

## Two Christmas Eves.

BY WILSON S. HENRY.



NUMBER 1, the overland express, had just roared past Granite in its western flight, and Number 17, the fast freight, was reported four hours late, so the agent had four hours of Christmas eve to himself. There was a glowing, soft-coal fire in the whitewashed stove in his snug little office, which threw out welcome heat. The light of a kerosene lamp was subdued by an ornate paper shade, upon which some Louis XV sort of people were doing a gay dance on a green lawn.

The agent at Granite was a tall, good-looking young fellow, with a smooth face that, just now, was so bright that it had to be shaded like the lamp, with a soft felt hat. Observant people who glanced at the Granite depot out of car windows as the train rushed past usually said: "What a dreary life!" or wittily asked each other how any one could exist in such a spot, "a thousand miles from nowhere." Now the fact is, that instead of being "a thousand miles from Nowhere," Granite was just six miles from Everywhere—the place at which all of us try to locate sometime or other.

The Everywhere of this poor devil of an agent was the ranch of one Thompson, and the girl who made it Everywhere was Thompson's daughter. She had made it Somewhere to him for a long time, and very gently, but surely, had it come to be Everywhere. They had taken many long rides and walks over the prairie, that gently undulated away from them with but little topographical interruption for hundreds of miles in every direction. His love for her had grown to accord with this vast expanse of landscape, until it filled all the vista, from the hills that narrowed into a cañon in the east, to the far, high mountains in the west. And so, because it was a great, vigorous, outdoor

love, he had found it hard to tell her of it by word of mouth, though he often felt that just a little word would do it all, so nearly did her thoughts seem to run with his, and so knowing were her dark eyes.

This Christmas eve he told her all about it on paper. With an absurd idea of doing justice to the thing, he filled both sides of ten sheets—the Railway Company's own private paper—and then, in despair, he had put it all into three lines. He finally compromised on two pages of what was really, from a literary standpoint, an admirable specimen of condensation. It was to be sent out with some Christmas gifts, brought out for him from Cheyenne by the obliging conductor of Number 3.

For Her mother there was a Scotch plaid shawl of florid design.

For Her father there was an elegantly bound morocco volume of five hundred gilt-edged leaves, entitled, "The Horse; His Diseases," with a spirited gilt horse, remarkably free from disease, cavorting upon the cover.

For Her there was a "hand-painted" satin Christmas card. It bore a winter scene that sparkled beautifully with imitation snow. Under it was a pretty verse, so warm with love that it would have melted anything more like snow than diamond dust. The packages were wrapped up and the letter duly addressed.

As he sat waiting for Thompson's man, Whittaker, who had promised to look in after finishing his business at Fleener's store, he gave freedom to his fancy, which threw love-lights ahead and showed him that golden future we all dream of, and which always cheats us by dribbling along, one poor little day at a time, instead of coming all at once, as we promise ourselves it will.

From the confused rattling of the telegraph key his ear suddenly caught the letters "Gn-Gn-Gn-"; his call. He took the following message:—

ROCK CREEK, IDAHO, Dec. 24.

P. J. THOMPSON, GRANITE:—

East drift cut ore pipe below fault yesterday. Breast in solid horn silver. Assays forty-one to sixty-four hundred. Old Chute sure.

WARNER.

As he sent back the "O. K." Whittaker and Fleener came in. He arose excitedly with the message in his hand.

"Say," he said, "they've struck it in the old man's claim — found the old vein. Look here — four thousand dollars a ton; how's that for a little Christmas present?"

"The hell you say!" exclaimed Whittaker fervently; "well, I want to tell you right here that I never worked for a whiter man than old Thompson; must be hundreds and thousands there. Holy Smoke, what a strike!"

"More'n likely it'll pinch out 'fore they git in six foot," said Fleener.

"Yes; 'n more'n likely they got fifty million dollars there askin' to be shot down and histed out. He's a dead square man, too. I'll take that telegraph out in a hurry. You got some other stuff to go?" he queried of Andrews; "be quick with it."

"Why, yes; I — here — No, no — nothing else at all."

"Well, so long! I'll skin out with this; it'll paralyze him!"

"Prob'ly ain't nothin' but a blamed pocket," said Fleener. "Tain't no trick to find good *prospects*. What's the matter, under the weather? Ain't feelin' well, eh? Guess I'll go over to th' store'n tell the boys about it."

For a moment Andrews stood still, trying to determine just what calamity had befallen him. He took the three packages and placed them on a table in his little bedroom off the office. He took the letter in both hands, as if to tear it across, but hesitated; then he put it away in the bedroom with the painted satin Christmas card. It was worthless now, like the currency of a conquered nation; but it had once been legal tender for a fortune of dreams.

A little later an operator in the Chief Dispatcher's office at Cheyenne said: "Granite must be getting a Christmas jag on; he broke four times, taking that order for seventeen."

Three days later at the station, Thompson said to Andrews: "Well, we're goin' to get out of this God-forsaken place at last, goin' to travel awhile, and then we'll settle in a civilized country where we can have first-class advantages. There's that daughter of mine has growed up here on the desert and never seen anything. I'm goin' to take her where she can see the proper sort of people and live right among 'em."

"I think she will lead a very happy life," said Andrews.

"Well, it won't be my fault if she don't. We got money now, and she can trot with the best of 'em."

There was much confusion around the depot the day the Thompsons left. All of Granite was there to see them off, and twenty people can make quite a stir. Martha was sprightly and vivacious, and her pretty, tanned face was rich in color.

"Good-by, Hugh," she said, and she clasped his hand tightly and tried to look into his eyes.

"Good-by, Martha," he said; "I hope you will —"

Whatever it was he hoped, he didn't say it distinctly; it seemed to be something commonplace enough, though. There was a last pressure from her warm little fingers, and she was in the car.

As the train started, she looked out at him with wistful eyes, but his gaze was centered upon an imaginary point a thousand miles or so beyond the farthest mountain peak. For this reason she secluded herself and cried for fifty miles.

All through the long days after they had gone he had ample time to think over his loss. While he really felt it to be irreparable, he still possessed that magnificent delusion Hope, which was always reiterating a lot of nonsense to him. In the hot summer days, when the sun blistered the little red wooden building and every green thing died under its heat, his love was only seasoned by it. And when winter came again and dressed the earth in swan's-down and snowy, spangled tights for its Christmas pantomime, the biting blasts only made his love more hardy.

His hope was really not impractical. It comprised simply: the sudden loss of P. J. Thompson's entire fortune through unwise speculation, complete failure of the mine in which he still retained an interest, and the immediate return of the family, in comparative poverty, to Granite. That would bring Her back — his own little Martha of the old days, with her plain dresses and pretty ways; her deep eyes, her soft brown hair, and her little hands that could hide so easily in his. He felt that if she should come back that way he could tell her of his love.

Then there would come days when those foolish hopes that lure lovers from reason would fail him, and he would grow low-

spirited and morose. At such times Fleener would come across the track from the store and cheer him up.

"'Tain't money as makes people easy in this here world," he would remark sententiously. "I know folks with thousands of dollars, et ain't reely any better off'n I be." Mr. Fleener's time was chiefly occupied in sitting in front of his store and meditating cynically. Mrs. Fleener boarded the section-men.

"Now jest take that Thompson girl, fer egsample," he said one day; "she'll prob'ly git married to a damned prince er a dook, er some of that riffraff, that's what American girls with money does these times, 'n they git led a dog's life, too; the titles, 'n glory, 'n striped uniforms, 'n hemlets is what ketches 'em every time. My wife's third cousin, Blivens by name, — Homer J. Blivens, — made a pile of money on a paten' right; then his girl up 'n married a furrin' nobleman right away. They'r livin' in a kind of stone palace in Injia, with whole passels of people to wait on 'em, 'n wearin' special clothes fer it."

There was no good reason to doubt the truth of this narrative except the fact that Mr. Fleener was a notorious liar.

Toward the end of the second year after the Thompsons' departure Mr. Fleener sauntered into the office one day.

"Ain't heard the news yit, eh?" he asked Andrews. "Well, Moss Brothers down to Hailey has got a kontrak to put up a house fer Thompson, out on the ranch, an' they're comin' back here to live. Mebbe we'll board some of the workers."

"What's that? When are they coming — soon?"

"Oh, I d'no; sometime, I guess. They'll prob'ly have a big one, with blines and coop'los and marble chimleys onto it; 'n they'll most likely have gorgeous furnishins inside — cookoo clocks, 'n music boxes, 'n bristles carpets. Some 'a them carpets 's got bristles that long," he added, indicating about eighteen inches.

It was the second Christmas Eve. Number 1 seemed to wheeze and grumble to itself at having to stop at a place like Granite long enough to let three people off. But there they were on the platform, and Andrews welcomed them.

"Whittaker won't be along 'til about nine," he said; "it's a bad night for the horses, and the train was an hour late at three."

"Mother has a bad headache; may she lie down in your room until John comes?" It was Martha. Her hand was white now, but as firm of clasp as ever. Her face was paler, but her eyes were the same. The most striking change was in her waist. Its lines had been emphasized by a cunning artificer in dress, and some latent curves had been developed. She said she was glad to see him again, and went to rub her mother's head with camphor.

"You haven't got an extry pipe, have you, Andrews?" Thompson asked. He was quickly supplied with one, which he filled and smoked eagerly. "That's real smoke," he said; "and you can't get it out of cigars, either. Well, I'm glad to get back to God's country again; back where you can see a hundred miles, and get all the clean air you want to breathe, and don't have to dodge shiny carriages. No more travel for me, my boy. Of course I couldn't get out of it at first — you know how the wimmen folks pester a man; but they'll be contented here, now. We been all over Chicago, and London, and It'y, and Paree, as they call it. They're too small and crowded, and *slow*, too; they don't get to dinner 'til supper time, and then they bring you a little dab at a time — tabble dote that is. I didn't stand it long; I'd jest have 'em bring me a good porterhouse steak, *with plenty of fat on it*, and some fried potatoes, and a piece of pie. A man wants to see jest what he's got to eat, and not have a lot of fricaseed truck run in on him after he thinks he's down to cases. They don't know how to use money, either. Why, in Noo York they give you *pennies* in change; and when you get a bill changed, do you think they give you good hard silver dollars that you can feel? Not much! They lay out a lot of greasy one-dollar bills; I got fifteen or sixteen of the mis'able little things in my pockets this minute, and —"

"Hugh!" It was Martha's voice, calling him from the doorway. He had thought her pale at first; now two bright spots of color glowed on her cheeks, and her eyes were unnaturally bright. He stepped quickly into the little room. She closed the door and stood with her back against it, facing him with a look of accusation. He saw that her mother was asleep on his bed. She spoke in low but excited tones, and it seemed to him she was making an effort to keep from laughing — or crying, was it?

"Hugh, you're not a fit man to be in a position of trust. You've

been false to my best friend, and I'm going to do something about it — I think I ought to write to the Government."

She had held one hand behind her ; she put it forward now, and in it was that old letter he had written to her. "I was looking through your scrap-book and I found it — and I — I read it."

Through a glare of light he saw the two unfolded sheets. He made a quick step forward and grasped the hand that held them.

"It was that night two years ago, Martha, and just after I'd written it, the message came about the mine. I was afraid to send it then — it wouldn't have looked well, and your father said so much about your meeting the right sort of people."

"You were a coward, Hugh." There was scorn, and something else, in her glance that seemed to draw all the nerves in his body to the hand that grasped hers. "You didn't dare send it, and you forgot me in a little while, and I — I *wanted* that letter."

"No, no, Martha, I never forgot — never for a day nor an hour — I love you for always — Martha."

The old lady on the bed stirred uneasily, and opened her eyes. She closed them lazily again, though, as if she had expected something of the sort.

Thompson *père* opened the door and heard his daughter say : "That's American, isn't it?"

"What's American?" he demanded. Martha submitted to "that" again, for his general enlightenment.

He grasped Hugh's hand. "Young man, you're all right."

The words were not much, but men are creatures of the flesh, — most of them can say more in a hand-shake than in an oration.

The dispatcher on duty at Cheyenne that night said: "Must be a new man on at Gn. He's a bird on the key, I'll tell you."

