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General Merchandise FAIRLEE MD

His First Christmas

By MARY GRAHAM BONNER

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IT WAS very quiet in the house. Outside the snowflakes were chasing each other with vigor and a gayety and a sense of the merriment of the season.

Voices could be heard shouting across streets, wishing others "A Merry Christmas." Now and again the wind blew loudly, but not shrilly nor harshly nor with a wailing sound. The wind, too, seemed to be quivering with happiness. All of nature had joined together to be as beautiful, as radiant, in honor of the day as possible.

The hills were covered with snow. The branches of the trees were laden with it. Icicles hung from eaves and from corners of houses, and windows were frosted with exquisite designs. The shrubs, too, were covered with snow. It looked more like Fairyland than anything else.

In the house they were waiting, waiting, waiting. How tense and long seemed the wait. How nervous, how frightful, and yet how marvelous—if all went well.

But just suppose everything didn't go well? Suppose anything happened?

Ray Clarke paced up and down the floor and wondered how he could have been so happy—so free from nervousness for so long a time.

He hated the great beauty of the outside world. When he heard people wishing each other "Merry Christmas" he almost hated their smiles and their cheerful voices.

How deeply he loved Lillian. She was worth all the Christmas presents in the world! Of course. There were no two ways about that child.

And the doctor had said with such a genial, merry twinkle in his eyes: "Well, I fancy the young son and heir will be a Christmas present from the misus to you!"

He had laughed at the time, and Lillian had blushed and smiled and laughed, too. The doctor was such a friendly old soul—he had been the doctor when Lillian had been born. And he was fine, too.

But perhaps he counted too much on Lillian's strength. Ray had been sent out of the room and he had been alone here now for so long.

At first he had been so full of high spirits. But the delay had been so strange. They hadn't told him there would be any such delay. They had simply sent him out of the room and had said that everything was all right, and that they'd come and tell him soon to be back to see his child.

He would go upstairs. He couldn't stand this another moment. And it was so quiet. He had fancied it would not be quiet. Then he heard a strange shrill voice.

How curiously it sounded. Was that Lillian. She must be very ill to have a voice sound so curiously. He never heard it like that.

They couldn't keep him from her. She would want him, too. Of course she would!

He hurriedly ran up the stairs. The doctor was at the top of the stairs. "Wait a moment; not so fast; not so fast," the doctor smiled. "I was coming to tell you."

"Couldn't you have let me come to her? Did you have to wait until it was all over to come and tell me?" Ray said in a husky voice.

"She wanted it to be that way," the doctor said. Still he was smiling. How could he smile at such a time? How hard and inhuman doctors became.

"I don't believe a word of it," he said. "She wanted me, I know. I heard her cry. That was it. You kept me from her. You wouldn't let me go to her and she—she—wanted me."

"My dear Ray, just a minute," the doctor said, but Ray had rushed past him and was in his wife's room. Tears were in his eyes.

Oh, he'd never forgive himself that he had consented to do what the doctor had told him to when suddenly he noticed that Lillian was looking at him, her eyes wide open, smiling happily.

"Did you hear him shout out a 'Merry Christmas' to you, Ray?" she asked.

"It was the baby who cried?" "Not a cry, my love, 'Merry Christmas' was what he said!"

"Lillian, my own, my own," he murmured, and bent down over her. And now the tears came freely. He didn't care at all about them. Nothing mattered. For the tears—they were the tears of joy!

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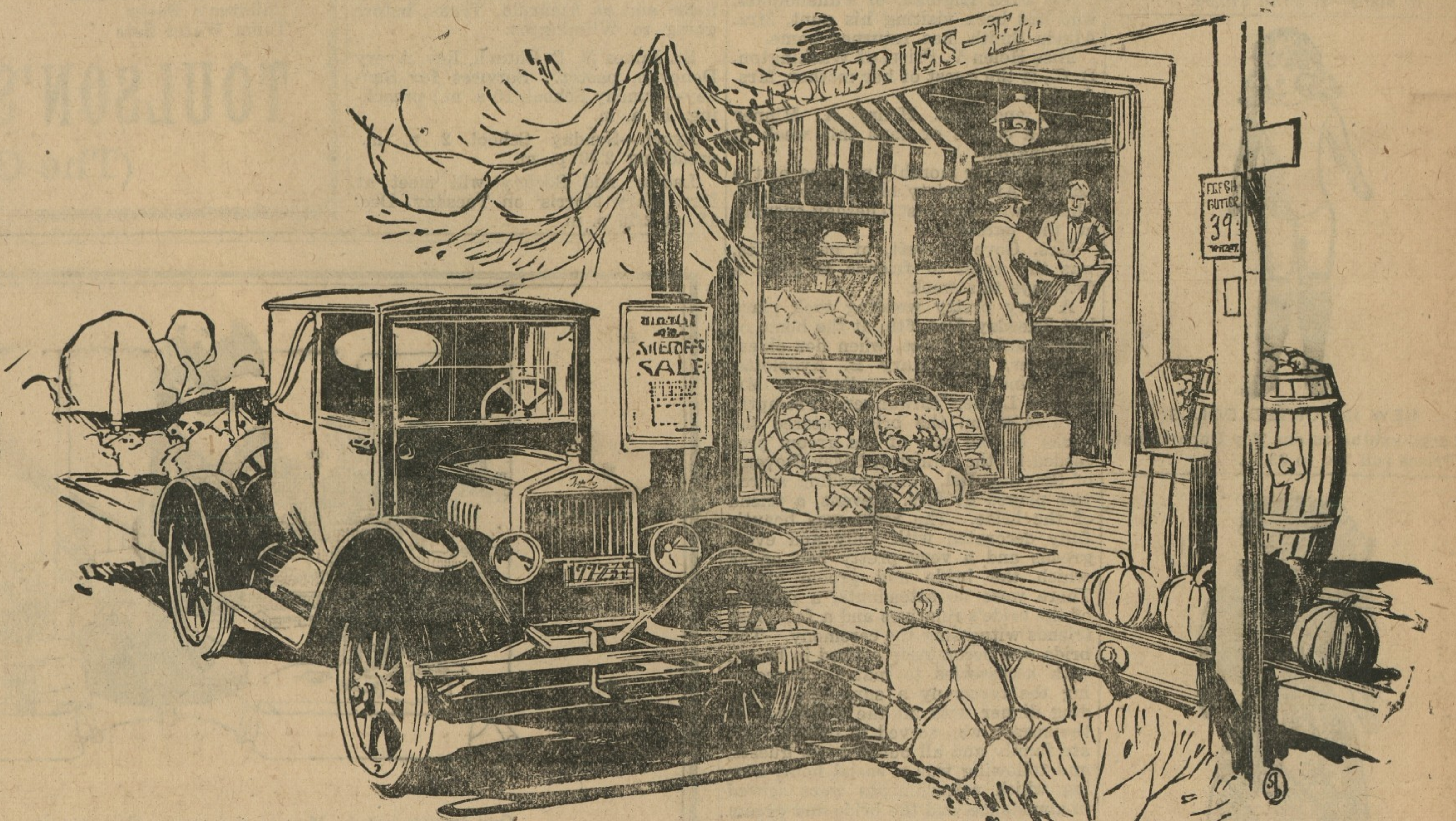
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