TELEPHONED TO SANTA

I.

It was an old-fashioned Christmas season—but not in the accepted manner of the term. Old-fashioned, because the streets were carpeted with the inevitable inch of mud; because the air was damp and raw, instead of being crisp and biting; because a drab mantle of wet mist hung over the city like a shroud, breathing contempt on the frosted Christmas-cards in the shop windows.

So the brass plate that heralded a suite of offices in Fore Street, E.C., hung with crystal beads of moisture, and seemed to weep as though it knew of the little tragedy passing in the top-floor attic.

A woman lay there in a low, scantily-covered bed, and the drawn cheeks and transparent hands spoke of poverty and illness. In her eyes a light burned strangely bright—a light that spoke . . .

But death the little boy did not understand. He knew his mother to be ill, very ill, and his heart went out in childish love and sympathy. He almost felt the pain when he saw her eyes and lips close tightly, and heard the groan she tried in vain to suppress.

He bent over her, concern in his wide, blue eyes.

"Does you want your beef-tea now, mum?" he whispered.

"It's all gone, dearie," she said.

"But the doctor said you wouldn't get better if you didn't have beef-tea. . . . And jelly and custard," he added thoughtfully.

"Mother hasn't any more. The doctor didn't know that," she told him.

For weeks—even months—she had felt the illness gathering about her; but she had worked on. People who rent offices are inclined to regard a caretaker a machine for keeping rooms clean. It seemed cruelly ironic that she had kept up until just before Christmas. Then came a burning fever, and only partial consciousness.

The doctor had been called in. He ordered rest and nourishment—the latter with a doctor's thoughtlessness. That her weekly pittance was inadequate to the slightest luxury did not come within his jurisdiction. His business was to diagnose and prescribe.

"Mum," Curly said presently, "why ain't you got a daddy?"

The question startled her for a moment.

"You're a little chatterbox," she parried.

"Why ain't we got a daddy like other boys and muvvers?" he persisted.

"Your daddy has gone away," she said softly.

"And can't he come back?"

"No. That is, I don't think so. Now mother wants to have a nap."

She closed her eyes, but not to sleep. It had been almost a comedy that had parted them—if pride and lack of humor had not turned it into a tragedy. He was sensitive and passionate, and, cursed with a sharp tongue, she had held the power to wound him. The quarrel arose from—she could hardly remember; but she had said bitter things, and in his passion he had struck her.

Pride and folly had done the rest. She left him, taking her baby with her. In five years she had not heard from him nor seen him; but the bitterness had long since gone from her heart, leaving only pride and a dull aching.

The memory of it brought a pain more intense than the physical agony of her illness. It was more than she could bear. She drifted into a sleep that was half coma.

The little boy watched his mother in silence. Her face was becoming dimmer and dimmer; he saw her as through a deepening mist. Something hot fell on his cheek, and tickled him as it ran down to his chin. Then he drew his hand across his eyes. That wasn't a boy's business.

He glanced up and around—to ascertain if his vision had cleared. A prettily designed calendar was hanging on the wall. It had been given him by a gentleman from one of the offices downstairs. That was last Christmas.

Crumbs! And to-day was the twenty-third of December. Only two more days to Christmas, when Santa Claus came in the dead of night, and filled little boys' stockings with everything the heart could wish for. He must be a fine old chap, Father Christmas—and rich, too.

Curly stiffened suddenly. Then he looked over at his mother—and at the empty basin on the chair by the bedside.

"I wonder if Santa Claus keeps beef-tea," he mused—"and custard and grapes?"

Teddy-bears and clockwork trains seemed more in his line; but one never could tell.

Then, again, where did he live? The postman might know; but——

Once more the little frame stiffened under the strain of sudden inspiration. His eyes grew wide with a great resolve.

"I know!" he whispered to himself. "I know!"

His mother was lying quite still, and the gentle heaving of her breast was almost perceptible.

Gently he tucked her up. Even the patchwork valence was lifted up and wedged tightly.

Then he tiptoed softly out of the room, and down the steep, wooden stairs to the concrete passage of the fourth floor.

From an office at the end came the spasmodic clicking of a typewriter. The other chambers were deserted. Into one of the empty offices the little boy stole quietly, glancing round, childlike, with unnecessary apprehension.

Just inside the office was a wall telephone, and for some minutes he eyed it with the circumspection due to an infernal machine. His mother had told him about that wonderful thing once, and how it helped you to talk to anyone you liked. He had heard people speaking into it, and had a child's notion of the correct procedure. With difficulty he carried an office stool to the spot, and clambered up abreast of the mouthpiece. Then he took off the receiver, and placed it to his ear.

"Number, please!"

For a moment he was flabbergasted. He'd forgotten that a number was required. Then came to him the recollection of a lesson his mother had taught him.

"Number, please!"

What a sharp, nasty voice it was.

"One, two, three, four," he piped.

"One, two, three, four what? Central?"

What that meant he'd not the faintest notion; but something had got to be done.

"Yes, please," he said, with mouth pressed close to the instrument.

And then, with fluttering heart he listened.

II.

Sir James Lancaster, M.P., Sheriff of the City of London, sat at his desk, and chewed on the end of his cigar in a manner that did not indicate the best of tempers. That a rush of business should require his presence at the office on the day before Christmas Eve was distinctly annoying.

It wasn't in the nature of the man, however, to respect his own convenience. Through steady application to work he had built up a huge business, though some saw the secret of his success in the fact that he knew by name every unit in the concern. Only this morning he had himself interviewed half a dozen odd hands for the Christmas pressure. Should any one of them prove possessed of capabilities beyond those of odd hands, Lancaster would know it.

The telephone-bell rang—for the twentieth time that morning. He snatched up the receiver impatiently.

"Hallo! What's that? Am I what?" His voice became suddenly incredulous. "Am I Father Christmas?"

It was a little piping voice, obviously not that of an adult. A twinkle sprang into the great man's eyes.

"Yes, I'm Santa Claus," he said, in a softer voice.

"Do I keep beef-tea—and grapes—and custard? Here, hold on, little man—one at a time. Now!

"Can I bring your mummy some beef-tea and things? Why, yes, I expect so."

Heavens, what an experience! The sheriff's face lit up at the thought of it.

"But how big's your chimney?" he said, very seriously. "Where do you live?

"What's that? You've got a big chimney? Oh, good! But whereabouts is your house? Eh? Three hundred and sixty-two, Fore Street, City? Right you are. I won't forget you."

He leaned back in his chair, and gave vent to a prolonged chuckle. Then he listened again intently. This was no joke. The little voice was in deadly earnest.

"Bring back your daddy?" repeated the M.P. softly. "That's rather a tall order for Father Christmas, sonny. What's happened to him?"

For some minutes he listened in silence.

"What's your mummy's name?" he asked presently. "You don't know? But what do the people call her—I mean, the butcher and the milkman and the baker? Ah, Mrs. Coleridge!"

At the mention of the name he knitted his brows, and, leaning back, remained for some minutes in deep thought. Could it be the same man? After all, life was made up of strange—almost incredible—coincidences. Then, as though suddenly recollecting himself, he bent forward to the 'phone.

"Are you there?" he called. "Are you there?"

But there came no reply. The little voice had gone.

Sir James Lancaster put up the receiver like a man in a dream. At first he had suspected a practical joke, but he felt convinced it wasn't. He tried to laugh; but there was a note of tragedy in that little child's voice which forbade it. It had held a world of trust and simple faith.

He pressed a bell button, and a clerk came in.

"Tell Coleridge to come to me, please," he said.

The clerk looked surprised.

"Do you mean the odd man we took on yesterday, sir?"

"Yes. Quickly!"

A few minutes later the man came in. He was an old young man, with streaks of grey in his hair, and facial lines that spoke of suffering. A clean collar and tie gave him a subtle air of smartness belied by frayed trousers and a threadbare coat.

"Take a seat," said Lancaster quietly.

Then he leaned forward, and looked into the man's eyes.

"Are you married, Coleridge?" he asked pointedly.

The odd hand started, and his face lost its color.

"Yes, sir," he said, and scrutinized the carpet.

"Where's your wife?" said the was a light almost of defiance in his eyes.

"Heaven knows!" he said. "We parted five years ago—we quarrelled—about nothing. That's all, sir."

"Not quite all," Lancaster replied quietly. "I have reason to believe your wife has need of you. She is ill."

"Ill!" The man almost screamed the words as he sprang from the chair. "Where is she? For Heaven's sake, sir, where is she?"

Sir James got up slowly from the chair.

"Keep your seat, Coleridge," he said softly. "There is no cause, I think, for alarm!"

Then he pressed the odd man back into his chair, and told him what he knew.

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That evening a man could be seen mounting the stone staircase of a house in Fore Street. The stairs were steep, and he was heavily burdened with bulky parcels, but he went up two at a time till he came to the attic landing. Then he hesitated—and listened.

The hum of feeble voices came from within. He pushed open the door, and crept inside.

"Arthur!"

The woman started up in bed, and held out her hands.

"My girl!" he said thickly.

And on his knees by the bedside he took her in his arms.

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Beef-tea and other delicacies have their medicinal properties; but love is the finest healer, and there was new life in the sick woman's face as she sat with those she loved in the firelight.

"By the way, I've a letter for you," Arthur Coleridge said to the "man" on his knee. "It's from someone you know."

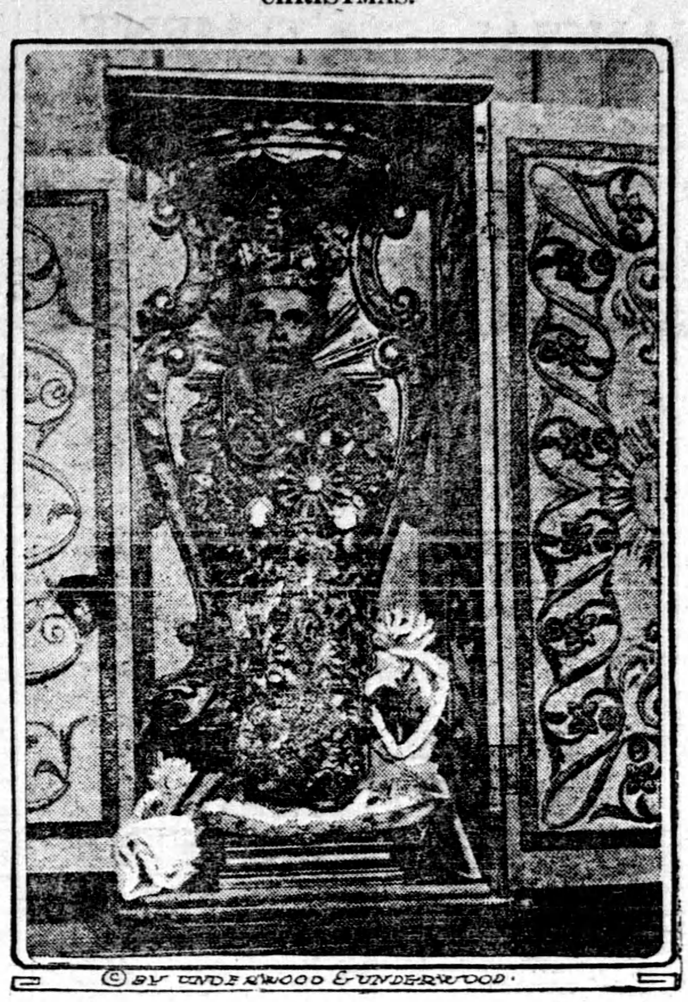
Curly took the letter, and opened it impetuously. With some assistance he spelt it out. It ran:

"Dear Chick,—I am sending along some of the things you asked for, including your daddy. But I haven't done with you yet. Hang up your stocking to-morrow night, and don't leave the fire-irons in the fender.—With love and kisses, your old friend,

Father Christmas."

Twice the child spelt out the letter carefully. Then, looking up at his mother with a smile of confidence, he tucked it in his pocket. —London Answers.

SACRED IMAGE OF THE CHRIST CHILD SHOWN AT CHRISTMAS.



This sacred bambino, or image of the Christ child, is in the church of Ara Coeli in Rome. It is brought out to public view every Christmas season and is literally covered with valuable jewels, the gifts of devout Christians.

ICING THE CAKE.

Here Is One Recipe Very Commonly Used by Confectioners.

The Christmas cake should be kept in a tin box, all ready for icing, until a few days before it is to be cut.

The following recipe is the one very commonly used by confectioners for icing their cakes:

Take two pounds of good icing sugar—which first sift to free from all lumps—five or six whites of eggs, according to size, and half a teaspoonful of lemon-juice. Put the egg-whites in an earthenware basin, and add the sugar to them, a little at a time; stir until quite smooth, and then add the lemon-juice. After this beat the mixture vigorously with a wooden spoon, until quite light and stiff.

Before icing the cake see that it is a good shape and quite level. If it is not, a sharp knife must be used to trim it. Stand the cake on a basin which is a trifle smaller than the cake, so that the sides of the latter overlap the edge of the basin. Next put some of the icing already prepared in a basin by itself, and dilute it slightly with warm water. But be careful not to make the icing too thin, or it will run off the cake.

Pour this on to the top of the cake, spreading it smoothly with a clean, broad knife. The surplus icing will not stand round the bottom of the cake as it would do if it were standing flat, instead of on the basin.

After the first coat of icing, the cake should not be put away until the next day, when the process must be repeated.

TRYING OUT WILLIE'S NEW SLED

Mrs. Blew—"Oh, doctor, what ails him?" Doctor—"Rheumatorial anthritis." Mrs. Blew—"Oh, doctor, we are very poor; can't you make it something cheaper?"

THAT CHRISTMAS SPIRIT.

IN ROYAL STOCKINGS.

The Pleasures That Attend Presents Giving In Palaces.

Queen Victoria made a practice of personally choosing every single Christmas gift which she made to relations or friends, and Queen Mary keeps to the same custom. As may easily be supposed, such a selection is no light task, for there are not only her own children, her friends, and her servants to be thought of, but any number of Continental Royalties, little and big.

Even the younger children of our King and Queen are getting beyond the age for the toy soldiers, model trains, and picture-books which were their joy a few years ago. But the Prince of Wales has been heard to say that he never had a more delightful Christmas gift than one given him six years ago by his late grandfather.

This was an ants' nest in a glass box. He spent hours watching the busy insects and their curious ways and habits.

Books delight the heart of the Princess Mary, and she gets any number each Christmastide.

From the Russian Court our younger Royalties receive the most magnificent bon-bons which can be found anywhere. They are specially manufactured for the Tsar by a Parisian firm, and can be obtained nowhere else.

The Tsar, too, knows more about good tobacco than any living monarch, and the cigars which he gives at Christmas are justly appreciated by the lucky recipients.

Every Christmas a splendid plum-pudding, with other old English Christmas delicacies, leaves Windsor for the Court of Potsdam, and at the same time a boar's head, usually from an animal shot by the Kaiser himself, is sent from Berlin to the British Court.

The Kaiser is always generous, if somewhat erratic, in his present giving. For his own family, particularly for his consort, he takes great trouble to choose personally some magnificent gift. For the rest he has a list made out, and opposite each name marks off a price, leaving the selection of the gift to one of his trusted secretaries. His latest portrait, suitably mounted, goes to a number of Royal relatives.

Last year he presented the whole of his salary as colonel of his Grenadier Guards to be spent in presents for the rank and file of that famous regiment.

The Queen of Belgium is clever with her needle. Our own Royalties usually receive pretty trifles made by her own hands at Christmas tide.

From their aunt, the Queen of Norway, our young Royalties get delightful photographs of Norwegian scenes, all taken by herself. And not only taken, but developed and mounted by her own hands.

The Queen of Spain is another Royal lady who makes some, at least, of her own Christmas presents. To her relatives in England come the daintiest handkerchiefs, embroidered by herself. She spends her spare time all the year round in making these.

King Alfonso is also very generous, and the Christmas-tree for his own family will this year be a marvel of beauty and costliness.

He, by the by, gets a very nice little present himself each Christmas. By old custom, the town of Valentia—famous for its raisins—presents him with a cheque for about $15,000, which is paid into the Royal exchequer for his own personal use.

The Dowager Queen Alexandra is one of the few—perhaps the only Royal lady—who designs and paints her own Christmas cards. Naturally, these are much prized by those who receive them.

Christmas Burns.

More little fingers get burnt at Christmas-time than at any other. Roast chestnuts, snapdragon, Christmas-tree candles, etc., are responsible. A crying child, in pain, is not soothed by endearments, but by something which will take the pain away. Here are some simple and proven remedies: Soft-soap, lightly rubbed on a burn, instantly relieves the pain. Every kind of soap has not this effect, but in default of soft-soap, use ordinary yellow or white curd. But it's worth while seeing that there is soft-soap in the house. Charcoal, powdered, laid fairly thick on a burn, has the same effect, and in addition, has healing properties. A severe burn must have the air excluded. That's what causes the intolerable pain—the exposure to air. Cover the burn with oil—linseed or olive—dust flour upon that, and then cover with wool wadding or a piece of soft linen. Another remedy is a soft rag dipped in a mixture of lime-water and linseed oil—equal parts. In a very severe case, a doctor must be sent for at once; but, in the meantime, oil and wheaten flour dusted on the flesh, and the air excluded, is the treatment.

Of course right thinking people are those who think as you do.