



# A SECULAR CHRISTMAS

by

R. POPE

It had been another one of those turned-around years, when it snowed in August and rained in December. The people on the Cote d'Azur had gone bankrupt and umbrella salesmen in Paris had made a killing. An unusual year, a year in which you remembered the weather. Some years you didn't. This year you did. You could not forget just exactly how miserable it was stepping quickly along the Rue Royale to your rooms on the place de la Concorde.

"It's won't be far," you had said. "I won't bother taking a cab," and suddenly the gray heavens had trembled with laughter at your vast folly and delighted in making you skip along the street like some tiny frightened thing till you were safe inside your stone womb.

At last, however, Jim had made it. His hair was plastered down on his head like a worn black mop slung over the side of a grey bucket. He felt grey, anyways, though the angle of his skin told him he was actually be coloured a secular form of red. The desk clerk nodded to him as he past by, and made some bland comment about the weather. Everyone was talking about the weather. There wasn't much else to talk about. Jim could hardly wait to get to his rooms. There was nothing so terribly uncomfortable as cold wet clothes, and no more pleasant prospect in this life than that of being able sometime soon to dash them aside and step into a nice warm shower. So, first thing in his suite, he began to quickly disrobe.

"Take it easy Rover," someone said. There was someone else in the room.

He looked up.

"My God!" he exclaimed. Jocelyn. He just stood there, looking at her. He hadn't seen her for something like a year. He never thought he would ever see her again.

"Whatsa matter?" she asked him. "Runnin' outa words? I never thought you ran outa words. Useta have alota words. Nice words."

She was so vulgar sometimes, he thought to himself, and the thought brought on a smile. She was a vulgar and unpredictable little witch. She was wearing dark glasses. She always wore dark glasses. Sometimes he would think maybe she had been worn with dark glasses. Even when she took them off (which wasn't too often) she still looked as if she had them on. She had a strange pair of eyes no one could ever say he had really looked into.

"Whaddya smilin' about?"

"—You, who else?"

She swung her hips, removed a cheap French cigarette from her baggy black purse and stuck it rudely between her thin pink lips. She did not immediately light it. Sometimes she lit it. Sometimes she didn't. Jim remembered. It was one of those things he best remembered about her.

He smiled his Oxford smile again and proceeded to explain "I don't know what you're doing here. At this moment, I really don't care. It's cold and wet out there and I stand before you a man with a great longing for a nice hot shower. Make yourself comfortable. Excuse me." With those words, he greatly brushed by her into the bathroom, closing the door behind him.

"Hey!" she exclaimed.

The shower waters began cascading down with a gentle tinkle. Jim had paid heavily for these conveniences, American conveniences he had grown to love. Jocelyn had been another one.

"Make yourself a drink!" he shouted from under the pocket size Niagara. "You know where everything is."

He was out shortly. He found her sprawled on the couch in one of her usual clumsy positions, left elbow on the arm rest, right elbow on the back with drink in hand, body curved down like a great dark banana, knees tightly clasped together, calves sprawled apart at a ninety-degree angle, shoes half-off. As usual, she was all in black, in mourning for "everything that ever is" as she put it once, or as he himself once suggested "for that poor dead god fellow."

He sat down on the piano bench. He couldn't play much himself, but the piano came with the suite.

"Moscow Mule?" he asked.

"What else, ya think," she answered.

The rain spat fiercely in the window-panes.

"What are you doing here?" he finally asked her, his face stiff and so very very English. "How did you get in?"

She giggled. "Well, Big Boy, I came here to see you—to wish you a merry Christmas you might say, and as for now I got in—well—you gave me the key—remember?"

The fool! of course he had! He had forgotten all about that little gift. He should have never done it. He had done it against his better judgement. He should never act against his better judgement.

"So I did," he told her. "I had forgotten."

"Forget lotsa things, doncha?" she immediately retorted. "Forgot the date we made last year, dincha?"

"What date?"

She looked at him with a gruesome little smirk. "The Christmas date, stupid, what else? 'Dhaling' have she began to mimic him "dhaling, though we must paht, r-r-e-e-member-r we must see each other again before Christmas! next year' or some such piece a junk, anyways. Well so, here I am. I took you seriously. Shouldn't of, should I, eh?"

All he could do was look out at the rainy scene, out at this cold wet Christmas, on this melancholy Festival scene and think what a fool he had been. Something in her he had liked. That had been about the time of his divorce. Anything looked good, somehow. His wife had been such a stiff, stupid little Welsh thing, bland and

gray—always she was in grey, grown old before her time. But that was a year ago. He stood a year back from those days and was able to view them so objectively, and to conclude definitely how much of a fool he really was. And she had to take him seriously. It disgusted him.

"So you've seen me," he told her. "Now, get out!"

Dam her then, she laughed! She laughed, the little tease, she laughed long and loud!

"Not so fast," she said. "Not so fast. You don't know what this means to me honey, You just don't know."

"Well then, tell me?"

She put down her drink, and stood up. She started to wander around the room. She loved to wander around just gazing balnkly at things. She had spent weeks in the Louvre and yet couldn't tell you of one thing they had. To her, it was the shuffling around that mattered. Suddenly, she turned about and looked at him with those great nothing-eyes.

"Money, buster, me needum the moola. Understand!"

It was his turn to smirk.

"Money maketh loyalty, eh? Want a little Christmas present, right- Well, I'm not Santa Claus. I don't owe you anything. Get out!" His tone was not loud but emphatic. She brought a bad taste to his mouth.

"Owe!" she exclaimed. "Owe!" she shouted. "You owe me your life, buster. Doncha forget it. When I come across you last year, you were down and out, b' boy, you were in the dumps, get it? First time I saw you, you were eye-in' that Seine river like it was Mother Earth 'r somethin'. You were low, Mac—too low. Member?"

He did not look at her. "I'm sure you exaggerate," he quietly commented. "In fact, I know you exaggerate."

She smiled.

"Remember Boyston?"

His eyes flew open and his mouth screamed up tightly. Boyston—my God! only a sorcerer could have known what happened there. He was sure he never told her. He never told anyone.

"How do you know?" his voice was feeble. His fingers idly tinkled over the keyboard.

"How do I know? Why, I

was there. How else?" A certain softness now come over her voice. "I was there," she contineud. "I am always there. I am not absent when-even you stoop to the depths of your vanity and despair. When a young lad looks over the body of his mother, killed in an Air Raid, I am there."

This was strange talk. To where had fled the crude little American bitch? he wondered. He looked at her with questioning eyes.

"Who are you?"

She only kept on smiling. The room was dim and grey. He had never before noticed just how white, ghostly white her skin really was Her face looked even spectral.

"Remember Miami?" He felt like crying. Through his closed eyes came forth hard tears. "Remember that palm tree kid with the dime-store muscles wel-shaven, well-bronzed, and well greased? Your little grey wife rather took him, didn't she? Christmas in Miami that year, wasn't it? in 1957, if my memory serves me right."

He was now beyond tears.

"O shut up!" he shouted. His eyes were red and sore. "Shut up you! Yes I remember. I remember very well. I wish I could forget." He stood up and looked at her. His voice dropped unto unsurer ground. "And I remember you too. Not as the little bundle of fun that made me forget my sorrows, but as some—some unseen Woman-force always back there! Back there tearing at me! Dragging me backwards towards time, hitting me with the wall of the things to come—Hurting me, hurting me! You bitch, you hurt me!" Sobbing loudly, he dropped to the floor.

Slowly she approached him

and bent down gently near him. She spoke in a voice too mild to be human.

"I'm Santa Claus kid. Santa Claus."

With fumbling motions he reached into his pocket and pulled out the precious black wallet.

"Fourhundred'll do." He quickly gave it to her. She turned to leave.

"Wait!" Jim shouted after her. "There's something I just don't understand." He had gotten up from the floor and stood there feebly, handkerchief in hand. "I don't understand."

She smiled again. This time, her thought, her smile was clean and fresh, even a little naughtily.

"My soul does magnify the Lord, boosy," she said, and Lord, boosy," she said, and the black rain of Paris.

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