

# The Christmas Scapegoat by JACK NORMAN



**"M"** R. PETERS brought you some mail, Miss Pam," announced Aunt Sally, coming into the cozy sitting room with four damp letters.

Pamela looked at them over knowingly, felt of their soft contents and smiled grimly. "The regular Christmas donations of handkerchiefs has begun," she observed in a dry but humorous voice. "This is from Lottie Preston. This," fingering a thinner envelope gingerly, "is probably a pin cushion cover from Geraldine, and this very fat envelope contains a linen initial handkerchief from Molly Drew.

"Last year, Aunt Sally, I received 17 handkerchiefs and three embroidered cushion tops that bore unmistakable marks of previous Christmas travels. I received three invitations to spend Christmas with relatives—Salina and Pauline, of course, and the Prestons—all of whom had gaps to be filled in, and I filled them as usual. I spent \$32 for Christmas gifts that I didn't enjoy giving because I knew they were expected, and made three trips to the city for the express purpose of suiting everybody as nearly as possible, and in consequence I grew so tired that I was cross to you for two whole days before I left on my Christmas tour.

"This year I shall not make a single present outside of my immediate family—which means just us two, Aunt Sally, for I intend to make myself a handsome Christmas present instead of wasting my money on the relatives who dump all their left-overs on me. I shall not accept a single invitation, either. I have lost the Christmas spirit."

Aunt Sally's honest black face took on a look of perplexity, whereupon Miss Pamela went on to explain the situation.

"I am tired of being a Christmas scapegoat," she declared with spirit. "Everything unpleasant is loaded on my shoulders because I happen to be unmarried."

"I do wish to goodness sake you had-a-married!" exclaimed Aunt Sally in a tone that gave Pamela to understand that all hope had been relinquished.

"You never was cut out for an old maid," Aunt Sally maintained, sorrowfully, whereupon Pamela shrugged her well-set shoulders in half humorous despair.

She dearly loved her faithful old servant and friend, who had descended to her together with the little country home which was the most undesirable of "effects" mentioned in the paternal will "to be equally divided among my three daughters."

Pamela being unmarried, had no need of the negotiable property which her sisters' husbands eagerly desired for the purpose of enlarging their business operations, so Pamela had accepted the country house and a third of a maternal income, which barely sufficed to cover the taxes and repairs.

"Now we shall see what Salina has to say," observed Pamela as she opened her sister's hurriedly scrawled letter.

"Dear Pamela," she read aloud. "Please don't take offense at what I have done, for I simply had to take advantage of your irresponsibility at a pinch. The Kensingtons—you remember them, don't you, Jim's sister and family?—have just come back from Texas, of course expecting to be invited here for Christmas. That is what we've had to do if I didn't have you to fall back on. I'm sending them all down to you to spend the holidays, as we simply can't have them here, for the reason that we've invited the Masons, Jim's business friends, you know. It is likely that Tom Mason will be here if he can get away from a pressing business engagement, and as he was rather attentive to Geraldine last summer at the mountains something may come of this Christmas visit. You know how fastidious Tom is and how a crowd of noisy children would annoy him. I know men of his kind—they are as sensitive as girls, and I don't propose to spoil my daughter's prospects for the sake of the Kensingtons."

"Geraldine is packing a box of things for the Kensingtons which we will send by express to-day, so you needn't go to any expense buying Christmas presents for them. I hope you'll have a real pleasant Christmas and come to see us as soon after the holidays as possible."

Pamela threw down the letter with a determined gesture and for a few moments she thought deeply, painstakingly, with her smooth forehead puckered in a very unusual frown.

"Aunt Sally," she said suddenly, "could you possibly make out to spend Christmas week in the pasture cabin?"

"For what, Miss Pam?" asked the negress in a puzzled voice.

"For peace—I'm going to spend Christmas as I please. The Kensingtons can come if they like and make merry in my house, but I am not going to be a Christmas scapegoat any longer. Can you make the cabin do, Aunt Sally?"

"Deed an' I can," was the confident answer. "I can cook the bestes' kind in a fireplace, jes' like my old mammy could. Ben can haul us down all the bed close an' things we need."

Fortunately Salina was at home when Pamela's telephone call reached her, so there was no delay. She was surprised to receive a mes-



"I'M NOT LIVING THERE JUST AT PRESENT," SAID PAMELA



"I'M TIRED OF BEING A CHRISTMAS SCAPEGOAT."

sage from her sister and still more surprised at its purport.

"You have made other Christmas plans!" she repeated in blank amazement.

"Yes, I'm real sorry you will be put out Salina," came the brisk, businesslike answer—"What did you say?—O, no, Salina, I couldn't possibly do that, but my house will be here, open to your guests, so send them right along just as you planned, only tell them that I have made arrangements to be away over Christmas—What?—They can't cook? Then I don't see but that you'd better send Geraldine down to entertain them, as she is such an excellent manager and hostess."

Salina's answering voice was exceedingly sharp. "Geraldine can't possibly be spared," she snapped. "I wrote you that the Masons are going to be with us, and we hope to have Tom if he can possibly get off, and I really think something definite may come of his visit, for I'm almost certain he admires Geraldine. Just give the Kensingtons a sort of a camp Christmas and they'll be perfectly satisfied."

"Very well," Pamela answered, cheerfully, "send them down and let them have a camp Christmas, as you say. I'll see that the house is well stocked with provisions and will leave the key under the doorstep—don't forget to tell them that, Salina, or they won't be able to get in, mind."

Pamela dropped the receiver to choke off Salina's parting protest, and hurried away fearful of being recalled. She went the rounds of the village stores, ordering what she needed to tide herself and the Kensingtons through the holiday week.

It was a snowy morning and walking was very disagreeable and tiring, so by the time Pamela reached her own gate she was glad to climb up beside old Ben on the bob sled that was taking the last consignment of household stuff to the cabin in the pasture where Aunt Sally already held cheerful sway.

The next morning was clear and very cold. Pamela, in her warm but humble cabin sitting room, thought of the Kensingtons.

"Ben had better lay the fires up at the house so that it won't take too long to warm up after they come," she said. "You tell him about it, Aunt Sally, when he brings down the groceries."

Pamela settled herself to a pleasant task, which was nothing less than the ordering of a long-wished-for winter coat with fur trimmings, which was to be her Christmas present to herself. She had a \$30 check saved to pay for it, and was about to inclose it in the carefully written letter, to which she had pinned a clipping from the cloak maker's catalogue, when Aunt Sally called to her from the front door.

"Dey's come!" she announced. "Why, dey's most all growed up! I expected for to see a passel of chilluns."

"They're just big, Aunt Sally, not grown," Pamela explained, watching the stumbling descent of the six Kensingtons from the station hack. "The oldest girl can't be over 15, for she was born while Salina was spending the summer with us when Geraldine had her third

birthday. I remember Salina told us the whole Kensingtons' history when she received her sister-in-law's announcement of the child's birth—four girls and a boy."

"That last one walks terrible puny," Aunt Sally observed with something akin to pity.

"That must be the mother. She has had a lot of sickness, I understand. The father died three years ago, but according to Jim and Salina he wasn't of much account anyway—a professor, or something bookish, I believe."

Pamela went back to her writing, but seemed unable to finish it to her satisfaction. She could not put her mind to it; instead, she kept thinking of the Kensingtons, of Salina and Geraldine, and lastly of Tom Mason, whose supposed fancy for the former surprised and rather irritated Pamela, who had always considered Tom thoroughly sensible.

"I suppose his money has spoiled him," she said to herself as her mind went back to the days when Tom was her school friend, before the Masons made their fortune in Pennsylvania oil lands.

"Certainly Tom Mason of old would not have thought of marrying an affected, vain girl like Geraldine. How Salina has spoiled that girl! Whew, there goes the ink all over my letter. Now I shall have to write another!"

But she didn't even begin another letter. Instead she rose and flung on her coat and hood preparatory to going out.

"I'm going up to the house, Aunt Sally," she announced to her surprised servant. "I'll pretend I'm a neighbor who wants to see the lady of the place."

Pamela rang her own doorbell rather timidly, and was admitted by a tall, rather pale girl in a skimpy plaid dress.

The girl led her to the dining room, where the other four were seated before an open fire. In a deep-seated rocker, with a well-worn shawl about her thin shoulders, sat a gaunt-looking woman of middle age, who introduced herself as Mrs. Kensington, a relative-in-law of Miss Pamela.

"You are not very well, are you?" Pamela asked, as she accepted a chair beside the fire.

"I'm a great deal better than I was last year," was the cheerful answer.

Miss Pamela left such a kind note of welcome for us. She must be a very nice person.

"O, yes," said Pamela, with a flush of shame as she remembered the indifferent wording of that reluctant note. "Well, I must go. Thank you for letting me warm up. I hope you'll have a real nice Christmas here."

She rushed out into the keen, wintry day in a rage against herself and Salina and Jim, who had combined in that shabby treatment of the needy Kensingtons.

Outside of her gate she narrowly escaped being run over by a trig little cutter with two occupants, one of whom she recognized with a start of amazement as her old friend, Tom Mason.

He looked exceedingly well-to-do in his fur great coat and his smooth, blond face had a fresh, boyish charm that made him look much younger than he really was, for Pamela knew that he was exactly her own age—31.

"May I stop?" he asked, as he threw back the lap robes. "The south-bound train ran off the track just below the station here and I took that opportunity to give myself the pleasure of calling on you."

"I'm not living there just at present," said Pamela, with a backward nod of her head, "but I'll be glad to have you go down to my cabin with me. And O, I do need sensible advice just this moment, and I'm awfully glad to see you, Tom."

Seated before Aunt Sally's nicely laid table in the lean-to kitchen, Pamela poured out the story of the Kensingtons.

"Do tell me what I can do to ease my con-

science and give those people a real good time," she begged.

"Why, give them a rousing good Christmas tree. I'll help," Tom offered cheerfully.

"Geraldine is sending a Christmas box for the Kensingtons, but I don't believe there'll be enough in it to make the tree look real festive," said Pamela, "so we'd better do what we can at the village."

The tree trimming began that evening with great gusto. Tom opened Geraldine's Christmas box expectantly and out tumbled a lot of antiquated toys, half a dozen summer hats, stained and crushed beyond repair, some worn and none too clean waists and two dragged, silk-lined skirts. In the bottom of the box were two baskets of cheap candy and a cake and a few shopworn Christmas cards.

Tom's wholesome face had taken on a look of deep disgust. He caught up the armful of rumpled finery and flung it violently on the glowing coals of the big fireplace.

"So much for Geraldine's generosity!" he exclaimed in a voice that would have made Geraldine's ears burn furiously, had she heard it.

At 10 o'clock Tom took his cheerful leave, promising to return by 10 o'clock on Christmas morning.

Tom reappeared promptly at the appointed hour, with additional packages, which he stowed in a corner, for they did not seem designed for the tree.

At 11:30 the jangle of sleigh bells announced the arrival of the guests, who trooped in rather timidly, bewildered by the littleness and humbleness of the cabin, evidently, but Tom soon put them at ease.

By the time dinner was over the guests were as happy as birds, even to the pale, weak-looking mother, who glowed with the reflected happiness of her children.

And the Christmas tree surprise! It was almost too much to be quietly borne by children who had known so very little of Christmas lavishment. Laden with gifts, they departed all a-quiver with gratitude.

"It has been a great success!" Tom declared when the jangle of sleigh bells had died away on the icy night air. "One phase of it is regrettable, though, and that is the dissatisfaction it has left in my mind."

"What do you mean?" Pamela asked, frankly surprised.

"It has made me feel dissatisfied with my bachelor existence. It is lonely at best and a pretty selfish way of living."

"So unmarried men are selfish and irresponsible as well as unmarried women, are they?" mused Pamela. "I'm rather glad to hear that because I have so often been censured for selfishness and obstinacy and—"

"Do you ever think seriously of getting married, Pam?" Tom broke in.

"I haven't for years," was the frank answer.

"I have thought of it a good deal lately—very lately," he declared, significantly. "If you could make up your mind to marry me, Pamela, we could have many a Christmas like this, for we certainly—"

"Marry you!" Pamela echoed, turning her crimsoning face toward the speaker. "Why, I never once thought of—not for years, that is," she interrupted herself to say truthfully.

"But once you did think of me," Tom cried, triumphantly. "I wanted you years ago, Pam, but now I want you a great deal more. At 31 a man knows his mind perfectly, especially if it concerns a woman that he has known and cared for all his life."

Then for the first time the remembrance of Geraldine's expectations surged through Pamela's mind. She spoke of it in a confused, embarrassed way, whereupon Tom laughed and said he guessed the Clydes would survive the disappointment, especially as he had never given them any grounds for such expectations.

"Come, Pam, give me my answer," he urged, "and don't forget that the season called for—a joyous one to me."

Aunt Sally, listening eagerly behind the half-shut kitchen door, saw rather than heard what followed. She smiled a big, intensely gratified smile as she turned back to her fragrant old pipe.

"Thank the good Lord, she's settled at last!" she exclaimed, gratefully.

Then, after a long, delicious pull at her faithful pipe, she added, triumphantly, "An' she's done better'n any of 'em, too, if she is a Christmas scapegoat."

## CHRISTMAS COMING

HOW THE HOLIDAY IS REGARDED BY DIFFERENT PEOPLE.

It Depends Entirely on One's View-point as to What the Day Brings to Each—The Child and Pater Differ.



"CHRISTMAS is coming!" shouts the schoolboy, flinging his cap in the air. "Turkey and pudding! Mince pie, jolly pantomimes, and parties! Hurrah for Christmas!"

"Christmas is coming," says the draper. "Turn one of our showrooms into a toy bazar and get out the list of tickets required for the New Year's sale. What a good job Christmas has not followed in the steps of other old institutions. Thank goodness for Christmas!"

"Christmas is coming," murmurs the employe of the latter. "Hours of extra unpaid labor; bullying, sweating, hurry scurry to catch the train, then helgo! for home and holidays. If it only came quicker and stayed longer we should say 'Welcome Christmas.'"

"Christmas is coming," says busy mother. "There's the pudding, cakes and mince-meat to make. And the shopping there is to do! Presents for the little ones' stockings, not forgetting something warm for father to wear, and some new curtains to make the house look gay. Christmas is coming—the busiest time of all the year—and the happiest."

"Christmas is coming," muses the child, gazing dreamily into the fire.

"I wonder what Santa Claus will bring me this year? Let's see, I've written out 'doll,' 'perambulator,' and 'picture book,' and all three pieces of paper went up the chimney all right—though I'm not quite sure whether I spelt 'perambulator' just right. Still, Santa Claus will understand. Oh! I do hope he'll be quick and come. Dear old Father Christmas!"

"Dear, indeed!" echoes Pater.

"Thank goodness he does only come once a year, for I should soon find myself in the bankruptcy court were he a frequent visitor. No wonder the abbreviation of the word 'Christmas' starts with 'X,' for it is the period of the 'ex's.' The young folk may hang their stockings, but I say hang Christmas!"

"Christmas is coming," reflects the errand boy as he fixes the sprig of mistletoe to his cap. "I must be on my best behavior for the next few days, no loitering on my errands, no back-answers when I'm grumbled at, then great shall be the number of my Christmas boxes."

"Christmas is coming," sneers the dyspeptic. "The time for over-feeding and drunkenness, cheap sentiment and ever-greens. Turkey and mince-meat! Ugh! the combination makes me shudder. How thankful I shall be when Christmas is gone!"

Christmas is coming."

She murmurs the word as she stoops reverently over a tiny pair of shoes, a little white frock and blue sash, lying in a sacred corner of the drawer. Many Christmases ago these shoes pattered lightly hither and thither under a pair of eager, restless feet, that ribbon encircled a fairy form that danced in and out helping and hindering in a thousand ways the numerous preparations for Yule-tide. A film of tears suddenly spreads over mother's eyes as she shuts the drawer and turns sharply away. Cruel Christmas! when you bring such memories as this for your gift.

### Christmas Crackers.

Do "plants" for making pretty gifts grow up to Christmas trees? And are "the sea-sons' greetings" sent by salt sons of the seas?

Are Yule-logs cut from snowdriftwood by Yule-tide washed ashore? And could you stub a mistletoe against a parlor door?

If Eve had tried from holly-twigs a party-gown to weave, Do you suppose that Adam would have called her "Christmas Eve?"

Saint Nicholas in autosleigh defies police and laws: Do regulations as to speed contain a Santa clause?

—Lippincott's.

### Yule Cake.

On Christmas night, if a maiden place a piece of the Yule-cake under her pillow she will dream of her future husband. Also a portion of the cake should be kept for the next year, as it brings luck in the house. The plum pudding must always be kept and again partaken of on New Year's day if one would have a successful year.

### Burning the Yule Log.

The ancient Saxons burnt the yule log as a symbol of the turning of the sun toward spring.