

One Christmas Eve

by RALPH HAMILTON

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The shades of the pretty home were pulled down and the gloom of dusk was alleviated by one light only in the room where the mourning denizens, Harold Bruce and his wife, Laura, sat. They were awaiting the arrival of a taxicab ordered in time to catch an evening train for the South. Both were somber-faced and wearied of men. They had not spoken for some time, for it was a situation where words meant nothing. The wife never lifted her tear-stained eyes, the husband wore a set expression upon his face as though exerting the utmost will power to repress the poignant emotion which consumed him.

Without, joyous shouts echoed, the sound of merry sleigh bells tinkered the air with Christmas eve fervor, and the contrast of this long-anticipated holiday presentation with what they had hoped and planned for, wrenched their souls to the point of anguish. Their lives desolated beyond repair, poignant memories ever present, they scarce dared to rest their glance upon the portraits of two smiling, happy faces looking down from a heavily framed picture, for only that morning they had received the terrible news that the originals, their only children, Don, aged six, and Etta, two years his junior, had been victims, with many others, of a disaster by cyclone and flood that had devastated the district where they had their winter home in Florida.

All they knew was that the pretty bungalow and many others, with their occupants, had been swept away, and hundreds were said to have perished, and no word had been received as to the fate of their two little ones, nor of Rhoda Marsh, who had them in charge.

Rhoda Marsh had come into their thoughts almost as frequently as little Etta and her brother. Each recalled that it was a Christmas eve four years



Both Were Somber-Faced and Wearied of Mien.

back when Harold Bruce had come home from the funeral of his mother, bringing with him a wistful-eyed, sad-faced mite of a girl.

"Laura," he said to his wife, "this is Rhoda Marsh, a poor orphan child whom my mother adopted, who has given her the tenderest care to the last hour of her life and was a blessing to her old age. She is left without a home. Should we give her one?"

"We should, and we shall," came the quick reply, as Mrs. Bruce gazed into the earnest, longing eyes of the girl of fourteen, and read there truth and innocence and a soulful appeal to all that was maternal and sympathizing in her nature.

It proved to be a wise and fortuitous choice. As the children came along Rhoda proved to them a true and loving sister, nurse and friend.

Then came a test of the fidelity and self-sacrifice of the girl just merging into young womanhood. Both of the children were taken down with a dangerous contagious malady. The house was quarantined. Rhoda braved the perils of infection. Day and night she was the constant attendant of Don and Etta. She found so sure a loving place in the hearts of those she had benefited, that her eyes beamed with joy and happiness whenever she was in their presence.

The physician who attended the children was Aldon Merritt. He had entered the profession the protégé of a wealthy man, and had acquired a clientele of prominence and a large income. It was when the little ones were convalescent that he had come to Mr. Bruce, who was a close personal friend.

"Bruce," he said, "I cannot find words to express my admiration and respect, yes, and something deeper, for that sweet little heroine, Rhoda, whose studious care of the children, far more than my ministrations, is responsible for their recovery."

"Yes," answered Mr. Bruce with genuine fervor in his tones, "she is a

my wife and myself realize what we owe to this poor wail who has endeared herself to us as though she were our own daughter."

Doctor Merritt proved his expressed sentiments by very often visiting the Bruce home after that. The children loved him and he would drop in for an hour or two and play with them and talk with Rhoda and listen to her singing at the piano, for music with Rhoda was her one great passion. There never was a visit on his part that Rhoda did not greet him with a beautiful, tender flush upon her fair, expressive face, and one night her kindly benefactors indulged in playful badinage when she accompanied Doctor Merritt to the door.

"Doctor Merritt has become quite a beau—oh, Rhoda?" intimated Mr. Bruce.

"Three times in a week," spoke Mrs. Bruce. "Rhoda dear, he is a loyal chevalier."

"Please don't," pleaded Rhoda, looking serious, shy and embarrassed. "He is only a great good friend to all of us, and he has so encouraged my singing that it has made me more anxious than ever to please him."

Early in November Mrs. Bruce, the children and Rhoda went to the Florida winter home where the family spent four months of the year. There were anticipated happy days in the pretty bungalow when Mr. Bruce should join them later on. It was just two weeks before Christmas when Mrs. Bruce decided to take a trip North and remain with her husband until the holidays, when he would be ready to accompany her to Fair Villa. It was a few days after her coming that her husband said to her: "Laura, Doctor Merritt has fairly haunted the house evenings since you went away. I met him today and told him of our plans, and he was especially pressing in his inquiries about Rhoda. I presume he will be here this evening to ask you about Rhoda," but the young physician did not materialize as expected, and the next day the Bruces understood that he had left the city.

It was two days before Christmas when the dreadful news came of the disaster in the South. Fair Villa had been practically swept off the map; their winter home had been carried away by the raging waters. Telegrams contained vague and distracting details. They had no reason to hope that their loved ones had escaped the general fate of those who were missing among the former residents of the little inland town. They were now ready to go South and seek a trace of their two little children and of Rhoda, in whom they had so trustfully left them in charge.

"It must be the taxi," spoke Mr. Bruce, arousing with a sigh from his painful reverie as the doorbell rang, but he crossed the outer threshold to come face to face with Doctor Merritt. The manner and words of the latter were jarring to the bruised sensibilities of the bereaved father, for the young physician was radiant of face. His eyes suggested a fervent exhilaration as he greeted Mr. Bruce with riotous embrace and waved his hand gaily to Mrs. Bruce, who had followed her husband into the hallway.

"A glad and merry Christmas to both of you!" hailed Doctor Merritt jubilantly.

"You haven't heard?" spoke Mr. Bruce in a low, reproachful tone.

"Why, what do you mean?" questioned Doctor Merritt.

"The disaster at Fair Villa—the children."

"Why, bless you!" fairly shouted the doctor—"they are right here!"

Harold Bruce wavered against the wall for support. Mrs. Bruce uttered a wild scream. Across the threshold from the porch there rushed little Etta and her brother. Joy, delight, ecstasy mitigated the shock of what at first stunned the frantic parents as an appearance from the dead.

"And lest, but not least, she whose mission in life seems ever to be to bring healing and happiness, and love,

and peace to all those who are dear to her!" in a gently reverent tone continued Doctor Merritt, and with supreme satisfaction the young physician viewed the five reunited ones in a maze of embraces, kisses and tears. Rhoda, clinging to Mrs. Bruce, hid her face in modest confusion, as Doctor Merritt recited her brave battle against the elements in a great storm upon a battered raft until she had brought the children to safety.

"But you, Doctor Merritt?" propped Mrs. Bruce wondering—"how came you to be at Fair Villa?"

"I arrived there after the disaster," was the reply. "I had gone there on a specific mission, later executed, to ask our peerless Rhoda, queen of all woman-kind, to become my wife," and as Rhoda extended her hand he covered it with kisses and pressed it to his happy, happy heart.

"If there was a mistletoe here I would march you two promptly under it!" threatened Mrs. Bruce, immersed in thrilling joy and gratitude.

"There shall be one before Christmas morning arrives!" cried Doctor Merritt in tones that rang out like a cheer. "Come, Bruce, you and I on a hunt for Santa Claus and the choicest gifts he can bestow. Oh! nowhere in the world, and never to any others, has there come a happier, merrier Christmas than the one we shall celebrate!"

Peace Maneuver.

"You always play the phonograph during meals."

"Yes," replied Farmer Cornatossel. "Tain't that we care for the music, but we want to do everything possible to keep the summer boarders from talkin' about the League of Nations."

CROSS HILL NEWS.

Cross Hill, Dec. 8.—The Baptist 75-Million Campaign was brought to a close here Saturday when the last resident member had signed up for his part of the fund. With an apportionment of \$15,000 as the minimum for the church at this place this quota was passed early in the week and when the final count came the subscriptions had gone a little over \$17,000.

McKenzie & Douglas of Greenville were here again Saturday with another lot of mules which were offered for sale at auction. A good crowd was present and a number were bid off at fairly good prices, though the bidding was not generally enthusiastic.

Mr. H. L. McSwain is having erected a cotton warehouse on the lots recently purchased at the Leopard real estate sale. The building will have a capacity of 600 bales and is expected to be ready for use in a week or two. Mr. Enoch Pinson has the contract and is pushing the work as fast as circumstances will permit.

Miss Annie Rudd was at Greenwood several days last week because of the sickness of her niece, Miss Floride Rudd at Lander College.

Mr. Wm. G. Boazman, who recently suffered the painful accident of hav-

ing a falling log, is doing well and hopes to be up again in a short while.

The Cross Hill lodge, No. 159 A. F. M., held their annual December meeting last Friday evening. According to the various official reports this lodge has closed the most successful and prosperous year in its history of five years existence. In the points of membership, work, and general progress the year 1919 has been its best. Five years ago the lodge was organized by a few members of this fraternity under the leadership of Mr. J. A. Guthrie, whose untiring efforts have largely contributed to its success. Under its present stable foundation and success its future prosperity is very bright. There is some talk of a new hall for the organization which it is hoped will soon materialize into a more suitable and convenient meeting place. At the meeting Friday night the following officers were elected for the ensuing year: Joe L. Carter, W. M.; Chas. S. Pinson, S. W.; Henry G. Culbertson, J. W.; Claud J. Hipp, Treas.; W. Paul Martin, Sec.; G. Dewey Nelson, S. D.; Willie T. Boyce, J. D.; Jas. L. Guthrie and Rev. W. D. Ratchford, Stewards; John R. Wells, Tyler.

Mr. T. Miller Pinson was also elected a delegate to the State Grand Lodge and left here Sunday afternoon for Charleston to attend the meeting of that body which begins tomorrow.

Shop Early--Shop Mornings

Shop Early--Shop Mornings



APPROPRIATE PRESENTS

Do Your Christmas Shopping

AT

Minter Co.'s Cash Department Store

Christmas is just 15 days off--You should begin NOW to do your Christmas trading before the big Rush is On--You find it a pleasure to shop in this Big Store with its large and varied stocks. We are anticipating the largest Christmas business in our history and are well prepared to meet the demands of the trade.

Furs as Christmas Presents

What could be nicer than a handsome fur for Mother, Sister, Wife or Daughter? Furs are unusually good this season.

Neck Pieces \$12.50, \$20.00, \$25.00 to \$36.00
Sets \$35.00 to \$50.00

Christmas Sale of Coat Suits

We hope to close out every Coat Suit in the house by January 1st and have reduced prices to move them. Come and get this big saving.

\$85.00 Coat Suits \$65.00
\$75.00 Coat Suits \$54.75
\$60.00 Coat Suits \$44.98
\$50.00 Coat Suits \$38.98
\$40.00 Coat Suits \$28.98
\$35.00 Coat Suits \$25.98

Christmas Sale of Dresses

\$50.00 and \$55.00 Dresses \$37.98
\$40.00 and \$45.00 Dresses \$33.98
\$35.00 and \$37.50 Dresses \$27.98
\$25.00 Dresses \$19.99

Ladies' and Children's Bedroom Slippers

One of the most practical of gifts

Ladies' Felt Slippers \$1.75, \$2.00 and \$2.50
Children's Felt Slippers \$1.25 and \$1.50

Dolls! Dolls!!

While in New York recently we took the agency for a line of high class dolls—American made—the best shown in the market for several years. See display of these in our window. Special at \$5.00 and \$10.00

Silk Shirt Waists for Christmas Presents

A beautiful line of Georgette Waists for Christmas trade at \$4.98, \$6.98 to \$10.00
Silk Camisoles \$1.25, \$2.00 to \$3.00

Silk Underwear

Silk Underskirts \$5.00, \$7.50 to \$10.00
Silk Gowns \$5.00 and \$6.50
Silk Teddies \$3.00 to \$5.00

Ladies' Bath Robes

Ladies' Bath Robes \$5.00 to \$9.50
Children's Bath Robes \$2.25 to \$3.75

Children's Coats

A big assortment of fine Coats at Special prices \$10.00 and \$15.00

Close-out Millinery

Fine Pattern Hats at sacrifice prices.

Silk Hosiery

Phoenix and other good makes in Christmas boxes \$1.50, \$2.00 and \$2.50

Beaded Bags

The popular thing this season \$10.00 up
Others at \$2.50 and \$5.00

Sweaters

Ladies' and Children's Sweaters at special prices for Christmas shoppers \$4.98 to \$10.00

Minter Co.'s Cash Department Store

THE CHRISTMAS STORE

See Our Display of Christmas Handkerchiefs

Laurens, S. C.

See Christmas Dolls on Display in Our Windows