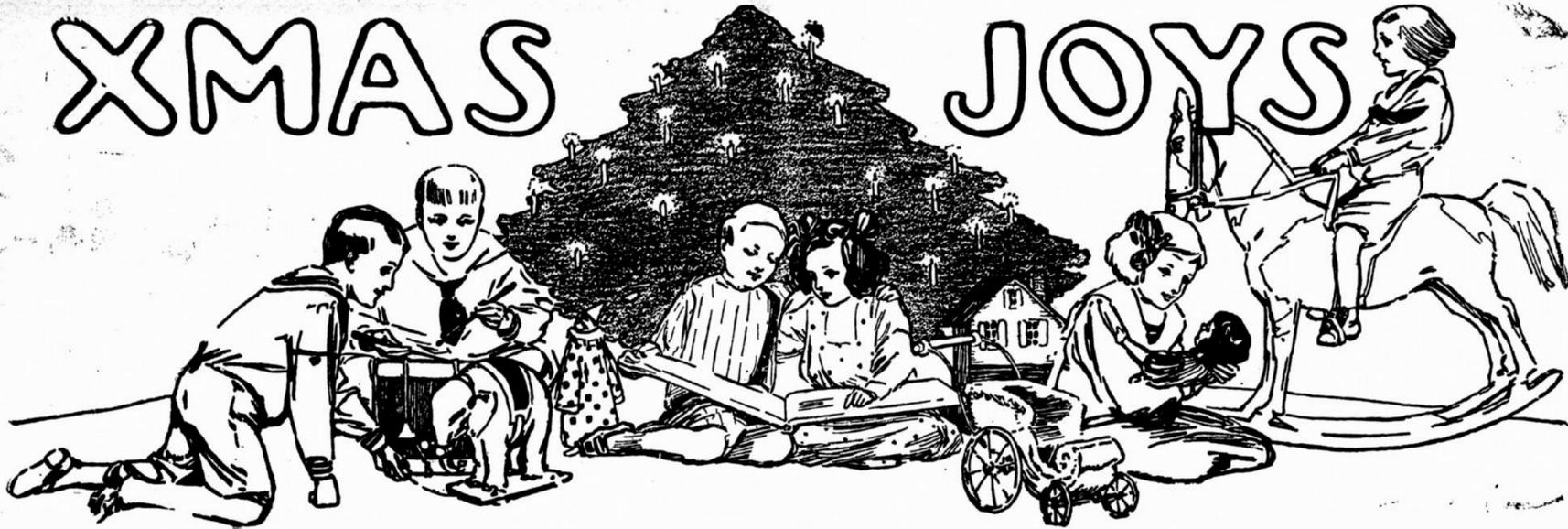


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CUPID MAKES A CHRISTMAS CALL

She had written to him: "It will seem quite like old times to have you with us again at Christmas. It seems much longer than four years since you were here, but I am sure things will appear quite as usual to you. We make no change in our yearly program for Christmas. It is really the children's day, as it was when you and I first spent it together. (I hesitated when I went to write how many years ago. It must be eighteen.) But I think father and mother—and I—take quite as much interest in it as grown people do in the circus—quite for the children's sake, of course.

"I would ask you to dinner immediately on your arrival Christmas eve, but if I dared to suggest the presence of an outsider there would be a hubbub among the powers that rule the nursery and—at this season—the entire household. I simply dare not say anything save that we should like to have you come at 9 precisely, so that we may have a little chat before the arrival of our other guests."

And indeed as he walked up the avenue with his long prairie stride Christmas eve he was depressed to find everything so little changed from the night four years since, when he had left New York for the west to make over his life in a new pattern of work and usefulness.

Here was the familiar door and the old bronze doorknob which had once been on a level with his eyes. And the old butler, whom the Stantons had had for twenty years, opened the door to him and answered his greeting with a respectful "Good evening, Mr. Burnside," giving him his Christian name as if he had called only the evening before. But the hall was hidden in a mass of evergreen and holly, and the electric bulbs glowed in their shades like huge berries in the greenery. And here he seemed suddenly a stranger, coming now on the old Christmas spirit to which his absence had made him an alien. It bewildered him; it saddened him.

He entered the front drawing room and saw the hem of a skirt disappear through the portieres which hung between that and the second drawing room behind it. Some one was placing a Christmas wreath in the middle window, a woman's figure. He did not know her. She turned to greet him with an eager, "Why, Burnside, I am so glad to see you!" and grasped his brown fingers with a warm clasp of a white hand.

She was not of that girlish fragility which he had remembered. She was the elder sister of her old self, but in the excitement and pleasure of seeing

him her voice and manner were those of the girl whom he had loved—and lost—four years before. He smiled at her sadly. "How you have grown!" he said.

She arched her eyebrows at him. "And you?" she laughed. "Why, you're as broad and brown as a soldier. I shouldn't have known you. You have changed!"

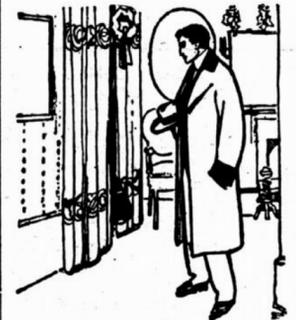
"Have I?" He caught at it eagerly. She saw the trouble in his eyes. "They'll all be delighted to see you looking so well"—she avoided it—"so big and strong."

He saw the picture of himself which she carried in her memory of him, and it pained him. He had thought that his letters would have told her.

She held the wreath up to him. "I was pretending to hang it in the window," she confessed, "so that I should be the first to see you. And I didn't know you when you passed."

He smiled again, and they sat down together. "How are they all?"

"As well as ever," she said and began to tell him of them—how the children had been growing; how her mother was aging. "And father," she whispered. "Is so deaf. You mustn't



SOME ONE WAS PLACING A CHRISTMAS WREATH IN THE WINDOW.

let him see you notice it. It was the grip last winter." As for herself, her life was the old round. "I keep it full. I ride—with a groom. It isn't as jolly as when we used to ride together. But you—you must be a famous horseman by this time?"

He remembered those rides. What a fool he had been to forfeit all that!

"Yes," he said vaguely. "What an age I have been away!"

"And what a lot you have done," she reminded him. "You don't know how proud we have been of you. I used to read your letters and Stewart's out to father as soon as they came." She had risen. She went over to the window to hang the wreath, with her back to him. "He used to watch for them almost as eagerly as I did."

"Yes, you were all very good," he sighed. It was unkind, though, for her to say such things when she meant nothing by them.

"Did you meet any nice girls out west?" she asked in another voice, fussing busily with the wreath.

He shook his head. "Not that I remember."

"How did you spend last Christmas?"

"In a railroad train. I had to make a trip to Frisco." He spoke abstractedly. "I haven't had a real Christmas since I went away. I felt like—I don't know what—when I saw the old hall."

She caught her breath at his tone. "Oh, did you?" she said sympathetically. "We fixed it in the old way just for you—to make it seem like old times." She had come back to him, distressed by his manner. She looked down at him helplessly.

"That was just it," he said. "Nothing has changed."

She guessed what he had left unsaid. He needed encouragement, consolation.



SOME ONE WAS PLACING A CHRISTMAS WREATH IN THE WINDOW.

tion, the assurance that his life in the west had cleaned the blot from his escutcheon. She began to busy herself about the room, planning sprigs of Christmas green on the hangings. "Do you remember how we used to decorate together?" she asked him.

"Do I?" he said. "Don't you let the servants do it yet?"

"No," she laughed. "It'd spoil the fun. I have to do it alone now."

"Oh, I beg your pardon," he apologized, coming over to her eagerly. "Can I help you?"

"Well," she said, "if you haven't forgotten how?"

"Forgotten?" he exclaimed. "I remember the proper place for every berry."

"Get the holly, then," she ordered. "We'll have to hurry. They'll be in on us in a few minutes."

He brought the branches to her and they went to work together, putting twigs of it among the bric-a-brac and in the vases, drooping clusters over the tops of the pictures and twining them in the chandeliers and electric brackets. She saw him smile with something of his old boyishness and was encouraged.

They stood in the center of the room at last and looked around at their work. "I have one sprig left," he said. "Where can I put it?"

"There's not a corner left," she said, searching the walls with a most in-

nocent eye. He could see none either.

"Why," she exclaimed, "there's the old place over the mantel."

He looked up at the carving. "I can't reach it without a ladder, even yet."

She measured his height with a glance. "Stand on the arm of a chair."

"With my weight?" he laughed.

She studied the situation. "I'll do it myself steady—the chair."

He drew over a corpulent chair of puffed upholstery, with an arm as broad as a cushioned window seat. She hopped into the ample seat of it with a show of dainty slippers and put her hand on his shoulder. "You will have to catch me if I fall," she smiled down on him.

He reached up and took her hand. "Be careful," he said and closed a firm grasp on her fingers, which were trembling despite herself.

She stepped up, swaying, on the arm; he held the chair with his knee and handed a sprig of holly to her. He had forgotten the four years that had passed.

She straightened up slowly. "Oh, I can't," she said and fell back to him again. "I'm afraid you can't hold me."

He came around to the other side of her. "Put your hand on my shoulder," he directed. It was the way they had done it before, and he longed for the old touch. When she stood up on the arm of the chair he put his arm about her and held her there. She reached the branch of holly into its place in the carving slowly and then lowered her hand to his shoulder.

There were tears in his eyes. He took her fingers and put them to his lips. "Thanks," he said huskily.

She slipped down to him in a sudden wave of weakness. "Oh, Burnside," she whispered, "how—how you frightened me!"

She was such a little thing in his arms. The blood choked in his throat. "Have you forgiven me?" he asked quickly.

Her hand stole up, trembling to flutter a touch of pity on his brown cheek. "Forgive you?" she whispered. "I forgave you the day you went away and cried all night for you to come back."

He gazed into eyes that were swimming in tenderness. "God bless you," he said to them—"dearest," to her lips.

The butler coughed in the hall. "The mistletoe has come, Miss Frances," he announced.

"Bring it in," she cried. "We'll have some on the chandelier."

"And a piece over the mantel," Burnside suggested slyly.

She looked at him with a sidelong smile.—New York Commercial Advertiser.

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