

Christmas

TO OUR READERS.

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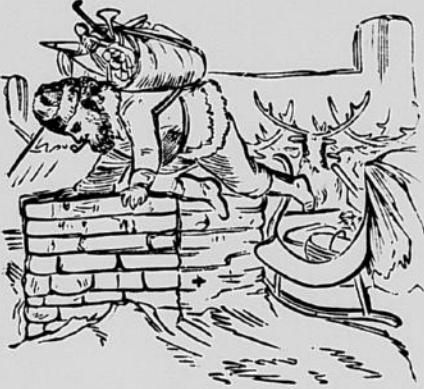
DECEMBER, 1887.

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(For the Little Ones.)
SANTA CLAUS.

BY M. J. ADAMS.

Said Santa Claus, on his midnight drive,
As he neared a cottage white:
"There's Freddie, Annie, and little May,
Who are good children quite.
I'll give them these." And he held two dolls,
And a sled both new and bright.



"There's Johnnie, who lives across the street
A disobedient boy?
He shall have nothing for Christmas Day,
Not even a little toy.
I'm sorry, but he deserves no gifts,
Good children will enjoy."

And thus good Santa Claus went round
With presents nice and new,
Omitting naughty boys and girls,
Their papas and mamma's, too.
He has their names in a great big book
He carries the whole year through.



So children, if no presents come
To you on Christmas Day,
You must not blame good Santa Claus—
A kind old man, they say,
But for naughty children he never has
A present to give away.

VENGEANCE IS THINE.

A Tale of Two Christmas Days.

BY ROBERT FINDLEY.

CHAPTER I.

A push with a cowhide boot, a heave, a grunt, and up comes a shovelful of soft red earth. More stamping and grunting, and more earth, and the grizzly old sexton from the little church under the hill stands erect to mop his streaming brow and catches sight of me perched on a neighboring tombstone.

"Wall, I s'wore! and who might you be?"



"I'm Ted."

"Ted? Oh, you're the kid what washed to shore on the wreck of the 'Mornin' Star.' You're Farmer Bierce's boy now, ain't ye?"

"Yep." "Poor kid! Niver will I forgit how Farmer Bierce dashed into the breakers and dragged ye and the dead woman to shore. No one knowed ye, and I reckon no one does yet. Why, lad, yer ma lies yander just beside the Hoskins headstun, poor soul, and nobody knowed her nuther, fur that matter. No one has found out yet who ye are, and ye are like to remain and be one of us, for all I see, for yer clothes was of furm make, and few furners visits Nottinghamham."

Thus the old man tells the story of my five years of existence, and, growing familiar, I scramble down from the plain slab that marks the resting place of the "Beloved wife of Hiram Fuller," and, with my feet swinging in the little chasm the sexton is digging, I literally sit upon the edge of the grave and watch the work. The next day I come again. Then again and again, and sometimes I find my new-

childless old couple in the farm-house, but nature has made me a queer child, and manhood finds me a solitary, loyal to the past, attached to our homely farm-life, and detesting the advance of "a higher order of civilization" upon our frontier world. I live in the forest and am the passionate idolater of Nature. My thoughts are my companions, and the thousand voices and habitants of the woods my friends. To such a nature love comes like an electric shock.

CHAPTER II.

I met Bessie Sherwin. Love bursts upon me, a sudden revelation of some subtle, terrible power that was unsuspected, and the discovery of which frightens and half angers me. I stare at her, spellbound. She blushes. She glances my person over. For the first time in my life I realize that my clothes are patched, my feet large, my hands red and rough, and my beard unkempt.

"These e-g-g-s are for the sick Mrs. T-t-turner," I manage to stammer. Then I thrust the small basket with its donation from Mother Bierce into Bessie's hand and rush toward home. But my peace has gone forever. I see her face everywhere. I am hot and cold by turns. Hope and despair alternately wrench my heart. I become a slave, an idolater. I shave regularly now. I demand collars for my shirts. I buy a clothes brush. I invest the proceeds of four days' labor in a pair of fine shoes. I fairly stuff the locker of the sick Mrs. Turner with quail, venison and trout. I haunt the Turner residence with the most ridiculous excuses for my presence. I envy the Turners' stable-boy who cares for my idol's pony. My starved soul is mad with a passion that stops at nothing foolish in the long list of a lover's follies. For months I live in the air, in the crystal air-castles that imagination builds for Hope.

CHAPTER III.

It is in the silent house, after the funeral of Mrs. Turner, Bessie's aunt, who brought the beautiful girl, an orphan, from Buffalo, that I find my angel in tears. Her distress, her loveliness torture me. I kneel at her feet. I pour forth my story of passion. She places her soft hand on my shoulder and strives to speak. I spring to my feet and clasp her in my arms.

Resend thy immutable decrees, O Fate, and condense my life into that moment of ecstasy!

How could I know that her tears were caused by her grief, instead of joy? How could I understand that her loneliness drove her to my sympathy; that my devotion had won her gratitude, not her heart? How could I understand that in her great grief she was not strong enough to trample my hopes in the dust of despair?

I only know that she puts her head upon my shoulder as if glad to have found a place of rest. I only know that suddenly the gates of heaven stand ajar and the rance pouring from within dazzles my eyes.

CHAPTER IV.

It is Christmas eve, and to-mor-ow Bessie is to become my wife. I have just come through the woods where the men were cutting Christmas trees for to-morrow, and am sitting before the fire in Mother Bierce's dining room. The old couple have retired, and I am doing what Mother Bierce calls "brooding" over my happiness. And I am happy. Will Bessie be happy with me? Ah! here's the great problem of my love. She is always pale and absent-minded lately. She is kind to me, but has an air of resignation that provokes me. Her frank eyes of earlier days is given less often. She cannot have tired of my adulation, but sometimes she trembles and grows paler at my approach. "Pshaw! 'Tis but the natural anxiety of a girl that troubles her, and I am a fool to sit up this late and worry about nothing. And yet, something serious is at the bottom of her 'mental worryment,' as dear old Mother Bierce would say. A smile, a hand-clasp, a flower, would transport me a few weeks ago; but now, since I have pressed her lips and held her in my arms, I must have all my idol's thoughts, all her heart, all her confidence. I must be part of her life. Such is the arrogance of my passion. Sometimes I have caught her looking at Paul North, the artist fellow from Buffalo, with a light in her sad eyes that I do not understand. Paul is handsome, polished in manners and speech. He shines in the presence of her friends, while I am at a disadvantage, silent and uninteresting. Bah! How I hate him! But can it be that my Bessie—what a fool I am, to be sure. Sitting up till morning to speculate upon the loyalty of the dear girl who will be my wife in a few short hours!



I met Bessie Sherwin.

I smile at my folly, banish doubt, and hurry to my bedroom up-stairs.

CHAPTER V.

It is late when I awake. Christmas morn-

ing! The house seems unusually quiet. Mother Bierce is usually rattling her saucers and pans at this hour. None of the familiar odors are rising from the kitchen beneath me. Everything seems strangely still. I hurry on my clothes. I rush to the well-known bedroom into which I have so often toddled at dawn in my early years. My God! what is it? Father Bierce on the floor on his knees, with his gray head bowed upon the bedclothes! Fainted, but breathing—thank God! Mother! Mother! Oh, dear Mother Bierce! Dead! dead! Staring, but cold and rigid, dead! Crazed with grief, I stagger to the door. I must have help. I will go to Mr. Turner's. I will take my grief to Bessie. My rifle stands beside the door. Why

dark. Beside the animal's hoof-marks are other tracks, tracks made by city-made boots. Curse him! Grinding my teeth together I tear along the road. The snow-flakes fall upon my bare head. I plunge through drifts, with curses between my sobs, and tears dropping from my cheeks. Running, walking, plunging, on I go. Now I stop to recover breath, and I snarl in devilish glee as I look upon my rifle. I forget that she loves him and cannot, should not marry me. I forget the kind, suffering old man, my more than father, whom I left unconscious in the old farm house. I only remember that she was mine, my Bess, and that he, the city galant, has stolen her. All that is savage in me is aroused. I shall

pale and full of cursed pride. Bessie utters a little cry, as she beholds and recognizes the raging demon crouching on the threshold. Still I do not see her. I see only him, and there comes to my maddened senses the full knowledge of all that he is robbing me of. With hot fingers I feel for the lock of my rifle. I do not take my eyes off him. He sees my movement. His face turns ghastly white and he shrinks back against the fire-place. I smile fiendishly as I see him quail.

"You die, you black dev'l!" I shriek.

But Bessie steps before him.

I see her now. How white and faint she looks! Her hands are pressed against her bosom, and her eyes are full of agony.

"Teddy," she says tremulously, "I tried

my back upon that Christmas day of long ago. But everything is changed. Strangers stare at me, and the town has advanced to the dignity of possessing an hotel. In the crisp air of Christmas morning I climb the hill once crowned by that old, old cemetery. Not a vestige of the Bierce residence can be seen! But they've spared the old orchard and maple grove, which seem to welcome me with their swaying branches. I hurry to the old graveyard. I clamber over the fence. Nothing seems changed here. There are more mounds, tombstones, and crosses, but here are all my old companions. I am a child again—ah, no; there is a heaviness about the heart that will not permit that delusion. But I hunt among the tombstones. Here's Mrs. Turner's grave, and the good Deacon, too, has "fought the good fight." Here's another familiar name, and another, and another! They all come here at last. But this—this time-sold, marble shaft? It was not here in early days.

SACRED TO THE MEMORY OF
ELIZABETH SHERWIN NORTH,
BELOVED WIFE OF
PAUL

My Bess! Ah, here is the end of it all. Dead all these years? All the old love wells up in my heart. It has been hidden, but never extinguished. "You are mine now, Bess," I moan. "I have recovered you at last. You have come to my home. You are in the family of the dead I love."

A few withered leaves from the old oak fall rustling about my face as I lower it to the frozen sod that shelters my lost love. My heart grows bitter and I rebel against fate. Even at her grave he may claim her, for have I not just read that there was no shame in their love? Somewhat of the old-time passion mingles with my grief, and the old mad envy and jealousy possess me.

Regrets that I did not satisfy my vengeance seize upon me, and again, in imagination, I am raging on the trail of the fugitives, with the Christmas bells ringing in my ears and murder in my heart.

"Why do you cast yourself upon that grave?" are words that break in upon my misery.

"Because"—I rise to my feet angrily. I look at him! The man who robbed me—the man who stole my Bess!—the man whose face wore sneers when my heart was being crushed.

He comes here now to drive me from her grave. Great God! he comes here now, when the passion of a lifetime is springing from control, more terrible, more deadly than ever. He is here to laugh at my tears, to torture me with visions of the bliss that he has tasted. He is here to torment me with the shame of her desertion of me for him!

He is within my reach, just across the narrow mound!

Again my eyes seem filled with blood. Again I choke with hunger for revenge. Again is he the pallid, trembling wretch who covered in the woodcutter's cabin. Again my hands ache to dash his wreat. The heavy cane in my hand has become the red-hot life of that other day.

"I know you, Paul North," I hiss between my grating teeth. "I am Ted—"

"My God!" he exclaims, and he sinks upon his knees, while the same old terror leaps into his eyes.

"We met and loved before she came among you. She lived but a year after that day we—"

Something in my eyes causes him to pause, and he moans, "God help me!" But I don't catch what he says. I am living over again that scene in the woodman's cabin. I hesitate to spring upon him. I am waiting, waiting for my Bess to step between us, as she did that other Christmas morn. But no Bess comes. Instead, there comes from the little church below the hill the melody of childish voices:

"Hence on ear he's old-will toward men."

I turn my head to catch the song. When I look at Paul North, again he is not the old-time Paul of the woodman's hut. He has risen and leans upon his cane. Why, his face is wrinkled and aged, and he tremles with feeble hands.

"He wishes to die," and he points at a tombstone of marble rising close beside that of my—of his wife. I wipe my eyes and read:

AT REST.

TEDDY BIERCE, ADOPTED SON OF
LUCIUS BIERCE, DIED DEC.
25, 1810.

Erected by Paul and Bessie North.



That

"Miles from here, weeks after that day, they found a body in the woods, and we thought it was yours, although it was badly disfigured," says Paul. Hate flees from my heart forever. I reach across her grave and grasp his hand. Awhile we talk beside our loved one's grave, and then, arm in arm, leaning upon our canes and on each other, we two go down the hill together.



WHERE THE MEN WERE CUTTING CHRISTMAS TREES.

do I notice it at such a time? What fiend possesses me that I seize the weapon and rush through the woods to the village?

Oh, how good that dear dead mother has been to the unknown child cast up by Erie's raging waters, in the past. What kindnesses, what love, what care! Bessie alone can comfort my stricken heart. How precious is her love to me now!

I quicken my pace. I reach the lawn before the Turner residence. I come upon the household gathered about Deacon Turner, who is seated upon the steps, with his face buried in his hands. My appearance seems to quiet the excited people.

"Mrs. Bierce died suddenly, last night," I say; "and I have come to ask—"

"Why, you are in tears! Where is Bessie?" "Gone," answers Mr. Turner, raising his tearful eyes to mine. "Gone," he repeats, "to shame and ruin."

My heart stops beating. Cold fingers seem to strangle me.

"Gone? Shame! I don't understand—"

"Yes. She and Paul North have—"

overtake them. I know this as I bound along. I shall tear his throat. I shall kneel upon his breast and gloat over the contortions of his handsome face as I strangle him. I feel only pity for her—poor bewitched Bess! I shall save her from shame.

By noon I am nearing the town of Mayville. The trail in the snow is very fresh. See! The trail leaves the road and leads



At the woodman's cabin.

to the cabin of a wood-cutter. The are in the cabin. I am a savage. Vengeance is mine. The rifle in my hand seems made of red-hot steel. I strike the cabin door a fierce blow with my heavy hand. It swings inward. I confront the fugitives, who stand side by side on the hearth of the wide fire-place. His arm is around her. My eyes seem to be swimming in blood, and through the mist I see only his face,

hard to love you. Paul and I met, loved, quarreled and parted long before I knew you. My God, how I have suffered!" And she sinks between that craven wretch and me, and stretches forth her hands toward me for mercy.

"But the shame, the shame!" I hiss through set jaws.

"We are to be married to-day at Mayville, and, oh, my friend, I love him," she sobs, and hangs her head in shame to say it to me.

"Married to-day? Love him?" I mutter incoherently. To-day? Why, to-day is Christmas and I was to be the happy bridegroom. How far away seems yesterday and all its happiness. How I still love this girl kneeling before me. Her misery, her humiliation are greater torture to me than is my own loss. Vengeful desires leave me. The demon of murder takes his hot fingers from my heart. I look at Bess for the last time. I am choking. I feel as if I have fallen from a fearful height and am still falling. I try to brush the mist from my eyes. I cast my rifle to the ground, turn, and rush, like the madman I am, into the woods.

After many years I persuade myself that it is my duty to return and care for dear old Father Bierce, if living. I do not pause to think the chances are all against his having been spared. But I want an excuse by which to delude myself, and this will answer.

The snow is falling softly as I alight from the stage at Nottingham one afternoon in December. I sigh for a welcome from the old familiar objects that I turned