

Their "Poor" Christmas

How It Came to Be an Institution in the Family

By F. A. MITCHEL

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Christmas in the Ripley family was coming on, but there were none of those delightful anticipations that usually attend the approach of the day which marks the birth of the Christ Child. Little Frank, the youngest, a boy of seven, was lying ill, and the doctors gave slight hope of his recovery.

On Christmas eve Frank lay in a stupor. His brothers and sisters were sitting in an adjoining room talking in low voices, but he could occasionally hear a word or part of a sentence. The word most used was Christmas. Frank had passed through four or five of these joyful anniversaries after he was old enough to appreciate them, and a faint interest, notwithstanding his condition, was awakened.

Then he heard the word death spoken almost in a whisper, and the children wondered whether the dead can enjoy Christmas. One said that the dead were everywhere at Christmas, but their enjoyment consisted in giving presents to the living. Another declared that these spirits visited only the poor. Then Frank heard his oldest sister say:

"It may be that Santa Claus is one of these persons who lived, but have become spirits. This would account for his being everywhere at once."

"I never thought of that," said Joe. "When I was a little kid I soon ceased to believe in Santa, but if I had thought of him as a spirit I might have believed in him till today."

Frank was approaching the crisis of his disease and was a very sick child. The doctor had told his parents that during the night he would either die or in the morning be much better. Among other things the children talked about was this crisis, some speaking of Frank dying, others wondering, if he passed the crisis, whether he would be well enough the next day for them to celebrate Christmas. And Alice, the girl next older than the sick boy and his inseparable playmate, said that she shouldn't enjoy the day anyway unless Frank were able to enjoy it with her.

It must not be supposed that Frank listened to all this as another would listen to it. He was in a high fever, and it seemed to him that he was in the midst of a turmoil. What the children said seemed to pass by him like bits of mist scudding before a driving wind. Then all was still for awhile. Possibly the poor boy fell into a slumber. He saw something white bending over him, great wings extending from his shoulders. The figure took him up in its arms and rose slowly with him. The ceiling opened, and Frank found himself passing out under the stars.

"I have died," he said to himself, "and an angel is carrying me away. Now that I am a spirit, I wonder if I shall be permitted to visit live people on Christmas eve?"

Now, Frank had not died at all. He was in a very low condition, and his nurse, clad in white, had bent over him and lifted him up in her arms to change his position in the bed.

Dreams sometimes lead us through a long chain of events, though the time occupied is but a fraction of a second. And, while I don't know whether this was a dream or a condition occasioned by the boy's weakened faculties, Frank was a long while under its influence. I am not prepared to say that there was nothing in it which we call supernatural. The immortal world lies all about and very near us, and it is not impossible that an innocent child should be given a sight into things that are hidden from men.

Be this as it may, Frank was carried in the angel's arms out upon the night. He looked down upon the lights and the throngs who were passing along the street going in and out of the shops, for, though it was dark, the people had not finished their buying for Christmas. The scene was busy without and busy within. Frank could look at both and at the same time.

And he saw the tired clerks in the stores waiting on customers and the children hanging up their stockings. The angel took him to the homes of the children of well-to-do parents. He saw them all in their richly furnished rooms going to bed in embroidered nightgowns, many of them crawling in under silk and down comforters. In the closets were innumerable packages that had not yet been opened while tables were heaped with candies and fruits.

"Take me where I can see the poor children," said Frank to the angel. "These have so much that it tires me to look at it all."

Then the angel passed over that part of the city where the poor children lived, and Frank was astonished through their huddle, many of them snuggled in their fathers he could see nothing for a Christmas dinner, and but few of them had any toys. And Frank saw something that made him wonder. It was himself in a dining room with no furniture in it except a chair and a small table. He was lying in a corner on a mattress covered with a thin, worn blanket. His

mother had put over him so much of her own clothing to keep him warm that she was shivering with the cold. Frank knew that the child he saw—his other self—was sick, because he was white and thin and he rolled his head from side to side as if in pain. The invalid opened his eyes and said: "Mamma, I want some grapes."

The mother moaned that she had no grapes to give her boy and no money to buy them with. Frank asked the angel why some of the grapes and other fruits he had seen in the houses of the rich could not be brought to the child, and the angel said: "These persons cannot look through each other's walls as we can. Rich people cannot give what they have to the poor or they would be poor and the poor rich. And I fear that those who had been benefitted would be ungrateful and, keeping what they had gained, would turn away from their benefactors. Nevertheless more than 1900 years ago on Christmas morning a child was born who when he grew up set an example to all people, telling them that the giver is really more happy in giving than the receiver. Tomorrow is the birthday of this child."

"But this troubles me," said Frank. "I don't wish to see any more of it. You showed me the homes of the children of the rich on Christmas eve, and they were so loaded with comforts, with good things to eat and with toys that it worried me. These homes of the poor I can't bear to look upon. Take me away."

Then it seemed to Frank that the angel rose with him into an atmosphere that was like summer. Birds were singing, flowers blossoming, and he heard the strains of music.

"I am going to heaven," the boy said, "where there are neither poor nor rich. I don't like to be one of either."

At 4 o'clock in the morning Frank's nurse called his mother and told her she thought there was a change for the better. He was sleeping quietly. The mother went into the sickroom and, looking down at the face of her boy, delighted, said:

"The doctor told me the crisis would pass tonight, and I believe it has. How sweetly he is sleeping! There is a smile on his face as if he were dreaming of heaven."

Then she went back and told the father to come and see. He did so and, hearing a great sigh of relief, said: "You are right. Our boy will live. When the children awaken we will tell them what has happened that they may make merry as usual on Christmas morning."

Before breakfast the doctor, who was anxious about his patient, believing that during the night a change would come, appeared at the house and went immediately to the sickroom. "Merry Christmas, doctor," said the patient. "I want a whole lot of things to eat. Can I have 'em?"

"What do you want first?"

"Grapes."

"The very thing," said the doctor. "What next?"

"Beefsteak and creamed potatoes."

"Good! You're all right."

Then turning to Frank's mother, he told her to bring the grapes and whistled to her to follow them with some broth.

"Doctor," called Frank as the former was about to leave the room, "can I get up?"

"Not just yet, my boy. You don't want to get up. You're comfortable in bed."

"Yes, but I want to go out with a whole lot of things to the poor children."

"The poor children! What do you know about them?"

"I know a lot. I died last night, and an angel in white who looked just like nurse took me all over. I didn't like it at all; it tired me."

That was a happy Christmas day to this family, Frank having been spared to them. During the morning one by one his brothers and sisters were admitted to see him for a few moments only. But when Alice came Frank begged hard that she be permitted to stay longer, and it was finally decided that she might remain half an hour. When they were alone together he told her all about his strange vision or dream, or whatever it was, and she listened to every word, and when he had finished she said:

"You and I can't do much ourselves this year at taking presents to the poor children, though I will tell papa and mamma about it and I think they will let some of our children go in the automobile and take some things to the McCanns, who used to work for us, and some others. But next Christmas I promise you, Frankie, dear, we'll spend most of our Christmas money in that way, taking our gifts to the poor children, and how nice it will be to see them made happy."

"That's what the angel said," Frank put in. "He said that the giver was more blessed than the receiver."

Alice didn't stay quite through to half hour, for while she was talking to the invalid she saw that his eyes were getting heavy. He had his hand in hers, so she ceased to talk to him, and sat motionless till he was asleep, and then she quietly withdrew her hand and left him.

The next Christmas was a very different one in this household from any that had preceded it. Alice and Frank had been proposing the change, they having called their "poor Christmas," every gift being to the poor. There was no suffering for the poor, for much as was provided there was room for as was provided more. Nevertheless they had noted that it was the happiest Christmas they had ever spent, and they agreed that they would have a "poor Christmas" every second year.

The Lost Whip

And How It Resulted in a Serious Complication

By F. A. MITCHEL

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In colonial days in Virginia there was a society that was unique. A number of planters with their families were assembled at a winter festival in the manor house of Le Roy Chalmers. There were driving, horse-back riding, shooting and other seasonal sports, affording a merry time to all. Beatrice Chalmers was the acknowledged belle of the party, not only on account of her comeliness, but a certain dash there was about her, an impulsiveness which was constantly bursting through conventional restraint. The young people of the party had done more or less pairing off, but Miss Chalmers, being a hostess, had refrained from accepting more attention from any one of the men guests than another.

Nevertheless there were two who, it was generally supposed, were nearer to her than the others—the one, Edmund Dargan, a creole from Louisiana; the other, Louis Fitz Maurice, a young Virginia attorney. Dargan had recently come to Virginia, had made the acquaintance of Colonel Chalmers, who with the hospitality of the times and the locality had invited him to his house. Fitz Maurice had known Beatrice Chalmers from childhood and was in love with her; but, being only an attorney, which was then considered greatly inferior to being a planter, and since he had no fortune, he had kept his passion to himself. At any rate, he had not spoken it.

One day when the party were returning from a hunt Miss Chalmers missed her riding whip. In the bundle was a valuable diamond. Her expressive face at once showed how keenly she felt the loss. They had been riding through a thickly wooded country, and it was quite possible that the whip might not be found.

"What will you give the finder?" asked one of the young men.

At that moment Dargan, who had fallen behind the others, rode up and, having heard the question and knowing the impulsive nature of the girl, said:

"Yourself?"

"Yes, myself," said Beatrice, "and all I possess."

Every young man of the party turned his horse's head to the direction from which they had come and spurred away to look for the lost whip. A short distance from the manor house they met Fitz Maurice and Carey Emmons, who were just coming in. Fitz Maurice succeeded in stopping one of the riders long enough to discover what they were returning for, but instead of joining them rode on to the house with Miss Emmons. Then he saw the ladies of the party standing on the porch. At seeing him Miss Chalmers cried out:

"Aren't you going to look for my riding whip?"

"You would not have me be so discourteous as to leave Miss Emmons?"

"Certainly not. But, now that Miss Emmons is here, I see nothing to prevent your returning to search with the rest."

"Nothing but that the whip has doubtless been already found."

A look something akin to reproach flashed in Beatrice's eyes at what she considered this ungalant treatment.

Half an hour later the men were seen riding back headed by Dargan, who held aloft the recovered whip. Miss Chalmers, who saw it all through a window, knit her brow and cast a deprecating glance at Fitz Maurice, who was standing near. In a few moments the hunters threw themselves from their horses, which were taken away by negro slaves, and all followed Dargan into the house. Advancing toward Miss Chalmers, he dropped on one knee and banded her the whip.

"You have found my whip," she said.

"It remains with you to say if you wish the offered reward."

"I certainly do wish it and claim it as my right."

Every one present except the man addressed, who was on his knees with head bowed, saw by the expression on the lady's face that she certainly did not wish it, and every eye saw a half reproachful, half appealing glance she threw at Fitz Maurice before replying:

"No Chalmers has ever gone back on his or her word. My friends, I have to announce my engagement to Mr. Dargan."

There was a clapping of hands from some who considered the matter to be mere banter and frowns from others who believed the girl would be foolish enough to sacrifice herself to a false sense of honor. Dargan took her hand, kissed it, rose, and the party dispersed.

The same evening Fitz Maurice, finding Dargan walking alone under some magnolia trees near the house, approached him and said:

"Dargan, I was surprised that in claiming your reward today you failed to say that you could only accept it in case the lady's heart went with it."

Dargan turned upon Fitz Maurice like a fury.

"That is a matter between Miss Chalmers and myself. I brook no interference in my affairs from any man."

Despite the fact that hot southern blood ran in Fitz Maurice's veins he answered coolly:

"I would not think of interfering in this affair were you acting honorably."

"Honorably! That means that you accuse me of acting dishonorably. You are doubtless prepared to back your insult. I shall kill you as I would a dog."

"I am prepared to back what I say both as you mean and in another way. I was riding behind Miss Chalmers today when she dropped her whip and saw you dismount, pick it up and put it in the pocket of your hunting coat."

Dargan started, and a changed look came over his face. For a moment he hesitated, then decided on his course.

"You must admit," he said, "that no man can make such a charge as that and not expect to enforce it on the field of honor. Before bedtime you shall hear from me. Good night."

Raising his hat, the speaker turned and walked away.

During the evening Fitz Maurice took Miss Emmons away from the others and said to her:

"What do you propose to do about making known the fact that we saw Dargan pick up Miss Chalmers' riding whip?"

"Nothing. I never interfere in other people's affairs."

"Very well; then she must remain ignorant that she is in no way bound to bestow upon him the reward offered."

"She won't anyway unless she wishes to do so. If you think she should know the truth, why don't you tell her?"

"Because certain conditions have arisen that should I do so I would render myself liable to the contempt of my associates. Nevertheless tomorrow I may tell her. I wish you to promise me that if I do not you will do so."

"Explain."

"Not till tomorrow."

"Very well. If you don't tell her tomorrow I promise you I will."

The next morning Beatrice Chalmers awoke before daylight and lay thinking about the peculiar position in which she had been placed by the loss of her riding whip. She was pledged to marry Dargan, whom she did not fancy, and considered that she had received a slight from Fitz Maurice, whom she did love. What would be the next development?

It was soon to become apparent. She heard footsteps on the stairs, though they were barely audible. Had her sense of hearing not been very acute she would not have heard them. She listened and after awhile a door softly closed directly below her room. Getting out of bed, she looked through her window and saw in the gray of the morning Fitz Maurice and one of the men guests, who carried a box under his arm, crossing the open space lying between the manor house and the road. That was quite enough in those days, to tell her what had happened. She dressed herself, opened her door and went out into the hall. A door opposite was opened, and Miss Emmons, in night-dress, called to her. She went into Miss Emmons' room and learned that she had seen Dargan leave the house on the opposite side. Miss Emmons thought it high time that she take an interest in "other people's business" and told her hostess all she knew about what was about to transpire.

"Get on your clothes, quick," exclaimed Beatrice, in a flutter, "while I go to the stable and bring a pony cart."

Within ten minutes Beatrice hurried up to the door as fast as her pony's short legs could carry her. Miss Emmons got in, and the two drove off at a gallop in the direction the latter had seen Dargan go. There had been a duel before in the family, and Beatrice surmised that this one would occur at the same place. When they reached it the two principals stood waiting while the seconds were measuring the ground.

"Gentlemen," said Miss Chalmers as she reined in near them, "there is no occasion for this fight. I am in a position to answer for the dishonorable act of one of the principals and the honorable conduct of the other."

Dargan, who saw that he had lost his case, turned pale.

"Mr. Dargan, not only did Mr. Fitz Maurice see you pick up my whip soon after I had lost it, but Miss Emmons saw you do the same thing."

"And," interrupted Dargan, with a contemptuous glance at Fitz Maurice, "he induced Miss Emmons to tell you in order to stop!"

"No such thing!" cried Miss Chalmers angrily. "He pledged her to tell me after this affair should be all over. Isn't that so, Carey?"

"It is."

"We both heard you go out," continued Beatrice, "and followed you to prevent spilling of blood and to exonerate Mr. Fitz Maurice. Mr. Dargan, I am astonished at your course. I need not add that I feel neither inclination nor compulsion to hold to my part of a silly contract."

Dargan turned and walked away from the field. It had not occurred to him that Miss Emmons had also seen him pick up the whip, and, confident that he could kill Fitz Maurice, he expected to cover up his dishonor with the latter's death. He did not go to the manor house, but sent a negro for his belongings. He was never again heard of in Virginia, but visitors from there to New Orleans learned that he was an adventurer and a duelist of considerable distinction.

Miss Chalmers married Mr. Fitz Maurice, who during the Revolution became one of the principal figures who resisted the encroachments of King George III, and brought about American independence.

Her Santa Claus

And the "Happy Man" Are One and the Same

By Clarissa Mackie

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The hall on the third floor of Mrs. Ramsell's boarding house stretched a dark and gloomy tunnel from front to rear. Halfway down its length a small nimbus of light surrounded a tiny gas flame. There was an undiscovered leak in the pipe here, and the air was always foul with the escaping gas.

White painted doors led from the hall into rooms at front and rear and on the west side. The stairway went down the eastern blank wall into the dimly lighted Brussels carpeted gentility of the second floor. Up here, however, there was merely brown oil cloth on the floor, and it was worn into uneven blocks and was slippery with age.

Honora Burr came up the stairs and thrust a key into the lock of the third floor rear room. The door swung back against the wall and made a passage for her to squeeze in between the narrow white iron bedstead and close the door. In one corner was a battered oak bureau with a distorting mirror above it. There were a washstand and a rocking chair and Honora's shabby trunk. That was all.

When she had removed her hat and cloak and hung them in the tiny closet Honora attached a piece of gas hose to her jet and lighted a small gas stove. On this she placed a saucepan of water and then sank wearily into the chair. With the stove lighted there was a dim bluish glow in the room, and Honora sat there waiting for the water to boil and looking out of the window at the dreary prospect of tall brick structures and distant blinking lights. From the next block came the clatter and bang of elevated trains.

Suddenly all the view from the window was blotted out in a mist of tears. Honora's bright head pressed heavily against the back of her chair, and she placed her hands against her eyes.

"I can't stay here," she sobbed. "I can't stay all alone in this big city at Christmas and know that there is nobody to care whether I have a good time or not, nobody to give any presents to, nobody to say 'Merry Christmas' as if they were really meant!"

Honora Burr's position was a peculiar one. She had been delicately nurtured in a comfortable home in a pleasant suburb. She was the only child of parents who had no relatives except very distant cousins in another city who were almost strangers to the Burrs. Honora's father had been confidential man in a large city house, and two years before this Christmas eve he had been arrested for embezzling money from his employers and in despair had killed himself, leaving his wife and daughter almost penniless.

The disgrace of the affair, combined with the shock of her husband's death, ended Mrs. Burr's life within another year, and Honora was left to face the world alone. After she had sold off most of the household effects and stored the remaining few with a friend Honora paid the debts and went to New York to seek a situation.

She had keenly felt the humiliation and disgrace attendant upon her father's death, but nevertheless Honora Burr never believed that he was entirely guilty. That he had not lived to make a fight for his honor was his weakness. Honora was proud, and she would not approach any of her father's friends or acquaintances in her quest for work. She would not embarrass them by courting a refusal.

By her own efforts Honora secured a position in a music store, where for \$8 a week she sold sheet music and demonstrated the quality of pianos by her brilliant playing, for Honora was a skilled musician. Her life was a very lonely one in the dreary boarding-house, but she could not afford to take a brighter and better room, for she was saving a dollar a week from her wages, hoping to accumulate enough money by spring to give up her situation and seek some music pupils.

The kettle was boiling merrily now, and Honora poured some of the water into the little Japanese teapot she had brought from home and set the remainder back on the stove to boil an egg for her supper. As she moved about the blue dusk of the room one could see that she was small and slender and gowned in black from head to foot. Her face and the white of her little hands and the snowy glimpse of white at neck and wrists shone out.

Somebody came up the stairs three steps at a time whistling merrily, tramped noisily down the hall and the door of the large front room opened and closed. The whistling continued.

"It's the happy man," said Honora to herself as she extinguished the stove and turned on the gas light.

This was the worst Christmas eve Honora had ever spent. Last year it had been sad, but her dear mother was alive. Now she was all alone and the horror of loneliness seemed almost more than she could bear.

"In the story books," said Honora forlornly, "if one is unhappy on Christmas eve they go out and do some good to the poor and unfortunate, but when one hasn't got but a dollar and forty

cents to last until next pay day I wonder what one ought to do?"

The question was answered at once. The door of the front room opened again and the "happy man," as Honora had designated the good looking lodger who ran up and down the long stairs of Mrs. Ramsell's gloomy house, whistled through the hall. He started down the stairs and Honora heard a ripping sound, a sharp exclamation and the thud of a heavy fall. Then all was quiet for a moment.

By the time she had reached the foot of the stairs there was an excited gathering of women about the prostrate form of the "happy man."

Mrs. Ramsell was loud in her lamentations. "As if I didn't have enough on my hands tonight," she wailed, "without him falling downstairs and killing himself."

"It might be cheaper if you'd put a new carpet on those stairs, Mrs. Ramsell," said a bleached looking woman in a red silk waist.

"That carpet was new last spring," retorted Mrs. Ramsell, quick in defense of the tattered furnishing of the third floor. "He oughter looked where he was going."

"Has any one sent for a doctor?" asked Honora quietly.

"No. Mary, you telephone to the hospital for an ambulance," screamed Mrs. Ramsell over the banisters to the floor below.

"Why not send for a doctor," urged Honora, bending over the unconscious man. She had noted his evident refinement, and the quality of his clothing indicated that he must have known better days, although his presence in the cheap boarding house was a mystery. "He has a room. Perhaps he would prefer to be taken care of here."

"Who's going to pay a dollar for a doctor?" demanded Mrs. Ramsell shrilly. "How do I know I'll ever get it back from him?"

"I'll take the risk," said Honora impatiently, and Mary was directed to telephone for the nearest physician. Mrs. Ramsell over the banisters to the floor below.

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After that Mrs. Ramsell announced that she left the case in the hands of Miss Burr, "who didn't seem to mind meddling in other folks' affairs," she acidly remarked, and at once disappeared to attend to the interrupted supper. The other boarders scattered to forget the affair in the more absorbing topic of approaching Christmas, and Honora was left alone with Paul Davis.

The doctor arrived five minutes afterward and announced that the patient was merely stunned and would recover under the application of certain restoratives, which, with Honora's help, he proceeded to employ. Their efforts were rewarded by the opening of a pair of dark eyes, followed by a prolonged stare and dazed questioning.

"It's a miracle that your husband did not break his neck," said the doctor genially as he pocketed his fee and hastened away, for it was Christmas eve, and he was in a hurry.

Honora blushed crimson and a look of concern came into Paul Davis' face, "I'm under the greatest obligation to you," he said frankly, "and I am sorry to have been the cause of any embarrassment. Please tell me who you are so that I can realize the situation. The doctor has ordered me to keep in bed till morning, and I feel dizzy enough to never get up!"

Honora told him briefly that she was his neighbor on the same floor and that as she had more leisure than any of the other boarders she had merely undertaken to look out for him until the doctor came. "The others had so many things to do. Tomorrow will be Christmas, you know," she ended.

"It's Christmas for you, too, isn't it?" he asked sharply.

"It used to be, but it isn't any more," she said sadly.

The pale faced young man thrust his head in the door to say that he would sit up all night with Mr. Davis, and so Honora, with a warm hand clasp from the "happy man," who looked especially happy whenever he glanced at her charming face, went back to her little room to face Christmas alone.

Morning brought a delightful surprise. From her door handle there hung all sorts of gifts, perhaps purchased in haste that morning, but selected with taste. Just the presents that Honora could accept too. A big box of roses and a glorious potted azalea, a five pound box of candy, a basket of fruit, a book and an envelope containing a couple of matinee tickets. "This should keep you busy on Christmas day," was scribbled on a blank card, for the donor was anonymous, but, of course, Honora knew who it was.

It was a happy Christmas for Honora, after all. The dollar she had emptied from her scanty purse to pay to the doctor brought her the happiness of her life. It developed that Paul Davis was a newspaper man temporarily out of a situation, and on Christmas eve he had been appointed to the staff of a great New York daily and, as he explained afterward to Honora, was "on Easy street." But he did not leave Mrs. Ramsell's shabby boarding house, which had been a refuge for him while out of work. He stayed on there and on until at last Honora could no longer withstand his pleading and so they were married.

"I can't say my husband 'Santa Claus' because he brought me the greatest happiness I have ever known," explained Honora to a friend one day.

"And I call Honora 'Mrs. Santa Claus' for the same reason," averred Paul Davis proudly.