

Christmas At Marlin's

The Day When the Pride of Ten Years Melted Away

By JOHN C. WHARTON
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In the middle of the long dining room the small table was set alone under the softly shaded electric light, his strong hand idly playing with the stem of his wineglass.

The light shone on pale, sharply cut features and hair prematurely gray. It was a handsome countenance, but overcast with habitual gloom that tinged in the fine gray eyes and was written about the well-cut lips.

A negro servant moved slowly toward and faintly proffering this or that tempting dish for the notice of his master. At last the servant moved toward the door and stood there at attention; it irritated Benjamin Marlin to have a servant behind his chair.

At last the man at the table lifted his head and looked around the expanse of snowy darkness, glittering with silver and cut glass in the ceiling a bowl of crimson carnation-flamed richly.

"Caleb!" he said sharply.

"Yes, Marse Ben," was the eager reply.

"Do you know what day it is?" Marlin's face wrinkled into a bitter smile.

"Yes, sah, it's Christmas eve," replied Caleb, with an expectant glance at his employer.

"Hannah understands that my orphans are still in care?"

Caleb's face lengthened. "You mean Marse Ben, dat you don't want no Christmas dinner cooked in dis house?"

"That is what I mean, and I don't want anything served that approaches a Christmas dinner, understand?"

"Sah will know what to do just as you have done for the past ten years."

The servant bowed respectfully and turned away with bent shoulders.

"Yes, Marse Ben," he said suddenly.

Down in the warm kitchen big black Hannah was washing dishes with a sifter and bang that threatened to bring disaster upon the Marlin china ware.

She turned a white turbaned head toward her husband as he entered the room.

"You needn't say a word, Cale, noo," she ejaculated. "I kin see by yore face dat he's not gwine to have no Christmas dis year."

"I dunno what we're coming to," groaned Caleb. "It ain't scarcely respectable not to keep Christmas."

"Respectable!" mottled Hannah angrily. "It ain't respectable. Here wid de face of Christmas for ten years running; I don't care if it ain't Marse Ben Marlin himself, I kin see you look at us dat way. Cale Brown, I reckon I sussed Marse Ben when he was a little boy, and I seed him grow up into a willful tempered young gen."

"Woman you was always lit to have his own way. Of course when he married a high spirited gal like Miss Cornelia, who give him no good as he sent and wanted her own way, nebber, once in a while, mos' anybody could see dere was bound to be trouble."

"If Miss Cornelia didn't look bote de young uns with her, mourned Caleb, she might have had a teeter Christmas fatted of cooking fish or cabbage or mos' anything dat don't smell like chicken or turkey or mince pie. Oh, Lordy, I wish dat debbil could be driver Marse Ben and debbil send for 'em all to come home."

"Twelve years and three months to a day," calculated Caleb mournfully. "I reckon I shall run away from Marse Ben before next Christmas, Hannah, and you kin run too. I shall try to find Miss Cornelia, and shebbe she'd take us I expect she has a sight of trouble wid her down in Philadelphia."

"Humph! You know as well as I does dat Miss Cornelia don't keep no help. Ain't he bored time and agin dat she's teachin' how to sing and play de piano and woking her pretty self to stunner and bones to take care of dem children, an' no proud to take a penny from him for dere keep? It makes my blood bite, Cale, to think of dem cullen a-din' up a Christmas box for dere pa each Christmas and him having it put up in de nursery without even untying de string! It's a biling shame to be so proud as Marse Ben."

Their indignant voices drifted up the forgotten open shaft of the dumb waiter into the dining room overhead, where the object of their remarks sat with a white spot face fixed unseeingly on the opposite wall, where long rows of stiff necked ancestors looked down on this member of their race, the most proud and stiff necked of them all and the most unhappy.

When the voices had sunk to a low murmur Benjamin Marlin arose and left the room. He did not cross the hall to his library, as was his usual custom, but turned and went slowly down the circular staircase to the second floor. His own apartments were on the north side, but on the south there stretched a sunny suite of rooms. They had belonged to Cornelia, his wife, and behind them were the nurseries.

For the first time in ten years he unlocked the nursery door and entered the room. He reached up and snatched at the electric lights and looked down at the little table set for the Christmas dinner.

His eyes were attracted by the miniature furniture brought back a sharp pang to his heart as he remembered the delightful days he and Cornelia had spent in selecting it, but he stilled the thought of Cornelia and tried to recollect nothing save his two children. They were his, and he had accepted their banishment from his presence with a hardening heart, a heart that now acknowledged that he had been unjust to Cornelia, that he had restricted her in many ways that must have chafed the pride of a high spirited girl such as his wife had been. His own character had changed in a measure. He could see and appreciate Cornelia's position.

Each Christmas week had brought a package from the twins. At first it had been addressed in Cornelia's hand writing, but afterward it came to Benjamin superscribed in round childish characters that became firmer every year and marked the development of the twins' education. The packages were there in the nursery, on the little white beds—ten packages that had come by mail or express and had never been untied. Old Caleb had received orders to place them in the nursery, and each year he had carried them there with tear brimmed eyes. Afterward he and Hannah would laugh and cry over their own Christmas remembrances that had come from the same source.

Never by word or sign had Benjamin Marlin recognized the receipt of the packages, nor had he ever sent any gifts to his children. It is hard to understand the pettiness that was so deep welled and yet so near to tenderness that the man was afraid to open the packages lest he be forced to tears.

He was fearful to recognize the Christmas festival in any degree, there were such painful recollections of the first two Christmases after the twins had been born. At first he had tried running away from the Christmas merry making, but wherever his wandering feet carried him there was the joyous observance of the great anniversary. Benjamin Marlin couldn't run away from Christmas. It was everywhere. So he fixed the habit of shutting himself in his own house during those holidays.

Now he looked longingly at the packages on the beds and with a sudden impulse crossed the room and laid his hand on one. It was the first one, and Cornelia must have prompted its sending. For the twins were only three then. Cornelia must have had a strong sense of duty, he admitted as he cut the cords.

Inside was a small box containing a very much soiled and laboriously constructed spirit picture frame, undoubtedly the work of childish fingers. That was from Bobby, as the attached card indicated. Another bit of kindergarten work was Dorothy's offering—a watch chain made of colored beads. In the bottom was a little photograph of the twins. Suddenly the picture frame and the chain and the photograph were blotted out from Benjamin Marlin's eyes in a mist of tears.

He went through the packages one by one until he came to the one that had arrived that morning. All the gifts were of home construction—there was one from each twin and always their photograph, a new one, in the bottom. That was Cornelia's mute contribution. This last package betrayed the fact that Dorothy, a charming lass of twelve now, was a clever water colorist, while Bobby had carved an inkstand from a handsome piece of Cuban mahogany.

As the evening wore on Marlin sat there on the white fur rug beside the little bed, his head leaning against the snowy counterpane, surrounded by the tender remembrances by the children who evidently loved their father so devotedly. The last six packages had contained letters from the twins thanking him warmly for the lovely presents he had sent them and begging him to write to them.

It was this last straw that almost broke Marlin's proud heart. He had never sent the children a gift. It must have been Cornelia who had done that in his name and thus kept his memory fresh in their loving hearts.

He did not hear the ringing of the doorbell nor the excited voices of Caleb and Hannah lifted in delighted surprise. He did not note the bust that followed and then the soft footfalls of several persons on the carpeted stairs. Hannah's pass key turned in the door of the adjoining room, and then, as if attracted by the light the footstepers approached the open doorway and paused.

Then Benjamin Marlin looked up and saw his wife and children for the first time in ten years—saw them looking wistfully at him, Cornelia, more beautiful than ever, with the proud, spirited eyes humbled in appeal to his, the eager loving faces of his own children turned to his in joyous expectation.

"Can you forgive me for not coming to you, dear heart?" whispered Marlin to his wife. "I would have reached you in the morning."

"Can you give me for taking them away from you, my husband?" she pleaded. "I ain so much to blame."

The door closed softly behind Hannah and her husband, and they tiptoed down the stairs with averted and happy faces. When they reached the bottom Hannah lumbered into the telephone alcove and sang frankly.

"What you doing, honey?" demanded Caleb.

"I'm ordering de Christmas dinner, of course. I want de biggest turkey I can git—holla, yere, la dis de butcher?"

Caleb executed a double shuffle on the parquet floor and then stopped abruptly. "Oh, Lordy me! I's got to get out and find a Christmas tree for dem children, and some green stuff and Holly. Well, dis am going to be a Christmas at last!"

HUMOROUS QUIPS

Is There a Santa Claus?

"Is there a Santa Claus?" she asked. "Come, daddy, tell me true. I heard today the good old saint is really truly you. That no one down our chimney comes. To little girls and boys. To you and to me, really buy My dollies and my toys."

I held her on my knee and gazed into her eyes. "Oh, my dear, somehow I've felt this time would come. This question would arise. And yet, I pondered to myself, What shall I say or do? And then I answered, 'Yes, there is a Santa Claus for you.'"

"He comes to you on Christmas eve, but let me tell you this. He's with you when you hug your dad. And when his cheek you kiss. He's with you when you say your prayers. To God, who reigns above. Sometimes he has another name. We grown folks call him Love."

"You keep your faith in Santa Claus. When others bid you doubt. You still retain your faith in him. Let not belief die out. Let what you hear, today is wrong. I felt the teardrops start. 'Yes, yes, there is a Santa Claus. He lives in daddy's heart.'"

Detroit Free Press.

Christmas at the Corners.

When the members of the Basswood Silver Chorus band gave a concert last winter and wore the neckties their wives gave them for Christmas, you couldn't hear the music at all.

William Jenkins, who is somewhat high in money matters, expects to present his family with an encyclopedia, one volume to each member. Last year he gave 'em one dozen eggs.

Rev. Hanks wishes us to announce that he has plenty of white lawn neckties, and if he preaches from now to the crack of doom he won't use up half what he got last year for Christmas, even if he uses a fresh one with every sermon. Potaters and Hubbard squash will be welcome, but he has all the secondhand earmuffs that he needs.—Judge.

Mental Influence.

"How far is it to Bloomville?" we ask of the native who is leaning over the gate.

"Ten miles, straight ahead," he answers.

"But we met a man a little way back, and he said it was only two miles."

"Short, fat man, drivin' a scabitten sorrel horse."

"That's the man."

"Did ye meet him or pass him?"

"We passed him."

"Thought so. He's drivin' a baler I traded him an' he didn't want his boss to know how much furdur it had to go."—Chicago Post.

When the Turkey Said Goodby.

The five turkeys we had taken on subscription were stolen from us sometime Wednesday night, and no trace of them has been found. We don't regret the loss so much because we'll be minus Christmas and New Year's dinners, but the turkeys were good. We've written some snappy editorials about the meat trust, holding ourselves high and independent of it, and now we'll have to help out the blamed trust by purchasing a couple of cans of sardines to fill the void caused by the loss of the turkeys. Atlanta Constitution.

There's the Rub.

"Well," said the optimistic boarder, "there's one thing about our boarding house you can't get out as much as you like there."

"Of course, same as ours," replied the pessimistic one. "You can eat as much as you like, but there's never anything you could possibly like."—Catholic Standard and Times.

She Should Be Tied.

"He's a dangerous man for the community."

"Does he steal?"

"No, indeed."

"Does he intox?"

"No, but he goes round among the married women telling how much he helps his wife out with the household work." Boston Herald.

The Inevitable.

"You don't resent that successful candidate's proud and haughty manner?"

"None," rejoined Farmer Cornstossel. "The fact that he's in politics is all the guarantee I want that sooner or later he'll meet with some kind of a terrible finish."—Washington Star.

Inducements Wanting.

"Why does Willie Smifkins refuse to be a good boy just before Christmas?"

"Because," answered the boy who always knows the answer, "he belongs to one of those families that believes in giving none except useful presents."—Washington Star.

The American Way.

Microbe on Apple: Why is yonder man eating in such a tremendous hurry?

Microbe on Pear: Appointment with his doctor. He is taking treatment for indigestion during his lunch hour, you know!—Puck.

The Maid's Excuse.

Pearl: I am shocked at you! The idea of flirting with a perfect stranger!

Ruby: But, dear, he isn't a perfect stranger. He is your perfect he wouldn't flirt.—Chicago News.

Date of the Row.

The Bachelor: Yes, she has threat ended to make things unpleasant for him. The Benedict: Is that so? When are they going to be married?—Philadelphia Record.

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Kingley's Stammering.

Charles Kingley had talking had an enormous deal to say on every conceivable subject and he liked to say it. But his stammer was always checking him. He gurgled and gasped and broke faces and would sometimes break off in a conversation or a meal, rush out into the open air and liberate his suppressed emotions by rapid exercise or physical exertion. Yet, as has often been observed in similar cases when he had to preach the stammer subsided, and though there was some faint contribution, the flow of the discourse was never interrupted. He said to his friend Tom Hughes: "I could be as great a talker as any man in England but for my stammering. When I am speaking for God in the pulpit or paying by bed-sides I never stammer. My stammer is a blessed thing for me. It keeps me from talking in company and from going out as much as I should do but for it." G. W. B. Russell in Winchester Guardian.

Lisbon in Pepsy's Times.

Pepsy's Diary gives an unflattering picture of the Lisbon court in his day. On Oct. 17, 1861, he talked with Captain Lambert, fresh from "Portugal," who told him it was "a very poor, dirty place—I mean the city and court of Lisbon. . . . that there are no glass windows, nor will they have any. . . . that the king has his meat sent up by a dozen of lazy guards and in plinks sometimes to his own table and sometimes nothing but fruits and now and then half a hen. And now that the infant is become our queen she is come to have a whole hen or goose to her table, which is not ordinary." Some few months later, when some "Portugal lady" had come to London, Pepsy found them "not handsome and their fardlingales a strange dress. . . . I find nothing in them that is pleasing, and I see they have learnt to kiss and look freely up and down already and I do believe will soon forget the reclusive practice of their own country."

A Good Loser.

Arthur's, Almack's, Bootle's and White's were the chief clubs of the young men of fashion. There was play at all, and decayed noblemen and broken down senators flocked thither. Charles Fox, a dandy full gambler, lost £200,000 at a play. Gibbon tells of his playing twenty-four hours at a sitting and losing £500 an hour. That indomitable punster said that the greatest pleasure in life after winning was losing. What hour, what nights, what health did he waste over the devil's books! I was going to say what peace of mind, but I took his losses very philosophically. After an awful night's play he was found on a sofa tranquilly reading a volume of Virgil.—From Thackeray's "The Four Georges."

The Tombigbee.

"Do you know the origin of the name of the Tombigbee river?" asked the well-informed man. "Well," he went on, "if it is Choctaw, every syllable, only the word is not 'Tombigbee.' It is 'Tom-bi Ik-bi' two words, the 'I' being short in each instance. Long ago Choctaws inhabited the section now embraced within the states of Mississippi and Alabama and traversed by the stream that song was about nearly a century ago a white man a carpenter came among the Indians. He lived on the banks of the stream and among other things made rude coffins for burials. Indians at that time 'buried' their dead upon an arbor supported by poles, but they gradually came to the white man's custom of burying in earth and went to the white man carpenter to get their boxes. From this incident, I am told, the stream received its name, 'Tom-bi' meaning box and 'Ik-bi' meaning make or maker, only they added the word 'ok,' which signifies river or creek, so, literally translated, the combination means 'the river where lives the man that makes boxes.' Time as well as the Anglo-Saxon disposition to round corners in pronunciation Anglicized 'Tom-bi Ik-bi' into 'Tombigbee.'—Wichita Eagle.

The Uplift Movement.

When he left the house Saturday morning Burton yanked at the door as if he would pull it off its hinges. When he couldn't open it he started to grumble until his wife came to his assistance.

"What'n blue blazes is the matter with this door?" he grumbled, giving it another powerful yank without being able to open it.

"The trouble with you, John, dear," the wife ventured, "is that you are always down on everything—down in the mouth, down on the world. Let me try it."

With a gentle tug upward on the knob she easily opened the door.

"John was about to sputter out a sarcastic remark when the force of his wife's logic sank in his thick skull. 'I get it!' he exclaimed. 'I get the lesson.'"

That afternoon when his wife visited his office she saw over his desk a little motto with the words, "Me For the Uplift."—Youngstown Telegram.

A Sign of a Crowd.

A very fat, puffing, elderly woman stepped up to the box office of the Chestnut Street theater and, placing a coin on the ticket window, said: "Give me a ticket to the gallery?"

"You are at the wrong window, madam," said the ticket seller. "The gallery ticket office is to your left as you go out of the door."

The old woman walked down the steps and, advancing a few feet, glanced around inquiringly and then let her

With an Eye to the Future.

It would probably take many generations of adversity to trial Americans into the farseeing thriftiness of my people, once observed an American of Scotch birth. "I remember a case of a Scotch woman who had been promised a new bonnet by a lady. Before she undertook the purchase the lady called and asked the good woman:—

"Would you rather have a felt or a straw bonnet, Mrs. Carmichael?"

"Well," responded Mrs. Carmichael thoughtfully, "I think I'll tak' a straw one. It'll maybe be a month or two before I'm done w' it!"—Lippincott's.

Crockett's Revenge.

There is a story of Crockett of "Sticket Minister" fame to the effect that when he offered his first volume to a Scotch firm it was returned with a polite note assuring him that there was no market for that sort of thing. The letter was marked "No. 396b." In later years when the same publishers asked him for one of his manuscripts he politely requested them to refer to their previous correspondence with him marked "396b."

One of Tom Hood's Last Jokes.

Shortly before his death, being visited by a clergyman whose features as well as language were more ignominious than consoling, Hood looked up at him compassionately and said, "My dear sir, I am afraid your religion doesn't agree with you."—Punch's Reminiscences.

Fence of Habit.

A street car conductor who recently embraced religion was called upon to take up the Sunday morning offering. He did very well until he came to a boy. "Young man," he said sternly, "you will have to pay half fare."

Stopping It.

"Willie," said his mother, "are you making the baby cry?"

"No'm," replied the boy. "I'm holdin' my hand over her mouth to make her stop."

Cautious.

Mr. Frubb—This affair is horribly dull. I guess I'll go home. Miss Coby—That would remove some of the dullness. Mr. Frubb—Chicago News.