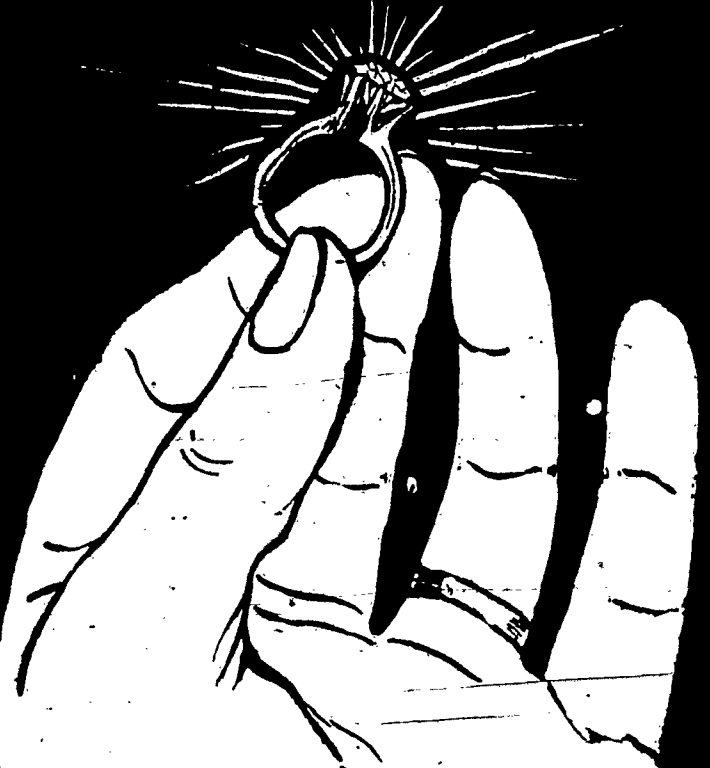


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Christmas After All

And a Very Happy
One.

By CLARISSA MACKIE

The old farmhouse suggested against the side of the hill as if for warmth and protection against the driving snowstorm. The wind howled among the bare branched locust trees and whistled down the wide chimneys.

Inside the house the low celled kitchen was warm from the glowing stove and from the big lamp on the supper table. James Drayton and his wife, Hannah, had finished the evening meal and were sitting quietly before the unlit fireplace. They were listening for the sound of sleighbells and the shrill whistle of the R. F. D. man. Tonight they should receive letters from their married children telling them whether or not they would be down to the old home nest for Christmas. Bob lived in New York with his wife and one child, while Ellen, the only daughter, lived at Sheerbrook, only twenty-five miles across the island from her parents.

"Jingle, jingle, jingle!" cried Hannah, nervously pressing the gray hair back from her temples. "Oh, James, I hope they are coming!"

Presently her husband's form emerged from the flying flakes. He stamped his feet on the doorstep and came into the house, his broad shoulders powdered with white. In his hand were two letters.

Hannah began fidgeting on her glasses and tearing at the envelope in her hand. As she read the letter her chin trembled. "Ellen can't come, father," she quavered. "She says Ann's folks are sweet on her all over there and they're sending a box to us and hope we won't mind very much." Tears were falling fast now.

"Bob—Bob says they can't come either," said Hannah at last. "Louie's folks are coming to spend Christmas with them, and she don't know how to entertain them all in her little flat either. He says they are sending a box down. Oh, James," she suddenly cried, "I don't want their boxes! I want them, the children! I raised 'em. It will be so lonesome without them. It won't be Christmas!"

James Drayton tried to comfort her, but his face worked strangely. He told her that it would still be Christmas, but that the selfishness of others might mar it a little. For should not these children have planned so that their parents should not be left alone on this day of days?

The next day would be Christmas eve, and there was much to do in preparation for the holiday. For James Drayton insisted that the usual preparations be made for the day. He had spent a sleepless night, but in the morning there was a look of stern determination on his face.

"Well, Hannah, do you feel like entertaining a bunch of children today?" he said. "Children that ain't got no folks—that is, no folks to make Christmas for them."

"Who in the world do you mean, James Drayton?" she demanded. Before he could answer she added quickly, "You mean the Flecks?"

He nodded, watching her face. "And you know we haven't been on speaking terms with Cousin Peter Fleck's folks since—since he cheated you out of that forty-acre pasture?" she asked breathlessly.

"I know it, Hannah. I know that Peter lost it all before he died and that Ada Fleck is having a hard time trying to bring up those four children. They're nice children too. The oldest girl—Beatrice—makes me think of Ellen," he added reflectively.

"Ada's been doing sewing," said Hannah, "and I heard she was taking home work from the big factory. I expect it will be a poor Christmas for them all."

"I met little Fred, and he told me that they didn't expect Santa Claus to stop at their house this year."

"Will you go after them, James, or shall I go?" asked Hannah.

James Drayton smiled down at her, and suddenly stooping from his tall height, he kissed her lips. A warm blush invaded her faded cheeks. "We will both go after them," he decided. "I'm going out now to harness up."

The door slammed after him. Hannah gave one glance out into the snowy world outside. The sun was coming out, and everything was a sparkle with reflected glory. She hastily banked the fire in the stove, dressed herself warmly and, locking the door, went out to the barn, where old Gray was harnessed to the double cutter.

"You'll have to cut a Christmas tree, father," she said gayly.

"I'll go out before dark and do that," he said as they started off.

Little Fred saw them coming and ran to open the door for them. There was a little embarrassment at first, for the Draytons and the Flecks had not been on speaking terms for many years. But James Drayton's kindness and Hannah's sympathy soon bridged the gap, and when the invitation came for the whole family to pack themselves into the sleigh the children broke into excited clamor.

"Oh, mother, please!" they coaxed. Ada Fleck smiled through her tears. "It's real good and forgiving of you, Hannah and James," she sobbed. "Af-

ter all that's happened we couldn't expect anything of you at all. I'm trying to impress upon the children that they must work hard to pay back what their father—"

"Tut, tut!" warned James. "Let's not talk about past mistakes now. Now, who is coming to spend Christmas with us?"

"All of us," cried Ada. "But now, all of you, and get ready."

"We will stop for you on our way back," said James. "Hannah and I have got to do some Christmas shopping. We will stop along about 1 o'clock."

That was a very exciting Christmas eve for the Draytons after all. Down in the village they had to buy little gifts for all the children, and Hannah's motherly eye had rapidly appraised the wardrobe of the family, so that they could remember them with substantial gifts as well as toys. It was long after 1 o'clock when old Gray and the double cutter drew up before the Flecks' cottage once more. The little family was waiting, dressed in their best—a rather shabby best indeed.

It was a pleasant ride home indeed, and they did not know until afterward that the villagers noted and commented upon the reconciliation.

When Ada was in the pleasant sitting room watching the cedar log blazing on the hearth and sending up little blue spirals of fragrant smoke she fairly cried. Later Hannah, tiptoeing into the room, found her fast asleep in the big Boston rocker before the fire. The two younger children were coasting down the hill behind the barn. They had found Bob's old sled in the attic. Dan, the oldest boy, helped Mr. Drayton put up the horse and sleigh and feed the chickens and then went forth on that mysterious errand of "cutting the tree."

Inside the kitchen Beatrice, the girl who was "like Ellen," helped Hannah Drayton prepare the chickens for the next day's roast and cook the hearty supper that they were all hungry for. Beatrice pretended not to notice when Mrs. Drayton called her "Ellen," for she knew that the older woman was re-living just Christmas eve spent with her own daughter. Mr. Drayton also forgot and called Dan by Bob's name.

It was quite late before the children went to bed, and finally the whole house was asleep with the gayly decorated tree in the dark sitting room, waiting for the first peep of day to come in order to reveal its pleasant surprises.

On the floor were two boxes unopened. The station agent had brought them the night before. One was from Ellen and the other was from Bob. Hannah had cried a little in secret at the thought that this was to be the first Christmas without her children. But she chided herself for being selfish and tried to look forward to next year when it might be their turn to have a family reunion.

Still, talking the next morning in their bedroom, while the happy strains of the children from the sitting room testified to their delight in the tree and its gifts, they agreed that if Ellen and Bob had come home for Christmas they would never have dreamed of inviting the Flecks, and there would not have been this reunion and this happiness all around.

In the afternoon the children were to have the kitchen in which to make molasses candy and pop some corn. In the meantime there were sleds to try out on the hill, new clothes to try on and new books to read. Mrs. Drayton and Mrs. Fleck cooked the dinner and Beatrice set the long table.

They were just about to sit down when there came the rumbling sound of the station stage. The wheels creaked over the crusty snow and came to a stop in the yard.

The whole family streamed out on the front porch to see who had arrived. James Drayton and his wife pressed eagerly forward when a woman emerged, a woman who proved to be Ellen, and a man who was none other than Ellen's husband, and there followed Bob and Louie, his little wife, and their little one.

"Merry Christmas!" cried Ellen as she flew to her father's arms.

"Merry Christmas!" shouted Bob as he picked up his little mother. "Why we got to thinking about it, and I telephoned to sister, and we agreed that it was going to be a pretty mean trick to leave you here all alone at Christmas, so we stole away for a few hours to spend it with you. Who are all these folks?"

"Come inside, and I'll tell you all about it," said James Drayton, leading the way into the dining room.

That was a never to be forgotten occasion. For the Draytons it was an unexpected joy coming after a great disappointment. They had resigned themselves to a Christmas spent without their dear ones, and now the children had come, after all, to round out the perfect day.

As for the Flecks, it marked a change in their lives. Ellen's husband became interested in Dan and offered him a place in his store at Sheerbrook, and it was arranged that Ada and the other three children were to spend the rest of the winter in the Draytons' home. Bob and Ellen talked together before they parted that night. "Next year," said Bob gravely, "we mustn't wait until the last minute before deciding. We've got to see that all the fathers and mothers on all sides of the family are provided with a happy time before we think of ourselves."

"And by that time," smiled Ellen, "we will be quite happy ourselves."

That Christmas proved to be the beginning of many new things for many people, which is as it should be, for Christmas was a beginning—and all ways will be.



A Collar Bag for Christmas

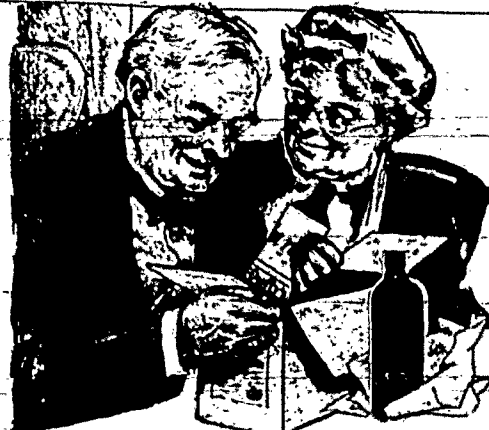
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