



A Merry Christmas
by Lillian Hall Crowley

POOR Mrs. Midgely sat in her disordered living room in an utterly hopeless attitude.

"Oh, dear," she sighed, "I haven't the heart to tidy the house or even myself. To think of Christmas only three weeks away, and not one gift for the children and no hope of getting any. I am glad they are at school; I can at least have a good cry!"

Just as she was getting out her handkerchief preparatory to enjoying this unusual luxury she heard the postman's step on the porch. Habit forced her to gulp back the tears and go to the door. He handed her several letters, all of which she recognized as bills, with the exception of one, which bore the handwriting of her sister Judith.

"Anne, dear," she wrote, "at last I can visit you, and shall be with you in a few days."

"Oh, dear! Oh, dear! To think of Judith visiting us at a time like this, when we can hardly manage, with the high cost of living, to set the table, let alone having a holiday time!"

Mrs. Midgely indulged in the desired cry, then, realizing there was much to be done, she dried her eyes, and with relief that the shedding of tears



she started in to put the case in order.

"At least we'll be clean," she said to herself, as she made broom and duster about.

Some months before this time Henry Midgely had lost his position as bookkeeper on account of the failure of the firm for which he worked. They had no idea of impending conditions were almost staggered by the news. The Midgelys had four growing children and every month had lived up to the salary. Mr. Midgely had just lost another position. When Anne came home she did not tell her family their loss, and she bravely set her task of making up for the months when debts had accumulated.

Christmas! That was the hard part. Thinking for the children! They had such jolly times before, with presents for everyone. Now she had more to do than ever to do and less time for buying presents, even if she had the money with which to buy material.

"I shall have to tell Judith," she said to her husband that night, when they were seated by the lamp and the children were in bed, "how sorry we are we cannot make her visit a pleasure."

"It is too bad," said he. "Judith is a slave to your father, looking after his every whim and never thinking of herself. I wish she had a home of her own. I always planned to give her a really good time whenever she could make that long-deferred visit."

Christmas arrived, her face shining with happiness.

"Where is last I am here! Are you quite alone?"

"No, yes, dear." Mrs. Midgely's voice had a strange note in it. Judith looked at her quickly.

"You don't look well, Anne. What is the matter?"

"For Anne let the floodgates of her heart open and told Judith her troubles."

"I am only that we don't want you to be a stupid time, Judith."

"Never mind about me," answered Anne. "I am wildly happy just to be with you all. But I am glad you are here."

The children were delighted to have their aunt with them. They had often heard of the pleasant old white house and the happy party that surrounded the dinner table that night. Mrs. Midgely, too, almost forgot to be worried as she smiled at her sister's high spirits.

The morning after Judith left the four children as they left school, she turned to her sister and

"Anne, dear, we must take an inventory of stock and see what we can make for the kiddlets for Christmas."

"There is nothing," said Anne.

"We'll find something!" determinedly answered Judith.

"You can make things out of comparatively nothing," laughed Anne, "but you can't make them out of absolutely nothing."

"Yes, we can! I'll send for my yarns and knit a cap and mittens for each child. They are using bright colors and combinations of colors. In that way we can use your left-over yarns, too. We'll have plenty without buying any more, and I knit rapidly. I've done lots of this work for the Red Cross."

She made looms with empty spools and pins, from which each child helped to make a round string which they worked on at odd moments. They were to be sewed on the mittens. No more hunting for the "other mitten." The children were entertained with the idea of being useful and of helping Aunt Judith.

The sisters looked up discarded dolls and sewed up legs and arms, painted the faces and restored the hair. Entire outfits of clothes that could be taken off and put on were made from bits of cloth found in the scrap bag, and they crocheted lace enough for the trimming. These were for the two little girls, Martha and Peggy, aged seven and nine.

How to make eleven-year-old Ralph happy with left-overs was the problem. Then Judith remembered that years ago she had been the recipient of a stamp book which she had not used. She wrote her father for it, and then invested in some mixed stamps for Ralph to make a beginning with. A few new puzzles and toys from the ten-cent store made a goodly array of bright things for Tommy, who was the youngest child.

"Now for the dinner," said Judith. "Let's not try to have the usual Christmas dinner, but think up something different."

"I did so want to ask Mr. and Mrs. Lambert," sighed Anne. "They came from England several years ago, and are so alone at Christmas time. I had hoped to have them, but of course I cannot do it this year."

"That gives me the very idea, Anne. We'll invite them and surprise them with a regular English dinner—roast beef, Yorkshire pudding and gravy, and have roly-poly pudding for dessert."

The days flew by with the sisters as busy as bees. Anne was never happier in all her life. She had not time for repining, and found that by simply making the best of everything she had no real troubles at all. Henry, too, caught the spirit of hope, and remarked to his wife:

"It won't be long until we have made up for lost time, and I like my new position better than the old one, because it has more of a future to it."

The Lamberts were delighted with the invitation, as they were expecting a lonely day, far away from Merrle England.

One day, when Judith came in from shopping, Anne met her with the news:

"A nephew, John Leigh, has surprised the Lamberts. He has seen service in France, and is sent here by the British government on a mission to Washington. He has a week's vacation and has come to spend it with them. I insisted that he come to our Christmas dinner, and they are all going to call tonight."

"How interesting," exclaimed Judith. "Perhaps he can advise me about my Red Cross work."

Everyone was delighted to meet the handsome young soldier and eager to hear stories of "over there" from one who knew. John became a great help to Judith with her plans for the children's Christmas and her Red Cross work. In fact, he thought of so many things that he came to the Midgelys at least once a day and every evening. He trimmed the tree while Judith made the simple things to adorn it.

One evening Mrs. Midgely remarked to her husband: "I never saw a young man so interested in children."

He looked up from his paper in amused surprise. "My dear, do you really think he is interested only in the children?"

"John, you don't mean Judith?"

"Certainly. It has been evident from the first."

Christmas arrived—a glorious day; with snow on the ground. The children had hung up their stockings. Into the bottom of each had been placed the bright new cap and mittens, and a gay bag of candy on top, while the other gifts were grouped about the tree.

After the successful dinner was eaten they spent the evening in singing carols. John had a good tenor voice and Judith accompanied him on the piano. Then he sang military songs he had learned in the trenches.

The guests took their departure, vowing it the happiest Christmas of all. Mrs. Midgely turned to her sister.

"Only think, Judith, I was afraid you would have a dull time. The children have missed nothing, and you have been an angel of mercy!"

"Happiness has nothing to do with the possession of things," smiled Judith; "it is all a state of mind. And—John and I will have something to tell you tomorrow, when he leaves for the front."

The day.

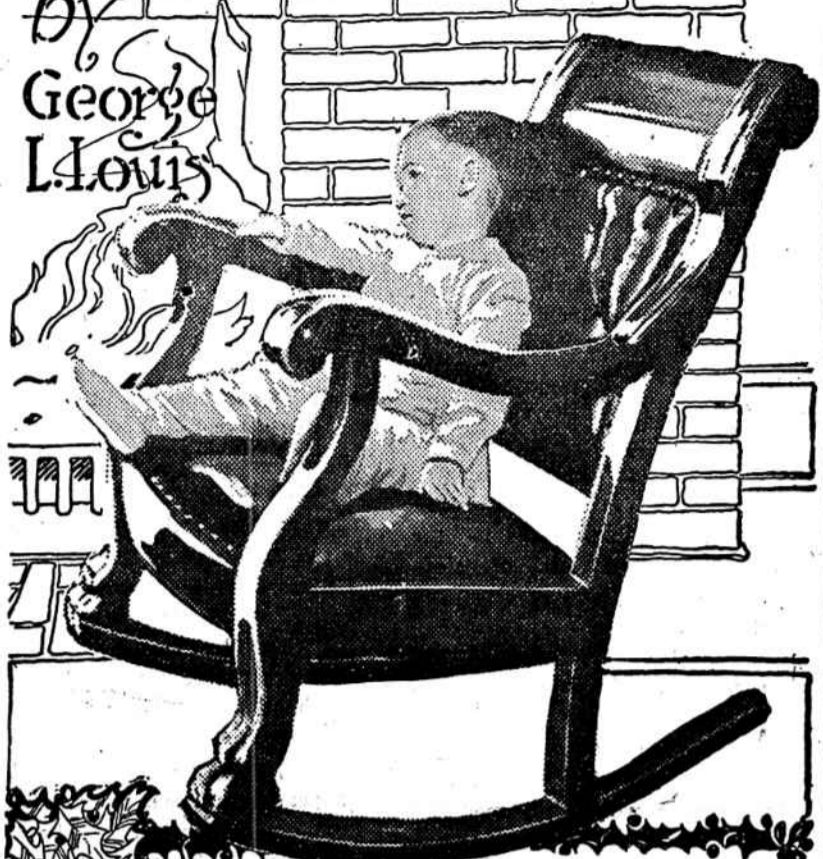
"I presume you had a great time Christmas, Willie?"

"No. I didn't have so much fun Christmas day, but I did the day after."

"Were you sick on Christmas?"

"Nope. But you see the day after Christmas pa had to go to work and I got a chance to play with all my toys then."

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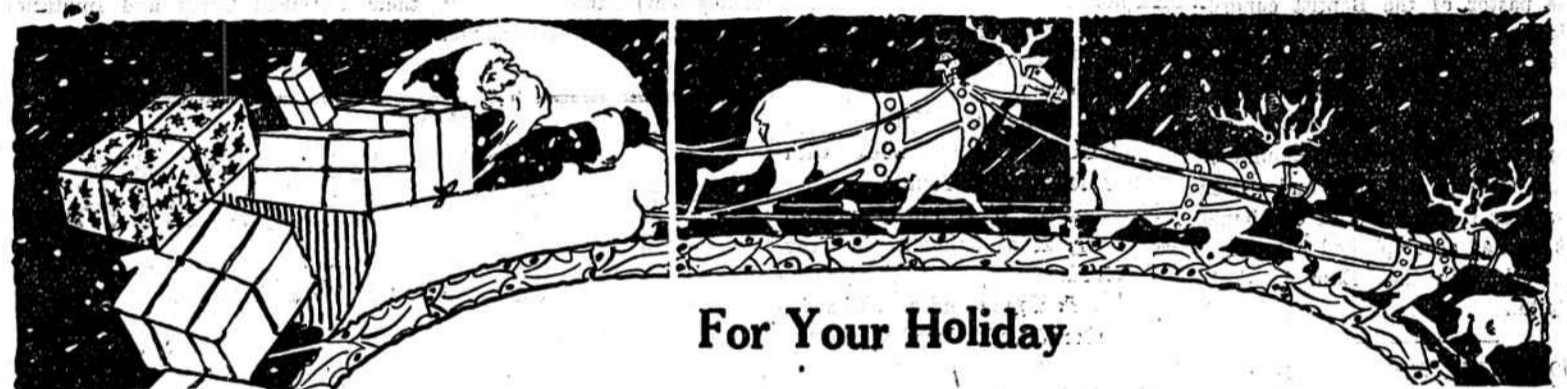
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