

FAMILY SACRIFICES

They Serve to Make a Merry Christmas

By CLARISSA MACKIE

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"I don't see how we can afford to observe Christmas this year, Henry," remarked Mrs. Tiddleberry two weeks before that anniversary.

"Not at all, my dear. I wouldn't be surprised if this turned out to be the happiest Christmas we ever had."

"For a long while after his wife had departed Mr. Tiddleberry waited in silence, and when he had quite determined she must have retired he slipped softly to and fro between the parlor and the hall closet under the stairs, his stockings feet making no sound on the carpeted floor.

"I wish he could package and hook up with undisturbed attention upon a cotton fringe kimono, a pair of red and yellow pajamas, a pair of brown gloves and a book that his wife had longed for. He found a pair of stockings in her dressing basket and hung one beside Linnie's putting nuts and candy and a big orange in first. Then he stuffed in the kimono and the gloves and hid the book in the closet above it.

"I'm afraid I've spoiled your Christmas by objecting to the presents," she said, with compunction in her tone, as she lingered by his side.

"Not at all, my dear. I wouldn't be surprised if this turned out to be the happiest Christmas we ever had."

"You needn't think you're getting to save on your only consolation just to buy some foolish nonsense for the children. How much of your month's salary will there be after you've paid aside the amount of the interest due the first of the year?"

"None," confessed her husband candidly.

"Then why should we try to observe Christmas just as if this year had been a prosperous one?"

"You have stamped me Anne I hate to give up Christmas, but I guess we'll have to."

"I'll do the best I can," promised Mrs. Tiddleberry as she folded up the stockings. "There will be enough to eat, but it will be plain. I find a little money away for Bob's suit and for Linnie's new coat, and that will be all the Christmas they can have this year. I can make some black walnut candy for them and some popcorn."

"You're right, as usual, Anne," said Mr. Tiddleberry bent to kiss her flushed cheek.

When she broke the news to Linnie and Bob the next day they young ones grew quite round and rosy, and she felt a little lump in her throat as they trudged off to school with a cheerful "All right, mother, dear."

"They're disappointed enough," she murmured, "but they won't say any thing. I'm proud of their peace."

Mr. Tiddleberry developed a habit of working late in the city, and each night found him taking a later train to his suburban home until finally he straggled into the house on Christmas eve just as the clocks were striking 11.

"Henry," said Mrs. Tiddleberry, "it seems to me the important thing is picking up or putting away the business with your books. There must be some reason for your working late at the office. You never did it before."

"There is an excellent reason, my dear," said Mr. Tiddleberry, "and as he hangs his overcoat before the kitchen stove to dry, "which I will explain to you in due time. It certainly is a wild night, Anne—a typical Christmas eve. Where are the youngsters?"

"Gone to bed like lambs," said Mrs. Tiddleberry in a burst of admiration. "I haven't told them just what their Christmas presents were to be, but they are clever enough to guess, I suppose. I told them it was something to wear."

"How about dinner tomorrow? Got everything in that you need?"

"Everything," said Mrs. Tiddleberry, bending double over the steaming newspaper she had just opened. "I told you this morning it would be the first Christmas eve you didn't have to do any shopping. Did you miss it, Henry?"

"Did I?" exclaimed Mr. Tiddleberry emphatically.

"You did," admitted Anne soberly. "Don't you see like Christmas at all. I told the children to help up their stockings."

"They might as well I suppose," said Mr. Tiddleberry, rather gloomily. "If you hadn't forbidden me, Anne, I might have managed a few oranges or something. I believe I'll go out and get some now." He reached into the kitchen for his overcoat, but Anne slipped to the china closet and threw open the door.

"Wait, Henry! Look there!"

"Great smoke!" exclaimed Mr. Tiddleberry, and then he chuckled softly to himself. "Oh, Anne, Anne, how could you, when you forbade me to buy a thing?"

"I baked a half dozen Christmas plum puddings and sold them and made enough to get some oranges and nuts," blushed Mrs. Tiddleberry under his tender scrutiny. "I couldn't bear to have them find empty stockings."

"Is that all?" demanded her husband. "Isn't it enough?" she evaded. "Come in the parlor and look at the coat and suit. I made a larger one for the furnace and turned the heat on here so it would be warm when they got up in the morning."

"What else have you done, Anne?" persisted Mr. Tiddleberry. "Confess! I'll give you—looking at his watch—just three minutes. Fire a read!"

Annie sank back in a big rocking chair and closed her eyes wearily. "Well, I found one of Linnie's old dolls and made new clothes for it from head to foot. It looks like new. Then I made the three dainty handkerchiefs. I had the material in the house, and I fixed a little workbasket for her."

That's all for Linnie. I made Bob a bath robe.

"A bath robe? Out of what paper?" "I had an extra blanket, a small one so I dyed it red and made a robe for him, using a curtain cord and tassels dyed the same color. That's all except the popcorn and candy. I never spend a penny for anything except nuts and oranges."

"It's enough, Anne. I'd like to see you were the exponent of the giftless Christmas! Good night, my dear. Go to bed. I shall sit up awhile."

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ALZINA'S TREE

The Momentous Part It Played at Christmas

By ELLEN P. BANKHEAD

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The red farmhouse was set in a white expanse of snow. The drooping elms protected the roof with wide spread arms clothed in ermine, and where the crisp wind had blown away the covering the tufts were darkly silhouetted against the bright blue sky. A thin spiral of smoke drifted up from the big chimney and shimmered away into nothingness.

Close to the south bow window grew the sturdy graceful edgic that had been planted when Miss Alzina was both.

Alzina lived alone with her third cousin the Widow Lasbury who had been a woman of her own. Mrs. Lasbury was a very fat woman who ate a great deal and talked incessantly. Some days she would take her sewing and her needle as usual, as usual, as usual, in order to escape the domination of her cousin's tongue.

The day before Christmas they sat on the sofa in the living room, and Alzina was knitting for the boy who brought the milk while Mrs. Lasbury was addressing Christmas cards with a pen dipped in violet ink.

Suddenly the widow lifted her head and looked critically at her younger cousin. Alzina was fair and slender and she had passed her thirty-fifth year, but her skin was fresh and unlined, and her gray eyes were clear and unclouded. She wore a plain gray dress and her brown hair was drawn smoothly back from her low white forehead.

"Alzina," said Mrs. Lasbury ponderously. "I never thought you set much store by Christmas."

The other looked up inquiringly. "I don't know as I ever did, Eliza, not since I was a little thing. You see we had lots of trouble when I was young. It seemed as if there was an other empty chair every Christmas till they were all gone. Since then it's been a lonesome season."

Mrs. Lasbury coughed deprecatingly. "Being as you don't set much store by Christmas, I know you wouldn't mind if I went over to Mrs. Beebe's to spend the day. She was second cousin to my husband you know."

"Very well," said Alzina quietly, and her voice did not tremble although a mist came into her gray eyes.

"Then as if you made much of the day, as I recollect Christmas is like most other days here," complained the widow in self-extinction. "Over to Beebe's they have a Christmas tree and a turkey and lots of good things. May be you'd like to go along with me though you might enjoy it not knowing anybody over there."

Alzina smiled at the grudging invitation and a duplicate came into one cheek. "No thank you, Eliza. I may as well spend the day as usual. You know we live so far away from neighbors we have got out of the habit of participating in their good times. I may walk over to church in the morning. I am sure you've had such dull holidays here. If I'd only known how you felt we could have had a turkey and all sorts of good things to eat, only Eliza, if you'll remember, you've spent every Christmas with Mrs. Beebe. I've always been alone."

"I don't remember," remarked Mrs. Lasbury vaguely, blotting the last card and putting the cork in the ink bottle. "I guess I may as well be getting ready. Alzina, Hiram's coming over for me at 5 o'clock, and I've got to get together for the little things I've been making for the folks, and that reminds me I've got something for you too." She fumbled through the Christmas cards on the table and extended toward her cousin a gorgeously colored Christmas greeting. "With a Merry Christmas, from Cousin Eliza," was written across the bottom.

"Thank you, Eliza," said Alzina, with a sudden choking in her throat. "It is very good of you to think of me."

"Not at all, Alzina," returned the widow graciously. "I think of you very often. Now, see here, what I've been making for the folks. You see, they'll expect me to remember them, seeing as I spend every Christmas with them. I bought this water pattern for Sarah, and I made this muffler for Hiram. Now, ain't it? Beebe's been wanting a china cup of her own to drink from, and I got this down to the store."

"It's real pretty," said Alzina, scarcely seeing the gayly decorated cup through the blurring mist before her eyes. There was a homesick feeling at her heart and a dread of the coming lonely day. Mrs. Lasbury had cared enough to plan out gifts for these others. For lonely Alzina there was nothing save the card. Ashamed of the jealousy that had burned brightly in her heart, Alzina praised the gifts her kinswoman had prepared, and then just before the widow's departure Alzina tucked in her hand a little purse containing a five dollar bill.

"With love and a merry Christmas, Eliza," she said heartily.

"That's real thoughtful of you, Alzina," cried Mrs. Lasbury, quite moved by her cousin's generosity. "I most wish you was coming along to enjoy the Christmas tree."

"I shall have a Christmas tree of my own," said Alzina spiritedly.

Mrs. Lasbury stared. "For the land! What do you mean?" she demanded.

Alzina pointed toward the widow where the feathery plume of the cedar branches tapped the pane. "That's my Christmas tree," she smiled bravely. "When the birds come tomorrow they'll find bits of suet and other goodies, and little Chip, the squirrel that lives in the hollow oak will find a handful of nuts. Then there's the red mittens for Jimmie and a jar of mince-meat for old Mrs. Peterkin. Why, we'll have quite a merry Christmas here, after all. I wish I'd thought of it before." Alzina's cheeks grew quite pink and her gray eyes sparkled.

"My land, Alzina, you're almost pretty," she admitted graciously. "They was asking down to the sewing circle why you never encouraged any company. There's plenty of young men would like to call on you, and most of them would like to marry you. I thought young Fred Pierson was quite smitten when he walked home from meeting. Well, you needn't look so mad, Alzina. Most girls would be glad to have him looking at 'em."

"Here is Mr. Beebe," remarked Alzina, turning from the window with her flushed cheeks. "I hope you'll have a lovely time, Cousin Eliza."

"I expect I shall," said the widow complacently. She bundled herself in a large cloak and tied a wooden shawl over her head. "I shall stop in the post-office and see if my present has come from Elderly. Do you really mean you're going to have a Christmas tree, Alzina, like you said?" And as Alzina nodded assent Mrs. Lasbury tucked her double chin in the folds of her shawl and added, "Good-bye, Alzina. I wish you joy of it."

When she was alone Alzina thought about the Christmas tree she had so bravely planned in Mrs. Lasbury's presence, and she tried not to remember that she was all alone and that her natural reserve had shut her away from the few friends she might have possessed. There was no one to remember her this lonely Christmas eve, and so she must try and remember the few people she knew. She had a bright idea in each thumb of the red mittens and wrapping them in white tissue paper placed them in the milk pail outside the door. She groped down cellar for a jar of mince-meat and made it ready to take to old Mrs. Peterkin in the morning.

When she opened the pantry door to find some bits of suet for the birds she met a surprise. There on the broad shelves the conscience-stricken Mrs. Lasbury had arranged two mince pies and a golden one of pumpkin. There was a small roasted chicken and a dish of cranberry sauce, besides several vegetables ready to be warmed up. The hot tears welled into Alzina's eyes.

That just shows that everybody is better hearted than I think they are," she murmured as she closed the door on Cousin Eliza's mute but substantial offering. "I'm ashamed of myself when I think how much I'm missing of all the goodness just by being so narrow minded."

Before she went to bed Alzina read the beautiful story of the first Christmas, and although she had read it before, it never held so much tender meaning for her as it did this anniversary of the blessed birthday.

She awoke cheerful and contented, and while there was no Christmas greeting awaiting her from the silent rooms of the house she resolved that when another year had rolled around the Christmas season would find a happy gathering under her own roof, the lame and the halt and the blind. Ah, she would find them in the high ways and byways. They would never be another lonely Christmas.

When she opened the sitting room door she saw the tree. After her first start of amazement she stood silently looking through the windows at the beautiful sight. Somebody had shaken the snow from her cedar and dressed the branches with tinsel and strings of popcorn. Somebody had tied oranges and cranberry canes and popcorn balls to the stems, while there were several mysterious looking packages depending from the lower branches.

Alzina tiptoed out of the door and like one in a dream approached the tree. Her slender feet made deep tracks in the snow, and the morning sunshine turned her brown hair into a mass of gold. Almost reverently she touched the branches that bore the Christmas fruits, and then she untied one of the packages and slowly opened it. Inside was a dainty white apron with a Christmas card. To Alzina from Sarah Beebe. There was another present from Mr. Beebe and one from Esther and a real present from Cousin Eliza Lasbury, a knitted Afghan. Then there was a big box of candy from Fred Pierson's mother, and, lastly, a very tiny box hanging all alone.

When Alzina opened it she found a beautiful little turquoise ring, and in it was twisted a note from Fred Pierson himself. "If it's all right, Alzina, wear this down to the gate," he had written bashfully.

After she had wiped the tears from her eyes Alzina Tweed saw that all the friendly Beebes and Cousin Eliza Lasbury were peering at her from adjacent points of vantage. "I never had such a good time in my life," panted Mrs. Lasbury as they gathered about her. "When I told Mrs. Pierson about it she and Fred wanted to join in, and so they did. If you'll give us some breakfast, Alzina, we'll take you back to Beebe's with us. Fred and his mother'll be there, and—where are you going?"

"If you'll excuse me a moment," blushed Alzina, twisting the turquoise ring around her finger. "I've got an errand down to the gate."

And all the Beebes and Cousin Eliza winked solemnly at each other.

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