

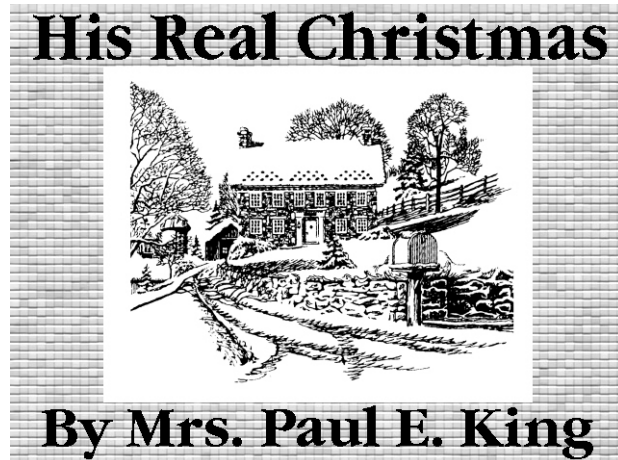
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HIS REAL CHRISTMAS
By Mrs. Paul E. King

Howard brushed a hand across his forehead. Beads of perspiration stood thick there. He reached for a handkerchief and mopped his brow in utter disgust and disdain.

He glanced across the room at the swinging, swaying forms of the dancers. They were a noisy crowd, and getting more so with each new cocktail they drank and with every additional hour.

He spied Ellen at the far end of the mammoth room, gliding gracefully across the floor to the time and tune of a popular local orchestra.

"More cocktails!" someone shouted, laughing hilariously and disappearing into the lounge at the president's home.

Howard cast one last hasty glance around the dimly lighted room; then, with shoulders squared, he walked toward the door. "See that the young woman, Ellen Courtney, gets a ride home," he told the butler. "I'm leaving. No need to tell anyone. Good night, Sir."

With that he stepped outside. Music from the orchestra was wafted on the still night air and the hilarity of the party sounded suddenly deafening to his ears.

"Christmas!" he exclaimed derisively. "What do they know about Christmas!"

The night was still and silent. Stars, as bright as any jewel and just as sparkly and glittery, speckled the deep blue of canopied heavens. The snow, which had fallen earlier in the week, squeaked and crunched beneath his feet and made rainbow shadows of the myriad colored lights that ornamented and decorated every bush and evergreen along the winding, circling driveway to the gaily festooned door of the Hathaway mansion.

It was beautiful, Howard soliloquized as he turned the key in the car door and slid behind the steering wheel. Very beautiful and, in a way, highly romantic and appealing to the outward eye. But, was this the true meaning of Christmas? Lights, cocktails, eating, and making merry? To the point of hilarity and drunkenness even!

He turned the key in the ignition and slowly eased the car down the driveway. He felt sick. Not physically, but spiritually. And to think that he had felt flattered and honored and, yes (he may as well admit it), he was proud when, less than five months ago, he was promoted as assistant to the president (Mr. Hathaway himself) of the prosperous and rapidly expanding Cornell and Heats Manufacturing Company.

He liked his work and he worked diligently and hard and honestly for the company. Local shop gossip had it that no other one man had the Company's interests and progress more at heart. Not even Keith Ellory Hathaway himself!

Howard sighed as he turned the car onto the main highway at the bottom of the hill of the Hathaway lawn. Never before had he thought of resigning his position, but the thought suddenly prompted itself forcefully now as he rehearsed the drunkenness and revelry that was going on inside the mammoth house at the top of the hill.

It both sickened and disgusted him. So this was Keith Hathaway's idea of a good and highly successful office party! And to think that Ellen . . . his Ellen, the girl he believed he could really love and respect . . . was enjoying every single minute of it. Even drinking the cocktails with apparent relish and delight! He was shocked. He had been deceived by her.

A deep frown furrowed his brow as he thought of the tomato juice he had requested for himself. One sip and he was convinced that someone had put more than tomato juice into his glass.

"Aw, c'mon!" Harry Antwerp had teased, noting with a bit of amusement Howard's glass that he pushed aside. "A little liquor's not gonna hurt you, Howard or boy!" he laughed. "Drink the tomato juice. It's good, isn't it?"

"Look, Harry, if this is your idea of a practical joke I want you to know I don't go for it! I'm a teetotaler. Always was and always intend to remain that way. Always!" Howard emphasized, his voice employing that office note of finality.

Harry shuffled away, muttering something or other about a fellow being a real square. A kill-joy.

Driving down the highway, Howard had time to think. Think and reflect. Why hadn't Keith Hathaway told him about the cocktails and the dancing? he wondered. Keith knew he didn't go in for such things.

"You'll enjoy the food, Howard," he told him one day at work. "I've hired the best caterer in the city. A real smorgasbord! Only the best and most expensive kinds of meat prepared with the gourmet's touch; plus everything else good to eat, including home-baked pies, rolls and cakes."

It sounded all right and all on the level and Howard, too engrossed in his work, had merely smiled assent and never thought to ask about the possibility of anything stronger than tea or coffee being served.

While not a Christian, Howard had never known the taste of any kind of alcoholic beverage. It was a vow he had made to his godly mother on her deathbed. A vow which he had kept faithfully.

In the midst of his thinking, the beautiful ringing of a church bell nearby caught his attention, filling his somber thoughts and the stillness of the night with joyous peals of peace on earth, good will to all men.

He drew up along the side of the road, rolled his car window down and listened as the sweet strains of "Silent Night, Holy Night" were wafted to him on the still night air from a loudspeaker somewhere inside the dark church.

Wave after wave of sweet nostalgia rushed around him and washed over him. He seemed to hear his mother sing to him from out of the long-distant past,

"Silent night, Holy night. . . .
Son of God: Love's pure light. . . ."

How could he ever have forgotten? "Love's pure light. . . ."

"A tear stole down his cheek.

"Mother!" he cried aloud into the night. "Oh, Mother! I... got so busy trying to get ahead. . . ."

The sentence trailed off into the silence of the night. Thoughtfully, Howard rolled the car window up and eased the car back on the road. He would go into the city to a section known as the "religious corner" and see how people there "celebrated" Christmas. Did they do like his mother used to do so many, many years ago when he was a very small boy . . . before she took ill and died?

He drove until he came to a part of the city where the houses were neither mansion nor shack. They were simply but durably built and Howard noted with interest how well-painted, neat, and clean and trim they looked.

He pulled the car over to the curb, got out and started walking down the sidewalk. A brightly lighted placard suddenly caught his attention. "He came . . . Luke 2," it read, "That He might die . . . Matthew 27:22-50; He rose, triumphant over sin, death, hell and the grave . . . Matt. 28:1-10, that mankind might be saved and live! Luke 19:10. St. John 3:16."

Reaching inside his coat, Howard extracted a small notebook and pen. Quickly he jotted the saying and the Scriptures of the placard, in the notebook. He must look those verses up when he returned to his apartment. Farther down the street he paused at a white picket fence and gate. Love and peace and joy, sprinkled thickly with happiness, seemed to spill out of the house from behind the closed door to the gate where he was standing. Gathered around the piano, singing with radiant faces, were a father, mother and eight children.

"Joy to the world, the Lord is come;
Let earth receive her King;
Let every heart prepare Him room. . . ."

A lump rose suddenly and totally unannounced in Howard's throat. Oh, to have in his heart what the occupants of the house had! But then, he hadn't opened his heart and prepared room for Him! He had been too busy getting ahead in the business world. . . .

He bowed his head in shame. In one night he had seen the various ways in which people "celebrated" the birth of Jesus: the wicked in sin, revelry, drunkenness and dancing; the righteous in the simple but beautiful, clean and pure Bible way. Tears of shame and remorse coursed down his ruddy cheeks. He ached to possess whatever it was these people had!

"Care to come inside, stranger?" a kindly voice asked as a friendly hand clasped his own.

"Why I . . . I'm sorry," Howard stammered. "I . . . hope you won't think me rude; standing and.., and listening. It . . . it's beautiful!"

"Rude?" The young man laughed. "Not at all. Come inside. I'm child number nine. The folks are waiting for me. I had an emergency to attend to or

I'd have been in there a long time ago. John King's my name. Yours?" He turned to Howard. "Howard Otterbein."

"A good German name," John commented. "Come inside and partake of our kind of Christmas. It's spiritual and wholesome and one you'll not forget." In spite of himself, Howard followed John to the door.

"I'm home!" John called, opening the door and entering, "and I brought company. I knew you wouldn't mind, Father and Mother. Folks," he said with a twinkle in his eyes, "this is Howard Otterbein. He'll help us sing in the carols." Then beginning with his oldest sister down to the baby of the family, John introduced each member of the family with pride.

"I feel flattered and highly honored," Howard began, his voice shaking with emotion, "to have been invited into this wonderful home. Your son John was most kind. I paused outside your gate, listening to the beautiful carols you have been singing. One in particular reached my heart. The one about, 'Let every heart prepare Him room.' " Howard paused. The lump was back in his throat and tears fell unashamed down his handsome face.

"I . . . wish I knew my... mother's God. Or how to find Him," he stammered.

"God sent you here, Howard," John said, standing close by. "I felt strangely warmed and compelled to ask you inside when I saw you standing by the gate. The Savior is waiting to come into your heart. You must open from within."

Howard faced the young man who had just finished speaking. "I will open my heart, John. Right now!" he exclaimed, his face registering the anguish of his soul.

In the center of a perfect circle of interested and concerned people, Howard knelt and prayed. Never in all his life had he heard praying like he heard from the King family. It wasn't long until his soul was bathed in heaven's glory, its pardon and forgiving blood.

This was the reason for Christmas! He rejoiced exceedingly. Quite suddenly the words on the placard up the street were comprehensible to him: "He came to die; He rose . . . that I may live!"

"I told you our Christmases were wholesome and spiritual."

"And one I'd not forget!" Howard said jubilantly, interrupting John and wiping happy tears from his eyes. "Thank you, John. Thank you.., for inviting me to come inside. I have a peace in my heart that I never had before. It's something the world can't give and something it can't take away."

Mary, the oldest daughter, began singing and playing on the piano, "Constantly abiding, Jesus is mine. . . ."

Howard had the grandest kind of feeling that he had come home! It was a wonderful feeling. So glorious . . . to be reconciled to God, redeemed and washed in the precious blood.

Suddenly, from somewhere in God's beautiful City, it seemed to Howard that he heard loud rejoicing and shouting. He buried his face in his hands and wept for pure joy. It was the singing and shouting of his mother!

Yes, he knew for sure, now, he would see her again. He found her Lord and Savior . . . the Christ of the manger; the Christ of the cross and the Christ of the empty tomb.