

# **The Christmas Bishop**

*BY*

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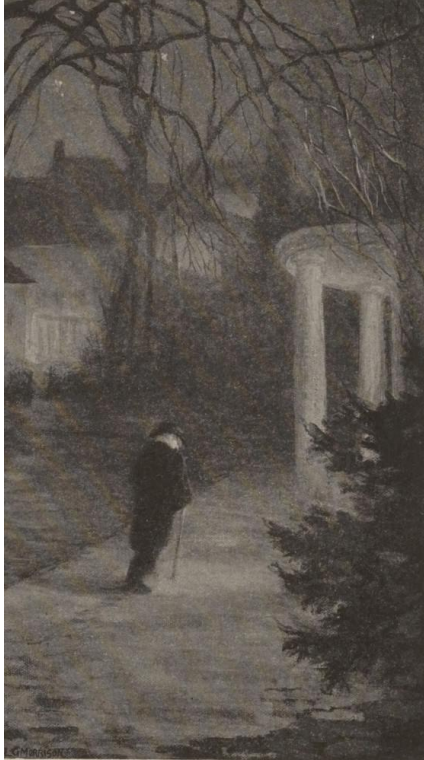
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## **THE CHRISTMAS BISHOP**



**Sometimes, against the dark faces of the housefronts,  
window shades were rolled up, like eyelids opening, on  
home-pictures that reminded the Bishop it was Christmas  
night**

# **THE CHRISTMAS BISHOP**

## PART I

Christmas morning, blue-black, pricked with stars against the Bishop's window panes. Westbury lay asleep beside its curving river, the great old houses with gardens that ran terraced to the bank, the churches, the college, even the new teeming tenements at the bending of the water, all lay asleep in the Christmas dawning. The Bishop alone was awake, and against the darkness before his eyes pictures raced. He had been a poet once, so long ago that when sometimes they sang his hymns in church he had forgotten they were his, but he still kept the poet's trick of thinking in pictures during those strangely alert moments between sleep and full awakening. The pictures fell into the march of a poem.

It was a storied city built upon two hills cleft by a valley. On the twin crests towered great palaces and a temple. Where the hills sank toward the north, there were terraced streets and narrow climbing byways. There were markets and booths and all the signs of multitudinous life, but throughout all the place one heard no sound, saw nothing that moved, yet one knew that the whole city throbbed with the pulse-beats of innumerable homes. A gray pall hung low, as if the abrupt Oriental dawn had been arrested; the gray dimmed the marble of the palaces, and dulled the temple gold. In the silent gloom one waited.

One did not know whence he had come, the Child who was suddenly there, in the streets of that city without stars, a sacred city once; but wherever he knocked upon the portal,

quickly all within woke to life, and became a teeming, bustling household; again, when he withdrew, all was once more silence and darkness.

He was a tiny child, barefoot and pale, some little lost waif from the mountains who had come seeking his kinsfolk among the homes. So fast he pattered over the pavement that his pale hair and his white tunic streamed upon the wind. His little yearning hands stretched out showed fair as a baby's in that wintry twilight. Ever and again he knocked and entered, and always, entering, his face flamed with hope, and always, coming forth, he was sobbing, for he found no welcome.

On and on he went, while each black street along which he hurried was stabbed ever and again by the opening and shutting of a ruddy door. In the silence one heard it plain, the heavy sound of a door that closed because it did not know him. At length he had passed the city portals and was mounting the hill-slope that is Golgotha, a form all pale upon the dark, blown hair and robe and pattering feet. There the Child turned, for it seemed he was the little Prince of that city, and all the folk his kin. Rising a-tiptoe he stretched out his hands, cross-wise, to them in love, and suddenly the sun, withheld, leaped kingly above the hills beyond Jordan, and the silent air was full of wings and of voices, the chant of the Christmas angels singing home the Homeless One, and in that flood of light and song all that city knew the Child they had lost their own, forever.

Slowly, before the Bishop's eyes, that gold radiance dimmed into the bleak gray twilight that was stealing over his room. Sharp as life shall strike at visions came a sound from below that struck the dreamy smile from his lips, leaving a twitching

pain; certain sounds had that power of intolerable renewal. A homely enough sound, merely the thud of a lid dropped upon a flour bin, but it seemed now to be a flour bin in a doll-house pantry in their first Rectory, his and Annie's. He would seek her there before going out to his parish calls. She would be standing with her back to him, hands deep in dough, and would turn to him her cheek, olive that always went rose beneath his kiss. He could still hear the catch of her breath as she whispered good-by, for Annie, deeply joyous, had yet always treated joy a little apprehensively, as if knowing it would not last so very long. Looking back over many years, the Bishop thought how young Annie had been when she died, and Nan had been younger still. Nan! There it was again! That flash of hot pain through his head, followed by a numbing dullness, even stranger to bear. He had felt this several times of late. The Bishop ran a hand over his forehead. He seemed to be floating far, without thought, yet this was not sleep. Slowly, slowly, he drew back, but his thoughts were heavy, not clear. He seemed to lie there waiting, waiting for something. Surely thus he had always waited on Christmas morning. He listened. It would come in a moment. There! A scurry along the hall, the clatter of the door-handle, a rush, a jump, curls, lips, bubbling chuckles, little cold toes to be warmed in his hand! Hear the shouts and the singing of her, feel the pummelling of her little hands!

"Christmas! Christmas! Christmas!" shrilling straight up to the angels! Was she not Christmas joy turned mad, his little girl!

He was full awake now. His lips formed a word. We are very weary of old pain repeated when we whisper out to God like that.

The Bishop wondered why people say that one grows used to loss, and that old age grows dull in feeling. Still he had got used to it, of course. This was Christmas, too; it was quite natural that he should feel it more on Christmas. He must be a little patient then with himself about it, perhaps, on Christmas. Yet when had there been a day when he had not missed them, his own!

The Bishop turned toward the eastward window, and on his gray and beautiful face fell the gray and beautiful morning, for the Bishop was one who had made God a habit, so that he turned to Him instinctively without thinking about it at all. And since also he was a man of quick visual imagination he thought of God quite simply: he saw Him standing there, between the bed and the brightening window, in the form of a young Jewish rabbi. He always stood there, to greet the Bishop's day. Together they always went about, step matching step, so that the Bishop was never a lonely man. To himself he always thought of the Nazarene as the Friend, because, so he thought, it was by loneliness that Jesus had learned how to love. Since the Bishop always thought in words and in pictures, it seemed to him that the Friend said to him now, "Rise. Let us go forth into the morning. It is Christmas. It is the day of giving."

While he dressed, the Bishop still knew God standing there, but felt rather than seen, being lost sometimes in mist and dizziness. The spaces in the room were strange; it was a very long journey to the washstand, and the white window squares seemed to advance and then recede. The Bishop could see his brush plainly enough on the bureau scarf, but it was a long time before he could make his hand reach it. He had to smile



quaintly at himself at last, for he was sitting on the bed mechanically counting the flower baskets in the worn Brussels carpet, flower baskets that ran diagonally to the chair holding his coat. Groping a little, the Bishop achieved the coat, then stood trembling. Undoubtedly he was ill that morning, but Mrs. Graham should not know it! For he must go out, he must go to church, there was no service in all the year so dear to him as the Christmas communion at St. John's. He would force his blurring head to go through with it, and Mrs. Graham should not keep him in! Keep him in! A frown twitched on his forehead, an old man's helplessness at the thought of coddling. Why should a woman he had known but three years be so solicitous over his health, dictating about his rubbers and his socks—he was not ill, nor was he so very old! At that his brow cleared in a sunny flash of amusement, for of course, he was very old, eighty-one, and besides Mrs. Graham was very good to him. Still to-day she must not keep him at home, for to stand once more within the rail offering the chalice to his people had become a deep and blind desire, overmastering all sense of weakness. Besides, there were other matters and grave ones to be seen to, to-day. Somehow—he looked toward the eastward window—the strength would come for the day, as it always came.

Slowly, while he stood looking out into the morning grown rosy now with the coming sun, his head cleared more and more, as he thought about his Westbury as it brightened beneath the Christmas sunrise. Few towns, the Bishop thought, had changed so little in sixty years. He looked out on the same Westbury he had first seen when he had come to St. John's college as a boy. Stately old River Street with its twin rows of

elms still curved to the curve of the river. Each quiet old house had in the rear a terraced wintry garden sloping to the wide and sparkling water. The Bishop knew each of these houses, even as far as Lucy Hollister's, which was beyond his sight. Lucy still kept the house of her girlhood where the Bishop had first known her, known Lucy and her cousin, Annie. Far beyond Lucy's house, River Street changed to towering tenements and grimed factories, the place of the strangers, where the Bishop often walked, but wistful and puzzled, for it was this part of Westbury alone that had changed since his boyhood, although even then it had been the place of work-people, for whom St. John's Southside Mission had been founded. The Bishop stood thinking of the mission.

Well in sight, breaking the row of houses set among their wintry trees, sprang the spire of St. John's, and beyond its Rectory lay the brown, cube-like buildings of the college above the sweeping river, a small college of mighty men. It was there that the Bishop and his roommate, Barty Judd, had learned to dream dreams. It was the glory of Westbury, the kindly old city, remote, unworldly, that it had set so many young men dreaming. The Bishop smiled to think how proudly Westbury still pointed to its seven bishops, for the spirit of Westbury had not changed in all the sixty years since the founding of the mission. Westbury had given the Bishop, he thought, the most beautiful thing in his life; it was this that brought the light to his face as he thought of the gift he wished to give Westbury in return, to-day, if—if he could! At that "if" his eyes deepened with a sharp and subtle change, then cleared as the passing thought of the day before him yielded to memories, and he saw the afternoon of the laying of the mission corner-stone. As they

had walked home together, the Bishop, after long silence, had broken into boyish fire of words, seeing all his life before him. Lucy had listened and answered, but Annie had been silent.

Dreamer as the boy had been, he had never dreamed of coming back one day, long afterwards, and living to be an old, old man in the bishop's house in Westbury.

The sun was climbing to a golden blaze now, filling with hope the day before the Bishop. He was always a good deal of a child in his Christmas feeling. There was work before him on this Christmas day, in his own house and out of it. Quite simply he closed his eyes a moment, with bowed head, thinking of the Westbury he loved and of three within it, whom he should see that day.

The Bishop's tall figure swayed a little as he grasped the stair rail, and for an instant his gaze was vague upon the dusky hall, upon the gloomy wall-paper, the threadbare carpet. It was a gray and worn old house in which the Bishop's soul was harbored. A succession of housekeepers, under the oversight of Mrs. Hollister, kept it in order, but it needs the authority of kinship to change a wall-paper or a carpet. Thus it was that the Bishop's long hallway was hardly more his own than the pavement outside, or his own dining-room door before which he paused, hardly more his own than the doors along his familiar River Street. His hand lingered on the knob, for, thinking of Mrs. Graham within, and of the testing now of his three years' hope, he had grown apprehensive and wistful. Then his face flashed firm in a smile, as he looked toward Someone beside him there in the dim hall. That little way of looking toward the Friend with a quick upward smile was one

of the Bishop's habits engendered by solitude. He never meant to betray his thought publicly, yet sometimes wayfarers in the train, on the street, were startled at the sudden passing of strange light across the gray face, making it, as now in the opening doorway, the face of a little child. The Bishop bent toward the black-clad little woman before him the bow that belonged to the days of his youth. Age had stooped his shoulders, but never stiffened their grace, nor that of the sweep of his extended hand. His face—lean, clear-chiselled, blue-eyed, and heavily thatched with white—was ashine with Christmas greeting.

"I wish you a beautiful Christmas!" he said.

Mrs. Graham's glance met the Bishop's furtively. She had restless brown eyes beneath a tranquil parting of brown hair, curling and lightly silvered. Her mouth looked as if locked upon discontent. She was a stout, rosy little woman who moved in a heavy, bustling manner. She put her hand into the Bishop's awkwardly, never having become accustomed to one who shook hands as a morning greeting.

"Merry Christmas," she murmured perfunctorily, as, in the holiday absence of a maid, she turned toward the business of the Bishop's breakfast. The raised slide of the dumb-waiter made a gap in the solid paneling of dark cupboards occupying one wall. Like other dining-rooms on River Street, the room had two long windows looking toward the water. There was a wide piazza beyond them, hung with the gnarly ropes of leafless Virginia creeper. It was a dark-wainscoted room, but now the level eastern sun flooded it, and there was a great crimson spot of roses at the Bishop's plate. The table was set

for one, he noticed; when Maria was away, Mrs. Graham insisted on serving him with her own hands, instead of settling comfortably into her usual seat. In the silent room, only the sound of the dumb waiter that creaked and rattled, but the Bishop was waiting to speak, after the long patience of three years. When his breakfast had been set forth to her satisfaction, Mrs. Graham sank upon the edge of a chair near the window, keeping an alert eye on the Bishop's needs, but having also an air of absence.

"Well," she burst out at last, "so it's Christmas again!"

"Yes," the Bishop smiled, "'again.' It comes around pretty often, doesn't it? This is your third Christmas in Westbury."

"I wonder how many more I'll have, in Westbury."

"Is it such a bad place to spend Christmas in then, Westbury?"

"Bad for me, yes! After Fair Orchard!"

"But I had hoped you had begun to feel at home in Westbury."

"Me! At home! In Westbury! No, I've no place here and never can have. I see that plain enough,—just a housekeeper, anyway! I've no place in the place, I mean, like at home! Oh, there's no harm in Westbury! It's not as bad as some towns. There's show here, but it's not showy; there's money, but there's manners, too! Only there's no *heart* in the place! How could there be, with Dr. Newbold running the church and Mrs. Hollister running society?"

"They both have hearts, I am sure, Mrs. Graham."

“Maybe. Not for plain people, or poor people, though. Maybe for you. Although Dr. Newbold—” she broke off sharply, teeth on lip, while her eyes, too full and bright with meaning, changed before the Bishop’s gaze, and she altered her unspoken sentence, concluding, “Dr. Newbold suits the place all right. He don’t suit me, that’s all. It’s kind of spoiled church for me, going to St. John’s, and church in Fair Orchard was such a lot to me. It’s queer when you always hear about Westbury being such a strong church place that it should have spoiled church for me. It’s all right when you preach, of course, Bishop, but it’s something else I’m talking about. It was different at home—oh,” her rosy face darkened savagely, “sometimes it seems as if my church was just another of the things she’s taken from me along with my home and my boy!”

The Bishop closed his eyes an instant, seeking counsel.

“It’s Christmas that upsets me so! Christmas that brings it all back on me so. And then to-day she sent, Florence herself, she sent the baby’s picture on a post-card. It’s signed ‘From Florence.’ You’d think after all that’s happened, she’d have let Dan send it, the first word I’ve had from either of them for three years!”

She rose and filled the coffee cup abruptly. “Well,” she jerked the words out, “Christmas and other days, I’ve got to grin and bear it, being turned out by my son’s wife. But it’s been worse since there was a baby.”

“It’s the baby’s first Christmas,” mused the Bishop.

“Yes, he’s seven months and sixteen days old.”

The Bishop smiled up at her, "May I see him? Where is the picture?"

She laid it before him. The Bishop adjusted his glasses, then removed them to look from the picture to a keen scrutiny of the grandmother's face.

"Yes," she answered his look. "You see it then? The baby looks like us, like Dan and me. And I can see Dan's father in him, too. There's not a hair of him that looks like the Reynoldses,—that lot!"

The Bishop was examining the photograph minutely. Mrs. Graham looked over his shoulder, but at his next word she moved away again. "That's his mother's hand holding him, isn't it, that shadow under his arm?"

"Yes! His mother's hand! He looks like us, but he don't belong to us! He's hers!"

The Bishop glanced up, "And I suppose he's also the other grandmother's."

"No! Florence has no mother. I'm all the grandmother that baby's got!"

"I think you never told me that before," he paused thoughtfully, then looking over to her standing by the window, he said, feeling slowly for words, "So the baby's mother, that girl out at Fair-Orchard, has had no mother—to go with her—on that way—a woman goes, to bring home, a little child?"

The Bishop's voice was soft with the awe of many years ago. The grandmother flushed, muttering, "She would not have wanted *me*. She had Dan."

The Bishop's eyelids had fallen, quivering, over his eyes. He was far away; again he watched with Annie, with Nan, as he said, "But men cannot understand. God does not mean them to. Such things are a secret between God and women, like the coming of Mary's little child. Each mother needs a mother then. It was not—it was not till then that I understood how much my Nan had lost when she lost her mother."

"It did not live, did it, at all, your daughter's child?" whispered Mrs. Graham.

The Bishop shook his head, not speaking, thinking of the little waxen loveliness they had laid to sleep with Nan in the hollow of her arm. His lips showed their rare palsied trembling, murmuring, "Both together, Nan and the little one. She had been so well! I was not prepared—" the eyelids of his quiet gray face trembled, then opened on the blue eyes, as he said, "Of course, we know they do not die. They are alive, somewhere where the dreams come true that we dream for our children." He smiled into her eyes, "For we are great old dreamers, aren't we, we grandparents?" He raised his hand from the chair-arm, as if it would have pleaded, "But I think each mother needs the grandmother to help her dream. I think she is wanting you now, that Florence out there."

She faced sharp about, "Florence! Want me!" She looked at him in grim pity at his simplicity. "No, Bishop, Florence don't want me! No more than I want her! We're misfits, Florence and



me,—worse luck for Dan, and for me, and for the baby, too, now!”

The blue eyes a-twinkle, “And worse luck for Florence, too,” he persisted. “She sent you the picture. Wasn’t it perhaps to say that she wants to show you the baby himself?”

“It’s like you to think that, Bishop, but it’s not like Florence to mean that. I understand Florence! I can still see her face plain, that last morning!”

“You have not seen her face since there was a baby. Perhaps she understands you, too, now. Perhaps she understands, now, what it costs, to give up an only child to anyone.”

“That’s it, of course, that’s what finished me up, her getting Dan, the way she has. I guess I seem pretty mean to you, but Dan was all I had.”

“I think I understand,” the Bishop said quietly.

Arrested by his tone she turned, “Was he good, your daughter’s husband? Did you get on with him?”

“No one is good enough for an only child. Yes, he was good. He—he has been remarried for a long time, you know.” He spoke with long pauses, remembering, “Yes, I got on with him. I should have lost my daughter if I hadn’t. We had one happy year, together. Getting on is hard. But not getting on is harder.”

She did not speak, turned from him again toward the window, intent, musing.

“Isn’t it,” he pleaded, “harder?”

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