

Tom and the High Cost of Christmas Gifts

by De Lysle Ferree Cass

WHEN Tom left the farm to go to the city to make his fortune he did it contrary to the ominous head-shaking and prophecies of disaster of all the neighbors. Even his father and mother, with past years of toil rapidly beginning to tell upon them, were pessimistic of his chances of success, nor could they resist expressing their forebodings.

The old folks loved their boy too well to reproach him for his desertion now in the first flush of his young manhood, but their hearts did ache at thought of the separation. "You'll soon get tired of all that hurly-burly there in the city, Tom," his old father told him. "And when you do, I want you always to remember that we've still got a place for you back here at the old homestead. It mayn't be as fine and showy as lots you'll see there in the city, but it's more the sort that the good Lord intended you for. Ma and I are hoping the best for you, son, but—when you do find out that your fortune's not away off there—just pocket your pride and come back here to us who love you."

So young Tom left the farm with shining eyes and a high heart and adventured into the great, far-away city in quest of fame and fortune.

How he fared there and all the sorry disappointments that repeatedly overtook him during that year of absence would be a long and harrowing story to tell. He chased his rainbow to its end, yet found the fabled pot of gold not there as he had so confidently and blatantly expected.

Tom made applications for all sorts of office positions only to find himself quickly rejected because of his lack of experience in those specific lines.

"Well, anyway, I'm young and husky and used to hard manual labor," Tom consoled himself. "I can at least get a job with a contracting gang, as a painter, or plumber's assistant, or teamster. That will suffice to keep me

going for a while until the sort of position I want turns up."

But even in those lines of work the green country boy found himself suddenly brought up short against a blank wall. He had no references as to past city employment and nobody would hire him after once finding out that he had no union card.

Huddled in his shabby overcoat on a street corner in the squalid section of the city—the icy wind whistling around him and biting through his threadbare garments—poor Tom stood on the evening before Christmas, wondering where he might find a shelter in which to sleep that night without freezing.

Just how long he had stood there, shivering in the chill wind on the street corner—bitterness against the great, unfeeling city ranking in his heart—Tom did not know. He was startled from his moody reverie by hearing a hoarse, wheedling voice at his very elbow, saying what was intended as a confidential tone:

"How'd y'like a nice hot feed and some coin to jingle in yer pants, bo? Ain't hungry, are ya?"

Whirling about, Tom saw that his accoster was an under-sized, burly fellow with a tough, truculent visage and hands shoved deep into the side pockets of his coat. He wore a battered cap with the visor pulled low down over his eyes and spat unobtrusively upon the sidewalk each time before he spoke.

"How'd y'like the idea, huh?" he reiterated in his raucous, grating voice, sidling closer as he spoke and casting a wary eye up and down the nearly deserted, gloomy, wind-swept street.

Tom regarded him with distaste and undisguised mistrust. He looked like a typical thug. But misery cannot be too fastidious about the company it keeps. Finally Tom scowled blackly and answered:

"What's that to you, anyway?"

"We'l, you're outta luck, ain't cha, pal? Yer, on yer uppers, stony broke and maybe with an empty belly, too, huh, bo? Well, I guessed that much. I ain't blind yet, I ain't! Well, I need a pal for a little job tonight and we both can make a lotta jack out of it, see?"

"You—you mean—burglary?" Tom muttered hesitantly, with an involuntary contraction of his heart.

"Humph! Not anything like safe-cracking or breaking into a house I don't. Too many people staying up with the kids over Christmas trees tonight. I ain't keen on takin' fool chances like that, I'm tellin' ya! Naw, this I wantcha for is something soft, safe and easy as falling off a log. You know the big prices people are willing to pay for real booze since the country went dry, don't cha? Well, right near here I know a certain warehouse that's got 20 cases of whisky stored in the basement. Real bonded stuff! The watchman is an old pal o' mine and is willing to let us swipe it if

we'll split on the coin we get afterwards. I've got another guy with a flivver that's ready to meet us about 2 o'clock this morning to haul away the stuff as fast as we pass it up to him through the alley windows. We've got it all framed for a fake capture and tying up of our other pal, the night watchman, so that the bulls can't get wise to him. We're willing to split four ways on the swag if y' wanta go in on it with us. Watcha say now, bo, huh? Safe and easy as falling off a log!"

The sinister appearance of the ruffian repelled Tom, and the very thought of the crime they contemplated struck him with fright. It meant jail, disgrace, if they were caught.

"But I—I never have done anything like that in my life," he stammered weakly, teeth chattering in the biting wind. "It would be criminal. The whisky doesn't belong to us. It would be illegal for us even to try to sell it afterwards."

"Pah!" spat the ugly-visaged man, sneeringly. "You look pretty, a bird like youse, talking that way about what's lawful and all that! Lots that these rich guys have cared how you got along since you came to town, from the looks of you! They've got fine, warm homes and coin and everything. Wotta they care whether poor bums like us have to go hungry or freeze in the gutter on Christmas eve? Why should you care about them when they don't give a rap about you? You've got to go on living, ain't cha, huh?"

Tom hunched his shuddering shoulders against the wind, trembling as much because of his own moral irresolution as from the terrible cold.

"Well, bo, how about it? Are y' on or are y' still so almighty particular



"How'd Y'Like the Idea, Huh?" about how y' handle the stuff belonging to all them rich guys?"

"God!" groaned poor Tom in the abyss of his wretchedness. "Yes, I'll do it! I will! I will!"

The other clapped him roughly on the shoulder with a saturnine leer and attempt at jocular fellowship.

"Well, I thought cha would," he rasped hoarsely. "We'll meet cha at the corner by the lumber yard at 1:30. Don't you fall to be there now!"

"I won't! I'll be there all right!" Tom muttered brokenly. Already in his cringing soul he felt like the thief he had pledged himself to become. Oh heaven, if only—

To kill time until the appointed hour, he dug his numb hands deeper down into his pockets and wandered aimlessly on. He had no particular objective in mind save only the need to keep moving lest he freeze or go mad with the strain of waiting. He shrank from letting himself think of the deed to which he was about to be party.

Involuntarily his dragging footsteps took him back into the more brilliantly lighted retail shopping district, where the crowds already had thinned, hurrying home to their families and happy, expectant kiddies with the holiday celebration in mind.

The hours dragged slowly by. It came near the hour for the stores to close. But still there was time, if poor Tom had only had money, to have rushed in, bought the presents he wanted for the old folks and children, and caught the midnight train back to the country. He easily could reach there by morning and appear as a joyous surprise to them—

But ah! Why drive himself to distraction by thinking of that when there was no chance that—

And right then, suddenly, he espied it lying there, almost at his very feet—a big, fat wallet, with not a person nearer than a hundred yards of him. Plainly someone had lost it in their mad haste to get home.

Tom stopped and scooped it up like a flash. Around the corner he surreptitiously examined it. Bills—both green and yellow, of large denominations—they fairly stuffed it! There were seven hundred dollars or more!—a small fortune to the miserable boy who had not even eaten for fourteen hours. Money! Money! Money! Far more than he possibly could need even in his most extravagant dreams. With a gurgling cry, Tom stuffed the wad of bills into his trousers pocket, threw away the fine leather purse and, made a mad dash for the nearest department store.

No need now to keep his sinister, criminal appointment—no more necessity for—

But the most gladsome feature of young Tom's homeward trip that next day was his blushing announcement to the old folks that he had had enough of the big city; that he had come home to stay, as they had prayed he would.

NEWS FROM CALIFORNIA

Mr. and Mrs. Fred Gerwig and family visited the Clamptts on Sunday.

Mrs. A. Modjeska and family motored Saturday to Gerwig's at South Gate Gardens, California.

Romanzo Lyman and Roland Modjeska attended the Motor Race at

Santa Monica race track and witnessed the accident in which a rolet was killed.

The Modjeska and Lyman families spent the week end on top of Mt. Wilson.

Harold Beidelman, who has been visiting with the Singletary's in Oakland, left last week to visit friends in San Diego. He is getting along nicely.

Warning

If you desire a house connection with the gas main please notify us immediately.

No house connections will be made under our regular contract while the ground is frozen.



GOING HOME FOR THE HOLIDAYS?

Then, remember the usual rush and start right by letting me make your travel arrangements, at once.

And, be sure you get ahead of the "last hour" rush and avoid possible disappointment at the other end of the line, by sending your Christmas packages without delay.



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CLASS 1A. Members depositing 50 cents the first week, 49 cents the second week, and decreasing 1 cent each week for 50 weeks will get \$12.75	CLASS 2A. Members depositing \$1 the first week, 98 cents the second week, and decreasing 2 cents each week for 50 weeks will get \$25-50	CLASS 5A. Members depositing \$2.50 the first week, \$2.45 the second week, and decreasing 5 cents each week for 50 weeks will get \$63.75	CLASS 50. Fixed. Members depositing 50 cents a week for each week of the fifty will get \$25.00	CLASS 200. Fixed. Members depositing \$2.00 each week for every week of the fifty will get \$100.00

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