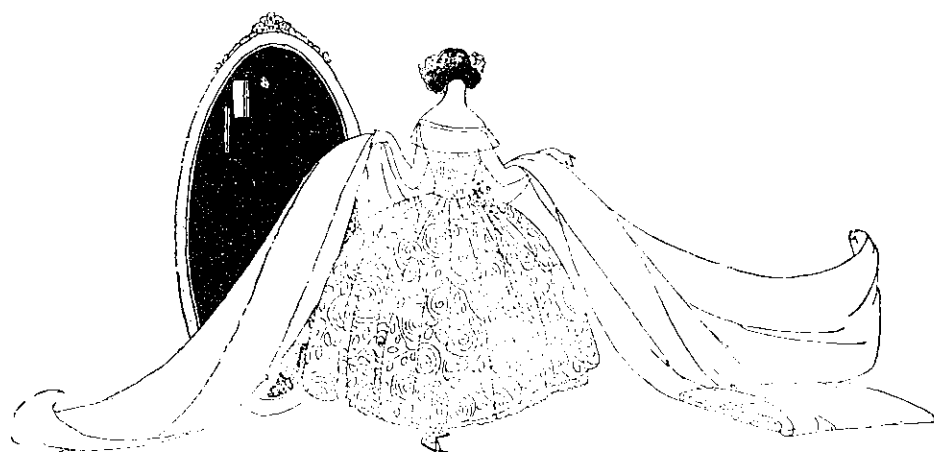


A Christmas Story
by a New Zealand Writer



MR. AND MRS. SMITH

by
DEARMER McCORMAC

Mr. Smith, who had great experience with many varied spirits, suddenly developed the Christmas Spirit and received an expected Christmas Present

A very human Story

CHRISTMAS EVE!

Above, a warm, cloudy sky in which the red embers of the sunset had as yet barely begun to fade. Below, the joyous holiday city, shimmering, on tiptoe with excitement and anticipation, hastily washing up its tea dishes, blacking its children's shoes, shaking out their money boxes, running lightly down steps through the ruddy dusk, flinging back merry words over its shoulders, to join friends in waiting, throbbing motors, or shepherding its families out with a locking of doors and banging of gates, to catch the early trams. In another hour—in another half-hour, it would be in full swing—the happy surging and spending and good-natured jostling, the hooting and clanging of slow-moving traffic, the thin piping and wailing everywhere of toy whistles and trumpets and balloons.

Mr. Smith had just arrived in town for Christmas by the evening train. Mr. Smith had in his pocket a very satisfactory cheque, as yet quite untouched, and Mr. Smith was unhappy. Or, to express it more exactly, Mr. Smith was not happy.

For this reason Mr. Smith was in no very amiable mood with himself. It would have been too absurd and ridiculous and impossible—these are not, of course, the words Mr. Smith would have used—to have supposed that he had been so much disappointed by the non-appearance of Jack and Bill Simms, whom he had understood had been going to meet and help him “make a night of it,” as to have his evening entirely spoilt. And yet, there could be only one other reason, which was even more absurd and ridiculous and impossible—with additions and flourishes.

The conscience of a gentleman who almost habitually ill-treats his wife, and occasionally deserts her for indefinite

periods, is not as a rule remarkable for any great tenderness and delicacy, and can surely be reasonably expected to have safely survived a knocking-down and desertion which has occurred nearly a year ago.

So that the fact of Mr. Smith's not being happy was very extraordinary and most uncomfortable, especially now that he was in the midst of the delights of town once more. He had been so hopeful of getting rid of the feeling once he got into town, away from the trees and their “confounded noise all night long”—only Mr. Smith had not said “confounded.”

But here he was, sixty miles away from the bush and its trees, and with the feeling as strong as ever. Here he was indeed, coming out of his third hotel less than five minutes after he had entered it. He had even had to win—or lose—a battle before he could go in. He had stopped himself suddenly, and demanded of himself ferociously, “Well, what's the matter with you. You're going in to have a drink, aren't you? Any harm in that, eh? Any harm?”

AND something had replied in a voice so small and still that he could not catch the words, or else had realised the uselessness of answering and remained sadly silent, so infuriating him that he had lunged forward shoving open the door with his shoulder and pushing his way in.

But here he was now, standing at the top of the steps, coming down, “mooching” up Queen Street. The embers in the sky had faded to ashes, dull grey ashes blown about by a little warm gusty wind. . . . It was strange how the ashes blew about!

Mr. Smith lowered his eyes—a little, but only a very little—inflamed by his

three whiskies, from the sky to the street, only to have them dazzled and bewildered by the lights, and the shop windows, and the coming and going of glaring headlights, and the winking and disappearing and flashing again of electric signs. And the noise! A sustained, endless roar, with little sharp, happy noises popping and jerking up and down on every hand.

AND you were supposed to keep to the left, were you? Mr. Smith learned this interesting fact from an overloaded and purple and indignant elderly gentleman; learned it in silence, sullen, but still, silence, which was rather remarkable, because Mr. Smith had a very ready tongue—and fist, too, when he was drunk. Only, of course, Mr. Smith was not drunk just now.

He wished, savagely, that he was, and slouched over to the edge of the pavement to debate with himself what should he do? Go and have another drink, and then go up to Ponsonby to Bill's old address to try and find out what had become of him, or take a walk along the town in the hope of meeting him or Jack?

Mr. Smith could not decide. He turned, with mental profanity, and in doing so knocked a child flying. Only a skinny little half-caste, who was instantly retrieved and volubly scolded by a gigantic tattooed mother. But with eyes? Great, scared, soft eyes that had gleamed up at him a second from the pavement. . .

Mr. Smith found himself planted, five minutes later, like an island in the flowing river of Christmas shoppers in front of a window displaying cow covers and porch swings and rug straps, which might have been watches, or hats, or trains.

Curious, how that Maori kid's eyes