



LD CURMUDGEON sat in his lonely villa and cursed Christmas. He cursed the compliments of the season; he cursed the waifs; he cursed Christmas boxes (these with extreme unctious); he cursed the Yule-log; he cursed turkey and goose, plum pudding and mince pie, snap-dragon and Santa Claus—in short, he cursed Christmas and all its joys!

"Rap, rap, rap, rap, rap!"
A whole-souled knock at the street door. Curmudgeon cursed the knocker, and, intercepting the maid in the hall, growled out instructions that he was out.
"Out be hanged!" cried a voice through the letter box. "Bowled out, you mean! I see you, Curmudgeon, by the hat rack. Open the door, my son, or I'll play a tin-whistle on the doorstep."
Curmudgeon opened the door and confronted his neighbor like a thunderstorm that had made a mistake in the season.
"Now, sir, what the dev—"
"Devil be hanged!" quoth Felix, bursting into the hall like a forlorn hope through a breach. "This is Christmas eve—Christmas eve, Curmudgeon! Good old Christmas eve! Good old Santa Claus! Good old Curmudgeon! Join in the chorus, and I'll tip you a stove."

He lifted up his voice and sang:
"God rest you, merry gentlemen,
Till daylight doth appear!"
Felix was a member of the stock exchange; he had been toasting Christmas, and he and Curmudgeon had been boys together; so that there was really no excuse for that merry gentleman's inquiry as to whether Felix had mistaken his semidetached villa for the county asylum. Felix laughed like rude Boreas in a good humor, and his laugh would have made a charity school forget its misery.

But it was lost on Curmudgeon. He had made up his mind to celebrate Christmas eve by a cheerful grizzle over his solitary fire and a festive growl over his solitary supper.

"What on earth do you want at this unearthly hour?" he asked, peevishly. "And what do you mean by this unearthly behavior?" he added, savagely.

The maid beamed in the background, but, catching Curmudgeon's fiery eye, she fled to the underground kitchen and cheered herself with the thought that Robert would be off duty at ten.

"Unearthly hour! Good heavens, man, it isn't half-past seven, and to-morrow's Christmas!"

"I don't care whether it's seven o'clock, eleven o'clock or one o'clock, or whether to-morrow's Christmas day or Judgment day. I believe, Felix, that this house is mine. What do you want?"

"You!" roared Felix, and the hall gas flickered as he laughed. "We want you to come in next door and help us to be festive and free. I've got a few pals, and the missis has got a few pals, and as for Geoff and Maidie, they've got all the children of the terrace. Slip on your coat, man, to keep out the blizzard, and come along."

"Come along!"
"Come along!"

Curmudgeon groaned, and came along like a snail unwilling. He hated most things, but especially he hated children. He closed his street door behind them in stony silence.

"Come along," said Felix. "We'll kick up our heels to-night and be boys again—hold up!"

Curmudgeon was already kicking up his heels. Some juvenile criminal had made a slide before his very gate. Curmudgeon's feet flickered in the starlight on a level with Felix's shoulder, and but for Felix's support he would gleefully have flung himself on his back in the snow.

"A slide!" said Felix. "Hooray! Come on, Curmudgeon!"

He took a short run and a long slide, and knocked a terraceful of postman's knocks. He was so pleased at this performance that he gave himself an enthusiastic encore, and slid till he had made a 20-foot death trap.

Curmudgeon stood shivering and unenthusiastic. He did not approve of grown men making fools of themselves and slides before other people's gates, and told Felix so in language that was forcible and free.

"All right; I've done now," said Felix. "I'll send the boy out to throw some sand over it."

He bore the despairing Curmudgeon into his bright hall. Tom, the page of all work, went out to throw sand over the slide; and did it so thoroughly that 20 minutes later, when a demand arose for his services, they found him, after a quarter of an hour's calling and ringing, the leader of a string of butcher's boys, and baker's boys, and poulterer's boys, sliding before the house, oblivious to all the world.

But long before this Curmudgeon had been welcomed in the drawing-room hilariously, Codger and Cockywx and Buffer had wrung him by the hands and slapped him on the back, Mrs. Felix and Mrs. Felix's gossips had wished him a "Merry Christmas," and a horde of children, white-frocked and velvet-suited, had hailed him as a man and a "gran'papa."

"And now," said Felix, standing on the hearthrug and beaming like a winter sun, "let us be happy."

Whereupon Curmudgeon, snubbing Codger and Cockywx and Mrs. Felix impartially, retired into himself and the most obscure corner of the room, and looked as happy as Daniel in the den of lions. A small child pursued him and tried to tug him in front of the fire, but, finding that Curmudgeon stuck to his corner like a periwinkle to his shell, gave up the attempt and climbed on his knee.

"Boh!" said Curmudgeon, with forced mirth. He would rather have had black beetles crawl over him than children. But "Boh!" said the small child, with a shriek of delight. She held a sprig of mistletoe, and, standing on Curmudgeon's knee, she held it over his head and kissed him moistly in the left eye, after which atrocity she lost her balance and fell at full length on the rug. They picked her up, and, hesitating for an anxious moment whether to laugh or cry, she laughed like a set of musical bells.

"Maidie's not hurt, Mr. Turmudgeon," she said, to reassure him. Curmudgeon refrained from expressing his disappointment, and she captured him by escalate once more and established herself on his knee, and the company, who had crowded round at her fall, dispersed.

"I know you!" she said, confidentially.

"Indeed!" growled Curmudgeon. "Well, I don't know you, you know."

"What!" cried Mrs. Felix, who was watching with maternal pride. "You don't know our Maidie? I am shocked, Mr. Curmudgeon. She's passed you with her mail cart scores of times."

"O, indeed!" said Curmudgeon, trying to feign interest in his tormentor. Scores of children passed him scores of times with mail carts—the terrace was

Curmudgeon's Christmas

By ALFRED HURRY

rich in both. Scores of cats fought in his garden at nights as well, but he did not know which was Felix's cat. If he had he would have singled it out for the largest lump of coal. How was he to know the Felix's brat?

"Mr. Curmudgeon," she whispered, putting her lips to his ear, "I've come to apologize."

"O! What for?"

"For muddying your clothes. I've so sorry. It runned away with me."

"What runned away with you?"

"My mail cart. It was Wilberforce's fault, really. He was so naughty; O, Mr. Turmudgeon, he was so naughty that I had to speak severely to him, and it runned into your legs."

Curmudgeon remembered that yesterday he had been surprised by a shock behind the knees, and, turning wrathfully, had discovered an alarmed infant with a mail cart, packed full of frightened dolls.

"All right," he growled. "It didn't hurt. I wasn't angry, Maidie."

Relieved to hear that the old gentleman's looks had belied him, Maidie kissed him in both eyes. Curmudgeon blinked and stifled a despairing "Ugh!"

"Now, ladies and gentlemen," said Felix, "I am about to douse the glim—I mean I am about to turn the gas out. No kissing aloud, please. Now, Geoff, ready with the slides?"

Almost before the younger gentlemen had had time to range themselves by the side of the younger ladies the room was dark and Geoff's magic lantern was in operation, and the hands of the youths found the hands of the maidens.

A skeleton flashed on the screen. Geoff, with youthful prodigality, had given his piece de resistance first. Chorus of delight from the younger spectators and cries of mock terror from Felix.

"I'm not frightened, Mr. Turmudgeon, is you?" whispered a still, small voice.

Curmudgeon reassured the small owner of the voice. It tickled his ear. He writhed like a red Indian at the stake.

A boar at bay was depicted.

"O, look, Mr. Turmudgeon! Just look at that pretty pig—o-o-h! and that naughty butcher man!"

A frightened face burrowed in Curmudgeon's neck.

"Give us something pretty, Geoff," cried Felix. "We don't want blood and bones on Christmas eve. Give us the clown whacking the pantaloons with his sausages. That's it! Hit him again, Joey!"

A shout of laughter shook the chandelier.

"Tomfoolery," muttered Curmudgeon. "Grown-ups are worse than the children."

"Isn't it funny?" whispered the still, small voice, as Geoff worked the slide for all he was worth, and the sausages flickered like cycle spokes.

And, behold, it was funny. Curmudgeon was petrified to find himself laughing. What had come to him? Was he a little boy with a frill round his neck, and was the voice in his ears Nesta's, and were they sitting with papa and mamma at Sadler's Wells?

No. That was half a century ago. He had stood at Baby Nesta's grave with her children. And he, Curmudgeon, was not a little boy with a rosy face and an appetite for bread and milk any longer, but a lonely old man whose collars were derided by an irreverent generation. Amid the laughter one sigh was breathed.

Another picture. The whisper went round the room: "Darby and Joan!" The two withered faces close together drew another laugh from the darkened room, and another sigh from the old man.

A cheek was pressed against his, as in the picture, and Maidie whispered, with a gurgle at the quaint conceit:

"We's Darby and Joan, Mr. Turmudgeon. I love oo—oo pretty man."

Curmudgeon gasped. It was a long time since anyone had felt moved to remark that they loved him. The dark room turned to a sunny old garden. In the shade of the trees hung a swing, in which two children nestled, a fair-haired little boy and a baby belle with dark eyes and clustering curls. Curmudgeon knew the little boy; but the little girl—ah, Winnie. She came from the garden next door, and they were sweethearts. Where was Winnie now? Was she keeping Christmas with grandchildren climbing on her knee, or—



A Child Climbed on His Knees.

waiting for it in Kensal Green?

"Hallo, Curmudgeon, buck up! What's the matter?"

The magic lantern was over, and the room bright with light.

"Nothing! Buck up yourself, Felix. Let's play blind man's buff—and I'll be blind man."

A shriek of joy from the children. Mrs. Felix's eyebrows went up. Codger, Cockywx and Buffer gasped.

When blind-man's buff palled they played hunt the slipper and puss in the corner; and, finally, when they had exhausted all the recognized games and themselves, they played go as you please and romped indiscriminately. Felix, in a dunce's cap from a bonbon, told impromptu fairy tales to a charmed circle; and Codger, in a Red Riding Hood costume, from the same wardrobe, played the famous heroine to the life; while Curmudgeon's impersonation of the wolf knocked Lauri into a cocked hat.

Then they had supper, and, "for the first time for five-and-twenty years, sir," Curmudgeon ate a mince pie. He was incited to this outrage on his digestion by Maidie, who sat on his knee munching her third, and strewing his trousers with crumbs.

And later, when Maidie and Geoff had gone to bed, and the other children had departed under the escort of rosy-cheeked nursemaids, and Buffer had fallen asleep, Felix and Codger and Cockywx played many keen rubbers of whist; and Curmudgeon, who loved whist, but hated losing helpence, lost eightpence with cheeriness of a juker plunging.

Somewhere about midnight a faint wail was wafted from the upper regions, and Mrs. Felix, rushing up, returned with the intelligence that Maidie was awake again as noonday, and insisted on Curmudgeon's going up to sing her to sleep. Curmudgeon detested being interrupted at whist, and he was nothing of a singer, but he went up like a Briton and sang "Three Blind Mice" and "Frog He Would A-Wooing Go," and told the Homeric story of the "Brave Tin Soldier," till at length, promising to marry him when she was "grewed up"—in a year and a half at the outside—Maidie fell asleep.

Christmas broke bright and clear. Curmudgeon, drowsily wondering how he had got there, turned over in bed and listened to the "Sweep yer door, mum?" of the street boys and the scraping of their spades. Annually, on every Christmas morning, it had been his custom to turn over thus and breathe anathemas on the day. But this Christmas morning he murmured something that may have been a curse, but which certainly sounded like a "Good old Christmas!" He had neither headache nor heart-ache, and, tucking himself up, almost wondering why "mamma" didn't come and do it for him, Curmudgeon felt young again.—London Black and White.