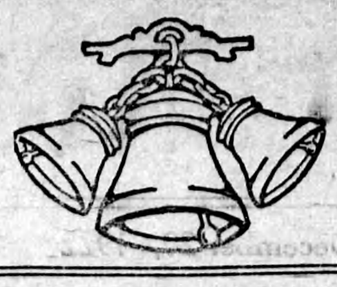
A Window Into Christmas



By L. Paul Suter

In pursuit of his regular calling, Andy Dugan left home shortly after midnight and began threading a tortuous way among the alleys and back streets of the city. Ordinarily, he would have spent Christmas Eve in bed, like other men, with perhaps a long enough interruption to deck an evergreen tree for the benefit of the younger Dugans; but he had not pulled off a good job for some time and funds were running low.

He had in mind a certain house toward the suburbs which bore the distinction of being a magistrate's. The fact that the magistrate lived there was incidental, though it had a vindictive interest for Andy; but a well-defined presumption that the household was supplied with plate and jewelry was of the highest importance. Andy figured that if he could effect an unobtrusive entrance, and could withdraw again without being perceived, the empty coffers of the Dugan family would be well on their way toward replenishment.

Strange what trifling temptations come to thwart one's plans! Andy was nearly at his destination. Another square, which had a convenient alley running through it, would have taken him there. But instead of completing the distance, he stopped behind a comparatively mean and insignificant looking house, merely because the window was open.

Open windows had a fascination for Andy. They were the signs and symbols of his calling. Perhaps a brother operator was at work within. Perhaps—and this was the thought which warmed his heart—the window had been carelessly left open, and a minimum of effort would secure something well worth the trouble. The second possibility was worth testing, anyway.

He placed both hands on the window sill, raised himself with the ease of muscles long trained to that sort of thing, and landed quietly in the room. Here he turned on his flashlight and paused to look around.

It was evidently a bedroom. The window had been left open for air, in spite of the sharpness of the night. The ray of light, traveling to and fro, glanced for a moment upon white bed clothes at the other end of the room. Andy thereupon shut it off entirely and proceeded to investigate the sleepers, with eyes which had somewhat of a cat's faculty of seeing in the dark.

He stepped to the side of the bed, without making any sound. There were two children in it—two little girls. They had kicked off the coverings, which lay in a heap partly at the foot of the bed and partly on the floor, and they were shivering in their sleep.

"Catching their death o' cold, too!" Andy growled to himself. "A nice mother they must have! Window open and blowing down their spines like a knife."

He laid the flashlight down for a moment and put the bed clothing back where it belonged, then passed out into the hallway. He was taking note, meanwhile, that the furniture and carpets were not of the costliest. This might be near the magistrate's house in distance, but it was a long way from it in wealth. The hall had no carpet of any kind. He had to tiptoe with elaborate caution to avoid making too much noise. It was doubtful whether the visit would be worth while, after all, but Andy made a rule of seeing his jobs through. Sometimes unlikely places held out a good reward to the diligent worker.

He had expected to find the grown folks' bedrooms next that of the children. Instead, he blundered into the kitchen. The remains of a meal were lying on the table, which in itself was a bad omen for the wealth of the place. In the stove at the farther side some coals were still smoldering. Andy's quick eye caught three long, slender objects suspended beneath the chimney hole, and his flash brought back to him with a start the fact that it was Christmas Eve. The slender objects were stockings. Two of them belonged, evidently, to the little girls he had just covered in their sleep; the other to another child whom he had not seen—probably a boy.

Andy recognized the importance of the find. What the children were getting for Christmas would tell him pretty well whether it was worth while to go on with the job.

The first stocking had a little popcorn in its toe, as he could tell by feeling, and a little candy atop of that. Above the candy was a brown-eyed doll, which he drew out carefully and replaced.

"Five-and-ten-cent store," was his verdict.

The next stocking was like the first, except that the doll's eyes were blue. The third, which Andy had sized up as belonging to a boy, bore out his surmise. It contained popcorn and candy, like the other two, but in place of the doll there was a top.

"A five-center," Andy appraised it, with easy skill. "Twenty-three for me! This ain't the place where Adam Worth stole the Gainsborough.

He crept back through the hallway, paused again by the bedside of the two little girls to ascertain that they were still sleeping and covered, then dropped out of the open window as lightly as he had entered. Once in the alley, he broke into a noiseless dog-trot which brought him rapidly to the magistrate's.

He waited a moment before climbing the back fence, to make sure that no four-footed watchmen were about. A few kicks against the boards, in imitation of a suppressed scuffle, convinced him that there were not. Any dog would have responded to such a challenge. So he clambered over and made his way quickly to the side of the sleeping mansion.

The kitchen window was locked, which meant that the other windows would be locked, too; but a few skillful prods of Andy's "outsider" brought forth a satisfactory click from within. He was about to throw his strength against the window when instinct told him that if he raised it a burglar alarm would go off.

So he went to work on the little cellar window in front of him. It was scarcely large enough to admit a man of average size, even with squeezing, but Andy was considerably below the average. Perhaps its narrowness had led the designer of the burglar alarm to consider it beneath his attention. At any rate, no alarm responded. Andy waited, to assure himself that no delayed buzz was coming; then, with a sudden effort, opened the window to its full extent and shot the rays of his flashlight right and left through the basement to pick out a landing place.

There was a pile of potato sacks underneath the window—a highly satisfactory condition. Andy squeezed himself through and lighted noiselessly upon them. While he was sliding off the sacks a tool of questionable uses fell from his pocket, but he caught it neatly, in time to prevent its clattering to the floor.

The door leading up from the cellar was locked, but a brief manipulation sufficed to open it. In a few minutes he stood in the darkened kitchen, beyond which all was clear sailing.

It was an axiom with Andy, born of long experience in his profession, that safety should never be taken for granted. Observing it now, he determined to inspect the entire ground floor of the house before getting down to business. He could have secured the plate from the sideboard, but some late member of the family, sitting up in the drawing-room or elsewhere, might have heard the chink and have investigated, with unpleasant results.

Therefore, he contented himself with a hasty examination of the plate, and proceeded into the hall. A broad staircase went up from his feet, surmounted by a gigantic moose head. The ray of light revealed a little marble statue on the stair post, which Andy contemplated with hurried appreciation. He glanced into two or three rooms leading from the hall, to find them all deserted and silent. Finally, he came to what was evidently the drawing-room.

The flicker of a fire in this room shone plainly on the polished floor of the hallway, so he peeped cautiously around the doorpost before venturing within. No one was inside. The flicker came from a huge fireplace at the other side of the room, in which a log was still burning. A very faint aroma of cigar smoke tickled the nostrils, but it would hardly have been perceptible to one not in search of such traces. Andy considered it scarcely strong enough to be of real importance. The smoker must have left for bed fully an hour before.

He chuckled, however, at sight of three stockings hanging above the fireplace. They were well-made stockings, of fine texture, and they swung stiffly with an air of comfortable fullness, almost as if their wearers were inside them. Andy set himself to examine them with more interest than such things usually would have excitey in him.

None of the stockings seemed large enough to contain all the presents which their possessors were to receive. Two of them had each a pair of large dolls lying on leather-covered chairs beneath—dolls which could not, to the grossest imagination, have suggested a five-and-ten-cent store. Beside them were sets of doll's furniture, complete, one for each of the first two stockings. A mammoth bob sled, "knocked down," lay partly in front of all the chairs. There was a smaller sled, too, beneath the third stocking, with a pair of racing skates atop of it.

Andy inspected all these with gravity, and a slow smile lit up his weather-beaten features.

"I'm not the man to rob a kid's stocking," he said to himself. "But it strikes me that when these kids have all that pile of stuff, and them other kids ain't got nothing but ten-cent dolls and a five-cent top, there's robbery going on somewhere. For two bits I'd do something that Providence seems to have overlooked, and throw the rest of the job over."

He hesitated, and peered into the stockings themselves.

"Here's a fountain pen," he said; "and a stickpin—solid gold—and another pen. And this one's got a two-bladed knife, with a saw and screw-driver and a nail passer—I wouldn't mind having that, myself, but the kid ain't going to lose it through me. And I'll be pinched, here's pen number three. They're jealous kids, maybe, and if one gets a pen, they've all got to have it. I ain't grudging them a thing, but it don't seem right. Damn it, it ain't right," he concluded. "Here goes! I'm not feeling for the other job to-night, anyway."

With a sigh of relief, he set himself to the task of selection. A doll from each of the two chairs was set aside, leaving one apiece beneath those stockings; and after judging gravely between the desirability of the sled and of the skates, he took the former, and put the dolls carefully upon it.

"That's plenty," he said, taking the three toys in his arms. "These kids won't miss it much, and if them other kids don't believe in Santa Claus after they get it, I'm no prophet."

For the moment, righteous satisfaction had overcome his usual caution. Had it not been so, he might have raised his eyes in time to avert a painful surprise. When he did look up, a big man stood in the doorway, quietly regarding him. The man was clad in Santa Claus costume, and his arms were folded on his breast.

Andy put down the toys with great suddenness, and drew his revolver.

"Up with your hands!" he said, in businesslike fashion.

The big man kept his arms folded.

"Are you going to put 'em up, or ain't you?" Andy demanded.

"When you come before me, Andy Dugan, I'll give you five years for this job!" was the reply. "A man is getting down to pretty small potatoes when he steals toys from children's stockings."

Andy replaced the revolver in his pocket with an air of resignation.

"I might have known you, Judge," he said sadly. "I've seen you often enough, but not in that rig. You say you're going to give me five years; then maybe you won't give me any more for speaking out and saying that if anybody's getting down to small potatoes it's yourself when you have presents like these for your own kids and let kids within a block of you go with next to nothing. You think I was taking these things for myself. Well, I wasn't."

The big man stepped up fearlessly and stood in front of Andy.

"You're not drunk," he said, with a keen glance. "Are you crazy? If so, now is the time to prove it. It may save you a heavy sentence."

"I'm neither the one nor the other," Andy retorted, looking him in the face. "If I was, I wouldn't be trying this sort of thing. Maybe I'm a fool because I didn't go off with your plate when I had the chance. This is my second job to-night, Judge. I didn't get nothing at the first house, because there wasn't nothing to get. From all I saw there wasn't enough to eat, let alone to steal. They're neighbors of yours. They live in the same square. There's three kids, two girls and a boy—just like yours—but it's mighty little Christmas them kids are going to get. I looked into their stockings. They're getting two fifteen-cent dolls and a five-cent top, with some popcorn and a little candy throwed in for good measure. That's what they're getting. I was going to play Santa Claus for once in my life and take 'em something worth while when you came in."

"Do you mean to say you were taking those things for someone else?" the Judge demanded.

"For them kids, Judge, s'help me. What would I be wanting with two dolls and a sled?"

"Your children might play with them."

"They're both boys, Judge," Andy declared with brisk finality.

The big Santa Claus sank into a chair, his chin on his hand, and regarded Andy deeply, with the expression for which he was famous—and dreaded—on the bench. Seeing that the burglar did not quail beneath it, he rose again with a sudden determination.

"I'll call your bluff, Andy Dugan, if it is a bluff," he said, coldly. "Bring the dolls and the sled and show me where this house is."

"You're not going there with me?" Andy inquired.

"Bring them!"

Andy chuckled.

"If you get in the way I did, Judge, it'll have to be through the window—and that's burglary."

"If you don't care to show me the way, say so," the other snapped.

Andy picked up the dolls and the sled without further comment and followed his host to the front door. Once they were outside he led the way to the back alley and down it to the open window of the mean-looking house. The Judge was silent throughout and Andy did not presume to speak. Once or twice, however, he glanced incredulously at the big man in the festive garb walking beside him, and but for the toys in his arms he would have been tempted to rub his eyes to make sure that it was not all a fancy of the night.

In front of the window Andy carefully laid down his burdens.

"This is more in my line than yours, Judge," he ventured timidly. "You'd better let me boost you inside and hand up the sled and dolls, then I'll follow after."

"As you say," the Judge returned curtly.

Andy made a "step" with his clasped hands and the Judge scrambled up without much noise. He took the toys as quietly and put forth a hand to help Andy over the windowsill.

Andy delayed picking up his burdens to turn the flashlight on the sleeping children for the Judge's benefit, then piloted his guest to the kitchen stove, which was now cold and dead. Here he placed the light so that it would shine full on the three stockings and waited in silence for the Judge to examine them.

"Did I tell you a straight story, Judge?" he asked presently.

The Judge nodded. He had pulled up a kitchen chair and put the two dolls upon it with great care that they should not roll off and be damaged. He had also felt in the pockets of his trousers and underneath the Santa Claus costume and had slipped something therefrom into each of the stockings.

"Is this the house next the corner?" he inquired in a whisper.

Andy nodded.

"Then these people are tenants of mine."

"Let me ask you, Judge," said Andy eagerly, "what kind of a woman is the mother?"

"There is no mother."

Andy drew a long breath.

"That's why the two kids had kicked their bedclothes off. Poor little imps!"

"Their bedclothes? They were covered well enough when I looked at them, just now," the Judge returned, suspiciously.

"So they were," replied Andy cheerfully. "You don't think I'd see them shivering and not cover them up? I've got kids, myself, Judge."

The Judge turned toward the door.

"We must go before any one catches us," he whispered nervously.

When they were in the alley again, Andy turned uncertainly toward his companion.

"How about the five years, Judge?" he asked, with anxiety.

There was some moonlight now, to reflect upon the hardened snow, and they could see each other plainly. The Judge looked thoughtfully at Andy for some time before he spoke.

"Andy Dugan," he said, softly, at length. "How does it come that a man like you should follow such a calling?"

Andy shifted his flashlight from one hand to the other and remained silent.

"Why don't you answer?"

"If I told you the truth, it'd hurt your feelings, Judge."

"Tell me the truth," the Judge replied, earnestly.

Andy wavered a moment longer; but something in the other's tone, rather than in his words, told him that it was safe to speak.

"I'm a crook, Judge," he began slowly; "because I fell down, and after that everybody held me down. I was sent up, and when I got out, they pinched me again on suspicion. You know how that goes, Judge. I didn't have a chance to do anything out of the way, but I got thirty days, just the same. After that I was sore, and I pulled off a job. You gave me a year for it. That's how it has been ever since—in and out. Nobody wants to give me an honest job, and here am I with a wife and two kids to keep. What else can I do? I leave it to you, Judge. I'd rather work days, if they'd let me."

"Have you ever tried honest work?" the Judge inquired.

"Once. A man gave me a job, and you let on to him that I was a crook. Then I was fired. I was going to swear off when I got that berth, but I lost it so sudden it took my nerve away."

"You have said enough. If I get you honest employment, and guarantee that your previous record shall not tell against you, will you take it?"

"I will, Judge," Andy answered, promptly. "My wife has been praying for it, ever since I married her."

The Judge put out his hand.

"Then I promise to find it for you; and I promise not to misunderstand my neighbor, after this, for want of the will to get acquainted with him. Now, if you will return with me, we will talk over another matter—you have children, too."

They turned to go, in the moonlight just preceding dawn; but before they had gone far, Andy grasped his companion's arm and motioned him to silence.

"Listen, Judge," he whispered.

From within the house they had just left came the sound of childish laughter, breathless and hysterical; such laughter as comes only on Christmas morning, and then not to every child in the city. Mingled with it, presently, was the deep, half-sobbing laugh of a man.

The "kids" had found their stockings.

> For Christmas the weather should be of that Pickwickian kind in which the grass is "crisp and frosty," the air has a "fine, dry, bracing coldness," and the day is one "that might induce a couple of elderly gentlemen in a lonely field to take off their greatcoats and play at leapfrog in pure lightness of heart and gayety."

SMOKE
OLD
CHUM
The Tobacco of Quality
1/2 LB. TINS
and in packages

EARLY CHRISTMAS MORNING.

Christmas Candlelight.

A group of girls settled cosily round the fire were putting the finishing touches to the Christmas gifts that they were making. One girl who had brought no workbag spoke in answer to a question:

"Last year I made a new friend in the town where I spent the fall. When I left for home just before Christmas, Anne came to say good-bye and brought me a tall red candle lettered in gold with a Christmas blessing that she herself had written. Then then told me that it was an ancient custom to light a candle on Christmas Eve just before midnight, to say a prayer and to open the house door wide to welcome the Christ Child as He went through the world looking for open homes and hearts that were truly welcoming.

"At home on Christmas Eve the family assembled to light Anne's candle. We opened the hall door so that the light shone out into the starlight as we said our prayer in silence and waited for the church chimes to strike midnight. As the last stroke died away we wished one another a merry Christmas on the first moment of Christmas Day, and we felt as if that little ceremony shared by us all had given us a sort of right and fresh mood about Christmas—which means in spirit, doesn't it, the most welcoming, warm-hearted day of the whole year? So for this Christmas I'm going to give everyone of you a red candle. I've put Anne's Christmas verse on each, and you'll know that I am giving you her idea for Christmas."

This stanza was lettered on the crimson candles that came on the day before Christmas:

As in the blessed Christ Child's name
This sacred wax shall feed the flame,
So let my heart its fires begin
And light the Heavenly Pilgrim in.

My Hand in Thine.

When baby eyes in mother's eyes
  Their heaven found;
When baby feet first followed hers
  In joyful round;
When baby lips from hers did learn
  My Name divine;—
How tenderly my mother placed
  My hand in Thine!

—Jessie Colby.

Joys of December.

Oh, I love the bleak December,
  In spite of his rime and snow,
For then I well remember
  Comes the cheer of the ingle glow,
The gleam of holly ember
  And the rite of the mistletoe.

—Arch. Crombie.