

Lowrie's Good Will

By S. E. KINGS.



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MUCH snow had been piled in a drift upon the window sill, and the wind was blowing madly through the deserted streets. Lowrie looked out and the feeling of loneliness which had possessed him all day was intensified.

"Christmas," he said half aloud, "and here I am without a friend to wish me well; with nobody to care whether I am merry or sad and with no one to whom I may even offer a friendly greeting. I suppose the boy in the elevator or the porter would be glad enough to exchange a word or two with me, if I made it worth while, but—"

He suddenly ceased to think of his loneliness and stood in a listening attitude. In the adjoining room a woman was singing. The notes were faint, but sweet and clear; yet there was a pathos in them that strongly appealed to him. He inclined his head to hear the words:

"Lead Kindly Light, amid the encircling gloom,
Lead Thou me on!
The night is dark and I am far from home—
Lead Thou me on!"

The singer paused and Lowrie stood looking out at the whirling snow which was falling so thickly that the light of day was almost shut out. The afternoon was well advanced. Soon the electric lights would begin to glow in the streets, and the candles on the Christmas trees would be lighted. Happy children would shout with glee; fond parents would join their little ones in giving expression to the spirit of the occasion; eager lovers would be greeting each other with delight and he would be sitting down to eat his Christmas dinner alone, with no one but a waiter who expected a tip to give him a word of cheer.

Between his room and the one which was occupied by the singer there was a door, evidently to be opened only in case the two apartments were used as part of a suite. Lowrie, who was far from home and alone in a big hotel for the first time in his life on Christmas day, looked curiously at the door for a moment and then went over to it and putting his ear close to the panel, listened. After a little while he could hear a faint sound as of some one rocking on the carpeted floor, and presently, very softly and sadly the words:

"And for Bonnie Annie Laurie I'd lay me down and die."
Then there was silence again. Lowrie straightened up, walked to the window, and after looking out for a moment turned back with a smile. Taking one of his cards from his pocket he wrote on the back of it: "Merry Christmas," and pushed it under the door. He drew a chair over near the door and sat down to await developments. It was rapidly growing dark, but he forgot to pity himself for his loneliness and neglected to turn on the electric light. He was wondering if his card had been seen and trying to picture to himself the kind of woman his neighbor might be.

"Perhaps," he thought, "she is stout and has gray hair. She may even have grandchildren. Well, in any event, she has a sweet voice, and it is a certainty that she is lonely."
He had closed his eyes while he was musing, and his thoughts winged away to the place where his mother and sisters were probably entertaining their friends and wishing he might be with them. At length he came out of his reverie and, looking down, at the place where he had pushed his card under the door, saw something small and white. He picked it up eagerly, turned on his light and read:

"Thank you, and may your Christmas be a thousand fold merrier than mine."
It was a woman's writing in the fashionable scrawl, but no name was signed to the message. She had merely used a strip of the paper furnished by the hotel, so there was no hint of her identity. Lowrie's interest was aroused, and he decided to pursue the adventure. On the stand in his room were several sheets of paper, in addition to pen and ink. He sat down and wrote:

"I am here alone, a stranger. Is it fair that a Christian should be friendless on Christmas?"
This message was pushed under the door, and almost immediately the corner that had been left protruding on his side disappeared. Evidently the lady had expected a continuance of the correspondence. Lowrie forgot that he was lonely; forgot that a big hotel far from home was a dismal place to be in at Christmas time. He was busy wondering whether there would be an answer to his note and what it would be. He was not kept long in doubt, and the thrill which he experienced when he saw the folded piece of paper gently pushed under the door was one of distinct pleasure. With nervous eagerness he picked it up and went over to the table under the chandelier. As he opened it he suddenly became dismayed again. It was his own note that had been returned to him. But his disappointment was brief. Under his message the lady had written the one word, "Ditto."

After he had studied the matter for a time Lowrie sat down and spread the paper out before him. He looked at it curiously and again tried to picture to himself the lady in the adjoining room.
"Pshaw!" he thought at last, "she is probably a good, plain old soul who is the victim of some such combination of circumstances as that which has placed me in my present predicament. If she were young and beautiful she wouldn't be alone and neglected. A young and beautiful woman never has to sigh for attention or companionship. Yet, why should I permit her to remain there alone and unhappy merely because she is unfortunate enough to be unable to claim youth or beauty? This is a time when good will should prevail, a time when every one should make an effort to be kind."

Then he took up his pen again and wrote:
"May I be permitted to offer the greeting of a well wisher, and to hope that I shall not be considered too bold if I suggest that it might be possible for us to have a little Christmas festival of our own? Though we are strangers to each other there is no reason why we should not at such a time as this be friends."
Elliott Lowrie.
He pushed the paper under the door and listened, with his ear against the panel. He heard the lady cross the room to get the

message; heard her as she picked it up, and experienced a curious feeling as he realized that they were separated only by an inch or two of wood.

"What curious beings we are," he thought, "and how we shut ourselves out from one another." We sit in loneliness and despair when beyond the thin walls against which we lean there may be others who, if they knew of our troubles or were aware of our existence, might have it in their power to lend us happiness or rescue us from misfortune. It is all because of the foolish conventionalities by which we are enslaved. I hope she may at least wear her hair in a becoming fashion. Almost any woman can be attractive if she knows how to wear her hair."

He heard the lady go away from the door and cross the room again, and fancying her sitting at her table and dipping her pen in the ink well, he went to the window. The lights were glowing in the street; the snow was coming down in a slanting deluge, and a few people with upturned collars and bowed heads were hurrying along far below. As he stood looking out it occurred to him that a warm room in a big hotel was not a bad place in which to be, even at Christmas time and far from home. The answer he expected was waiting for him when he turned from the window. This is what the lady had written:

"Thank you for your kind greeting. I hope I shall not be considered too bold if I suggest that you propose some way in which we can determine whether we shall care after we have seen each other to have a Christmas festival of our own. It would be awkward if we were to decide to have a festival and then you were to find, on seeing me, that you did not care to go on with it, or if I were to have a similar feeling after seeing you. We ought to decide upon some plan which will leave each of us free to advance or retreat without making it embarrassing for the other. You seem to be reasonable. I leave it to you to suggest a mode of procedure."
"Constance Hallock."

It had not previously occurred to Lowrie that the lady might after seeing him be inclined to wish to continue to treat him as a stranger and he was disposed at first to be a little resentful because she had hinted at such a possibility. It was Christmas time, however, and he generously forgave her. After having done that he began working out a plan in accordance with her suggestion. In a few minutes he had it formulated. It all came to him as if he had been mysteriously inspired, and he made haste to write it out, thus:

"My Dear Miss (or Mrs.) Hallock: In a little while the few unfortunate people who are stranded here will begin assembling in the dining room to partake of such Christmas cheer as may be had there. I propose that we join them. If you will take a seat at one of the small tables at the east side of the room, I will watch for you as you enter. In case I desire, after seeing you, to complete the arrangement which has been suggested, I will enter shortly after you. I will pretend to have forgotten something, and, just after getting inside the room, turn to go out. Before leaving the room, however, I will glance over at you and pause for an instant. If you how to me I will know that the Christmas festival is to proceed, and after I have gone out for a moment I will return, greet you as if you were my dearest friend and sit down beside you. In case you do not how to me when I pause before going out I will not return. Or if when I have seen you, I do not wish to go on with the programme I will not enter the dining room at all. Thus we shall both escape any embarrassment. If this plan meets with your approval I will go downstairs in fifteen minutes, and take a position from which it will be possible for me to see you as you direct the head waiter to give you a seat at the east side of the dining room."
Elliott Lowrie.



"How I Am Without a Partner to Wish Me Well!"



"You ARE TEN MINUTES TOO LATE, MISS HALLOCK."

In a little while this answer was returned: "Your idea is a very ingenious one; but make it twenty minutes instead of fifteen. I shall need that much time to get ready. (Miss) Constance Hallock."

Twenty minutes later Lowrie stood near the door of the dining room. Only four ladies had entered, and they had all been accompanied by men. Then there came a woman who was unaccompanied. She was very tall, very angular, very much made up, and she bestowed upon him a silly smile as she passed near where he stood.

With a feeling akin to homesickness he watched her as she lingered near the entrance until the head waiter approached. Lowrie saw her point toward a small table at the east side of the room, and, sad at heart, he turned away. Hardly realizing what he did, he rushed over to the elevator and returned to the fifth floor. Then, still downcast, and completely oblivious of the fact that it was a time when good will should have prevailed, he hurried along the hall toward his room, intending to shut himself up there until the next morning, when it would be possible for him to escape from the hateful place.

As he was half blindly fumbling at the keyhole of the door of the adjoining room opened, and, looking up, he beheld a lady, young, graceful, beautiful and tastefully dressed. She seemed to be surprised to see him and paused for a moment as if she intended to retreat. But she thought better of it when Lowrie took off his hat, looked at his watch and, smiling in a way that caused all her doubts to flee, said: "You are ten minutes late, Miss Hallock, and those ten minutes almost caused me to miss what I am sure is going to be the most delightful experience of my life."

A year later they occupied these rooms again, and the door between them was open. But they were on their wedding journey, then.

He always ready, of course, to strike the iron while it is hot, but be ready, also, to make it hot by striking.

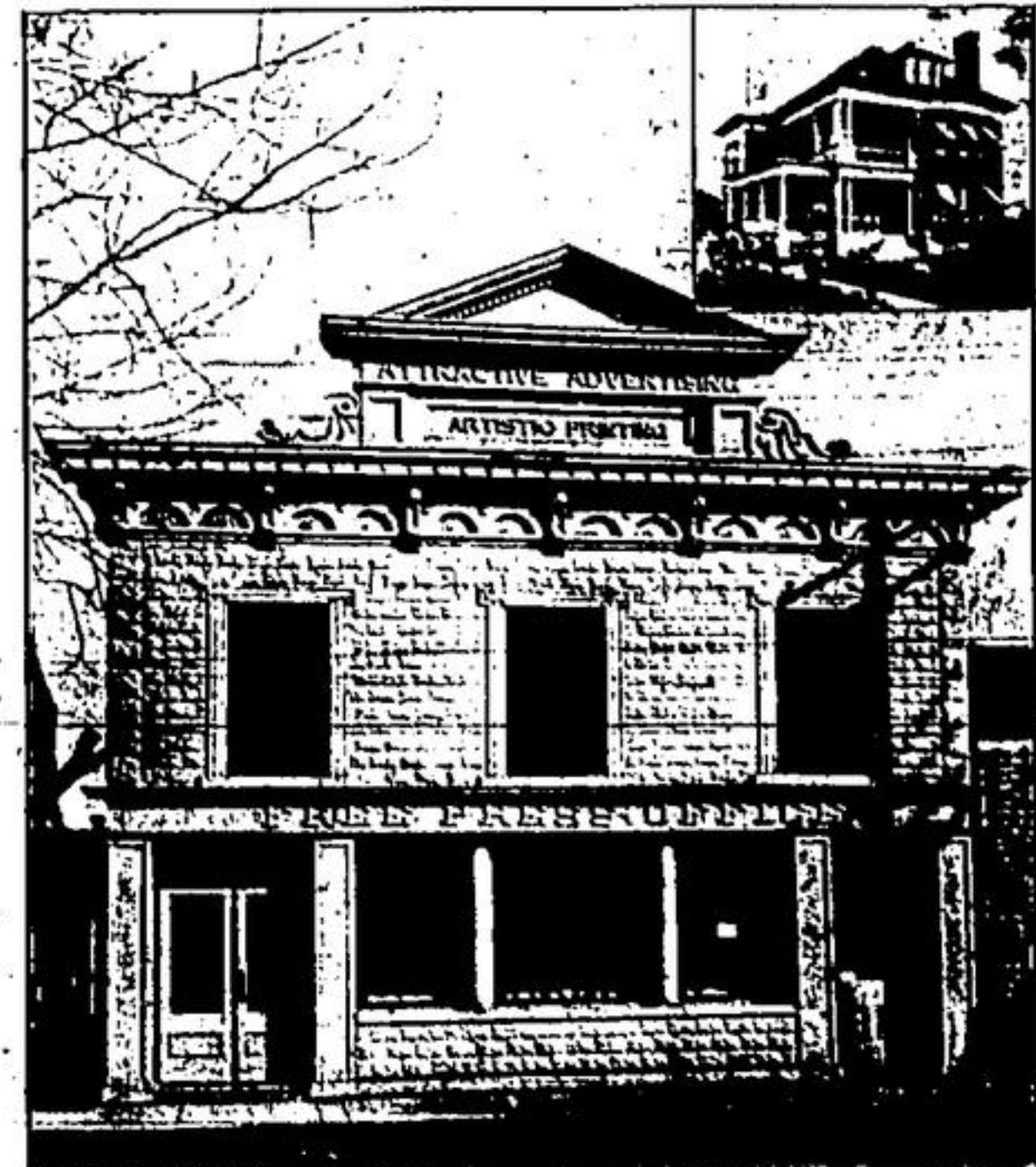
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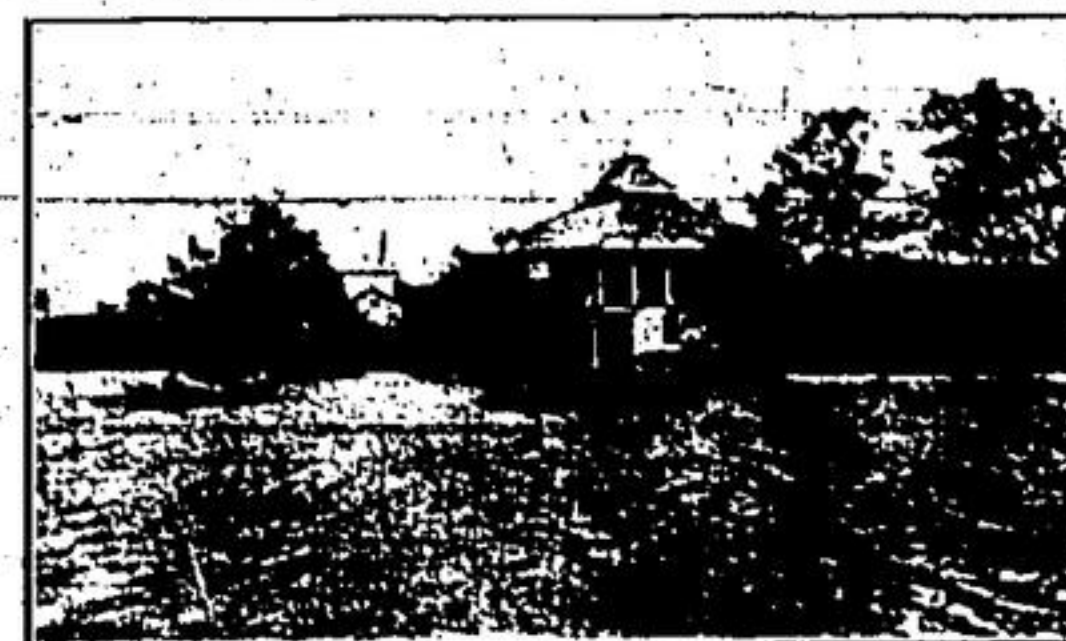
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