

A Christmas Gift Worth Having

By GERTRUDE E. WHARTON

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"Mrs. Austin," said the clergyman, "you are on the committee on decoration for Christmas this year."

"Indeed, Mr. Rice, the others must get on without me. I have no heart for the work."

The good man turned away without trying to persuade her. He knew that there was a sorrow always with her and intensified on this Christmas anniversary. Her husband, Edgar, had gone away from her six years before and had never returned. Every year her little boy had asked, "Mamma, isn't papa coming home for Christmas?" and every year she had been obliged to put him off by saying: "Not this year, Arthur dear. Perhaps he may be with us next year." But she only said it to lighten the child's disappointment, for she did not believe he would ever come.

Edgar Austin was an artist and had an artist's temperament. He had married a woman with a very practical disposition, and when hard times came on and he was not able to sell his pictures she had lost her patience at the hardships she was obliged to endure and had told her husband that he had better leave such "idle work" as "daubing" and take up something that would bring more steady and practical results.

While Edgar was painting he forgot the troubles that were always present with her. It was her part to see that the rent was paid and the other necessities of life were provided. Since she had little money for them she at last lost all patience and upbraided her husband. There seemed but one thing for him to do to save himself from breaking down under the strain—to go away from her. One day he took his little boy, who was then four years old, in his arms and after a long embrace went out of the house and did not return.

At times Mrs. Austin received small donations from the clergyman, which she supposed came from his parishioners. On this and what she was able to earn she managed to get on. She knew that it was her want of sympathy for her husband in his profession during a trying time that had driven him from her, and bitterly she rued it. She would have called him back, but she did not know where to find him. The child had been his constant companion, often playing in the studio, and the artist said that he could always do better work with his boy near him. For six years the easel had stood with an unfinished picture on it, and the studio remained in every respect as it was when Austin left it.

The day before Christmas the clergyman came to the house with a large basket on his arm and emptied it on the kitchen table.

"These things," he said, pointing to one heap, "are for supper tonight and these for your dinner on Christmas day."

"How many kind people there are in your church! But how could any congregation help being kind with such a pastor!"

"And, Arthur," the clergyman continued, speaking to the little boy, "I've got a nice present for you and one for mamma, too, which I shall bring in this evening before dinner that you may have it Christmas eve and enjoy it all Christmas day."

Mrs. Austin took great pains in preparing the supper, brought out a set of china she had received as a wedding gift and set an extra place at the table for the pastor. It was dark before 5 o'clock, and she lighted the lamps, and Arthur was delighted at the smell of the good things coming from the kitchen. He had forgotten, that the minister was coming and, seeing the extra place, asked:

"Is that for papa?"

"The mother burst into tears. With all the comfort on this evening, blessed to all Christian families, the husband and father was still away, perhaps dead."

At 6 o'clock there was a tap on the door. Arthur ran to open it, crying, "It's all ready, Mr. Rice!" But instead of Mr. Rice there was another, who picked the boy up and held him to his breast. The mother came from the kitchen to see her husband standing in the doorway embracing his child. Then in a moment she, too, was taken to the man's arms, and kisses from mother and child were rained on the artist's face.

"Wife," he said, "my fortune is made. I have sent you through Mr. Rice all I could earn—little enough, I grant—but now I can sell pictures as fast as I can paint them. A year after leaving you I found means to take me to Paris. A few months ago I painted a picture that was hung in the salon, and it made a great hit. But we must not stay here, where I am not yet known. Besides, my pictures will bring higher prices coming from abroad. We must go back to Paris."

Then they all sat down to supper, the happiness that had so suddenly come with this Christmas eve tingling in their very finger tips. But the transition was too quick for Arthur to understand.

"Papa," said the little man, "I thought you was Mr. Rice. What does it all mean, anyway?"

"It means," said the mother, "that when people are doing the best they can it's wicked for others to make it all the harder for them by complaint."

"Not wicked," said the father, "only a natural giving way under what nature cannot endure."

A CHRISTMAS SURPRISE

By EDWARD L. SCARRON

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I am or was a telegraph operator. I had been married long enough to be the father of a small boy and know what it is to have coal bills, doctors' bills, clothing bills, grocery bills—indeed, all kinds of bills—coming in and a small salary with which to pay them. My wife proved a financial gem or I don't know how we should have made ends meet. I turned it all over to her, and she brought the ends together as well as she could. I felt that a nest egg should be started, but every time we tried to start one some of our small family was taken ill and a doctor must be called in and paid or extra clothing must be purchased or some one of the many extra necessities must be provided, and it didn't look as if that nest egg would ever be started or if it were started that it would be continued.

Then another child, a girl, came along, and what before was an even thing between salary and necessities began to be a gradual running behind.

One day a gentleman came into the telegraph office where I worked and sat down at a desk to write a message. He seemed to be doing more thinking than writing. After sitting there an hour or more he got up and went out. In another hour he came back, wrote out a message and handed it to me.

"I should use a cipher for that," he said, "but I haven't one. You'll have to send it in plain English, as I have written it. There's no time to communicate by mail."

I counted the words, told him the cost, which he paid me, and took his departure.

I saw that the message was an important one, considered in a financial sense. It was the announcement to parties in New York that the sender had completed the amalgamation of a number of companies into one trust.

provided his action were ratified by the New York parties. In order to close the deal he must explain what was proposed and get their authority to do so. It occurred to me that an operator in a financial center might sell out his secret for a big price and make a lot of money out of it. It did not occur to me to take advantage of my position to make money, for the reason that I have always been opposed to making money dishonestly. But I saw no necessity for sending the message in such form that it could be used by any except the parties for whom it was intended. We operators are used to various devices for keeping such telegrams from the public, and I knew a very simple method of sending the message whereby only those for whom it was intended could benefit by it. I sent it by this method.

In the afternoon the gentleman came in and asked if I had sent his telegram.

"Yes," I said, "I have, but not just the way you wrote it."

"How did you send it?" he asked, bristling.

"I didn't think of suggesting a safe way till you had gone out. So I acted without your authorization."

"Well?"

"I sent the first, the third, the fifth word, and so on to the end, by our company and gave the second, the fourth, the sixth, and so on by another company. Of course neither of the two dispatches alone means anything. Then I sent a third telegram telling the parties how to read the two former ones. There is a cost of 60 cents for the third message."

He stood gaping at me for a few moments till he got the scheme through his head, then pulled 60 cents out of his pocket and gave it to me.

"Much obliged," he said. "I wonder I didn't think of that myself."

He was going out when he turned and said: "Give me your name. I reckon I owe you a box of cigars for that."

I wrote my name on a telegraph blank and handed it to him, rejoicing in the prospect of getting a box of cigars, if he remembered the matter. I love cigars, but couldn't afford to smoke anything but a pipe and poor tobacco at that.

This was along in September. I pulled away on my pipe for a couple of months, hoping each day would bring the box of cigars. But they didn't come. Indeed, they never came. Things looked rather blue for Christmas that year. The children were getting old enough to expect gifts, and I wished I could give something to my wife as some return for doing all the work in lieu of a servant. One morning I received an envelope stamped "The Consolidated Copper and Lead Company." I opened it and found a certificate for a hundred shares of the stock of the said company made out in my name.

I couldn't understand what it meant or where it came from. I inquired what the stock of that company was selling at and found the last quotation to be 70. This made the shares worth \$7,000. I wrote the company for an explanation, and the only explanation I got was that the stock stood in my name on the books of the company.

Then I thought of the cipher telegram and the box of cigars I never got.

I've had some Christmas comfort since then, but nothing like that which gave me the nest egg I had so long planned for.

A PENITENT

A Burglar Is Brought Back to the Fold on Christmas Morn.

By EMMA EDMONDS

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Mike Conover, burglar, the day before Christmas stood on a sidewalk in a great city and watched the shoppers. On the other side of the street was a large jewelry store, in and out of which throngs of people were going and coming, many of them carrying the goods they had bought rather than risk not getting them before Christmas morning if left to be sent home by the delivery wagon.

Mike was watching for some prosperous looking person to come out of the store, his pockets bulging with small packages—he knew the small ones to be the most valuable—intending to follow him home and during the night relieve him of them. Presently he hit upon an elderly gentleman with nutton chop whiskers and a gold headed cane, who, as he emerged from the store, was cramming the said small packages down into his pocket. Mike followed him, noted the house he entered and went away.

The town clocks were striking one hour after midnight when the burglar bent his steps to the house in question, passed from the front steps on to a balcony, inserted a jimmy under a window sash, pulled out the screws that held the sash, raised it and entered a large drawing room. The Christmas presents were doubtless kept above, so, feeling his way upstairs, he found a hall lighted by a gas jet turned very low. He turned it a trifle higher in order the better to see the way and, looking into an open door, saw two little children asleep with their arms about each other. To the mantel hung two long stockings bulging in every part. On a bureau was a crucifix.

Mike had been brought up a Catholic by an honest, hardworking mother and remembered when a lad quite well grown seeing his little brother and sister, both less than five years old, lying in bed together in this fashion. He remembered it especially because he had just come in with some toys to put into their stockings. The sight took him back to those days when he had not yet gone to the bad, and there came a sinking about his heart. He passed back through a narrow hallway and, opening a door, entered a portion of the house that seemed to be an addition and cut off from the rest. The door had scarcely closed behind him when he heard a low voice say:

"Dominus vobiscum."

Mike started, and his knees trembled beneath him. Whence came the voice—from the ceiling, from under the floor or from behind curtains? It had been years since Mike had gone to mass, much less to confession, and now it seemed to him that he was in a church; that the priest had turned from the altar to the congregation and, spreading his arms in an attitude to bless them, had intoned the Latin words meaning "The Lord be with you."

Instinctively Mike bowed his head and made the sign of the cross on his forehead. Then suddenly a woman's voice began to sing that beautiful hymn "Ave Sanctissima" ("Hail, Most Holy Mother"). From the moment Mike heard the first note he began to droop. Gradually he bent almost to the floor, and when the words "Ora pro nobis" ("Pray for us") were sung he sank upon his knees. When the song stopped the penitent was sobbing like a child.

Suddenly a light was turned on behind him. But Mike remained on his knees. He was too overcome by the music to make any resistance.

"What are you doing here?" asked the gentleman Mike had shadowed that day.

"I came to rob you, sir," Mike replied in a hoarse whisper, "but I have been turned from my purpose, first, by your two little children with their hanging stockings and, second, by what I have heard here. Am I dreaming that I am in a church? Is this a dwelling, or have I gone mad?"

"Neither. We are Roman Catholics here, and I have purchased a phonograph as a Christmas present for my wife, who is a very devout woman. It is intended for such. I left it wound, and I suppose something has gone wrong with the machinery and started it up. I heard the singing and came in to shut the thing off."

Then Mike rose from his knees, but with his head still bowed said: "I am ready, sir, to go to jail and suffer the punishment I deserve. But never again will I commit a crime. The influence of our holy church and my old mother when I was a boy has been brought back to me tonight to save me from sinking any lower. I am armed, sir, and could kill you in a moment. But fear nothing. Go to your telephone, if you have one in the house, and call the police."

The gentleman stood looking at Mike for some moments without speaking, then said:

"I shall not telephone for the police. The police represent the law. Our church has done what the law can never do. The law can only punish; the church has brought a sinner to repentance. Go your way, and tomorrow, if you will call at my place of business, I will give you work."

Mike is now earning an honest living and hangs stockings for his own children on Christmas eve. But he is never comfortable in presence of a phonograph. Somehow it connects him with a past that distresses him and which he wishes to forget.

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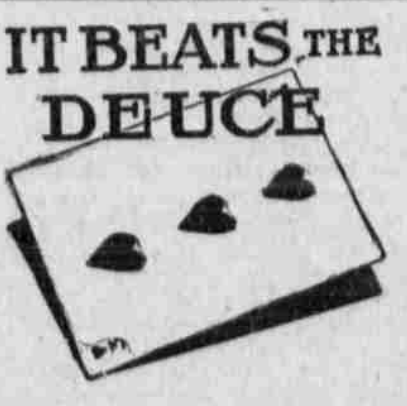
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