PAGING SANTA CLAUS

A Christmas Romance of Loving Service, Intrigue and a Lasting Happiness—The Reward of Sacrifice and Suffering

(Continued from page 20)

Back in her apartment Jan felt lost. These were the hours, after rehearsals were over and before it was time for her to appear in the show, in which she and Tony had ha. all those happy adventures. Still, as she looked back, the glamour seemed to fall away from it all. The places where they ate—the dull little roads just outside the city, which were all they had time to explose— even an occasional pause for conversation with a garrulous gas station man...No a garrulous gas station man...No —it wasn't at all what the had said, or where they had gone that had given those few short weeks their touch of magic. It couldn't have been! It must have been just being with Tony.

Everything was changed now. Oh, well, Christmas being so near would be fun for Dora, and there was something that had to be done right away - Christmas present wrapping. Resolutely Jan went to the desk and got out th rolls of red and green transparent paper, the gold-starred ribbon, the box of bright stickers.

When the gifts were all spread out on the bed ready for wrapping Jan suddenly thought they didn't look very grand after all. And she had spent hours choosing them! But Dora would like those delicate embroidered handkerchiefs. And the length of palest blue satin ribbon for her fair curls. There was a book of puzzles and a novel in a gaudy jacket. Jan set about wrapping them in as many boxes and layers of tissue paper as possible. It would be fun for Dora to unwrap them, and Jan wanted to make it as intricate a job as she could.

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"Dr. Curtis asked to see you when you came in," the nurse told Jan when she entered Dora's room. "He said to go up to his office."

Jan, who had stooped to kiss Dora, looked uncertain as she straightened up.

"Go on up right away," Dora suggested, "maybe it's important.

"Darling, I haven't even seen you yet! But I'll hurry."

Dr. Curtis was not in his office when Jan reached it. The door was open; she went in and sat down by the window.

"Well, here we are!"

The doctor's voice brought her back to the room — she had been far away— back indeed to her first meeting with Tony. She was seeing herself, rain-soaked and mud-splattered, and Tony trying to repair some of the damage his car had caused.

"Dora is doing well, isn't she, Doctor?" she asked rising, as he went toward his desk.

"Dora couldn't be better, and hang around here." Dr. Curtis assured her glancing hurriedly through some papers that had been left on his desk. "I just wanted to ask you to have dinner with me tonight."

"Why, I'd love it, Doc —Brad," she substituted at a warning look from the doctor.

"That's better," he said with satisfaction. "I'll call for you at your hotel, say at seven? Right?" He came close, smiled down into her face. "Run back to your sister and tell her I said she's my prize patient."

Dora accepted this praise with less interest than she evinced at Jan's dinner engagement with her "doctor man."

"Oh Jan, your're getting to be so popular," she cried gleefully.

"Silly," said Jan laughing. Popular! Why, she was the unhappiest girl in all the world. Not only had she lost Tony— oh, why did she let him go, no matter what he had done? —but, after Christmas eve she and Dora would lose their beautiful apartment at the Devon Arms. William Anthony Deverest would appear with his fiancee. Jan Payson would be know for what she was, a fraud, and she and Dora would have to go back to some wretched little furnished room. It was just possible that Paul Harris cared enough for Dora to want to marry her, of course, but Jan hardly dared hoped that it would really turn out to be so.

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Brad Curtis's eyes told Jan, without a word spoken, that she had chosen well when she opened the sitting room door to him. She was wearing a frock of gold-colored chiffon — one that Mary Elizabeth Howard had assured her matched her golden eyes.

"All ready?" The doctor smiled at her.

"I know how busy you are —I didn't want to take up any more of your time than I have to," said Jan.

That's beside the point. The real question is, do you want to give me as much of your time as I want?"

"That's exactly what I do want!" But Jan's laugh could not conceal her surprise— the surprise she had first felt when, over the luncheon table a few days before, Dr. Curtis had seemed to be genuinely enjoying her company. She could hardly believe it, but here it was again. That half hidden but inescapable impression that Dr. Curtis was making love to her.

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"I ventured to hope that you would have dinner at my home," Brad went on. "My mother is particularly anxious to meet you; I've talked about you two girls a lot."

"Do you live with your mother?" said Jan simply because she felt she had to say something. Dr. Curtis was helping her into her wrap.

"That's right. She's very old, hardly stirs out of the big top-heavy house in which she went housekeeping when she was first married. I live there because it pleases her, and because I like it myself." He leaned closer to the speaking tube." "Stop at the corner, Charles. I want to get some flowers."

When he came back he handed Jan a box containing a spray of bittersweet berries, red and gold against evergreens.

"How lovely with this dress!" Jan took out the unusual corsage and fastened it at her waist.

"Lovely with your eyes and hair," Brad said gravely. "More red than your hair, less golden than your eyes."

Charles was maneuvering the car deftly to the curb now, stopping before a great pile of brown-stone house, all bay windows, it seemed to Jan . A high fence enclosed a little garden space at the side.

"You see, it's a throwback to the elegant eighties," said Brad, helping her mount the steps that climbed up the front of the house, past an English basment, to the parlor floor. Before they reached the door it was opened by an elderly maid in a voluminous uniform that all but touched the floor. Her white hemstitched apron was voluminous too, and she wore a real cap, not a pert bow. Jan was sure she must have served in this house many years.

That was true, she learned later, after she had greeted old Mrs. Curtis in the drawing-room, dinner had been announced by the same old maid, and they were all three seated at the heavy mahogany table in the dining room. Everything in the room was heavy —the tapestry covered chairs, the thick draperies drawn together at the tall windows, even the silver on the table. Only the china was fragile, and that was so delicate that Jan was careful about touching it with her knife and fork. It looked as if it could be shattered by a sigh, she murmured to Mrs. Curtis, admiringly.

"It's real old Irish Belleek," explained the doctors' mother. "It's my favorite tableware — that's why I had it brought out tonight."

"That shows you what she thinks of my friends, Jan," Brad put in. "Funny part of it is, she wouldn't use it if this were a dinner party for her own pals."

"I'm glad she brought it out tonight," said Jan, very fragile herself against the high back of her chair, "I've never seen anything like it."

When the meal was over the old lady suggested coffee in the library for Jan and Brad. She never drank coffee herself ,she explained, and would go to her own room at once.

Jan waited until Brad had escorted his mother to her room and called her maid to make her comfortable for the night; he returned to the dining hoom and drew Jan's arm through his, and they went into the library. Here only one lamp had been switched on; the light of a coal fire behind the bars of an old-fashioned grate seemed very bright.

"Let me pour that for you," Brad half rose from his chair as the maid left a silver tray with the coffee service and two of the fragile Belleek cups on a small table beside Jan.

"No, you stay put," she ordered. "I" pour —how many lumps?" She looked across at him, the sugar poised in the old silver tongs.

"One. No cream. This is luxury," as he took the cup from her hands and watched her return to her own chair.

"Do you know this is the first time I've ever had coffee in a library?" she said as she settled back, her own cup still on the silver tray. "I've read about it in stories; I often wondered what it would be like."

"Is it anything like what you expected?" The doctor's eyes were amused.

"No. I never dreamed that a room could be as beautiful as this— and only one of a whole houseful of beautiful rooms. There's something about it, about this whole house, that makes it different from anything I've ever seen.

"You're right, Jan. This house has something it— has a past. It has years of living and loving in it, and the house remembers."

"Your mother must have been very happy here."

"She was. Not always, of course. There was a younger sister —" he broke off. "I'm glad you like the house, Jan."

"I do." She smiled at him.

"Enough to live in it?"

"You mean- -?"

"I mean it now I've seen you in my home, I can't let you go out of it. Not without telling you that I hope you will come back soon to stay."

Brad rose and crossed the space that lay between them. "Come over here," he said, drawing her to her feet.

Into each side of the hearth a seat had been built facing the fire. They were made of the same old polished oak which paneled the room, and the glow of the fire was reflected in the gleaming wood. The doctor led her to one of these narrow benches and took the other himself.

"It's not very comfortable, but I like the view," he smiled. "I want to look at your face by firelight." He was silent for a moment and Jan, confused, was unable to speak.

"You belong here." Brad began after a while, "you should have the things that I can give you. You belong here, and you belong to me. I knew that the moment I first saw you. Do you remember that first day, Jan? You opened the door and when I told you who I was and that I had come to see Dora, you turned so white I thought you were going to faint.

"'Not Dr. Bradford Curtis,' you kept saying, 'not the only man in the world who can cure Dora!' You remember that, Jan?" the doctor asked.

"I remember." Jan's voice was husky. The miracle was as great now as it had been then. It was a miracle that had brought the great Dr. Curtis, the one man who had had conspicuous success in cases like her sister's, to their door that day.

"I was so grateful then that I nearly died," she said simply. "And yet I didn't know what gratitude was till I heard that the operation had been a success."

"You can forget about that now," the doctor went on. "I don't want anything I have been able to do for Dora to influence your decision, Jan, when I ask you what I'm going to ask you, will you marry me?

"I'm thirty-five years old and you're —twenty? That's fifteen years between us. Could you learn to love me?"

He paused and Jan, twisting in her fingers, a bit of evergreen from the bouquet he had given her, sat staring into the fiery heart of the coals.

"Perhaps," said Brad gently, "I ought first to ask you, is there anyone else Jan?"

"No," whispered Jan.

"For a little while I thought you and Tony —er —Williams —"

"No," said Jan, firmly this time. "That didn't mean anything."

"Then —you'll try to love me?" 'Oh Doceor Curtis, I do love you!" Impulsively Jan rose and threw her arms around his neck. He disengaged them after a moment and held both her hands in his.

"That's not quite the way I meant," he told her softly. Then, we'll leave it at that, shall we? And now I'll take you home. I'm flying up to Vermont in the morning; I've got a camp at a place called Moose River. I'm going up there for a little rest over Christmas."

"You're going to spend Christmas all alone?"

"I need a glimpse of the mountains every once in a while. This is the only time I can get away. There's an old guide who has a shack nearby he— always looks after me on these occasions."

"Brad, I do wish you a happy Christmas!" said Jan.

He put his arm around her, drawing her close as she stood beside him before the fire. After a minute Jan looked up, mischief in her dancing eyes.

"Brad," she asked, "isn't that mistletoe?" She pointed to a vase filled with Christmas evergreens, just above their heads.

"There must be some around up there."

Laughing, he bent his head and kissed her.

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It was December 23rd. Jan was expecting Tony to ring up any moment now. With such an excuse as this Christmas eve party he would surely make an attempt to see her again! If he did she would just have to be firm and say:

"No, Tony, that's all over now. Everything is settled. Let's leave it that way."

Or, perhaps, it would be better to be reluctant at first, but give in gracefully before Tony hung up. Under the circumstances Tony would be concerned, no doubt, about Deverest's coming party, and would be particularly perturbed because of the effect it might have on Jan's future. Probably he would want to talk it over with her and help her find a way out of the situation in which she found herself involved.

But days had passed since that last ride with Tony This was the third, to be exact, and he had not called. That was a relief, of course. Jan told herself over and over. Only it was the kind of relief that made her turn pale every time the telephone rang and caused her to wonder irritably each time she hung up why it was that people bothered to telephone about such trivial matters!

She was due at Mary Elizabeth Howard's at eleven this morning. She presented herself dutifully. Mary Elizabeth herself came in to supervise this last fitting as Jan did as they directed her before the big mirrors. She watched her image advance and retreat in their depths.

"There." Mary Elizabeth pointed out, to the seamstress sitting back on her heels just out of Jan's line of march, the cause of the defect in the hang of the full skirt, for which they had been looking.

It was a nice enough dress, Jan conceded. A queer blue, though, she thought. Miss Howard called it "romantic blue". It did remind Jan of midnight winter skies she and Tony had seen together. Suppose he called while she was out. Would Molly the telephone operator, remember to give her his message? He **wouldn't** call! Jan forced herself to consider the dress reflected in the mirrors. What soft velvet! And how the color darkened or took on added sheen as new lights or shadows played on the sweeping ripples of the skirt! A "picture" gown, Miss Howard called it. The bodice was the off-the-shoulder type and her skin looked very white against the intense blue of the velvet. Oh, the style suited her all right, she acknowledged to herself, but what difference did it make? She would never wear this dress!

"Turn again." Obedient to Mary Elizabeth's commands Jan moved this way and that, stood still at the turns, pacing slowly in a wide circle around the beautiful modern salon.

"I will never, **never** wear this dress!"

Jan had made her decision. Right, here, with the fitting in progress. Up to now she had had no idea what she would do. As the time for the Deverest Christmas party drew near she had seemed to be under a spell. She couldn't think her own thoughts. That didn't make sense, she told herself. Surely there was something she could do! Something she ought to do— before catastrophe descended upon her! But she remained dully oblivious to the passing of the hours. She simply could not rouse herself to take any course of action. Now, suddenly, seeing herself reflected in the "engagement" gown, she came face to face with reality— and she knew what she had to do!

When the fitting was finally over to Miss Howard's complimentary satisfaction, Jan went to see Dora. She must be assured once more that Dora was being well cared for. She could come home by New Year's, Dr. Curtis had promised. That was nearly a week away. Well, the course of Jan's life would have been mapped out long before that time. Long before that time it would be necessary to decide what would be best for Dora, too. Jan wished she could tell her little sister her plans, but it seemed better to wait. Dora would be overjoyed when she learned of the step Jan had now determined to take.

As for Jan, herself, what did her happiness matter? Dr. Curtis had said that she had it in her power to make him happy. She had told him not long ago, and meant it, that she wished there was some way she could show her gratitude for all he had done for Dora. Her way seemed clear enough now. She would be doing the best thing for everybody by accepting Brad's proposal. She would make him a good wife, too: respect, admiration, real liking—she felt all of them for Doctor Curtis. Surely that was enough on which to start a successful marriage. Besides, hadn't she heard often that love was a matter of propinquity? That many a girl who married a man merely liking him, actually grew to love him sincerely? It shouldn't be difficult to fall in love with Brad, she assured herself. All she needed was a little time to forget Tony.

It would be different, Jan's thoughts ran on, if knowing her had had the right effect on Tony. But, as it was, she could bring him nothing but disaster. With her out of his life he would find some other girl—someone to whom he could be just Tony Williams, without any of this pathetic effort toward munificence.

Jan lingered at the hospital with Dora as long as she could. Dora was looking forward to Christmas as a child might. She wondered if that "nice Tony Williams" really meant to give her a present. "Oh, I'm sure he does!" Jan exclaimed. And she hoped that in spiite of what had happened Tony would not forget her little sister.

"I'll bet that he's paging Santa Claus this minute," she told her with conviction.

They had agreed that it would be best for Jan to bring over to the hospital all the wrapped-up presents from the hotel. Jan would be very busy on Christmas eve with Mr. Deverest's party and would not have time to come to the hospital. Dora promised solemnly that she would not open a single present until Christmas day, and Jan listened, her heart a little heavy at the thought that Dora would have to spend this Christmas day alone. But that's the way it would have to be. Dora would be happy enough when she knew!

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Jan had never seen a day race by so fast. At the hospital she stowed Dora's gifts away in the dresser drawer while Dora looked on delightedly, trying to guess from the shapes of the packages what each one held. When it came time for Jan to go she clung to Dora a little and then, because she would have burst into tears if she waited another minute, she jumped to her feet and ran out of the door.

There was still much to do! She must stop at a store and buy a traveling basket for Pussy-puff. She would never have forgiven herself if anything happened to Doras' kitten while she was away. Pussy-puff must go with her. Her packing took very little time. Just an overnight case that held a few things she really needed. With her own bag in her hand and Pussy-puff mewing piteously in his basket, she hurried toward the elevator.

"Going away?" There was Mrs. Talbot coming out of her room just as Jan was passing her door. She would run into Mrs. Talbot, thought Jan, annoyed. Not that it mattered at all, but there was no use in broadcasting things before you were ready

"No, I was just taking the kitten to see Dora." She couldn't think of anything better on the spur of the moment.

"Humph!" said Mrs. Talbot.

XXI

Jan walked to the subway station as fast as she could. She knew she had very little time to spare if she was to catch the afternoon northbound bus. When she reached it she thought for a moment that she was too late. Every seat seemed to be taken. She stepped into the bus quickly and looked over the sea of hats, two by two, in every seat. Way toward the back she saw a free in the solid phalanx of heads and pushed her way down the aisle. Everybody had been Christmas shopping, apparently. Boxes and bundles of every imaginable shape and size all but engulfed the passengers, many of them even resting their feet on one or two of the sturdier purchases.

The unoccupied seat Jan had thought she saw was next to the window. A middle-aged, tight-lipped woman sat on the aisle and had formed a barricade in the space between her seat and the window with all sorts of bundles. "Ready to hold the fort against all comers," thought Jan.

Jan wedged her way down the aisle until she stood beside the stern visaged woman.

"Is this seat taken?" she inquired in a low voice.

Her tone did not mollify the occupant in the least. She turned her steel-rimmed spectacles full on Jan and stared at her without speaking.

"I said, is this seat taken?" repeated Jan.

"Can't you see it is?" the other snapped. "A voice like ground razor blades," thought Jan. But she smiled sweetly. "I mean, is there anyone sitting there?"

At this point the bus driver looked around. He was due to start in one minute flat, and he did not propose to be kept waiting while passengers argued over priority rights, or anything else.

"Everybody seated, please," he shouted. "And I do mean you, miss," as Jan still stood in the aisle. He was becoming even more emphatic when he remembered the courtesy of the drivers stressed by his company, so he added with an effort oward the jollity of the Yuletide season, "Got to get all you people home in time to trim your Christmas trees. Let's go!"

"I—" began Jan. But for an answer the driver got up, and in a moment loomed over the bespectacled woman with the bundles.

"All right, lady—all right, pick 'em up—one seat to a passenger, let's go!" His jollity gave way to unmistakable determination as he spoke, and the woman began in a maddeningly slow way to stow away her packages under the seat and pile others in her lap. She finally moved just enough to allow Jan to squeeze past into the now vacant seat.

Pussy-puff mewed feebly as Jan settled his basket on her knees.

"A cat!"

Jan's bespectacled companion transferred her baleful glare from the travelling case which Jan had had difficulty in fitting in at her feet so that it would not infringe on the floor space belonging to the other, to the cat's basket on her knees.

"I didn't know they allowed animals on thesse buses!" Jan reached a finger through the wire screen at the end of Pussy-puff's basket and stroked his pink nose.

The heavily laden bus shook itself a little and then rolled smoothly out of the terminal.

It was good to Jan to lie back in the seat and feel that things were now beyond her control. She had set her feet in a new direction and there was noturning back. But the more she tried to put Tony out of her mind the more persistently his face mocked her. She saw it when she looked out into the jammed street. Once she thought she actually did see Tony behind the wheel of a passing car, but it was only a man who held his head with that same touch of arrogance. She let her thoughts wander for a moment to the puzzle that Tony presented.

Evidently he was a man of good background and fine education. He had a mechanical bent too, that Jan, although she knew nothing of mechanics herself, recognized as unusual. He could have made something of himself. Perhaps if he had the right incentive...For a moment she wavered. They weren't out of town yet, She had only to find a subway terminal to be back in a few minutes in the heart of the city.

Jan stirred impatiently. What could she be thinking of? Definitely she was not the right influence for Tony. She could adore him if she allowed herself to do so, but she would as surely destroy him. A girl who inspired a man to steal for her was not the one to bring him happiness.

Jan's impatient movement had brought her elbow in sharp contact with her seat mate's arm.

"You don't happen to want this seat, too?" her companion inquired acidly.

"What-t?" said Jan. "Oh, I beg your pardon I did not realize—"

"That there was anyone else on the bus, I suppose," sniffed the woman. "You and your cat!"

She flounced as far away from Jan as the seat allowed, actually not more than an inch, and fastened her gaze rigidly on the bus driver's broad back.

"It's a wonder that he can drive under that awful glare," Jan thought. "It's like having a death ray directed at you!"

If only the last few days had never been. If only she could go back to those first days at the Devon Arms when Dora and she had been so perfectly happy!

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It was only after they had left the city far behind that Jan noticed how much snow was on the ground. Here, in the open country that lay in increasingly long stretches between the small towns snow had drifted on the fields and was piled high at the sides of the road. It must be very deep in the Vermont mountains, or a moment Jan's heart qualled at the thought of her destination, a wintry mountain region that she had never seen. But Brad would be there, she told herself resolutely. And Brad would be glad to see her.

It was silly perhaps to run off like this in search of Dr. Curtis when she knew he would be back in town within a few days. But she could not wait. Now that her mind was made up she was driven by a fierce urge to find Brad at once and get everything settled. That, and the decision to put as much distance as possible between herself and the Devon Arms and the William Anthony Deverest engagement party led her on, and could help her to hold fast to her decision, no matter how strange and unfamiliar were the places where she must go.

She would marry Brad as soon as he wished Of that much she was certain. Beyond that she did not think at all. Brad would be able to tell her what to do about Dora; perhaps he would want her to live with them—the Curtis house was big enough.

"Why, it's snowing!" Jan almost spoke aloud as she noticed that the landscape, which she had scarcely seen for many miles, was blurred by a drifting veil of snowflakes.

XXII

The bus was nearing a town now, and Jan's seat mate was obviously preparing to depart. She was collecting bundles from the floor under the seat, from beneath her own feet and finally wrenched one loose that was caught under the seat ahead. These were all added to the pile in her lap. She encompassed them with her arms by some sleight of hand gesture that left Jan open-mouthed, and rose as the bus slid to a stop. She then began to cut a wide, swath down the aisle, knocking other people's bundles out of her way, and one man's hat completely askew.

Jan set Pussy-puff's basket in the vacant seat. The crowd of passengers had thinned somewhat, but there was still that Christmas homecoming look about the package-laden group. The bus lights were on now and the great vehicle hurtling through the snowy dusk must appear to the occasional person they met trudging along the roadside, like a sort of land-going ship, Jan thought.

She stared out of the window as long as she could see anything at all. Real farms sprawled beside the road: Jan could discern outlines of the farmhouses, surprisingly alike for the most part. The same sloping roofs, the same air of having stood in one spot for uncounted years. More often than not the houses were dwarfed by the barns; the barns looked newer—better kept, too.

Sometimes, when a house was situated close to the road, Jan caught a glimpse of a woman's face at a window; sometimes there were other little faces just above the sill.

"Daddy's late getting home for supper," Jan surmised, "and they're getting worried because it's snowing so hard."

To keep her thoughts away from her own problems, she began trying to reconstruct the stories of the women she saw as they flashed past.

There was one young woman standing in an open doorway holding a baby in one arm and reaching out the other hand to catch hold of the rocker of a chair, held upside down by a young giant of a man, with his mackinaw collar turned up over his pulled-down cap. The chair was partly wrapped in paper.

"It's a Christmas present for her!" Jan figured out the story happily. "They've been married just a little more than a year. She's from the city, probably worked in a department store. Her house dress is cute and becoming, and her hair has a new cut—she's a city girl, all right.

"The baby is a girl, named Elma. That's for his mother who lives on a farm on the side of that big hill back there. His mother lives with her married daughter and her husband, and they have three children who go to the community school, miles and miles away. The school bus calls for them night and morning, but they have to walk down the hill to the highway to meet it. There have been stories of bears in the hills around, and the two youngest children are afraid coming home after school when it begins to get dark so early. But Edgar—he's ten and the oldest—quiets their fears by telling them that he knows how to handle bears.

"'See this big stick?' he tells them. 'Well, just you watch if any old bear comes out from behind any of those trees. I'll hit him on the nose—hard—with my stick. That's the way to frighten bears; sock 'em hard, right on the nose! That's the way the scouts used to do when this part of the country was just full of Indians and bears.'"

Jan laughed at her own narrative ability.

"I guess I ought to write a book, she thought. "I guess if I just wrote the story of my own life it would make a book. The smile died out of her eyes; the book, she thought, wouldn't have a very happy ending. The she took a firm grip on herself. She would be happy! The past was over and done with; from now on she would look forward—she and Brad would be happy. He was so kind, she reminded herself for the hundredth time; and that great old house was so gracious, so welcoming. It was as if the old place had held out its arms to her last night. She would accept their invitation; she would creep into them and find safety and comfort now, and later, perhaps, contentment.

It had been dark outside the warm lighted world within the bus, for a long while, it seemed to Jan, when they finally stopped in a fir sized town.

"Half an hour for supper!" the bus driver announced, drawing up before a little lunch room where a girl was making pancakes in the window. She waved a greeting and he waved back. Everybody clambered stiffly out of the bus. For some it was journey's end; most of them, however, like Jan, were going on; they scattered quickly. Jan stood a moment in the driving snow, Pussy-puff's basket and her traveling bag clutched tight in her hands. Then she turned and followed the bus driver and some of her companions into the lunch room behind the pancake exhibit.

A thick-armed, red-cheeked waitress brought Jan the pancakes and honey and coffee she ordered and, when she asked timidly, an extra pitcher of cream. Jan put the kitten's basket on the floor between her chair and the wall, surreptitiously poured the extra cream into her saucer and edged it down to the floor in front of the door in Pussy-puff's basket. Then she opened the door and the kitten stepped out cautiously, sniffing experimentally at the outer edge of the basket doorway, at the leg of Jan's chair, finally observing the saucer of cream. He fell to work on it glancing around guiltily, began with complete absorption and Jan, quickly to butter her pancakes.

She had Pussy-puff back safe in his basket and was in her seat in the bus before the others began their straggling return. There was a good deal of turmoil when everybody was in and all settling themselves for the night. The bus was going straight through; there was a long swift-paced night anead. The passengers had their own ideas of comfort and were very busy for a few moments adjusting bundles, arranging things to meet these notions.

Jan rested her head on the back of the seat. Pussy-puff, after his good supper, was curled up into a contented, almost spherical bit of yellow fluff. Talk among the other passengers gradually dwindled to an occasional few words; some of the people seemed to be asleep, the backs of their seats adjusted so that they were half reclining. The headlights of passing cars loomed out of the darkness less and less frequently; there came a time when nothing except the bus seemed to be moving anywhere on the road.

That they were climbing steadily, Jan knew. Sometimes the road dipped a little and often it ran along at one level for a long eime, but every once in a while it began to ascend, gradually but persistently. It was a road cushioned in powdery white; even above the sound of the motor Jan could hear occisionally the creak of the snow, protesting under the impact of a heavy tire.

More and more of the passengers assumed the half-sitting, half reclining position that the sliding seat backs permitted. Jan experimented, found that it was very comfortable. She wouldn't sleep, of course, but it was restful to lie here like this, listening to the steady muted squeaking of the busy windshield wipers. They sang a sort of song, a monotonous chant—

Jan was astonished when she opened her eyes to find herself swinging through murky gray light. Next minute she realized that she was not swinging—it was the bus swaying ever so gently as it ploughed determinedly onward. Why, it was morning! The lights were all out in the bus. She set up straight. Other people were stirring too, rubbing their eyes, yawning wearily. Somebody asked about the next stop.

"Kent's Corners," said the driver, "straight ahead."

It was later than Jan had thought—almost seven o'clock. But the steadily falling snow and heavy skies threw a pall over everything, even the houses of the small village into which they rolled presently, seemed unreal, their outlines vague, only half visible in this strange dawwn.

XXIII

It was good to stretch her arms and legs, to breathe deeply of the clear, vitalizing air. They must be well up in the mountains by this time, Jan realized. She could see, off in the distance, steep dark slopes—the fir-covered sides of the very mountains, perhaps, they would presently ascend.

"This is Christmas eve," she thought with a shock. "Christmas eve, and I am far away from darling Dora."

But Dora was safe and happy, she reminded herself, and what she was doing now would be best for all of them in the end. She drank steaming hot coffee with the others at a little bus station; thought at first that she couldn't eat, found the good morning odor of crisping bacon and sputtering frying eggs irresistible, finished a plateful relishing every mouthful.

Just in time, too, to avert a major disaster with Pussy-puff in the stellar role. The kitten had lapped up his milk and was nibbling the bit of bacon Jan allotted him when, as the door between the small restaurant and the kitchen swung open, a fox terrier came prancing in, barking in joyous excitement over his discovery of the kitten. Jan upset her chair as she leaped to the rescue of Pussy-puff.

"Get out! Scat! Shoo!" she shrieked at the dog. He had the kitten cornered near the outer door. If someone opened the door the kitten might escape and she'd never find him again!

Desperately she tried to push the terrier aside so that she could reach Pussy-puff. But the dog put a gleeful nose between braced front paws, emitting sharp little yelps of delight, getting in her way, blocking her every effort to reach the kitten.

It was the owner of the place who came to her aid finally.

"Down, you, Snappy!" he commanded, attracted by the uproar, from the kitchen where he was supervising the cooking. Snappy paused, looked up sidewise at his master, barked yearningly at the kitten.

"Come here, sir!" and as the dog reluctantly obeyed, "down, Snappy! Lie down!"

Before the crestfallen terrier had assumed a recumbent position on the floor, Jan had Pussy-puff in her arms and was hurrying him toward his basket.

"You have your dog well trained," she told the proprietor, smiling, as she fastened the door of the basket on the kitten and started back to the bus.

"Good dogs, these fox terriers," said the man, pleased at her praise. "easy to teach."

Jan could hear the roar of the motor as the bus driver prepared to shove off, Everyone else had gone. She turned back at the door.

"Merry Christmas!" she called. "Merry Christmas, Snappy!"

• • •

Paul Harris was often perturbed, but he was rarely upset. And of all the occasions when he was upset, there had been few when he was as worried as he was at ten o'clock of the morning of December twenty-fourth. The chambermaid assigned to the rooms on Jan's floor had come straight to him—very properly,—too,—with a note she had found pinned to Jan's pillow. The bed had not been slept in, the maid reported. Paul read the note, holding it with fingers that quivered slightly as he absorbed the contents.

"To whom it may concern," he read, "don't worry about me. When I get back I'll explain everything. Jan Payson."

Paul thanked the chambermaid and sent her on her way. Then he rang the Deverest residence, found out from the butler where Tony was likely to be at the moment and finally located him.

"I'll be over," said Tony, hanging up while Paul was still speaking.

The next half hour was a nightmare to Paul

"No, I haven't any idea where she could have gone. No, I didn't say anything to hurt her feelings That note there. Mr. Deverest, was the first inkling I had that she wasn't here."

"But when did she leave? Did she appear in the show last night?"

"I gave her last night off," said Paul sadly. "I thought she ought to rest up for the big doings tonight. And this is what I get for being thoughtful."

"Maybe Dora knows where she went"

"That's an idea," said Paul, brightening. "I'll go around to the hospital and ask her."

"Don't frighten her," said Tony from the doorway. He was on his way upstairs to hunt for clues.

"Frighten Dora!" exclaimed Paul. "Really, Mr. Deverest!" And after Tony had left the room Paul stood for a moment, trying to regain control of his injured feelings When he thought of the high—the very high—regard in which he held Dora Payson the very suggestion that he might frighten her by careless questioning was devastating. Finally he reached for his hat and overcoat, still suffering, however, from shock.

Tony meanwhile had reached the Payson apartment and had been admitted by the chambermaid. No, the girl told him in answer to his questions, she hadn't seen Miss Payson yesterday at all. She had done the rooms as usual and left. Then when she came in again this morning there was that note. Had he seen it? Tony had. He got rid of the maid and after staring helplessly around, wondering where he could begin looking for some nints, he began pacing aimlessly up and down the sitting room.

"I must have beea crazy to wait all this time," he muttered to himself. "Why didn't I insist on her dashing around to the marriage license bureau as soon as I was certain she knew who I was? Of course her worst suspicions were confirmed when I didn't speak up. She was surer than ever that I was just a playboy. I hadn't given her any reason to believe I was serious.

"Gosh, and I thought I was being so smart, surprising her by announcing our engagement at a Christmas eve party! It was a fool idea, anyhow. Suppose she doesn't love me after all—a nice thing to do, arrange a party to announce a girl's engagement to a man she doesn't love

No, that wasn't true. It couldn't be true. Tony felt if Jan did not love him he couldn't possibly go on living. He had to hold fast to the thought that Jan loved him, not so much as he loved her, of course—he would have to give her a little time to reach that point. Then he became aware that someone was standing in the open door of the sitting room. He looked up. What a sour-faced old woman!

"Good morning," he said shortly.

"Good morning," said the visitor, even more shortly. "Is Miss Payson in?"

"No, Miss—Mrs.—I didn't catch the name—"

"I didn't give the name, but it's Mrs. Talbot. If you're interested. I thought that girl was up to something, the way she went sneaking down the hall with that cat! Maggie, the chambermaid, said she hadn't been home all night."

Tony ignored the last. But what did she say about the cat? Here was what he was looking for!

"That's right. The kitten is gone," he said. Where could she have been going with it?"

"She said," Mrs. Talbot stressed the word to indicate her disbelief, "that she was taking the kitten to see Dora. Fine hospital that permits cats in a sick room!"

"Excuse me," said Tony, leaving the room so quickly that Mrs. Talbot had all she could do to get out of his way.

XXIV

Tony reached the hospital just in time to meet Paul Harris coming down the corridor from Dora's room.

"What did she say?" Tony asked breathlessly.

"Nothing," said Paul, "except that Jan brought all her presents over yesterday and put them away in a drawer to be opened on Christmas morning. She doesn't expect Jan today. She thinks she's getting ready for the party tonight and is too busy to come over here."

"Mrs. Talbot says Jan had the kitten with her, and that she was taking it to Dora. Did you see it around the room anywhere?"

"I'm sure it wasn't there," said Paul. "Dora certainly would have mentioned it to me."

"Go back and ask her," Tony urged. "We've got to know!"

Nothing loath, Paul returned to Dora's room.

"I forgot to tell you," he said with what he considered positively Machiavellian cleverness, "Pussy-puff sends his love."

"I haven't seen him for so long," mourned Dora, "I suppose he's grown to be a great big cat, so big I wouldn't know him!"

It took a few more minutes to cheer Dora and persuade her that Pussy-puff was doing all he could in her absence to improve his looks for the express purpose of pleasing her on her return to the hotel.

When he rejoined Tony Paul found that young man almost beside himself with impatience.

"Dora hasn't seen the cat—"

"Then what are we waiting for?" cried Tony, hustling Paul down the stairs and out into his car.

"Let you off at the hotel," said Tony between clenched teeth. "I am going to make a round of the railroad stations."

(Continued on Page 26)

Santa Claus' History

The dictionary merely tells you that Santa Claus is a contraction of Saint Nicholas. A turning of the pages reveals that Nicholas was bishop of Myra or Smyrna in Asia Minor about 300 A. D. He was the patron saint of old Russia and was believed to offer special protection and comforts to "seafaring men, thieves, virgins and children." His affection for children was based on the assertion that he brought back to life three schoolboys who had been murdered. An encyclopedia attributes the name by which he is known in America to the early Dutch settlers who called him San Nicholas.

But it little matters whether he be known as Saint Nicholas, Santa Claus, Kris Kringle or a dozen other names, for the presence of his spirit on this climax holiday of the year is the important thing. It enters every home in the four corners of Christendom and touches the hearts of all the men and women in them. Moreover, it is essentially the spirit of childhood the freshness, the courage and the eagerness of young lives. Saint Nicholas may seem old, but he has none of the fears, regrets or prejudices of age. He and his children stand on the threshold of the world. Their banner is goodwill and their goal is peace.

So Christmas Day, dedicated to the memory of the birth of a child belongs to all children. It is their carols, their laughter, their happiness which makes it sweet. And we older folk should on this day at least share their kindness, their tolerance, their purity and their Saint Nicholas.