

What Christmas Brought to Him

By LAURA ELAINE CAMERON

Back to His Old Job, the Present Walter Manners Needed Most His Cup Was Full to Overflowing With Yuletide Joy

of winter sunshine, and his face showed a dull red—the hue which creeps over a man's face when insult or humiliation has come to him.

For twenty years of service to old Clarkson, twenty years wherein he had given the best that was in him to a man who was reputed to be the most ill-tempered man in all Washburn—he had just been told that from now on his services would be dispensed with, and all because of a small mistake that had been made which Clarkson in the blind rage which had taken hold of him, had laid on the shoulders of Manners.

It was hard, he told himself as he walked along, that a man who had given the best of his life in service could be cast away like an old glove. It must be that he was not so competent as other men, he told himself. For the hurt of dismissal had sunk its iron deeper into Walter Manners' soul than it would have done in the case of another man, for always he had been possessed of the feeling that he was not quite as capable as other men. Something within him always tried to belittle him to himself, and although he had often fought with this feeling and had tried to assure himself that he did as good or even better work than some, in spite of himself it came every now and then to torture him. Now, in the face of his recent dismissal, it came with added force, and he told himself over and over again that he was a failure or else old Clarkson would not have let him out. He never stopped to think that perhaps it was the long association with a man of Clarkson's type that had made him so diffident about his own worth.

He dreaded the thought of going home and telling his family the bad news. He reproached himself that he had not broken away from old Clarkson ten years before when he had an offer from young Peters, who had just then come to Washburn, and who had since made such a success. But then, as always, the fear of himself kept him from accepting and he had stayed on and borne the ill-temper of old man Clarkson since. His forty-five years hung heavily upon him as he



went on and he looked with dread to the future, for his family was just at the age when a steady income was an absolute necessity.

He shuddered now as he thought of Christmas, when only a few hours ago he had been living in happy anticipation of the day. He had planned so many things; so many little surprises that would bring joy to his loved ones; but now that was all over, for how could he enter into the spirit of Christmas, weighed down with care and dread of the future as he was now?

Walter Manners had always been a man who set a great stress upon duty, and as he went along now the thought came to him that a real duty to his family lay before him. For he felt that he was being a great wrong upon them were he to go to them now with the story of his failure and to spoil their Christmas. What of his own feelings—surely he could be man enough to hide them for a few days for the sake of those he loved! After Christmas there would be time enough to tell them the dread news—to let them know what a miserable failure he was.

He decided then that he would not go home until his usual homecoming hour, lest it might create suspicion, so to kill time he wandered aimlessly around town. He stopped to gaze in Peters' window as he passed. He admitted to himself that there was a vast difference between the appearance of this store and Clarkson's. Here everything was up-to-date and attractive; the window arrangement such as might make anyone pause to look. Once he had broached this



subject to old Clarkson, but had been met by such an outburst of wrath that he had never dared to open the subject again.

So engrossed was he with his thoughts that he never noticed that Clyde Peters was standing inside the window and gazing straight at him. He flushed a dull red again as the thought came to him that surely Peters would suspect something to see him wandering aimlessly around at what was usually the busiest time of the day at Clarkson's. But he nodded as pleasantly as he could to Peters and walked on.

Somehow he got through the evening without his family suspecting that there was anything amiss. He joined in the general gaiety and helped with the decorations and various other little jobs, but all the while the heart within him was sick with misery. But he knew that the burden was his to bear alone, and the thought that he was saving his family from the truth for a few days gave him a little feeling of comfort.

At ten o'clock, after the smallest of the children had been put to bed and the Christmas tree had received all its trimmings, the door bell rang with a loud peal. Walter Manners opened it, thinking it was a neighbor or possibly a Christmas gift of some kind, but instead the tall figure of Peters stood in the doorway.

In a few minutes he told what he wanted—seeing Manners standing outside his store that afternoon and suspecting from his attitude that something was wrong, he had made inquiries and found he had left Clarkson's. Whereupon he had come to ask him if he would consider a position with him, and when he named the salary, Walter Manners gasped, as it was nearly twice the figure he had been getting. And when, because of his high sense of duty that was his, he told Peters that Clarkson had let him out, Peters only laughed aloud and said: "As if that would make any difference. The wonder to all in Washburn has been how you could have stood him so long."

After that it did not take Walter Manners long to give consent to the offer, and his cup of joy seemed full as he bid good-night and good wishes to Peters at the door.

But it was full to overflowing a few minutes later when old Clarkson came puffing to the door and told him he could have his old job back again, with a small increase in salary. For although he never wanted to see Clarkson's store again, yet the feeling that he was wanted back in the old place, added to the offer which he had just accepted, gave him the confidence in himself which he had always been lacking, and that Christmas Walter Manners really came into his own, he had gotten the gift which he needed most of all.

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