A COMPULSORY CHRISTMAS—A STORY: BY MARY ANNABLE FANTON

A wide stretch of very white land, a wider sky—blue black, close to the ground—the sky gaudy with stars that peered and glimmered, with now and then one curving like a fine steel blade to earth. A windless night, the plains empty and silent, the prairie animals, great and small, hidden for shelter from the still intense cold.

The plain like the palm of a mighty hand, the fingers spreading out into gray vanishing “coolies” at the foot of the grayer hills. In the hollow of the hand a low stockade with high gates barred inside—no light and no sound of people or animals.

Near the bank of the bare, frozen river the one glow of light; the one murmur, hushed and tense, of human voices. Close to the edge of the river a hundred or more tepees huddled together, the fires burning slow and reluctantly in the dead wind, the squaws and children long since under blankets and furs to forget the cold. Coyote dogs whined at the tepee flaps for shelter, or met in shivering groups and waited out shrill protests to the sparkling sky.

In the center of a bunch of tawny tepees, embroidered in porcupine quills or painted in gorgeous hues, a high pile of cottonwood logs flamed up into the shadows, prodded from time to time by a tall young Indian, stately and vivid in full war caparison. The flames cut a path of light through the night down to the door of the Great Chief’s tepee. By this yellow path Sitting Bull with war bonnet and cou stick, followed by his oldest fighting men, trod softly to the War Council. Already the Medicine Man was quietly circling the fire, chanting in monotonous tones his regret, suspicion and disappointment at the treachery of the “White Mother” at the little stockade.

“Hi-ya! Hi-ya! We believed her,” droned the Medicine Man, rocking back and forth as he paced, and bowing his head until his war plumes trailed.

“Hi-ya! Hi-ya! We thought her heart good,” sang the fighting men, their blankets thrown off, their bonnets streaming back—their voices growing keener and higher as the sense of their wrongs overwhelmed them. “She saved our children—she doctored our women, but she has forgotten the word of truth and our hearts are on the ground.”
A steel wind crept down the river and up through the empty tree branches. It stirred the fire and the dry cottonwood logs flamed up in response. The Medicine Man lifted his tomtom high over his head, striking it an ugly blow, then dropping from the circle he flung himself on the ground and beat out with a wailing accompaniment the low sinister music of the Council call. The circle dropped instantly and silently to the ground, the women of the Chief’s family crept out from their blankets and clustered cross-legged near Sitting Bull. A child left alone in the night cried out. A line of starving wolf puppies stood, a black silhouette, at the river’s edge.

All were to speak for or against the White Woman, wife of the Government Agent. The Chief’s wives were also to speak, for they had heard the story, they and their children.

The youngest and favorite wife of the Great Chief spoke first: “It was in the Spring she came with her little children. We women have never forgotten the first sight of the pure white child, Is-tah-toto. (The Blue-Eyed One.) The dark one was small and laughed much, but she was more like our own children. The Blue-Eyed was silent and she has worked great medicine for us. When she looked at Eo-win-chin, my Iron-Child, he was cured of the awful shaking, and Um-ba-tu-yie had the dread disease in the eyes which the White Mother took away with a pure white water, and to us women she has given healing so often that we can not remember the times. She touches our wrists and looks into our eyes and knows all our sorrows.” Sitting Bull looked troubled, for she spoke of his dearest children. The White Mother surely had the gift of healing. As for himself, the racking pain in his shoulder from the piercing arrow of White Dog—that, too, was gone.

The tomtom sounded again, the Medicine Man spoke—the Council was called to remember lies, not to talk sentiment. The White Woman, droned out the Medicine Man, had told their wives and children that on a night like this, cold and white and starlight, the Great Father in the Happy Hunting Grounds beyond the stars would send His Agent with gifts for all who loved Him and obeyed His laws and believed in Him. The Wauk-pam-nie from the skies would come, with bells ringing and horns blowing, bringing with him a travois laden with gifts, blankets, coffee, sweet food and strange toys for little children.
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"Hi-ya! Hi-ya! it is not true," answered the fighting men, "We are old, and the Heaven-Sent Wauk-pam-nie has never appeared to us. We have worked well; we have fought well; our scalps are many and our wives and dogs are obedient, but no gifts have come to us. The White Mother says not the truth." They spoke with the bitterness of unrewarded virtue.

"But we women have found her good, and our children cling to her hands, and the Wauk-pam-nie at Washington has sent us more blankets and food since she came; and the Blue-Eyed One—if her eyes are turned from us what would become of our children?" For the pale white child was "great medicine."

The fighting men plucked uneasily at the feathers of their war bonnets. Sitting Bull saw their unrest, but he was a just man, even when he felt he had been treated unjustly, and he loved his children.

Standing erect and looking straight at the favorite wife crouched at his feet, he proclaimed: "Let the White Mother prove her word. The night of the coming of the Heaven-Sent Agent is yet five suns off. If on the fifth night he shall come with gifts for us, we will spare the wooden tepee yonder in the dark, and the White Mother shall stay among us, and her children shall be the friends of our children. If not . . ."

Before the Great Chief could finish his sentence, a cow stick was waved in the air by the wildest of the fighting men, and a new scalp floated from the top of the pole. The Chief's wives covered their faces and moaned, and the tom tom sent out a call so fierce that it reached the people in the little wooden fort—the woman sewing by the fire and the children waiting at her knee to hear once more the story of the Christ Child.

The Council fires burned low; the women crept back to their tepees and crawled under their blankets. Their babies were asleep, safely done up in their little cradle sacks, but the White Mother's children—who could tell? And if the Blue-Eyed were hurt, how could they guard their babies from her spirit? They shivered and whispered soft incantations, and slept.

The wolves came out from the gray hills and howled at the dying fire. The Medicine Man lifted up his voice and proclaimed: "If the Heaven-Sent Agent come on the fifth night all shall be well." The Great Chief smoked and watched the fire die.
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THE Agent’s wife knew well the meaning of the war call of the tomtom. It was only back in the last Spring that this very band of Indians, Sitting Bull and his fighting men, had saved the fort from the Un-ka-pah-pah Sioux war party. She had lived through long terrible nights with that sound beating on her heart. The cause of it now she realized all too well. A few hours before, the Chinese cook, coming for breakfast provisions, had warned her of the state of affairs in the camp. “They no likee Klismas. They no b’lieve. No talkee no mo’e; makee touble. Klismas for Melican man and Chinaman. No for Injun. Injun heap fool.”

At first the Agent’s wife had smiled at this fresh exhibition of race jealousy, but now she realized that in some unaccountable way she had offended her friends. She had banked too heavily on the aboriginal imagination, and had passed its limits to meet fear, distrust, and the bitter prejudice of the unexplained. She put the children to bed, cuddling them a bit more than usual, adding a petition or two to her simple prayer, and then she called a War Council of her own, her husband, brother and the hunters and trading men at the fort.

“What’s up, Nani?” (the children’s pet name for their mother) said the laughing college brother. “You act like a great war chief, calling together a Council of your fighting men. Have you another proposal of marriage for the Blue-Eyed, or do you want a bigger Christmas tree?”

As usual, the college brother was ignored. “First of all,” said the Agent’s wife, smiling but a little, “I want to know who will be Santa Claus.” She was a practical New England woman, and intended to meet distrust with conviction. “We will have a real Christmas this year, even here on the prairies, with Santa Claus at the chimney, and sleigh-bells and horns and presents for the camp. I have heard the call of the War Council, and intend to answer it in my own way.”

“All right, Nani,” agreed the brother. “We’ll all help. I’ll be Santa Claus, or the Three Wise Men, or the Star in the East, any old thing you like, but if I were you I’d quiet down a little as a missionary, if we once get out of this with our scalps on.”

Then up spoke Rattler Joe. “Yes’m. It’s all right, ma’am, in a first-class garrison with some blue-coats for periods, but at a doggone trading post you’ve got to missionize a leettle slow. Sarve the scriptur with rations and hand out a black plug with each precept; that’s the
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best rule, ma'am. Them tomtoms don't sound none too good a night like this, with the closest blue-coat a hundred miles off."

"All they want," returned the undaunted Nani, "is a real Christmas Eve, and they are going to have it. Ned will be Santa Claus, and Joe, you start to-morrow for Fort Benton and bring back all the sleigh-bells and horns and dolls and red and white candy you can find at the fort. You can make it in forty-eight hours. Take the Major's Wildfire and Fury and they will bring you back in time. I will keep the Indians quiet. If you will all mind, and do just what I say, I will take care of our scalps."

Later that night, after the Major had helped Rattler Joe to plan out his trip to Fort Benton, he found that his wife's courage had ebbed a little, as she knelted by her children to pray for them and for help to meet the great emergency that had come, because she wanted — "O Lord, just to help make her Indians all good. She did not mean to have any harm come to any one, and surely not to her little children." Thus Nani prayed intimately and with affection, as she felt.

SITTING BULL'S favorite wife was called into council the next day with the White Mother, and told that they must all prepare for the great Christmas Eve, to celebrate the birth of the Lord's Son, and that the heavenly Wauk-pam-nie would surely come on the fifth night if the Indians obeyed the White Mother, and made ready just as she directed; that any disobedience of her laws would account for the Heaven-Sent Agent's not coming.

It was no small task to play St. Nicholas for the families of over one hundred tepees. There must be blankets, and rations, and candy, and dolls. The trader was at his wits' end to corral supplies enough, and the white children kept late hours popping corn and making candy by the bushel.

Rattler Joe had driven off at daydawn after Nani's Council, over white prairies and across shining crusted hills, to Fort Benton for all the Christmas properties that belong to the Christmas Eve story. The morning of the fifth day Benton Hill was crowned with a heavy laden team, Joe driving furiously and assuring the squaws who had gone out to meet him that he had the Christmas mail from the East for the Agent and his family.
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At midnight the Indians were to assemble quietly as at a feast, not a war party. The first Chief would leave his tepee as the moon rose over Benton Hill, then they were to meet at the fort gate and listen to the Christmas songs. At the first sounds of a bell the heavenly Wauk-pam-nie would be seen at the chimney with his travaoie. After a signal to greet him, the Indians were to go back to their tepees and remain indoors until sunrise, when they would find the Christmas gifts which had been promised them.

It was a serious experiment. What if the whim should seize the Chief to investigate? What if a scout should be sent out and encounter Santa Claus as he mounted to the roof? What if one and all did not stay in their tents after midnight! All these thoughts Nani lived with from day to day, but she did not mention them. She just worked and played with her children. She made the Santa Claus costume for her brother, the paper cornucopias for the children; she taught the hunters and traders Christmas carols, and went out as usual into the camp, helping and healing where she could—a dauntless Nani who believed in action as she did in prayer. And after all the Lord must surely understand what a difficulty she was in because of her too zealous work in His vineyard, and deep down in her heart she felt that no little of the responsibility was really His.

THE first Christmas Eve ever celebrated on that vast white plain was full of beauty and a certain high festivity. The fort was glowing with lights. Pitch torches sent up balls of fire at each corner of the stockade. There was a great camp fire just outside the gate, and lanterns (fashioned from pumpkins by the college brother), hung from poles on the pathway leading from the camp.

As the first yellow edge of the moon came softly up to the hilltop the Indian chief's rose from the camp fire, where they had been called to smoke the pipe of peace, and filed silently up the lighted path, headed by the Medicine Man and followed by all the women and children.

The moon swung up into the sky as the White Mother, sitting by the camp fire with her children's hands in hers, told again the story of the Christ Child and the symbol of gifts at Christmas time. She told it simply, in their own language, the few Sioux words she knew, with a trembling heart and a brave voice. Then the traders and
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hunters, led by Nani’s beautiful contralto voice, sang of “Peace on earth, good will to men.”

As the sound died out in the still night, the far-off music of sleigh bells came nearer and nearer with the whirring sound of a travoie dragging over crusted snow, then a swift confusion of many sleigh bells and the tooting of horns. The Great Chief’s wife pointed with trembling hands to the bastion on the top of the fort. Instantly there was a clapping of hands and a great shout of “Hi-ya! Hi-ya!” from the Indian men and women, for very close to the chimney stood the Heaven-Sent Wauk-pam-nie, looking just as the White Mother had said, with long white beard and hair, a cap such as they had seen in her books, and on his back a sack full of white people’s toys. In the torchlight the children could see dolls of wax like the Blue-Eyed played with, and little wagons. There was silence, and another carol as Santa Claus dropped presents down the chimney reserved for him. Then, as he advanced along the roof toward the group, the awe-struck Indians retreated down the path to the tepees, and every tepee flap closed down until sunrise.

BROTHER Ned had a busy night as the Celestial Agent, hastening on moccasined feet from tent to tent, with cornucopias, dolls, wagons, blankets and provisions, and then back to the fort to burn up the beard, dress and cap in the dying camp fire.

A sleepless night for all the white people at the fort, for who could tell what the coming Christmas Day would bring forth—peace and good will or suspicion, gratitude or destruction. Before the moon grew gray and the night trailed away about it, the fort was up and dressed and ready for action—waiting. Would the Medicine Man call for war or peace?

At daydawn the Great Chief and the Medicine Man and all the fighting men rose from their blankets and passed in single file from tepee to tepee to find that the White Woman had kept her promise for all, not merely for the chiefs and their families, but for every sick woman and every smallest child. It was all true—they had not been fooled. The White Woman had spoken words from the Great Father. Her heart was good, and all their hearts were full of joy and good will to her. The tomtom sounded the call for rejoicing. The mothers and children answered the call, rushing from the tepees and
shouting "Hi-ya! Hi-ya! The White Mother's medicine has lifted our hearts from the ground. She has saved us from doing wrong."

And the White Mother lifted up her heart in prayer, and at last dared to weep a little and clutch her children very close to her, and forget to be brave and smile. The Heaven-Sent Wauk-pam-nie had brought them peace and life, but Death had been very near, and the memory of his presence was very terrifying.

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I remember all this vividly, even now after so many years, for the White Mother was my own mother, and for weeks after the appearance of the Heavenly Wauk-pam-nie the Indians, man and woman, showered gifts of every description upon the Blue-Eyed One and myself.

A MADRIGAL

SPRING went by with laughter
Down the greening hills,
Singing lyric snatches,
Crowned with daffodils;
Now, by breath of roses
As the soft day closes,
Know that April's promise
June fulfills.

YOUTH goes by with gladness
Fairy woodlands through,
Led by starry visions,
Fed with honey-dew;
Life, who dost forever
Urge the high endeavor,
Grant that all the dreaming
Time brings true!

—By Elizabeth Roberts MacDonald.