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The Better Treasure

By Mary Raymond Shipman Andrews

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morning—couldn't disappoint the baby," said the steady voice.

"I know," the clergyman agreed. "I'm in the same box. Yet," he harked back, "it's taking too much risk. You have no right to run such a risk. How much are you carrying?"

"Three thousand dollars."

The man outside drew a sharp breath as if the distinct words had hit him. Three thousand dollars!

The clergyman inside repeated them. "Three thousand dollars! It's too much to carry after dark through a nest of banditti!"

"Banditti!" The other's tone protested.

But Dr. Harding persisted. "At least leave the money in town."

"Where?" Maxwell asked. "The banks are closed. The men's wages must be paid the twenty-sixth. I'll carry it safe enough—the Maxwells have carried their employes' wages to Maxwell Field for five generations."

The clergyman's reply was serious. "With two Maxwells killed to discourage the practice," he said. "There was silence for a moment. Then, 'I see what can be done,' the older man spoke. 'Give me the money. I'll take it to the rectory to-night, and to-morrow you'll all be over to service and you can fetch it back. How is that?'"

"You've a lonely drive, too."

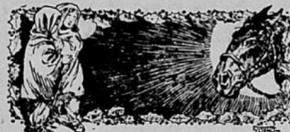
"Only two miles," said Harding. "And there's no danger for me. No body suspects a parson of money."

Maxwell considered, hesitated. "I think I'll accept your offer, doctor," he said at last. "Quarles, the manager, objects to my landing with a bag which I carry carefully myself, as I must when it's loaded, this way."

The man outside, strained forward, could imagine the manufacturer's hand laid on the stout bag on his knee. "My dress-suit case I throw at somebody to be put into the trap, and I think no more of it, but this I keep by me, and I'm so well known about the country that they are familiar with my ways."

The confident voice, the voice of a personage, went on, but the shabby figure outside relaxed, shivering a bit, against the wall of the station. He was thinking fast, but his listening now was less careful; he knew the rest; his data were collected.

There was a whistle down the track, and a wave of humanity drew together; the train pulled in, the man hovering in the background waited to see Mr. Maxwell of Maxwell Field, in a fur-lined ulster with his collar and cuffs of sable, and the thin clergyman in his overcoat a little gray at the seams, enter a car together, before he sprang unnoticed into the car behind them.



"Say 'The Night Before Christmas,' Mother, He Begged."

The two big children and their small mother sat on the rug before the fire, the fire being an especial luxury for Christmas Eve. The nursery was a pleasant room; the spondfright firelight washed brightness over gay colors of coarse stuffs, over cheap prints of fine pictures, over the whitewashed walls and the peace of the two white beds folded back for the night. There was a homelike atmosphere, full of the alert leisure of a house where much is done. The children leaned

close against the woman between them; the girl's hair was spread on her mother's shoulders, and the boy's arm was around her and his head pressed her arm.

"Say 'The Night Before Christmas' again, mother," he begged. "You promised you'd say it next."

"No, she didn't, Benny," objected the girl. "She only promised she'd say it again; she hasn't said 'While Shepherds Watched' at all yet, or told us the story of the beasts on Christmas Eve. Have you, mother?"

"My knee, Benny—you weigh a ton, dear," remonstrated the mother, pushing a heavy foot. "We'll do this, Alice. Benny knows 'While Shepherds Watched' as well as I, and if he'll say it, then I'll do 'The Night Before Christmas,' and the story, and just anything you want."

"I like your saying of it, mother, better than I do Benny's. He always makes the angels talk like people," Alice demurred.

But the boy, undisturbed by criticism, began at once. His large brown eyes fixed on the fire, he recited, slowly and conscientiously, the two-hundred-year-old Christmas carol: "While Shepherds watched their flocks by night,"

very late—look! It's almost nine," and the girl and the boy cried out together.

"Oh, the Beasts! The Beasts!"

They pressed against her, a head on either shoulder, and held her hands in theirs, while she told them a tale of a boy in a German forest whose father and mother were so poor that there was not enough to eat in the house. She told them how he lay in his cot on Christmas Eve and heard them plan; how he listened as they divided what food was left into three portions for tomorrow's breakfast, the largest for the boy; how he sobbed to himself in the dark as he heard them arrange to kill his two friends, the old horse Friedel and the old cow Minna, rather than let them starve to death; how, lying awake late in the night, he could not bear to think that the dear horse and cow stood hungry in the barn, on their last night of life; how he stole into the kitchen and found the coarse bread and the milk that were saved for his own breakfast, and carried them out to the stable; how, as he came to the door, he heard strange hoarse voices speaking low, and listened and found that it was Friedel and Minna talking together; how then he remembered that once a year, at midnight on Christmas Eve, dumb beasts may find speech in memory of the night when the Christ-child lay among beasts, in the manger; how little Hans listened to the thin old horse and the hungry old cow and heard them grieving for the poverty of their master and mistress and heard them speak of the secret which, if the beasts might have speech to tell it, would make everything right; how Hans went in boldly then and gave the animals his breakfast, and asked them to tell him the secret; how they told him, in unison,

"All seated on the ground,
The angel of the Lord came down
And glory shone around,
The reedy voice repeated, and a listener might have understood what Alice meant. It was much as if John Jones had met William Smith and mentioned to him a matter of news about a mutual friend, an angel. But to the woman who listened with the boy's head against her shoulder, the incongruous inflections were sweet; the audacity of it seemed to bring so near, that it thrilled her, a night when, for another Child's sake, the skies had rung with a song that has echoed always. Benny's fresh tones disclosed, with careful conversational emphasis, more and more facts about angels, to him a shade less real, a shade more holy than his mother.

To you in David's town this day
Is born of David's line
A Saviour, who is Christ the Lord,
And this shall be the sign—

was elucidated in a realistic manner, and the child proceeded to explain.

"Thus spoke the seraph and forthwith appeared a shining throng of angels—praising God—who thus addressed their joyful song."

"An atheist would have got an impression, hearing him tell it, that the boy had seen with his eyes and heard with his ears what he related. There was a silence as the sturdy tones ended and Benny's eyes gazed on into the heart of the fire, as if they saw in a vision the still eastern night, the shepherds on the hills, the white flight of angels.

"You repeated it very nicely," Mrs. Harding said softly, and put her mouth against his head again. "Now you shall have yours."

The big 11-year-old girl caught her mother's hand—a hand worn with

rusty voices, that beneath the empty stall of the stable was a treasure of gold, buried a thousand years before by the Romans, which would make his mother and father richer than they could dream; and how just then the bells of the distant village rang for Christmas morning, and the poor beasts were dumb again, and Hans went back to his bed and waited for daylight to tell his father and mother, who dug for the treasure and found it and were happy with the horse and cow, and rich ever after.

The story ended and the children were quiet, as if listening, thrilled, to those stammering hoarse tones of the good brutes in the chilly stable.

"Now, chickens, you must go to your roosts," the mother broke their dream, and her words ended in a sigh. "Father! It's too bad to have him left out of Christmas Eve, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is," agreed Benny sturdily. "Nobody can say 'Peaceful Was the Night' 'cept father. It's too bad for father he had to go to the thing-ma-jig's funeral;" and, being Christmas Eve, Benny went unreproved for the description of his great-uncle.

"Father'll be home before morning, won't he?" asked the girl, and went on. "Oh, I remember. You said some time in the night, but we can't tell when, 'cause the trains get late. Well, I hope he'll be here in the morning when we wake up. It wouldn't be Christmas without father; would it, mother?"

"I can't bear to have him out so late," the little woman said, and her tones were troubled. She went on as if thinking aloud—a way she had with her big babies. "Father isn't well—he ought to go south—I wish he could go," and Benny answered in strong baby tones:

"Oh, he can't go, mother. We have not got money enough—you said we hadn't."

"No, dear, we haven't," she sighed; and the girl shook her mane of hair back thoughtfully.

"I wish I could find a lot of money like Hans, for father," she said.

The fascination of the firelight as the children lay in their beds, their mother gone, held the drowsy eyes open. The girl, the more aggressive, the more imaginative of the two, went back, with a thought working its way in her mind, to the story which had a hold on both, the story of how two dumb brutes may talk once a year on Christmas Eve.

"Do you believe it's true, Benny?" she consulted her brother. "Mother didn't say it wasn't, you know."

"Then it's true, and I believe it's true," said Benny stoutly. "I'm glad they can. I know Nigger would enjoy a talking. He looks like he wanted to talk when he squeals, and he squeals words sometimes. I heard him say 'corn bread' one day."

(Continued on Page 7)

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