

A Far Cry

The Story of a Happy Christmas

By MAGLYN DUPREC

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It had not been easy for John Wellington, Sr., to select his Christmas gifts this year, although his old wife and one or two servants were all for whom he had to provide. It was Christmas eve, and he had been through bookstores, where handsomely bound volumes of story writers, philosophers and poets were displayed on every counter; through brilliantly lighted jewelry stores, where precious stones gleamed softly against backgrounds of rich velvet; through the perfumed shop of the florist, where delicate blossoms from famous greenhouses breathed forth a fragrance that gave the lie to the bitter wind and swirling snow outside. With each he had left a generous check, but always with an unsatisfied feeling that he was paying for something he did not care to have. Finally, he had been lured into a shop whose windows displayed an attractive lot of toys for small boys, and he had selected from its almost endless store of guns, wagons, wonderful animals and ear-splitting "wind instruments," a red tin horn, costing him only 25 cents.

This had given him more satisfaction than any purchase he had made for many times that amount.

The other parcels he had ordered delivered, but this he had carried himself, as though it were something too precious to be trusted to other hands. It was this that he unwrapped before the big, old-fashioned fireplace where his wife sat, as soon as he had come in from the storm-swept street. As he held it up where the red gleam of the firelight was caught on its rounded surface, a look of surprise swept over the gentle old face near him.

"Why, John, you never bought that! Surely they handed you someone else's purchase."

"No," he said, his face growing suddenly tender, "I bought it."

His wife, with a woman's quick

instinct, divined the reason. She stepped nearer to him and laying her hand on his arm, looked at him with pleading eyes, saying: "But why, Father?"

It was the first time she had called him father for a decade past, and there was a pitiful break in the old man's voice as he replied: "I bought it for a memory, mother."

That was the first time in ten years he had called her mother, and at the sound of the name, she, too, gave way—gave way, womanlike, leaning her head on his arm, and sobbing out a grief that had silently stolen the roses from her cheeks and the light from her eyes as the years had gone by. The old man's arm went round her lover-fashion, while his hand gently stroked her soft white hair.

"There, there, mother, dear. The boy's not dead. I'll find him for you, if I have to hunt the world over. I was to blame," he said, with such infinite regret in his voice that the old wife reached up and drew his head down to her face and whispered: "Don't take it so, father. I know you thought you were doing the best for the boy when you sent him away to do or die on his own account, and somehow I feel tonight, as I have never felt before, that he may be found."

As she spoke, something in her tones made him feel that at last his wife had forgiven him entirely for the decision which, ten years before, had robbed her of her only child. Always before this he felt through all her gentle and kindly care for him, that tucked away somewhere in the silent recesses of her being there was just a little bitterness against him for the childless state he had brought upon her. But now that he, himself, had come to repent it, he knew beyond a doubt the last drop of that bitterness had been swallowed up in a grief grown sweet from being shared.

He sat down in his great arm chair and looked up with misty eyes at his wife. "You're right, mother. I did think it best. I would rather have seen him dead than worthless, and I knew if he had worth, he would conquer himself, and rise without my aid, more of a man than with it."

She put her arm around his neck and patted his cheek. "He has risen somewhere, father. I know it. He could not be your son and fail," she said, the loyalty and love of a lifetime lighting her face with a soft radiance.

He took up the tin horn from the table where he had laid it, and

fondled it as if it were fraught with memories, instead of merely recalling them.

"It's ten years since he left," he said, "what a man he must be now—31 tonight. But I was thinking, when I bought this, of the time when he was such a little yellow-haired toddler, and almost drove us wild with just such a horn as this at Christmas time."

She took the horn from him, and looking dreamily at it, said: "We'll keep this father; maybe Jack's boy will some time make these old walls ring with it at Christmas time as he made them ring, himself, so many years ago."

"God grant that he may!" said the old man. "Do you remember, mother, how he used to come chasing down the street after me when I would start off to my work in the morning?"

"Yes, and how you would pick him up and carry him back to me," she said. "And do you remember the time we came near losing him, the day he ran away to hunt you in the city?"

"Who that saw you then could forget it, mother?" and he took her hand in his and drew her down to the chair beside him. They sat hand in hand in the silence, given over to voiceless memories of the past, only the ticking of the old clock keeping an accompaniment to their dreams of other Christmas Eves. They were sitting thus an hour later when a servant opened the door and said, respectfully: "There is a telephone call for Mr. Wellington."

"Can't you answer it, Mary," the old man asked, loath to leave his comfortable chair and dreams.

"No, sir. It is especially for you. A long-distance call, I think."

"Who the deuce wants to talk to me from a distance," he said, as he rose and went to the telephone in the hall.

"Hello, who is this?" he asked, as he picked up the receiver. "Yes, this is John Wellington."

"A party in Chicago wants to talk to you," said the long-distance operator.

"All right, put him up. Who in thunder do I know in Chicago," he ejaculated to himself, pressing the receiver closer to his ear.

A peculiar wailing sound was all he heard, and a puzzled expression crept over his face. "Talk a little louder. I can't understand a thing you are saying," and he listened more intently. The wailing grew a little louder, but still it was nothing but an articulate wail, and for a

moment the old man looked thoroughly disgusted.

"Confound it!" he shouted at last "You sound exactly like a mewling infant I don't know what you are saying."

Then a man's laugh was heard, followed by "A merry Christmas, father. You know exactly what he sound like, but you don't know what he is saying," and there was another laugh, ringing joyful, as in his boyhood days, and the old man knew he had found his own.

"Jack, Jack, my boy, is that you?" he shouted, staggered by the unexpected joy of his sudden discovery.

"None other, father, but what you just heard was another Jack, the second Jack Wellington, Jr. He has just arrived, and his command of English is somewhat limited, but he was doing his best to introduce himself, and invite you and grandma to Christmas dinner with him, and—"

"Oh, Jack, Jack, where have you been all these years?" sobbed the old man.

"Catch the Lake Shore Limited tonight, father, bring mother with you, and I'll tell you all about it when you get here. You've got time. You see, father, I've kept track of you and mother all along. I wasn't going to let anything happen to the

old folks, and—" there was a catch in his voice. "I've got the right kind of a report to make, father. Never fear that."

The old man could scarcely contain himself as he listened, pressing the receiver closer and closer to his ear, as though he feared some bit of the precious news might escape him. Then he shouted: "All right, son, we're coming on the next train." He left the receiver dangling on the wall, and started on a run to the room where his wife sat, shouting as he went: "Mother, mother, it's Jack—our boy. Get ready, mother. I'm going to have a cab here in 20 minutes to catch the train for Chicago." She had risen with a wild look on her face, and had started to question him, but he shook his head, saying: "No, no, I'll explain later. Not got time now. We're going to spend Christmas with Jack and his boy."

He started for the 'phone again, and then dashed back, exclaiming, "Pack the tin horn if you don't pack another thing. Any child that can cry loud enough to be heard all the way from Chicago ought to have breath enough to blow that horn," and he dashed again to the 'phone to order a cab.

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