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"THE FOOL"

BY CHANNING POLLOCK

ILLUSTRATED BY R.W. SAYWERFIELD

CHAPTER I.

THE CHRISTMAS TREE.

Here and there above the roofs and gables, eaves and steeples that ade the skyscape of New York, there towers an occasional church spire, a great, sensitive, kindly finger pointing to Heaven.

The Church of the Nativity holds aloft just such a finger—but it rises from a smug, sleek, soft hand.

An habitue of New York's most fashionable club would feel quite at home in the Church of the Nativity. There is the same rich simplicity in both, the same warm comfort, and, above all, the same exclusiveness. But a threadbare man would be as self-conscious in one institution as in the other.

A fleeting winter sun, homeward bound on Christmas eve, peered through stained glass windows upon a scene of disorder not in keeping with the primness it usually found in the rich shadows of these stately walls.

Crumpled paper, boxes and wood shavings were scattered everywhere. Bits of abandoned string scrawled strange figures on the floor.

Rising above this confusion towered a giant fir tree, decked with the lights and colors of an Aurora Borealis. Tinsel and trinkets weighed its boughs. A young girl poised on a step ladder, draped a strand of silver on already overloaded branches, then sat down awkwardly on one of the steps.

A woman, dressed too youthfully for her 40 years, and too tightly for her 180 pounds, turned slowly, surveying a dazzling ball held level with her eyes. As she faced the ladder she glimpsed other ornaments.

"Dilly!" she reproved. "Dilly, for pity's sake pull down your skirt." She turned to a third feminine figure bending over a box. "I don't know what skirts are coming to!"

"They're not coming to the ground, mother, you can be sure of that," Dilly rejoined flippantly.

Dilly, otherwise Daffodil Gilliam, was pretty even before she learned that nature had adjuncts sold in small round boxes. Twenty years old, she was 30 years witty, 40 years wise, 50 years worldly and 60 years cynical.

"I can't understand why our young women want to go around looking like chorus girls," Mrs. Gilliam complained irritably.

"Perhaps they've noticed the kind of men that marry chorus girls," Leila Thornbury remarked, looking up from a box of toys. At 30 Leila had left one marriage behind, carrying away court-awarded spoils of war. There was something feverish and restless in her eyes, something deliberately attractive in her manner.

"I've two engagements before dinner," said Mrs. Thornbury, finally, "and I've got to go home and undress for the opera."

"I gave up the dance for this," boasted Dilly.

"But you all waste your time so dreadfully," objected Mrs. Gilliam. "I'm busy too, but my life is given to the service of others."

"What could be sweeter!" her daughter mocked.

"Dilly! Nobody knows better than you that I've never had a selfish thought. Mr. Gilliam—"

"Of the Gilliam Groceries, Inc.," interjected the girl.

"Mr. Gilliam says I'm far too good! Only yesterday I gave 500 pounds of coffee and sugar to the Salvation Army."

"And today," interrupted the incorrigible Dilly, "father jumped the price of sugar 32 cents!"

Mrs. Gilliam saw the futility of further argument.

"One gets precious little reward, I can tell you," she said with rising emotion. "I sent helpful thoughts from the Bible to all Mr. Gilliam's employes! Now they're on strike, and the man that got 'Be content with your wages is leading the strikers."

Minard's Liniment for Asthma.

She rummaged in the toy box to conceal her agitation.

"Where's the Star of Bethlehem?" she asked absently.

"It doesn't work, mother," explained Dilly.

"Are those your husband's men on the front steps?" Mrs. Thornbury asked after a moment's pause.

"Oh, no," said Mrs. Gilliam. "Those are people from the sweat shops. They're starving, I hear, and Mr. Gilliam says it serves 'em right." By this time she had found the object of her search—a large, brilliant star-shaped ornament. "What's the matter with the Star of Bethlehem?" she inquired.

"Oh, the usual," said Dilly. "Whoever heard of the lights working on a Christmas tree?"

"But this must work," Mrs. Gilliam declared firmly. "Mrs. Tice had it made to order—of Parisian diamonds. It cost $300."

"All right, it's better than nothing," said Dilly, taking it from her mother and clambering up the shaky ladder.

"Well, I'm half dead and there can't be any more presents," droned Mrs. Thornbury, reaching for her wrap. "I'd give my left hand for a cigaret."

"Not here!" exclaimed Mrs. Gilliam, a bit shocked.

"Why not? We've had almost everything else."

"Mother's so mid-Victorian," whined Dilly. "And ministers are finding theyve got to do something to make church-going attractive. What do we get out of it now? I've heard of preachers who go in for dances and movies and they draw crowds, too. Who wouldn't go to church to get a squint at Dougy Fairbanks?"

She clambered down the ladder, having hung the star at the top of the tree. Light from an opening door drew attention to a small, bent, mouse-like man, a grayed creature who bowed his way apologetically, his arms filled with bundles.

"Good Lord!" expostulated Mrs. Gilliam. "More presents?"

"Mrs. Tice brought them," he explained. "She and Mr. Jerry Goodkind. They're coming right in."

"Oh, Mr. Barnaby," said Dilly. "Our star won't light. Will you see if you can fix—"

"One moment—" The sexton was hurrying back to the door, free of his arm-load. The Gilliams could wait. Mrs. Tice was much wealthier. With a servile bow Mr. Barnaby opened the door.

CHAPTER II.

MRS. J. ORSON TICE

Mrs. J. Orson Tice swept into the leaden shadows of the darkening church in much the same manner that she had just entered middle age—refusing to close the door behind her.

"Hello, everybody," she said in airy greeting, which "everybody" returned. "Who are those people on the church steps? A lot of dirty foreigners blocking the sidewalk."

"It's the grating, Mrs. Tice," explained the chronically apologetic Mr. Barnaby. "The furnace room's underneath and they're trying to keep warm."

"Well, let 'em try somewhere else," said Mrs. Tice, brushing herself in unpleasant recollection. "I don't mean to be unkind, you know, but there must be missions or something."

Proper obeisance having been paid to Mrs, Tice, Leila Thornbury turned to the man who had entered leisurely in her wake. Jerry Goodkind leaned indolently on a shiny, yellow walking stick. It was a favorite pose, restful and at the same time man-about-town-ish. Jerry was 35. Having had everything he wanted hadn't left him bored or jaded. On the contrary, he was well pleased with things in general, and himself in particular.

"We didn't hope to see you here, Mr. Goodkind," said Mrs. Thornbury graciously.

"I met him in front of Tiffany's," explained Mrs. Tice.

"The most dangerous corner in New York!" Jerry said knowingly, with a smile. He was always smiling, sometimes carelessly, sometimes amusedly. But his eyes seldom joined in the smile.

"I lured him here by mentioning that Clare Jewett was helping us," continued Mrs. Tice.

Dilly saw a chance to tantalize.

"Page Mr. Gilchrist!" she called in strident bell-boy tones.

"Dilly!" rebuked her mother. "What a way of saying that Clare is engaged to the assistant rector! Dilly's looking well today, isnt she, Mr. Goodkind. So young and—"

"Fresh!" added Jerry.

"Well, good people, I must leave you," Mrs. Thornbury remarked, turning to her wraps Jerry was at her side in a moment helping her into an enormous fur coat, admiring it the while.

"Miss Jewett's in the chair room," she murmured to him as she left.

"She has an engagement for dinner, but you notice she didn't say with whom," Mrs. Gilliam said when the outer door slammed. "I don't think they ought to allow divorced women in the church!"

"The church won't marry them," Mrs. Tice answered.

"That's the trouble," complained Mrs. Gilliam.

"The church will let 'em give stained-glass windows, though," interjected the rebellious Dilly.

"Where does she get all her money?" queried Mrs. Gilliam, brushing aside her daughters irony.

"Billy settled for $36,000 a year," Mrs. Tice replied.

Jerry chuckled.

"Think of getting $36,000 a year out of munitions," he laughed. "Gee! what a lot of lives that coat must have cost!"

It was a pleasantry which pleased Jerry. He saw the tragedy of men's lives exchanged for women's finery, one of life's little jokes. The others joined in his merriment and the Rev. Everett Wadham, walking in upon the scene, found "the flower of his flock" in high good humor.

"Here's Dr. Wadham," welcomed Dilly. Dr. Wadham bowed in well-contrived humility. He was an easy-going man of 60, a kindly, earnest, pleasant soul. As rector of a rich churhh he had no worries, so those of others did not occur to him. He had known no discomfort in his life, hence it was simple for him to deny its existence.

(To be continued.)

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