

FICTION

Cyrus Townsend Brady

And Thus He Came

A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK

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"No, No," said the woman, "I can't go with you now."



And Thus He Came

A Christmas Fantasy

By

Cyrus Townsend Brady

**Pictures by
Walter B. Everett**

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To the Beloved Memory
of
Little Betty

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"NO, NO," SAID THE WOMAN, "I CAN'T GO WITH YOU NOW."
AFTER A TIME SHE FELL DOWN ON HER KNEES. SHE PRESSED THEM
AGAINST HER FACE
SHE LAID HER HAND UPON THE KNOB OF THE CHURCH DOOR
"IT IS HE," WHISPERED THE PRIEST; "HIS SORROW WAS GREATER THAN
MINE"
ABSOLVO TE
THE CRY FOR BREAD

I

The Baby

"A LITTLE CHILD SHALL LEAD THEM"

The heavy perfume of rare blossoms, the wild strains of mad music, the patter of flying feet, the murmur of speech, the ring of laughter, filled the great hall. Now and again a pair of dancers, peculiarly graceful and particularly daring, held the center of the floor for a moment while the room rang with applause.

Into alcoves, screened and flower-decked, couples wandered. In the dancing-space hands were clasped, bosoms rose and fell, hearts throbbed, pulses beat, and moving bodies kept time to rhythmic sound.

Suddenly the music stopped, the conversation ceased, the laughter died away. Almost, as it were, poised in the air, the dancers stood amazed. One looked to another in surprise. Something stole throughout the room which was neither music, nor lights, nor fragrance, but which was life--a presence!

"Do you see that child?" asked the wildest of the dancers of her escort. "There," she pointed. "He looks like a very little boy."

"I see nothing," said the man, who still held her in the clasp of his arm.

"He is strangely dressed, although I see him indistinctly, vaguely," whispered the woman. "He wears a long white robe and there is a kind of light about his face. See, he is looking at us."

"I see nothing," repeated the man in low tones. "The heat, the light, the music, have disturbed you; let me get you--"

"I want nothing," interposed the woman, waving the man aside and drawing away from his arm. "Don't you see him, there?"

She made a step toward the center of the room. She stopped, put her hand to her head.

"Why, he is gone," she exclaimed.

"Good," said the man, while at that instant the room suddenly rang with cries: "Go on with the music, the dance is not half over." He extended his arm to the woman again. "Our dance is not finished."

"Yes, it is," she said as the flying feet once more twinkled across the polished floor, as everybody took a long breath and a new start apparently unconscious of the pause.

"It is over for me. What I saw!"

"What did you see?"

"I don't know, but I'm going back home to my child. Good-night."

Yes, the music had stopped suddenly. The man in the farthest alcove turned to his companion. They were hidden by a group of palms.

"I wonder why?" queried the woman. She was deathly pale. Her eyes were dark with fear, yet alight with passionate determination.

"When it begins," said the man tenderly, "we will slip away. My car is outside. Everything is ready."

"That is my husband over there," said the woman.

"Yes," said the man, "he won't trouble you any more."

"That woman with him is leaving him," she said. "I wonder why." She turned suddenly with a great start. "There is somebody here," she whispered, staring into the back of the alcove.

"Nonsense," said the man, throwing a glance around the recess. "There's nobody here but you and I. We are alone together, as we shall be hereafter, when we have taken the step."

"But that child," whispered the woman, "with his strange vesture and his wonderful face. His eyes look at me so."

"There is no child there, my dear," urged the man; "you are overwrought, excited, nervous. The music starts. Let us go."

He stretched out his hand to the woman, but as he came nearer she shrank back with her own hand on her heart.

"Oh," she said faintly, "he's gone."

"Of course he's gone," he answered soothingly. "Now is our time to get away. Let me--"

"No, no," said the woman. "I can't go with you now. It wouldn't be right."

"But you knew that before," pleaded the man. "Besides--"

"Yes, but I can't do it. He was there! His eyes spoke--I--don't touch me," she said; "I'm going back to my husband. Don't follow."

II

The Child

"SUFFER THE LITTLE CHILDREN TO COME UNTO ME"

The employees had all gone home, carrying with them Christmas checks and hearty greetings from the great man whose beck and nod they followed. He sat in his private office absolutely alone. He had some serious matters to consider and did not want any interruptions. His balance-sheet for the year had been made up according to the custom of the firm before Christmas instead of on New Year's Day. He examined it again. It showed tremendous profit. The mills were turning out quantities of material, the demand for which was greater and the cost of production less than ever before.

"I tell you," said the man to himself, "it was a master-stroke to displace the men with children in the mills. They have reduced the cost by four fifths. War has made the prices go up. This is not wealth, it is riches beyond calculation."

He picked up a letter, read it over. It was a proposal from the superintendent to clear more land, to build more buildings,

to install more machines, to employ more children and increase the profits greatly.

"I'll do it," said the man. "We can crush opposition absolutely. I'll control the markets of the world. I'll build a fortune upon this foundation so great that no one can comprehend it."

He stopped, leaned back in his chair, lifted his eyes up toward the ceiling of the room and saw beyond it the kingdoms of this world and the means unlimited to make him lord and master. He gave no thought to the foundations, only to the structure erected by his fancy. How long he indulged in dreams he scarcely realized, but presently he put his hands on the arms of the chair and started to rise, saying,

"I'll telegraph the superintendent to go ahead."

He had scarcely formulated the words when right in front of him, seated on his desk, he saw a young lad regarding him intently. He stopped, petrified, in the position he had assumed.

"How did you get in? What are you doing here?" he asked. There was no answer. "Come," said the man, shrinking back. "I can't imagine how you got in here. If my people had not all gone I should hold them to strict account. As it is, you--"

The room was suddenly filled with people. They came crowding through the walls from every side and pressed close to him. Such people he had never seen: wan, worn, stunted, pinched, starved, joyless. They were all children, meagerly clothed, badly nourished, ill developed. They were quite silent. They did not cry. They did not protest. They did not argue. They did not plead. They did not laugh. They just looked at him. They made no sound of any sort. He had children of his own and he had known many children. He had never known so many gathered together without a smile or a laugh.

His eye wandered around the room. They were very close to him and yet they did not touch him. He turned to the desk where the lad had sat, but he was no longer there and yet he well remembered his face. He knew exactly how he looked. He turned to the nearest child and in some strange way, although the poor, wretched face had not changed, his look suggested the lad who had been his first visitor. He turned to another and another. They all looked back at him in the same way with the same eyes.

He threw his head up again and saw the castle of success of which he had dreamed. He looked down again. This was the foundation. Slowly his hand went to the desk. The little crowding figures drew back to give him freedom of movement as he stretched his hand out for a telegraph-blank. He drew it to him. He seized a pen and wrote rapidly:

"Build no more mills, take the children out of those already in operation, put men in their places. We will be content with less profit in the future."

He read over the telegram. The telephone was close at hand. He called up the telegraph-office, dictated it and directed it to be sent immediately. He had been so engrossed in this task that he had noticed nothing else. Now he looked up. The room was still filled with children, but they were all laughing. It was a soundless laugh, and yet he heard it. And then the room was empty save for the child he had seen first and vaguely. He had just time to catch a smile from his lips and then he, too, was gone as silently and as strangely as he had appeared.

Was it a dream? No, there was the telegram in his hand! Had he sent it? Again he called up the office on the telephone.

"Did you get a message from me just a minute ago?"

"Yes, do you want to recall it?"

The man thought a second.

"No," he said quietly--was it to himself or to his vanished visitors?--"let it go. Merry Christmas."



III

The Friend

"INASMUCH AS YE HAVE DONE IT UNTO ONE OF THE LEAST OF THESE, MY BRETHREN"

"Is the story of the Christ Child true, Mommy?" quivered one little, thin voice.

"Yes, they told us it was over at the mission Sunday-school," said the littlest child.

"I don't believe it," answered the mother. "God ain't never done much for me."

"It's Christmas eve, ain't it?" asked the boy, climbing up on the thin knees of the threadbare woman and nestling his thin face against a thinner breast which the rags scarcely covered decently.

"Yes, it's Christmas eve."

"And that's the day He came, ain't it?" urged the oldest girl.

"They say so."

"Don't you believe it, Mommy?"

"I used to believe it when I was a girl. I believed it before your father died, but now--"

"Don't you believe it now?" repeated the first child.

"How can I believe it? You're old enough to understand. That's the last scuttle of coal we got. We ate the last bit of bread for supper to-night."

"They say," put in the little boy, "that if you hang up your stockings, Santa Claus'll fill 'em, 'cause of the Christ Child."

"Don't you believe it, Sonny," said the mother desperately.

"I'm going to hang up mine and see," said the littlest girl.

"He's got too many other children to look after," said the woman, "to care for the likes of us, I'm afraid, and--"

"But my Sunday-school teacher said He came to poor people special. He was awful poor Himself. Why, He was born in a stable. That's awful poor, ain't it?" asked the boy.

"When I was a girl," answered the mother, "I lived on a farm and we had a stable there that was a palace to this hole we live in now. No, you'd better not hang up your stockings, none of you."

"And you don't believe in Him, Mommy?"

"No. What would be the use if you hung 'em up and didn't find anything in 'em in the morning?"

"It'd be awful, but I believe in Him," said the littlest girl. "I don't think God has forgot us, really. I'm going to try."

"I tell you 'tain't no use."

"Oh, yes, it is."

"I'm sure it ain't. But have it your own way," said the woman. "If someone would fill your stockings with milk and bread and--"

"I want a turkey," said the oldest girl.

"And cranberry sauce," added the boy.

"I want a doll-baby in mine," said the littlest girl.

The mother hid her face and groaned aloud.

"You ain't sick, are you, Mommy?"

"I guess so. Come, you'd better say your prayers and go to bed. We don't have to keep the fire going so hard when you're all covered up."

It did not take long for the three little youngsters to divest themselves of the rags of clothing they wore. They slept in what passed for their underclothes, so there was no donning of white gowns for the night.

"Here are our stockings, Mommy," said the oldest, handing three ragged, almost footless, black stockings to the woman.

"It's no use, I tell you. I can't do it."

"It won't do any harm, Mommy," urged the girl.

"Do you believe in it, too?" asked the mother, and the girl shook her head. "You won't be disappointed in the morning if there's nothing in 'em?"

"No, I suppose it will be because Santa Claus was too busy."

With nervous fingers the woman hung the three stockings near the window. She was hungry, she was cold, she was broken, she was a mother. She could scarcely keep from crying.

"Maybe you'll be glad you did it," said the littlest girl drowsily.

"Ain't you comin' to bed, too, Mommy?" asked the oldest, beneath the covers over the mattress on the floor.

"In a little while."

"And you won't forget to say your prayers?"

"I ain't said 'em for months, ever since your father was killed, and we got so poor."

"But you'll say 'em to-night 'cause it's Christmas eve?"

"Yes, to-night," said the mother; "now you go to sleep."

"Are you waitin' for him to come, Mommy?" asked the littlest girl, who was very sleepy.

"Yes," said the mother.

Presently, as she sat in the dark, having turned out the light, the deep breathing of the children told her they were asleep. She rose quietly, stepped to the window, and stood looking at the three shapeless, tattered stockings. She was high up in the tenement and the moonlight came softly over the house roofs of the city into the bare, cold, cheerless room. She stared at the stockings and tears streamed down her wasted cheeks. She had hung them low at the suggestion of the littlest girl so the children could easily get at them in the morning.



She pressed them against her face.

After a time she fell down on her knees. She pressed them against her face. She did not say anything. She could scarcely think anything. She just knelt there until something gently drew her head around. She dropped the stockings. She put her right hand on the window-ledge to steady herself and looked backward.

No sound save the breathing of the children and her own stifled sobs had broken the silence; the door was shut, but a man was there, a man of strange vesture seen dimly in the moon's radiance, yet there was a kind of light about his face. She could see his features. They were those of a man in middle years. They were lined with care. He had seen life on its seamy side. The woman felt that he had known poverty and loneliness. She stared up at him.

"I didn't believe," she whispered; "it cannot be. I thought we were forgotten."

The man slowly raised his hand. The moonlight struck fair upon it. She saw that it was calloused, the hand of a man who toiled. It was extended over her head. There was no bodily touch, but her head bent low down until she rested it upon her hands upon the floor. When she looked up, the room was empty. There was no sound save the breathing of the children and the throb of her own heart which beat wildly in the fearful hollow of her ear.

She heard a sound of strange footsteps outside the door. There was a crackle as of paper, the soft sound of things laid upon the floor, a gentle rapping on the panels, a light laugh, a rustle of draperies, footsteps moving away. As in a dream she got to her feet, she knew not how. She opened the door.

The hall was dimly illuminated. Her feet struck a little heap of joy-bringing parcels. She leaned back against the door-jamb, her hand to her heart, trembling. What could it mean?

A tiny voice broke the silence. It was the littlest girl turning over in her sleep, murmuring incoherently and then clearly:

"If you only believe, that's enough; if you only believe."

IV

The Workman

"IS NOT THIS THE CARPENTER?"

In the mean squalid room back of the saloon half a score of men were assembled. They were all young in years, in other things not youthful. Some of them lounged against the wall. Some sat at tables. All were drinking. The air was foul with smoke and reeked with the odor of vile liquor.

"We've got two jobs on hand to-night," said the leader of the gang. "There's a crib to be cracked an' a guy to be croaked. Red, you an' Gypsie an' the Gunney will crack the crib. It's dead easy. Only an old man an' his wife. The servants are out except one an' he's fixed. I'll give you the layout presently. The other job's harder. Kid, I'll put you in charge, an' as it's got to be done early to-night I'll give you the orders now. He'll be at The Montmorency at ten o'clock. Someone will call him out to the street."

"Who?"

"Never mind who. You'll be there in the car."

"Whose car?"

"Never mind whose. Why're you askin' so many questions? It'll take you an' the four to The Montmorency at ten o'clock. When he comes out every one of you let go, the whole bunch, understand. If they don't find five bullets in him there'll be trouble to-morrow."

"What do we get out of it?"

"A hundred apiece fer you an' a hundred an' fifty fer me fer engineerin' the job. Christmas money! You get me?"

"Of course. How'll we know who we've got to shoot?"

"I'll be there myself on the sidewalk. I'll point him out to you."

"The police?"

"They're fixed."

"Easy enough," said the Kid, the youngest of the gang.

"Well, you guys," said the leader pointing out four of the men, "will go with the Kid. The car'll be at the door in half an hour."

"Now, gimme my orders," said Red.

The gang leader scribbled something on a bit of paper.

"You go to that number with these two guys between midnight an' two in the mornin'. You'll find a back winder open. Here's the combination of the safe. The silver'll be in that."

"Jewels?"

"In a wall cabinet upstairs. It'll be unlocked."

"An' if they make any noise?"

"Croak 'em, of course. But don't make no noise doin' it. Better use a blackjack. We're not sure about the cop on that beat."

"I understand."

"Well, git your gats and make ready. Before we go, the drinks'll be on me. Fill up, men," he added, first pouring himself a liberal glassful, "an' here's to bringin' it off easy."

With deep relish the toast was drunk by all save Red and the Kid. Red set his glass down on the table. The Kid dropped his to the floor.

"There's somebody else in the room," whispered Red.

"Yes, yonder by the door," said the Kid. "You c'n jest see him."

"Don't be a fool," said the gang leader. "There's nobody here but us."

"He's wearin' strange clothes," said Red.

"He looks like a carpenter by his kit o' tools," said the Kid.

"Here, pull yourselves together, men," said the gang leader; "you're dippy, there's nobody here. Where's your nerve?"

But Red made no move to obey. He thrust his glass from him and rose and leaned over the table staring. The other men shrank back glancing at the two figures, for the Kid had also dashed the proffered glass aside.

"I see him," he said, "he's lookin' at me, he's lookin' through me."

In his excitement he took a step forward and the table went over with a crash. The two men passed their hands over their eyes in bewilderment.

"Why, there ain't nobody here," said the Kid.

"But I seen him I tell you," persisted Red.

"And so did I."

"Well, he's gone, whoever he was, accordin' to your own showin'," said the gang leader contemptuously. "Now brace up. Take your liquor. Get a move on youse."

"Not me," exclaimed Red suddenly.

"Nor me," said the Kid.

"What d'ye mean?"

"I won't do it."

"Neither will I."

Both men moved to the door. The gang leader sprang to intercept them, his arms upraised, his hands clenched.

"Lemme pass," said Red.

"Are you goin' to give us away?"

"No," answered Red. "But you don't rob no house, an' you don't kill no man to-night."

"You all know what that means," cried the leader. "Here you men grab 'em."

But the rest of the gang hung back.

"Mebbe they did see somethin'," said one.

"You cowardly dogs," cried the leader.

"We won't mention no names to nobody," said the Kid, "but you can't pull them jobs off. We'll jest warn 'em."

"You swore you'd be true to the gang, that you'd obey orders an' follow directions."

"We won't give ye away but I'm goin' to quit the gang an' go to work," said Red.

"Me too," said the Kid.

"Work! Hell!" exclaimed the gang leader, but they shoved him out of the way and went out of the door.

V

Comforter

"NEITHER DO I CONDEMN THEE"

She was a daughter of shame. Even inexperience could see that as she wandered up and down the streets of the town, desperate, impelled to go on by a force too strong for her to resist. She trod the pavement, yet loathed the necessity and hated herself for her compliance. She had only to look forward to the jail or the hospital; yet there was always the river. Had it come to that? Was there nothing else?

She lifted her eyes from the stone walk as hard as the heart of the world, and found herself opposite a brightly lighted building. She leaned against the door. From within came the sound of music, the strains of a hymn, words of prayer. The light streamed about her face from the stained window. This was a Church of God. Stained window, stained woman, confronting each other in the night!

There was no God for her. There might have been once, but she had committed the unpardonable sin against society and society was God. There was no place for her anywhere, save the jail or the hospital or the river. That last was the best. The street was deserted. She had thought it not a good place in which to ply her trade! She made a step forward and stopped.

In her pathway stood a figure seen dimly in the darkness. It stood in the shadow beyond the broad light from the painted window. There was something strangely familiar about it. She glanced up at that window. Had the figure there stepped down and embodied itself vaguely on the walk before her?



She laid her hand upon the knob of the church door.

What was this strange figure? Who was he? As she stared, the outline drew nearer. A man vested in long white draperies confronted her. He was bareheaded and appeared insensible to the cold in which she shivered. She put out her hand and something folded it back upon her breast. She opened her lips and something sealed them.

As she watched, the figure slowly moved. It bent forward and went slowly down on its knees on the sidewalk. The white hand began to trace strange, mysterious, unknown, incomprehensible characters upon the pavement. She watched with bated breath, some memory of another sinful woman of whom she had heard in childhood coming back to her prostrate mind. Yes, and there behind the figure stood others, hateful and hating, very violent, passionate men. She stared from the handwriting in the dust to these others and they faded away. She was alone with the kneeling figure and, as she looked, it too vanished in the chill air.

She bent over the pavement. There was nothing there, yet she had received a message. After a last glance she turned away, new courage, new life, new hope in her heart.

She mounted the steps, she laid her hand upon the knob of the church door, she turned it and went bravely within.



VI

The Burden Bearer

"HE, BEARING HIS CROSS, WENT FORTH"

The sound of the running feet of the man smashing through the burned stubble ceased abruptly. He stopped at the threshold of the door. No friendly bark of dog welcomed him. From the barn there came no gentle lowing of cattle, no homely clucking of chickens. Like the house the byre too had been ruined, gutted with flame.

The soldier whose march had brought him back to his own village that night stood in the entrance of what had been his home and stared at the smoking walls, the charred roof gaping to the sky, the empty casements. The enemy had been there. He whispered his young wife's name, he called softly to the baby, as if they might be sleeping somewhere within the devastated house. He listened for a reply but none came. Perhaps he would have been thankful even for a groan or a cry of agony, anything that meant life. But all was silence within, without.

Yonder on the winding road at the foot of the hill he could hear the trampling of men, the groaning of wheels, the clank of iron cavalymen, the jingling of bits and swords, sharp words of command. The army was advancing. He could delay no longer. He must get back to his place in the ranks. Summoning his courage he crossed the threshold and stepped into the vacant emptiness of the house. Everything was gone but the four stone walls. There were unrecognizable heaps of ashes here and there. He bent over them fearfully in the twilight wondering whether the shapeless, formless masses were--

Something caught his eye. The one thing intact apparently. He stooped over it. It was the baby's shoe--white, it had been originally. He remembered it. Now it was stained with blood. That was all that was left--a little baby's shoe, blood spotted. He pressed it to his heart and groaned aloud. A spasm of mortal anguish shook his frame. He lifted his clenched hand toward the sky overshadowing the roofless walls.

Now he suddenly became aware that he was not alone. There was someone else in the room. He saw vaguely, indistinctly, a figure strangely clad, staggering on with bended back as if under some crushing load. He stared in the twilight striving to concentrate his faculties. The figure passed by. On its back was a shadowy something--beams of wood roughly crossed, he decided. It raised its head and looked at him. The face was somehow lighter than the rest.

The man's arm fell. The room was empty after all. He stared at the little shoe. Was it somewhere well with the child, with its mother? Unbuttoning his tunic he thrust the little shoe within, over his heart. He straightened up. Away off on the road a bugle call rang out above the tumult. He turned away, seized his rifle, shouldered it, stepped rapidly toward his regiment and his duty.

VII

The Thorn Crowned

"THE SOLDIERS PLATTED A CROWN OF THORNS AND PUT IT ON HIS HEAD"

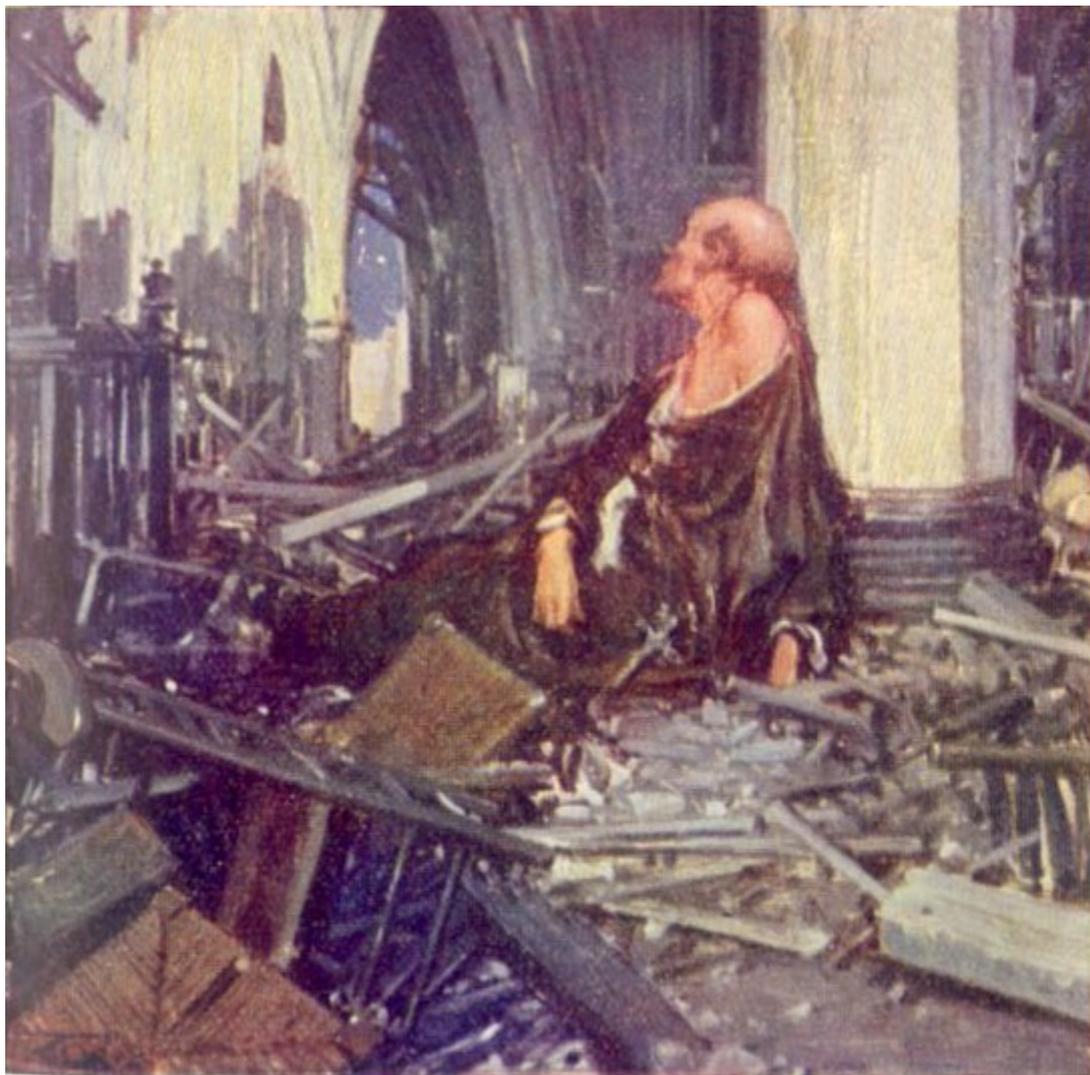
It was ghastly cold in the ruined church. It had been warm enough there during the day, but the fire that had gutted it had died like the young acolyte, like the aged sacristan, the venerable mother, the sweet young novice, the women who had sought shelter there in vain. Neither the dignity of age nor the sweetness of maidenhood nor the innocence of

youth nor the sanctity of profession had availed.

The old priest was glad they were dead. Life after what they had suffered had been unthinkable. He thanked God for that oblivion. He wished that he, too, might die in that violated shrine where he had peacefully ministered for so long a time. They had taken the flock, the shepherd must follow. He should have led.

He had fought, oh, he had played the man for the honor of the poor lambs committed to him. Had he done right? Should he not have stood dumb before the shearers? They had shot him and stabbed him and beaten him into insensibility. The last thing he had heard was the shriek of one woman, the piteous appeal of another. They thought he was dead, but he was living. Why had he not died?

How could God be so cruel? This was war. This ruined sanctuary, these broken men and women who had sought only to serve Him! Was there a God indeed? Faith, hope, what were they? Assurance, trust? Words, words! Ah, how he suffered.



"It is He," whispered the priest. "His sorrow was greater than mine."

It was bitter cold and yet he burned with fever. The tremors of pain so exquisite that they might almost be counted pleasure shot through his ruined, torn, broken figure, yet he recked little of these. It was the shame, the shame. He had been zealous for the Lord of Hosts. There was no God. Men were not made in any image save that of hell. He could not move hand or foot, but he could see. He could speak. He could curse God and die.

As his lips framed that anathema he saw vaguely the figure of a stranger; a slender, wasted body, dark stains upon it in the moonlight. It wore some kind of curious headgear. The man stared. The light was reflected from the sharp points of

long thorns. A cloth was fastened about the loins. The figure stood very straight in the desecrated Holy of Holies. A light seemed to come from its face. Its eyes looked at the man with great pity. Slowly the figure raised its arms. Slowly the arms extended themselves; there were blood-stains in the palms of the hands.

"It is He," whispered the priest. "His sorrow was greater than mine. Lord, I believe."

He knew nothing more save that a great peace had suddenly stolen around him.



VIII

The Broken Hearted

"ONE OF THE SOLDIERS WITH A SPEAR PIERCED HIS SIDE"

"I'll get that man if I die for it," said the soldier. "He's found the one position in the lines from which he can fire into our trenches."

"It's easier said than done," remarked his comrade, "and the minute you cross that spot you come within his range. He'll put a bullet through you before you can level a rifle or press a trigger."

"I'll not go that way," said the man.

"What is your plan?"

"You know that salient yonder on the right? I'm going out of the trench there."

"When?"

"Now. I'll wrap myself in white. That little run of coppice will cover me until I get within a few feet of him, then I'll have to chance it."

"Wish I could help you, old man. I'd like to get that man. He's shot six of the best fellows in the company and--"

"You can help me by making a diversion to attract his attention. Keep him looking at that alley."

A few moments later the soldier shrouded in white crept out of the trench and noiselessly rolled down the slope to the bushes. The snow was deep on the ground. There was no touch of color about the soldier. He even thrust his rifle under the linen in which he had wrapped himself. Outside the shelter of the trenches the wind blew with terrific force. It was terribly cold. He had discarded his overcoat for freedom of motion. Only his indomitable resolution kept him alive. He locked his jaws together to keep his teeth from chattering. The ice-covered snow under his bare hands almost blistered the flesh as he crept along.

He intended to use the bayonet. If he shot the man he was stalking alarm would be given and he would be riddled with bullets before he got back. He was willing to give a life for a life if it were necessary, but he was reluctant to do so if it could be avoided. Cold steel would be better. Cold steel! He smiled grimly. It would need some hot blood to take the chill off the bayonet at the end of his rifle.

Slowly, almost holding his breath lest he be noticed, he edged his way along. He had plenty of time for thought. This was not so easy a job as he had fancied, not the physical part, but the mental strain. He could shoot a man who was shooting at him, he could batter a man over the head who was trying to do the same to him, but this stalking a man in cold blood was different somehow. Cold blood! He laughed soundlessly at his recurrent fancy. He went a little more slowly. Finally he stopped to consider.

From the nook ahead of him in which the enemy had ensconced himself came a sudden rapid rattle of rifle-shots. His

friend back in the trench was doing his part. The man was awake--on the alert. It would be something of a fair fight, he thought with some little satisfaction. He surveyed the intervening space beyond the coppice. The men in the trenches on both sides would be awake, too. It would take him a few seconds to cross that space and get at the man he was stalking. Could they shoot him before that? There was some shelter where the enemy was. If the stalker could get to that spot he would be protected for a moment from fire from the enemy's trench.

It would take him a second or two to cross that space. In a second or two what might happen? Well, he would have to risk that. At the very end of the coppice he gathered himself together and rose slowly to a crouching position. Another rain of shots came from the nook; the man's rifle would be empty, he must give him no chance to reload. Now it would be a fair fight with the bayonet.

He threw aside the white draperies that impeded his legs and in half a dozen bounds the two men were face to face.

No shot had been fired. Yes, the magazine of the man's rifle was empty. He heard the crunch of his enemy's feet on the snow. He rose to his feet, his bayoneted rifle extended. The two barrels struck with terrific force. The men swayed, drew back for another thrust, and they were suddenly aware of a mist-like figure between them, a figure draped in white, lightly, diaphanously.

They stood arrested, guns drawn back, and stared. The figure slowly extended its arm, carrying drapery with it. A man's breast was bared. There, over the heart, was a great gaping wound, fresh, as if a broad, heavy blade had pierced it.

There was a clatter on the ice as a gun dropped and another clatter as a similar weapon struck the stone opposite. The two men bent forward, their hands outstretched. They took a step as if to touch the figure and there was nothing there! The hands met. They clasped warmly in the cold against each other.

"My God, what was that?" said the stalker.

"I don't know," answered the other.

"A pierced side!"

"Was it--"

"No. It couldn't be."

"Well, we worship the same God and--"

Ah, they were seen. There were quick words of command from the trenches, a staccato of rifle-shots, and two bodies lay side by side, hands still clasped, while the snow reddened and reddened beneath them.

And it was Christmas eve.



IX

The Forgiver of Sins

"I SAY UNTO THEE UNTIL SEVENTY TIMES SEVEN"

"A Priest, for Christ's sake, a priest," moaned the man.

A white-faced sister of charity upon whom had developed the appalling task of caring for the long rows of wounded at the dressing station before they were entrained and sent south to the hospital, hovered over the stretcher.

"My poor man," she whispered, "there is no priest here."

"I can't die without confession--absolution," was the answer. "A priest, get me a priest."

Next to and almost touching the cot on which the speaker writhed in his death agony lay another man apparently in a profound stupor. He wore the uniform of a private soldier and his eyes were bandaged. His face had been torn to pieces by shrapnel, fragments of which had blinded him. At that instant he came out of that stupor. Perhaps the familiar words recalled him to himself. He moved his hand slightly. The sister saw his lips tremble. She bent low.

"Who seeks confession, absolution?" he whispered. "I am a priest."

"You are wounded, dying, father."

"How can I die better than shriving a fellow sinner?"

That was true. The heroic woman turned to the man who still kept up his monotonous appeal.

"The man next to you," she said, "dying like you, is a priest."

"Father," cried the first man with sudden strength. "I must confess before I die."

"Lift me up," said the priest.

The woman slipped her arm about his shoulders and raised him.

"The sister?" began the other.

"I shall be blind and deaf," said the woman.

"Speak on," whispered the priest.

"I have been a great sinner--there isn't time to confess all."

"What is heaviest upon your soul, my son?"

"A woman's fate."

"Ah."

"There were two who loved her--a dozen years ago--she preferred me--I took her away."

"Did you marry her?"

"No. And then we quarreled--I deserted her. When I came to seek her she was gone--young, innocent, penniless, alone in Paris--I have sought her and never found her."

"What is your name?" asked the priest suddenly with a fierce note in his quivering voice.

"Father, can I be forgiven?" answered the man giving his name.

The dying soldier stared anxiously up at his bandaged comrade, at the nun who had hid her face behind the shoulder of the priest. He noticed that her body was shaking.

"And the woman's name?"

The priest suddenly sat upright. He shook off the sister's restraining hand. He tore the bandage from his own face. He bent over the dying man as he murmured the woman's name.

"Wretch," he cried, "look at me."

His face was gashed and cut and torn but something remained by which the other recognized him.

"You!" he cried shrinking away.

"I loved her, too," said the priest. "I would have married her. When she went away with you Holy Church received me."

"Mercy," cried the soldier uplifting his hand.

"What mercy did you show her?"

The priest could not see but he could feel. His hand seized the other's throat.

"My father," interposed the nun. "He has confessed. God will forgive, even as I."

"Who are you?" asked the blind priest, fearfully.

"The woman!" cried the dying man shaking off the other's hand and lifting himself up.

The sight came back to the priest on the instant. The fierce agony that filled his blinded eyes seemed to give place to the gentle touch of a hand upon them. He seemed to hear a mighty word--*Ephphatha*--that meant "be opened." Light flooded his soul. Looking up he was aware of two figures. One of the twain, an old man, gray bearded, was appealing to the other, clad in white raiment and youthful. And the priest suddenly recalled an old and well-known story of a fellow servant who would not have mercy.

"Father, forgive--" whispered the man before him.

As the voice of the dying sinner died away in the silence all was dark again. The priest saw no more, but the horrible pain in his eyes did not return. Over his torn features came a look of calm. He lifted his arm. His wavering hand cut the air in the sign of the cross.

"*Absolvo te*," he murmured as he pitched forward dead upon the breast of the dying.

And the woman tenderly covered them over.



Absolvo te.



X

The Giver of Life

"HE THAT EATETH OF THIS BREAD SHALL LIVE FOREVER"

Of the five specters in the boat three were without life. Those whose faint breathing indicated that they had not yet reached the point of death were too weak and indifferent to rid the boat of the bodies of the others. Ever since the homeward-bound whaler had struck a derelict in a gale of wind north of the Falklands and foundered, this little boat, surviving the shipwreck as by a miracle, had drifted on.

For three weeks in vain they had scanned the horizon for a sail. Their scanty supply of bread and water had been consumed in ten days. Thereafter they had nothing. The baby had died first, next a man whose arm had been broken by a falling spar in the disaster, and then the ship's cabin boy. The survivors were a man and a woman. They were both far gone. The woman was plainly dying. The man kept himself up by sheer exercise of will.

Their drifting had been northward toward warmer seas. It was winter in their home land and, though they knew it not, Christmas day. There the tropic sun blazed overhead from an absolutely cloudless sky. There was no vestige of breeze to stir the canvas of the solitary sail or ripple the glassy surface of the smoothed out ocean. The boat lay still. Not even the iron man at the helm could have lifted an oar. It had been dead calm for days. Speech there was none except in the gravest necessity. To talk connectedly was impossible.

After scanning the horizon for the thousandth time the man's burning eyes sought those of the woman at his feet. He was astonished to find them open. Her mouth was working, her parched lips strove to form words. He dropped the tiller which his hand had grasped mechanically, and which was useless since there was no way on the boat, and bent his head lower. Some sudden recrudescence of strength which the dying sometimes receive came to the woman.

"Death," she whispered. "Glad." She turned her head slightly and saw the form of the child. "The Baby--and--I--together."

The man nodded. Tenderly he laid his hot wasted hand on the woman's fevered brow.

"A priest," she said, looking up at him uncomprehendingly.

She was evidently going fast yet she knew what she wanted although she was not conscious that she craved the impossible. It would appear that she had been a good churchwoman. The man could only stare. He was no priest, only a rough sailor.

"A priest," said the woman more clearly. "I want--a priest--the sacrament." By some nervous convulsive effort she lifted her arms up toward him beseeching, appealing. There was another kind of agony in her voice that had not been present when she had moaned for water in the days before.

"The sacrament," she insisted, "I die."

The man looked away. Hard by the boat where there had been but a waste of sea rose a green island. A stretch of pleasant meadow met his eyes. It was so close to him that if he had leaned over the gunwale of the boat he could have laid his hand on the lush grass. Dumbly he wondered where it had been before, how he had come upon it so suddenly, why he had not seen it hours ago.

In front of him were hundreds of people, men, women, and children, plain people in strange simple garb, the like of which he had never seen. In front of these people and with their backs toward him stood a little group of men, in the center a figure in white garments. A lad offered something in a basket.

The man watched, amazed, awe-stricken, yet with a strange peace in his soul. He made no movement to gain the shore. He only looked and looked. The white-robed figure bent over the basket. He lifted from it a crude rough loaf of bread. He raised his eyes to heaven, his lips moved. He broke the bread and gave it.

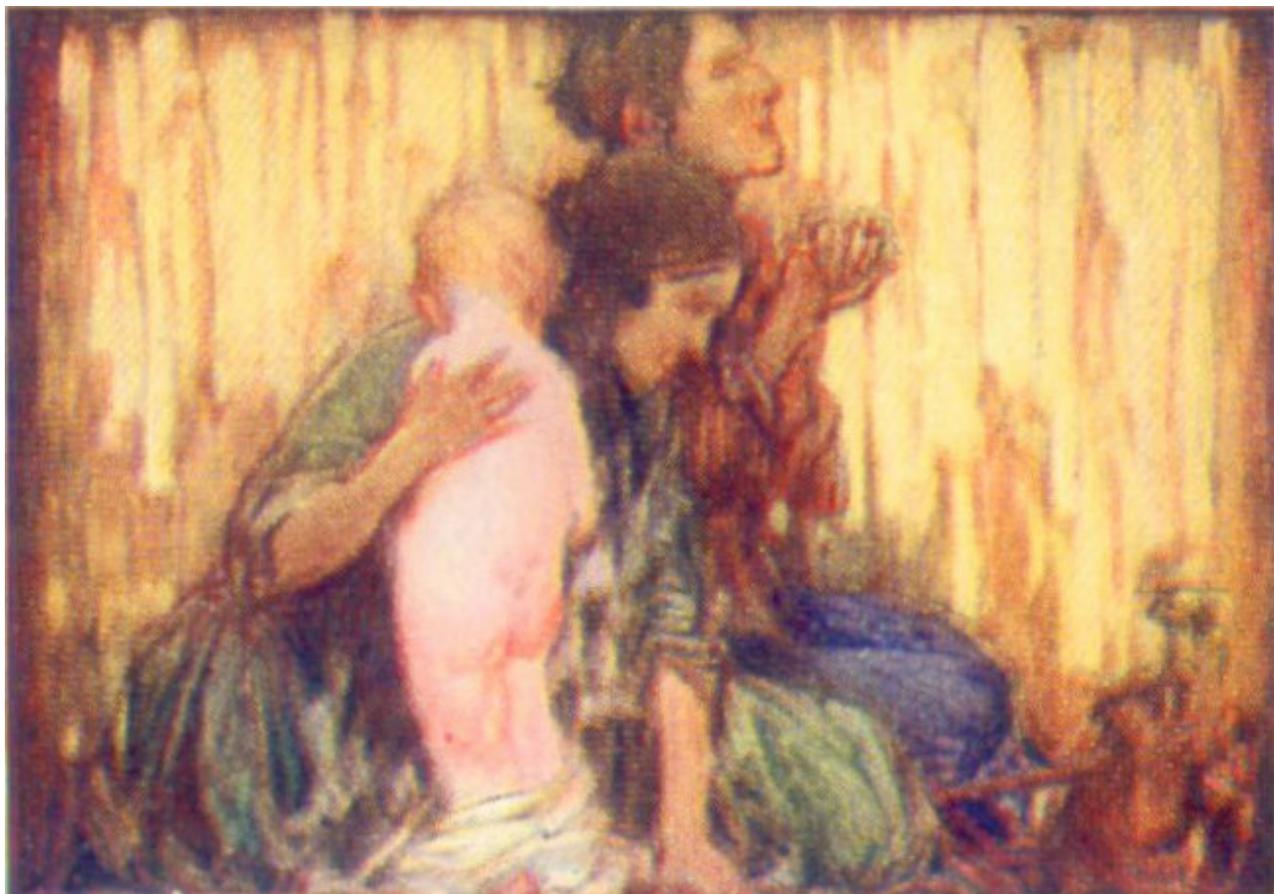
As the sailor watched the island disappeared as suddenly as it had come. The scene changed. Now he looked into a low room, dimly lighted with strange lamps. Through an open window he saw the stars. The few men that had stood about the man in the grassy meadow were alone with him in that upper chamber reclining about a table. The man lifted

from the board a cup of silver. He blessed it and gave it. The fragrance of wine came to the watcher.

He rubbed his eyes and looked again and before him spread the smooth unbroken surface of the monotonous sea. The woman's voice smote his ear again, higher, shriller, with more painful entreaty.

"A priest--for the love of God--the sacrament," she whispered.

The man tore open the last canvas bread-bag. It was tough material but it yielded to his insistence. In the corner there was a single tiny crumb they had overlooked. He lifted it gently with his great hand. He held it up in the air a moment striving to think. He was an English sailor and in his boyhood had been a chorister in a great Cathedral. The mighty words came back to him. He bent over the woman.



The cry for bread.

"Bread," he whispered. "The body--"

He shattered the water breaker with his fist. There was a suggestion of moisture on the inside of the staves of the cask. He drew his finger across them and touched it to the woman's lips.

"Water," he said hoarsely. "The blood--"

The terror, the yearning, disappeared from the woman's eyes. She looked at the man sanely, gratefully.

"God bless--" she faltered and then her lips stiffened.

Some tag of quaint old Scripture that had impressed him when he first heard it because of its very strangeness, but of which he had never thought in all the years of his rough life since boyhood, came into the man's mind now. He lifted his head as if to see again that figure.

"A priest forever," he gasped, "after the order of Melchis--"

He did not finish the word. The woman was dead. He knew now for what he had been kept alive. His task had been

performed. He bowed his head in his hands and entered into life eternal with the others.

Presently a little cloud flecked the sky. Out of the south the wind blew softly. The smooth sea rippled blue and white in the gentle breeze. The little boat, cradling its dead, rocked gently as it drifted on.

XI

The Stiller of the Storm

"BE OF GOOD CHEER; IT IS I; BE NOT AFRAID"

"It's Christmas eve at home," murmured the young lad after he had said his prayers and tumbled into his narrow berth on the great ship. "I suppose they're trimming the Christmas tree now and hanging up the stockings. I wish I were there."

He was very young to serve his country, but not too young according to the standards of mankind to be a midshipman on the great steel monster keeping the leaden deep. It was the first time he had ever been away from home on Christmas day, too. The youngsters had all laughed and joked about it in the steerage mess. They had promised themselves some kind of a celebration in the morning, but in his own cot with no one to see, a few tears which he fondly deemed unmanly would come. He had the midnight watch and he knew that he must get some sleep, but it was a long time before he closed his eyes and drifted off to dream of home and his mother.

Athwart that dream came a sudden, frightful, heart-stilling roar of destruction; a hideous crash followed, a terrible rending, breaking, smashing, concatenation of noises, succeeded by frightful detonations, as through the gaping hole torn in the great battleship by the deadly torpedo, the water rushed upon the heated boilers, the explosion of which in turn ignited the magazines. By that deadly underwater thrust of the enemy the battleship was reduced in a few moments to a disjointed, disorganized, sinking mass of shapeless, formless, splintered steel.

As the explosions ceased, from every point rose shrieks and groans and cries of men in the death-agony hurled into eternity and torn like the steel. And then the boy heard the surviving officers coolly, resolutely calling the men to their stations.

He had been thrown from his berth by the violence of the explosion. His face was cut and bleeding where he had struck a near-by stanchion. His left arm hung useless. He had lain dazed on the deck for a few moments until he heard the orders of his lieutenant. He was one of the signal midshipmen stationed on the signal bridge. Whatever happened that was the place to which to go; he still had a duty to perform.

Picking himself up as best he could, he hurried to report to the lieutenant. With such means as were available signals were made. Calls for help? Oh, never! Warnings that the enemy's submarines were in the near vicinity and that other ships should keep away.

The captain was on the half wrecked bridge above. The boy noticed how quiet he was, yet his voice rang over the tumult.

"Steady, men, steady. Keep your stations. Stand by. Be ready."

The old quartermaster whose business it was to tell the hours saluted the captain.

"Eight bells, sir," he said, "midnight. Christmas day," he added.

"Strike them," said the captain.

And, as clear as ever, the four couplets rang out over the chaos and the disaster.

"Christmas day," the boy murmured.

"She's going, men," said the captain, as the cadences died away. "Save yourselves. Abandon the ship."

"Christmas morning," said the boy. "I wonder what they're doing at home."

"Overboard with you, youngster," said the signal lieutenant; "I wish I had a life-preserver for you, but--"

"Merry Christmas, sir," said the lad suddenly.

"Good God!" said the man. "Merry Christmas! They will think of us at home."

What was left of the ship gave a mighty reel.

"Quick or she'll suck you down," the officer roared, as he fairly flung the boy into the water,--and how he hurt that broken arm! "You can swim. Strike out. Good-by."

The boy had caught a glimpse of the captain standing on the bridge as the wreck went down and then the wild waters closed over his head. It was frightfully cold. A hard gale was blowing. The waves ran terribly high. His left arm was helpless. His head ached fiercely. What was the use? Still the boy struck out bravely with his free hand. The instinct of life! It was too dark to see. The sky was covered with drifting clouds. Only here and there a little rift of moonlight came through.

"Christmas morning," he sobbed out as the waves rolled him over. "Oh, my God!"

He felt himself going down. All at once the waters seemed to grow still. It was suddenly calm. He was no longer cold. He threw his head up for one last look at the sky and life and then he hung, as it were, suspended in some strange way. He saw a figure walking across the smooth of the seas as it had been solid ground. The figure drew nearer, the wind seemed to have died away, but the draperies that shrouded it swung gently as they would while a man walked along. The face he saw dimly, vaguely, but there was light in it somehow. It came slowly nearer.

"Christmas morning," whispered the boy.

The hand of the figure reached down. It caught the boy's right arm. He was lifted up.

"Home and Christmas morning," whispered the boy, closing his eyes.

The moonlight broke through a cloud and fell upon him. A wave rolled over him and the sea was empty as before.

He that hath eyes to see, let him see!