

CHEATED OUT OF CHRISTMAS

By Doris Amy Ibbotson

It was Christmas Eve all the world over—except in George Bickerton's office. But that was just like George Bickerton. Where other people divided the seasons into spring, summer, autumn and winter, he only looked upon them in the terms of slump, boom, depression and prosperity. No May morning or August heat-wave could tempt George Bickerton from his desk if there was a boom in business, and as for Christmas, why, that was just the time that brought prosperity unlimited to the firm of George Bickerton, Limited.

George had outgrown Christmas by sixty years now, but he had not outgrown a certain preference for attractive secretaries round about the age of twenty-five.

Norma Trent was one of them—his private secretary who shared the inner office with him and understood the business secrets of the firm, and just how he liked his tea made, and what clients he would or would not speak to on the telephone.

There was an orderly mind beneath Norma Trent's sleekly shining nut-brown hair, otherwise she would not have been in the employ of George Bickerton. She knew it was beyond the bounds of possibility to hope for a few days' holiday at Christmas. She also knew that this extra time she was putting in on Christmas Eve would bring her that bonus she was so much in need of—even if it did mean her leaving the train that would take her away from this dismal northern town straight down to where Christmas waited.

"Oh, well, I shall just have to do without it this year!"

Norma shrugged her shoulders and stopped glancing at the clock. What was the use? The south-bound train had left an hour ago. She still had the statements to go, the electric light would be burning in George Bickerton's inner office until close on midnight.

"I mustn't think about it any more," Norma told herself sensibly. "I—I mustn't."

Crash! Clang! Clang! Clang! Christmas bells pealed out through the frosty air. Norma locked her desk and went over to the window. There were stars and a full moon, and a faint crescent of light over the pointed roof and crooked chimneys, so that even this dull town looked like a Christmas card.

"Midnight!" muttered Norma to herself. "I've never stayed so late before. And I've not to come again on Boxing Day!" She smiled wearily. "Wonder what o'd Bickerton would do without me."

"I'm not indispensable," Norma told her tired little reflection in the dressing-room mirror, as she pulled on her hat. "What business is it nowdays? There are too many of us—men, and women, and children, and all sorts of things—pretending to be wrapped up in our careers, yet knowing all the time that we are being cheated out of the best things in life."

Even though it was after twelve, the streets were not deserted. Bright lights still burned in shop windows. A hawk's barrow showed a rainbow mixture of oranges and violets, and toys and candy, Christmas glowing in the bright eyes of passer-by. Christmas sparkling down from glittering stars in moonlight-blue sky. Christmas gleaming tenderly from the windows of little homes.

"I hate Christmas!" she told herself bitterly. "Too much fuss and when it's over."

She hated it because she was being cheated out of it this year, because the glorious Festival of the Child was to mean nothing to her—nothing.

"A Merry Christmas!" shouted a merry passer-by. Norma's lip curled, and she drew her cheap fur closer about her shoulders. It was all this "Merry Christmas" stuff that was so stupid. If people wouldn't prate so much about gathering round the Yule log, and about kissing under the mistletoe, and filling little stockings, then other people wouldn't feel it so badly—other people who hadn't a chance of keeping Christmas, however much they wanted to.

Thirty shillings was the price for missing Christmas. Funny, wasn't it? Her laughter grew loud and metallic and mirthless. But the funniest thing about the whole affair was that she needed that thirty shillings—and every other thirty shillings she could manage to scrape up; needed them more than she needed sufficient sleep or nourishing food or warm clothing. Needed them more than she needed Christmas.

Then the laughter turned suddenly to sobs, and Norma Trent, the calm, decisive business woman, gave way.

She felt better after that. Calm, self-contained women generally do. She pulled herself together and made a cup of cocoa over the unsympathetic gas-fire, and nibbled a biscuit and tried to think it was just an ordinary winter day, and tried not to think about this time last year, and tried not to wonder what on earth the future had in store for her.

She picked up the notes and stuffed them into the inner compartment of her handbag. Tomorrow—no, Boxing Day—no, the day after, of course, she would change them into shillings, and put them in her money-box. Otherwise, it would be such a temptation to spend them on new shoes, or a macintosh that wouldn't let in the rain, or that little red hat she had seen in May's window.

Funny the way she kept her money in that pill-box safe that nurse had given her one Christmas. She must remember to change the notes into shillings. Nurse's money-box would only accept shillings. Nurse said that was the way to be thrifty—save one coin at a time. Thirty shillings! Thirty—pieces—of—silver!

Norma's polished nails dug into the palms of her hands. She had been cheated out of Christmas for thirty pieces of silver, reluctantly doled out by George Bickerton, who had ceased to believe in Christmas before Norma was born.

Suddenly she was groping feverishly in her handbag, pulling out those coloured scraps of paper, spreading them across her lap.

"You are not going into the money-box after all," she cried dramatically. "You are going to buy Christmas for me—if it is not too late. I can't afford it, but I'm going to have it—in spite of everything!"

There were trains to look up—miserable, slow trains, crawling through the darkness of early Christmas morning. Cross-country trains, taking their time about it. But sooner or later, with their help Norma would find Christmas.

Church bells were ringing when she set out, although the sky was not yet red with winter dawn. Behind the golden squares of bedroom windows Norma could hear children's laughter, the banging of cracker, the music of toy drums and tip trumpets. Her heart thumped—Soon—oh, soon!

Christmas morning wore on from the excitement of present-giving at the breakfast table to the nervous anxiety prevailing in the kitchen. Church bells rang out again, and carols were sung by young voices. And all the time Norma was being taken by cross-country trains away from her business life to where Christmas was waiting.

It was afternoon before she arrived at her destination—a large, square, barrack-looking house, with a brass plate on the door which read:

"Heathdown Nursery Home for Young Children. Matron, Miss Murchison."

Norma rang the bell, trembling with excitement, and a moment later was facing the severe-looking matron, whose eyes expressed more surprise than pleasure at this visitation.

"This is rather an unexpected—" "Oh, please, matron," interrupted Norma timidly. "I've come to see if—I can spend Christmas, or rather what's left of it, with Cynthia! You don't mind, do you? If I could just have her to myself—away from the other children—"

Her voice trailed off. "You should have let me know earlier," said the matron stonily. "I could most certainly have made arrangements for you to spend Christmas with your child, although the rules do not allow parents to make use of this Home except for brief visits during the hours appointed. Still, considering the season, I would have waived that rule. Unfortunately, however—"

"Where is she?" Norma caught at the other woman's arm. "Where is Cynthia? Not—not ill?" Her face was white with apprehension. "Cynthia has gone away for Christmas." The matron spoke deliberately.

"Gone away!" gasped Norma, staring at the matron with horror. "But—how dare you let her go without letting me know? You had no right to do it!"

"There was no time to let you know," Steely-grey eyes were cold and hard. "Mr Temple only called for her this morning."

"Mr. Temple!" Norma's hand crept to her aching lips. "He wanted her just for the day. I have his address." The matron fumbled among some papers on her desk and handed Norma a card. "He lives not very far from here. Of course, I would not have allowed her to go any distance without your permission."

Well, thank heaven, it was not in this soulless Children's Home, with that steely-eyed woman presiding over the festivities, that she had chosen this place because it was cheap.

"I'm very sorry indeed," the matron's voice broke in on her thoughts. "Of course, I would have kept the child had I known you were coming to see her."

"It's all right," Norma gave a wry smile. "You did the wisest thing in letting her go. I—I couldn't give her a real Christmas myself. I—I hope she enjoys every minute of this one. Don't—please don't tell her that I came to see her. It might upset her."

The matron sighed with relief. "May I offer you a cup of tea before you go? You look very tired."

"No, thank you," Norma shook her head. "I'll go back to the station. Perhaps I can find a train to take me north again."

Back to the world of George Bickerton, Limited. Back to a one-roomed flat and loneliness. Back to files and statements and business jargon and too-slow pay envelopes. Back to everything that was cold and dreary and depressing. Away from soft arms and dancing, sunny curls and dewy eyes, and the feel of a little poppy-bud mouth on her own.

"I'm glad you are here, Norma," he said quietly. "Cynthia and I came to the conclusion, some hours ago, that it wasn't a real Christmas—without you."

She flushed a little. "Thank you, John. I—I'm rather late."

"Mummy! Mummy! I want to show you all my lovely presents."

Gently he took the child out of Norma's arms.

"Seasonable!" called the man to another across the road.

"Yes. Real old-fashioned Christmas weather, as the saying is," returned the other slowly.

Norma drew her fur up round her ears. She didn't want to hear that word again.

Thank goodness it only came once a year.

She might have to wait for another slow train back north, but that was what waiting-rooms were for. She smothered a little high hysterical laugh. Fancy spending Christmas—fancy spending a winter afternoon in a waiting-room.

Norma wished people would draw their blinds in the front rooms of little houses along the road. Flickering freight, the mellow glow of lamps, the white glare of electric light, all threw into relief jolly family parties. Some were at tea, gazing eager-eyed at a monster iced cake in the middle of the table. Some were gathered round a tree. Some were just sitting quietly by the fireside. There were decorations in all those rooms—paper streamers, gleaming dark-green ivy, glowing holly berries, mistletoe.

Last Christmas there had been freight and a tree and a monster iced cake; a little stocking to fill; and the wonderful glimpse of a child, bright-eyed, in the dawn. There has been mistletoe also...

"There's a train just going now, miss." The porter beamed at her. "You'll catch the connection at the Junction and—"

"Never mind—" Norma turned away abruptly. "I—I've changed my mind."

There were taxis in the station yard. Norma got into the first one and gave the address mechanically.

"The Gables, Rookvale. Is—is it a long way from here?"

"A matter of twenty miles, miss."

"Oh!" she said faintly. "All right. Please hurry."

Twenty miles. A mere giant-stride if you possessed your own car. She simply couldn't afford a twenty-mile drive in a taxi. But she was going to because it was Christmas—because it was a special occasion. But, oh! the things she would have to go without during the next few months to make up for this.

She leaned back in her seat, pale and frightened. She had burnt her boats this time, but she just wouldn't be cheated out of Christmas any longer. If she could just hold Cynthia's slim little body in her arms for a moment, feel the softness of those bright, dancing curls against her cheeks, the touch of a little mouth on her own, then that would be Christmas indeed.

The bligness of The Gables almost took away her courage. The long sweep of carriage drive, glimpse of green lawns, massive trees, glasshouses, stone steps leading to the porch. All this meant money. It was a country mansion, and no place for a tired business girl stealing a day from George Bickerton, Limited.

For a moment she covered, trembling, on the taxi seat, then pulled herself together for the ordeal that faced her.

It was a brave gesture to dismiss the taxi. Suppose Norma tugged at the bell. She mustn't think of anything but Cynthia.

"I wish to see Mr. Temple," she told the manservant who came to the door.

His eyebrows shot up. "I am afraid Mr. Temple is not seeing anybody this afternoon, madam. He is engaged."

A peal of childish laughter rang out from a room to the right of the door. Norma brushed past the servant and ran through the hall. She flung open the door of a large, luxuriously-furnished lounge and paused on the threshold.

"Mummy! Mummy!" A little flying figure darted across the floor and into her arms. "Oh, Mummy, how scrumptious! Mummy, I've got such wonderful presents. And there's a most 'normous tree, and a huge cake. And we're just going to have tea and pull crackers. Oh, Mummy, darling, I'm dreadfully glad you came!"

It was worth it all to have those little arms round her, that flower-sweet body pressed so tightly to her own. Norma hid her lips in the soft brightness of dancing golden curls.

Over her child's head she looked into the grave brown eyes of a young man.

"I'm glad you are here, Norma," he said quietly. "Cynthia and I came to the conclusion, some hours ago, that it wasn't a real Christmas—without you."

She flushed a little. "Thank you, John. I—I'm rather late."

"Mummy! Mummy! I want to show you all my lovely presents."

Gently he took the child out of Norma's arms.

"Seasonable!" called the man to another across the road.

"Yes. Real old-fashioned Christmas weather, as the saying is," returned the other slowly.

Norma drew her fur up round her ears. She didn't want to hear that word again.

Thank goodness it only came once a year.

She might have to wait for another slow train back north, but that was what waiting-rooms were for. She smothered a little high hysterical laugh. Fancy spending Christmas—fancy spending a winter afternoon in a waiting-room.

Norma wished people would draw their blinds in the front rooms of little houses along the road. Flickering freight, the mellow glow of lamps, the white glare of electric light, all threw into relief jolly family parties. Some were at tea, gazing eager-eyed at a monster iced cake in the middle of the table. Some were gathered round a tree. Some were just sitting quietly by the fireside. There were decorations in all those rooms—paper streamers, gleaming dark-green ivy, glowing holly berries, mistletoe.

Last Christmas there had been freight and a tree and a monster iced cake; a little stocking to fill; and the wonderful glimpse of a child, bright-eyed, in the dawn. There has been mistletoe also...

"There's a train just going now, miss." The porter beamed at her. "You'll catch the connection at the Junction and—"

"Never mind—" Norma turned away abruptly. "I—I've changed my mind."

There were taxis in the station yard. Norma got into the first one and gave the address mechanically.

"The Gables, Rookvale. Is—is it a long way from here?"

"A matter of twenty miles, miss."

"Oh!" she said faintly. "All right. Please hurry."

Twenty miles. A mere giant-stride if you possessed your own car. She simply couldn't afford a twenty-mile drive in a taxi. But she was going to because it was Christmas—because it was a special occasion. But, oh! the things she would have to go without during the next few months to make up for this.

She leaned back in her seat, pale and frightened. She had burnt her boats this time, but she just wouldn't be cheated out of Christmas any longer. If she could just hold Cynthia's slim little body in her arms for a moment, feel the softness of those bright, dancing curls against her cheeks, the touch of a little mouth on her own, then that would be Christmas indeed.

The bligness of The Gables almost took away her courage. The long sweep of carriage drive, glimpse of green lawns, massive trees, glasshouses, stone steps leading to the porch. All this meant money. It was a country mansion, and no place for a tired business girl stealing a day from George Bickerton, Limited.

For a moment she covered, trembling, on the taxi seat, then pulled herself together for the ordeal that faced her.

It was a brave gesture to dismiss the taxi. Suppose Norma tugged at the bell. She mustn't think of anything but Cynthia.

"It was all I could afford." He flushed.

"Haven't you been receiving my allowances every month?"

Norma's chin went up. "That is being put by, untouched, for when Cynthia grows up. I want her to enjoy her youth—not slog through it as I have done."

"That you were keen on your career? You always put it first—in the old days."

"I was pathetically young in those days, John."

"We both were. Perhaps that was why we—"

"John, I think I had better go. I'll slip away when Cynthia isn't noticing."

"Afraid, Norma?" His hand shot out and grasped her arm.

"Of course not." But she was trembling.

"Don't you realise that we've grown up now?" He spoke in a low voice. "We're not the couple of kids who made a romantic runaway marriage and thought that love and kisses would last us for the rest of our lives. We're man and woman now, Norma, with the thirties not many years ahead. We've got a six-years-old child to consider. We can face facts squarely now. I'm glad we had that break. It's given us time to think things over, to realise what a couple of young fools we were."

"John!" She stared at him amazed. "I—I thought we had parted—for ever."

He laughed. "Silly baby talk. I've learnt better since. Haven't you, Norma?"

She closed her eyes and nodded. "I've been terribly lonely. You're right, John. We were fools. I was a fool to go on with my so-called career instead of making a home for you."

She laughed bitterly. "Career! Why, I was only a glorified typist calling a weekly wage a salary."

"We won't bring that up again. I was a fool, too, to be so jealous of your business life, Norma. But with Cynthia's help, we're going to forget the past."

Tabby Brought Kittens Into Christmas Manger

The celebration with the Christmas tree that touched the ceiling and had a manger beneath it, was over, and a row of little stockings were hanging for Santa Claus. Mother had just tucked the happy children into bed and by the soft glow of the nursery Christmas tree was singing Christmas carols to them.

Father was about to turn off the lights below and lock the door for the evening when he heard a faint "mew" from the cold darkness without. Upon opening the door he saw a forlorn, bedraggled tabby cat almost frozen in the Christmas snow.

"Why, you poor creature," spoke father tenderly, "come in this very minute!" For some moments father was busy making tabby comfortable. He found some milk which he warmed, and plenty of holiday food. He served kitty with generous portions of Christmas repast and then provided a soft bed in the corner, with a cushion from his own easy chair. Tabby showed her appreciation by purring and purring louder than father had ever heard a cat purr before.

Satisfied and delighted with his Christmas guest, father retired, grinning and wondering what the family would say in the morning.

Christmas morning the happy family entered the living room—the children rushing ahead, bearing their bulging stockings and shouting with laughter.

"Oh, look at the manger!" cried mother with surprise.

"Merry Christmas!" retorted father, trying to keep from bursting out laughing.

Tabby had selected the soft straw of the manger as a fitting birthplace for her litter of Christmas kittens.—Alice B. Palmer.

"John!"

"I didn't realise how terribly I missed you and wanted you until I had Cynthia all to myself today. She reminds me of you so much."

"Tomorrow, darling, I meant to come to you—wherever you were."

"John!" She smiled up into his eyes. "Do you really mean that?"

He caught her hands and imprisoned them in his own.

"Of course. I've got you now, Norma, my sweet, and I won't let you go again. We won't let happiness escape us this time, darling. We'll put some salt on its tail."

He laughed.

"John, I can't. You were a poor man when I married you, and—and I was not much of a help-mate. I—I wanted my silly career instead of my own treasure. Now—now that I would give everything to be in a tiny home home with you and Cynthia, to work my fingers to the bone for you both—I find you are a rich man! No, John, I can't come back to you—like this. She gave a comprehensive glance around the room.

He shouted with laughter. "That's good, Norma. Me rich! Why, it was just a matter of luck,

Christmas Fancy Dress * * * Costumes * *

Striking tableaux and costumes are always an appreciated feature at Christmas parties, and while there is always a round of applause for the dainty fairies, bold robbers, Robin Hoods and other charming characters, it is often the most novel and unusual costume that makes the widest appeal and the boy or girl who can manage this generally makes the "hit" of the parade.

Cockerel or bird or animal costumes supply a good range of ideas not often followed. Shaped canvas or cotton overalls with paintings of feathers and wings can be made strikingly effective, especially if pains be taken with a realistic head-dress.

Here are a few suggestions:

Silver Star: Light blue dress with silver stars around the bottom, neck and sleeves.

Powder Puff: Pink cap with swansdown round the edge, and large bone ring on top, white jacket with swansdown round the bottom.

Master of Music: Black dress with large markings of music all over.

Goliath: Light blue pants, black face and arms and legs, red lips and black frizzy hair.

Peace: White robe with paper dove on right shoulder.

Nigger: Gaily colored clothing, black cap and tambourine.

Chinese or Japanese Boys and Girls: Loose coat and trousers of Willow pattern paper, and a round cap fashioned from stout paper.

Clown: The usual clown dress. In the event of the character being taken by a girl the hair should be divided in three portions and tied with three differently-colored ribbons. The costume could be a loose white dress with sleeves, with three paper frills around the neck and frills around the skirt for a girl and trousers for a boy. To be completely effective there should be differently colored stockings and the bows on the shoes should alternate in color. Balloons may be carried.

Pirate: This always appeals to the boys. A colored paper head-dress and sash, white blouse, black trousers and imitation Wellington boots. And do not forget the shade over the eye.

Woodland Sprite: G: blouse and brown skirt. Trim with a variety of representations of flowers.

Honey-suckle and Bee: Plain white dress with trails of honey-suckle round the sleeves and skirt, and small pieces of the skirt for a bee. Scatter over the dress to represent the bees.

Gypsy: A square of colored paper folded round the head in handkerchief fashion, with a few imitation coins stitched round, and a paper sash. Ragged trousers would be more effective than sound ones.

A great variety of head-dress can easily be arranged, and, of course, masks should not be forgotten. Indian head-dress of feathers, and the witch's peaked hat always make a good show.

So now you have some suggestions for fancy dress to work on this Christmas. It is not necessary to stick to these few, but they may provide some ideas upon which to work out your own costumes and make your party this year a real success!

TOYS CHILDREN LIKE

A comprehensive survey leads to the conclusion that building blocks are the favorite toy for children up to the age of seven. Drawing and painting materials rank high. With little girls, dolls and housekeeping equipment are favorites. Sand and clay for modeling retain the interest of most children. Mechanical toys, on the other hand, are soon discarded. Adults usually enjoy the mechanical toys more than the children for whom they are prepared.

landing this job. I don't own the place, darling. I'm only private secretary. My boss is away on holiday in Switzerland. He's an author—the kind that dictates at a Niagara rate." He pulled a little face. "He happens to know about Cynthia and—and you. Saw me looking down in the mouth one day, and got the story out of me. He believes in the 'happy ending,' both for his novels and for real life, too. He'll be terribly sucked to know that we two have come together again."

"Oh, John!" There was relief in her voice. "Oh, I am so glad you are not rich, dear! I want to start all over again with you—only properly this time. A real marriage, John. Not a selfish playtime affair like the other one was."

"Just come over here a minute. He pulled her towards an alcove until they reached the spot where a bunch of mistletoe hung over their heads."

"Oh, John!" She emerged laughing and gasping from his embrace. "That was hardly a mistletoe kiss, darling!"

"Mummy! Mummy!" Cynthia stood in the doorway. "Come and see my presents now."

"Just coming, darling." Norma stooped and kissed the flushed, excited little face.

"And then we must have tea," said John, "and cut the cake and pull the crackers, and read the mottoes and wear the caps, and do everything in the approved style."

"Oh, Mummy, don't you love Christmas?" cried Cynthia ecstatically.

"I never realised before how wonderful it was," answered Norma slowly, her eyes on the brown eyes of John.

"Make the most of it," he teased his little daughter. "Christmas only comes once a year, you know."

Norma shook her head. "I think this kind of Christmas is going to stay with me—for ever," she whispered.

Christmas Eve Alliance Made Two Hearts Happier

The wind howled dismally, and Oscar Huggins, looking out at the whirling snow, put up the shutters. Put them up right, too, as the little grocery would be closed tomorrow. Dimly, he wondered how to spend Christmas.

He checked over his stock, nibbled a bit of cheese, and opened the back door to throw out a rotting apple.

In the snow stood a boy. The lad dove for the apple, polishing and handing it as something precious.

"Here!" said Oscar roughly. "What are you doing?"

The boy looked startled. "I thought you threw it away," it answered, "and see, it's pretty good."

"Humph," said Oscar. "All right, keep it. But, mind, you've no business loitering here. You should be home in this weather, and on Christmas eve, of all times. The lad shifted uneasily, but did not leave."

"What are you looking for, sir?" Oscar looked at him sharply. "Out on your own son?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where are your folks?" His tale of bereavement, struggle and loneliness was brief but impressive.

"How'd you like to spend Christmas with me?" the grocer offered. "Funny this life. A bit ago he had almost wished he wasn't closing tomorrow—now it seemed jolly."