Tale of Christmas

His Day of Days

By Edgar White

(COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE)

CHAPTER I.
ONCE IN ALL HIS LIFE.

"BUT, think of it, Sam—here's a chance to do something worth while. We need an organizer—a man who knows the game of transportation and supplies. That's your business—you're the one person in a thousand. And your country needs you!"

The tall, dark-faced man who sat in the swivel chair at a flat-top desk in the private office of the Golden Era Investment Company shrugged his shoulders. "I'm not a slacker, colonel, but honestly, I can't leave now. If money——"

The other made an impatient gesture. "To—Hannibal with your money, Sam! It's you we want!"

"Well, I'll think it over; but mind you, colonel, I'm not promising anything. There's a little matter I——"

"Your country is a big matter, Sam," reminded the officer significantly.

The other laughed. "To be sure," he admitted, with provoking good humor.

Sam Hardeman, who at forty was the owner of more money than he knew what to do with by reason of sagacious investments in oil lands, railroad stocks, and steel securities, the organizer of a dozen big enterprises that were coining money, had just been invited by his friend, Colonel Daniel McPhearson, to join an engineering and military party that was going overseas about the first of the year.

Two months back Hardeman would have battered down a stone wall to get this splendid chance to do his bit, but now—well, it all happened through a little four-page weekly newspaper that had fluttered into his office some three weeks ago. It was by the merest chance that he broke the scrawled wrapper, and saw the Fern Valley *Star.* Fern Valley was his "starting place," the immediate movement being caused by Mary Conway, a blue-eyed girl with a smile that turned the world to sunshine, and then into gloom for the big captain of industry.

Sam Hardeman didn't amount to much when he clerked at Bill Robinson's "New York Store" at Fern Valley, but when Jerome Masterson cut him out with Mary, Sam went West to become a hermit in Oklahoma. He took up some land, and his ambition would have worked out all right if some "Meddlesome Mattie" hadn't come into the section

and began boring for oil. Worse still, he found it, and Sam's hermitage was right in the heart of the big strike. Sam gave up being a hermit and went into the oil game. Because he didn't care a darn whether he won or lost, he won, and in a few years had become disgracefully rich.

Then he traveled about over the Western country, picking up a tottery railroad here and there and putting it on its feet, bought up some run-down-at-the-heels auto factories and made them producers, and then broke into the ammunition business and organized his Golden Era Investment Company in the metropolis. He hadn't been to Fern Valley since the light of Mary's smile went out for him, and when the *Star* came he looked through it with curious interest.

When he noted that the citizens had met and decided to turn the usual Christmas fund for the big tree over to the Red Cross, Sam ordered his cashier to send them a check for one thousand dollars so the kids might not be deprived of their annual celebration. Some unknown person sent him the subsequent issue of the Fern Valley *Star,* in which there was a short notice about the receipt of a check from the Golden Era Investment Company for one thousand dollars, and that if it didn't turn out to be a practical joke it would be added to the Red Cross fund, the city rulers having decided that the children wouldn't object to missing their Christmas blow-out for once.

When Sam read that he forgot his early aspirations to be a hermit, and said things that made his stenographer go into the room where the mirror was to see if her hair was on straight.

But a few inches farther down the column was news that made him forget all about the high-handed action of the citizens of Fern Valley. Under the heart of "Court Items" was the record of a divorce suit filed by Mary Conway Masterson versus Jerome Masterson, the allegation being general indignities and nonsupport.

Now, Sam had a sort of hunch that when Mary took Jerome for better or worse she was getting a gold brick and passing up a "diamond in the rough," but it wasn't his way to butt in on a thing of that kind, even though he was vitally interested, and he let the ceremony go on without hanging out any danger signals.

However, when Sam read the little piece in the *Star,* he wrote Mary a nice note, tendering any assistance she might need, and Mary had replied promptly and gratefully. She said there were two "sweet children," a girl of ten and a boy of six, and that the boy had been named Sam.

She diplomatically dodged the offer of assistance, but expressed so earnestly the wish that Sam could see her pretty children that the reformed hermit spent a valuable half day thinking over Fern Valley and the people he used to know there before he hit the idea. And about the time the idea developed Colonel McPhearson had come along with his fascinating offer of a chance to die for his country.

Sam did not feel a bit like dying just then. You see, he had never had time to be in love but once in all his life, and he really did not know there was any other girl beside Mary Conway. Of course, she was a woman now, possibly about thirty, but to Sam Hardeman she would never be anything but a dainty little star-eyed maiden, with the fragrance of honeysuckle about her, smiling dimples, and a rosebud mouth fashioned for the angels to kiss.

CHAPTER II.

THE SANTA CLAUS COMPANY.

WHEN Sam Hardeman got off the night train at Fern Valley, in the midst of a pretty lively snowstorm, there had been so few changes since he had lived there that he could have found his way about, even without the weird glow from the oil lamps on the square. He put up at the Marlborough Hotel, was warmly greeted by old Landlord Winkler, whom the boys used to call "Rip Van Winkle," and went to bed. In the morning he asked Winkler to call Bill Robinson, proprietor of the New York Store, where Sam once earned his bread.

Winkler brought back the information that "Uncle Bill" already had more goods on hand than he could sell, and that if any blankety-blank salesman wanted to see him he'd have to come to the store; that he wouldn't trudge through the storm to see a salesman who was big enough fool to go abroad in such weather.

Sam grabbed the telephone receiver. "Hello, Bill!" he said. "How's your Christmas stock?"

The answer was: " !——x——! ! !——?—z ! ! !"

"You don't get me, Uncle Bill—I don't want to sell. I want to buy!"

"Who the blankety-blank are you, mister?"

"Santa Claus."

"——x——! ! !——x x x ! ! !"

"Same old Bill," soothed Sam; "now come

over to Rip Van Winkle's joint and let's do business; my money's burning holes in my pocket."

The instrument clicked off spitefully at the other end, and Bill Robinson walked up and down his store saying unkind words, but finally curiosity got the better of him and he put on his greatcoat and navigated the snowdrifts over to the hotel. The landlord was standing by his little counter.

"Where's the maniac who's been tel——"

"Same old Bill! Just like red pepper," and Hardeman entered from the sample room with two extended hands.

"Bless my soul!" exclaimed Robinson. "Is this Sam, that freckled-faced young——"

"Red-head imp," Sam put in. "You bet it is, Uncle Bill! Now, come up to my 'parlor' and let's talk business. Time's short, and I've got a good deal to do to-day."

In the large room assigned to Hardeman, the two men rapidly came to an agreement—a surprisingly generous one for Robinson, who, because of the decree of the patriotic citizens to give the children no presents, had found himself with a carload of dolls and toys on hand, and no prospects of selling them. He fixed a lump sum for his stock, and Sam handed him a check for it. Then Robinson agreed to make connections with a reliable man to assist in the distribution, according to Sam's plan. Thus was the "Santa Claus Company, Limited," made a going concern.

The deal finished, the two men sat silently by the log fire, Robinson smoking and Sam with an unlighted cigar in his mouth.

"Have you heard about the divorce suit?" asked Robinson.

Sam nodded.

"The fellow's no good," Robinson went on; "hasn't earned his salt for years; spends his time playing cards and shooting craps over Pete Comisky's place. She lives in a little three-room house out on the end of Main Street; sews and takes in washing, I believe; neighbors wanted to help her, but she wouldn't let 'em do anything. Proud girl, is Mary."

The question Hardeman feared to ask was answered by Robinson: "Of course she looks all tuckered out with the work and worry of it, but if she could get a little rest and happiness would come back to her, she'd still be the best-looking girl in this town. Be you married, Sam?" he added suddenly.

"No, sir. You know——"

"Yes, she was a fine girl, but I could never understand how she took up with that fellow," Robinson went on in his garrulous way. "Anybody could have told her there was nothing to him, and I guess she knows that herself, now."

"Girls have queer notions about men sometimes," mused the millionaire. "They call it love, and perhaps it is."

"Love fiddlesticks! How can a girl love a man who sinks so low you wouldn't tolerate him among respectable people? Tell me that."

To this Hardeman made no reply, and, as if a sudden idea occurred, Robinson said: "But she's applied for a divorce. That shows she has some sense. Sam, why couldn't you——"

Hardeman held out his hand deprecatingly. "Be careful, Uncle Bill," he remarked gently. "Whatever is done must be for her good, and the children's."

"To be sure."

Robinson took his leave, and went back to the store, where he and his clerks were busy all the balance of the day fixing bundles of toys and marking the names on them so Santa Claus would make no mistake in their delivery.

CHAPTER III.

WHERE HE BELONGED.

IN the middle of the afternoon, Sam plowed through the snow to the Masterson cottage. Although he had not written definitely that he would come, Mary seemed to be expecting him, and the pleasant smile and friendly hand she extended bridged the twelve years at a jump. Thinner in form, with lines of care about the eyes and mouth, coarsely dressed, yet she stood at the threshold of her little home, the one woman in all the world for Sam Hardeman.

Behind her stood a tall, slender girl with big, wondering eyes and a thoughtful face. This was Cecil, the ten-year-old. The boy, Sam, stood by his mother, holding to her dress. Big Sam went in and was given a seat in a rocking-chair by the hearth, where he sprawled out his long legs in content. Mary took his overcoat and hat and hung them on a nail in another room. There was no hallway in the little house. About the room were some fragments of evergreen, and a spray of holly was over the mantel—a pathetic reminder of Christmas, a Christmas when no Santa Claus was expected.

Sam and Mary talked about old times quite easily and naturally, avoiding the one subject.

Little Sammie quickly made friends with big Sam and climbed up in his lap, listening intently to tales of bears and deer and Indians that roamed the prairie in the days when big Sam was little Sam. The boy went to sleep with his head on his new friend's breast and his little arm about his neck.

It has been said that the children of the woman who has been loved and lost always are drawn to the man who lost. Certain it is that that afternoon Mary's little ones formed the conclusion that big, tanned Sam, the promoter of anything that could be promoted, the man who had made money until he was sick of the sight of it, was the most wonderful being in all the world. Perhaps it was because their mother looked at him so tenderly, or because, despite his big frame and rough face, he had a gentle, kindly voice, and knew how to tell things they loved to hear.

At dinner, Sam sat at the head of the table, with one of the children on each side of him. Mary sat at the other end, poured the coffee, and filled the plates. It was a modest meal, comprising only a few articles of the plainest and cheapest sort, but to the soul-hungry millionaire it was the greatest occasion of his life. It seemed as if he belonged there; that all his working and striving had been for that day. He was like a ship that had struggled through a long and tempestuous night, and had entered a beautiful harbor at dawn. And he thought of what his money could do for these who had fought the bitter fight so bravely and deserved so well.

After dinner, Sam insisted on going out to the shed and bringing in a "turn of wood," and Mary went along with the lantern, and, in stooping to pick up the sticks, their hands touched, and once they bumped together, and Mary laughed in her old, girlish way. Then Sam drew some water at the pump, which was outside, so Mary would have everything in the house ready for the morning. They returned to the parlor, where Sam resumed his big rocking-chair, and, with Mary's permission, he took a cigar and lighted it.

Presently little Sammie went out of the room and returned with a photograph, which he held up to Hardeman. Mary flushed. It was the photograph of Jerome Masterson, Mary's husband, taken at his best. Hardeman looked thoughtfully at it for several minutes and handed it to Mary, who took it with some embarrassment. Not a word was said, but Hardeman knew the boy had taken the picture from the bedroom, and that it probably had rested on the dresser or table there.

There were frequent pauses in the talk after that. At about ten o'clock, Sam got up to leave. Mary got his big coat and held it for him, as she had often done in the old days.

"Some one sent me a copy of the *Star,* and I noticed that instead of giving the children presents this year the money is to go to the Red Cross fund," said Sam wanly; "and I decided to come up and play Santa Claus—now don't give me away!"

Mary held out her hand. "It is like you, Sam," she whispered. "You were always good to others."

Hardeman went directly to his hotel, and to his room, despite the fact that the night clerk said he had an insistent call from Uncle Billy Robinson.

CHAPTER IV.

THE HELPING HAND.

FOR two hours the man who had come to his native village to play Santa Claus for the poor walked the floor, biting on an unlighted cigar. Then he put on his overcoat and went out into the snow-bound streets, crossed the square, and made his way to where a bright light flared out in the gloom—Pete Comisky's place. There were dark steps to one side, and up these steps Sam Hardeman resolutely proceeded. The clock on the courthouse tower struck twelve. The lookout opened a narrow slide.

"This is an old friend, Sam Hardeman," explained the caller. "Tell Jer Masterson I want to see him for a minute." He slipped a couple of silver dollars through the narrow slit. The lookout took the money.

"Here's the password to-night," whispered the sentinel, "'The gang's all here.' Please remember it in case anybody hops on me for letting you in. Go in this room here—I'll tell Jerry."

In a few minutes the gambler entered, a deep frown on his white, emaciated face. Hardeman stepped back, startled. He never had witnessed such a change in a man. Twelve years previous Jerome Masterson was tall, broad-shouldered, an athlete—fine looking.

The man before him was shrunken, glassy-eyed. Hardeman proceeded to business: "I'm Sam Hardeman—I want you to go home with me to-night—to your home."

The glassy eyes scintillated. "You Sam Hardeman—the Sam that used to live here?"

"Yes."

"Well, I declare! What you doing here?" Masterson asked, with sudden suspicion.

"Just run down to see my old friends again. But that's neither here nor there, Jerome. I want you to cut this place and go back to Mary to-night."

The gambler scowled and clenched his white hand. "Never! She's filed a suit for divorce against me."

"Well, perhaps she had reason to. Now go get your hat and coat and come on."

"I can't, Sam—she won't take me back."

"She will."

Hardeman spoke with such confidence that the gambler looked at him with sudden eagerness. "What makes you think so?" he asked.

"Your photograph is on the bureau in her home—it has always been there. I was out there this afternoon and saw it."

"God bless her!"

The man said it with such sincerity that Hardeman began to have a new respect for him, and next time he spoke more gently: "Get your things, Jer, and let's go home—it's late."

"I'm willing to go, Sam," said Masterson, "but look at me; haven't been shaved for three days; nerve all on edge, eyes red. I'm not fit to go where a woman and children are—not tonight, Sam. Please don't make me go to-night!"

Hardeman tried to be fair in all things. Looking into Masterson's bloodshot eyes and drawn face, he saw there was a picture that would never pass from the minds of his children. "Maybe you're right, Jerry," he said slowly, "but you ought to be able to pull yourself together to-morrow. Now, here's the program," speaking quicker. "I'm going to play Santa Claus to the town kids to-morrow night, driving around in a big sled with Tom Leathers, over at the livery stable. We'll start out about ten and get through before midnight; then I'll call for you at the hotel and we'll drive out to see Mary and the kids—understand?"

"Yes, Sam, I'll do it."

"Cut this game quick as you can and come over to the hotel—I'll be up waiting for you."

An hour later, Jerome Masterson quit the game at Pete Comisky's. He was an inveterate gambler, but not a successful one. At Pete's he was known as a "come-on." The fellows who won were in Pete's pay, and they used marked cards, loaded dice, and every trick to keep the play from being a game of chance. When Masterson got up from the table he was cleaned out. He went directly to Winkler's hotel, where he found Hardeman waiting.

"Do you think she'll take me back, Sam?" asked Masterson childishly.

"I'd stake my life on it," returned Hardeman earnestly, "but you want to get some sleep, then in the morning get a clean shave and some new duds. Here—take this—don't be afraid—it's just a loan—you can return it when you get back to work."

"All this, Sam?"

There were five one-hundred-dollar bills. "Yes, and more if you'll do right by those folks out home."

Hardeman was busy all the next day sorting and arranging the Christmas presents and checking up to see that no one was left out in the Christmas Eve distribution. At noon he dined with Masterson at the hotel. A clean shave and a new suit had helped the gambler's appearance some, but nothing could improve the pallor of his thin face and the uncanny look of the glassy eyes. Hardeman found him very tractable.

"You want to get a little more sleep, old man," said Sam, "and by night you'll be all right. We got two sled-loads of things for the kids. I got a horn two yards long to-day, and I'm going to toot it at every house where there're some small chaps. The idea of these old skinflints passing a resolution not to give the young uns any Christmas! They ought to be ducked in the pond!"

CHAPTER V.

A SUPREME MOMENT.

THAT Christmas Eve will ever be cited as a historical event in Fern Valley. Hitherto, Santa Claus has been more or less of a legend, and there were many empty stockings left drooping from the mantel after he had passed by. Not so this night. Uncle Billy and Tom Leathers had made a careful census of the town's little ones, and Sam Hardeman put every one on the night's schedule. At some places the children were up and waiting, and when they heard the horn and bells they came scampering out in the snow for their presents. Sam wore a Santa Claus regalia which Uncle Billy had dug up for him from last year's blow-out.

When every house brightened by the eyes of small chaps had been faithfully visited, the sled was driven back to the hotel. Masterson was in the office, nervously waiting. On a chair were some bundles—Christmas presents for his family. Hardeman's eyes lightened when he saw that. He had wondered whether the gambler would think of

his little ones on this occasion. In making the rounds, he had not stopped at Masterson's home, but now, with Masterson in, the sled was headed in that direction. As they approached the house, Masterson began to break. "What if she won't take me in, Sam—you know that——"

"Steady!"

Hardeman reached out and grasped the gambler's hand. "She's all right," he whispered. But in his heart he did not know, and he trembled at what might happen to this poor wreck of a man in case the one woman should hold back her hand in scorn. Even with good women there was an unpardonable crime, and the man beside him may have sinned beyond forgiveness.

The sled was stopped a little before it reached the cottage and Hardeman leaped out. Then he held his hand to Masterson. "Out with you, Jer!" he said cheerily.

"Aren't you coming, too?" pleaded Masterson.

"Sure! Here—take these things!" and he loaded the gambler with the presents. "Now, trot along—it's all right."

Hardeman led the way, still wearing his Santa Claus costume. He walked right up to the front door and knocked. Then he stepped aside in the shadow, leaving Masterson alone on the step.

Before the gambler could locate his companion the door was thrown open and a flash of light swept out across the snow. For a moment Mary stood wondering, and then: "Oh, Jerome!" she cried, holding out her arms.

"Mary!"

Masterson dropped his bundles, and, with arms entwined, they walked into the little front room. Hardeman hurried around to the side yard stood by a tree where he could look into the window. He wanted to be sure that he had made no mistake. He saw Mary take Masterson's hat and coat and hover about him as he sat by the fire; saw her arouse Cecil and little Sammie, who came running in their night-clothes to greet the prodigal; saw little Sammie climb up in his father's lap and throw his arm around his neck; then he saw Mary go to the door and get the presents, which she opened while the children danced for joy; then he saw Mary discover something for herself, and in delight run again to her husband and kiss and hug him; he saw Masterson reach into his pocket and hand Mary a lot of bills, and then he saw something so reverential and holy that he removed his hat and bowed his head.

Mary spoke a few eager words to her husband, and then, taking his hand, led him to the bed where the children had been sleeping, and there they knelt together, the husband and the wife, and Hardeman knew by a sort of second-sight that Heaven gives to humankind in supreme moments that they were invoking a blessing upon the head of the man out in the shadows.

Hardeman had seen enough. With a catch in his throat, he turned away. Before retiring to his room at the hotel that night, he went down to the railroad station and handed the operator this message to Colonel Daniel McPhearson:

"Have changed mind about going. Make reservation for me in steamer, and will join you on order. S. H."

CHRISTMAS IN THE NORTHLAND

By Jo Lemon

THE moon from out her dusky height,
A silver mantle flinging,
In folds the snow-clad hills of white
With luster soft and clinging.

While o'er the land for mile on mile
The spruce-tree legions marching,
In shining armor, rank and file,
Their glistening arms are arching.

The lacelike frost by unseen hands
Seems woven with a reason—
Each spruce a Christmas tree now stands,
A spirit of the season.

And there among the stars on high
Still shines the light adorning,
That led the shepherds, from the sky,
Upon a Christmas morning.