

## *A Christmas Story* by Mary Kyle Dallas

It was Christmas-day, 18—, and among those who trod the busy streets of great New York was a man one scarcely could have passed without some notice: a man with an under-jaw that was ferocious; a man with beetling-eyebrows and glittering black eyes, and a hard redness of cheek; shoulders like Robin Hood's, "a cloth yard measure from tip to tip," and six feet at least in his boots; a man of might and pluck. It was a pity that he had put those qualities to the uses he had plainly put them to. It was a pity that, at thirty years of age, this man could not have remembered, had he desired to do so, one worthy deed, one honest piece of labor honestly paid for, even one kindly deed, such as ordinary men do out of mere good-nature every day of their lives.

Somehow he had come by the name of Ishmael—certainly not by christening. It was the fittest name for him that could have been chosen. His hand had been against every man, and every man's hand against him, from the time when he stole "barbers' poles" from the candy women until those years in which he had been "committed" and "sent up" under every alias under the sun. Even his babyhood had nothing gentle in it to remember. His mother was a drunken jade, who taught him to pick pockets and to swear. His first home was a loathsome cellar, with a stagnant pool in the center.

Since his boyhood days, he had committed every crime under the sun, and under the moon, and being no fool, had made his mark in his own select circle. He always had enough to eat, and too much to drink; often exhibited gorgeous garments, glittering watch chains and kid gloves. He took more silver to the "melters" than any other house-breaker among that gentleman's customers; and awed policemen into blindness, and detectives into silence, by his well-known ferocity, and the fact that he always revenged himself on any one who stood in his way.

With a bank robbery on his conscience, if he had one, and the knowledge that all the powers of the police were at work to prove him engaged in it, few men would have walked down Broadway that day, glittering and flashy, with a long cigar in a long amber mouth-piece, and a stolen watch at his fob, but he did it. He met an acquaintance and said—*anathema*—"How are you? and"—*maranatha*—"where are you going to?" *Anathema* again, his ordinary mode of salutation. He knocked an innocent little Frenchman down for being in his way, and kicked a boot-black for saying, "Shine your butes?" Insulted every woman he met by a word or a look, and sent a dog or two yelping up the street by way of *divertissement*. And he was not in an ill-humor, as you may suppose, but in his normal condition. Then he stood leaning against a lamp post smoking, and no good clergyman, strong on the subject of perdition, could have wished to see a soul more completely lost than his, even in the bottomless pit. He was thinking that the next time an old woman screeched when he "cracked a crib" he would blow her brains out. He was thinking how he could waylay his enemy Jack with a dozen aliases, and "finish him." And just then, way down at his feet a little voice said, "Papa, papa," and two little arms encircled his leg; and, looking down, he saw a toddling thing in white and blue, with sunny curls and a rosebud mouth, clinging there. "Papa," it said again, and then a tidy nurse-maid, all out of breath, came up and caught it, and cuddled it and laughed over it.

“The gentleman an’t your papa,” said she. “It’s the way with her always; any big, fine lookin’ gentleman she’ll take for her papa.”

And the girl smiled on Ishmael, and, for a wonder, he did not insult her, either by word or look.

Something nipped at his heart. A great ball seemed to be in his throat. He dubbed children “kids” and hated them, but this was not like the children of the dens he frequented. A little soul pure as when it came from God, and with all outward purity about it too—fragrant, fresh, and white of garb as a lily is of leaf. Such a thing had never touched him before. He wanted to be kind to it, and he hardly knew how. He bent his head a little.

“Give us a kiss,” he said, in a gruff rumble of a voice, and the nurse girl held the baby up to him.

“Give the gentleman a French kiss,” she said, and Innocence personified did not even know Sin in the flesh when it looked at and touched it. The cherub hands caught softly at the man’s whiskers, the angel mouth kissed his two cheeks, one after the other, then his mouth.

“Say, ‘day day,’” cried the girl, and baby said it, and the two were gone.

The man had never had a pure kiss before—had never felt a tender emotion, had never loved any one. On the instant he loved this baby. He walked away very quickly. His heart was troubled, as the waters of the pool when the angel descended into it. He passed the people going home from church, and asked himself if they had babes at homes like that one.

Nothing pure and holy would ever call him papa in very truth. He wondered what men felt like who owned them.

Wives were not the fashion in his circle. Now he half envied the family men with well-dressed women on their arms. He wished himself a broker or a Wall street man, instead of a burglar. It was a nearer approach to aspirations after honesty than he had ever made before.

He took his Christmas dinner at a flash hotel, and bought a paper to read afterward. Its first page had a picture of a family group at table on it: the stereotyped mother, father, grandparents, one-armed soldier, lots of babies, and cook with a plumb pudding on a dish.

It had a meaning to the man now, as he looked at it. He saw Heaven in it. He looked at his own life and at his future, and turned sick.

He called to the waiter:

“That (anathema) old beggar out there?”

The waiter said, “Yes, sir.”

“Send him in.”

Then in came the thing that sat at the door, waiting for alms.

Ishmael pointed to the feast on the table.

“Sit down and eat that,” he said, with more oaths; “and you—a glass of brandy for him; and I say, if you disturb him till he’s done, I’ll put a bullet through your brains.”

“Yes, sir—thank ’e, sir,” said the waiter, turning white; and the burglar left his dinner to the beggar, and walked away.

“Off his feed;” “choking;” “wishing himself respectable.” What could it mean? He didn’t know. Through basement windows he saw folks at dinner, without a thought of their spoons. What did it mean? Suddenly he stopped and took an oath.

“I’ll be respectable. I’ll go to foreign parts and start fair. I won’t have jail and gallows ahead of me, and I’ll have a little kid like that to call me daddy.”

And then two big tears squeezed themselves out of his eyes, and rolled down his cheeks unconsciously.

“I’ll go in the Liverpool steamer,” he said. “I’ll change my name. If I’m not nabbed for this bank affair I’ll make my fortune as these fellows do. I’m their match, I reckon. I’ll not have the gallows ahead of me, as it’s like I shall if I stay here. And I’ll have little kids, and an old woman. I will—”

There was more of it. He could not help swearing; but I think, had he known how, he would have prayed this time instead. But just then there came upon his ear a sudden tumult. Men were flying past him; a bell was ringing; women were shrieking. He caught a boy and asked him what the row was.

“House afire, and a young one burning up in it,” said the boy.

And at that Ishmael followed the crowd. He had never before cared for any one’s danger. He had never felt pity for any one. Now the thought of that soft mouth that had touched his made him quiver with the thought that a little soul like that was in such awful danger; made him promise himself to save it, if he had the power; made him call them all cowards for standing there, staring and shouting, and doing nothing. The engines had not yet come, and the house, all in flames inside, belched forth fire from its many windows, as though they had been the mouths of the fabled dragon. And in the midst of the crowd a girl, restrained by kindly hands, struggled and screamed:

“Let me go! Let me go! They left her in my care. She’s burning to death up there. I’d rather die than face them. Let me go!”

And Ishmael heard the voice, and saw the face of the nurse-maid who had held the baby up to kiss him.

“Is it the little kid you had along of you?” he asked, clutching the girl’s shoulder with his big hand. “That little critter—say?”

“Yes, yes,” cried the girl. “Make them let me go. She’s atop of the house, back in the nursery. Oh, make them let me go!”

“You stay here,” said Ishmael. “I’ll go myself; and I’ll bring her out, or never come at all.”

And with these words Ishmael dashed into the building, already a very furnace of red flame. A shout arose as he did so—a cry between a scream of horror and a roar of applause. No one expected to see the man come out of that blazing pit alive.

The engines came rattling up. The firemen fixed their ladders to the windows and ran up them, and were driven back again scorched and faint. Nothing alive could be within, they said. But suddenly, on the blazing parapet, appeared a figure holding a burden in his arms. He looked downward at the ladders, which could not reach him, then backward at the flames. Then he dropped, clinging by one hand to the hot ledge, swung there a moment, and dropped upon the ladder. The crowd had thought to see him dashed to pieces in the street, and had stretched up their arms involuntarily, as though to catch him; but some were on the ladder, and they did their best for him. Even they were in great danger, but good angels watched over them. The bundle that he held so fast, wrapped in a wet blanket, was seized by one man; two others held him in their arms and brought him down.

The girl rushed forward screaming, and those who held the blanket unwound its folds. Out of it peeped a little flushed baby face—a head of ruffled curls. Half smothered, but unhurt, Trot held her tiny arms toward her nurse, and cried in baby fashion to be taken by her.

No harm had come to Trot; but what of her preserver, Ishmael? He lay there with his head upon a fireman’s knee. A doctor had his hand upon his heart. His eyes were closed; his hair singed; his eyebrows whitened; his flash clothes one mass of tinder; his very boots shriveled and scrolled away from his burnt feet; that hands that had held the little burden and clung to the molten roof ledge so bravely were one mass of blistered burns.

Like one dead he lay for a while, but at last his eyes opened. He looked at the faces about him, all kindly, pitiful, full of sympathy, and felt that for once he was a friend among friends. He heard men call him brave, and heard women sob. A new life had dawned upon him—he, Ishmael, was a hero. He had often been stared at by a crowd before, as he stood at the prisoner’s bar, but a host of kindly eyes had never thus turned upon him. He did not feel much pain, but he knew that the end was at hand. He was dying—dying just as he had begun to see what life might be; yet, after all, he was happy.

“It’s no use, pals,” he said faintly, to those busied about him. “I’ve swallowed fire! I’m a dead man! Where’s the little kid? I want her.”

They brought her to him. The innocent thing had neither fear nor dread, but she came solemnly, and her great eyes dilated as she looked at him.

“Dit up,” she said softly, and patted him—“dit up.”

“Kiss him, Trot,” said the girl, sobbing. “He took you out of the fire. Oh, poor, poor fellow! Kiss him, Trot.”

And Trot knelt down and took the singed black whiskers once more in her hands, and holding them apart, gave the dying Ishmael her pretty “French kisses,” one for each cheek and one for the mouth. He drew her to him.

“I want her arms about my neck,” he said faintly.

“Cuddle him, Trot,” said the girl.

And Trot sat down and wound her tiny arms about the great throat and put her cheek close down to his, and he whispered so softly that no one but this innocent baby heard him.

“Good-bye, little kid. I might have had something rougher round my scrag when I died. If the prison chaplains are right, may be we’ll meet again. I wish I’d had a little kid like you; I might have been another man.”

His hand dropped away from Trot’s waist with these words.

“Man’s aleep,” said Trot.

And Ishmael was asleep indeed. The sleep that knows no waking had come upon him in Trot’s innocent arms. He lay there dead.

Bewailed by strangers as a martyr, he had made the greatest sacrifice a mortal can make. He had laid down his life for another—he, Ishmael, who at dawn that day had found “his hand against every man, and every man’s hand against him.”

No one there knew that the burly man who stepped forward, looked at dead Ishmael, took off his hat, and turned away with a strange alteration of his stern face, was Detective —, who had in his hand at that moment a warrant for the burglar’s arrest, and in his pocket handcuffs meant for those blistered wrists that had slipped through many a pair before. Something in the heart of the man of the law kept him from telling the truth then and there. He had been searching for a living desperado steeped in crime; he found a dead hero amidst his worshippers. In every soul is a certain germ of poetry, so Detective — had looked at Ishmael with his hat off; and so those whose child he had saved buried him with honors, such as they would have given a soldier done to death in battle.

The muffled drum beat before him as they carried him to the grave; words of adulation were uttered over him; and Trot who kissed him, still goes at times to plant sweet flowers above his breast, and to wonder who it was that saved her.

*The New York Ledger*, January 13, 1872