

CHRISTMAS IN MY HEART®

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Only Seven Days Until Christmas

Anna McClure Sholl

“Daddy, I only wanted to ask, whose turn is it to get the wedding fee?”

But times were mighty lean in the parsonage, for the church was split right down the middle. In the resulting ugly spirit, even weddings were in short supply.

Little Edgar, however, concluded that landing a wedding fee was worth a little sleuthing—

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There was absolutely no question but that this timeless Christmas love story had to anchor our twenty-fifth collection.

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Part I

“The Lord loveth a cheerful giver.” Edgar delivered his text piously. A titter went around the breakfast table, and the Reverend Joseph Bentley glanced at his wife with an inquiring look that said: “Shall we notice it now? Shall it be public

reproof or a conference in the library after breakfast?” The quick answer of her eyes said as plain as words: “Don’t let us have a fuss in the middle of family worship.” Then she repeated her own text, and listened to her husband’s grave reading of the Psalms with a part of her brain on the subject of the breakfast toast.

During prayers she became conscious that the boys were comparing marbles, for without opening her eyes she could hear the clink as the marbles came together. Unconsciously she sighed. This naughtiness of the children seemed to her all one with the general disorder, the dreadful church quarrel that had split up the congregation into two irreconcilable factions beyond even her husband’s power to unite. What was the matter with her own children—what was the matter with the First Church that nobody could be good five minutes?

The Reverend Joseph Bentley said “Amen” and rose with a sad, stern face. “Edgar,” were his first words, “you are to come to me in the library after breakfast.”

Jean was eating her toast daintily. She paused a moment and regarded her father with a wistful inquiry. “Daddy, aren’t we really to have any Christmas presents this year?”

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A smile flitted over his face. Jean’s little feminine wishes always touched him, but it was time to talk frankly with the children. “Don’t you know, Jean,” he replied, “that this church quarrel has made a real difference in our finances! People are holding back with their pew rents—with everything. They are afraid I am taking sides, though I don’t care whether Deacon Wilberforce’s Byzantine plan or Deacon Cargrave’s

Gothic one is adopted for the new church. We ought to be a united congregation, and then it wouldn't matter if we worshiped in a log cabin."

"Who drew up their old plans anyway?" Edgar asked bitterly.

"Edgar, you'd better come with me now to the study," his father said. "I want a little talk with you."

"Daddy!" Jean's sweet voice detained him. He turned and smiled down into the upturned face of his only daughter. "I only wanted to ask," she said, "whose turn it is to get a wedding fee."

"Mine!" Edgar announced triumphantly. "Don't you remember, sis, Mother got the fee from the Park wedding, and you had the farmer's who was married in the study?"

"Oh, yes." Jean sighed. "I had forgotten."

She went away to collect her school books in the wake of her two small brothers. Mrs. Bentley was left alone, but she did not at once begin her morning activities, for her depression still weighed upon her. Oh, how hard it was to be a Christian! Most hard, indeed, since the Old First had become so fatally rich that it must have a new ornate edifice to take the place of the ancient brick building with its paneling and galleries. The Old First Church had stood among its graves for over a hundred years; graves over which the shadow of great elms moved lightly. She had loved the Old First from the first moment she had set eyes upon it; and in her expectant thoughts had woven a romance of religious life through what might be accomplished there by the efforts of a happy, humble, aspiring congregation. The neighborhood offered great opportunities to any church, for beyond the elm-shaded houses of Old Lyme was New Lyme with its mills, where a

depressing repetition of an ancient story was to be followed in the lines of gray, unpainted houses, the ash heaps and piles of refuse, and the unsewered streets.

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With her husband Kate Bentley had visited New Lyme in the first days of his pastorship, only to learn that this frayed fringe of a proud old township did not take kindly to visitors, lay or clerical. Kate learned later that the deacons had hinted with amused tolerance to her husband that the highly respectable congregation of the Old First would absorb all his activities. It was an interesting congregation; everybody who was anybody had vaults in the yard and pews in the sanctuary, and they had known all about one another for over a hundred years—not an infallible recipe for Christian charity.

But all minor differences were focused about two greater ones represented by Deacon Wilberforce, a big mill owner, and Deacon Cargrave, who was president of the First National Bank of Old Lyme. They were haughtily prosperous gentlemen who kept up with the tradition of rivalry between the two families—not in ways obvious or crude, but by invariably taking opposite sides on any subject that might be presented. Half the congregation would then draw off to one, half to the other leader, and endless discussions would ensue that sometimes led to people not speaking.

Kate thought it was very dreadful, but, as the pastor's wife, she schooled herself to the inevitable negations. Certain people were a comfort to her, and chief among them was the spirited, pretty, motherless Elise Wilberforce, whose eyes Kate had often seen directed toward West Cargrave, Deacon

Cargrave's son, not long out of the medical school, who had begun to practice in Old Lyme.

Kate had asked herself more than once if these two were falling in love, and if they did, what would happen! The serious, bitter, heart-burning quarrel over the plans for the new church had literally brought everything to a standstill. People wouldn't come to the guilds because they might meet members of the opposite faction; they wouldn't pay their pew rents because some of the money might support the wrong kind of architecture. Even the usual Christmas Eve festival had been abandoned because people were too sulky to take interest. Something must be done! Christmas was only seven days off.

"Why, Kate, you're crying!" Her husband's voice broke in upon her thoughts.

She looked at him through the big tears that had come welling to her eyes and tried to smile. "Joe, we've got to do something about this church quarrel."

"I've tried everything," he replied with quiet discouragement. "I've called on everybody in the congregation and personally appealed to their sense of charity, of right—of humor; but it's no good."

She gazed at him a minute, lost in thought. "Yes, but you've gone to the heads of families, the old ladies, all the people who have stopped growing, all the labeled, settled sorts. You haven't tried—" She paused, and he waited. "There's only one hope," she began again abruptly. "Is there anybody in love in the congregation? I mean really, deeply in love—the big thing that's bound to go on, and clear a way for itself, and find a hearth—and find the stars maybe?"

He smiled wistfully. "I know! It is a God-time, isn't it? That first real thing."

"Oh, yes! Sometimes people get nearer the kingdom of heaven than ever in their lives! And that's the great chance to reach them. They've no prejudices then, no resentments, no frozen opinions. You can't have these things when you are warm and happy right down to your toes; when all the universe has burst on you through just one girl—or one good man. Joe, who is in love in your congregation?"

A twinkle came into his eyes. "Edgar has just asked me the same thing."

"The monkey! Of what possible interest is that to him?"

"The wedding fee, of course. He gets it next, and he's crazy for somebody to be married before Christmas. He's sore, of course, about this Christmas, and it's hard to make a boy see the fun of giving rather than receiving. Something has to happen inside of him, and it hasn't happened to Edgar yet."

"I think I know someone in whom it has happened—and that's Elise Wilberforce!"

He nodded. "Yes, I've noticed her in church. She feels, she thinks, as the others are not feeling and thinking—and I've imagined that there's someone else."

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Kate laughed. "Of course there's someone else! You don't begin to feel and think in a certain way until there's someone else. Do you suspect who it is?"

"I know! It's West Cargrave—and he has thoughts and feelings too. My dear, I know the look! When I see it in their faces, I feel I must step down from the pulpit and put them there to tell their message!"

"Let's begin with Elise and West then!"



“How? In what way?” he questioned.

“They are in love. They’ll work together—oh, gladly! We’ll get up a Christmas festival all by ourselves.”

“But will people come?” he asked doubtfully.

“Will cold people warm their hands at a fire? Oh, don’t you see? Any official thing now would be like ice—just a cold failure. We’ve got to have something that’s unofficial and new and warm.”

“But how?” he questioned. Kate’s idealism made her inspiring and wonderful to live with, but he knew the congregation of Old First better than she did. If she conducted what they would call a fantastic affair, matters might be made worse instead of being improved.

“I am going to have everything new,” she said. “Even the congregation!”

He looked alarmed. “You’ll be prudent, Kate dear!”

“The three kings weren’t prudent when they risked a long journey to a strange land because of an unidentified star. Now I’m going to make the beds and ‘settle the day,’ as cook and I call it; then at eleven, if you want to walk partway with me to the Wilberforces, I’ll be glad.”

Her eyes were shining like stars as they went out together and crossed the frozen garden of the parsonage which ran up to the churchyard, where the brick church with its high white spire looked old and solemn under the gray sky that promised snow. Kate and Joseph paused a moment to gaze up at it.

“What a thousand pities to tear it down anyway!” she said. “A place where people have prayed for a hundred years has something precious in its keeping.”

“I was against it from the first,” he replied with a touch of bitterness. “And that’s why Wilberforce and Cargrave are

almost as much out with me as with each other.”

“Never mind. There are no accidents in this world; maybe we’ll be in green pastures soon,” she added gaily, and parted from him at the high, impressive gate of the old Wilberforce place.

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The manservant conducted her into the drawing room, a stately, impressive, paneled room hung with portraits of dead-and-gone Wilberforces.

“Dear Mrs. Bentley, I am so glad you’ve come!” The girl who had entered the room was of the kind of beauty likely to turn reason into rapture should the understanding man appear. Kate had often wondered out of what lost Arcadia of prehistoric Wilberforces she had arrived in Old Lyme. She was not her father’s daughter in mind or person.

“I’ve come because it’s only seven days until Christmas,” Kate said.

The girl flashed a keen glance at her. “It doesn’t seem like Christmas, does it?”

“No! But couldn’t we help it a bit? Couldn’t we go on making Christmas just by ourselves?”

Elise sighed. Suddenly she took both Kate Bentley’s hands in hers. “This is the first Christmas since I was little that I’ve wanted—well, just to let myself go and get it all back again, the wonder and the expectation and all the big happiness over little gifts; and it’s just—” she paused, a quiver in her voice—“it’s just the one Christmas when everything seems shut off. Father’s blue, and there will be no festival; no mingling of the congregation—” A bright flush overspread her face.

“But I’ve come to tell you that we *are* going to have a festival; and we will ask the New Lyme people and have a tree for them on Christmas Eve.”

Elise looked mystified. “The mill people!”

“The mill people. If our own congregation wants to come, it can; but we’ll have the tree and the carols, and we’ll ask the New Lyme people to help us decorate the church; and maybe some of the young men in the congregation who don’t care a rap whether the next church is Byzantine or Gothic—maybe they’ll help.”

She looked away from Elise as she spoke and, when she turned to her again, the girl was as pink as a rose and her hands were clasped.

“I—I think,” she murmured, “that Doctor Cargrave might help. He doesn’t—share his father’s views, and I know he’d let us have his car to go up the hills for greens; and then with my runabout for the little errands, we’d manage, oh, beautifully!”

“Let’s go about it then!” Kate said with the first enthusiasm she had felt in months. “We’ve only seven days; but a whole new world can be made in seven days!”

Part II

Edgar was strolling home from school, an unusual form of locomotion, for as a rule when he was on his feet at all he was running. But today matters were on his mind important enough to hold him to a meditative walk. Only seven days until Christmas, and not a soul in Old Lyme who showed any intention of getting married! It was tragic! What was the matter with this town, that nobody wanted to be married! Edgar kicked a bit of ice along the frozen pavement and then picked it up and shied it at Miss Leonard’s yellow cat, Rusty.

“Edgar!” said a reproving voice behind him—his sister Jean’s. She was with “a lot of girls,” and her cheeks were as red as her woolen cap. Edgar raised his hat sulkily and gave an imitation of Rusty’s prolonged mew, at which the girls tittered.

He dropped behind them for greater privacy, and as he was nearing the business part of the main street, a blowing bit of paper came to meet him, and he stooped and caught it, for it had writing on it. It proved to be the impressive note paper of the First National Bank, and the writing was poetry. The first word of the first line caught his eye, “Beloved.” That was hopeful. If anybody in Old Lyme was addressing anyone else as “Beloved,” an investigation should be started. He read on:

*Beloved, when the waiting hour is o’er,
Like the soft twilight of a gladder day,
What rapture will sweep toward us with the dawn,
And bear our souls away.*

*To lands aglow with fires of fervid souls,
Where every wind brings whispers of that Will
That moves the stars and bids the daisies bloom,
And bids the Heart be still.*

*To wait the consummation of its Hope,
As he who kneels before an empty shrine,
Until the candles flame and through sweet air
Trembles the voice divine.*

“U-m-m,” commented Edgar, “that’s worse than algebra.” But, if enigmatic, it was hopeful. There was no doubt that

this writer liked the person whom he wanted to find when the dawn came and it was light enough. The shrine business was a trifle puzzling, but Edgar, after some cogitation, decided that on the whole it was a love poem! If it was a love poem it must involve two persons, the one who wrote it and the one to whom it was written, the “Beloveder” and the “Beloved.” Who was the “Beloveder”?

Somebody in the bank, no doubt! Edgar’s heart fell. He couldn’t urge upon anyone there the advantages of being married, because they all were married—and, in Edgar’s opinion, looked it. There was the man who had an expression as if he could bite nails; and the little worried cashier, and the great deacon himself, who was a widower, to be sure; but he never could have written about rapture. No! It couldn’t be Deacon Cargrave! Suddenly, Edgar remembered that the deacon had a son, West. He was a doctor, but no doubt he sometimes went to the bank and sat there waiting for his father in the directors’ room.

Light was beginning to dawn on the situation. It was quite easy to think of West writing those verses. He was tall and handsome, “and he doesn’t seem finished yet,” Edgar reflected. All the older people in Old Lyme looked “finished,” as if they would never have fun anymore in this world. But West Cargrave had the air of expecting to have a lot of enjoyment.

It would do no harm to see him, and ask him in a polite, general way his views on life and if he believed in people getting married; and if they wanted to be married, did he not think that the sooner the better was a good rule?

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It was lucky that the doctor was in; and lucky, too, that nobody was in the little waiting room. Old Lyme was dreadfully healthy; and Edgar, as he looked about him, wondered if West was pleased when people sneezed in church.

“Hello, Edgar, what can I do for you?” In Doctor Cargrave swung with that fine, free air of his; and his clear blue eyes had a twinkle in them as he regarded the minister’s son.

Edgar felt suddenly embarrassed. After handshakings were over and they had both remarked that it was a cold day, Edgar was seized with a fit of very mechanical coughing.

“Lemon drops are good for that!” said the doctor, producing some.

Edgar accepted the offering and wiggled a little in his chair. “Looks like snow! And it’s only seven days till Christmas! It’d be fun to have snow on Christmas.”

“It would be fun to have some other things on Christmas,” said the doctor, and he sighed.

Edgar pondered over this. Was the doctor’s heart desirous of a new scarf pin or an electric runabout—or that dawn he wrote about? The more Edgar looked at him, the more he was sure that the doctor had written the poem. The time was ripe to confront him with it.

“Doctor Cargrave,” he said, “what’s the Latin botanical name for potatoes? I want to ask for ’em in Latin at dinner and make Henry stare.” Cargrave laughed. He took down a little writing pad and, having inscribed something on it, passed it to Edgar, who scrutinized the handwriting and then chuckled. “I was *pretty* sure it was you. Here it is! I found it in the street.”

He pulled out the verses. The doctor grew red as fire and thus pleasingly completed the circumstantial evidence. “Well, I’ll be—jiggered!” he exclaimed. “I suppose the paper blew



off my desk when the window was open. Thanks for bringing back the treasure! How did you know it belonged to me?"

Edgar grew red in his turn. "I—I didn't know, but—but the rest are married!"

"The rest!" The doctor threw back his head and laughed. "Oh, Edgar! And you thought those old fellows at the bank didn't qualify!"

Edgar shook his head. "You don't—object to marriage?"

he said boldly. Christmas was only a week off! There was no time to lose!

"Object!" The doctor had become very grave, and into his eyes came a look that made Edgar feel uncomfortable, as if somehow he had hurt him. "No, it's not that!" he said quietly. "You'll know when you grow older that you wait a long time for the best things—"

Edgar sighed. "There's always a year between Christmases."

“And there are some Christmas presents one has to wait more than a year for.”

“It’s hard luck,” said Edgar.

“Hard luck becomes good luck some day—if you are a good sport!” the doctor commented, and then the look came again into his eyes, as if he saw somebody in the room who really wasn’t there.

Then in the ensuing silence a door opened. On the threshold stood Edgar’s mother, and back of her was Elise Willberforce, her face like a Christmas rose above her dark furs. Doctor Cargrave turned very white; then a great gladness seemed to envelop him, as if he had stepped into a patch of brilliant sunshine; but he looked at Mrs. Bentley as he said, “Edgar and I have been talking about Christmas—and the things one has to wait for.”

He turned to Elise then; and her eyes for a moment answered the light in his. “We’ve come to talk about Christmas too,” she said. “A Christmas for New Lyme—and Old Lyme, a Christmas for everybody! And we’ll have to work very hard, because we have only seven days; and—and we want your help!”

“You can have me—for anything! For anything!” the doctor exclaimed. He was looking straight at Elise and she at him, as a girl does who is not sure that some deeper, sweeter meaning underlies the plain sense of uttered words, but wishes it were so.

Kate Bentley put an arm about her eldest son. “Suppose we all walk over to the parsonage, and then, while I am attending to the children, Elise can tell you all about it, and just what our plans are.”

When they reached the parsonage, Kate showed the two

young people into the study and then went off to the dining room to the waiting hungry children.

“Where’s Edgar?” Jean asked. “He left school long ago, for I saw him in the street.”

“We came home together,” her mother answered with a little smile. “Here he is now!”

But it was the Reverend Joseph Bentley himself. He looked puzzled. “My dear,” he said, “will you tell me why I am not to go into my own study? Edgar met me as I came in and told me I was on no account to go into my own study!”

Kate Bentley’s eyes grew bright as a girl’s. She came up to her husband and put her hands on his shoulders. “I’ve started Christmas,” she said in a low, earnest voice, “or rather those children of your deacons are planning a real Christmas by your study fire. New Lyme’s coming to Old Lyme, and the Old First is going to have its festival—and Elise and West—” But here she stopped and put her head down a moment on her husband’s shoulder.

Part III

New Lyme took kindly to the idea. How could anybody resist an invitation delivered by a young girl who looked as if she were walking on air, and by a young doctor, already beloved by the poor, who seemed to be treading with her the same ethereal floors; and last but not least, by the gentle parson’s wife of the great cold Old First over in Old Lyme. Kate asked everyone to help; the things she couldn’t say to the rich and finished congregation came bubbling from her heart after weeks of repression as she talked to the mill workers and their wives. The affair began really to turn into a seven days’ picnic; for the doctor got a huge motor van and took a number of

the older children up into the hills to gather greens.

For Elise the days passed only too quickly. Her father was away on a business trip, and she rather dreaded his return and the questions he would ask. Yet she was determined to be brave, to tell him that four people wanted a Christmas, a real Christmas—and those four were Mr. and Mrs. Bentley and herself and—and Dr. West Cargrave. They wanted a real Christmas so much that they'd asked all New Lyme to have it with them. But they wanted Old Lyme too—if Old Lyme would become like the children, and just be happy and glad!

Old Lyme had got wind of the affair, and the telephone at the Wilberforce house rang incessantly. "Who's getting this up?" "Aren't we to be asked to our own church?" "Does the minister know?" "Does he dare do it without the deacons?" These were among the most frequent questions. Elise replied with a cordial invitation to all to come and see for themselves.

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Christmas fell on Friday. On Wednesday afternoon the great tree was in its place at the front of the church. Doctor Cargrave, mounted on a tall ladder, was filling the upper boughs with all kinds of glittering tinsel things, while Elise was teaching the children the easiest Christmas hymns she knew. Edgar was prominent among them, as he had been prominent every day in everything that was done. Elise had to acknowledge that he made himself very useful, but she wondered why he followed Doctor Cargrave so closely and why he watched her with such apparent interest.

The afternoon wore on. The tree was complete in its decorations; and the children as near perfect in their hymns as

time allowed. Kate and Joseph Bentley left at last, corralling Edgar with difficulty, and the other children trooped after him. No one was left in the shadowy old church at last but the doctor and Elise. She had seated herself in one of the pews and closed her eyes a minute to try to picture how it would be when the tree was lighted and the church was full and the hymns were pealing forth—those blessed hymns of love and peace on earth. Love! Of course—it made the world over! Of course nobody could hold grudges long under its influence—not even New Lyme against Old Lyme, or the Gothics against the Byzantines.

"Elise!" She looked up, startled. West Cargrave was standing in the aisle, and something in his eyes brought her to her feet in mute, tremulous expectation. "Dear—dearest! Oh Elise, it's only two days till Christmas now—and our joy—"

His voice trembled, and he broke off abruptly. Her face shone white as a star. "Do you think," she whispered, "we could take it—just the joy that's ours?"

"They took it, didn't they—Joseph Bentley and Mrs. Bentley—the chance to be happy this Christmas in the Old First, in spite of my father and your father!"

"Oh, West! Our two fathers!"

"Never mind, dearest. I love you! I want you!"

He was drawing her to him, holding her in his arms as if not even the sacred place could be more sacred than the up-springing joy that was carrying both of them to undreamed-of heights. They clung to each other a moment, then solemnly drew apart.

Elise whispered, "Please leave me all alone in the church."

He saw in her eyes why she wanted to be alone and, raising her hand, he kissed it—and went away.

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A few minutes later she went softly down the aisle. A figure was advancing to meet her, and she saw that it was her father. He looked stern and angry and accusing.

"Elise! I'm just off the train—and the first thing I hear is that Bentley's lost his head and you with him. What's the meaning of this!"

"Why, Father, we're going to keep Christmas!"

"'We'—who's 'we'? Not Cargrave! If he thinks he can work his plan through by—"

"Oh, Daddy, no," she cried desperately. "The mill people! Your people! And if the congregation wants to come—"

"Come to their own church?" he interrupted.

"Of course! That's just what they haven't done!" she gave back.

He looked at her with unwilling admiration. How beautiful she was; she seemed transfigured by some strong emotion. Suspicions held by him for some months now loomed as actualities. "Elise," he said sternly, "they tell me that West Cargrave has been very busy in all this."

Her bright color answered him before her words. "Yes, he has helped all this week. Oh, Father, don't you see they can't say anything now—neither the Gothics nor the Byzantines, because you are Byzantine—and West's father's Gothic; and West and I—"

"Yes!" he interrupted coldly. "What of West and you?"

"We love each other," she replied quietly and dared to raise her eyes to meet his.

"It will never be!" he said emphatically and strode down the aisle.

Part IV

Christmas Eve! And such a Christmas Eve! The gray clouds had come down in snow. A sky of brilliant stars was revealed—stars climbing to the zenith, stars shaking light like spears and glowing like the jewels of a shrine.

New Lyme, breathing the frosty air, felt an unusual exhilaration, heightened by the chimes of the Old First, which never before had rung for a mill congregation.

When New Lyme reached the churchyard, a broad swath of hospitable light stretching to the gate forbade timidity. The timid people were, indeed, the Old Firsters. Many of them were loitering curiously about—with an air of indecision, as if they had not quite made up their minds to accept this unofficial festival. The Reverend Joseph Bentley, arriving with his wife, spoke heartily to this contingent. He mentioned the fact that after the festival there was to be a fine supper in the basement, of coffee, sandwiches, and cake; and he hoped that Old Lyme would pass the cake, because New Lyme would be sure to be hungry.

The church began to fill up. At last it was crowded to the doors. Elise had marshaled the mill people and their children to the front pews—the awe-inspiring front pews that had been held by the same families for generations. Old First, or that portion of it whose curiosity had conquered its resentment, gazed at this astounding spectacle in speechless apprehension. What if New Lyme found the service and the church so pleasant that it would like to come again? What would become of the regular congregation? What would become of all the pleasant dignities and exclusions of bygone years?

The service began. The Reverend Joseph Bentley made a prayer; then the carols were sung. At last the pastor arose to

address his novel congregation. By this time two figures had entered the church, Deacon Wilberforce and Deacon Cargrave.

Their glances met, and each saw written in the other's face disapproval of the occasion, of the minister's temerity, of the shocking breach of old traditions—and unconsciously the same thought possessed them both: *It's time for Gothics and Byzantines to get together, if only to save the Old First from such radical departures.*

When the minister began to speak, a hush fell over the congregation. The Reverend Joseph Bentley was not as a rule an eloquent speaker, but the spirit of this occasion moved him to unwonted fervor.

In simple words of deep appeal and reverence he spoke of the manger, of the stable that sheltered Mary and Joseph, of the star-heralded Child; of those that sought Him. "Shepherds and kings were called to worship Him, but He was revealed first to the simple people, afterward to the wise men."

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Deacon Wilberforce looked toward his daughter, where she sat close to the glowing tree. She was very pale; she had been pale all day, and quiet. Would she be white and still through the days to come? He did not like to think of it.

"Deacon."

He looked down. It was Edgar of the friendly gray eyes and turned-up, freckled nose. Deacon Wilberforce had never had a son of his own; beneath his grim exterior was a lurking fondness for all small boys.

"What is it, Edgar?" he said with unwonted gentleness.

Edgar regained an ebbing courage. "Mother's made some of the chocolate raisin cake you like so much," he whispered. "You'll stay and have some?"

The deacon's lips twitched with an irrepressible smile. He glanced across the aisle at Cargrave, whose eyes were fixed upon the minister with a curious, baffled expression, as if he resented what was being said, yet was coming in spite of himself under the spell of the message. Deacon Wilberforce hesitated. Old scenes and happier memories rose before him. He thought of the days when he and Cargrave had gone fishing together as barefooted, happy boys; of their studying Latin together in the old academy before the ugly, petty rivalries of later years had ever existed. And now Cargrave's son was in love with Elise! The deacon's mind went back to his own courting days; and the old-time basement suppers with the cheering coffee and the pleasant bustle. Those were happier years. Standing up for a certain kind of architecture was a lonesome business.

Edgar, his courage rising as he studied the deacon's face, suddenly grabbed his hand, feeling very much as if he had hold of a lion's tail. But the grim deacon was Elise's father, and Edgar was sure now that it was Elise who was the "Beloved," as the doctor was the "Beloveder." Impulsively, he said in a stage whisper, "The icing is an inch thick."

This time Deacon Wilberforce didn't try to hide his smile. For a moment he stood irresolute, then suddenly he stepped across the aisle, holding out his hand. "Cargrave," he said, "what do you say to holding on to the Old First a while just as it is?"

Deacon Cargrave gasped, frowned, then broke into a broad smile and began shaking Deacon Wilberforce's hand as if he would never let it go. "The Old First is better than

Gothic or Byzantine either,” he said heartily. “You can’t beat the lines of this old building.”

Then Deacon Wilberforce yielded to impulse for the first time perhaps in years. “Let’s tell Joseph Bentley,” he said, “and let him announce it. I guess everybody’s sick of the plans for a new church anyway.”

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Elise, absorbed in her thoughts, was suddenly conscious of a rustle and stir in the congregation. She looked around and gasped, for, walking up the aisle, shoulder to shoulder, were her father and West’s father. They appeared grim and solemn, but resolute.

The Reverend Joseph Bentley advanced to meet them; then came the announcement—the announcement about which Old Lyme talked for weeks. “And I propose,” the minister ended, “that the money we would have used for a new church we employ now to endow the pews, so we can make them free forever to Old Lyme, to New Lyme, and to any passing stranger!”

He sat down, amidst a rustle and stir like the passing of a great wind, and babble of children’s voices, and reverent, because happy, laughter—the soft laughter of relieved hearts. Suddenly, everybody had discovered that nobody wanted the Old First pulled down.

West looked at Elise. In her face was not only the joy of Christmas but the light of a new, fresh hope and expectation. As she began to distribute the candy and oranges, West, coming up to help her, whispered, “Dearest, they are actually shaking hands with the New Lyme people—your father and mine.”

“Oh, West!” she whispered. “We must be happy no matter how long we have to wait!”

Kate Bentley came up to them, her cheeks glowing. She was happier than she had been since her husband was called to the Old First. “They are staying to supper,” she said exultantly. “Your respective fathers! Oh, what a wonderful Christmas Eve this is!”

Elise’s eyes gave back joy for joy. As she went on with the distribution of presents her thoughts rose above her own personal problem. One couldn’t be unhappy with all this joy about one—no, not if one were lonely forever. Christmas had made it impossible for people ever to be really lonely again in this world.

The last package of candy and the last orange had been given out when West came up with a folded bit of paper. “For you,” he whispered, “from your father.”

She opened it—and read:

* * * * *

“My Christmas present will be my blessing on your marriage in the Old First. Only I want you and West to live with your

DAD.”

* * * * *

Edgar came down to breakfast next morning in a subdued but not unhappy frame of mind. Nobody had been married, but he had had fun—and Father and Mother had been so happy that one couldn’t possibly be gloomy about that wedding fee.



The other children were already deep in their presents, but when Edgar came in, everybody paused and looked with meaning at an envelope that lay prominently upon his little pile of gifts. On it was written in a bold hand: "For Edgar."

"That is from Dr. West Cargrave, Edgar," his mother said. "He gave it to me for you just as we were all leaving."

Edgar sniffed at the envelope, turned it over and around; then opened it amidst a breathless silence and drew out a crisp ten-dollar bill.

"Oh, dear! They got married after all!"

"No, dear," his mother said gently with something shining in her eyes, "though they will be married soon. Doctor Cargrave said you had been such a help to him, and he wanted you to get a Christmas present from him with this money—something you wished for very much."

Edgar was speechless with joy. He glanced at his father; no halves to the heathen this time! A magnificent cataract of skates, sleds, and guns tumbled before his vision. He could have them all!

At that moment he glanced across the table. Jean was busy with her own presents, but the eyes of his two little brothers, round as saucers, were fixed hungrily upon him. He knew just what they were thinking. He couldn't dash that cup of joy from their lips, and, after all, it was no fun to skate alone. Then there was that nice mill boy from New Lyme with whom he had had a cake-eating competition the night before and who had confessed then he had no skates!

Edgar sighed. The heathen were all around him—at his own breakfast table! There was no escape! On the other hand, there was no fun in being happy alone! That wasn't Christmas!

"Mommy," he said desperately, "how many pairs of skates *can* you get for ten dollars?"*

Anna McClure Sholl was born in Philadelphia. She wrote for popular publications early in the twentieth century.

* In terms of today's purchasing power: about twenty times that.