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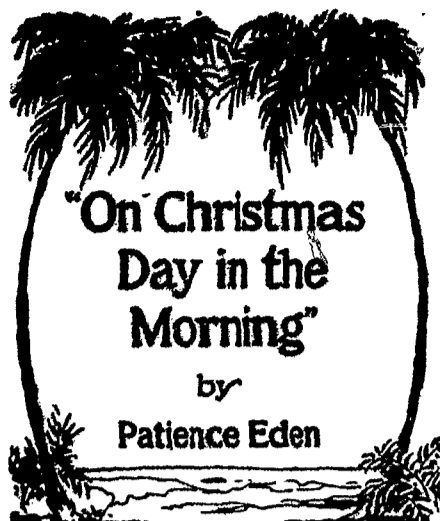
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CHRISTMAS?

Not at all. Oh, nothing like it.

Cherry dug her hands down in the pockets of her gay sweater and gloomily surveyed the lovely scene.

Christmas . . . and the lazy swing of moss garlands from tropical trees? Christmas . . . and a languorous moon riding a southern sky? Christmas . . . and a soft breeze fanning her cheek?

Certainly not! It might be the jolly holiday season at home, thousands of dreary miles away, but there was not the hint of it here.

Cherry walked slowly along the white, gleaming beach. Silver waves lapped softly over the stones. Beautiful! Ah, yes, it had all been wonderful when she first came nearly a year ago. But she had not thought about Christmas then, and how lonely a person could be, even with beauty for a constant companion. All that concerned Cherry was high adventure and the chance to do some fine work in the world.

A hospital had been built. A hospital equipped to the last degree of efficiency. A hospital on one of the



He Waved His Hat, She Waved Her Handkerchief.

larger islands in the southern Pacific. Then had come the call for nurses. Cherry had answered promptly.

And tonight was Christmas Eve! Christmas Eve!

Cherry's mother would be bustling about, busy with a hundred secrets. Rows of pies in the pantry. Rows of stockings on the mantel piece. Whispers in corners. Clatterings up and down the stairs. Giggles from her younger brothers and sisters who could hardly contain themselves for very exuberance.

The rattle of paper being wrapped around presents! Secret conferences about the best manner in which to present mother with the great gift! (Probably a new shade for the living room lamp.)

She could smell the fragrance of wood just piled in the fireplace. She could see the scrolled patterns of frost on the windows. And outside the wide, gleaming stretch of snow. White—not white like this southern silver.

Then she began thinking of David. He had not wanted her to come. They had had a tremendous quarrel over it.

"Anything might happen to you!" cried David.

She could see David's face now, pale and strained as he tried to smile a good-by to her from the wharf when she sailed. He waved his hat, she waved her handkerchief. . . . Cherry was quite sensible and practical.

But David . . . well—David was different. She missed telling him for mercy's sake to comb his hair and not let it ramp all over his head like a haystack! David laughed at her, and teased her and was tender in a nice, clumsy man-way. And he had not written her very often. A slim letter came now and then filled with scraps of home news. He never said he missed her or wanted to see her, or when-in-the-dickens was she coming home? She rather expected to be urged about returning. But not a syllable on the subject.

Cherry was about to rise and go back to her room, shared with another nurse, when she heard quick footsteps behind her.

"Miss Stone," panted the voice of a convalescent native who was allowed to go about on small errands, "Oh, Miss Stone! They want you at the hospital! An accident . . . come!"

Cherry was on her feet in an instant. She ran all the way back, forgetting in her haste the lonely surge of homesickness on Christmas Eve. What could have happened? She gained a fragmentary account from the boy running beside her.

The nurses were trimming a Christmas tree for patients in the ward. Strings of small electric bulbs had been ordered long ago to grace this very occasion. They had come in on the boat that very afternoon. Cherry had paid no attention to the boat. She wanted to get away by herself.

It was the same old story. A short circuit of wires . . . a flash of fire and the tree ablaze in no time. It was not a regulation Christmas tree, but one constructed with patient care to look as nearly like one as possible. Much green paper had been employed, festoons of tinsel, bright bangles.

Cherry flew down the corridor to the ward. And upon entering found plenty to do. The fire had been quenched but not without danger to several patients and nurses. The place was still in a commotion. There was a smell of burned clothing. The wreck of the tree was a heap of ashes. Hands were burned in putting out the fire. Excitement and terror were written on the faces of the sick.

With quiet capability Cherry helped to bring peace out of chaos. She worked quickly. Hands were bound up. Patients soothed. The last traces of the tree removed. Order began to reign again in the large ward.

All through the excitement Cherry was faintly aware of someone who was always ready at her elbow to do the necessary lifting of patients out of the burned area. This somebody had a towel bound over his forehead. It came over his eyes and fell on one side almost obscuring his face. The lights in the ward were not going properly; everything was a bit dim. Cherry paid no attention to anything but the necessary work. But she felt glad of the strong, intelligent hands of this stranger.

When everything possible had been done, Cherry left the ward and went slowly outdoors to get a breath. Now that the emergency was over she began to feel again the unbearable wave of loneliness sweep over her.

She stood a long time in the shadow of a huge tree. How still, how inexpressibly still everything was! You almost expected the moon to make some sound as she glided through the thin rifts of clouds.

Home . . . snow-covered fields so far away . . . would she ever be hearing the musical jingle of sleigh bells?

Somebody stepped beside her. The tall person with the towel bound over his forehead.

"Were you hurt in the fire?" asked Cherry sympathetically.

The tall person drew nearer. The tall person laughed. A deep rumble very pleasant to hear.

"Not much," replied somebody.

Cherry stood as if turned to stone. She was stiff with amazement. She tried to cry out, and made no audible sound whatever.

"Only a bit of a burn on my hair," said somebody. Then: "Aren't you glad to see me, Cherry?"

Cherry faltered. Yes, it is regrettable to report, but that is exactly what she did. A thorough-going, complete faint.

When she came to she tried to explain it away by saying the fire had unnerved her. (Cherry with the best nerves on the island?)

"Cherry!" somebody was saying softly, over and over, "Cherry—aren't you glad to see me on Christmas Eve? I've come so far to be with you at this time. Cherry—say you're glad to see me!"

Fifteen minutes later they were sitting on the silvery beach much in the same place which had been occupied by the homesick young lady from northern New Hampshire.

"David!" said Cherry. "David, how did you do it?"

"Planned it all along," replied David laughing. "Decided you would have had enough of it in a year's time."



They Sat a Long Time in the Silvery Moonlight.

Found out the way to get here, and thought I'd bring a bit of New England Christmas to you cut here on these darned coral islands. I've brought you all kinds of things from the farm. Maple sugar, Cherry! Latest pictures of the twins—and holy terrors they are, too! Stuff your mother made for you to wear. Oh, the greatest amount of dunnage. I arrived on the boat this afternoon, after fussing about in the Pacific for weeks at dozens of rotten little ports. You were off duty, and just as I was ready to tear around after you, the fire happened."

They sat a long time there in the silvery moonlight. And they talked of roasted chestnuts in front of a fire—and sleigh-rides and plum puddings and stockings hanging in a row on the mantel piece, and how the back stairs creaked when you tried to sneak down 'em early Christmas morning. Cherry was never quite so happy in her life. "Coming home with me?" asked David.

"We-e-e-l!" said Cherry.

"Let's get married tomorrow!" suggested David in the cheerfulest manner.

"On Christmas Day in the morning?" "On Christmas Day in the morning!" And they were!

And all the nurses and the doctors and patients in the ward had a piece of maple sugar instead of a wedding cake.

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