

any highland evening...
ness man. "And heaven knows," she said to herself, "I need an occasional pick-me-up."

At 5:30 she telephoned Keith to stop at the day nursery for Betty. After she had hung up the receiver she realized with a sinking heart that Keith's voice had sounded flat and very, very discouraged. She did hope that nothing more than usual had gone wrong at the store. But, she thought, a little bitterly, resentfully even, as she hurried back to the pretty, spotless kitchen, something doubtless had. Oh, if only Keith had not given up his position with the Jarson people and gone into business for himself. She hadn't wanted him to surrender the security and dependableness of the substantial salary he had been getting. But he had brushed aside her scruples. Impatiently. Intolerant even, of her opinion. What did she know of business? he had demanded. Besides, a man had to take a chance some time or other if he was ever to get any place. "Yes," she had said, "but these are not the times to be taking chances."

WHILE she set the dining-room table prettily, Margaret decided she would say nothing about the vase but would let its exciting and glamorous beauty capture Keith's imagination as it had hers. She went to the door to meet Keith and Betty when they came and, smiling gayly, kissed them both impulsively.

"Did you get my dress and sweater, Mother?" Betty wanted to know.

"Yes, dear," Margaret told her nervously. There was something in Keith's face—as if he had been whipped; had the heart taken out of him. He was pale, and the lines around his once-smiling mouth and twinkling gray eyes were deeper than usual.

"They're on your bed," Margaret said, giving Betty a little push. "Go try them on quick, while I cook the chops."

But as Betty skipped away, Margaret, due to her sudden nervousness and desire to be saying something, anything, very foolishly remarked: "Leonard's had some adorable smocks and embroidered jersey dresses. I wanted awfully to get one for Betty for Christmas but I knew it was out of the question. I had to shop around a lot to find what I did get with what money I had."

"I do wish," Keith interrupted, frowning, "that you would stop buying things at Leonard's. They're higher than other places and I want to get square with them. I still owe about \$80. What did they say about the \$15 payment today?"

"You'd have thought I was handing them a hundred," Margaret said, maneuvering so that she stood between Keith and the gleaming vase. "Not many people are paying bills or making payments on overdue accounts this near Christmas. The cashier was virtually obsequious when I told her I expected to make a bigger payment the first of the year."

She pushed a stray black curl behind an ear and tapped the floor with a nervous foot. She felt embarrassed and

Keith, if you'd go...
more ruthlessly, you could make them come across."

"It's easy for you to talk like that," Keith said coldly. "You've never had to deal with the public. You'd find collecting a most discouraging business. Just how can you make a man pay if he hasn't the money or says he hasn't? You can't call him a liar; at least, I can't. Of course, I might stick a gun in his back or some such persuasive thing, but I'm not made that way either."

"Sometimes I almost wish you were," Margaret retorted from the dining room. "No money to pay with! My hat. They are liars all. The Hunters, the Wilsons and the Browns have all had two or more big new cars since we got our old trouble-buggy, and the Browns have 200 invitations out for a reception in their home New Year's Day. And they actually had the gall to send us an invitation. It's an insult to our intelligence, if you ask me."

"Oh, let's skip it," Keith said wearily. "How soon will dinner be ready?"

"Ten minutes!" Margaret called from the kitchen. Stirring furiously the clear brown gravy that Keith liked, she told herself that she would go into town first thing in the morning and return that vase. Perhaps after Christmas she could buy it back or something equally beautiful. Maybe her sister in California would send her a check again this year.

WHILE she was washing the dishes and standing them in the wire drainer for the hot rinse, after an unhappy, practically conversationless dinner, Margaret heard a chair or a table fall, along with the sound of delicate shattered glass. Her heart stood still. The vase! Nothing else would have made that clear, ringing sound. Margaret ran to the living room. Betty was sitting on the floor and crying loudly.

"Oh, Betty!" Margaret wailed, heart-sick and furious. "Why are you so careless? Always running or kicking or dancing about and never looking where you're going. If only just once you'd walk."

Betty cried louder and Keith interrupted: "Don't scold her. The rug slipped." Keith was on his knees now, beside the child and picking up the fragments of glass. "I never saw this before," he said, looking at Margaret suspiciously.

Margaret's face turned red, then paled. Her hands, which still held the tea towel, shook a little. "I bought it today. It was so lovely, and I was going to ask you to consider it my Christmas gift."

"Well, it's a shame it had to get broken right off, but look, Margaret." Keith's voice was suddenly hard and without pity. "Where'd you get the money for it? You didn't have it charged?"

"I bought it at Parker's. I just couldn't resist it. I paid for it."

Without a word Keith picked up the paper. His significant silence was com-

plete condemnation, and Margaret's heart constricted and then suddenly hardened against him. She pulled the sobbing child into her arms and, hugging her close, wiped the tears from her face. "Never mind, dear, Mother's sorry she spoke so crossly. Go find a story and get ready for bed. I'll read to you after you're tucked in."

IT WAS snowing fast when Margaret stopped, as if drawn by a magnet, in front of Wade's gown shop windows the following afternoon. Great white powder-puff flakes that any other time would have sent a thrill of delight through every fiber of her being. She loved the snow, the bracing mile-high air. All the holiday excitement. For there was something about Christmas that went deep under her skin. She was still a sentimental person, she had often told herself, and the old symbols and traditions clung in spite of a highly commercialized era. But today the lilt and the thrill of it were missing. She couldn't get into the spirit of the thing. This year Christmas was going to be a flop. She knew it, and her heart was heavy with a poignant nostalgia for the days that were gone.

Belated shoppers, tired office workers were jamming the interurban cars. It was the rush hour between 5:30 and 6 o'clock. But Margaret had suddenly lost all sense of time. She had made three calls. She had stated her case to Messrs. Hunter, Wilson & Brown. And before she left their offices each man had said in effect: "I'll see what I can do, Mrs. Carter. When you put it that way—I hadn't realized things were like that with you and Mr. Carter. Mr. Carter has not been really insistent. I'm sorry you've had to do this. I'll try to do something about a payment tomorrow. And yes, you may rest assured that I will not let Mr. Carter know you had anything to do with it. I understand how you feel. Good day. And Merry Christmas!"

Margaret had smiled and said: "And a merry Christmas to you and your family." But descending in the elevator, each time, she had experienced a feeling of doubt. Each man had said, "I'll see what I can do." He hadn't committed himself and, after all, what was even a promise from any of these men? Margaret had felt very depressed.

Nevertheless, she made an enchanting picture in her close-fitting black coat

"If you could choose, young man, what would you buy?" Margaret asked softly and with an irresistibly friendly smile

with its worn fox collar framing her lovely young face. And gazing now upon the beautiful dress in Ward's, her lips curved unconsciously in a smile.

Abruptly the snow ceased its silent falling and suddenly an icy wind swept the Avenue and cut dagger-like at Margaret's smooth cold cheeks. She shivered and realized that night had come. And there went a Mississippi Avenue street car! She would have to wait ten, perhaps fifteen minutes for the next one.

And she'd forgotten the meat for dinner. Oh, well, they would have scrambled eggs—if there were enough eggs, which was doubtful—since they seemed always to be short of something. She took one last hungry look at the dress and made a sudden vow. When her check came, she would buy that dress and nothing would stop her. Nothing. Not Keith's demurring or any conscientious scruples about unpaid bills. She simply couldn't stand it to go on like this without something new or beautiful to satisfy her soul; or maybe it was only her vanity. Anyway, she didn't care. She was sick of being a good and duty-conscious woman. She would be a bit selfish and ruthless herself. Like those other people who managed to get things they wanted.

In the morning mail the check actually did come. So it could happen. It had happened, Margaret exulted. Her eyes were aflame with joy; her heart pounding suffocatingly as she stared at the figures, \$110. Oh, life was still capable of dealing out pleasant surprises.

IT SEEMED to Margaret as she merged with the hurrying, excited crowds that holly wreaths and Christmas greens in the windows and for sale on street corners had never been so beautiful; so symbolic and gorgeous. And surely the holiday spirit had never been more joyous or people so human and kind.

Margaret smiled companionably at strangers, old and young, men and women alike who responded in kind. All were laden with a heterogeneous assortment of bundles, with the easily recognizable little red wagon for Johnny, the sleeping doll for Susan and the traditional long narrow boxes which fairly

shouted ties for uncles, in-laws and big brothers.

She felt a warm inner glow when she dropped a silver dollar in the Salvation Army's Christmas kettle and received a grateful acknowledgment from the black-bonneted woman, standing red-faced and patient in the increasing cold.

"Peace on earth, good will to men," caroled a trio of voices from a sidewalk radio in front of a music store. The snow made a crunchy sound beneath Margaret's swinging steps. Blithely she bought a sprig of holly, pinned it to her fur collar and told the boy to keep the change.

Her head was a happy whirl of plans. She would get the dress, then a buggy and a silken-haired, beautiful sleeping doll and a pretty set of dishes for Betty. For Betty was domestic in her tastes and never tired of playing house and surrounding herself with a family of dolls.

SHE must not forget a string of larger lights and some of the newer electric ornaments for the tree. She had promised Betty that they would decorate the tree directly after dinner tonight. She would then purchase a soft, warm, English wool sweater—a maroon or deep bright blue for Keith.

In front of a toy-shop window she paused and became instantly aware of a small, inadequately clad and very tense little boy close beside her. His face was pressed to the plate-glass window and in his brown eyes there was such a wistful look of longing that Margaret's throat tightened.

The child's nose was red, his thin face blue with cold. Scrutinizing him more closely, Margaret saw that there were holes in both his shoes and his worn coat was at least two sizes too small for him. His hands were thrust into his pockets. He couldn't, Margaret decided, be more than 7 years old, maybe only 6. She touched his shoulder gently. "If you could choose, young man, what would you buy?" she asked softly and with an irresistibly friendly smile.

Startled, the child gazed into Margaret's mistily sympathetic eyes. "The skates," he announced. And before his look, Margaret's heart wept. "But we can't have any Christmas presents this year," he finished.

"And how does that happen, Jimmy?" "Robert's my name," he told her seriously. "My Daddy had the flu and died and Mother's sick. My Aunt Jane's takin' care of us but we haven't got any



when Keith came into the warm kitchen, bright with cherry red, Spring green and old ivory-painted furniture and walls. "Christmas gift, from me to thee!" She closed his cold fingers around a receipted bill. From Leonard's. Paid in full.

"Margaret!" Keith exclaimed, his gray eyes incredulous. "How could you do this?"

Tears sprang to Margaret's eyes when she saw the look in Keith's face after she had told him.

He snatched her to him. "My girl!" he cried hoarsely, chokingly. "I haven't been so happy for—well, for a couple of years, I guess. I had been thinking I had lost my little pal along with—other things these last few desperate years."

Suddenly he pushed her away and his eyes filled with excited laughter. "Wait!" he commanded. Then he dashed from the kitchen, ran bare-headed down the snowy walk to the garage and was back in a twinkling. "Close your eyes," he shouted from outside the door, "and no peeking until I say open. Now! Christmas gift!"

"Oh mother!" Betty shouted. "It's a wedding dress!"

Laughing, trembling, crying all at once, Margaret threw her arms around Keith and the incomparable white chiffon dress that she had seen in Ward's. "But Keith, how in the world?" she finally managed.

"I was passing Ward's just about closing time; saw it in the window. Crazy notion, I reckon, but somehow it looked like you. They told me it was your size."

"It's wonderful! But you shouldn't have. It must have cost a lot. And my taffeta's still quite—wearable."

"Christmas gifts," Keith interrupted, "should never be criticized and never returned. And this one is all paid for and a nice balance in the bank."

"But how?" Margaret asked, although suddenly she knew.

"Oh, there's something about this Christmas idea I suppose. Not just the singing of 'Jingle Bells,' the mistletoe and holly wreaths on the front door or the gaudy trimmed trees or even the giving of silver and fine linen. It's something down inside us.

"BUT so much for the sermon. And I know you're going to be taken off your feet, but Brown, Hunter and Wilson all came in today and handed me checks; shortly after I had sold a \$50 bond to buy you a blue vase and some trinkets for Betty. Now, don't ever let me hear you say there isn't a Santa Claus or that practically all debtors are liars and deadbeats if they think they can get away with it."

"I won't," said Margaret very solemnly. "I won't ever, dear."

Keith's lips came down on hers in a caress that made Margaret's heart leap. "Peace on earth, good will to men," she murmured in a voice tremulous with happiness.