

# Christmas Gift

What shall I give my loved one  
For a Christmas gift to-night?  
How can I tell the story—  
My pen refuses to write?

I would give her gems of light  
From the caverns deep of night;  
Opals, rubies, emeralds green,  
Diamonds bright with fiery sheen;

All the spices, rich and strong,  
From the eastern lands of song;  
Perfumes heavy, musk and nard,  
Ambergris, opaque and hard;

And the tissues soft and rare,  
That Circassian beauties wear,  
That with clinging, tender fold,  
All her charms should closely hold.

I would give her castles fair  
Far in Spain's ambrosial air,  
Tall and stately, gayer with gold,  
Ivy grown and shrouded old.

Since I cannot give her these—  
For I lack the needful elf—  
I will give her, if she please,  
All I have—my life, my self.

DAVID A. CURTIS.

# An Ishmaelite's Christmas

GOODBY, Henry," said the warden, holding out his hand.

"Goodbye," said the man as he grasped his late jailer's hand; "goodbye," a bit huskily. "I thank you—sir—for all your kindness."

"Oh, that's all right!" said the warden cheerily. "I try to do what's right; that's all. Just you do that in the future, Henry, and I shall never see you here again. Good luck to you."

The great doors clanged behind Henry Johnson as he stepped out of the prison, where he had served six years, four months and twenty-five days—not the full sentence he had received, for the benefit of the allowance for good behavior had been his. But six years is a long time, long enough to change a man for better or worse.

With a new suit of clothes, a ticket to New York and twenty-three dollars Johnson walked away, once more a free man.

He had looked forward to this day for years. He had dreamed of it on his hard bed in his lonely cell—the day on which he would be liberated, on which his revenge would begin.

It was here at last. Johnson was surprised at his sensations. Instead of shouting, leaping or crying for joy, he was walking along as quietly as though setting out on a visit to friends.

Ah, friends! The word brought him to a realizing sense of what was before him. Friends indeed! In all the wide world had he a single friend?

With lightning rapidity the events of the last eight years swept before him. He saw himself honored and respected, holding a position of trust in a banking house, laying by a tidy little sum for the home which was to be his—and here in the near future.

Then came the scandal, the embezzlement, the mystery, the plot which wrecked his life and sent him to prison for a crime of which he was innocent, then, through that inexplicable channel which news drifts from the outer world to those in prison, he had learned of the prosperity of the man who in his cell he was convinced had ruined him, and of his marriage to the woman Johnson had loved.

The train for New York swept around the curve, and the smoothly shaven man in the ill fitting clothes, with despair on a face and hell in his heart, crept on and slunk into a corner by the door. He crept out the window to catch a last glimpse of the high stone wall and the entry stalking solemnly up and down.

"How soon will I be back?" he asked himself.

Then as the gloom deepened on his eggard face he muttered, "When I get back it will not be for embezzlement, but for murder."

Johnson had in those six dreary years of captivity calmly and coolly meditated his plan of revenge. He had decided to kill John Raymond, his former friend and business associate, as he would kill a viper that had stung him.

How—when—where? were the words which jumped ceaselessly through his mind, keeping time to the clattering of wheels over the rails.

At night, Night, with its awe and mystery, should surround the deed. In his own house—the house which had stolen from him. In its privacy, in its seclusion and elevation, calling distance of—

his wife—if possible, would the murderer find him.

The man in the corner of the car laughed aloud. One or two passengers near turned and looked at him, but quickly withdrew their eyes. There was no contagious mirth in that laugh, and the smile on the cruel face was the smile of a fiend.

That night he crawled into a slovenly bed in a cheap lodging house on the east side. He missed the lonely cell to which he had become accustomed, and found himself wondering if they would give him his old quarters when he went back.

Next day he prowled about the muddy streets seeking work. It was Christmas week, and everybody was too busy to listen to him. He ate sparingly and hoarded his little roll of bills, counting them over and over. A strange attraction lured him to the neighborhood of the bank where he used to work. At the close of the sabbath day he stood and watched the well dressed, well groomed men emerge from the building. "That is the way I used to look," he said to himself, and then glanced down at his plain clothes and coarse shoes.

At night the Bowery glittered with rows of lights that twinkled like evil eyes. Johnson tramped for many blocks, pausing now and then to gaze in the windows at the Christmas decorations. There was one display which fascinated him. In a cutler's window were stars, crosses and other emblems formed of smooth, shining, sharp edged knives. Johnson looked steadily at them for a long time. Then he went in, and selecting one particularly wicked blade paid for it from the little roll of bills, thrust it in the breast pocket of his coat and resumed his tramp.

"Christmas, Christmas," he muttered as he plodded on. "What is Christmas to me? I'd like to give John Raymond a Christmas present, curse him," and then suddenly he thought what a fine thing it would be to drive that knife home in Raymond's heart and attach a piece of paper to the handle bearing the inscription, "A Christmas present from a loving friend."

"I'll do it!" he exclaimed. "Yes, I'll do it on the night before Christmas. What a merry Christmas it will be for me!"

People brushed against him in the throng. Children shrank at sight of his scowling face. On, on he went, unmindful of his surroundings.



SOMETHING ROLLED DOWN THE CHEEK OF THE EX-CONVICT.

Suddenly he paused before a great building into which crowds were pouring. He joined the throng and drifted in. There were lights and music. Somebody—a man with a clear baritone voice—was singing something. To the ears of the Ishmaelite stole these words:

I've found a friend in Jesus;  
He's the fairest of ten thousand to my soul,  
The Lily of the Valley,  
In him alone I see  
All I need to cleanse and make me fully whole.

Then suddenly the great audience rose to its feet and responded:  
He's the Lily of the Valley,  
The Bright and Morning Star;  
He's the fairest of ten thousand to my soul.

Johnson looked stupidly about. He saw faces lined with sin and suffering—the faces of thieves and outcasts. But everybody was singing. He looked at the platform. It was filled with men and women dressed in curious fashion, in dark blue costumes, with big scarlet letters on their breasts. During Johnson's prison life the Salvation Army had sprung into existence.

He all my griefs has taken,  
And all my sorrows borne;  
In temptation he's my strong and mighty tower—

rang out the voice like a clarion call. And once more the poor, sodden wayfarers to whom he sang answered:

He's the Lily of the Valley,  
The Bright and Morning Star;  
He's the fairest of ten thousand to my soul.

Something rolled down the cheek of the ex-convict.

He put up his hand impatiently to brush it away.

And then, half stumbling, he hurried out into the night.

But as he fled through the fast falling snowflakes he heard again the refrain well up like a batttery:

He's the Lily of the Valley.

Next day as he aimlessly walked about he came face to face with a man he had known in his old life. The man started as if he had seen a ghost, and then shamefacedly and hesitatingly extended his hand.

"Howdy do, Johnson?" he said timidly.

"Oh, I'm well enough," said Johnson with a short, harsh laugh. "I'm trying to get something to do. Perhaps you could help me."

"I—oh, no—well, you see, just now everybody's taken up with Christmas."

"Yes, so I see."

"Of course you understand it's not an easy thing to recommend—a—"

"A jailbird."

"Well, er—you understand."

"Yes, I understand. I won't bother you. I'll get along in some fashion. I've a little money. But tell me, can you give me any news of Raymond?"

"Well, yes. You heard about his failure?"

"His failure? No."

"Yes, lost every cent a year ago. Poor as a church mouse. Sick, too, I heard a few days ago. Rheumatism, I believe. His wife—"



Time turn back, and I'll forgive  
Thy whips and goads of pain  
Once more on Christmas eve to live  
And be a boy again

Tom Messinger

"Yes, yes, his wife."  
"She's supporting him, I understand—sewing. They live somewhere on the east side in a tenement. Horrible come down! Well, I can't stand here all day. Goodbye. If I hear of anything"—and he was gone.

Johnson stood looking after him in a dazed fashion until a gentle hint from a policeman reminded him he had better move on.

So Raymond was poor and sick—his revenge, then, was partly begun—and that Christmas present—some way the thought of killing a poor invalid did not appeal so strongly to the Ishmaelite—somewhere on the east side—as well try to hunt the traditional needle—poor, sick, and Nelly sewing to support him—well, there was some justice in heaven, if not on earth.

It was the night before Christmas when Johnson strolled again into the great rink where the Salvation Army was holding its meetings. He listened to the burning words which fell from the lips of a sweet faced woman. She talked of God's best gift to man and spoke of peace and good will. Then again the singer came forward, and again the strains which had rung in Johnson's ears for two days rolled to the roof. While listening eagerly his eyes suddenly fell upon the face of a woman who was sitting three seats from him. A pale, thin, shabbily dressed woman.

It was Nelly!  
When she rose to go he followed her. As she hurried away he stealthily crept behind her, his hand involuntarily clutching the knife over his heart.

Up a rickety flight of stairs she went, and close behind came her pursuer. She opened the door on the third landing and went in. He crouched outside, holding his breath.

The door remained ajar.  
He looked in and marked the poor room, with its wretched belongings. He saw the bed and the sick man bolstered up by flabby pillows.

"Is that you, Nelly," he heard Raymond moan. "I thought you would never come."

"Well, John, dear, I just ran into the rink a moment to hear the singing. It sounded so sweet as I came along. Here is your medicine now."



"HE WAS INNOCENT, NELLY."  
Then Johnson, listening, straining every nerve there in the darkness, heard an awful groan.

"What is it, John? the pain again?"  
"Yes, yes. Oh, this is terrible! Nelly, I am dying."

"No, no, dear, you will be better presently. Here, drink this."

The sufferer obeyed and sank back exhausted on the pillows. "Now," thought Johnson, "now is my time. I can rush in and stab him before his wife. Why do I not do it?"

"Poor Nelly!" said Raymond again, "to what have I brought you? Ah, sin finds its reward."

"Sin, John?"

"Yes, sin, Nelly, I am dying. I must speak—I must tell you all!"  
"Hush, dear, you are excited. Listen now. I'll sing you to sleep, and tomorrow, Christmas morning, you will be better."

And then to the Ishmaelite, his hand against every man, outside there in the darkness, floated in Nelly's sweet voice:  
He's the Lily of the Valley,  
The Bright and Morning Star.

But she was interrupted.  
"I must speak," moaned the sick man. "I will tell you."

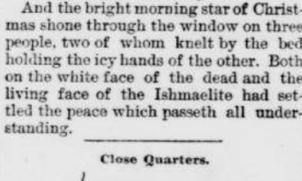
Then the door was softly pushed open, and the startled couple saw him. His face was pale, his features working, and tears were raining down his cheeks.

"No, John," said the Ishmaelite, "do not speak."  
But not to be overcome in generosity,



Raymond raised himself, and with one supreme effort pointed to Johnson, crying:  
"He was innocent, Nelly."  
And the bright morning star of Christmas shone through the window on three people, two of whom knelt by the bed holding the icy hands of the dead and the living face of the Ishmaelite had settled the peace which passeth all understanding.

Close Quarters.



Clara—I hung up my stocking Christmas eve, and what do you think I got in it? A beautiful umbrella.

Maude—It must have been a pretty tight fit.

Christmas Holly.

The practice of decking churches with the evergreen is very ancient, says Chatterbox. On this account our pious forefathers gave it the name of "holy tree," of which our word holly is a corruption. Duppa tells us "that branches of this tree were sent by the Romans to their friends with their New Year's gifts as emblematical of good wishes, and the custom is said to be nearly as old as the building of Rome itself." The holly sometimes attains the height of forty feet, and when of this large size the wood is very valuable and is much used by cabinet makers. It is white, hard, close grained and takes a very fine polish.

When stained black it is an excellent imitation of ebony. The long and straight tough branches are often used for whip handles and walking sticks. The leaves of the holly near the ground are frequently much more prickly than those toward the top of the tree. This circumstance forms the subject of a poem by Southey, in which he says that though in youth buffeted with the world may call forth harshness, yet a man ought to pray that unkind feelings may daily wear away—

Till the smooth temper of his age shall be  
Like the high leaves upon the holly tree.

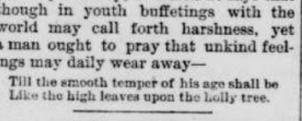
Among other quaint customs still extant are those of the "mummers" and mummings at Christmas, all common in Oxfordshire, England. Some wear masks, some black their faces and others dress fantastically. They go about singing:

A merry Christmas and a happy New Year,  
Your pockets full of money and your cellars full of beer.

But this is the convivial side. At this time the following apparently senseless lines are sung by the yeoman of Somersetshire:

Here comes I, liddle man Jan,  
With my sword in my han!  
If you don't all do  
As you be told by I,  
I'll send you all to York  
Vor to make apple pie.

Mum.



Dashaway—I hear, Bobbie, that you got a train of cars for Christmas and they had an accident. Tell me all about it.

Bobbie—I can't say a word. You see, I am one of the officers of the road.

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