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CHRISTMAS ON WHEELS



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Willis Byrd Allen.

Christmas, 1896.



CHRISTMAS
ON WHEELS

By
WILLIS BOYD ALLEN

Boston
MDCCCXCV

CHRISTMAS ON WHEELS.

1.



A RAILROAD station in a large city is hardly an inviting spot, at its best; but at the close of a cheerless, blustering December day, when biting draughts of wind come scurrying in at every open door, filling the air with a gray compound of dust and fine snow; when passengers tramp up and down the long platform, waiting impatiently for their trains; when newsboys wander about with disconsolate, red faces, hands in pockets and bundles of unsold papers under their ragged and shivering arms; when, in general, human-kind presents itself as altogether a frozen, forlorn, discouraged, and hopeless race, condemned to be swept about on the nipping, dusty

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wind, like Francesca and her lover, at the rate of thirty miles an hour — then the station becomes positively unendurable.

So thought Bob Estabrook as he paced to and fro in the Boston & Albany depot, traveling-bag in hand, on just such a night as I have described. Beside him, locomotives puffed and plunged and backed on the shining rails, as if they, too, felt compelled to trot up and down to keep themselves warm, and in even tolerably good humor.

“Just my luck!” growled Bob with a misanthropic glare at a loud-voiced family who were passing; “Christmas coming, two jolly Brighton parties and an oratorio thrown up, and here am I, fired off to San Francisco. So much for being junior member of a law firm. Wonder what” —

Here the ruffled current of his meditations ran plump against a rock, and as suddenly diverged from its former

course. The rock was no less than a young person who at that moment approached with a gray-haired man and inquired the way to the ticket office.

“Just beyond the waiting-room, on the right,” replied Bob, pointing to the office and lifting his hat courteously, in response to the lady’s question.

He watched them with growing interest as they followed his directions and stood before the lighted window. The two silhouettes were decidedly out of the common. The voice, whose delicate tones still lingered pleasantly about Mr. Robert Estabrook’s fastidious ears, was an individual voice, as distinguishable from any other he remembered as was the owner’s bright face, the little fur collar beneath it, the daintily-gloved hands, and the pretty brown traveling suit.

“Dignified old fellow!” mused Bob, irrelevantly, as the couple moved to-

ward the train gates. "Probably her father. Perhaps — hallo! by George, they're going on my car!"

With which breath of summer in his winter of discontent the young man proceeded to finish his cigar, consult his watch, and, as the last warning bell rang, step upon the platform of the already moving Pullman.

It must be admitted that as he entered he gave an expectant glance down the aisle of the car; but the sombre curtains hanging from ceiling to floor told no tales. Too sleepy to speculate and too learned in the marvelous acoustic properties of a sleeping-car to engage the porter in conversation on the subject, he found his berth, arranged himself for the night with the nonchalance of an old traveler, and, laying his head upon his vibrating atom of a pillow, was soon plunged into a dream at least fifty miles long.

II.

It was snowing, and snowing hard. Moreover, it had been snowing all night, and all the afternoon before. The wind rioted furiously over the broad Missouri plains, alternately building up huge castles of snow and throwing them down again like a fretful child; overtaking the belated teamster on his homeward journey, clutching him with its icy hand, and leaving him buried in a tomb spotless as the fairest marble; howling, shrieking, racing madly to and fro, never out of breath, always the same tireless, pitiless, awful power. Rocks, fields, sometimes even forests were blotted out of the landscape.

A mere hyphen upon the broad white page lay the Western-bound train, held fast by the soft but firm hand. The fires in the locomotives—

there were two of them — had been suffered to go out, the fuel in the tenders was exhausted, and the great creatures waited silently together, left alone in the storm, while the snow drifted higher and higher upon their patient backs.

When Bob had waked that morning, to find the tempest more furious than ever, and the train stuck fast in a huge snowbank, his first thought was of dismay at the possible detention in the narrow limits of the Pullman, which seemed much colder than it had before; his next was to wonder how the change of fortune would affect Gertrude Raymond. Of course he had long ago become acquainted with the brown traveling suit and fur collar. Of course there had been numberless little services for him to perform for her and the old gentleman, who had indeed proved to be her father. Bob had already begun to dread the end of the journey. He had gone to his berth

the night before wishing that San Francisco were ten days from Boston instead of six. Providence having taken him at his word and indicated that the journey would be of at least that duration, if not more, he was disposed, like no few of his fellow-mortals, to grumble.

Once more he became misanthropic. "There's Miss Raymond, now," he growled to himself, knocking his head savagely against the upper berth in his attempt to look out through the frosty pane, "sitting over across the aisle day after day with her kid gloves and all that. Nice enough, of course," recalling one or two spirited conversations where hours had slipped by like minutes, "but confoundedly useless like the rest of 'em. If she were like mother, now, there'd be no trouble. She'd take care of herself. But as it is, the whole car will be turned upside down for her to-day, for fear she'll freeze or starve or spoil her complexion, or something."

Here Bob turned an extremely cold shoulder on the window, and having performed a sort of horizontal toilet, emerged from his berth, his hair on end, and his face expressive of utter defiance to the world in general and contempt of fashionable young ladies in particular.

At that moment Miss Raymond appeared in the aisle, sweet and rosy as a June morning, her cheeks glowing and her eyes sparkling with fun.

“Good-morning, Mr. Estabrook,” she said demurely, settling the fur collar about her neck.

Bob endeavored to look dignified and was conscious of failure.

“Good mo-morning,” he replied with some stiffness, and a shiver which took him by surprise. It was cold, jumping out of that warm berth.

“I understand we must stay — but don’t let me detain you,” she added with a sly glance at his hair.

Bob turned and marched off solemnly to the masculine end of the car, washed in ice-water, completed his toilet, and came back refreshed. Breakfast was formally served as usual, and then a council of war was held. Conductor, engineers, and brakemen being consulted, and inventories taken, it was found that while food was abundant, the stock of wood in the bins would not last till noon. There were twelve railroad men and thirty-five passengers on board, some twenty of the latter being emigrants in a second-class behind the two Pullmans.

The little company gathered in the snow-bound car looked blankly at each other, some of them instinctively drawing their wraps more tightly about their shoulders, as if they already felt the approaching chill.

It was miles to the nearest station in either direction. Above, below, on

all sides, was the white blur of tumultuous, wind-lashed snow.

The silence was broken pleasantly. Once more Bob felt the power of those clear, sweet tones.

“The men must make up a party to hunt for wood,” she said. “While you’re gone we women will do what we can for those who are left.”

The necessity for immediate action was evident, and without further words the council broke up, to obey her suggestion.

A dozen men, looking like amateur Esquimaux, and floundering up to their armpits at the first step, started off through the drifts. One of the train-men who knew the line of the road thoroughly, was sure they must be near a certain clump of trees where plenty of wood could be obtained. Taking the precaution to move in single line, one of the engineers, a broad-shouldered six-footer, leading the way, and steering by compass, they

were soon out of sight. As they struck off at right angles to the track, Bob thought he recognized a face pressed close to the pane and watching them anxiously; but he could not be sure.

Two hours later the men appeared once more, some staggering under huge logs, some with axes, some with bundles of lighter boughs for kindling. In another five minutes smoke was going up cheerily from the whole line of cars, for the trees had proved to be less than a quarter of a mile distant and the supply would be plentiful before night.

When Bob Estabrook stamped into his own car, hugging up a big armful of wood, he was a different looking fellow from the trim young lawyer who was wont to stand before the jury seats in the Boston Court House. He had on a pair of immense blue yarn mittens loaned by a kindly brakeman, his face was scratched with

refractory twigs, his eyebrows were frosted, his moustache an icy caret.

The average tramp might well have hesitated before acknowledging kinship with him.

His eye roved through the length of the car as it had that first night in the depot. She was not there. He was as anxious as a boy for her praise.

“Guess I’ll take it into the next car,” he said apologetically to the nearest passenger; “there’s more coming just behind.”

She was not in the second Pullman. Of course she was n’t in the baggage car. Was it possible—? He entered the third and last car, recoiling just a bit at the odor of crowded and unclean poverty which met him at the door.

Sure enough, there she sat—his idle, fashionable type of inutility—with one frowzy child upon the seat beside her, two very rumped-looking boys in front, and a baby with terracotta hair in her arms. Somehow, the

baby's hair against the fur collar didn't look so badly as you would expect, either. She seemed to be singing it to sleep, and kept on with her soft crooning as she glanced up over the tangled red locks at snowy Bob and his armful of wood, with a look in her eyes that would have sent him cheerfully to Alaska for more, had there been need. A few seats off, I ought to say, her father was talking kindly and earnestly to a rough-looking man and his wife, the latter of whom wore the dear old gentleman's cloak. Fathers and daughters are apt to be pretty much alike in these things, you see.

III.

With the cheerful heat of the fires, the kind offices of nearly all the well-dressed people to the poorer ones,—for they were not slow, these kid-gloved Pullman passengers, to follow Miss Raymond's example,—the day wore on quietly and not unpleasantly toward its close. Then some one suddenly remembered that it was Christmas Eve.

“Dear me!” cried Miss Raymond delightedly, reaching round the baby to clap her hands; “let's have a Christmas party!”

A few sighed and shook their heads as they thought of their own home firesides; one or two smiled indulgently on the small enthusiast; several chimed in at once. Conductor and baggage-master were consulted, and the spacious baggage car “specially

engaged for the occasion," the originator of the scheme triumphantly announced. Preparations commenced without delay. All the young people put their heads together in one corner, and many were the explosions of laughter as the programme grew. Trunks were visited by their owners and small articles abstracted therefrom to serve as gifts for the emigrants and train-men, to whose particular entertainment the evening was by common consent to be devoted.

Just as the lamps were lighted in the train, our hero, who had disappeared early in the afternoon, returned, dragging after him a small stunted pine tree, which seemed to have strayed away from its native forests on purpose for the celebration. On being admitted to the grand hall, Bob further added to the decorations a few strings of a queer, mossy sort of evergreen. Hereupon a very young man with light eyebrows, who had hitherto been

inconspicuous, suddenly appeared from the depths of a battered trunk, over the edge of which he had for some time been bent like a siphon, and with a beaming face produced a box of veritable tiny wax candles! He was "on the road," he explained, for a large wholesale toyshop, and these were samples. He guessed he could make it all right with the firm.

Of course the affair was a great success. I have no space to tell of the sheltered walk that Bob constructed of rugs from car to car; of the beautified interior of the old baggage car, draped with shawls and brightened with bits of ribbon; of the mute wonder of the poor emigrants, a number of whom had but just arrived from Germany, and could not speak a word of English; of their unbounded delight when the glistening tree was disclosed, and the cries of "Weihnachtsbaum! Weihnachtsbaum!" from their rumpled children, whose faces waked into

a glow of blissful recollection at the sight. Ah! if you could have seen the pretty gifts, the brave little pine (which all the managers agreed couldn't possibly have been used had it been an inch taller); the improvised tableaux, wherein Bob successively personated an organ-grinder, a pug dog, and Hamlet, amid thunders of applause from the brakemen and engineers! Then the passengers sang a simple Christmas carol, Miss Raymond leading with her pure soprano, and Bob chiming in like the diapason of an organ.

Just as the last words died away a sudden hush came over the audience. Could it be an illusion, or did they hear the muffled but sweet notes of a church bell faintly sounding without? Tears came into the eyes of some of the roughest of the emigrants as they listened, and thought of a wee belfry somewhere in the Fatherland, where the Christmas bells were calling to prayers that night. The sound of the

bells ceased, and the merriment went on, while the young man, with eyebrows lighter than ever, but with radiant face, let himself quietly into the car unnoticed. It had been his own thought to creep out into the storm, clear away the snow from the nearest locomotive bell, and ring it while the gayety was at its height.

All this indeed there was, and more; but to Bob the joy and sweetness of the evening centred in one bright face. What mattered it if the wind roared and moaned about the lonely snow-drifted train, while he could look into those brown eyes and listen to that voice for whose every tone he was fast learning to watch?

Well, the blockade was raised, and the long railroad trip finished at last. But two of its passengers, at least, have agreed to enter upon a still longer journey.

IV.

She says it all began when he came staggering in with his armful of wood and his blue mittens; and he? he does n't care at all when it began. He only realizes the joy that has come to him, and believes that after a certain day next May it will be Christmas for him all the year round.

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