

"TOOK BY MISTAKE."

Cold! Oh, it was cold! A bitter north-east wind, doing its wickedest, is hard to beat in that respect.

It was trying hard to snow moreover, stray flakes smote you in the eye, tickled the tip of your nose, and insinuated themselves between your turned-up collar and your shrinking neck.

Your fingers encased in wool or fur according to circumstances, buried deep in a cosy muff or thrust deep into masculine pockets were nevertheless conscious of the bitter, stinging cold.

You were hurrying along probably after a comfortable tea with the prospect of a good dinner before you, your thoughts happily engrossed with the completed list of your Christmas presents, the last of which—an afterthought—you had left your blazing fire to go in search of. In spite of, or maybe by contrast, because of the cold, the world was not too bad.

Not too bad for such as you!

Bob Jones in his worn shabby clothes couldn't echo that sentiment. He found the world about as bad as could be—unrelieved wretchedness in point of fact.

He had no collar to turn up. His threadbare pockets had the merit of being empty certainly, and could accommodate his chilled blue fingers. His weary feet encased in broken boots had tramped miles in the fruitless search for work.

Heart-sick, stomach-sick, soul-sick, he plodded in the direction of his home.

He passed you, Madame Arrogant, in your well-fed comfort; you, Sir, in your overcoat carrying your opulent parcels, and he hated you bitterly as he passed.

He turned over in his pocket the few shillings that remained of his "dole," and reflected that it was Christmas Eve, and that in that one room that was his home there awaited him the wife he loved, and the child he adored.

Other Christmas Eves in prosperous days before the war, when he had renounced a good job to fight for his country, rose before his sullen imagination. Good work, good wages, good management, solid comfort, all vanished from no fault of his, and this year the Missis and Jacky could have no part or share in the joys that were their right.

Five bob! What use was that? and the "dole" not due for three days. An infernal five bob, for coals, food and everything.

His eyes, once so large and fearless, scowled, his mouth set in a sneer.

He paused before a brightly-lighted store, and took stock of the good things displayed.

Hams dressed in frills, turkeys of all sizes, sausages in compact bundles, gleaming chestnuts, juicy oranges, all those desirable things in which Jacky could have no share. A catch came in the man's throat and a dangerous light in his eyes.

A band at the edge of the pavement struck up a Christmas Carol; he knew the words right enough, had sung them many times in his choirboy days.

"Aye, and therefore be merry, set sorrow aside,
Christ Jesus, our Saviour, was born at this Tide."

The picture of his prosperous, happy boyhood it conjured up made him groan aloud.

Jacky, poor little nipper! What 'ave you done to be served so? 'Ere was me 'ad all I wanted when I was a kid, and 'im without so much as a mince-pie to keep Christmas with!

"Therefore be merry, set sorrow aside."

All very well, if you could do it. How the devil was he to be merry, when his kid had called out to him with the eternal hope of childhood:

"Come back soon, Daddy, and bring some Kismis!"

Bring some Kismis! By Heaven so he would. He would, if he swung for it; if he lost his soul for it.

The cloud cleared off his brow as he made his plan.

Out of his scanty store he purchased a cheap shopping bag, and mingling with the pushing, struggling crowd with an ease that amazed and excited him he filled his bag with an assortment that would leave little for Jacky to desire.

Having taken the plunge he resolutely banished all scruples from his mind. "I don't care," he said, doggedly. "It ain't my fault."

He entered his home whistling, "Aye and therefore be merry," and set the bag on the table.

"Here, Missis! 'Ow'll that suit you? 'Ad a stroke of luck and done a job of work."

"Joe!" she gasped. "What was you dreamin' of. The money ought to have lasted a week."

"Well, ain't there enough stuff to last a week, old dear? Where's the nipper?"

She pointed over her shoulder to a bed in the corner. "'E don't seem ezzackly the thing. Been crying with tummy ache. I couldn't do nothin', as there ain't a penny in the 'ouse."

A sudden fear caught at the man's heart, as he bent over the little restless form. A nameless agony. Had his sin been in vain?

"Missis," he said, quietly, "wrap him up in that there blanket. I shall take him round to the Children's 'Orspital. I don't like the looks of him."

Three hours later Jacky was tucked up in a cot in a gaily-decorated ward with a huge Christmas tree at one end.

"He's just come down from the theatre," the Sister told the trembling parents. "It is well you brought him round at once or it would have been much more serious, but I think he will do quite well now. Appendicitis, you know."

Bob and his Missis didn't in the least know, but they could have fallen down and kissed the hem of her white apron. Something broke in Bob's heart when he saw a well-filled stocking hanging at the foot of the little cot, similar to those on every other cot in the ward.

"Jacky would have had a 'Kismis' in any case."

"I don't care," he tried to say when he thought of that bag of ill-gotten goods at home, but he couldn't say it.

He told the Missis on the way home all about it; he had always sooner or later told her all his troubles.

"Don't take on so, Bob," she said, simply. "I reckon the Lord ain't 'ard on what you done. He knowed it was for Jacky. But in course you an' me can't touch none of it. It ain't late yet, Bob; you write on a piece of paper, 'took by mistake,' and I'll go and pop the bag down alongside of the counter. There's such crowds in the shop no one won't notice."

Her woman's wit accomplished that delicate task, and Bob, notwithstanding the nipper's illness, felt a load lifted from his heart as they emerged from the store.

On their arrival back home, which looked strangely forlorn without the nipper, Bob espied a letter on the table—a most unusual happening.

"DEAR BOB," it ran, "I heard only yesterday you was down on your luck, for which I am truly sorry, old man. It's bad to be hard up at Christmas. I am doing pretty well, so send you a couple of quid to be a bit festive like. But better still, I've heard of a job to suit you, and I've spoke to the boss and he'll start you when the holidays is over. Love to the nipper.—BILL."

Bob stood very still—"if only—"

"Christ Jesus our Saviour was born at this Tide."

How the Carol haunted him. "Why," he thought, "He was only a little kid like Jacky! and His Mother hadn't anything to give Him on His birthday, but I reckon she

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