

A CHRISTMAS TRAGEDY

— BUT NOT TOO TRAGIC. —

It was Christmas morning and, with the usual perversity of fate, it was raining steadily and noiselessly. The streets and crossings were running with water and the few wayfarers in sight, warmly wrapped in raincoats and ulsters, were hurrying along with intent only upon regaining warmth and shelter. From a window of a suite overlooking Herald square a mile of glistening roofs and steeples stretched away under a leaden sky.

Outside, all was cheerless; within, the room was warmth and comfort. The open grate was ablaze with crackling logs and the copper kettle on the breakfast table reflected its glow. A young man lay on the couch, his face half hid by an open letter and his slippered feet held to the blaze. Above him blue smoke clouds melted away in the draperies. On the table at hand, disputing its possession with the breakfast equipage, lay a number of opened packages displaying their contents to the gaze of the solitary occupant of the apartment. Dozens of presents were there, many—and probably from female donors—making up for their lack of possible utility by their elegance and value. Over them all lay a number of cards and notes, and an open pen knife suggested that the ceremony of cutting the strings had but recently taken place.

Turning his eyes to the letter in his hand the recipient of the gifts re-read the few sheets, punctuating each line with a smile. Then stretching lazily, he arose and crossed to the window and surveyed the dismal prospect.

"A mouchoir case, eh?" he said aloud. "I've got a dozen already, but this one from Nell will be the best of them all. I'll throw the rest away—except that one from Maude—and Ethel's, that's too pretty. Dear Nell! Made it all herself, with those dear little hands of hers! She's a brick! And what a jolly, sweet letter," pressing to his lips the perfumed sheets. "I wonder why it hasn't arrived; delayed probably; horrible rush at the express office, I suppose. I'll put it on the table when it comes for Jack to see. Time he was here, by the way. Dear old Jack! Used to know her himself. I did think for a time that he used to be sweet on her, but Nell says I'm the very first one; and I've no earthly reason for doubting her. Well, Jack will bring me news of her and of the rest of the folks up in the cold country. Perhaps she will send it by him; but no, she doesn't know he is coming. Well!"

Turning to the fire, he threw away his dead cigar, and taking up a pipe, proceeded to fill it from a jar on the mantel. At that moment there was a knock on the door, and, without waiting for the cheery "come in!" that followed, the door opened and a figure in mackintosh and soft hat, with a bundle and a gripping umbrella under its arm, entered. The host dropped his half-filled pipe on the mantel, and advanced with outstretched hand.

"Jack, old man!" he cried. "Well, I am glad to see you! Take off your things; sit down here. Oh, throw them anywhere!" The newcomer responded cordially to the greeting, and soon, before the fire, with pipes lighted and decanter at elbow, the two friends were absorbed in ejaculatory questions, answers and laughter. Presently Jack, with a start, jumped from his chair, and, going to the couch, picked up the bundle which he had brought.

"I beg your pardon, Will; here's a package which the expressman brought just as I arrived, and as I was on my way up, I offered to deliver it. Sorry I forgot it; nothing important, I hope? Probably another offering to the shrine of Apollo," with a laugh and a nod toward the well-filled table.

The host seized the package eagerly with a muttered response to his friend's apology, and cutting the cords laid bare a handsome mouchoir case. It was as he thought—from her! A card lay on top: "To dearest Will, with love and best wishes from Nellie. Christmas, '95." He gazed a full minute in silent adoration, and, had it not been for the other's presence, would have pressed a kiss on the dainty silken ribbons. Presently he brought it to the fire place for his friend's inspection.

"That is handsome!" Jack exclaimed. "And, by Jove, it's the exact image of one I have, or rather, used to have. May I ask who sent it? No secrets, you know, old man." He held the case to his face, inhaling the delicate suggestion of wood violets that arose from its folds.

Half annoyed at the preposterous idea of there being anywhere in the wide world a mouchoir case approaching in any detail to his lady's gift, the proud owner answered rather shortly: "You know her, of course, Miss Milton." The other buried his face deeper in the silken thing. "Miss Milton? Not the Quebec one, I suppose?" "Certainly," was the answer, "why not?" "Nothing; nothing, of course." Jack yielded the treasure and strolled over to the window. With a sudden pang of jealousy Will laid the case on the table. As he did so a tiny card met his eye. It was half hidden among the multitude of ribbons and laces which had become disarranged. He unpinned it and read the few words it bore. There was a look of bewilderment on his face, which turned quickly to anguish as his gaze, roaming about the room fell on Jack, who stood idly at the window drumming lightly with his fingers on the misty pane. He dropped into a chair before the fire. All was very still, save for the restless tit-tat on the window pane and the cheerful crackling of the logs. The card fluttered to the floor unheeded. There it lay, face up, and the dozen words it bore stood out distinct in the mellow light of the flames. This was the message:

"To dear Jack, with love and best wishes, from Nellie. Christmas, '94."

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