



A Detour at Christmas Time
by Edith Minifer

"DETESTABLE people," said Helen, wasting a glare on the crowd milling about a bargain table. "Each one in search of the very object I am trying to get."

"Impossible," returned good old Cyrus from over his lading of bundles. "Some are men and cannot be in pursuit of the articles on your list."

Helen wanted to retort. "Stupid!" but laughed instead. "I don't mean they are looking for step-ins and teddies," she returned. "But we all want a \$5 gift for 40 cents. I'm so tired! I guess I'll go home."

And went, just like that. She was that kind of a sudden person, which was why Cyrus loved her, but had never found time and place right for telling her so.

Helen fell into a waiting jitney. Oh, but she was a-weary. And how long since the nightmare started? It began in the summer, when conscience said she mustn't crochet what she wanted to crochet, but what would be useful come Christmas. Then came the slogan, "Shop Early." Helen had shopped early, but that did not mean she was able to avoid shopping late.

The spirit of Christmas—love, goodwill, peace. Where was it? Her eyes closed.

"Detour!" exclaimed the driver, as he turned on a side road. He was an "extra" earning for college. During Christmas season he, like the rest of the world, overworked and under-slept. After driving 18 hours, he had taken this "trick" so the regular man could go and buy things. All the wives made all the husbands do the same.

Therefore Clay Hamilton, who had no wife, drove the jitney. Drove it on and on. Perhaps dozed off. A wheel skidded. Something careened and something else smashed.

"Where can we be?" asked Helen, gazing at a black highway.

The man laughed grimly. "I don't even know where we are," he responded. Both turned to meet the old man who hobbled from the nearest house.

"Well," he cackled, "this is Middleton, the town folks forgot. Years ago trains stopped running. We got no garage, no phone, pretty nigh no inhabitants. Me'n my sister live here 'cause we ain't able to live nowhere else. Mrs. Gould is bedridden and her daughter stays to take care of her. Come in. You can't move on tonight, wheel all crumpled up. And you can't walk if you've hurt your foot, as I suspect."

Inside the quaint house, with his shoe cut off, Clay made apology to Helen.

"I could kick myself," he said, "for getting you into such a scrape. I must have dreamed that sign 'Detour.' The truth is, I shouldn't have been driving. It's the—"

"Holiday rush," interrupted Helen. "I understand, I won't complain, though a roll of red tissue paper and

bolts of green ribbon aren't very efficient provisions for an overnight stay. But—doesn't that coffee smell good?"

"Rather. If it wasn't that I know you are anxious to get home and finish your Christmas preparations, I'd say, 'What larks!'"

"You may say it," returned Helen. "I'm reconciled. Glory be, there are no signs of holly in this house."

"Perhaps," said the young man, following her mood, though rather amazed, "we've reached a land where Christmas ends. A test! Miss Elliot, addressing their hostess as she entered with a tray, "Can you tell us the date of day after tomorrow?"

"Day after tomorrow is the twenty-fifth," she said calmly. Then she went out for more food, and Helen, grinned at Clay, as if they were old friends. The twenty-fifth of December was just a date!

They had actually got away from Christmas.

It proved a delightful evening, prolonged as the two young folks dis-

cussed everything but Christmas. The next day came, bringing a blizzard. For a little they spoke of a search being made for the jitney, but it became evident "detour" had indeed been a dream. Never mind, Clay's ankle was getting better, and Helen felt like a child out of school.

In the afternoon the two hobbled and tripped, respectively, into the kitchen entry. Through the half-open door they saw their hostess and the daughter of the bed-ridden woman. What was it they bent over?

Helen's parcel, with its bunch of scarlet tissue, its bolt of green ribbon its sprigs of artificial holly. But with what wistful eyes were the women regarding these gewgaws.

"They say," whispered Miss Gould, barely touching the pretties with finger tips discolored by iodine. "that in lots of places one never has a Christmas gift not tied up nice. I read it somewhere—the wrapping is half the gift!"

"Maybe so," said Miss Elliot. "I never had a Christmas present."

"I did have some good times," returned Miss Gould, "before ma took sick. Hung up my stockings and always got some little tricks. Wasn't contented, though. Used to hanker for a tree."

Helen turned quickly, not to be caught eavesdropping. In the parlor



For He Pulled Birchbark From Sticks in the Woodbox.

she confronted Clay Hamilton with the air of one about to reply to a loud-spoken objection.

"For goodness gracious' sake," she exclaimed, "don't say whatever you were about to. Stop right where you are, and help me. I have to contrive a Christmas present for at least a dozen people, and deck a tree for two. And nothing to do it with—not a thing. And it's already late and night closing in."

Right here was where Clay scored above any possibilities of Cyrus, who would surely have observed the inconsistency. "Let it close," said he. "The local shops aren't closed. They never open! How would a branch off that hemlock we ran into do for a baby tree?"

"Splendiferous," said Helen. Then she wanted to know what became of the wishbone she had seen on his plate at dinner? He had saved it, for good luck. And what was it one used to do with a wishbone? Why, make a pen wiper, to be sure. So Helen made one, and dressed it in red felt cut from her overshoe lining. Clay printed the rhyme:

Once I was a little part
Of a little hen,
Now I'll be a little slave
And help you clean your pen.

"It has all the earmarks of the perfect gift," quoth Helen. "for I doubt if any one here ever uses, much less has occasion to wipe a pen."

Then she sent Clay to gather the alder berries reachable from the porch. Later she strung these for a necklace on a bit of colored string from her parcel. After the Elliots had retired she went as eagerly to work as if she had never forsown Christmas. Twisting the strands of hay she made dainty baskets. She also constructed candlesticks of cornstalks, trimmed prettily with fringed husks. In the meantime Clay was not idle, for he pulled birchbark from sticks in the woodbox and borrowing needle and thread from the Elliot workbasket, sewed tiny hemlock sprigs into "Merry Christmases," making objects that Helen asserted would be considered "just wonderful" if discovered in a gift shop.

All was at length completed, but the two had little time for admiration of their handiwork, since the parcels must be wrapped with all the wealth of the tissue, the ribbon, the holly, and the seals.

And was Helen "tired to death" when all was complete? Nay, standing beside Clay on the little porch, listening to the crackling ice as trees swayed in the rising wind, she felt as if swaddled in the comfort of a great joy. Vainly had she thought herself "sick of Christmas." At her first chance to forget, she had worked her utmost to bring holiday to the forgotten town. With dawn, she knew the extent of her success. Clay, who had been limping about, told her that in every house some old body with trembling hands was unwrapping a gift sure to be treasured for years.

"And nothing for either of us," laughed Helen.

Yet a few moments after, when Miss Elliot entered the room, it was to say, "My dear, I never before noticed the pretty ring on your finger!"

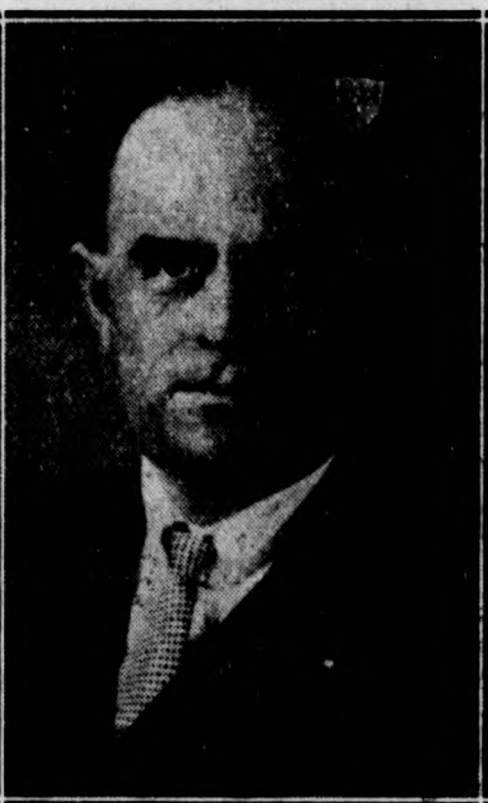
Two golden hands clasped, an old fashioned betrothal token, which Clay Hamilton had from his mother, and because it was always with him, had quite providentially taken on detour.

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"The object of the organization," Mr. Baldwin continued, "is to promote efficiency in the buying, handling and selling of the products handled by these stores.

"To reduce costs and pass this saving on to the consumers; to arrange suitable displays in windows and inside the stores, and make the stores generally attractive; to run regular advertising in the newspapers, telling housekeepers of seasonable offerings, special price concessions, etc., and also telling of the advantages of dealing with a service grocer such as telephone service, delivery service and charge accounts.

"The organization includes a number of the oldest and best known stores in Clinton and vicinity, men who have spent years catering to Clinton homes and who know what our people want, and how they want it, and men who have done their part year after year in building up their neighborhoods, in every possible way.

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