



Ririro

READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

Christmas on Wheels

Willis Boyd Allen

I.

A railroad station in a large city is hardly an inviting spot at the best of times — but at the close of a cheerless, blustering December day, when biting draughts of wind come scurrying in at every open door, filling the air with a gray compound of dust and fine snow; when passengers tramp up and down the long platform waiting impatiently for their trains; when newsboys wander about with disconsolate red faces, hands in pockets and bundles of unsold papers under their ragged, shivering arms; when humankind presents itself as altogether a frozen, forlorn, discouraged, and hopeless race, condemned to be swept about on the nipping, dusty wind like Francesca and her lover at thirty miles an hour — then the station becomes positively unbearable.

So thought Bob Estabrook as he paced to and fro in the Boston & Albany depot, traveling-bag in hand, on just such a night. Beside him, locomotives puffed and plunged and backed on the shining rails, as if they too felt compelled to trot up and down to keep themselves warm and in tolerably good humor.

"Just my luck!" growled Bob, with a misanthropic glare at a loud-voiced family passing by. "Christmas coming, two jolly Brighton parties and an oratorio thrown up, and here am I, fired off to San Francisco. So much for being junior member of a law firm. I wonder what—"

Here the ruffled current of his meditations ran plumb against a rock, and as suddenly changed course. The rock was no less than a young woman who at that moment approached with a gray-haired man and inquired the way to the ticket office.

"Just beyond the waiting-room, on the right," replied Bob, pointing and lifting his hat courteously.

He watched them with growing interest as they followed his directions and stood before the lighted window. The two silhouettes were decidedly out of the ordinary. The voice, whose delicate tones still lingered pleasantly about Mr. Robert Estabrook's fastidious ears, was an individual voice — as distinguishable from any other he could remember as was the owner's bright face, the little fur collar beneath it, the daintily-gloved hands, and the pretty brown traveling suit.

"Dignified old fellow!" mused Bob, irrelevantly, as the couple moved toward the train gates. "Probably her father. Perhaps — hello! By George, they're going on my car!"

With which breath of summer in his winter of discontent, the young man proceeded to finish his cigar, consult his watch, and, as the last warning bell rang, step onto the platform of the already-moving Pullman.

He gave an expectant glance down the aisle as he entered, but the somber curtains hanging from ceiling to floor told no tales. Too sleepy to speculate, and too experienced in the remarkable acoustic properties of a sleeping-car to engage the porter in conversation on the subject, he found his berth, arranged himself for the night with the nonchalance of an old traveler, and, laying his head upon his vibrating atom of a pillow, was soon plunged into a dream at least fifty miles long.

II.

It was snowing, and snowing hard. Moreover, it had been snowing all night, and all the afternoon before. The wind rioted furiously over the broad Missouri plains, alternately building up huge castles of snow and throwing them down again like a fretful child; overtaking the belated teamster on his homeward journey, clutching him with its icy hand; howling, shrieking, racing madly to and fro — tireless, pitiless, awful. Rocks, fields, sometimes even forests were blotted out of the landscape.

A mere hyphen upon the broad white page lay the westbound train, held fast. The fires in the two locomotives had been allowed to go out, the fuel exhausted, and the great creatures waited silently together, left alone in the storm while the snow drifted higher and higher upon their patient backs.

When Bob woke that morning to find the tempest more furious than ever and the train stuck fast in a huge snowbank, his first thought was dismay at the prospect of confinement in the narrow limits of the Pullman, which seemed much colder than before. His next thought was to wonder how this change of fortune would affect Gertrude Raymond. He had, of course, long ago become acquainted with the brown traveling suit and fur collar. There had been numberless small services for him to perform for her and her father — for the old gentleman had indeed proved to be just that. Bob had already begun to dread the end of the journey. The night before, he had gone to his berth wishing San Francisco were ten days from Boston rather than six. Providence, having taken him at his word and arranged for a journey of at least that duration, if not more, found him, like no few of his fellow mortals, inclined to grumble.

Once more he became misanthropic. "There's Miss Raymond, now," he growled

to himself, knocking his head against the upper berth as he tried to peer through the frosty pane. "Sitting across the aisle day after day with her kid gloves and all that. Nice enough, of course" — he recalled one or two spirited conversations where hours had slipped by like minutes — "but hopelessly impractical, like the rest of them. If she were like Mother, now, there'd be no trouble. She'd look after herself. But as it is, the whole car will be turned upside down today for fear she'll freeze or starve or spoil her complexion."

He turned a cold shoulder on the window and, having performed a sort of horizontal toilet, emerged from his berth — hair on end, face expressive of utter defiance to the world in general and contempt of fashionable young ladies in particular.

At that moment Miss Raymond appeared in the aisle, sweet and rosy as a June morning, cheeks glowing, eyes sparkling with fun.

"Good morning, Mr. Estabrook," she said demurely, settling the fur collar about her neck.

Bob endeavored to look dignified and was conscious of failure.

"Good m-morning," he replied, with some stiffness and a shiver that took him by surprise. It was cold, jumping out of that warm berth.

"I understand we must stay — but don't let me detain you," she added, with a sly glance at his hair.

Bob turned and marched off solemnly to the masculine end of the car, washed in ice-water, completed his toilet, and came back refreshed. Breakfast was formally served as usual, and then a council of war was held. Conductor, engineers, and brakemen were consulted, inventories taken. Food was plentiful, but the stock of wood in the bins would not last until noon. There were twelve railroad men and thirty-five passengers on board, some twenty of the latter being emigrants in a second-class car behind the two Pullmans.

The little company in the snowbound car looked blankly at one another, some instinctively drawing their wraps more tightly about their shoulders as if they already felt the approaching chill.

The nearest station was miles away in either direction. Above, below, on all sides — the white blur of tumultuous, wind-lashed snow.

The silence was broken pleasantly. Once more Bob felt the power of those clear, sweet tones.

"The men must make up a party to hunt for wood," she said. "While you're gone we women will do what we can for those who are left."

The necessity for immediate action was plain, and without further discussion the council broke up to follow her suggestion.

A dozen men — looking like amateur polar explorers, and floundering to their armpits at the first step — started off through the drifts. One of the trainmen who knew the line thoroughly believed there must be a stand of trees nearby where plenty of wood could be found. Moving in single file with a broad-shouldered engineer in the lead steering by compass, they were soon out of sight. As they struck off at right angles to the track, Bob thought he recognized a face pressed close to the pane watching them anxiously — but he couldn't be sure.

Two hours later the men reappeared: some staggering under huge logs, some carrying axes, some with bundles of lighter boughs for kindling. Within five minutes smoke was rising cheerily from the whole line of cars. The trees had proved to be less than a quarter of a mile away, and the supply would be more than plentiful before nightfall.

When Bob Estabrook stamped into his own car hugging a big armful of wood, he was a different-looking fellow from the trim young lawyer who normally stood before the jury box in the Boston Court House. He wore a pair of enormous blue yarn mittens loaned by a kindly brakeman; his face was scratched with refractory twigs, his eyebrows frosted, his moustache an icy chevron. The average tramp might well have hesitated before claiming kinship with him.

His eye roved the length of the car, as it had that first night in the depot. She was not there. He was as eager as a schoolboy for her praise.

"Guess I'll take this into the next car," he said apologetically to the nearest passenger. "There's more coming right behind."

She was not in the second Pullman either. Of course she wasn't in the baggage car. Was it possible—? He pushed into the third and last car, recoiling slightly at the smell of crowded, cold poverty that met him at the door.

Sure enough, there she sat — his idle, fashionable type of uselessness — with one tousled child beside her on the seat, two rumpled-looking boys in the row ahead, and a baby with bright red hair in her arms. Somehow the baby's hair against the fur collar didn't look as odd as you might expect. She seemed to be singing it to sleep, and she kept on with her soft crooning as she glanced up over the tangled red locks at snowy Bob and his armful of wood — a look in her eyes that would have sent him cheerfully to Alaska for more, had there been need. A few seats away, her father was talking kindly and earnestly to a rough-looking man and his wife, the latter of whom now wore the old gentleman's cloak around her shoulders. Fathers and daughters tend to be very much alike in such things, as you may have noticed.

III.

With the cheerful warmth of the fires, and the kind attentions of nearly all the well-dressed passengers to the poorer ones — for those kid-gloved Pullman travelers were not slow to follow Miss Raymond's example — the day wore on quietly and not unpleasantly toward its close. Then someone suddenly remembered that it was Christmas Eve.

"Oh!" cried Miss Raymond delightedly, reaching around the baby to clap her hands. "Let's have a Christmas party!"

A few sighed and shook their heads, thinking of their own firesides. One or two smiled indulgently at the young enthusiast. Several chimed in at once. The conductor and baggage-master were consulted, and the spacious baggage car was "specially engaged for the occasion," as its originator triumphantly announced. Preparations commenced without delay. All the young people put their heads together in one corner, and there were many explosions of laughter as the programme took shape. Trunks were visited by their owners and small items extracted to serve as gifts for the emigrants and trainmen, to whose particular entertainment the evening was by common consent to be devoted.



Just as the lamps were lit, Bob — who had disappeared early in the afternoon — returned, dragging behind him a small, stunted pine tree that seemed to have wandered away from its native forests expressly for the occasion. He also contributed several strings of a curious mossy evergreen to the decorations. At this point a very young man with light eyebrows, who had until now been inconspicuous, suddenly rose from the depths of a battered trunk over the edge of which he had been bent like a siphon, and with a beaming face produced a box of actual tiny wax candles. He was "on the road," he explained, for a large wholesale toyshop, and these were samples. He reckoned he could square it with the firm.

Of course the affair was a great success. I have no space to tell of the sheltered walkway that Bob built from rugs between the cars, of the interior of the old baggage car draped with shawls and brightened with scraps of ribbon, of the wondering silence of the poor emigrants — a number of whom had just arrived

from Germany and spoke not a word of English — or of their unbounded joy when the glittering tree was revealed, and the cries of "*Weihnachtsbaum! Weihnachtsbaum!*" burst from their children, whose faces woke into a glow of blissful recognition at the sight. If you could have seen the pretty gifts; the brave little pine (which all the organizers agreed couldn't possibly have served had it been an inch taller); the improvised tableaux in which Bob successively portrayed an organ-grinder, a pug dog, and Hamlet, to thunderous applause from the brakemen and engineers!

Then the passengers sang a simple Christmas carol, Miss Raymond leading with her pure soprano and Bob joining in like the deep register of an organ. Just as the last notes died away, a sudden hush fell over the audience. Was it an illusion, or did they hear the muffled but sweet sound of a church bell faintly ringing outside? Tears came to the eyes of some of the roughest emigrants as they listened and thought of a small belfry somewhere back in the old country, where Christmas bells were calling people to prayers that very night. The sound faded, and the merriment went on — while the young man with the lighter-than-ever eyebrows and a radiant face slipped quietly back into the car unnoticed. It had been his own idea to creep out into the storm, clear the snow from the nearest locomotive bell, and ring it at the height of the festivities.

All this, and more besides; but to Bob the joy and sweetness of the evening centered in one bright face. What did it matter if the wind roared and moaned around the lonely, snowdrifted train, so long as he could look into those brown eyes and listen to that voice whose every tone he was fast learning to treasure?

Well, the blockade was lifted, and the long journey finished at last. But two of its passengers, at least, have agreed to set out on a still longer one together.

She says it all began when he came staggering in with his armful of wood and his blue mittens. And he? He doesn't care at all when it began. He only knows the joy that has come to him, and believes that after a certain day next May, it will be Christmas for him all the year round.

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