

Santa Claus' Sweetheart.

(Continued from page 2, Col. 6.)

He went quickly up to the door, over snow that had been tracked by the passing of many feet. There were footprints everywhere—great marks of a man's boot and the smaller ones of a woman's or a girl's shoe. The sight turned him a little giddy. Was this his goal—could his happy news be spoken here? He tried to shout, but his voice seemed frozen in his throat. He fell to trembling. He—he could not speak. He tried again, choking out a faint sound. There was no sign from the silent house that his call had been heard—no stir, no movement of



Its Empty, Staring Windows Chilled Shawe.

life. He flung himself against the door and battered it with his fists. The waiting seemed like eternity to him; then his hand sought the knob, turned it, and the door flew wide. He stared half dazed into the narrow passageway, with the stairs climbing at one side; all the light seemed out in the world behind him: the place was dim and chill. For a moment he paused; then his voice sounded through the silence.

"Halloo, halloo! Is a little child missing here?" There was a quick sound of running feet overhead, an opening door and a woman's scream.

"That's uncle, have you?" The cry went up from below: "Is a little child missing here?"

Something darted down the stairs. One wouldn't have said it was anything human, so swift was the motion, yet swifter than the flying feet, and yet pitifully human were the words that came from the mother's heart.

"Is—she—dead?" "No; I tell you, no; she's alive and well. She's at Thornby's logging camp. Don't faint! She is all right. She's safe, I tell you. Don't!"

Shawe was only just in time to catch the swaying form in his arms, and for the moment, as he stood there, holding the unconscious woman, he was unable to think what to do. It didn't seem possible to him that the joy of his message could harm her. Perhaps he ought to have broken it more gently. But how could he? It had to be told. No, no; the joy couldn't harm her! A little air, a touch of snow on her temples, and she would be herself again. He lifted his burden and turned to the open door. The clear light from without came searchingly in upon



"You," she said softly; "you—Humphrey?"

the still face on his breast, showing its pinched lines of distress and the ravages the tears had made in its fairness. He started at the sight and uttered a sharp exclamation.

The keen air revived her; she stirred a trifle with a low moan; a minute later her eyelids fluttered, and her words came disjointedly in little sobbing breaths:

"Safe, my precious, safe—thank God; oh, thank!" The cold whipped a tinge of color into her lips, her eyes opened wide, and she stared up into Shawe's face. A look of bewilderment suddenly clouded their gaze.

"You," she said softly; "you—Humphrey?"

She did not move from his arm, but very slowly she lifted her hand and touched him wonderingly, her fingers lingering over his coat and creeping up and up to his cheek.

"You, Humphrey!"

"Something like a sob broke from him. 'Elizabeth!' he cried. 'I don't understand,' she said weakly. 'It was so very long ago—oh, is it really you? I—I—thought you would never come back—so long ago—and you were angry—we were both angry, but I was the one to blame!'"

"No, no, no," he interrupted; "mine was the real fault! I knew that when it was too late, but I couldn't let you know. Before we could make our port the ship was wrecked—oh, it's a sad story! Most of the crew were lost, but the few of us who were saved lived somehow on that desolate little island waiting, hoping, fearing, through those interminable months before the rescue came. Then we were carried off to the other side of the world and from place to place—wanderers on the face of the globe—but I got home at last, and—there was no home for me—you had gone away, you and baby. They couldn't tell me where, but I searched for you, my girl; I searched for you. I wouldn't give up looking—I meant to find you—and it was so useless!"

She clung closer to him, stroking his quivering face with gentle fingers.

"I thought you never meant to come back," she whispered, "and I wanted to beg you to come. I wanted to tell you I was really the most to blame, but I didn't know where to send a letter. I had to keep still. Oh, I waited so patiently, and every day was a year! Then when you didn't come I couldn't bear the neighbors' pity. It—it hurt! So I stole away one night with Betty. We went to a big city where no one knew us, and we were very poor. I didn't mind much for myself, only for baby. It was so hard to find work. I—I almost gave up. Then I remembered Uncle Steven, my mother's half brother, who used to be with us a good deal when I was a child. I knew he was all alone out here, and I felt he would help Betty and me in our troubles. And he was so good; he is so good! He didn't even wait to answer my letter. He came to find us instead, and he brought us back to share his home with him. That was three years ago. But you—how is it you are here?"

"It's a long story, Bess, darling. I've knocked around everywhere. I hadn't the heart to settle to anything, you know—hunting, trapping, whatever offered. I'd try first one thing and then another. Something made me come over here. I don't know what it was. I simply had to come. I was on my way to the Northwest and passed through Wistar three weeks ago, never dreaming you were so near; then I went on to the logging camp and stopped there for a time, but I'd made all my plans to leave tomorrow!"

His voice trembled, and he rested his face against hers. "Oh," he went on brokenly, "I might have missed you altogether. We might never have met again—never—if it hadn't been for Santa Claus, sweetheart!"

She looked up curiously, interrupting him with a quick exclamation, and bit by bit the account of the little child's arrival at the lumber camp was told.

"But didn't you know right away who she was?" the mother asked jealously when he paused.

"Dear, I didn't. She was such a baby when I left—scarcely two years old, you remember. There was a likeness, though, to you that troubled me, but I told myself I was fanciful. I've seen that likeness so many times. It has been uppermost in my mind, going with me everywhere, eluding me everywhere. And her name was different—Hammond."

"That's uncle's name. He would have her called so. Then you came all that way not knowing who she was nor for my sake?"

"Yes," he answered honestly. "I only thought of the sorrow in the stricken household. I didn't think of you at all. And yet it was for your sake too. Ah, Bess, dear, my heart has been very tender for all mothers since I left you to fend for the little one alone. I can never make up for that!"

"Hush," she interposed; "you have made up! Even if I'd been somebody else and Betty somebody else it would have atoned and doubly atoned for you to do what you have done." She laughed unsteadily, she was so happy that her words had become hopelessly tangled. "You know what I mean," she finished.

"I know," he smiled back. "But you ought to have recognized Betty at once. There was no excuse."

"I thought she was a dear little tot." "Why, Humphrey, she's the very dearest, the sweetest, the most precious, the—"

He stopped the loving catalogue with a kiss.

"You'll let me stay and find that out for myself, won't you?" he asked humbly.

She clung to him, trembling all over, her face quite drawn and white.

"It won't take long. Oh, you must stay longer than that!"

"I'll stay till the end, please God," he said very solemnly.

As they stood together, faintly from the distance there came the sound of bells. The spirit of the blessed season filled the air—the cheer, the peace, the good will. North, south, the sound of bells; the spirit of the blessed season filled the air—the cheer, the peace, the good will. North, south, east, west, along the happy roads that lead around the world, the message ran. Oh, very beautiful are the roads of the world, but surely the most beautiful of them all is little Forgiveness lane that winds through tangles and briars and over stony and waste places, from heart to heart and climbs at last up to the very gates of heaven!

Chapter IX. Christmas Day.

THE day was several hours older when Humphrey and Elizabeth Shawe started for Thornby's camp. Before that time, however, poor Uncle Steven, weary and disheartened and looking suddenly like an old, old man, had returned from his futile search in and around Wistar, ac-



A Young Woman With a Radiantly Happy Face Ran Toward Them.

companied by a number of the inhabitants of the little town who were eager to lend what aid they could, although they realized how unavailing their efforts must prove.

They had expected to find the house wrapped in gloom, but instead, as they stopped at its door, a young woman with a radiantly happy face ran toward them, crying out the joyful news. Then a mighty shout went up from the sleighs. No one knew who started it, but it grew and grew until it seemed to reach the sky, and when it died away—it was a long while before that happened, because it was always breaking out again—there was a great blowing of noses and clearing of throats, as if an epidemic of influenza was raging among them all. As soon as quiet was restored every one went within doors to find Shawe, who was resting under the strictest orders not to move and who was allowed to remain quiet no longer. There would be ample time on another day to get over his fatigue. For the present he had to submit to being made much of. Such a shaking of hands as took place then—Uncle Steven started it—and such hearty wishes as were poured forth! It wasn't merry Christmas just once, but it was merry, merry Christmas over and over again until the house rocked with the noise. And there were no reproaches in word or thought about that sad past, with its mistakes and misunderstandings. It was all blotted out, just as the snow stretched its sparkling whiteness over the earth, hiding many an ugly spot, so the beautiful mantle of charity lay close over what had been. Finally, at Shawe's insistence, the sleigh was made ready—not Uncle Steven's shabby cutter, but the roomier one of the most important citizen of Wistar, who had been among the first to offer his services to find the little child. It was heaped high with robes from the other sleighs until its gorgeousness and comfort were something to wonder at, and four horses were harnessed to it. Then the best driver climbed up in front with much pride, and as soon as the husband and wife had taken their places behind him he cracked his whip briskly in a hurry to be gone. Again the air was rent with cheers, and amid the tumult the horses sprang forward. Ah, they were very different from sober old Danny and Whitefoot! They fairly flew over the road that

had seen the jolly progress of Santa Claus and his little sweetheart the previous day and that solemn faring southward through the night of the messenger bearing his good tidings. The bells rang out merrily—the gayest, gladdest tune—and the spirits of the sky, the plains, the woods, laughed back in an ecstasy of delight, echoing the happiness everywhere. As far as eye could reach the snow twinkled and shone as if with rapture that Christmas day. There was hardly any speech among the travelers, but joy sat very close to their hearts, and no one objected to the silence.

At last the logging camp was reached, and as the horses drew up with a great shaking of their bells the door of the shanty flew open and a body of men trooped out to greet the newcomers. They had all heard of Shawe's errand from old Jerome—all but the child, who was kept in ignorance, because no one knew what its result would be—and at sight of their former comrade a shout of welcome—and something more, something deeper—burst from them, to be echoed again and again. Under cover of the happy sounds Shawe, too moved for any words, jumped from the sleigh and turned to help his wife, but she scarcely touched his hand, springing past him as if she were winged. Only too well the men knew who the shining eyed woman was, yet they had no greeting for her. The exultation in her face silenced them all. They opened a way speedily for her to pass through and then turned by common accord to look at the sight that would meet her, as if they could see with her eyes! And yet the picture was an unforgettable one to them.

They saw the rude familiar room, beautiful as it had never been until the previous night, with the huge fire blazing at one side and on the hearth old Jerome bending down to the child, who, at the clatter without, had risen from her play, the skirt of her gown gathered up over a store of her new treasures as she turned wonderingly toward the door. The men, still looking, saw the little hand relax its hold hastily, so that the precious hoard fell to the floor unheeded—forgotten. The small face changed from bright to brighter, to brightest—they had not believed that possible—and then they saw nothing but two figures running toward each other and meeting in a close embrace, and they heard the cries uttered in shaking voices "Muvver!" "Dear; my little own!" mingled and lost themselves in breaking sobs and a low peal of rippling laughter.

"I swan that hick'ry makes the 'arnaldest smoke!" Jerome muttered a moment later. "It do beat all!" he stopped, choking over the words—"it do beat all," he said again, blinking around with misty eyes.

Some one laughed unsteadily, and some one else coughed; then a third person sneezed, and so the charm was broken. The mother raised her head and gazed over the little shoulder at

(Continued on page 7, Col. 1.)

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Happy New Year