Lanier.

George Loring, was what would be called a fine looking young man—tall, erect, although a trifle too slight and delicate, perhaps, with clean shaven face, showing to advantage his handsome, regular, features, a shapely head, dark curling hair and

flashing black eyes. He was the chief accountant and confidential clerk of the large dry goods house in which Lanier was a partner.

Loring was found by Mr. Lanier pacing up and down the room, his face pale and betraying great alarm.

"Ah, glad to see you Loring. Why, old fellow, what is the matter? You appear to be greatly agitated."

"The door—shut the door, please," said Loring, "I have bad news for a Christmas eve. You are aware that Mr. Wadsworth drew out of the firm to day.....dollars which he intended to invest elsewhere."

"Yes, go on!" cried Lanier.

"Mr. Wadsworth had the checks that were drawn cashed at the.....national bank this afternoon, and deposited the currency, tied up in a brown paper package, in our safe. The package has mysteriously disappeared."

"Good heavens! Loring, what have you said—the money been stolen; whom do they suspect, surely not you."

"No. You know I have been out of town all day, but they suspect—you." "Suspect me, a member of the firm! Come Loring, this is too serious a matter to joke about."

"I wish that I were joking, but it is, alas, true that Mr. Wadsworth said to the other members of the firm in my presence, this evening, after you had left for home, that inasmuch as you had been the last one known to have visited the large safe, and that you closed it yourself (I being absent), that the safe had not been broken into, and for various other reasons which he would not then mention, except that he had observed your increasing extravagant habits of late, he firmly believed you to be guilty of having appropriated the money for your personal use; but he said you would not be arrested (that we would keep the matter a secret from you) until to-morrow morning as he did not wish to spoil Christmas for your wife and children."

"Arrest me! Let them. It will not take long to establish my innocence, but an outrage will have been perpetrated."

"No; do not let them find you, for circumstantial evidence would, I feel certain, convict you."

"Loring, do you believe me guilty of this crime?" groaned Mr. Lanier.

"I know that you are innocent," answered Loring.

"I have thought it all over. In one hour (looking at his watch) you must be on your way to New York by the eight o'clock express. Arriving in New York you will disguise yourself and start for some foreign country, where you will remain until your innocence may have been proven."

"But my wife and children—leave them? No! I will remain and face my accusers."

"Mr. Lanier," said Loring "the time is precious; your own good judgement must tell you that I am right. You must prepare to go. I will be your secret agent. You will say to Mrs. Lanier that you are called out on important business, for you have not time to explain matters to her except by a very brief note. We will call at the house of Mr. Baldwin, Cashier of the Bank, where your private funds are deposited, and get his check for deposit; explaining to him that you have to use same in Lowell to-morrow morning, otherwise you could wait for the regular banking hours. On the first of every month you will send me a certain sum for the maintenance of your family—but we have no time to lose, so you had better write the brief note to your wife at once and I will deliver it to her immediately after your departure, and, as your friend, do all in my power to reconcile Mrs. Lanier to what she, as the sensible little lady that she is, will at once perceive to be the inevitable for the present."

"Loring," cried Mr. Lanier, "there is my hand; accept the thanks my heart extends to you but which words will not express. I will now write the note. Oh, my God, that I should be condemned to such sorrow!"

Lanier then wrote his wife as follows:

"MY DARLING WIFE—Circumstances, which will be explained to you by our mutual friend Loring, necessitate my immediate departure from Boston to return I know not when. God bless you, my wife and precious children. I shall remit to you a certain sum of money, sufficient for your support, at least, on the first of every month. Believe that I am your faithful, loving, and innocent husband, CLIFFORD LANIER."

"Loring, you will pardon me for having sealed this note," said Lanier, with an attempt at jocularity.

"Certainly," answered Loring "and we must now make our apologies to Mrs. Lanier for having to absent ourselves a little while."

Just at that moment came a light tap at the door and in answer to 'come in,' Mrs. Lanier entered.

"Ah, my dear," said her husband, "we were just about looking for you. I am obliged to go down town at once with Mr. Loring on a matter of business, and I don't know when I can return."

"Oh, that is too provoking, Clifford," cried Mrs. Lanier, "but you must—both of you—come at once, just for a minute, and look at the tree—we have been waiting for you this half hour."

"Yes Loring I must see the tree and the children before we go," said Mr. Lanier.

The trio walked down the hall to the back parlor, and upon opening the door a truly dazzling sight met their gaze. In the centre of the elegantly furnished apartment was the Christmas tree, literally loaded with gifts for the children and entire household. To nearly every branch and twig was affixed a tiny wax candle, while between the top-most branch and the ceiling an electric light threw down its rays, rendering an effect as of early dawn, just at sunrise, and the candles—one might have imagined—had been left burning till daylight. At either end of the room, however, gas-lights proclaimed it night instead of day. As the door opened, two beautiful children, a boy and girl, aged eight and five years, left their governess and came running from near the tree to meet "papa" and "mama" by whom they were fondly caressed. Soft strains of music floated in through the half open door of the drawing room, and the children waited in eager anticipation the arrival of Santa Claus (to be persecuted by the butler) who was to distribute the gifts.

Again Loring referred to his watch and cast a significant glance at Mr. Lanier.

"Well, little wife" said Lanier "we have to keep our appointment down town, so we must say good bye, or au revoir, I prefer." And the husband kissed and embraced his wife with unusual tenderness for a brief separation it seemed to her.

The children were fondled and kissed; and Lanier then shook hands with the governess, in apparent playfulness or good humor, for the pleasant occasion, and then in company with Loring walked from the room; but almost directly he returned, took another look at the bright scene, and again joined his friend with whom he left the house.

Christmas evening was over—the children and all in the house on Beacon Hill had retired, except Mrs. Lanier who waited the expected arrival of her husband. Suddenly there was a gentle ring of the door bell. Mrs. Lanier started, for she had fallen nearly asleep.

"Who can have called at this hour?" she asked of herself aloud, "It must be Clifford; he forgot his key, probably," and Mrs. Lanier entered the hall and opened the door.

"Why, Mr. Loring! Where is Clifford?"

"He is safe, I believe, Mrs. Lanier, and, if you will allow me to enter at this unreasonable hour, I will give you a message from him."

"A message from my husband? Walk in, of course; but what has happened? Do not, I beg you, keep me in suspense!"

They were by this time seated in the library, and for reply to Mrs. Lanier's last question Loring handed her her husband's note. As she perused it a deathly palor overspread her face, but ere she had finished reading she had partially recovered herself.

"Now give me the promised explanation or the circumstances in detail, please," she said.

A careful observer might have detected a strange light in Loring's eyes as he began stating the facts already given the reader. Mrs. Lanier listened more calmly than he had expected, and at the conclusion of his statement requested his advice as to the best course for her to pursue. Loring, without hesitation, counseled that she immediately seek some quiet residence in a suburban city, as the expense of managing the large house that had for three years been their home, would be too large for her to meet. The soundness of the advice was apparent to Mrs. Lanier, and it was at once decided that she should start out on the very next day, under Loring's escort, to search for a new home.

For two years since her husband's departure Mrs. Lanier, with her two children, had resided in a pretty cottage on Newton Heights, of the beautiful little city of Newton, ten miles out of Boston. A remittance from her husband sufficient for her own and children's support had been received through the mutual friend, regularly every month; but letters direct to her from her husband came never, although Loring said that her husband promised to write her. George Loring had been a frequent caller at Mrs. Lanier's since she had taken up her abode at Newton, and it had become painfully perceptible to the lady that his attentions were far too assiduous to be compatible with propriety or simple friendship; therefore, it came about that often when Loring called Mrs. Lanier was "out." Loring's calls at last became fewer and far between; and thus six months passed, at the end of which time came the great business panic that so unmercifully swept the entire country.

In the meantime Mr. Lanier had successfully engaged in the silk trade at Calcutta. He had written letter after letter to his wife but had never received an answer. Loring had written Lanier that his wife declined to reply to the letters and Mr. Lanier finally ceased writing except brief notes of transmittal enclosing the regular monthly remittance, which were