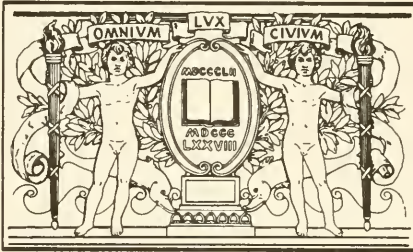


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A Live Christmas Tree

CHRISTMAS STORY

By

BRADLEY GILMAN

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A Live Christmas Tree



THE more Hypatia Fenderson saw of her new Forty-H. P. Conrad-Plympton, the less she cared for her horses; blue-ribbon creatures of high pedigree though they were, their restless clacking of bits and chaotic clatter of hoofs became an increasing irritation to her, once she had felt the thrill of a "full speed," on the Walbridge Turnpike, with her ear attuned to the obedient murmur of her high-grade car.

To-day, holding the Titan in leash, outside the town-hall, the golden glory of the October afternoon cast no spell over her; she waited impatiently for her husband, who was presiding at a meeting of the Anti-Tuberculosis League within. Presently he appeared, hurrying, and explaining his necessary delay, and became her passenger. He had been her passenger all along the highway of their wedded life; some cynical friends said he had been a captive at her chariot wheels; even said it to him; but warm-hearted Tom laughed and loved, and Hypatia knew not that he was the very breath of her life.

She sat stiffly erect at the wheel; she could not relax into the conventional chauffeur loll. Local bucolic wits said that she was trying to

live above the gasoline smell; and it must be conceded that always she had the manner of one in whose mouth the cup of life left a bad taste. Now, in special, she was moody and misanthropic. "Why will you . . . waste time . . . with those . . . garrulous old women . . . male and female!" she clicked, ratchet-like, and accompanied herself as in an obbligato, with throttle, sparker, and advancing gears.

"Really," laughed Tom Fenderson, "I fail to identify. The women of our League are not garrulous, they are simply women; and the men are no more old women than . . . I am."

"You are . . . sometimes, Tom." This in a suppressive tone, with a quizzical dilation of petal-like nostrils, but with keen gray eyes fixed on the brown ribbon of highway ahead.

A mile and more of clear country road now opened, and Hypatia, still cynical — even metallic — a modern Centaur — soliloquized: "It is such a waste of time and strength — this holding of tiresome meetings, and this extracting of reluctant dollars; and what for? Aiding imperfect specimens of the human race to draw out a few more unhappy days of existence. How futile to combat the inexorable law of the 'survival of the fittest'!"

"Thanks, Mrs. Herbert Spencer," commented Tom, unshaken and smiling. "Your scientific

hierarch did indeed point out a far-reaching law, but laws have exceptions, you remember; that's where our League steps in. We hold by Nature; but we appeal to her against herself; to higher law against lower, you understand."

Hypatia's lip curled obdurately. "Old stock arguments. I've heard them many times;" and she seemed so vital, so dominant a being, in her self-reliant grace and beauty, that Disease would not have dared molest her, and even Death, with uplifted dart, might have stayed his arm.

Their obedient Geni, sighing in his bondage, bore them swiftly on through fields of yellow corn, under arches of leafy gold, and over slopes of highway which seemed to bend pliantly beneath them. Tom, "the Passenger," noted with eye and ear the varied splendor of the waning day; the lucent yellow of golden rod, the turgid Silenus purple of sumac, and the arcs of cryptic circles cut by restless south-beckoned swallows into the velvety blue of the sky. Yet his joy in the crimson and golden glory was shot across, at intervals, by the sombre wish that his wife might share with him his zealous interest in this crusade against the Great White Plague. Then he suddenly recalled a remark which his friend, the stock broker, had inadvertently dropped, the day before: "That wife of yours, Tom, is one of a thousand. Why, she wired me last

week, after that tenement-house exposure, to sell all her shares in the United Claims Company. They really own that deadly tenement-house district, you know, and won't make improvements."

The broker's voice had vibrated with admiration, and Hypatia's husband had mechanically nodded and confirmed, "Yes, I know"; but he had not known. Still he knew her — as well as anybody could — and was not surprised. Now he recalled the matter, and it comforted him.

"One of the weak points in this whole movement," resumed Hypatia, aggressively, "is that you people — physicians as well as others — don't use plain speech with persons who ought to hear it. You all beat about the bush. You give to the disease which you are combatting mild and misleading names, or you accept such when used by friends of the patient; but, mark me, the truth should be held up to people; facts, even harsh facts, should be boldly faced; yes, and nearly all people will welcome them . . ."

Her husband was shaking his head slowly but firmly, and sat with compressed lips. "You don't agree, I know;" she went on, her tones growing more insistent; "but just try it; you will see . . ."

She interrupted herself by a half-choking cry

of alarm, her gray-gauntleted hands strained fiercely at the wheel, and a sharp clicking and clacking of gears arrested the car's progress within thrice its length. Tom gasped and clung to his seat. He had caught only a glimpse of two boyish figures, as they had burst forth from two great mounds of red and yellow leaves by the roadside, and vanished in front of the car. One boy sped across the road in safety; but the other . . . the car — though with speed slackened — struck him, and tossed him, screaming, back among the red and yellow leaves, where he now lay motionless.

"It's those McDermott twins;" cried Tom, leaping from the car.

"Yes, those dreadful twins, Micky and Macky;" echoed Hypatia, as she braked, and reversed, and stopped the car. "Mic-Macs, indeed; little Indians; scourges of the town."

But little Micky McDermott was less injured than terrified. In a moment Tom was at his side, raising him up, and Macky close after him. The child drew a few long breaths, stared about him, then turned to his noisily sobbing brother: "Shut up . . . Mack," he enjoined. "I'm . . . all right. What . . . was it?" This last with inquiring gaze at the bearded face bending anxiously over him.

All right he was, indeed; shaken and bruised,

but in nowise disabled; and when he heard the voice of the "Fine Lady" in the car speaking to him, he responded with alacrity. "Climb in!" it had directed, "both of you. I will take you home."

Her voice was steady, her manner collected; and Tom Fenderson stepped in after the now eager twins — himself pale and trembling — and wondered at the marvellous poise of the woman beside him.

The twins gave themselves up to the full rapture of the "joy ride," and rolled about gleefully on the big back seat.

"What is that in your hand?" demanded Tom, now inspecting Micky more calmly.

The urchin held it up — a fragment, the mere neck of a large brown bottle, with tattered yellow wrapper still hanging from it. He had clung to it through everything. Tom took it and read aloud, derisively, from its showy wrapper, "Omnia curativo — the world-renowned remedy for colds, hoarseness, and pains in the chest and back; warranted to restore health and strength: a guarantee given with ten bottles."

Then followed "testimonials" from names, suffixed with "M.D." and hailing from obscure towns in remote States of the Union.

Tom held it an instant before his wife's keen eyes, then threw it far out into the bushes. "Got

it from the store;" volunteered Macky, as if he owed the information in partial payment for his ride. "It's for father. His cough's awful bad."

Hypatia's eyes were bent upon the now narrow and winding "back road," but red glowed in her pale cheeks as she spoke with unwonted stress: "The other fragments of that precious bottle are probably scattered on the Turnpike, lying in wait for the next motor car. And you noticed, didn't you, the wording of that advertisement on the wrapper? Nothing said about 'consumption,' or 'phthisis' — only 'colds,' and 'hoarseness,' and pains in general. Deceitful, deadly euphemisms!"

Tom Fenderson had nothing to give in response save an assenting nod.

"And this imp of a boy, too — he says his father's cough is 'awful.' Probably the whole family think and talk merely 'cough,' and say, 'It is so wearing.' I've heard the same kind of futile maundering before, and it is a shame that hard, stern facts are so ignored."

The perfect machine glided, like a sentient thing, along the grooves of the forest road; and on the front seat uneasy, angry silence reigned, but on the back seat the two "Mic-Macs" disported themselves like irresponsible cherubs. It was joy unexpected and even un hoped for —

this triumph of a motor ride. "Gee, what fun!" confided Macky rapturously. "We're jest like rich folks now. Ain't we, Mick?"

"Well, you can jest thank me;" responded his fellow-imp, loftily, while his restless fingers explored the various metal and leather surfaces around him, and his eager eyes searched out other delightful novelties of the well-appointed car. "If I hadn't got knocked over, you wouldn't have this fine ride."

"An' you wouldn't yourself;" retorted Macky, instinctively parrying his brother's attack in words, as often in more corporeal ways. "But I say, Mick, here we are home again. See, an' there's Pa, diggin' p'taters, an' 'Tina shutt'n' up the chicks."

The terse way in which Hypatia now suggested that Tom remain in charge of the car implied deliberate design; and, as she followed the voluble twins to the door of the plain little homestead, her firm mouth grew firmer, and her clear gray eyes became even clearer and more dominating.

The dramatic tale which the twins jointly and severally poured out — tragedy transformed into comedy — was like a tangle of their own kite-string; but stout-bodied, big-hearted Mrs. McDermott was quick at practical details — with fingers or wits; and, in a trice, she dis-

entangled the snarl of exclamatory explanations, flung her bare red arms tightly around the bubbling, gesticulating urchins, and gathered them, with a mighty mother-hug, to her loving breast.

“And the bottle of medicine, you say, was smashed?” she inquired, presently. Then she discovered the impressive figure of Hypatia Fenderson outside the door, and half-curtseyed, with an old-fashioned grace and dignity. “Excuse me, Marm, I did not see you before. I was so put about by the children’s story that . . .”

The good woman’s tongue was as mobile as her heart was warm; and Hypatia interrupted — with decision, yet with those circumflex tones which she vainly intended should convey kindness — “Yes, Mrs. McDermott, the bottle was broken, and no loss to any one. The mixture it contained cost about a dollar, but any druggist could put it up for a quarter of that sum.”

Here she waved off, with gloved hand, the invitation to enter, which Mrs. McDermott brokenly and shyly extended, and continued, standing stiffly at the foot of the steps beside the luxuriant hydrangea, “Such mixtures are fraudulent in at least two ways. Their cost is excessive, and they encourage sick people in thinking that their ailments are slight and easily cured, when really those ailments may be deep-seated and dangerous.”

Mrs. McDermott stood uneasily in the doorway, with red, swollen hands of tireless toil clasped in front. She smiled constrainedly under the doubtful pleasure of the call, and nodded in agreement with her visitor's views, thus far expressed in impersonal generalization. But Hypatia now entered upon more definite and more delicate ground: "You doubtless know, my good woman, that often people say they have only a cold, or a bad cough, when they really have . . . er . . . something much more serious than that."

The mild brown eyes of the stout woman in the doorway showed a gathering perplexity, and her tone was a guarded one as she responded: "Yes . . . er . . . I've known such."

"Of course you have;" continued her visitor, plucking with insistent fingers at the hydrangea petals. "And now, to bring this matter down to realities, your husband, for example, has . . . has . . . er . . . what do you say is his exact sickness, Mrs. McDermott?"

Hypatia bit her lip in vexation at herself. That "plain, frank statement of evident facts," which she had long advocated, seemed to halt in its unfolding; and as she glanced at the ample figure filling the doorway, she felt positively at a loss for words. Mrs. McDermott was no longer leaning against the side of the door, but stood firmly erect, and even rigid.

“I don’t rightly know why yer ask, Marm, but since yer do, it’s a little matter of a cough my man has; that’s all; we all have such things; in big houses, as well as little ones.”

There was a vigor and even a defiance in the sturdy housewife’s terminal sentence, which Hypatia, calling herself a neighbor, had never before noted. She was now quick to feel the barrier so suddenly erected, yet she chose to ignore it, and persisted, “But, my good woman . . .”

The hollow circumflex in this form of address made its listener shut her teeth in protest.

“ . . . There are simple colds and coughs, and then . . . er . . . also . . . there are . . . worse things, which colds and coughs lead to. I am sure that an intelligent, experienced woman, like you, knows that.”

Mrs. McDermott’s round, red face seemed to be undergoing mysterious transformation. Firm, hard lines appeared in it, ridges and knots where before had been soft creases and rounded curves. She was distinctly pale, too, and her brown eyes seemed darker, and keener, and more animal-like. Constantina, the slender, delicate daughter, after shutting in the fowls for the night, had come nearer to listen, and the tall, thin, stooping man had left the potato-patch and entered the back door. As for the irrepressible “Mic-Macs” — perpetual motion incarnated — they hung around

the fascinating motor-car, like their scalp-lock prototypes around a cut-off prairie schooner; and all of Tom Fenderson's resources were fully taxed to keep them and the car from coming to harm.

The mother of the family stood boldly at bay against the invader of her home; former deference of cottage to mansion was laid aside; shyness — because of imperfect grammar and faulty intonation in the presence of smooth diction and modulated speech — was utterly forgotten; mother-nature and wife-nature became united, solidified, and sublimated into fierce, protective passion.

Hypatia broke the painful silence. She could not easily relinquish her cherished theory of candor, and the beauty of truth unadorned. "You must know, Mrs. McDermott," she offered more tentatively, "that often a really serious disease can be treated with success if it is recognized as such. As for myself . . ."

"You must excuse me, Marm . . . Mrs. Fenderson, I mean, but I don't rightly know what you're talking about." She broke through her visitor's softly spun web of speech like an aroused lioness through a frail and futile net. She seemed to rock with suppressed energy. She threw a quick glance behind her — having heard the back door open and shut — and went

on in a louder and harsher tone, "We're all very well here, thank you, barrin' a little cough, somewhat wearin', of my husband's; we are doin' fine, an' he's gett'n' better every day."

It was a defiance, almost a threat. "Extremely disagreeable;" Hypatia thought, unconsciously gathering up her skirts, as if from contamination. She knew that her social prestige had ceased, for the time; indeed, it had been burnt up in the furnace of this woman's emotion. The two were facing each other, woman to woman; and Hypatia now recognized the failure of her attempt by a last formal, courteous sentence, and went back to the car and its passenger.

Not a word was offered by tactful Tom Fenderson as they sped along the road; but he knew that the interview had been a serious disappointment to his autocratic helpmeet; for she drove with more speed than was her wont, and she scattered fowls and dogs recklessly, and ran up steep Cobb Hill on her high gear.

During three weeks, nothing was said by either of them regarding the stinging rebuff at the little farmhouse under the hill. Then, one day, in the study, Hypatia sat attentively examining a new patent spark-plug, held in her left hand, while giving her right indifferently to the caresses of a superb Ben Lomond collie,

who seemed to recognize the spark-plug as a successful rival. Suddenly she remarked, turning the plug from side to side, critically: "It isn't of much use to try to help people who won't help themselves."

That meant the McDermotts; nothing else; as her husband now assumed. "But we must first make sure that they are not helping themselves;" he ventured, with caution.

"Certainly it did not look like it;" she continued, coldly.

"But they are fighting hard — those McDermotts," he said, now with more warmth. "As I happen to know."

"Not if I heard her correctly," countered Hypatia, in a severe tone. "And we must assume that people mean what they say."

"I'm not so sure of that;" Tom commented, nervously reaching for a particular pamphlet, in the pile on the table. "None of us mortals is wholly consistent. Do you and I always act quite as we speak? Sometimes, my dear, people . . . people look in one direction, and . . . and move in quite another."

He seemed much absorbed in his search among the pamphlets, but he knew that her keen gray eyes had been turned upon him like tiny searchlights; and he continued more rapidly, as if resolved to have his full speech without

let or hindrance. "Mrs. McDermott, for example, as you know, talks about a 'bad cold,' and 'a wearing cough,' and 'a slight hoarseness' — no extremer terms than those — but, really, she is acting very differently; she is fighting desperately the Great White Plague; and she knows it."

Then, as if aroused by his own words, he ceased his search among the papers, and stood erect before his wife, who met his earnest gaze with an indulgent raising of her white brow. "Yes, Hypatia, that big, blowzy woman is a heroine." He spoke with a vehemence rare in him. "She is nobly fighting a fierce battle for one whom she loves more than her life; and she has to fight — oh, the anguish of it — with a smile on her lips and a cheerful word on her tongue, when a terrible dread is gnawing at her loving heart."

Hypatia was at least interested. That could not be denied. Both hands were clasped in her lap over the now neglected spark-plug, but she was quite unconvinced and a bit contemptuous. "How do you know so much about this family?" she asked, in a frigid tone.

Her husband answered promptly: "By things I have seen and heard. Our district-nurse was called there twice; and the second time, Mrs. McDermott, nervously and with tears,

suggested that she would best not come again. But the nurse is quick and tactful, and she had already learned that hints which she had dropped during the first visit had been snapped up by Mrs. McDermott and that pale, clever daughter, and were being acted upon. Moreover, I myself observed that both windows of the attic, frames and all, had been removed; and one of those voluble twins told me, when I asked, that his father slept up there. You see the bearing of all that, my dear?"

¶ Hypatia drew her thin underlip between her white teeth, drummed nervously on the spark-plug, and looked alternately at it and at her husband. "How about that useless, deceitful bottle of medicine?" she asked, triumphantly. "That doesn't look as though they faced the hard facts of their case."

¶ Impulsive Tom Fenderson snapped his fingers in the air. "That for the bottle of quack medicine! It proves nothing. It is only an outer feint, to keep up her husband's courage. Yes, and to keep up her own, poor soul, if you can understand such an inconsistent position."

Hypatia turned and turned the metallic object in her hands, slowly yet uneasily. Her husband tried in vain to follow the involutions of her thought. Her mind was in one of its Star Chamber sessions; her judgment would find expression

later, he knew, but no hint would be given concerning her mental processes.

She arose and moved towards the door; passing a mirror, she paused and daintily touched hair and collar with slender, reparative fingers; but the disorder she felt was not in her outer self; it was within; and this inner disorder she now bore, in pride and silence, to her own room.

With a sigh Tom Fenderson dropped into his big easy-chair and leaned head upon hand; "Oh, the pity of it!" he groaned. Whether he had in mind the fierce, silent struggle at the little farmhouse, or the strange, inflexible nature under his own roof, who could say? If the latter, then there was a ray of hope in the frigid silence which had been her only response to his vehement plea. Open, candid concession was as impossible for her as for the moon and the stars to make obeisance to human mandate.

The weeks slipped swiftly away. Tom Fenderson respected his wife's reticence, but scanned the heavens for signs of the times. And when Hypatia, not long afterward, donned a new fur coat, without explanation, he wondered — and yet did not wonder — what had become of the old one. The district-nurse, taking her life in her hands, faced Mrs. McDermott in still another visit, and reported that Mr. McDermott was now living altogether in a well-built "shack,"

on the hillock back of his house, and that he wore a fur coat during the day and slept in a fur bag at night.

“These are luxuries inexplicable,” quoth Tom, “for plain people like the McDermotts. Who can have bestowed them? And who possibly can have induced that proud little group to keep them?” So, for days, whenever the bell rang, he was expectant of meeting Mrs. McDermott’s stalwart form and resonant voice at the door, she being laden with the furry garments. “Still, she can’t return the shack,” he said, nodding and smiling at himself in the mirror. “And the non-returnable real estate may serve to anchor the personal property where it is.”

Christmas was now near at hand. It is easy of celebration with a warm house and a festal tree; but how could a little family — say, like the McDermotts — celebrate it in their wonted way when the stricken, though now convalescing, head of the family was self-exiled from his own fireside, and had bared his face and nostrils to the healing airs of heaven, for weeks past, and must do so for weeks to come?

Thus Tom Fenderson pondered, in silence and even aloud at times, and each time he ended his reflection with a grim and comforting confidence that somehow his resourceful wife would find a way.

Then came an invitation, two days before Christmas. The twins brought it. A note in Constantina's fine, clear script and signed by her, but somewhat soiled by defects in the postal service — as yet an "infant industry."

In effect,— "Would Mr. Fenderson kindly come over to the Upland field, on Christmas Eve, at six o'clock, and join the McDermott family in holding 'tree-festivities'?"

Tom read it and re-read it, then sent messengers Micky and Macky away, each with a large slice of cake, and read it again. He scanned the words and weighed the sentences for signs of his wife's hand, but in vain; yet, although he was sure of her agency in the affair, he would not mention it to her. He knew her too well to knock more loudly or persistently at the portal of her personality, bolted as it was by a rigid reserve, and barred with many sensibilities.

Christmas day came, cold and clear; and at a quarter before six o'clock, he donned his heavy overcoat and set forth across the lawn. The sun had made a flaming exit from his day's duties, and the crystalline air showed the earth everywhere covered with a firm white carpet, while the star-host above seemed to twinkle with eagerness over the singular Christmas festivity now impending, which they — with rare good fortune — were to share.

Across the level lawn, and through the fringe of cedars, then over the mossy stone-wall, and across the uneven vegetable garden — now deep in its winter slumber — and at last down over the slope of the Upland field, toward the western corner, as Constantina's note had indicated.

In that snug corner there had been — almost as far back as Tom could remember — a group of three beautiful larch trees. He had seen them grow from frail babyhood through vigorous youth to sturdy, symmetrical maturity; and, only a month before, he had held hard at his own explosive wrath while trying to mollify his wife's, as they learned from their farmer that a field-fire, started by unknown hands, had kindled a rubbish heap beneath the trees, had caught the trees themselves, and had ruined two out of the three.

Of course his own and his wife's indignation had reverted instantly to the McDermott twins — heedless, irresponsible mischief-makers of the neighborhood, — but they had attempted nothing punitive. The farmer had cut down the two disfigured trees, and now as Tom drew near the tall, luxuriant survivor, he could make out many singular objects amongst its dense foliage. A few steps nearer, and the secret was clear to him. This was the Christmas tree; the living Christmas tree; and here was to be held a Christ-

mas *al fresco*, such as even an exiled invalid, like Mr. McDermott, might attend.

Now fell upon Tom's ear the sounds of voices, in hushed tones, and he saw warmly-wrapped human figures moving about the tree, and he also heard sundry gigglings and gurglings of boyish voices which argued convincingly for the presence of the inseparable and ubiquitous "Mic-Macs."

Yes, there were the McDermotts all, and the district-nurse, and the farmer's family, and several neighbors. Hypatia Fenderson herself was there, yet appeared to have nothing to do with directing events. It was the farmer — her farmer and overseer — who took charge of everything, or seemed to; and Hypatia, calm, sphinx-like as ever, had leisure to walk about like any other spectator.

And now somebody gave a signal; perhaps it was the farmer, perhaps not; and — O marvel of marvels — the great dark tree was instantly flooded with light from its host of electric bulbs. A luminous atmosphere of golden glory permeated the tree and radiated over the human faces that stared wonderingly up at it. Then the yellow glow ceased, and was followed by a flood of azure light, and bulbs flashed like sapphires in its branches. Still another change, and the magic tree throughout its great height

and breadth flamed with brilliant light, as from countless rubies.

The first faint murmur of wonder and delight among the rapt spectators slowly crystallized into more audible expression. Each voiced his feeling in his own way. Mrs. McDermott wiped her eyes, and told her silent husband that there never was anything seen like it before, nothing so beautiful on earth; and Constantina whispered to the district-nurse that it was like the Tree of Life, in the Garden of Eden. As for the redoubtable twins, they gaped and gasped, but for a minute only; soon each nudged the other, and audibly exclaimed: "Gee, what a show!" Then veered off into those inarticulate, juvenile frothings and fizzings which are the normal effervescence of happy childhood's aerated cup of life.

But the presents! Where were they? You may be sure that at least two of the spectators were not to be diverted from thoughts of them by any mere æsthetic color-appeals, however wonderful; and when the farmer took from the tree sundry small packages, and gave one to each person present, and Micky and Macky had dived into theirs, and found candy — that ambrosia of childhood — then they felt sure that the Christmas tree festivity was not — as they had half feared — a dream and a delusion.

There were gifts for all; and varied were the joyous exclamations — loud or soft, short or long — with which these were received from the farmer's friendly hands; and, all the time, the great, radiant tree looked down from its luminous height, and seemed to rejoice with them. Indeed, Micky was not wholly wrong when he burst out: "Gee, it's a really and truly live Christmas tree; not a dead one, like most Christmas trees!"

And Macky responded: "Yes, it's the real thing; it's alive; an' it will be alive to-morrow, and afterward, an' we can come . . . "

Then Micky elbowed him violently and repressively, so that he became suddenly silent; and a hurried conference in hoarse whispers ensued between them, which may have been prompted by pangs of conscience, and doubtless dealt with the danger of field fires.

Gifts for all there were; yes, a queer set of checkers and a checker-board for Tom Fender-son, from the twins, made by them out of spools and an old table-leaf, the year before, and their companions through many a rainy day since. There was also a pair of home-knitted slippers for the nurse, from Constantina, thick and warm, such as might be worn by a silent sister of mercy, in the tender ministrations of wintry midnights; and a copy of Kingsley's "Hypatia" came to

her of the same name. This also from Constantina. Also there were large, bulging packages firmly done up in brown paper for Mrs. McDermott and her husband; and these, being cautiously nipped open at the sides and corners, caused smiles of curiosity to widen into joyous laughter, and made hearts already happy ten-fold happier.

A tiny packet came in due time to Constantina; and it caused her such throbs of hope and joy that she leaned upon her mother for support. "See, Mr. Fenderson!" exclaimed the mother to Tom, as he came near; for she had learned to confide in her sympathetic neighbor and friend almost as readily as in her husband; "See, what a lovely letter my Constantina has!" And Tom read easily, by the bright light of the radiant, rejoicing Christmas Tree, that Constantina's trial as private secretary had been successful, and that she was engaged forthwith at ten dollars a week.

One glance at the familiar name and address signed, and Tom knew that his wife's hand was back of the hand that had written the letter; and he was deeply content that she should walk in her own labyrinthine paths.

But, at this moment, he was summoned to receive another gift; and he stood, positively blushing, when he had opened the package,

and found a book — “Baring Gould’s Lives of the Saints.” It came from Mr. McDermott; and, at the end of the table of contents, was written, “One Saint omitted — Thomas G. Fenderson.”

Tom walked over and gave the shy donor a hearty grip, and the vigorous grip given in return not only showed a grateful affection, but was good evidence of the sick man’s returning health and strength — which of late had been clearly apparent to all.

But the centre of the celebration, the focus of the joyous forces of the evening, was, after all, the McDermott twins; and when they had donned the fur caps which had come to them, and had pulled down the sideflaps over their ears, and had put on the long rubber boots — reaching nearly to their hips — which the tree had bestowed, then they looked as if bent upon exploration, Arctic or Antarctic. To be sure, the snowshoes which each now received formed a cumbersome combination with the long rubber boots; but they were promptly and enthusiastically put on; and in them the active youngsters made several noisy excursions out into the surrounding darkness, but soon came plunging back into the welcome circle of light and affection.

The evening was filled to the full with joy

and goodwill; and there was a splendid ring of reality in Mrs. McDermott's laugh, and a note of confidence in her tones, as she rallied her shy, silent husband, and called upon one and another friend to see how well he looked.

The crowning surprise of this glad evening of surprises came fitly at the last. The twins had become strangely silent and invisible, during several minutes, and then Hypatia called the attention of Mr. and Mrs. McDermott to two large packages, hanging high upon the tree, and now being carefully lowered on a pulley by the farmer. These bulky packages, on reaching the ground, were brought over by him and carefully deposited on end in front of them; and they were asked to read the labels.

One label read: "For Mother," and the other read: "For Father"; but no sooner were these words uttered, in a puzzled tone, by Mrs. McDermott, than mysterious gurglings and explosive splutterings issued from the bundles. Then the stout brown paper was burst open, and, with shouts of delight, Micky and Macky sprang out and leaped upon their unresisting parents, and gave them great "bear hugs," and entered vigorously on "a hundred kisses," until even loving Mrs. McDermott laughingly begged them to desist.

So that was the way in which the McDermotts

celebrated their open-air Christmas. The electric current which made the great, sombre tree spring into radiance and beauty, had been easily switched from the wire along the highway. It was an "overhead current;" whereas the kindly force which had brought weal, in place of woe, to the McDermott household, and had culminated at the Christmas tree, was more in the nature of an "under-ground current." But it was effective; and Tom Fenderson rejoiced. And he said, again and again, "There is no use in trying to thwart Hypatia; she will have her way."

BRADLEY GILMAN

Canton, Massachusetts.
December twenty-fifth,
Nineteen hundred and ten.

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