

DEAR

I WISH YOU
A MERRY
CHRISTMAS
& A HAPPY
NEW YEAR.
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The Burglar's

Christmas

WILLA CATHER



RENARD PRESS

TWO VERY SHABBY-LOOKING young men stood at the corner of Prairie Avenue and Eightieth Street, looking despondently at the carriages that whirled by. It was Christmas Eve, and the streets were full of vehicles — florists' wagons, grocers' carts and carriages. The streets were in that half-liquid, half-congealed condition peculiar to the streets of Chicago at that season of the year. The swift wheels that spun by sometimes threw the slush of mud and snow over the two young men who were talking on the corner.

'Well,' remarked the elder of the two, 'I guess we are at our rope's end, sure enough. How do you feel?'

'Pretty shaky. The wind's sharp tonight. If I had had anything to eat I mightn't mind it so much. There is simply no show. I'm sick of the whole business. Looks like there's nothing for it but the lake.'

'Oh, nonsense! I thought you had more grit. Got anything left you can hoc?'

'Nothing but my beard, and I am afraid they wouldn't find it worth a pawn ticket,' said the younger man ruefully, rubbing the week's growth of stubble on his face.

'Got any folks anywhere? Now's your time to strike 'em if you have.'

'Never mind if I have — they're out of the question.'

'Well, you'll be out of it before many hours if you don't make a move of some sort. A man's got to eat. See here, I am going down to Longtin's saloon. I used to play the banjo in there with a couple of coons, and I'll bone him for some of

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his free lunch stuff. You'd better come along – perhaps they'll fill an order for two.'

'How far down is it?'

'Well, it's clear down town, of course, way down on Michigan Avenue.'

'Thanks... I guess I'll loaf around here. I don't feel equal to the walk, and the cars – well, the cars are crowded.' His features drew themselves into what might have been a smile under happier circumstances.

'No, you never did like street cars – you're too aristocratic. See here, Crawford, I don't like leaving you here. You ain't good company for yourself tonight.'

'Crawford? Oh, yes, that's the last one. There have been so many I forget them.'

'Have you got a real name, anyway?'

'Oh, yes, but it's one of the ones I've forgotten. Don't you worry about me. You go along and get your free lunch. I think I had a row in Longtin's place

once. I'd better not show myself there again.' As he spoke the young man nodded and turned slowly up the avenue.

He was miserable enough to want to be quite alone. Even the crowd that jostled by him annoyed him. He wanted to think about himself. He had avoided this final reckoning with himself for a year now. He had laughed it off and drunk it off. But now, when all those artificial devices which are employed to turn our thoughts into other channels and shield us from ourselves had failed him, it must come. Hunger is a powerful incentive to introspection.

It is a tragic hour, that hour when we are finally driven to reckon with ourselves, when every avenue of mental distraction has been cut off and our own life and all its ineffaceable failures closes about us like the walls of that old torture chamber of the Inquisition. Tonight, as this man

stood stranded in the streets of the city, his hour came. It was not the first time he had been hungry and desperate and alone. But always before there had been some outlook, some chance ahead, some pleasure yet untasted that seemed worth the effort, some face that he fancied was, or would be, dear. But it was not so tonight. The unyielding conviction was upon him that he had failed in everything, had outlived everything. It had been near him for a long time, that pale spectre. He had caught its shadow at the bottom of his glass many a time, at the head of his bed when he was sleepless at night, in the twilight shadows when some great sunset broke upon him. It had made life hateful to him when he awoke in the morning before now. But now it settled slowly over him like night – the endless Northern nights that bid the sun a long farewell. It rose up before him like granite. From this brilliant

city with its glad bustle of Yuletide he was shut off as completely as though he were a creature of another species. His days seemed numbered and done, sealed over like the little coral cells at the bottom of the sea. Involuntarily he drew that cold air through his lungs slowly, as though he were tasting it for the last time.

Yet he was but four and twenty, this man — he looked even younger — and he had a father some place down east who had been very proud of him once. Well, he had taken his life into his own hands, and this was what he had made of it. That was all there was to be said. He could remember the hopeful things they used to say about him at college in the old days, before he had cut away and begun to live by his wits, and he found courage to smile at them now. They had read him wrongly. He knew now that he never had the essentials of success, only the superficial agility that