

Together at Christmas

(Continued From Page 6)

"That will do. I've stood enough from you—your turn to stand something from me, now." His voice was harsh and his strong hands pressed relentlessly on her arms until she was forced to her knees. Like a wild thing she wrenched and writhed and kicked but his grip held. The agony of that pressure drove all the light out of her. Humiliated, she huddled on the floor, sobbing dully. He held her there.

"YOU ARE STAYING HERE!" "Now listen. For what has happened to-night you alone are to blame. For twelve long years I have loved you, with never a thought of making you mine. The selfish, spiteful, world knows would have laughed in my face had I asked you to marry me. But there is another you that only I have discovered and that I love."

"Do I?" "There was infinite tenderness, now, in his voice. "You can get up, I am sorry if I hurt you." "Paul, please let me go." The flickering firelight illumined the red stain on his wrist where her teeth had been, and she felt a wild gladness at the sight.

"No, you are staying here, to-night. That's final. The words were like the flick of a whip in her face and before the masterful blaze of his eyes she loved her own in panic-stricken terror. Followed a hiatus while she gazed in dumb misery at her tormentor. But he made no sign. She tried appealing to his chivalry, assumed an air of gentleness, or weakness, but of no avail.

The situation seemed to afford him a strange satisfaction. He kissed her, exulting in her distaste at his caresses, and at length, taking her unresponsive arm in his, he led her up the narrow stairs to a low, sweet-scented room.

"You will find everything here you need. He pointed to a collection of dainty feminine things that were assembled on the bed. "And, by the way, you can't escape. The window is securely shuttered on the outside."

Her head bowed in weary acquiescence. "Will you come down again, or are you tired?" "I will stay here." A sob choked in her dry throat. "Very well." With set face he walked out and locked the door behind him.

Outside the snow still fell. Paul took the car and put it safely away inside the cart-shed.

By morning the snow had piled itself into giant mounds around the old cottage. Gloria noted the fact dully as she looked out of the window. The door was unlocked, now, but she made no movement to go downstairs.

The spun round and faced Paul as he entered the room. "Once I am free I will punish you for this. I'll make you sorry!" "You can never do that. Nothing can ever take from me the joy of having once owned you. Now I have prepared breakfast. Let us go down."

"I shall not eat." But the very matter-of-factness of his tone frightened her and she followed him without further resistance.

The day passed slowly. Paul cooked the dinner and tidied up with a characteristic thoroughness, while his wife sat staring with lack-lustre eyes at the fire flames, and from there to the dormer window through which the sun shone, slowly melting the snow with its weak, wintry glow. At length darkness fell. The lamp was lighted and the curtains drawn. Paul joined her beside the fire and smoked thoughtfully. Presently he began to speak.

"See that old framed sampler up there, Gloria? Another mother worked it when she was a girl. There's another one upstairs, too, that she did. Hers has been a sad life. Her people were gentlefolk, but she defied them and married my father, a rough, untutored farmer. Some people will do a lot for love."

"She made no sign, but he continued, as if speaking to himself. "Soon after he died there was a bad epidemic of diphtheria and it took both my small sisters. So my mother has only me, now. She will love you, Gloria, if you will let her."

The girl spoke tonelessly. "I did not know your mother ever had any other children." "We moved to this cottage when my father died and I started to work. Do you remember how I used to bring you the very first strawberries from the woods and the most luscious wild raspberries I could find? Every year I did that."

"You stopped later." "I know. When you were old enough for all the eligible young men around to take you out in their wonderful cars I knew that my love was hopeless. You could never stoop down to my level. Yet when I went away something urged me to, to make my way in the world, to prove myself the equal—comparatively—of those others that envied you. Journalism appealed to me and I drove myself at it like a nigger and forged ahead. To-day I have a position that I am not ashamed to ask any girl to share with me."

"Then—did you intend to ask me?" "No. It was not money that could make me your equal, Gloria. You are still as far above me as the stars, and I—I have been a beast to you." Suddenly he buried his head in his hands.

"PITY—!" A strange ploy stirred in Gloria, a vague something which she tried fiercely to crush. He rose to his feet. "To-morrow, I shall let you go. It was madness that made me hold you against your will. To-night it is late, but to-morrow you shall be free."

"And you will divorce me, Paul?" "And that he feared. "I suppose I must. I hate the thought of a divorce. It's nothing but an unclean lie. Still, I'll do it. That shall be my atonement for the sweet madness of this Christmas."

The girl shuffled uneasily. Paul's absent-minded thought of the lonely, loveless years that lay ahead of her, but he deeply. He had great faith in the contract, of course, but still, it was a precedent that which she could soon live down and forget, while he— Her eyes filled with tears. "I wish you didn't care so much, Paul. I feel so mean now for having married you."

"Tenderly he stroked her hair. "Fear heart, don't cry, and don't worry about it. I shall get along somehow." "With an impulsive gesture she seized his hands. "This evening is yours, anyway, and since you say you will remember, let's make it a happy memory, shall we?" He smiled at her, puzzled by the varying moods of her. But she opened the old piano and, after a few preliminary thrills began to play—jazz, love-song, anything that would make him glad and help him to forget. Presently he started to sing and together they ran through a vast repertoire of light, frivolous choruses and omissions. The whole atmosphere was changed. They laughed and made merry as if there had never been a miss-word between them.

FANCY DRESS OPTIONAL—By Kendall Graham

Freddy Bartlam, young, quite good-looking in his own particular way, and dressed at some considerable expense by one of the best tailors in London, stood hesitating on the footwalk in Oxford street. The reason for the hesitation was obvious to no one, not even to Freddy himself. It was just one of those inexplicable moments that occur at some time or another in the lives of all of us when, for no apparent reason, we stand staring at the traffic.

About ten minutes before this momentary lull in Freddy's usually lively consciousness, he had been pondering upon the important question as to what he ought to do about Christmas which was due for celebration two days hence. Unfortunately the cogitation had not been productive of anything tangible.

He was about to cross the road when, with a thoughtlessness for which they are frequently famous, an omnibus grunted to a standstill just opposite him, cutting short the intended movement abruptly.

As it happened, however, that omnibus had been specially chartered by Providence, and Betty Verne, a charming vision of fresh-complexioned loveliness, alighted as it were, on Freddy's doorstep.

"Hello, Freddy, old thing," she smiled joyously, "you've saved me threehalfpence."

Freddy grinned as though he understood. "I was going to write you tonight," she pursued, hurriedly, "about spending Christmas at Renstone Manor—you know, my Aunt Elspeth's place. Now don't say you are booked up! You will come, won't you?"

Betty Verne talked at about much the same speed as she usually drove her little two-seater and Freddy found both a trifle breathless.

"But I thought your aunt—" "Please, Freddy," she implored, "give your thinking mechanism a holiday for once. Aunt Elspeth is old enough to believe in the spirit of Christmas and all that sort of thing. I'll expect you on Christmas Eve—dinner is at seven, and with a 'so long, old thing,' Betty Verne fled towards the already brilliantly lighted windows of the shops, leaving Freddy feeling as if someone had just collided with the middle button of his waistcoat.

Once the shock had worn off, Freddy Bartlam fulfilled his original intention and crossed the road. It was only a great effort of self-control that prevented him singing lustily as a taxi bore him clubwards.

To Freddy Bartlam, Betty was the only girl-in-the-world. He had known her long enough to know that he would very much like to marry her, but so far the conquest had been beset with difficulties, and the greatest of these was Betty's Aunt Elspeth, who, from what Betty had told him, regarded him in a not too favorable light.

Freddy had long rankled under the lady's judgment of him. He considered it grossly unfair because she had never even seen him; but now all that was to be altered. He was to be given his chance and he must make quite sure that the impression was of a very favorable nature.

He was aware, of course, that, like the proverbial pebbles on the seashore, he was by no means alone in his aspiration, but Freddy was equally aware that the connoisseur of seashore pebbles would undoubtedly select the one that appeared just a little different from its fellows, and Freddy Bartlam, being a young man who did not hold with self-depreciation, decided that he was worth a second glance.

Renstone Manor. Victoria Station on Christmas Eve was a pandemonium of jostling humanity, all perfectly happy but nevertheless eager and all hopelessly at sea in finding their right platforms. Freddy Bartlam, having something more than a nodding acquaintance with Ruggier, rather enjoyed the scrum as, armed with suit case, he burrowed his way toward the looking office.

At the window, where a philosophical looking young man was issuing tickets, to almost anywhere, Freddy lowered his suit case and fumbled for the money.

"You've only a minute for your train," said the young man ironically, glancing at the clock behind him. "Time's been altered. Platform seven."

With a suffocated exclamation, Freddy reached down, grabbed his bag and dashed through the crowd as though he had been on the field at Twickenham playing in an international match. It was a breathless race, but Freddy won and tumbled into the first compartment he saw.

"Dance!" she exclaimed, winking up the wheezy old instrument. "Fraid there's nothing very up-to-date, Gloria. Mullo, here's a waltz." He put it on, and they danced up and down the narrow parlour.

The solemn grandfather's clock in the corner struck midnight. Paul's arms dropped to his side. "It is to-morrow, Gloria. You are free."

He looked at her and a little sob rose in her throat. "Paul—I wish I could—care." She came to him and, putting her arms around his neck, kissed him. "Good-night, dear." And, without looking up, he answered, "Good-bye, my wife."

AND REGRET The sports car was at the door awaiting her when she came down next morning. Breakfast was a silent meal, although Gloria did her best to keep up a fire of light-hearted chatter. He helped her into the car, a frozen smile on his lips.

"I will let you know when I've fixed the divorce, Gloria, and—try to forgive me." "I've done that." There was a great earnestness in her tone. Abruptly she ended, "Oh, well, good-bye."

Sutton Tawney, where he aighted, was a sleepy little place, whose station had not progressed beyond the old age for illumination, and, having passed from the feeble glimmer of the platform, Freddy found himself in a world of darkness.

The porter had given him such lucid instructions as to how to get to Renstone Manor that Freddy told himself that if he found it he'd be qualified for exploration work beyond the Amazon.

Lady Dorker's place, he remembered, had achieved, from time to time, a certain notoriety by reason of the fact that certain members of Mr. William Syke's scattered family had unsuccessfully endeavored to remove from within the famous Dorker Diamond, which had been in the family so long that it had now become their own property.

It was strange that in all his cogitations concerning Betty's Aunt Elspeth he had never really associated her in his mind with Lady Dorker and her famous diamond. Perhaps one reason why the old lady had not been deemed to regard his friendship with her niece favorably, was because she half suspected that Freddy was after the diamond.

The thought caused him some considerable merriment, and it was in that attitude of mind that he eventually arrived at the massive oak door of Renstone Manor.

The tall, commanding figure of the butler eyed Freddy suspiciously, he thought, as he explained his presence by the merest mention of Betty's name.

The interior of the Manor presented a festive appearance. Mistletoe hung in generous bunches from the antique fittings of the electric lamps. Holly and laurel garlanded the great newel-post at the foot of the broad staircase.

Freddy felt quite light-hearted as the butler opened the door of his room on the first landing and intimated that dinner would be served promptly at seven at the fancy dress dance which Lady Dorker had arranged for due at nine-thirty and would probably continue until well past the midnight hour.

"Fancy dress!" gasped Freddy, staring at the grey-haired yet quite muscular figure of the butler. "I didn't know it was to be a fancy dress. Betty—er—Miss Verne, never mentioned that. What am I to do?"

"I understand that her Ladyship has said that fancy dress will be optional, sir," the butler feared that he might ask for one of his outfits, took his leave with the words:

"Should you be wanting anything, sir, would you be good enough to ring?" When he had gone, Freddy slumped down upon the edge of the bed, to think. Now, why hadn't Betty mentioned that important detail? Stupid. Yes, it was very stupid of her.

Freddy's eyes wandered to the bed. "I might go as a shik, he mused, "those sheets would do if I had some pins." Down below a clock chimed. "Good lord! It's half-past six!" he exclaimed, jumping from the bed and tugging at the suitcase.

It was then that something odd about that suitcase occurred to him. Something very odd. It wasn't his suitcase at all. Rather like his in a way, of course. Same shape, same colour, much the same type of lock, but he initials.

Frantically Freddy tugged at the locks and fumbled the lid. A groan escaped him. He had scarcely expected to find a dress suit inside and he didn't. What he did find was a peculiar soft leather suit consisting of jacket and trousers all in one, overall fashion, the trousers narrowing down towards the ankles. Besides this there were a pair of rubber gloves, a black silk mask and a complete kit of burglar's tools—screwdrivers, jemmy, skeleton keys and other strange implements, the like of which honest-to-goodness Freddy had never seen before.

What on earth was he to do now. He couldn't go down to dinner in a lounge suit. That would be altogether too much for Lady Dorker. And he had planned to make such an impression, too. Freddy sank onto the floor with a groan. Perhaps the butler could help him. So Freddy did as he had been commanded. He rang the bell.

"You don't happen to have a spare dress suit anywhere?" inquired the distracted Freddy as the butler entered, and went on to explain that, in some mysterious fashion he had either picked up the wrong bag at Victoria, or else someone had lifted his by mistake.

"And there wasn't an evening suit in that?" queried the butler, nodding to the closed case on the floor and in a tone implying that no self-respecting suit case would ever carry anything else.

Freddy smiled. He certainly was not going to tell the fellow precisely what he had found there. "In a way—yes," said Freddy. "I suppose you would call the toga evening dress, or perhaps early morning would be more accurate. But I'm afraid Lady Dorker would be offended if I put them on. Did I hear you say you did have a suit?"

"I'm sorry, sir, but I'm afraid I haven't—least-ways nothing that would fit your size. I can't think of anything."

"Neither can I!" moaned Freddy. Which was the truth. "Should I tell her Ladyship you are indisposed after your journey and that you will not be down for dinner. Some of the guests are frequently like that, sir. I could have a bit of dinner sent up here, sir."

"Lady Dorker wouldn't think I was an infernal idiot, I suppose?" murmured the hapless Freddy. "Her Ladyship's thoughts are quite unknown to me, sir," replied the implacable butler. "But I am sure she would not be so—generous."

"Right!" Freddy agreed. "I'll do my best to recover by the time the dance begins. You won't forget the food, will you. I'm as hungry as a wolf."

"I shall see to that myself, sir." The butler was about to turn when something on the floor seemed to attract his attention and he so far forgot himself as to stand and stare at it for a moment. Then his eyes came to rest upon the young man's face. It was only a fleeting glance before he opened the door, but it was jolly uncomfortable to Freddy. For the butler had seen that black silk mask which Freddy had forced to return to the case and as he descended the staircase his lips were set in a tight smile.

He told himself that the tale about the mistake of the suitcase was rather thin and that, as probably as not he would be called upon once more to defend her Ladyship's diamond.

THE BUTLER EXCELS HIMSELF Betty Verne had arrived at Renstone Manor too late for dinner. She had gone up to town that afternoon in her car and had telephoned to say that she had a breakdown on the return journey and would have to get by train from Worpleden which was ten miles away.

It was in this way that she had not heard about Freddy's "indisposition" until, finding her aunt in the large hall surrounded by a galaxy of young people mostly in fancy costumes, Lady Dorker had mentioned the matter and it was obvious to Betty that she was by no means impressed.

Betty was annoyed. Strictly speaking one of her reasons for inviting Freddy down was to prove to Lady Dorker that the young man of her choice was not the brainless idiot she imagined him to be. And now Freddy had let her down.

Quickly she looked around for him. She remembered she had forgotten to mention about the fancy dress so Freddy ought not to be difficult to recognize. But though she looked very hard he was nowhere to be seen.

The girl's heart beat quickly. Perhaps Freddy was really ill, after all. She had better inquire of Reeves, the butler.

Reeves was the acme of politeness and pointed out a singularly odd-looking figure seated at his himself in the neighborhood of the big fire that blazed cheerily on the wide, open hearth.

Freddy Bartlam was rather excited. The young men ran his fingers lightly over the pockets and at length drew out a small chamois-leather bag containing Lady Dorker's famous diamond which had hitherto resisted all persuasions to make it leave home.

Satisfied, Freddy locked the door behind him and strolled along the corridor. Before going down to find Betty he decided to take a glance into Lady Dorker's apartment. The safe that stood in one corner was open.

But just as he was emerging, Freddy tumbled straight into the arms of the butler, who grasped him by both arms with a savage exultation.

"You'd better come quiet," he said almost in a whisper. "It won't do for your ladyship any good if there's a fuss. And on Christmas Eve, too."

"Don't be a blithering idiot," almost shouted Freddy. "I've an idea you'd distinguish yourself before the night was out. Just you run along and tell Miss Verne I'd like to have a word with her—alone."

"And leave you here to clear off with the diamond? Not likely. I've already telephoned for the police. They'll be here any minute, now. Don't struggle, as Freddy began to squirm, "I've got you and I'm not letting go. Learn this grip out in Slam. I did, and it's been very useful here."

"That's all right," purred Freddy, "keep on gripping. I like it. But don't do it too much. I'm ticklish."

But the butler's face was like a mask. He had left his sense of humor in Slam by way of exchange. "I think we'd best be getting along downstairs," ventured Freddy, genially. "Your friends the police will have arrived and you ought to be there to greet them. More social you know."

So off they marched, the butler still clinging limpet-like to his captive.

A murmur of voices floated up to them from the hall—excited voices in which Freddy detected the shrill staccato of Lady Dorker demanding to know what the policemen were doing there.

"That's all right, M'Lady," chimed in the butler from the top of the stairs. "I've got him here."

Freddy saw the knot of people turn at the sound of the voice and a dozen pairs of eyes were raised to him, including those of Betty whose face had gone a sad pale.

Lady Dorker showed no signs of the hysterics promised by Betty. Instead she seemed uncommonly calm and business-like.

"Did he get the diamond?" she enquired. "As far as I know, M'Lady, he's still got it. The safe was open."

"Then you'd better search him, constable." "Freddy!" Betty Verne rushed forward but one of the policemen apparently diverting his attention put out one arm and the barrier was complete.

Freddy Bartlam never remembered having enjoyed himself better. His face, from which the mask had long been removed, was wreathed in smile.

"Perhaps Lady Dorker would like me to hand her the diamond myself," said Freddy, politely, and asking from his pocket the little bag handed it to its own with nice courtesy. "And now, officer, if you can persuade Sherlock Holmes here to unlock himself, I'll take you to the gentleman who seemed curiously familiar with the combination of the safe."

The policeman looked doubtful, but at length motioned to Reeves to liberate the prisoner. Together Freddy and the Constable who was making quite sure that there was no trickery, went upstairs. Half-way up Freddy turned and called over his shoulder to Betty. "I'll be down again in a minute."

But that was an exaggeration, for the process of disrobing the burglar and redressing him in his personal belongings occupied a little longer.

Next morning, of course, Lady Dorker insisted upon being told everything and the fact that Freddy Bartlam had prevented the complete disappearance of the diamond, quite endeared him to her.

But it did not endear him quite so much as it did to Betty Verne who was so excited about it that she almost forgot it was Christmas Day until Freddy reminded her when they were alone.

