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The King Of Christmas

By F. A. MITCHEL

Bickerstaff quarreled with his wife and went out from his home into the world with turmoil in his head and in his heart. He saw a troubled present and a dismal future. He had married rather late in life—forty—having taken a woman ten years younger than himself. The honeymoon was pleasant, but as soon as it was over the groom, who had become set in his ways, found the task of getting used to a woman, who was fast becoming—if she had not already become—also set in her ways, difficult. There was friction. Friction makes fire, and fire burns. Bickerstaff rued the day when he had married. At last he could stand it no longer and went off by himself.

But he had tasted of the sweets of matrimony as well as the bitter. When he had ceased to quarrel his mind settled back on the sweets. He remembered his courting days; went over the little nothings he had said to his love; dwelt on those feminine idiosyncrasies that had so charmed him.

And now what a contrast was his present life to that brief, happy season with one he had loved and who had loved him! The charm had gone out of his bachelor freedom. He was minded to get a divorce and try marriage again with another woman. No; if he couldn't live with the woman he already loved he certainly could not live with another.

He spent a long while trying to get used to the separation. He hoped some suggestion that might lead to a reconciliation would come from his wife. Then he began to dread lest she would proceed to obtain a divorce in order to supply his place.

Christmas was coming and added to his gloom. Men at business began to talk about getting this done and that done in order that they might be free to enjoy Christmas. This stung him. What in the world should he do, where go to avoid the day which would be full of misery to him as it was of pleasure to others? He could not get rid of it; he must face it.

Then something of the spirit of Christmas must have stolen into his heart, for he wrote a letter to his wife suggesting that they try to live together again or at least spend the Christmas holidays together. Doubtless he had been very impatient with her; he had not considered that her views, habits, requirements were as important as his own. If it appeared by the end of the holidays that they were as discordant as before they could part again.

At their separation his wife had gone to her former home on a farm so secluded that he heard nothing of her through others, and she never wrote him. He waited anxiously for her reply, and when it came was much pleased that she accorded with his proposition. She longed for their union as much as he did. "Try to think of some gift you can bring me," she wrote, "which will so please me that it will make me more patient with you hereafter—something not of pecuniary value. Read the poem of 'Paradise and the Peri' and you will understand. I have something for you that I hope will produce a like result."

Bickerstaff read the poem, in which a sinner takes a gift to heaven that will be acceptable and insure an entrance there. He tried many gifts and finally succeeded by offering a tear of repentance.

Mrs. Bickerstaff wrote her husband that Christmas morning would be the most convenient time to receive him. If they had a lot of children to hang up stockings Christmas eve would be preferable. As it was, let it be Christmas morning. The moment it was all arranged Bickerstaff began to fret over the period that remained before the visit. He had not seen or heard anything of his wife for months, yet the few days' interval before he was to meet her seemed an age. While reading the poem his wife had recommended—thinking of her—a tear had dropped on the paper. He tore out the page, resolving to take it to her for his gift.

Christmas morning opened bright and beautiful. Bickerstaff had taken the journey the evening before, so he had only to drive from a hotel to the farm. He was received by his wife's parents, who seemed to be very happy. He wondered if their joy was caused by the prospect of their daughter's reunion. They led him upstairs to her room and threw open the door. There she lay in bed, pale, but happy, while a babe was pulling for his breakfast.

"My Christmas gift!" she cried.

Bickerstaff made one bound for the bed and encircled his wife and his child in a single embrace.

"Now you have both got a governor," said Mrs. Bickerstaff's father, "perhaps you will not take the law into your own hands and fight it out on that line. He will rule you with a rod of iron. And yet he shall serve as a bond between you stronger than steel. Your lives are changed in this little tyrant, and, although he comes to his father on Christmas morning, a day of peace to all the world, yet shall he drag you from your slumbers at midnight and compel you to walk the floor with him."

"What gift did you bring me, dear?" asked the wife.

"Something that is now utterly useless, a tear of repentance. There will in future at least be nothing of which to repent. Our affairs are of no more importance. We shall live for the requirements of the king."

Christmas Christmas

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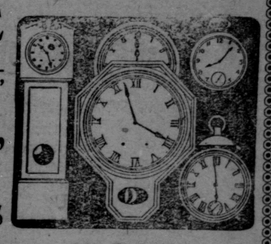
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