



AURA BRADON halted in almost superstitious amazement. "Bertha!" she gasped. "Come here! It's—happened—again!"

Bertha dropped the letters she was sorting and hurried to the door. "Laura!" her tone expressed awed unbelief. "Are you sure—?"

For a moment the two stared at each other in tight-lipped silence. "Did you see anyone when you came to work?"

Bertha shook her head. "Not a soul. The building was locked." "If it weren't so near Christmas and the whole force working overtime, it would be easier to imagine."

From her brown curls and sparkling eyes to her slim ankles Laura was beautiful and genuine. Because she never posed she wasn't self-conscious.

"Imagine a young girl running a post office?" some said. But immediately they added, "Laura can do it if anybody can!"

And Laura had been doing it. She had to. Aunt Juley had left only a small amputee and the use of the old residence for five years, at which time it went to some charity.

"No, it wasn't quite all. And very strangely this task, this legacy to another was apparently causing all the trouble. Even the office mystery had begun at about the time of the disappearance of the grand-father clock. Laura loved that clock. It recalled childhood associations. Maybe that was only perverse old Aunt Juley, who, dying, had made her promise to repair it for an Ernest Hamilton, the son of

Laura had missed the old clock! It was an awful feeling. She couldn't believe it. Neither could Mrs. Adams, the caretaker's wife. "It's spirits, Miss Bradon!" Mrs. Adams gasped. "Your dead ain't gonna see that clock leave the family! Past week I've had a feelin—"



"So, Robert Howard! You!—A Common Thief!"

wasn't a sign of breaking in. In the winter Mrs. Adams locks everything. And everything was still locked this morning. Bob whistled. "Looks like inside work."

But Laura had known the Adamses too long not to be certain they were guiltless. Bob's eyes held more concern for the slim wonderful girl than for the clock. "Don't you worry," he admonished. "I'm going to trace this fellow."

Because Laura didn't want Bob to think her foolish, she hadn't spoken about the mystery in the office. But for days she'd had a feeling that strange hands had arranged things at her desk. She wasn't positive at first.

There was something so strange about it that Laura's nerves tightened. "I'm going to find out about this," she determined.

When Bob waited, as he always did to stroll the seven blocks to her corner, he exclaimed: "Laura, you are pale! You ought to get more help during Christmas week. I'd help free of charge—"

"It's 'agin' the law," Bob. Thanks anyway." Laura smiled into his serious eyes. Bob was tall and straight and good-looking. He'd been practising law in Culver for almost a year and Culver people were saying, "At last there's a fellow good enough for Laura—only it's funny he'd settle here. All our boys with any git go to the city."



"It's Spirits, Miss Bradon!" Mrs Adams Gasped

Aunt Juley's girlhood chum. "The boy was always good to me when I visited his mother," Aunt Juley explained.

Restoring it would cost unbelievably. Aunt Juley hadn't provided for that, and Laura was saving every penny toward it.

But by Christmas she'd likely have enough to send Ernest Hamilton, a total stranger, the most expensive present she had ever even thought of buying.

"With my first of December cheque I'm going to send it to the clockmakers," she told Bertha and Bob, her two best friends.

But one morning just before that

The First Christmas

AND it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed.

2 And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.

3 And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city.

4 And Joseph also went up from Galilee out of the City of Nazareth, into Judea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David.

5 To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife being great with child.

6 And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered.

7 And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.

8 And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.

9 And lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them; and the glory of the Lord shone round about them; and they were sore afraid.

10 And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.

11 For unto you is born this day, in the city of David, a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.

12 And this shall be a sign unto you: Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.

13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God, and saying,

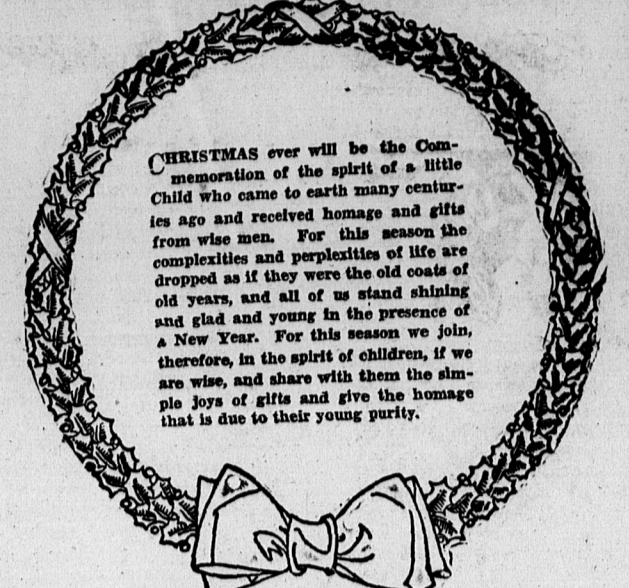
14 Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.

15 And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which has come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us.

16 And they came with haste, and found Mary and Joseph and the babe lying in a manger.

17 And when they had seen it, they made know abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child.

18 And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds.



MANY RIVALS CHRISTMAS OF HOLLY CANDLES

Australia Has None of the Real Plant But Plenty of Substitutes Abound

Even in England they have more at least than a dozen different varieties of holly, and the world at large has no fewer than 145 species of this tree. Australia is the only inhabited continent which has no holly—no true holly, that is to say. Yet Australia has a substitute, a shrub called "native holly" which grows in Victoria and New South Wales. It is not an ilex, but its leaves are holly like, and it is used very extensively for Christmas decorations.

Ivy is another plant which does not flourish in Australia as it does in England, though in the hills you find a kind of ivy with odd, wing-shaped leaves. But the housewife preparing for her Yuletide show has no true holly or ivy to hang on the walls.

Yet there is no lack of greenstuff for Christmas decoration in the Australian Commonwealth. The favorite plant is the she-oak, the tops of which are useful for feeding cattle in times of drought, and there is also "celery-top" with its big, handsome leaves, and the various pines such as the Huon and King William pine, and Acacia is also popular.

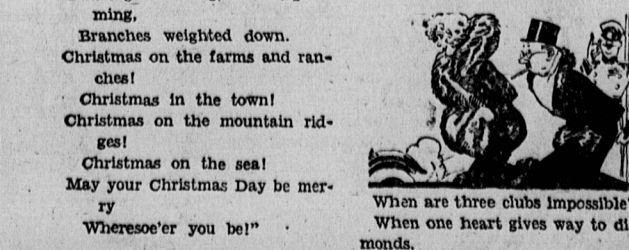
New Zealand has an ivy tree, a real tree with a good stiff trunk of its own, stout branches and large evergreen leaves. If you want its botanical name, this is Panax Colensoi, and it is found in both the North and South Islands.

A favorite plant for Christmas decorations in Australia is the Macquarie Harbor vine, which is a native of Tasmania, but is grown in Australia and New Zealand. It has a currant like fruit, with a delicate acid flavor, which is used for making tarts, puddings and preserves. The long, graceful branches make beautiful and distinctive decorations.

The Christmas tree is supposed by great numbers of people to have originated in Germany, but the Christmas tree came in the first instance from Egypt, and its origin dates from a period much earlier than the Christian era. The palm tree is known to put forth a branch every month, and a spray of this tree with 12 shoots on it was used in Egypt at the time of the winter solstice as a symbol of the completed year.

The Christmas Wreath With holly and ivy So green and so gay We deck up our houses As fresh as the day. With bays and rosemary And laurel complete. And everyone now Is a king in conceit. —Old Carol, 1695.

A Christmas Wish "Puddings steaming, candles gleaming, Branches weighted down. Christmas on the farms and ranches! Christmas in the town! Christmas on the mountain ridges! Christmas on the sea! May your Christmas Day be merry Wheresoe'er you be!"



When are three clubs impossible? When one heart gives way to diamonds.

THE MAN OF THE HOUR



Ernest Hamilton

"All right." The man before her tightened his jaw. "How did you get in?"

"That night you left your purse in my car. I had keys copied after yours—I'm really Ernest Hamilton."

Laura gasped. "Then why steal it?"

"After you'd told me how you were saving, and I saw how determined you were to keep your promise, I thought I'd get it restored, pay the bill, and return it without your ever knowing who'd done it. I couldn't bear to have you spend your money that way—"

"But—"

"You said, once, the old description of the clock was in your desk. It's all done now but one detail. I

was trying to find it for the man." Unbelief and relieved hope played over Laura's face. "If you're Ernest Hamilton, why come to Culver as—"

Resolutely the young man reached into his pocket. "You never saw your Aunt's will?"

"No. The lawyer said she asked that it be shown to no one for a year or—"

He nodded. "Here's why—a copy of it. She said you were stubborn."

Laura read. "—If Ernest Hamilton will marry my niece before the year is out, my entire estate will go to them instead of to charities."

"I wanted to see you. And after I had, and knew you for yourself, I couldn't," tenderness moved in his

eyes. "I couldn't even ask you until that year was up. I wanted you to know that I didn't—"

Again Laura's heart sang. The radiance which returns to youth so easily reflected in her eyes.

"Bob!" her heart spoke the name. "I'll be busy Christmas, but what plans have you for the Sunday before New Year's?"

"Why, none—I—"

She threw back her head and smiled a happy eager smile. Neither ever have!"

Ernest Hamilton stood bewildered for a moment. Then over his serious handsome face moved the comprehension of a great happiness. He opened his arms. "Laura! Laura, dear!" And it was his own heart, too, which spoke.