

## The Dream of a Christmas Shopper

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It is now the silence of the night hours, the hour of midnight. Earlier in the evening I had been downtown at the reception in the new Parish House of St. Stephens Church. I loitered along the way home, watching the Christmas Shoppers hurrying hither and yon, their faces lighted by that mysterious quizzical expression that seemed to say, "You can't guess what I have in these bundles?" Nothing stimulates me so completely as to loiter along the street in the evening when the folk are out in numbers, and, especially, does the spirit of a holiday time grip. I walk in an enchanted world. I let my imagination clothe the people with all sorts of romantic halos, and fill them with great emotions, experiences, and purposes until the whole world of history is walking about with me in these people with which we live every day. Tonight I saw the whole history of man enacted. That gray-haired man with the sled under his arm, I know him, not his name, but his history, the story of his soul. He is carrying that sled home to his grandson. I follow him. His step quickens, his shoulders straighten, his head is thrown back. I know why. His mind is carrying him back over the history of his own life. His early remembrance of Christmas as a boy, the story of his own love and home making, the birth of that first child, the work for the children, the cares, the sorrows, the joys and the laughter of his life, his defeats and achievements, his hopes, and longings, all these things are flitting through his mind as, on this cool crisp winter evening, he is carrying to the child of his child this combination of wood and steel, the delight of a boy's heart, a sled. But as I follow him, sort of eves-dropping on his soul, that sled seems to glow with the light of the great and disciplined affection of old age for buoyant youth, "Glory shines around." I slip into a store lest I might approach too near the inner shrine of his soul.

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<sup>1</sup> While this manuscript is undated, there is reference in the text to the battle of Verdun which concluded December 18, 1916, consistent with the theme of the manuscript about Christmas.

I wander along the throng. Strange sight! Strange Spirit there! Lighting the faces of these humans. Each face has its own story, and each conceals its own secret, but each tells the tale of a human life. Now I stand beside a young couple who are buying baby toys, "Just a wee-bit of a doll for the stocking," I hear the mother say. (Is her name Mary?)<sup>2</sup> Their suppressed excitement tells me more plainly than words that at home, snuggled warm in the crib, is their first-born. Happy folk, these two—"Glory shines around."

A wonderful place of enchantment is this city along about Christmas time. The spirit of the thing had me in its grip, everywhere people were thinking about what the other person would like, or might need, or what would bring happiness.

Thus I left them. As I walked, there was a flashing across the screen of my mind this great moving picture of human life gripped by the spirit of goodwill and cheer. Fairies danced about everywhere, in-and-out among the hurrying people, the electric cars, the doors and windows of the stores, carrying happiness and a Merry Christmas. Given, from each according to his ability, and to each according to his need.

When I arrived home all was quiet, all the house was asleep, "The children were snuggled all close in their beds." The last flickering flames of the evening fire in the fireplace gave a strange mystic light to the room. Mysterious packages were on the table; even "Daggie," as he jumped on me and wiggled his tail, seemed to say, "I feel it too. Glory shines around." With all the house asleep, while "the stillness hung that heavy, you was half afraid to speak." I dropped into the chair before the fire to read the evening paper, the news of the world.

Snap went my world of enchantment! What did I read? Great headlines, "Rumanian Army No Longer in Action." "French take 11,387 prisoners at Verdun Fighting." "United States needs a larger standing army." "Sylvia Pankhurst arrested for holding a 'peace meeting.'" "Strike to continue." "United States needs a million rifles." Etc. Etc.

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<sup>2</sup> Seems an odd insertion. Earl Davis' fourth child, Mary, was born 18 months before this was written.

What a fool I had been to allow myself to forget that this is a "practical age," that we are reasonable men, and reason rules. What an idiot I had been to imagine that those people in the stores were happy in buying things to give away. "Business is business," and the balance sheet rules the world. Why did I forget that more than half of the "adult males" in the country do not earn enough in a year to support a family of five in decency. We are out for the almighty dollar. That is the only thing that counts. "Giving" is folly. Employer pays as little as he can, and employee gives as little as possible in return for what he receives. We have to fight for all we get, and we care not whether the other fellow starves or not. "Dollars," "ammunition," "Cannon-fodder," these are the words, for we are a practical people, we must arm ourselves to protect our homes. We are the "Most cordially hated nation in the world."<sup>3</sup> War is the last resort. "Poverty and misery are the necessary evils of life." We are reasonable, practical, hard-headed men and women of the world—none of your soft-talk for us. We are practical—reasonable—hard-headed—

The paper fell to the floor. The practical world vanished. I was dozing, dreaming, incoherently, foolishly dreaming. And what silly thoughts come to us in dreams? What childish pictures flash through our minds? What foolish impractical thoughts played hide-and-seek with each other in my mind as I sat there dreaming—while the embers in the fireplace turned to ashes. For this is what I dreamed.

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<sup>3</sup> Editorial, "Responsibilities of a Prosperous Nation When Trade Conflict of Exhausted World Resumes After War," *Chicago Commerce*, Friday, August 11, 1916, Published weekly by the Chicago Association of Commerce, p. 18. In context, the sentence is part of a section entitled, "Choked With Wealth," which reads, "We as a nation have been built upon the generosity of the nations of Europe. If we absorb as a sponge and give out nothing, only condemnation will come to us in the last analysis, when we are charged with the responsibility of leading the finances of the world at large, and if we in our selfishness decline to let the flow of gold go outside of our own domain. The results will be that we will be choked with wealth; that we will gain a character which wealthy, ungenerously applied always brings to a nation, and such a nation will be the most cordially hated nation in the world, if we refuse to turn the tide of gold coming to us into the commercial channels of the world at large."

I dreamed that this Christmas spirit of thinking of the other fellow got such a hold on us that we could not shake it off. I dreamed that on this Christmas night, 1916, after the happiest day we had ever lived through, we went to sleep still under the spell of its enchantment, that we awakened on Tuesday morning, December 26, 1916 to our accustomed round of duties still under its magic spell. I thought that I was out on the street in the dark early morning hour as the men and women were hastening to the factories. I heard strange words come from their lips. "What a wonderful thing it is to be making things to satisfy the needs of people?" said my friend in the agitation. "How great a joy it is to make clothes to keep them warm, and to make food for them to eat?" I heard Mr. Grimbler say. "Houses to shelter them." Happy "good-mornings" passed back-and-forth. The footsteps were lighter and more crisp. I followed along into the factory. The machines, instead of grinding out their dull monotonous tone of unending toil, seemed to be singing merrily as a brook on the mountainside. The dark corners of the factory were lighted up with a new light. The workmen began to be eager to do their work well, because they saw that the better it might be made, the more happiness it would bring to those who might use it. Soon all were stepping about right lively, some whistling, others singing as they worked. Everything seemed to be chanting, "Glory shines around."

No sooner were they well under way than along comes "Mr. Boss" and "Mr. Manager" with a pleasant "good morning" on their lips, and that strange quizzical smile that I had seen in the stories playing around their eyes. "Guess what I have in this package?" it seemed to say. Mr. Manager says, "I have some important news to tell you this morning. I have just been talking with the people who own this factory. They tell me that in as much as we here who do the work, and manage this factory, and make so many valuable things for the lives of the people, and really know how to make them, they have decided to give over to us this great machine that we use together to be used by us to make more and better things for all the people. We are to manage and operate it ourselves. In exchange for what we make, other factories will supply us with our needs and comforts. So, from now on these machines that we manage and use are ours. Can we do it?" Hardly were the people able to answer, and yet the proposition seemed so sensible. Why does not the use of the machine constitute the only real and valid claim to ownership? Strange dream idea!

After a while the people met and talked the matter over, and they decided that the best man in the factory to manage it was the man who had always managed it, and so they asked him to continue his work. He went back to his office the happiest man of them all, for the first time in his life their real leader.

In a short time the Manager's office door opened again, and again that same quizzical expression was on his face. "Strange spirits are at work this morning." People all seem to want to work, and the telephones have been buzzing with new words. All over the nation people who own factories have been giving them over to the workers. More than that, all the idle people want to help make things for the use of the people. We have discovered that with all able bodies people working five hours each day, we can easily satisfy all the needs that we have. You will now have time to read, to play, to enjoy your children, to do something for the community. "As we journey through life, let us take time to live." What is better still, you will have time, each one, to teach your sons this great art of making things for the needs of people. You can be their companions, and their hours of lonely restless idleness will be wiped out by this wholesome creative work. You can be their teachers, and comrades. They need you. You need them. They need to see that in the handiwork of their craft is their prayer and yours. "We also find that in order to have stronger and more healthy boys, many women who are doing heavy work need work no longer. They can be provided with work more suited to their genius, for first of all we must give health and vigor to the coming generations by giving health and vigor to the mothers of today."

So the changes came thick and fast. By this magic spirit the whole nation had been transformed into a great family, making things, ideas, and ideals for each other. Each was doing his part, according to his ability, and each was receiving his compensation according to his product.

By noon-time came the news that this strange spirit of enchantment had spread over Europe. The war had ceased, and the erstwhile enemies, were helping one another back home, and together were repairing the damage done by war. The armies of devastation had become armies of constructive cooperation. The diplomats were revealing to each other their trade and state secrets. New treaties were being formed. The negotiations were underway for a federation of the world. Great guns of

destruction were being dismantled, and recast into machines of peace. Poland was being freed. Ireland was free. Joy, peace, goodwill, was replacing the song of hate and the bloodshed, and over the battlefields of Europe and the East brooded peace on earth, goodwill among men.

Wild incoherent dreams things are! Back came my wandering mind to Pittsfield, our own city among the hills. I dreamed that this spirit had become a habit with us. As the years passed by I saw our city transformed into a magic land of beauty with a beautiful park among the little river that flows through our midst. I saw the streets widened. I saw the three-deckers, and the tenement houses melt away. Cottages, plain, beautiful, and home-like, grace the large lots of our new boulevards. Well-kept lawns, productive gardens, shrubbery, and flowers tie them all together into one whole.

Best of all, as the years passed by, I saw being built and built upon a great municipal building. Slowly and irresistibly it was rising upon solid foundations, a thing of beauty and use. No ordinary building, but the product of the love labor of all the citizens, of all of us. Not one cent of labor paid for, but every bit contributed out of the leisure, and the devotion of free citizens to the symbol of the community life, a great cathedral of our common aims, the gift of our free spirit.

And as I went about in-and-out of the building, doing my share in its growth, I became accustomed to the presence of a strong majestic figure clad in the garb of an Oriental Carpenter. I watched him as he strolled about examining the handiwork in the building, and noting the spirit of peace and goodwill everywhere. One day as he stood near where I was clearing away some chips from the floor, I saw him stand as if lost in deep thought and meditation. After long minutes of gripping silence, I saw him move, gaze around the building, look into the faces of the throng that was going in-and-out of the temple. I think I saw lips quiver, and his body tremble, and he said half to himself and half to those nearby, "This day is my dream fulfilled. Thy kingdom come."

Daggie the dog awakened me from my dream world. The last spark of fire was gone from the fireplace. The stillness of an early winter's morning was brooding over the city. Half dazed by the lingering light of the enchanted city and world that I had been

living in, I glanced again at the paper at my feet, the messenger of the reality of this "practical, business world." Still I sat there, long in meditation. Was my dream so foolish after all? Was it not just a little rapid journey into the Christmas of tomorrow, and the life of tomorrow? So it seemed to me, and I went to bed to sleep on the thought that to the realization of my dream world, I give myself so far as in me lies. That is my Christmas gift to my children, my children's children and yours.

Strange things, these dreams of ours, our sleeping dreams, and our daydreams, but they make the future. Down at the bottom, the spirit of the Christmas-tide is right. Carry it into the year.