

### The Old Folks' Christmas Present

By DELYSLE FERREE CASS



HE old folks always had wanted a baby girl, even long after Henry had been born. But the years rolled by, their boy grew up big, handsome and strong, always cheerful and helpful about the farm, and they tried to resign themselves to the fact that their humble hopes never would be satisfied. Old John Barker never referred to them, but every once in a while his wife would catch herself brooding, misty-eyed, of the same day when young Henry would marry and leave them alone on the big farm for which there was no other heir.

Her sole comfort in the thought that he would undoubtedly marry one of the honest buxom daughters of neighboring farmers, who would be content with country life and not expect to take him too far away from them in their old age.

Then came the great war, and Henry went overseas with his regiment as did most of the other true



Accustomed to the Wicked Frivolities of Paris.

American boys. The old folks parted from him courageously—old John with a stern grip of clenched, toil-worn hands, and Ma Barker with tears steadfastly hidden behind her faded, hazy eyes. He was their all and they gave him.

In the anxious months that followed the old folks' life held the same hard routine as ever on the farm. Old John drove to town oftener than usual—sometimes even twice a week—to see if any letters had come from mysterious, sinister places in France, and he and mother would pore over the few that did arrive in the proud knowledge that their Henry was a "good" boy and was doing his duty. They prayed each night that the Lord would keep him safe to come back to them and to keep him from temptation while away from their care.

Then one day, like a thunderbolt out of a clear sky, came a terrible letter from France, which said: "I have found the sweetest little girl in all the world, and I'm bringing her home with me as a Christmas present to you. The regiment is now at Bress for embarkation and we'll surely be home for the holidays. . . . She is awfully pretty; black hair, big eyes and always wanting to be kissed. Her name is Angelique. . . . Of course she can't speak anything but French, but, dear mother and dad, I just know that you'll soon learn to love her as much as I do."

The old folks were stricken with consternation. Their Henry bringing home a French girl—a foreigner who wouldn't understand their simple, old-fashioned ways, and to whom they never would reconcile themselves! Such a one—accustomed to the wicked frivolities of Paris—never would fit in on the farm, however modest or "nice" she might be. More likely she would despise it, and them, and take their boy away to live in some big city—leave them lonely in the old age that was now upon them.

The old folks bowed their grayed heads beneath the blow, nearly heart broken, although they tried bravely to conceal their most harrowing doubts from each other.

"Maybe she won't expect to wear silk underwear all the time and will be willing to help you wipe the dishes evenings, mother," old John cautiously tried to console his wife as they sat alone in the farmhouse kitchen one night after chores were done. "And maybe, after all, she won't want to smoke cigarettes before people when she finds that American girls around here don't do that sort of thing."

Ma Barker shook her head sadly. "I'd do anything almost to make our boy happy, pa," she said, while the tears gathered in her faded eyes. "We must do our best not to let him notice how disappointed we are. Only I'm afraid she'll never be content here on the farm with us."

Ma Barker went about preparations for the big Christmas dinner with hearty premonitions, heavy hearted. She was nervous; wanted to sit down and cry, but felt she had to keep up before pa, for Henry's sake, if not

ing else. She knew of old, exactly all the good things that her boy liked for the Christmas dinner—juicy black fruit cake, steaming plum pudding, odoriferous brown-roasted turkey, and but oh! she didn't know what to prepare for her—couldn't get any frog legs if she had wanted to. And the geography said that frog legs were a favorite French delicacy.

Oh, whatever would the minister say? . . . yes, and Sally Howarth, too, when they heard about—about "Angelique!" Sally had been "sweet" on Henry, and poor old Ma Barker had hoped—

But, ah well! She mustn't let her dear boy know! He and his Angelique would be there tomorrow.

Christmas eve the old folks decorated the house with fir boughs, holly and strings of colored popcorn. They even trimmed a tree as they had done for Henry ever since he had been a little boy. Ma Barker thought, with a rising lump in her throat, that maybe the French girl would look on it all as silly; would curl her lip at their homely endeavors, but . . .

Christmas morning Jed, the hired man, drove off in the sleigh to meet their boy and his bride at the station in town. The odor of savory good things on the kitchen stove permeated the whole farmhouse, and the big open fire in the dining room crackled in comfortable contrast to the sparkling cold of the snow outside. Ma Barker bustled about, sadly setting the table with her best dishes. She caught old John stealthily coming up the basement stairs with a dusty demijohn.

"Why, Pa Barker!" she exclaimed. "What's that you've got there? I do believe it's that cider that fermented so as we couldn't use it!"

"Yes, 'tis," admitted old John pretty shamefacedly and shuffling his feet to hide his embarrassment. "But you see, I . . . I thought that maybe as Henry's girl is a French woman, she'd rather like hard cider, seeing as we haven't any light wines nor champagne for her to drink."

A few minutes later they heard the sleighbells jingling, the snort of the horses and the crunch of runners on the snow in front of the house. Instantly the old folks forgot the dread that had been overshadowing them since the letter came. Ma Barker, with trembling fingers undid her apron, smoothed her hair "so that Henry's girl would see her looking right," and rushed out of doors. Old John followed more decorously and stilly, for his rheumatism had been troubling him more than ever lately, making work harder for him about the farm. Yes, he certainly was going to miss Henry's help when—

"My boy! my boy!" cried ma as she threw herself into the extended arms of the sturdy young soldier in khaki as he stepped out of the sleigh behind the broadly-grinning Jed. They clung ecstatically together for a few minutes until old John forced them apart to pump his son's hand up and down and ramble something about the bright sun on the snow making his eyes water.

And then, after the first exuberant greetings were over with, Henry laughingly disengaged himself and cried at them:

"And now let me introduce Angelique to you, people. And I want you



Angelique Was a Four-Year-Old Baby Girl.

to feel that she's yours as much as mine. She'll love you, ma, as she does me."

From the depths of the hooded sleigh he bundled a diminutive figure, swaddled in furs and laprobes, with two big, sparkling round eyes beaming on them and red lips curved up into an adorable smile.

Angelique was a four-year-old baby girl whom he had adopted from a war-devastated village near the front!

Her people were all killed by the Germans," Henry explained apologetically, "so I thought I'd bring her along instead of letting her be sent to some orphanage."

Ma Barker gave a choking sort of cry and caught the baby girl for which she had prayed so long to her relieved breast. As for old John, he swallowed hard, winked broadly at the grinning Jed beside the horse, and said:

"We've got some hard cider in the house, Jed. Better come in with me and have a nip before you put the horses up. Gosh, but come to think of it, Sen't. Claus' presents always are supposed to be surprises anyway, aren't they, Jed?"

### Carol Singing Is Dying Out

THE custom of carol singing out of doors at Christmas time seems to be dying out.

This is a great pity, for carols are a branch of folk music, the unconscious act of the peasant mind, a heritage of inestimable worth.

In many English villages there are carols peculiar to themselves, to be jealously guarded and retained for their use.

The Christmas carol dates from the birth of Christianity itself, the angels having sung their carols at the birth of Jesus Christ.

Among the early Christians carols were sacred hymns representing Christ's nativity.

Now the name is given to a variety of popular metrical compositions from the simple record of the birth of our Lord to rade was-sall songs and rhymes of holiday revelry.

Probably no Christmas would seem complete without the well-known and popular hymn, "Hark! the Herald Angels Sing."

The word carol, which originally meant a dance, is thought to have come into our language either from the Norman French carole or from the Celtic carol.

In 1822 Davies Gilbert published "Some ancient Christmas carols, with the tunes to which they were formerly sung in the west of England." In his preface he declared himself to be zealous "of preserving them in their original forms, as specimens of times now passing away, and of religious feelings now superseded by others of a different caste."

Of late years some of the churches—chiefly in the larger cities—have held "Christmas carol services" during the Christmas season. This is an excellent movement, and might profitably be taken up by churches all over the country. Certainly if the churches can restore this old custom it will add to the enjoyment of the season.

France is exceptionally rich in carols, which are often drinking songs as in many European countries. We find many French carols translated into English, no doubt as a result of the intercourse which existed between dwellers on either side of the channel, in the days when English youths often pursued their studies in France.

There is a great deal of discussion as to which is the most popular carol.

While it is impossible to name the favorite, there can be little doubt of the universal appeal of "God rest ye, merry gentlemen," whose plaintive melody has touched a chord in the popular mind. Among modern compositions may be mentioned, "The Shepherds Left Their Sheep," by Alfred Hollins. Mr. Hollins is blind, but this affliction has not prevented him from becoming one of the finest organists and composers in Britain.

Washington Irving in his famous "Sketch Book" introduces us to most of the old English customs which have from time immemorial, attended the Christmas festival. Of his first night at Bracebridge Hall he says:

"I had scarcely got into bed when a strain of music seemed to break forth in the air just below the window. I listened, and found it proceeded from a band, which I concluded to be the waits from some neighboring village. They went around the house playing under the windows. I drew aside the curtains, to hear them more distinctly. The moonbeams fell through the upper part of the casement, partially lighting up the antiquated apartment. The sounds, as they receded, became more soft and aerial, and seemed to accord with the quiet and the moonlight. I listened and listened—they became more and more tender and remote, and, as they gradually died away, my head sank upon the pillow and I fell asleep."

In Pasquill's "Jests," a book published in 1604, an amusing story is told of a knight who gave a Christmas feast at which he entertained his friends and the tenantry.

The host ordered no man at the table to drink a drop "till he that was master over his wife should sing a carol." A pause ensued and then one poor male, more arising than the others, timidly lifted his lonely voice.

The knight then turned to the ladies, who sat at a table apart, and "bade her who was master over her husband," sing a carol. The legend says that forthwith "the women fell all to singing, that there was never heard such a catter-walling piece of musick."



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