

THE BURGOMASTER'S CHRISTMAS

BY JACOB A. RIIS

Author of "How the Other Half Lives," "The Old Town," etc.

THE burgomaster was in a bad humor. The smoke from his long pipe, which ordinarily rose in leisurely meditative rings signaling official calm and fair weather, came to-day in short, angry puffs as he tossed his mail impatiently about on the desk. A reprimand from headquarters, where they knew about as much of a burgomaster's actual work as he of the prime minister's! Less. Those bureaucrats never came in touch with real things. He smiled a little grimly as he thought that that was what his own people had said of him when twenty years before he had come from the capital to the little provincial town with his mind firmly made up to many things which—well, a man grows older and wiser. Life has its lessons for men, though it pass by the red tape in department bureaus. That never changes. His people and he, now— The stern wrinkle in the furrowed forehead relaxed, and he leaned back in his chair, blowing a long, contented ring, which brought a sigh of relief from the old clerk in the outer office. The skies were clearing.

In truth, despite his habitual sternness of manner, there was no more beloved man in the town of Hammel than the burgomaster. His kindness of heart was proverbial. The law had in him a faithful executor; the staff of office was no willow wand in his hand to bend to every wind that blew. To the evil-doer he was a hard

master, but many were the stories that were whispered of how, having sent a thief to jail, he had taken care of his wife and children, who were not to blame. In fact, word had come from more than one distant town of how this or that ne'er-do-well, after squaring himself with the law in Burgomaster Brent's jurisdiction, had made a new start, helped somehow where he might have expected frowns and suspicion. But of this, Hammel tongues were careful not to wag within that official's hearing. Those things were his secret, if, indeed,—the matrons wagged their heads knowingly,—they were not his wife's, the burgomasterinde's; and so they were to stay.

Whether something of all this had come to smooth the burgomaster's brow or not, it was not for long. There was a tap on the door, and, in answer to his brisk "Come in," there entered Jens, the forester, with a swarthy, sullen-looking prisoner. Jens saluted and stood, cap in hand.

"Black Hans," he said briefly. "We took him last night in the meadow brake with a young roe."

The burgomaster's face grew cold and stern. Black Hans was an old offender. As a magistrate the burgomaster had given him a chance twice, but he was a confirmed poacher, who would rather lie out in the woods through a cold winter's night on the chance of getting a deer, and of getting into jail, too, than work a day at good wages, clever blacksmith though he was. Now he had been caught red-handed, and would be made to suffer for it. The burgomaster bent lowering brows upon the prisoner.

"You could n't keep from stealing the count's deer, not even at Christmas," he said harshly.

The poacher looked up. Rough as he was, he was not a bad-looking fellow. The free, if lawless, life he led was in his face and bearing.

"The deer is wild. They 're for the man as can take 'em, if the count do claim 'em," he said doggedly, and halted, as with a sudden thought. Something had entered with him and the forester, and was even then filling the room with a suggestion of good cheer to come. It was the smell of the Yule goose roasting in the burgomaster's kitchen. Black Hans looked straight into the eye of his inquisitor.

"I did n't have none—for me young ones," he added. It was not said defiantly, but as a mere statement of fact.

An angry reply rose to the official's lip, but he checked himself.

"Take him to the lock-up," he ordered shortly, and the forester went out with his charge.

The burgomaster heard the outer door close behind them, and turned wearily to his mail. The count had been greatly wrought up over the depredations of Black Hans and his kind, and would insist on an example being made of him. Bad blood always came of these cases, for the game law was not well thought of in the land in these democratic days. There lingered yet resentfully the recollection of the days not so long since when to take "the king's deer" brought a man to the block, or to the treadmill for life. And the family of this fellow Black Hans, what was to become of them? The burgomaster's

gaze wandered abstractedly over the envelop he was opening and rested on an unfamiliar stamp. He held it up and took a closer look. Oh, yes; the new Christmas stamp. He knew it well enough, with its design of the great sanatorium for tubercular children that had been built out of the proceeds of other years' sales. It was a pretty picture, and a worthy cause. In all Denmark there was none that so laid hold of the popular fancy. It was the word "Yule," with its magic, that did it. There was no other inscription on the stamp, and none was needed.

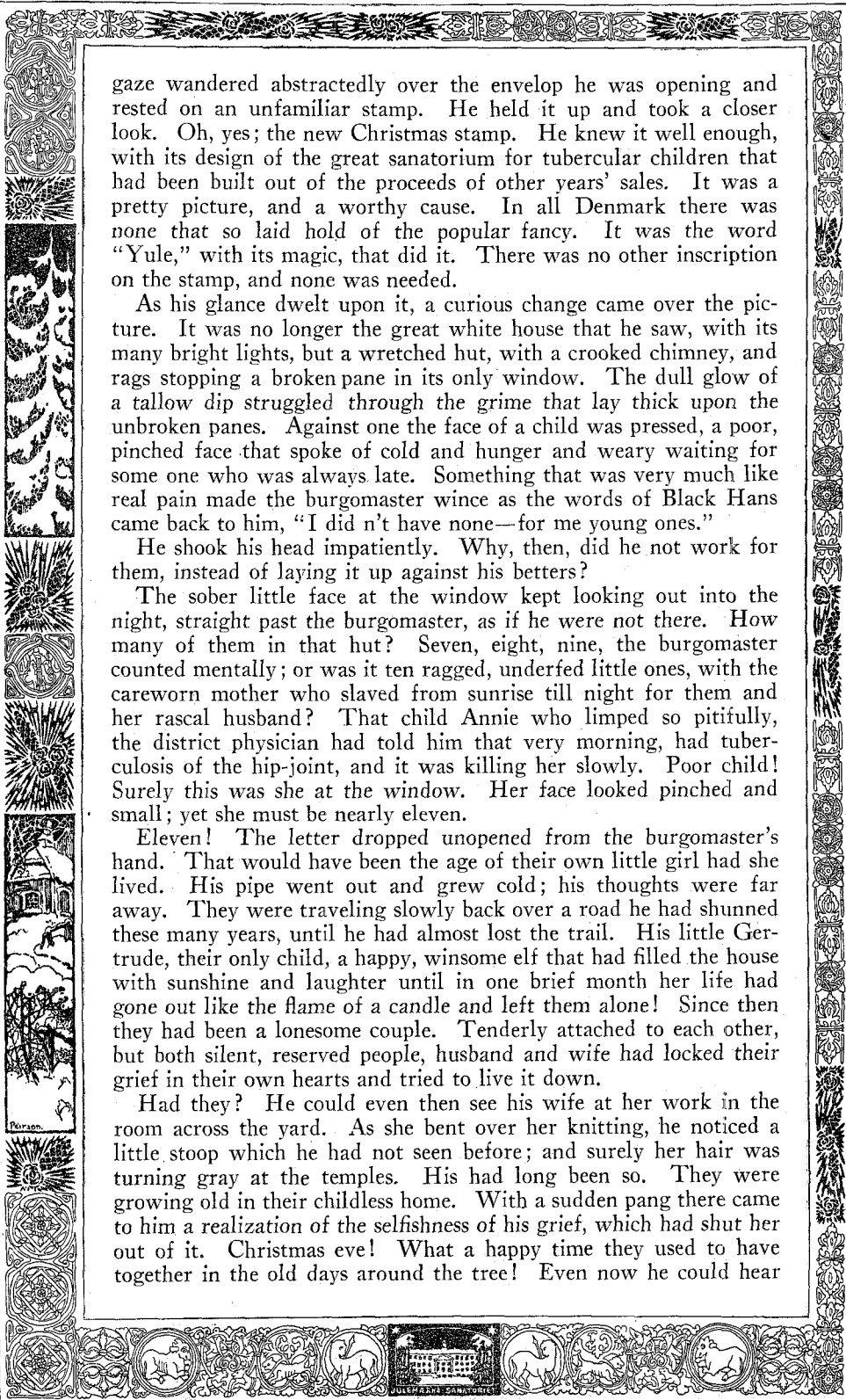
As his glance dwelt upon it, a curious change came over the picture. It was no longer the great white house that he saw, with its many bright lights, but a wretched hut, with a crooked chimney, and rags stopping a broken pane in its only window. The dull glow of a tallow dip struggled through the grime that lay thick upon the unbroken panes. Against one the face of a child was pressed, a poor, pinched face that spoke of cold and hunger and weary waiting for some one who was always late. Something that was very much like real pain made the burgomaster wince as the words of Black Hans came back to him, "I did n't have none—for me young ones."

He shook his head impatiently. Why, then, did he not work for them, instead of laying it up against his betters?

The sober little face at the window kept looking out into the night, straight past the burgomaster, as if he were not there. How many of them in that hut? Seven, eight, nine, the burgomaster counted mentally; or was it ten ragged, underfed little ones, with the careworn mother who slaved from sunrise till night for them and her rascal husband? That child Annie who limped so pitifully, the district physician had told him that very morning, had tuberculosis of the hip-joint, and it was killing her slowly. Poor child! Surely this was she at the window. Her face looked pinched and small; yet she must be nearly eleven.

Eleven! The letter dropped unopened from the burgomaster's hand. That would have been the age of their own little girl had she lived. His pipe went out and grew cold; his thoughts were far away. They were traveling slowly back over a road he had shunned these many years, until he had almost lost the trail. His little Gertrude, their only child, a happy, winsome elf that had filled the house with sunshine and laughter until in one brief month her life had gone out like the flame of a candle and left them alone! Since then they had been a lonesome couple. Tenderly attached to each other, but both silent, reserved people, husband and wife had locked their grief in their own hearts and tried to live it down.

Had they? He could even then see his wife at her work in the room across the yard. As she bent over her knitting, he noticed a little stoop which he had not seen before; and surely her hair was turning gray at the temples. His had long been so. They were growing old in their childless home. With a sudden pang there came to him a realization of the selfishness of his grief, which had shut her out of it. Christmas eve! What a happy time they used to have together in the old days around the tree! Even now he could hear



the glad voices of children from the grocer's across the street, where they were making ready for theirs. In their house there had not been one since—since their Gertrude left them. There was Jens, the forester, carrying in a Christmas tree over there even now—Jens who had caught Black Hans. What sort of Christmas would they keep in his hut, with the father locked up, sure of a heavy fine, which meant a long time in jail, since he had no money to settle with?

The childish face with the grave eyes was at the window again, keeping its dismal watch. Eleven years! His mind went back, swiftly this time, over the freshly broken road to the days when the tree was lighted in their home on Christmas eve. Of all the nights in the year, it had been the loneliest since, with just the two of them alone at the table, growing old.

A flood of tenderness swept over the burgomaster, and with it came a sudden resolve. It was not yet too late. He rose and slammed the desk down hard, leaving the rest of his mail unopened. Three o'clock! Almost time to light the candles, and this night he would light them himself. Yes, he would. He tapped on the window and beckoned to Jens, who was coming out of the grocery store. In the vestibule they held a brief whispered consultation that concluded with the warning, "and don't you tell my wife." The old clerk heard it and gave a start. What secret did the burgomaster have from the burgomasterinde which Jens, the forester, might share? But he remembered the day, in time, and bestowed upon himself a knowing wink. He, too, had his secrets.

Jens was less quick-witted. He offered some objection apparently, but it was promptly overruled by the burgomaster, who pushed him out with a friendly but decisive nod and bade him be gone.

"Very little ones—two, mind. And don't let her see."

Whereupon the burgomaster put on his overcoat and went out, too.

Before the church bells rang in the holy eve, all the gossips in town were busy with the report that the burgomaster had been buying enough Christmas toys and candles to stock an orphan asylum. What had come over the man? Five dolls, counted the toy-shop woman, with eyes that grew wide in the telling—five! And they alone, the two of them, in the big house with never a Christmas tree there that any one could remember! It must be that they were expecting company.

Nothing was further from the mind of the burgomasterinde as she went along with her preparations for the holiday. It had been a lonesome day with her, for all she had tried to fill it with housewifely tasks. Christmas eve always was. Now, as she sat with her knitting, her thoughts dwelt upon the days long gone when it had meant something to them; when a child's laughter had thrilled her mother heart. To her it was no unfamiliar road she was traveling. The memory of her child, which her husband had tried to shut out of his life lest it unman him for his work, she had cherished in her heart, and all life's burdens had been lightened and sweetened by it. Her one grief was that this of all things she could not share with him. No one

ever heard her speak Gertrude's name, but there was sometimes a wistful look in her face which caused the burgomaster vague alarm, and once or twice had led to grave conferences with the family practitioner about Mrs. Brent's health. The old doctor, who was also the family friend, shook his head. The burgomasterinde was a well woman; his pills were not needed. Once he had hinted that her loss—but the burgomaster had interrupted him hastily: She would get over that, if indeed she had not quite forgotten; to stir it up would do no good. And the doctor, who was wise in other ways than those of his books, dropped the subject.

The burgomasterinde had seen Black Hans brought in in charge of Jens, and understood what the trouble was. As he was led away to the jail, her woman's heart yearned for his children. She knew them well. The town gossips were right: the path to the poacher's hut her familiar feet had found oftener than her stern husband guessed. The want and neglect in that wretched home stirred her to pity; but more than that it was the little crippled girl who drew her with the memory of her own. She had overheard the doctor telling her husband that there was no help for her where she was, and all day her mind had been busy with half-formed plans to get her away to the great seashore hospital where such cripples were made whole, if there was any help for them. Now, as she passed them in review, with the picture of Black Hans behind the bars for their background, a purpose grew up in her mind and took shape. They should not starve and be cold on Christmas eve, if their father *was* in jail. She would make Christmas for them herself. And hard upon the heels of this resolve trod a thought that made her drop her knitting and gaze long and musingly across the yard to the window at which her husband sat buried in his mail.

The burgomaster's face was turned from her. She could not see that he held in his hand the very letter with the Christmas stamp that had stirred unwonted thoughts within him; but she knew the furrow that had grown in the years of lonely longing. She had watched it deepen, and he had not deceived her, but she had vainly sought a way out. All at once she knew the way. They would keep Christmas again as of old, the two—nay, the three of them together. With a quick smile that had yet in it a shadow of fright, she went about carrying out her purpose.

So it befell that when Jens, the forester, was making off for the woods where the Christmas trees grew, shaking his head at the burgomaster's queer commission, the voice of the burgomasterinde called him back to the kitchen door, and he received the second and the greater shock of the day.

"Get two wee ones," she wound up her directions, "and bring them here to the back door. Don't tell my husband, and be sure he does not see."

Jens stared. "But the burgomaster—" he began. She stopped him.

"No matter about the burgomaster," she said briskly. "Only don't let him know. Bring them here as soon as it is dark."

And Jens departed, shaking his head in hopeless bewilderment.

The early winter twilight had fallen when he returned with two green bundles, one of which by dint of much strategy he smuggled into the front office without the burgomasterinde seeing him, while he delivered the other at the back door without the burgomaster being the wiser, this being made easier by the fact that the latter had not yet returned from his visit to the shops. When, a little while later he came home, tiptoeing in like a guilty Santa Claus on his early evening rounds, he shut himself in alone.

Profound quiet reigned in the official residence for a full hour after dark. In both wings of the house the shutters were closed tight. In one the burgomasterinde was presumably busy with her household duties; in the other the burgomaster was occupied with a task that would have made the old clerk doubt the evidence of his eyes had he himself not been at that moment engaged in the same identical business at his own home. Two small Christmas trees stood upon the table, from which law books and legal papers had been cleared with an unceremonious haste that had left them in an undignified heap on the floor. The burgomaster between them was fixing colored wax candles, cornucopias, and paper dolls in their branches. He eyed a bag of oranges ruefully. They were too heavy for the little trees, but then they would do to bank about the roots. To be sure, they had left these behind in the woods, but the fact was not apparent: each little tree was planted in a huge flower-pot, as Jens had received his orders, just as if it had grown there.

One brief moment the burgomaster paused in his absurd task. It was when he had put the last candle in place that something occurred to him which made him stand awhile in deep thought, gazing fixedly at the tree. Then he went to his desk, and from a back drawer, seldom used, took out something that shone like silver in the light. Perhaps it was that which made him screen his eyes with his hand when he saw it. It was a little silver star, such as many a Christmas tree bore at its top that night to tell the children of the Star of Bethlehem. The burgomaster sat and looked at it while the furrow grew deeper in his forehead; then he put it back gently into its envelop and closed the desk.

It was nearly time for dinner when he straightened up and heaved a sigh of contentment. The candles on one of the little trees were lighted, and all was ready.

"If only," he said uncertainly—"if only she is not in now." Could some good fairy have given him second sight to pierce the walls between his office and his wife's room, what he saw there would certainly have made him believe he had taken leave of his senses. Jens had just gone out with one Christmas tree, all hung with children's toys. On the table stood the other in its pot, a vision of beauty. The mistress of the house sat before it with a little box in her lap from which she took one cherished trinket after another, last of all a silvery angel with folded wings. A tear fell upon it as she set it in the tree, but she wiped this away and stood back, surveying her work with happy eyes. It *was* beautiful.

"I wonder where Jonas is. I have n't heard his step for an hour." She listened at the door. All was quiet. "I will just carry it over and surprise him when he comes in." And she went out into the hall with her shining burden.

At that precise moment the door of the office was opened, and the burgomaster came out, carrying his Christmas tree. They met upon the landing. For a full minute they stood looking at each other in stunned silence. It was the burgomaster who broke it.

"You were so lonely," he said huskily, "and I thought of our Gertrude."

She put down her tree, and went to him.

"Look, Jonas," she said, with her head on his shoulder, and pointed where it stood. He saw through blurring tears the child's precious belongings from her last Christmas, —their last Christmas,—and he bent down and kissed her.

"I know," he said simply; "it was Black Hans's little Annie. See!" He drew her into his office. "I made one for her. Jens shall take it over."

She hid her face on his breast. "He just went with one from me," she sobbed, struggling between laughter and tears; and as he started, she hugged him close. "But we need this one. I tell you, Jonas, what we will do: we will send it to Black Hans in the jail."

And even so it came to pass. To Jens's final and utter stupefaction, he was bidden to carry the fourth and last of the trees to the lock-up, where it cheered Black Hans that Christmas eve. It was noticed both by the turnkey and by the poacher that it bore a bright silver star at the top, but neither could know that it was to be a star of hope indeed for little Annie and her dark home. For so it had been settled between the burgomaster and his wife, as they pinned it on together and wished each other a right Merry Christmas, with many, many more to come, that happy night.

THE GREAT MOMENT

BY HARRIET PRESCOTT SPOFFORD

Nam cælum et terra et omnes viventes expectabant

NOW the ox waited in the stall,
Now the stars waited in the skies,
For that strange thing which should befall
Before the moon should rise.

The winds about forgot to blow,
The spark to gather in the dew,
The cloud above forgot to flow
Along the midnight's blue.

The singer's song in sweetness hung
Trembling to stillness; and, as well,
Breathless that instant lovers clung;
The mother's rapture fell.

The shepherd ceased to tell his flock,
The father ceased to breathe his prayer,
The whole world felt the subtle shock,
The portent in the air.

An awful hush, from shore to shore,
In lands remote, on seas forlorn,
And no heart beat that time before
The Prince of Peace was born.