



Ririro

READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

Christmas Eve in War Times

Edward Payson Roe

It was the beginning of a battle. The skirmish line of the Union advance was sweeping rapidly over a rough mountainous region in the South, and in his place on the extreme left of this line was Private Anson Marlow. Tall trees rising from underbrush, rocks, boulders, gulches worn by spring torrents, were the characteristics of the field, which was in wild contrast with the parade-grounds on which the combatants had first learned the tactics of war. The majority, however, of those now in the ranks had since been drilled too often under like circumstances, and with lead and iron shotted guns, not to know their duty, and the lines of battle were as regular as the broken country allowed. So far as many obstacles permitted, Marlow kept his proper distance from the others on the line and fired coolly when he caught glimpses of the retreating Confederate skirmishers. They were retiring with ominous readiness toward a wooded height which the enemy occupied with a force of unknown strength. That strength was soon manifested in temporary disaster to the Union forces, which were driven back with heavy loss.

Neither the battle nor its fortunes are the objects of our present concern, but rather the fate of Private Marlow. The tide of battle drifted away and left the soldier desperately wounded in a narrow ravine, through which babbled a small stream. Excepting the voices of his wife and children no music had ever sounded so sweetly in his ears. With great difficulty he crawled to a little bubbling pool formed by a tiny cascade and encircling stones, and partially slaked his intolerable thirst.

Christmas Eve in War Times, babbling creekHe believed he was dying--bleeding to death. The very thought blunted his faculties for a time; and he was conscious of little beyond a dull wonder. Could it be possible that the tragedy of his death was enacting in that peaceful, secluded nook? Could Nature be so indifferent or so unconscious if it were true that he was soon to lie there dead? He saw the speckled trout lying motionless at the bottom of the pool, the gray squirrels sporting in the boughs over his head. The sunlight shimmered and glinted through the leaves, flecking with light his prostrate form. He dipped his hand in the blood that had welled from his side, and it fell in rubies from his fingers. Could that be his blood--his life-blood; and would it soon all ooze away? Could it be that death was coming through all the brightness of that summer afternoon?

From a shadowed tree further up the glen, a wood-thrush suddenly began its almost unrivalled song. The familiar melody, heard so often from his cottage-porch in the June twilight, awoke him to the bitter truth. His wife had then sat beside him, while his little ones played here and there among the trees and shrubbery. They would hear the same song to-day; he would never hear it again. That counted for little; but the thought of their sitting behind the vines and listening to their favorite bird, spring after spring and summer after summer, and he ever absent, overwhelmed him.

"Oh, Gertrude, my wife, my wife! Oh, my children!" he groaned.

His breast heaved with a great sigh; the blood welled afresh from his wound; what seemed a mortal weakness crept over him; and he thought he died.

"Say, Eb, is he done gone?"

"'Clar to grashus if I know. 'Pears mighty like it." These words were spoken by two stout negroes, who had stolen to the battlefield as the sounds of conflict died away.

"I'm doggoned if I tink dat he's dead. He's only swoonded," asserted the man addressed as Eb. "'Twon't do to lebe 'im here to die, Zack."

"Sartin not; we'd hab bad luck all our days."

"I reckon ole man Pearson will keep him; and his wife's a po'ful nuss."

"Pearson orter; he's a Unioner."

"S'pose we try him; 'tain't so bery fur off."

On the morning of the 24th of December, Mrs. Anson Marlow sat in the living-room of her cottage, that stood well out in the suburbs of a Northern town. Her eyes were hollow and full of trouble that seemed almost beyond tears, and the bare room, that had been stripped of nearly every appliance and suggestion of comfort, but too plainly indicated one of the causes. Want was stamped on her thin face, that once had been so full and pretty; poverty in its bitter extremity was unmistakably shown by the uncarpeted floor, the meagre fire, and scanty furniture. It was a period of depression; work had been scarce, and much of the time she had been too ill and feeble to do more than care for her children. Away back in August her resources had been running low; but she had daily expected the long arrears of pay which her husband would receive as soon as the exigencies of the campaign permitted. Instead of these funds, so greatly needed, came the tidings of a Union defeat, with her husband's name down among the missing. Beyond that brief mention, so horrible in its vagueness, she had never

heard a word from the one who not only sustained her home, but also her heart. Was he languishing in a Southern prison, or, mortally wounded, had he lingered out some terrible hours on that wild battlefield, a brief description of which had been so dwelt upon by her morbid fancy that it had become like one of the scenes in Dante's "Inferno"? For a long time she could not and would not believe that such an overwhelming disaster had befallen her and her children, although she knew that similar losses had come to thousands of others. Events that the world regards as not only possible but probable are often so terrible in their personal consequences that we shrink from even the bare thought of their occurrence.

If Mrs. Marlow had been told from the first that her husband was dead, the shock resulting would not have been so injurious as the suspense that robbed her of rest for days, weeks, and months. She haunted the post-office, and if a stranger was seen coming up the street toward her cottage she watched feverishly for his turning in at her gate with the tidings of her husband's safety. Night after night she lay awake, hoping, praying that she might hear his step returning on a furlough to which wounds or sickness had entitled him. The natural and inevitable result was illness and nervous prostration.

Practical neighbors had told her that her course was all wrong; that she should be resigned and even cheerful for her children's sake; that she needed to sleep well and live well, in order that she might have strength to provide for them. She would make pathetic attempts to follow this sound and thrifty advice, but suddenly when at her work or in her troubled sleep, that awful word "missing" would pierce her heart like an arrow, and she would moan, and at times in the depths of her anguish cry out, "Oh, where is he? Shall I ever see him again?"

But the unrelenting demands of life are made as surely upon the breaking as upon the happy heart. She and her children must have food, clothing, and shelter. Her illness and feebleness at last taught her that she must not yield to her grief, except so far as she was unable to suppress it; that for the sake of those now seemingly dependent upon her, she must rally every shattered nerve and every relaxed muscle. With a heroism far beyond that of her husband and his comrades in the field, she sought to fight the wolf from the door, or at least to keep him at bay. Although the struggle seemed a hopeless one, she patiently did her best from day to day, eking out her scanty earnings by the sale or pawning of such of her household goods as she could best spare. She felt that she would do anything rather than reveal her poverty or accept charity. Some help was more or less kindly offered, but beyond such aid as one neighbor may receive of another, she had said gently but firmly, "Not yet."

The Marlows were comparative strangers in the city where they had resided. Her husband had been a teacher in one of its public schools, and his salary small.

Patriotism had been his motive for entering the army, and while it had cost him a mighty struggle to leave his family, he felt that he had no more reason to hold back than thousands of others. He believed that he could still provide for those dependent upon him, and if he fell, those for whom he died would not permit his widow and children to suffer. But the first popular enthusiasm for the war had largely died out; the city was full of widows and orphans; there was depression of spirit, stagnation in business, and a very general disposition on the part of those who had means, to take care of themselves, and provide for darker days that might be in the immediate future. Sensitive, retiring Mrs. Marlow was not the one to push her claims or reveal her need. Moreover, she could never give up the hope that tidings from her husband might at any time bring relief and safety.

But the crisis had come at last; and on this dreary December day she was face to face with absolute want. The wolf, with his gaunt eyes, was crouched beside her cold hearth. A pittance owed to her for work had not been paid. The little food left in the house had furnished the children an unsatisfying breakfast; she had eaten nothing. On the table beside her lay a note from the agent of the estate of which her home was a part, bidding her call that morning. She knew why--the rent was two months in arrears. It seemed like death to leave the house in which her husband had placed her, and wherein she had spent her happiest days. It stood well away from the crowded town. The little yard and garden, with their trees, vines, and shrubbery, some of which her husband had planted, were all dear from association. In the rear there was a grove and open fields, which, though not belonging to the cottage, were not forbidden to the children; and they formed a wonderland of delight in spring, summer, and fall. Must she take her active, restless boy Jamie, the image of his father, into a crowded tenement? Must golden-haired Susie, with her dower of beauty, be imprisoned in one close room, or else be exposed to the evil of corrupt association just beyond the threshold?

Moreover, her retired home had become a refuge. Here she could hide her sorrow and poverty. Here she could touch what he had touched, and sit during the long winter evenings in his favorite corner by the fire. Around her, within and without, were the little appliances for her comfort which his hands had made, how could she leave all this and live? Deep in her heart also the hope would linger that he would come again and seek her where he had left her.

"O God!" she cried suddenly. "Thou wouldst not, couldst not permit him to die without one farewell word," and she buried her face in her hands and rocked back and forth, while hard, dry sobs shook her slight, famine-pinched form.

The children stopped their play and came and leaned upon her lap.

"Don't cry, mother," said Jamie, a little boy of ten. "I'll soon be big enough to

work for you; and I'll get rich, and you shall have the biggest house in town. I'll take care of you if papa don't come back."

Little Sue knew not what to say, but the impulse of her love was her best guide. She threw her arms around her mother's neck with such an impetuous and childlike outburst of affection that the poor woman's bitter and despairing thoughts were banished for a time. The deepest chord of her nature, mother love, was touched; and for her children's sake she rose up once more and faced the hard problems of her life. Putting on her bonnet and thin shawl (she had parted with much that she now so sorely needed), she went out into the cold December wind. The sky was clouded like her hopes, and the light, even in the morning hours, was dim and leaden-hued.

She first called on Mr. Jackson, the agent from whom she rented her home, and besought him to give her a little more time.

"I will beg for work from door to door," she said. "Surely in this Christian city there must be those who will give me work; and that is all I ask."

The sleek, comfortable man, in his well-appointed office, was touched slightly, and said in a voice that was not so gruff as he at first had intended it should be:

"Well, I will wait a week or two longer. If then you cannot pay something on what is already due, my duty to my employers will compel me to take the usual course. You have told me all along that your husband would surely return, and I have hated to say a word to discourage you; but I fear you will have to bring yourself to face the truth and act accordingly, as so many others have done. I know it's very hard for you, but I am held responsible by my employer, and at my intercession he has been lenient, as you must admit. You could get a room or two in town for half what you must pay where you are. Good-morning."

She went out again into the street, which the shrouded sky made sombre in spite of preparations seen on every side for the chief festival of the year. The fear was growing strong that like Him in whose memory the day was honored, she and her little ones might soon not know where to lay their heads. She succeeded in getting the small sum owed to her and payment also for some sewing just finished. More work she could not readily obtain, for every one was busy and preoccupied by the coming day of gladness.

"Call again," some said kindly or carelessly, according to their nature. "After the holidays are over we will try to have or make some work for you."

"But I need--I must have work now," she ventured to say whenever she had the chance.

In response to this appeal there were a few offers of charity, small indeed, but from which she drew back with an instinct so strong that it could not be

overcome. On every side she heard the same story. The times were very hard; requests for work and aid had been so frequent that purses and patience were exhausted. Moreover, people had spent their Christmas money on their households and friends, and were already beginning to feel poor.

At last she obtained a little work, and having made a few purchases of that which was absolutely essential, she was about to drag her weary feet homeward when the thought occurred to her that the children would want to hang up their stockings at night; and she murmured: "It may be the last chance I shall ever have to put a Christmas gift in them. Oh, that I were stronger! Oh, that I could take my sorrow more as others seem to take theirs! But I cannot, I cannot! My burden is greater than I can bear. The cold of this awful day is chilling my very heart, and my grief, as hope dies, is crushing my soul. Oh, he must be dead, he must be dead! That is what they all think. God help my little ones! Oh, what will become of them if I sink, as I fear I shall! If it were not for them I feel as if I would fall and die here in the street. Well, be our fate what it may, they shall owe to me one more gleam of happiness;" and she went into a confectioner's shop and bought a few ornamented cakes. These were the only gifts she could afford, and they must be in the form of food.

Before she reached home the snow was whirling in the frosty air, and the shadows of the brief winter day deepening fast. With a smile far more pathetic than tears she greeted the children, who were cold, hungry, and frightened at her long absence; and they, children-like, saw only the smile, and not the grief it masked. They saw also the basket which she had placed on the table, and were quick to note that it seemed a little fuller than of late.

"Jamie," she said, "run to the store down the street for some coal and kindlings that I bought, and then we will have a good fire and a nice supper;" and the boy, at such a prospect, eagerly obeyed.

She was glad to have him gone, that she might hide her weakness. She sank into a chair, so white and faint that even little Susie left off peering into the basket, and came to her with a troubled face.

"It's nothing, dearie," the poor creature said. "Mamma's only a little tired. See," she added, tottering to the table, "I have brought you a great piece of gingerbread."

The hungry child grasped it, and was oblivious and happy.

By the time Jamie returned with his first basket of kindling and coal, the mother had so far rallied from her exhaustion as to meet him smilingly again and help him replenish the dying fire.

"Now you shall rest and have your gingerbread before going for your second

load," she said cheerily; and the boy took what was ambrosia to him, and danced around the room in joyous reaction from the depression of the long weary day, during which, lonely and hungry, he had wondered why his mother did not return.

"So little could make them happy, and yet I cannot seem to obtain even that little," she sighed. "I fear--indeed, I fear--I cannot be with them another Christmas; therefore they shall remember that I tried to make them happy once more, and the recollection may survive the long sad days before them, and become a part of my memory."

The room was now growing dark, and she lighted the lamp. Then she cowered shiveringly over the reviving fire, feeling as if she could never be warm again.



The street-lamps were lighted early on that clouded, stormy evening, and they were a signal to Mr. Jackson, the agent, to leave his office. He remembered that he had ordered a holiday dinner, and now found himself in a mood to enjoy it. He had scarcely left his door before a man, coming up the street with great strides and head bent down to the snow-laden blast, brushed roughly against him. The stranger's cap was drawn over his eyes, and the raised collar of his blue army overcoat nearly concealed his face. The man hurriedly begged pardon, and was hastening on when Mr. Jackson's exclamation of surprise caused him to stop and look at the person he had jostled.

"Why, Mr. Marlow," the agent began, "I'm glad to see you. It's a pleasure I feared I should never have again."

"My wife," the man almost gasped, "she's still in the house I rented of you?"

"Oh, certainly," was the hasty reply. "It'll be all right' now."

"What do you mean? Has it not been all right?"

"Well, you see," said Mr. Jackson, apologetically, "we have been very lenient to your wife, but the rent has not been paid for over two months, and--"

"And you were about to turn her and her children out-of-doors in midwinter," broke in the soldier, wrathfully. "That is the way you sleek, comfortable stay-at-home people care for those fighting your battles. After you concluded that I was dead, and that the rent might not be forthcoming, you decided to put my wife into the street. Open your office, sir, and you shall have your rent."

"Now, Mr. Marlow, there's no cause for pitching into me in this way. You know that I am but an agent, and--"

"Tell your rich employer, then, what I have said, and ask him what he would be worth to-day were there not men like myself, who are willing to risk everything and suffer everything for the Union. But I've no time to bandy words. Have you seen my wife lately?"

"Yes," was the hesitating reply; "she was here to-day, and I--"

"How is she? What did you say to her?"

"Well, she doesn't look very strong. I felt sorry for her, and gave her more time, taking the responsibility myself--"

"How much time?"

"I said two weeks, but no doubt I could have had the time extended."

"I have my doubts. Will you and your employer please accept my humble gratitude that you had the grace not to turn her out-of-doors during the holiday season? It might have caused remark; but that consideration and some others that I might name are not to be weighed against a few dollars and cents. I shall now remove the strain upon your patriotism at once, and will not only pay arrears, but also for two months in advance."

"Oh, there's no need of that to-day."

"Yes, there is. My wife shall feel to-night that she has a home. She evidently has not received the letter I wrote as soon as I reached our lines, or you would not have been talking to her about two weeks more of shelter."

The agent reopened his office and saw a roll of bills extracted from Marlow's pocket that left no doubt of the soldier's ability to provide for his family. He gave his receipt in silence, feeling that words would not mend matters, and then trudged off to his dinner with a nagging appetite.

As Marlow strode away he came to a sudden resolution--he would look upon his wife and children before they saw him; he would feast his eyes while they were unconscious of the love that was beaming upon them. The darkness and storm

avored his project, and in brief time he saw the light in his window. Unlatching the gate softly, and with his steps muffled by the snow that already carpeted the frozen ground, he reached the window, the blinds of which were but partially closed. His children frolicking about the room were the first objects that caught his eye, and he almost laughed aloud in his joy. Then, by turning another blind slightly, he saw his wife shivering over the fire.

"Great God!" he muttered, "how she has suffered!" and he was about to rush in and take her into his arms. On the threshold he restrained himself, paused, and said, "No, not yet; I'll break the news of my return in my own way. The shock of my sudden appearance might be too great for her;" and he went back to the window. The wife's eyes were following her children with such a wistful tenderness that the boy, catching her gaze, stopped his sport, came to her side, and began to speak. They were but a few feet away, and Marlow caught every word.

"Mamma," the child said, "you didn't eat any breakfast, and I don't believe you have eaten anything to-day. You are always giving everything to us. Now I declare I won't eat another bit unless you take half of my cake;" and he broke off a piece and laid it in her lap.

"Oh, Jamie," cried the poor woman, "you looked so like your father when you spoke that I could almost see him;" and she caught him in her arms and covered him with kisses.

"I'll soon be big enough to take care of you. I'm going to grow up just like papa and do everything for you," the boy said proudly as she released him.

Little Susie also came and placed what was left of her cake in her mother's lap, saying:

"I'll work for you, too, mamma; and to-morrow I'll sell the doll Santa Claus gave me last Christmas, and then we'll all have plenty to eat."

Anson Marlow was sobbing outside the window as only a man weeps; and his tears in the bitter cold became drops of ice before they reached the ground.

"My darlings!" the mother cried. "Oh, God spare me to you and provide some way for us! Your love should make me rich though I lack all else. There, I won't cry any more, and you shall have as happy a Christmas as I can give you. Perhaps He who knew what it was to be homeless and shelterless will provide for our need; so we'll try to trust Him and keep His birthday. And now, Jamie, go and bring the rest of the coal, and then we will make the dear home that papa gave us cheery and warm once more. If he were only with us we wouldn't mind hunger or cold, would we? Oh, my husband!" she broke out afresh, "if you could only come back, even though crippled and helpless, I feel that I could live and

grow strong from simple gladness."

"Don't you think, mamma," Jamie asked, "that God will let papa come down from heaven and spend Christmas with us? He might be here like the angels, and we not see him."

"I'm afraid not," the sad woman replied, shaking her head and speaking more to herself than to the child. "I don't see how he could go back to heaven and be happy if he knew all. No, we must be patient and try to do our best, so that we can go to him. Go now, Jamie, before it gets too late. I'll get supper, and then we'll sing a Christmas hymn; and you and Susie shall hang up your stockings, just as you did last Christmas, when dear papa was with us. We'll try to do everything he would wish, and then by and by we shall see him again."

As the boy started on his errand his father stepped back out of the light of the window, then followed the child with a great yearning in his heart. He would make sure the boy was safe at home again before he carried out his plan. From a distance he saw the little fellow receive the coal and start slowly homeward with the burden, and he followed to a point where the light of the street-lamps ceased, then joined the child, and said in a gruff voice, "Here, little man, I'm going your way. Let me carry your basket;" and he took it and strode on so fast that the boy had to run to keep pace with him. Jamie shuffled along through the snow as well as he could, but his little legs were so short in comparison with those of the kindly stranger that he found himself gradually falling behind. So he put on an extra burst of speed and managed to lay hold of the long blue skirt of the army overcoat.

"Please, sir, don't go quite so fast," he panted.

The stranger slackened his pace, and in a constrained tone of voice, asked:

"How far are you going, little man?"

"Only to our house--mamma's. She's Mrs. Marlow, you know."

"Yes, I know--that is, I reckon I do. How much further is it?"

"Oh, not much; we're most half-way now. I say, you're a soldier, aren't you?"

"Yes, my boy," said Marlow, with a lump in his throat. "Why?"

"Well, you see, my papa is a soldier, too, and I thought you might know him. We haven't heard from him for a good while, and--" choking a bit--"mamma's afraid he is hurt, or taken prisoner or something." He could not bring himself to say "killed."

Jamie let go the overcoat to draw his sleeve across his eyes, and the big man once more strode on faster than ever, and Jamie began to fear lest the dusky

form might disappear in the snow and darkness with both basket and coal; but the apparent stranger so far forgot his part that he put down the basket at Mrs. Marlow's gate, and then passed on so quickly that the panting boy had not time to thank him. Indeed, Anson Marlow knew that if he lingered but a moment he would have the child in his arms.

"Why, Jamie," exclaimed his mother, "how could you get back so soon with that heavy basket? It was too heavy for you, but you will have to be mamma's little man now."

"A big man caught up with me and carried it. I don't care if he did have a gruff voice, I'm sure he was a good kind man. He knew where we lived too, for he put the basket down at our gate before I could say a word, I was so out of breath, and then he was out of sight in a minute." Some instinct kept him from saying anything about the army overcoat.

"It's some neighbor that lives further up the street, I suppose, and saw you getting the coal at the store," Mrs. Marlow said, "Yes, Jamie, it was a good, kind act to help a little boy, and I think he'll have a happier Christmas for doing it."

"Do you really think he'll have a happier Christmas, mamma?"

"Yes, I truly think so. We are so made that we cannot do a kind act without feeling the better for it."

"Well, I think he was a queer sort of a man if he was kind. I never knew any one to walk so fast. I spoke to him once, but he did not answer. Perhaps the wind roared so he couldn't hear me."

"No doubt he was hurrying home to his wife and children," she said with a deep sigh.

When his boy disappeared within the door of the cottage, Marlow turned and walked rapidly toward the city, first going to the grocery at which he had been in the habit of purchasing his supplies. The merchant stared for a moment, then stepped forward and greeted his customer warmly.

"Well," he said, after his first exclamations of surprise were over, "the snow has made you almost as white as a ghost; but I'm glad you're not one. We scarce ever thought to see you again."

"Has my wife an open account here now?" was the brief response.

"Yes, and it might have been much larger. I've told her so too. She stopped taking credit some time ago, and when she's had a dollar or two to spare she's paid it on the old score. She bought so little that I said to her once that she need not go elsewhere to buy; that I'd sell to her as cheap as any one: that I believed you'd come back all right, and if you didn't she could pay me when she could.

What do you think she did? Why, she burst out crying, and said, 'God bless you, sir, for saying my husband will come back! So many have discouraged me.' I declare to you her feeling was so right down genuine that I had to mop my own eyes. But she wouldn't take any more credit, and she bought so little that I've been troubled. I'd have sent her something, but your wife somehow ain't one of them kind that you can give things to, and--"

Marlow interrupted the good-hearted, garrulous shopman by saying significantly, "Come with me to your back-office"; for the soldier feared that some one might enter who would recognize him and carry the tidings to his home prematurely.

"Mr. Wilkins," he said rapidly, "I wanted to find out if you too had thriftily shut down on a soldier's wife. You shall not regret your kindness."

"Hang it all!" broke in Wilkins, with compunction, "I haven't been very kind. I ought to have gone and seen your wife and found out how things were; and I meant to, but I've been so confoundedly busy--"

"No matter now; I've not a moment to spare. You must help me to break the news of my return in my own way. I mean they shall have such a Christmas in the little cottage as was never known in this town. You could send a load right over there, couldn't you?"

"Certainly, certainly," said Wilkins, under the impulse of both business thrift and goodwill; and a list of tea, coffee, sugar, flour, bread, cakes, apples, etc., was dashed off rapidly; and Marlow had the satisfaction of seeing the errand-boy, the two clerks, and the proprietor himself busily working to fill the order in the shortest possible space of time.

He next went to a restaurant, a little further down the street, where he had taken his meals for a short time before he brought his family to town, and was greeted with almost equal surprise and warmth. Marlow cut short all words by his almost feverish haste. A huge turkey had just been roasted for the needs of the coming holiday, and this with a cold ham and a pot of coffee was ordered to be sent in a covered tray within a quarter of an hour. Then a toy-shop was visited, and such a doll purchased! for tears came into Marlow's eyes whenever he thought of his child's offer to sell her dolly for her mother's sake.

After selecting a sled for Jamie, and directing that they should be sent at once, he could restrain his impatience no longer, and almost tore back to his station at the cottage window. His wife was placing the meagre little supper on the table, and how poor and scanty it was!

"Is that the best the dear soul can do on Christmas Eve?" he groaned. "Why, there's scarcely enough for little Sue. Thank God, my darling, I will sit down with you to a rather different supper before long!"

He bowed his head reverently with his wife as she asked God's blessing, and wondered at her faith. Then he looked and listened again with a heart-hunger which had been growing for months.

"Do you really think Santa Claus will fill our stockings to- night?" Sue asked.

"I think he'll have something for you," she replied. "There are so many poor little boys and girls in the city that he may not be able to bring very much to you."

"Who is Santa Claus, anyway?" questioned Jamie.

Tears came into the wife's eyes as she thought of the one who had always remembered them so kindly as far as his modest means permitted.

She hesitated in her reply; and before she could decide upon an answer there was a knock at the door. Jamie ran to open it, and started back as a man entered with cap, eyebrows, beard, and shaggy coat all white with the falling snow. He placed two great baskets of provisions on the floor, and said they were for Mrs. Anson Marlow.

"There is some mistake," Mrs. Marlow began; but the children, after staring a moment, shouted, "Santa Claus! Santa Claus!"

The grocer's man took the unexpected cue instantly, and said, "No mistake, ma'am. They are from Santa Claus;" and before another word could be spoken he was gone. The face of the grocer's man was not very familiar to Mrs. Marlow, and the snow had disguised him completely. The children had no misgivings and pounced upon the baskets and with, exclamations of delight drew out such articles as they could lift.

"I can't understand it," said the mother, bewildered and almost frightened.

"Why, mamma, it's as plain as day," cried Jamie. "Didn't he look just like the pictures of Santa Claus--white beard and white eyebrows? Oh, mamma, mamma, here is a great paper of red-cheeked apples!" and he and Susie tugged at it until they dragged it over the side of the basket, when the bottom of the bag came out, and the fruit flecked the floor with red and gold. Oh, the bliss of picking up those apples; of comparing one with another; of running to the mother and asking which was the biggest and which the reddest and most beautifully streaked!

"There must have been some mistake," the poor woman kept murmuring as she examined the baskets and found how liberal and varied was the supply, "for who could or would have been so kind?"

"Why, mommie," said little Sue, reproachfully, "Santa Claus brought 'em. Haven't you always told us that Santa Claus liked to make us happy?"

The long-exiled father felt that he could restrain himself but a few moments longer, and he was glad to see that the rest of his purchases were at the door. With a look so intent, and yearning concentration of thought so intense that it was strange that they could not feel his presence, he bent his eyes once more upon a scene that would imprint itself upon his memory forever.

But while he stood there, another scene came before his mental vision. Oddly enough his thought went back to that far-off Southern brookside, where he had lain with his hands in the cool water. He leaned against the window-casing, with the Northern snow whirling about his head; but he breathed the balmy breath of a Southern forest, the wood-thrush sang in the trees overhead, and he could--so it seemed to him--actually feel the water-worn pebbles under his palms as he watched the life-blood ebbing from his side. Then there was a dim consciousness of rough but kindly arms bearing him through the underbrush, and more distinctly the memory of weary weeks of convalescence in a mountaineer's cabin. All these scenes of peril, before he finally reached the Union lines, passed before him as he stood in a species of trance beside the window of his home.

The half-grown boys sent from the restaurant and toy-shop could not be mistaken for Santa Claus even by the credulous fancy of the children, and Mrs. Marlow stepped forward eagerly and said:

"I am sure there is some mistake. You are certainly leaving these articles at the wrong house." The faces of the children began to grow anxious and troubled also, for even their faith could not accept such marvellous good-fortune. Jamie looked at the sled with a kind of awe, and saw at a glance that it was handsomer than any in the street "Mr. Lansing, a wealthy man, lives a little further on," Mrs. Marlow began to urge; "and these things must be meant--"

"Isn't your name Mrs. Anson Marlow?" asked the boy from the restaurant.

"Yes."

"Then I must do as I've been told;" and he opened his tray and placed the turkey, the ham, and the coffee on the table.

"If he's right, I'm right too," said he of the toy-shop. "Them was my directions;" and they were both about to depart when the woman sprang forward and gasped: "Stay!"

She clasped her hands and trembled violently.

"Who sent these things?" she faltered.

"Our bosses, mum," replied the boy from the restaurant, hesitatingly.

She sprang toward him, seized his arm, and looked imploringly into his face. "Who ordered them sent?" she asked in a low, passionate voice.

The young fellow began to smile, and stammered awkwardly, "I don't think I'm to tell."

She released his arm and glanced around with a look of intense expectation.

"Oh, oh!" she gasped with quick short sobs, "can it be--" Then she sprang to the door, opened it, and looked out into the black, stormy night. What seemed a shadow rushed toward her; she felt herself falling, but strong arms caught and bore her, half fainting, to a lounge within the room.

Many have died from sorrow, but few from joy. With her husband's arms around her Mrs. Marlow's weakness soon passed. In response to his deep, earnest tones of soothing and entreaty, she speedily opened her eyes and gave him a smile so full of content and unutterable joy that all anxiety in her behalf began to pass from his mind.

"Yes," she said softly, "I can live now. It seems as if a new and stronger life were coming back with every breath."

The young fellows who had been the bearers of the gifts were so touched that they drew their rough sleeves across their eyes as they hastened away, closing the door on the happiest family in the city.

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