

Stories for Christmas

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SELECTED AUTHORS

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The Birds' Christmas Carol

by

Kate Douglas Wiggin

I

A Little Snow Bird

It was very early Christmas morning, and in the stillness of the dawn, with the soft snow falling on the housetops, a little child was born in the Bird household. They had intended to name the baby Lucy, if it were a girl; but they had not expected her on Christmas morning, and a real Christmas baby was not to be lightly named — the whole family agreed in that.

They were consulting about it in the nursery. Mr. Bird said that he had assisted in naming the three boys, and that he should leave this matter entirely to Mrs. Bird; Donald wanted the child called "Dorothy," after a pretty, curly-haired girl who sat next him in school; Paul chose "Luella," for Luella was the nurse who had been with him during his whole babyhood, up to the time of his first trousers, and the name suggested all sorts of comfortable things. Uncle Jack said that the first girl should always be named for her mother, no matter how hideous the name happened to be.

Grandma said that she would prefer not to take any part in the discussion, and everybody suddenly remembered that Mrs. Bird had thought of naming the baby Lucy, for Grandma herself; and, while it would be indelicate for her to favor that name, it would be against human nature for her to suggest any other, under the circumstances.

Hugh, the "hitherto baby," if that is a possible term, sat in one corner and said nothing, but felt, in some mysterious way, that his nose was out of joint; for there was a newer baby now,

a possibility he had never taken into consideration; and the "first girl," too, — a still higher development of treason, which made him actually green with jealousy.

But it was too profound a subject to be settled then and there, on the spot; besides. Mamma had not been asked, and everybody felt it rather absurd, after all, to forestall a decree that was certain to be absolutely wise, just, and perfect.

The reason that the subject had been brought up at all so early in the day lay in the fact that Mrs. Bird never allowed her babies to go over night unnamed. She was a person of so great decision of character that she would have blushed at such a thing; she said that to let blessed babies go dangling and dawdling about without names, for months and months, was enough to ruin them for life. She also said that if one could not make up one's mind in twenty-four hours it was a sign that — But I will not repeat the rest, as it might prejudice you against the most charming woman in the world.

So Donald took his new velocipede and went out to ride up and down the stone pavement and notch the shins of innocent people as they passed by, while Paul spun his musical top on the front steps.

But Hugh refused to leave the scene of action. He seated himself on the top stair in the hall, banged his head against the railing a few times, just by way of uncorking the vials of his wrath, and then subsided into gloomy silence, waiting to declare war if more "first girl babies" were thrust upon a family already surfeited with that unnecessary article.

Meanwhile dear Mrs. Bird lay in her room, weak, but safe and happy, with her sweet girl baby by her side and the heaven of motherhood opening again before her. Nurse was making gruel in the kitchen, and the room was dim and quiet. There

was a cheerful open fire in the grate, but though the shutters were closed, the side windows that looked out on the Church of Our Saviour, next door, were a little open.

Suddenly a sound of music poured out into the bright air and drifted into the chamber. It was the boy choir singing Christmas anthems. Higher and higher rose the clear, fresh voices, full of hope and cheer, as children's voices always are. Fuller and fuller grew the burst of melody as one glad strain fell upon another in joyful harmony: —

"Carol, brothers, carol,
Carol joyfully,
Carol the good tidings,
Carol merrily!
And pray a gladsome Christmas
For all your fellow-men:
Carol, brothers, carol,
Christmas Day again."

One verse followed another, always with the same sweet refrain: —

"And pray a gladsome Christmas
For all your fellow-men;
Carol, brothers, carol,
Christmas Day again."

Mrs. Bird thought, as the music floated in upon her gentle sleep, that she had slipped into heaven with her new baby, and that the angels were bidding them welcome. But the tiny

bundle by her side stirred a little, and though it was scarcely more than the ruffling of a feather, she awoke; for the mother-ear is so close to the heart that it can hear the faintest whisper of a child.

She opened her eyes and drew the baby closer. It looked like a rose dipped in milk, she thought, this pink and white blossom of girlhood, or like a pink cherub, with its halo of pale yellow hair, finer than floss silk.

"Carol, brothers, carol,
    Carol joyfully,
Carol the good tidings,
    Carol merrily!"

The voices were brimming over with joy.

"Why, my baby," whispered Mrs. Bird in soft surprise, "I had forgotten what day it was. You are a little Christmas child, and we will name you 'Carol' — mother's Christmas Carol!"

"What!" said Mr. Bird, coming in softly and closing the door behind him.

"Why, Donald, don't you think 'Carol' is a sweet name for a Christmas baby? It came to me just a moment ago in the singing, as I was lying here half asleep and half awake."

"I think it is a charming name, dear heart, and sounds just like you, and I hope that, being a girl, this baby has some chance of being as lovely as her mother;" — at which speech from the baby's papa Mrs. Bird, though she was as weak and tired as she could be, blushed with happiness.

And so Carol came by her name.

Of course, it was thought foolish by many people, though Uncle Jack declared laughingly that it was very strange if a whole family of Birds could not be indulged in a single Carol; and Grandma, who adored the child, thought the name much more appropriate than Lucy, but was glad that people would probably think it short for Caroline.

Perhaps because she was born in holiday time, Carol was a very happy baby. Of course, she was too tiny to understand the joy of Christmas-tide, but people say there is everything in a good beginning, and she may have breathed in unconsciously the fragrance of evergreens and holiday dinners; while the peals of sleigh-bells and the laughter of happy children may have fallen upon her baby ears and wakened in them a glad surprise at the merry world she had come to live in.

Her cheeks and lips were as red as holly-berries; her hair was for all the world the color of a Christmas candle-flame; her eyes were bright as stars; her laugh like a chime of Christmas-bells, and her tiny hands forever outstretched in giving.

Such a generous little creature you never saw! A spoonful of bread and milk had always to be taken by Mamma or nurse before Carol could enjoy her supper; whatever bit of cake or sweetmeat found its way into her pretty fingers was straightway broken in half to be shared with Donald, Paul, or Hugh; and when they made believe nibble the morsel with affected enjoyment, she would clap her hands and crow with delight.

"Why does she do it?" asked Donald thoughtfully. "None of us boys ever did."

"I hardly know," said Mamma, catching her darling to her heart, "except that she is a little Christmas child, and so she has a tiny share of the blessedest birthday the world ever knew!"

II

Drooping Wings

It was December, ten years later.

Carol had seen nine Christmas trees lighted on her birthdays, one after another; nine times she had assisted in the holiday festivities of the household, though in her babyhood her share of the gaieties was somewhat limited.

For five years, certainly, she had hidden presents for Mamma and Papa in their own bureau drawers, and harbored a number of secrets sufficiently large to burst a baby brain, had it not been for the relief gained by whispering them all to Mamma, at night, when she was in her crib, a proceeding which did not in the least lessen the value of a secret in her innocent mind.

For five years she had heard "'Twas the night before Christmas," and hung up a scarlet stocking many sizes too large for her, and pinned a sprig of holly on her little white nightgown, to show Santa Claus that she was a "truly" Christmas child, and dreamed of fur-coated saints and toy-packs and reindeer, and wished everybody a "Merry Christmas" before it was light in the morning, and lent every one of her new toys to the neighbors' children before noon, and eaten turkey and plum-pudding, and gone to bed at night in a trance of happiness at the day's pleasures.

Donald was away at college now. Paul and Hugh were great manly fellows, taller than their mother. Papa Bird had gray hairs in his whiskers; and Grandma, God bless her, had been four Christmases in heaven.

But Christmas in the Birds' Nest was scarcely as merry now as it used to be in the bygone years, for the little child, that once brought such an added blessing to the day, lay month after month a patient, helpless invalid, in the room where she was born. She had never been very strong in body, and it was with a pang of terror her mother and father noticed, soon after she was five years old, that she began to limp, ever so slightly; to complain too often of weariness, and to nestle close to her mother, saying she "would rather not go out to play, please." The illness was slight at first, and hope was always stirring in Mrs. Bird's heart. "Carol would feel stronger in the summer-time;" or, "She would be better when she had spent a year in the country;" or, "She would outgrow it;" or, "They would try a new physician;" but by and by it came to be all too sure that no physician save One could make Carol strong again, and that no "summer-time" nor "country air," unless it were the everlasting summer-time in a heavenly country, could bring back the little girl to health.

The cheeks and lips that were once as red as holly-berries faded to faint pink; the star-like eyes grew softer, for they often gleamed through tears; and the gay child-laugh, that had been like a chime of Christmas bells, gave place to a smile so lovely, so touching, so tender and patient, that it filled every corner of the house with a gentle radiance that might have come from the face of the Christ-child himself.

Love could do nothing; and when we have said that we have said all, for it is stronger than anything else in the whole wide world. Mr. and Mrs. Bird were talking it over one evening, when all the children were asleep. A famous physician had visited them that day, and told them that some time, it might be in one year, it might be in more, Carol would slip quietly off into heaven, whence she came.

"It is no use to close our eyes to it any longer," said Mr. Bird, as he paced up and down the library floor; "Carol will never be well again. It almost seems as if I could not bear it when I think of that loveliest child doomed to lie there day after day, and, what is still more, to suffer pain that we are helpless to keep away from her. Merry Christmas, indeed; it gets to be the saddest day in the year to me!" and poor Mr. Bird sank into a chair by the table, and buried his face in his hands to keep his wife from seeing the tears that would come in spite of all his efforts.

"But, Donald, dear," said sweet Mrs. Bird, with trembling voice, "Christmas Day may not be so merry with us as it used, but it is very happy, and that is better, and very blessed, and that is better yet. I suffer chiefly for Carol's sake, but I have almost given up being sorrowful for my own. I am too happy in the child, and I see too clearly what she has done for us and the other children. Donald and Paul and Hugh were three strong, willful, boisterous boys, but now you seldom see such tenderness, devotion, thought for others, and self-denial in lads of their years. A quarrel or a hot word is almost unknown in this house, and why? Carol would hear it, and it would distress her, she is so full of love and goodness. The boys study with all their might and main. Why? Partly, at least, because they like to teach Carol, and amuse her by telling her what they read. When the seamstress comes, she likes to sew in Miss Carol's room, because there she forgets her own troubles, which, Heaven knows, are sore enough! And as for me, Donald, I am a better woman every day for Carol's sake; I have to be her eyes, ears, feet, hands, — her strength, her hope; and she, my own little child, is my example!"

"I was wrong, dear heart," said Mr. Bird more cheerfully; "we will try not to repine, but to rejoice instead, that we have an 'angel of the house.'"

"And as for her future," Mrs. Bird went on, "I think we need not be over-anxious. I feel as if she did not belong altogether to us, but that when she has done what God sent her for, He will take her back to Himself — and it may not be very long!" Here it was poor Mrs. Bird's turn to break down, and Mr. Bird's turn to comfort her.

III
The Birds' Nest

Carol herself knew nothing of motherly tears and fatherly anxieties; she lived on peacefully in the room where she was born.

But you never would have known that room; for Mr. Bird had a great deal of money, and though he felt sometimes as if he wanted to throw it all in the sea, since it could not buy a strong body for his little girl, yet he was glad to make the place she lived in just as beautiful as it could be.

The room had been extended by the building of a large addition that hung out over the garden below, and was so filled with windows that it might have been a conservatory. The ones on the side were thus still nearer the Church of Our Saviour than they used to be; those in front looked out on the beautiful harbor, and those in the back commanded a view of nothing in particular but a narrow alley; nevertheless, they were pleasantest of all to Carol, for the Ruggles family lived in the alley, and the nine little, middle-sized, and big Ruggles children were a source of inexhaustible interest.

The shutters could all be opened and Carol could take a real sun-bath in this lovely glass house, or they could all be closed when the dear head ached or the dear eyes were tired. The carpet was of soft gray, with clusters of green bay and holly leaves. The furniture was of white wood, on which an artist had painted snow scenes and Christmas trees and groups of merry children ringing bells and singing carols.

Donald had made a pretty, polished shelf, and screwed it on the outside of the foot-board, and the boys always kept this full of blooming plants, which they changed from time to time; the head-board, too, had a bracket on either side, where there were pots of maiden-hair ferns.

Love-birds and canaries hung in their golden houses in the windows, and they, poor caged things, could hop as far from their wooden perches as Carol could venture from her little white bed. On one side of the room was a bookcase filled with hundreds — yes, I mean it — with hundreds and hundreds of books; books with gay-colored pictures, books without; books with black and white outline sketches, books with none at all; books with verses, books with stories; books that made children laugh, and some, only a few, that made them cry; books with words of one syllable for tiny boys and girls, and books with words of fearful length to puzzle wise ones.

This was Carol's "Circulating Library." Every Saturday she chose ten books, jotting their names down in a diary; into these she slipped cards that said: —

"Please keep this book two weeks and read it.

With love, Carol Bird."

Then Mrs. Bird stepped into her carriage and took the ten books to the Children's Hospital, and brought home ten others that she had left there the fortnight before.

This was a source of great happiness; for some of the Hospital children that were old enough to print or write, and were strong enough to do it, wrote Carol sweet little letters about the books, and she answered them, and they grew to be friends. (It is very funny, but you do not always have to see people to love them. Just think about it, and tell me if it isn't so.)

There was a high wainscoting of wood about the room, and on top of this, in a narrow gilt framework, ran a row of illuminated pictures, illustrating fairy tales, all in dull blue and gold and scarlet and silver. From the door to the closet there was the story of "The Fair One with Golden Locks;" from closet to bookcase, ran "Puss in Boots;" from bookcase to fireplace, was "Jack the Giant-killer;" and on the other side of the room were "Hop o' my Thumb," "The Sleeping Beauty," and "Cinderella."

Then there was a great closet full of beautiful things to wear, but they were all dressing-gowns and slippers and shawls; and there were drawers full of toys and games, but they were such as you could play with on your lap. There were no ninepins, nor balls, nor bows and arrows, nor bean bags, nor tennis rackets; but, after all, other children needed these more than Carol Bird, for she was always happy and contented, whatever she had or whatever she lacked; and after the room had been made so lovely for her, on her eighth Christmas, she always called herself, in fun, a "Bird of Paradise."

On these particular December days she was happier than usual, for Uncle Jack was coming from England to spend the holidays. Dear, funny, jolly, loving, wise Uncle Jack, who came every two or three years, and brought so much joy with him that the world looked as black as a thunder-cloud for a week after he went away again.

The mail had brought this letter: —

London, November 28, 188-.

Wish you merry Christmas, you dearest birdlings in America! Preen your feathers, and stretch the Birds' nest a trifle, if you please, and let Uncle Jack in for the holidays. I am

coming with such a trunk full of treasures that you'll have to borrow the stockings of Barnum's Giant and Giantess; I am coming to squeeze a certain little lady-bird until she cries for mercy; I am coming to see if I can find a boy to take care of a black pony that I bought lately. It's the strangest thing I ever knew; I've hunted all over Europe, and can't find a boy to suit me! I'll tell you why. I've set my heart on finding one with a dimple in his chin, because this pony particularly likes dimples! ["Hurrah!" cried Hugh; "bless my dear dimple; I'll never be ashamed of it again."]

Please drop a note to the clerk of the weather, and have a good, rousing snow-storm — say on the twenty-second. None of your meek, gentle, nonsensical, shilly-shallying snow-storms; not the sort where the flakes float lazily down from the sky as if they didn't care whether they ever got here or not and then melt away as soon as they touch the earth, but a regular business-like whizzing, whirring, blurring, cutting snow-storm, warranted to freeze and stay on!

I should like rather a LARGE Christmas tree, if it's convenient: not one of those "sprigs," five or six feet high, that you used to have three or four years ago, when the birdlings were not fairly feathered out; but a tree of some size. Set it up in the garret, if necessary, and then we can cut a hole in the roof if the tree chances to be too high for the room.

Tell Bridget to begin to fatten a turkey. Tell her that by the twentieth of December that turkey must not be able to stand on its legs for fat, and then on the next three days she must allow it to recline easily on its side, and stuff it to bursting. (One ounce of stuffing beforehand is worth a pound afterwards.)

The pudding must be unusually huge, and darkly, deeply, lugubriously blue in color. It must be stuck so full of plums that

the pudding itself will ooze out into the pan and not be brought on to the table at all. I expect to be there by the twentieth, to manage these little things myself, — remembering it is the early Bird that catches the worm, — but give you the instructions in case I should be delayed.

And Carol must decide on the size of the tree — she knows best, she was a Christmas child; and she must plead for the snow-storm — the "clerk of the weather" may pay some attention to her; and she must look up the boy with the dimple for me — she's likelier to find him than I am, this minute. She must advise about the turkey, and Bridget must bring the pudding to her bedside and let her drop every separate plum into it and stir it once for luck, or I'll not eat a single slice — for Carol is the dearest part of Christmas to Uncle Jack, and he'll have none of it without her. She is better than all the turkeys and puddings and apples and spare-ribs and wreaths and garlands and mistletoe and stockings and chimneys and sleigh-bells in Christendom! She is the very sweetest Christmas Carol that was ever written, said, sung, or chanted, and I am coming as fast as ships and railway trains can carry me, to tell her so.

Carol's joy knew no bounds. Mr. and Mrs. Bird laughed like children and kissed each other for sheer delight, and when the boys heard it they simply whooped like wild Indians; until the Ruggles family, whose back yard joined their garden, gathered at the door and wondered what was "up" in the big house.

IV

"Birds of a Feather Flock Together"

Uncle Jack did really come on the twentieth. He was not detained by business, nor did he get left behind nor snowed up, as frequently happens in stories, and in real life too, I am afraid. The snow-storm came also; and the turkey nearly died a natural and premature death from overeating. Donald came, too; Donald, with a line of down upon his upper lip, and Greek and Latin on his tongue, and stores of knowledge in his handsome head, and stories — bless me, you couldn't turn over a chip without reminding Donald of something that happened "at College." One or the other was always at Carol's bedside, for they fancied her paler than she used to be, and they could not bear her out of sight. It was Uncle Jack, though, who sat beside her in the winter twilights. The room was quiet, and almost dark, save for the snow-light outside, and the flickering flame of the fire, that danced over the "Sleeping Beauty's" face and touched the Fair One's golden locks with ruddier glory. Carol's hand (all too thin and white these latter days) lay close clasped in Uncle Jack's, and they talked together quietly of many, many things.

"I want to tell you all about my plans for Christmas this year, Uncle Jack," said Carol, on the first evening of his visit, "because it will be the loveliest one I ever had. The boys laugh at me for caring so much about it; but it isn't altogether because it is Christmas, nor because it is my birthday; but long, long ago, when I first began to be ill, I used to think, the first thing when I waked on Christmas morning, 'Today is Christ's birthday — and mine!' I did not put the words close together,

you know, because that made it seem too bold; but I first said, 'Christ's birthday,' out loud, and then, in a minute, softly to myself — 'and mine!' 'Christ's birthday — and mine!' And so I do not quite feel about Christmas as other girls do. Mamma says she supposes that ever so many other children have been born on that day. I often wonder where they are, Uncle Jack, and whether it is a dear thought to them, too, or whether I am so much in bed, and so often alone, that it means more to me. Oh, I do hope that none of them are poor, or cold, or hungry; and I wish — I wish they were all as happy as I, because they are really my little brothers and sisters. Now, Uncle Jack dear, I am going to try and make somebody happy every single Christmas that I live, and this year it is to be the 'Ruggleses in the rear.'"

"That large and interesting brood of children in the little house at the end of the back garden?"

"Yes; isn't it nice to see so many together? — and, Uncle Jack, why do the big families always live in the small houses, and the small families in the big houses? We ought to call them the Ruggles children, of course; but Donald began talking of them as the 'Ruggleses in the rear,' and Papa and Mamma took it up, and now we cannot seem to help it. The house was built for Mr. Carter's coachman, but Mr. Carter lives in Europe, and the gentleman who rents his place for him doesn't care what happens to it, and so this poor family came to live there. When they first moved in, I used to sit in my window and watch them play in their back yard; they are so strong, and jolly, and good-natured; — and then, one day, I had a terrible headache, and Donald asked them if they would please not scream quite so loud, and they explained that they were having a game of circus, but that they would change and play 'Deaf and Dumb Asylum' all the afternoon."

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Uncle Jack, "what an obliging family, to be sure!"

"Yes, we all thought it very funny, and I smiled at them from the window when I was well enough to be up again. Now, Sarah Maud comes to her door when the children come home from school, and if Mamma nods her head, 'Yes,' that means 'Carol is very well,' and then you ought to hear the little Ruggleses yell, — I believe they try to see how much noise they can make; but if Mamma shakes her head, 'No,' they always play at quiet games. Then, one day, 'Gary,' my pet canary, flew out of her cage, and Peter Ruggles caught her and brought her back, and I had him up here in my room to thank him."

"Is Peter the oldest!"

"No; Sarah Maud is the oldest — she helps do the washing; and Peter is the next. He is a dress-maker's boy."

"And which is the pretty little red-haired girl?"

"That's Kitty."

"And the fat youngster?"

"Baby Larry."

"And that — most freckled one?"

"Now, don't laugh — that's Peoria."

"Carol, you are joking."

"No, really, Uncle dear. She was born in Peoria; that's all."

"And is the next boy Oshkosh.'"

"No," laughed Carol, "the others are Susan, and Clement, and Eily, and Cornelius; they all look exactly alike, except that some of them have more freckles than the others."

"How did you ever learn all their names?"

"Why, I have what I call a 'window-school.' It is too cold now; but in warm weather I am wheeled out on my balcony, and the Ruggleses climb up and walk along our garden fence, and sit down on the roof of our carriage-house. That brings them quite near, and I tell them stories. On Thanksgiving Day they came up for a few minutes, — it was quite warm at eleven o'clock, — and we told each other what we had to be thankful for; but they gave such queer answers that Papa had to run away for fear of laughing; and I couldn't understand them very well. Susan was thankful for 'trunks,' of all things in the world; Cornelius, for 'horse-cars;' Kitty, for 'pork steak;' while Clem, who is very quiet, brightened up when I came to him, and said he was thankful for 'his lame puppy.' Wasn't that pretty?"

"It might teach some of us a lesson, mightn't it, little girl?"

"That's what Mamma said. Now I'm going to give this whole Christmas to the Ruggleses; and, Uncle Jack, I earned part of the money myself."

"You, my bird; how?"

"Well, you see, it could not be my own, own Christmas if Papa gave me all the money, and I thought to really keep Christ's birthday I ought to do something of my very own; and so I talked with Mamma. Of course she thought of something lovely; she always does; Mamma's head is just brimming over with lovely thoughts, — all I have to do is ask, and out pops the very one I want. This thought was to let her write down, just as I told her, a description of how a child lived in her own room for three years, and what she did to amuse herself; and we sent it to a magazine and got twenty-five dollars for it. Just think!" "Well, well," cried Uncle Jack, "my little girl a real author! And what are you going to do with this wonderful 'own' money of yours?"

"I shall give the nine Ruggleses a grand Christmas dinner here in this very room — that will be Papa's contribution, — and afterwards a beautiful Christmas tree, fairly blooming with presents — that will be my part; for I have another way of adding to my twenty-five dollars, so that I can buy nearly anything I choose. I should like it very much if you would sit at the head of the table, Uncle Jack, for nobody could ever be frightened of you, you dearest, dearest, dearest thing that ever was! Mamma is going to help us, but Papa and the boys are going to eat together downstairs for fear of making the little Ruggleses shy; and after we've had a merry time with the tree we can open my window and all listen together to the music at the evening church-service, if it comes before the children go. I have written a letter to the organist, and asked him if I might have the two songs I like best. Will you see if it is all right?"

Birds' Nest, December 21, 188-.

Dear Mr. Wilkie, — I am the little girl who lives next door to the church, and, as I seldom go out, the music on practice days and Sundays is one of my greatest pleasures.

I want to know if you can have "Carol, brothers, carol," on Christmas night, and if the boy who sings "My ain countree" so beautifully may please sing that too. I think it is the loveliest thing in the world, but it always makes me cry; doesn't it you?

If it isn't too much trouble, I hope they can sing them both quite early, as after ten o'clock I may be asleep.

Yours respectfully,

Carol Bird.

P.S. — The reason I like "Carol, brothers, carol," is because the choir-boys sang it eleven years ago, the morning I was born, and put it into Mamma's head to call me Carol. She didn't

remember then that my other name would be Bird, because she was half asleep, and could only think of one thing at a time. Donald says if I had been born on the Fourth of July they would have named me "Independence," or if on the twenty-second of February, "Georgina," or even "Cherry," like Cherry in "Martin Chuzzlewit;" but I like my own name and birthday best.

Yours truly,

Carol Bird

Uncle Jack thought the letter quite right, and did not even smile at her telling the organist so many family items.

The days flew by as they always fly in holiday time, and it was Christmas Eve before anybody knew it. The family festival was quiet and very pleasant, but almost overshadowed by the grander preparations for the next day. Carol and Elfrida, her pretty German nurse, had ransacked books, and introduced so many plans, and plays, and customs, and merry-makings from Germany, and Holland, and England, and a dozen other countries, that you would scarcely have known how or where you were keeping Christmas. Even the dog and the cat had enjoyed their celebration under Carol's direction. Each had a tiny table with a lighted candle in the centre, and a bit of Bologna sausage placed very near it; and everybody laughed till the tears stood in their eyes to see Villikins and Dinah struggle to nibble the sausages, and at the same time to evade the candle flame. Villikins barked, and sniffed, and howled in impatience, and after many vain attempts succeeded in dragging off the prize, though he singed his nose in doing it. Dinah, meanwhile, watched him placidly, her delicate nostrils quivering with expectation, and, after all the excitement had subsided, walked with dignity to the table, her beautiful gray satin trail sweeping behind her, and, calmly putting up one velvet paw, drew the

sausage gently down, and walked out of the room without turning a hair, so to speak. Elfrida had scattered handfuls of seed over the snow in the garden, that the wild birds might have a comfortable breakfast next morning, and had stuffed bundles of dry grasses in the fireplaces, so that the reindeer of Santa Claus could refresh themselves after their long gallops across country. This was really only done for fun, but it pleased Carol.

And when, after dinner, the whole family had gone to the church to see the Christmas decorations, Carol limped out on her slender crutches, and with Elfrida's help, placed all the family boots in a row in the upper hall. That was to keep the dear ones from quarreling all through the year. There were Papa's stout top boots; Mamma's pretty buttoned shoes next; then Uncle Jack's, Donald's, Paul's, and Hugh's; and at the end of the line her own little white worsted slippers. Last, and sweetest of all, like the children in Austria, she put a lighted candle in her window to guide the dear Christ-child, lest he should stumble in the dark night as he passed up the deserted street. This done, she dropped into bed, a rather tired, but very happy Christmas fairy.

V

Some Other Birds Are Taught to Fly

Before the earliest Ruggles could wake and toot his five-cent tin horn, Mrs. Ruggles was up and stirring about the house, for it was a gala day in the family. Gala day! I should think so! Were not her nine "childern" invited to a dinner-party at the great house, and weren't they going to sit down free and equal with the mightiest in the land? She had been preparing for this grand occasion ever since the receipt of Carol Bird's invitation, which, by the way, had been speedily enshrined in an old photograph frame and hung under the looking-glass in the most prominent place in the kitchen, where it stared the occasional visitor directly in the eye, and made him livid with envy: —

Birds' Nest, December 17, 188-.

Dear Mrs. Ruggles, — I am going to have a dinner-party on Christmas Day, and would like to have all your children come. I want them every one, please, from Sarah Maud to Baby Larry. Mamma says dinner will be at half past five, and the Christmas tree at seven; so you may expect them home at nine o'clock. Wishing you a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year, I am

Yours truly,

Carol Bird

Breakfast was on the table promptly at seven o'clock, and there was very little of it, too; for it was an excellent day for short rations, though Mrs. Ruggles heaved a sigh as she

reflected that the boys, with their India-rubber stomachs, would be just as hungry the day after the dinner-party as if they had never had any at all.

As soon as the scanty meal was over, she announced the plan of the campaign: "Now, Susan, you an' Kitty wash up the dishes; an' Peter, can't yer spread up the beds, so't I can git ter cuttin' out Larry's new suit." I ain't satisfied with his clo'es, an' I thought in the night of a way to make him a dress out o' my old red plaid shawl — kind o' Scotch style, yer know, with the fringe 't the bottom. — Eily, you go find the comb and take the snarls out the fringe, that's a lady! You little young ones clear out from under foot! Clem, you and Con hop into bed with Larry while I wash yer underflannins; 'twon't take long to dry 'em. — Yes, I know it's bothersome, but yer can't go int' s'ciety 'thout takin' some trouble, 'n' anyhow I couldn't git round to 'em last night. — Sarah Maud, I think 'twould be perfeckly han'som' if you ripped them brass buttons off yer uncle's policeman's coat 'n' sewed 'em in a row up the front o' yer green skirt. Susan, you must iron out yours 'n' Kitty's apurns; 'n' there, I come mighty near forgettin' Peory's stockin's! I counted the whole lot last night when I was washin' of 'em, 'n' there ain't but nineteen anyhow yer fix 'em, 'n' no nine pairs mates nohow; 'n' I ain't goin' ter have my childern wear odd stockin's to a dinner-comp'ny, fetched up as I was! — Eily, can't you run out and ask Mis' Cullen ter lend me a pair o' stockin's for Peory, 'u' tell her if she will, Peory'll give Jim half her candy when she gets home. Won't yer, Peory?"

Peoria was young and greedy, and thought the remedy so out of all proportion to the disease, that she set up a deafening howl at the projected bargain — a howl so rebellious and so entirely out of season that her mother started in her direction with flashing eye and uplifted hand; but she let it fall suddenly,

saying, "No, I vow I won't lick ye Christmas Day, if yer drive me crazy; but speak up smart, now, 'n' say whether yer'd ruther give Jim Cullen half yer candy or go bare-legged ter the party? "The matter being put so plainly, Peoria collected her faculties, dried her tears, and chose the lesser evil, Clem having hastened the decision by an affectionate wink, that meant he'd go halves with her on his candy.

"That's a lady!" cried her mother. "Now, you young ones that ain't doin' nothin', play all yer want ter before noontime, for after ye git through eatin' at twelve o'clock me 'n' Sarah Maud's goin' ter give yer sech a washin' 'n' combin' 'n' dressin' as yer never had before 'n' never will agin likely, 'n' then I'm goin' to set yer down 'n' give yer two solid hours trainin' in manners; 'n' 'twon't be no foolin' neither."

"All we've got ter do's go eat!" grumbled Peter.

"Well, that's enough," responded his mother; "there's more'n one way of eatin', let me tell yer, 'n' you've got a heap ter learn about it, Peter Ruggles. Land sakes, I wish you childern could see the way I was fetched up to eat. I never took a meal o' vittles in the kitchen before I married Ruggles; but yer can't keep up that style with nine young ones 'n' yer Pa always off ter sea."

The big Ruggleses worked so well, and the little Ruggleses kept from "under foot" so successfully, that by one o'clock nine complete toilets were laid out in solemn grandeur on the beds. I say, "complete;" but I do not know whether they would be called so in the best society. The law of compensation had been well applied: he that had necktie had no cuffs; she that had sash had no handkerchief, and vice versa; but they all had shoes and a certain amount of clothing, such as it was, the outside layer being in every case quite above criticism.

"Now, Sarah Maud," said Mrs. Ruggles, her face shining with excitement, "everything's red up an' we can begin. I've got a boiler 'n' a kettle 'n' a pot o' hot water. Peter, you go into the back bedroom, 'n' I'll take Susan, Kitty, Peory, 'n' Cornelius; 'n' Sarah Maud, you take Clem, 'n' Eily, 'n' Larry, one to a time. Scrub 'em 'n' rinse 'em, or 't any rate git's fur's yer can with 'em, and then I'll finish 'em off while you do yerself."

Sarah Maud couldn't have scrubbed with any more decision and force if she had been doing floors, and the little Ruggleses bore it bravely, not from natural heroism, but for the joy that was set before them. Not being satisfied, however, with the "tone" of their complexions, and feeling that the number of freckles to the square inch was too many to be tolerated in the highest social circles, she wound up operations by applying a little Bristol brick from the knife-board, which served as the proverbial "last straw," from under which the little Ruggleses issued rather red and raw and out of temper. When the clock struck four they were all clothed, and most of them in their right minds, ready for those last touches that always take the most time.

Kitty's red hair was curled in thirty-four ringlets, Sarah Maud's was braided in one pig-tail, and Susan's and Eily's in two braids apiece, while Peoria's resisted all advances in the shape of hair oils and stuck out straight on all sides, like that of the Circassian girl of the circus — so Clem said; and he was sent into the bedroom for it, too, from whence he was dragged out forgivingly, by Peoria herself, five minutes later. Then, exciting moment, came linen collars for some and neckties and bows for others, — a magnificent green glass breastpin was sewed into Peter's purple necktie, — and Eureka! the Ruggleses were dressed, and Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these!

A row of seats was then formed directly through the middle of the kitchen. Of course, there were not quite chairs enough for ten, since the family had rarely wanted to sit down all at once, somebody always being out or in bed, or otherwise engaged, but the wood-box and the coal-hod finished out the line nicely, and nobody thought of grumbling. The children took their places according to age, Sarah Maud at the head and Larry on the coal-hod, and Mrs. Ruggles seated herself in front, surveying them proudly as she wiped the sweat of honest toil from her brow.

"Well," she exclaimed, "if I do say so as shouldn't, I never see a cleaner, more stylish mess o' childern in my life! I do wish Ruggles could look at ye for a minute! — Larry Ruggles, how many times have I got ter tell yer not ter keep pullin' at yer sash? Haven't I told yer if it comes ontied, yer waist 'n' skirt'll part comp'ny in the middle, 'n' then where'll yer be? — Now look me in the eye, all of yer! I've of'en told yer what kind of a family the McGrills was. I've got reason to be proud, goodness knows! Your uncle is on the police force o' New York city; you can take up the paper most any day an' see his name printed right out — James McGrill, — 'n' I can't have my children fetched up common, like some folks'; when they go out they've got to have clo'es, and learn to act decent! Now I want ter see how yer goin' to behave when yer git there tonight. 'Tain't so awful easy as you think 'tis. Let's start in at the beginnin' 'n' act out the whole business. Pile into the bedroom, there, every last one o' ye, 'n' show me how yer goin' to go int' the parlor. This'll be the parlor, 'n' I'll be Mis' Bird."

The youngsters hustled into the next room in high glee, and Mrs. Ruggles drew herself up in the chair with an infinitely haughty and purse-proud expression that much better suited a descendant of the McGrills than modest Mrs. Bird.

The bedroom was small, and there presently ensued such a clatter that you would have thought a herd of wild cattle had broken loose. The door opened, and they straggled in, all the younger ones giggling, with Sarah Maud at the head, looking as if she had been caught in the act of stealing sheep; while Larry, being last in line, seemed to think the door a sort of gate of heaven which would be shut in his face if he didn't get there in time; accordingly he struggled ahead of his elders and disgraced himself by tumbling in head foremost.

Mrs. Ruggles looked severe. "There, I knew yer'd do it in some sech fool way! Now go in there and try it over again, every last one o' ye, 'n' if Larry can't come in on two legs he can stay ter home. — d' yer hear?"

The matter began to assume a graver aspect; the little Ruggleses stopped giggling and backed into the bedroom, issuing presently with lock step, Indian file, a scared and hunted expression on every countenance.

"No, no, no!" cried Mrs. Ruggles, in despair. "That's worse yet; yer look for all the world like a gang o' pris'ners! There ain't no style ter that: spread out more, can't yer, 'n' act kind o' careless-like — nobody's goin' ter kill ye! That ain't what a dinner-party is!"

The third time brought deserved success, and the pupils took their seats in the row. "Now, yer know," said Mrs. Ruggles impressively, "there ain't enough decent hats to go round, 'n' if there was I don' know's I'd let yer wear 'em, for the boys would never think to take 'em off when they got inside, for they never do — but anyhow, there ain't enough good ones. Now, look me in the eye. You're only goin' jest round the corner; you needn't wear no hats, none of yer, 'n' when yer get int' the parlor, 'n' they ask yer ter lay off yer hats, Sarah Maud must

speak up 'n' say it was sech a pleasant evenin' 'n' sech a short walk that yer left yer hats to home. Now, can yer remember.'' "

All the little Ruggleses shouted, "Yes, marm!" in chorus.

"What have you got ter do with it?" demanded their mother; "did I tell you to say it? Warn't I talkin' ter Sarah Maud?"

The little Ruggleses hung their diminished heads. "Yes, marm," they piped, more discreetly.

"Now we won't leave nothin' to chance; git up, all of ye, an' try it. — Speak up, Sarah Maud."

Sarah Maud's tongue clove to the roof of her mouth.

"Quick!"

"Ma thought — it was — sech a pleasant hat that we'd — we'd better leave our short walk to home," recited Sarah Maud, in an agony of mental effort.

This was too much for the boys. An earthquake of suppressed giggles swept all along the line.

"Oh, whatever shall I do with yer?" moaned the unhappy mother; "I s'pose I've got to learn it to yer! " — which she did, word for word, until Sarah Maud thought she could stand on her head and say it backwards.

"Now, Cornelius, what are you goin' ter say ter make yerself good comp'ny?"

"Do? Me? Dunno!" said Cornelius, turning pale, with unexpected responsibility.

"Well, ye ain't goin' to set there like a bump on a log 'thout sayrn' a word ter pay for yer vittles, air ye? Ask Mis' Bird how she's feelin' this evenin', or if Mr. Bird's hevin' a busy season, or how this kind o' weather agrees with him, or somethin' like

that. — Now we'll make b'lieve we've got ter the dinner — that won't be so hard, 'cause yer'll have somethin' to do — it's awful bothersome to stan' round an' act stylish. — If they have napkins, Sarah Maud down to Peory may put 'em in their laps, 'n' the rest of ye can tuck 'em in yer necks. Don't eat with yer fingers — don't grab no vittles off one 'nother's plates; don't reach out for nothin', but wait till yer asked, 'u' if you never git asked don't git up and grab it. — Don't spill nothin' on the tablecloth, or like's not Mis' Bird'll send yer away from the table — 'n' I hope she will if yer do! (Susan! keep your handkerchief in your lap where Peory can borry it if she needs it, 'n' I hope she'll know when she does need it, though I don't expect it.) Now we'll try a few things ter see how they'll go! Mr. Clement, do you eat cramb'ry sarse?"

"Bet yer life!" cried Clem, who in the excitement of the moment had not taken in the idea exactly and had mistaken this for an ordinary bosom-of-the-family question.

"Clement McGrill Ruggles, do you mean to tell me that you'd say that to a dinner-party? I'll give ye one more chance. Mr. Clement, will you take some of the cramb'ry?"

"Yes, marm, thank ye kindly, if you happen ter have any handy."

"Very good, indeed! But they won't give yer two tries tonight, — yer just remember that! — Miss Peory, do you speak for white or dark meat?"

"I ain't perticler as ter color, — anything that nobody else wants will suit me," answered Peory with her best air.

"First-rate! Nobody could speak more genteel than that. Miss Kitty, will you have hard or soft sarse with your pudden?"

"Hard or soft? Oh! A little of both, if you please, an' I'm much obliged," said Kitty, bowing with decided ease and grace; at which all the other Ruggleses pointed the finger of shame at her, and Peter grunted expressively, that their meaning might not be mistaken.

"You just stop your gruntin', Peter Ruggles; that warn't greedy, that was all right. I wish I could git it inter your heads that it ain't so much what yer say, as the way you say it. And don't keep starin' cross-eyed at your necktie pin, or I'll take it out 'n' sew it on to Clem or Cornelius. Sarah Maud'll keep her eye on it, 'n' if it turns broken side out she'll tell yer. Gracious! I shouldn't think you'd ever seen nor worn no jool'ry in your life. — Eily, you an' Larry's too little to train, so you just look at the rest an' do's they do, 'n' the Lord have mercy on ye 'n' help ye to act decent! Now, is there anything more ye'd like to practice?"

"If yer tell me one more thing, I can't set up an' eat," said Peter gloomily; "I'm so cram full o' manners now I'm ready ter bust, 'thout no dinner at all."

"Me too," chimed in Cornelius.

"Well, I'm sorry for yer both," rejoined Mrs. Ruggles sarcastically; "if the 'mount o' manners yer've got on hand now troubles ye, you're dreadful easy hurt! Now, Sarah Maud, after dinner, about once in so often, you must git up 'n' say, 'I guess we'd better be goin';' 'n' if they say, 'Oh, no, set a while longer,' yer can set; but if they don't say nothin' you've got ter get up 'n' go. — Now hev yer got that int' yer head?"

"About once in so often!" Could any words in the language be fraught with more terrible and wearing uncertainty?

"Well," answered Sarah Maud mournfully, "seems as if this whole dinner-party set right square on top o' me! Mebbe I

could manage my own manners, but to manage nine mannerses is worse 'n staying to home!"

"Oh, don't fret," said her mother, good-naturedly, now that the lesson was over; "I guess you'll git along. I wouldn't mind if folks would only say, 'Oh, childern will be childern;' but they won't. They'll say, 'Land o' Goodness, who fetched them childern up?' — It's quarter past five, 'n' yer can go now: — remember 'bout the hats, — don't all talk ter once, — Susan, lend yer han'k'chief ter Peory, — Peter, don't keep screwin' yer scarf-pin, — Cornelius, hold yer head up straight, — Sarah Maud, don't take yer eyes off o' Larry, 'n' Larry you keep holt o' Sarah Maud 'n' do jest as she says, — 'n' whatever you do, all of yer, never forget for one second that yer mother was a McGrill."

VI

"When the Pie Was Opened, the Birds Began to Sing!"

The children went out of the back door quietly, and were presently lost to sight, Sarah Maud slipping and stumbling along absent-mindedly, as she recited rapidly under her breath, "Itwassuchapleasantevenin'n'suchashortwalk, that wethought we'dleaveourhatstohome.—Itwassuchapleasantevenin'n'such ashortwalk,thatwethoughtwe'dleaveourhatstohome."

Peter rang the door-bell, and presently a servant admitted them, and, whispering something in Sarah's ear, drew her downstairs into the kitchen. The other Ruggleses stood in horror-stricken groups as the door closed behind their commanding officer; but there was no time for reflection, for a voice from above was heard, saying, "Come right up stairs, please!"

"Theirs not to make reply,
Theirs not to reason why.
Theirs but to do or die."

Accordingly they walked upstairs, and Elfrida, the nurse, ushered them into a room more splendid than anything they had ever seen. But, oh woe! where was Sarah Maud! and was it Fate that Mrs. Bird should say, at once, "Did you lay your hats in the hall?'' Peter felt himself elected by circumstance the head of the family, and, casting one imploring look at tongue-tied Susan, standing next him, said huskily, "It was so very pleasant — that — that" — "That we hadn't good hats enough to go 'round," put in little Susan, bravely, to help him out, and then

froze with horror that the ill-fated words had slipped off her tongue.

However, Mrs. Bird said, pleasantly, "Of course you wouldn't wear hats such a short distance — I forgot when I asked. Now will you come right in to Miss Carol's room? She is so anxious to see you."

Just then Sarah Maud came up the back stairs, so radiant with joy from her secret interview with the cook that Peter could have pinched her with a clear conscience; and Carol gave them a joyful welcome. "But where is Baby Larry?" she cried. looking over the group with searching eye. "Didn't he come? "

"Larry! Larry!" Good gracious, where was Larry? They were all sure that he had come in with them, for Susan remembered scolding him for tripping over the door-mat. Uncle Jack went into convulsions of laughter. "Are you sure there were nine of you.'' he asked, merrily.

"I think so, sir," said Peoria, timidly; "but anyhow, there was Larry;" and she showed signs of weeping.

"Oh, well, cheer up!" cried Uncle Jack. "Probably he's not lost — only mislaid. I'll go and find him before you can say Jack Robinson!"

"I'll go, too, if you please, sir," said Sarah Maud, "for it was my place to mind him, an' if he's lost I can't relish my vittles!"

The other Ruggleses stood rooted to the floor. Was this a dinner-party, forsooth; and if so, why were such things ever spoken of as festive occasions?

Sarah Maud went out through the hall, calling, "Larry! Larry!" and without any interval of suspense a thin voice piped up from below, "Here I be!"

The truth was that Larry, being deserted by his natural guardian, dropped behind the rest, and wriggled into the hat-tree to wait for her, having no notion of walking unprotected into the jaws of a fashionable entertainment. Finding that she did not come, he tried to crawl from his refuge and call somebody, when — dark and dreadful ending to a tragic day — he found that he was too much intertwined with umbrellas and canes to move a single step. He was afraid to yell (when I have said this of Larry Ruggles I have pictured a state of helpless terror that ought to wring tears from every eye); and the sound of Sarah Maud's beloved voice, some seconds later, was like a strain of angel music in his ears. Uncle Jack dried his tears, carried him upstairs, and soon had him in breathless fits of laughter, while Carol so made the other Ruggleses forget themselves that they were presently talking like accomplished diners-out.

Carol's bed had been moved into the farthest corner of the room, and she was lying on the outside, dressed in a wonderful dressing-gown that looked like a fleecy cloud. Her golden hair fell in fluffy curls over her white forehead and neck, her cheeks flushed delicately, her eyes beamed with joy, and the children told their mother, afterwards, that she looked as beautiful as the angels in the picture books.

There was a great bustle behind a huge screen in another part of the room, and at half past five this was taken away, and the Christmas dinner-table stood revealed. What a wonderful sight it was to the poor little Ruggles children, who ate their sometimes scanty meals on the kitchen table! It blazed with tall colored candles, it gleamed with glass and silver, it blushed with flowers, it groaned with good things to eat; so it was not strange that the Ruggleses, forgetting altogether that their mother was a McGrill, shrieked in admiration of the fairy

spectacle. But Larry's behavior was the most disgraceful, for he stood not upon the order of his going, but went at once for a high chair that pointed unmistakably to him, climbed up like a squirrel, gave a comprehensive look at the turkey, clapped his hands in ecstasy, rested his fat arms on the table, and cried with joy, "I beat the hull lot o' yer!" Carol laughed until she cried, giving orders, meanwhile, — "Uncle Jack, please sit at the head, Sarah Maud at the foot, and that will leave four on each side; Mamma is going to help Elfrida, so that the children need not look after each other, but just have a good time."

A sprig of holly lay by each plate, and nothing would do but each little Ruggles must leave his seat and have it pinned on by Carol, and as each course was served, one of them pleaded to take something to her. There was hurrying to and fro, I can assure you, for it is quite a difficult matter to serve a Christmas dinner on the third floor of a great city house; but if it had been necessary to carry every dish up a rope ladder the servants would gladly have done so. There were turkey and chicken, with delicious gravy and stuffing, and there were half a dozen vegetables, with cranberry jelly, and celery, and pickles; and as for the way these delicacies were served, the Ruggleses never forgot it as long as they lived.

Peter nudged Kitty, who sat next him, and said, "Look, will yer, ev'ry feller's got his own partic'lar butter; I s'pose that's to show you can eat that 'n' no more. No, it ain't either, for that pig of a Peory's just gettin' another helpin'!"

"Yes," whispered Kitty, "an' the napkins is marked with big red letters! I wonder if that's so nobody'll nip 'em; an' oh, Peter, look at the pictures stickin' right on ter the dishes! Did yee ever?"

"The plums is all took out o' my cramb'ry sarse an' it's friz to a stiff jell'!" whispered Peoria, in wild excitement.

"Hi — yah! I got a wish-bone!" sang Larry, regardless of Sarah Maud's frown; after which she asked to have his seat changed, giving as excuse that he "gen'ally set beside her, an' would feel strange;" the true reason being that she desired to kick him gently, under the table, whenever he passed what might be termed "the McGrill line." "I declare to goodness," murmured Susan, on the other side, "there's so much to look at I can't scarcely eat nothin'!"

"Bet yer life I can!" said Peter, who had kept one servant busily employed ever since he sat down; for, luckily, no one was asked by Uncle Jack whether he would have a second helping, but the dishes were quietly passed under their noses, and not a single Ruggles refused anything that was offered him, even unto the seventh time.

Then, when Carol and Uncle Jack perceived that more turkey was a physical impossibility, the meats were taken off and the dessert was brought in — a dessert that would have frightened a strong man after such a dinner as had preceded it. Not so the Ruggleses — for a strong man is nothing to a small boy — and they kindled to the dessert as if the turkey had been a dream and the six vegetables an optical delusion. There were plum-pudding, mince-pie, and ice-cream; and there were nuts, and raisins and oranges. Kitty chose ice-cream, explaining that she knew it "by sight, though she hadn't never tasted none;" but all the rest took the entire variety, without any regard to consequences.

"My dear child," whispered Uncle Jack, as he took Carol an orange, "there is no doubt about the necessity of this feast, but I do advise you after this to have them twice a year, or quarterly

perhaps, for the way these children eat is positively dangerous; I assure you I tremble for that terrible Peoria. I'm going to run races with her after dinner." "Never mind," laughed Carol; "let them have enough for once; it does my heart good to see them, and they shall come oftener next year."

The feast being over, the Ruggleses lay back in their chairs languidly, like little gorged boa-constrictors, and the table was cleared in a trice. Then a door was opened into the next room, and there, in a corner facing Carol's bed, which had been wheeled as close as possible, stood the brilliantly lighted Christmas tree, glittering with gilded walnuts and tiny silver balloons, and wreathed with snowy chains of pop-corn. The presents had been bought mostly with Carol's story-money, and were selected after long consultations with Mrs. Bird. Each girl had a blue knitted hood, and each boy a red crocheted comforter, all made by Mamma, Carol, and Elfrida. ("Because if you buy everything, it doesn't show so much love," said Carol.) Then every girl had a pretty plaid dress of a different color, and every boy a warm coat of the right size. Here the useful presents stopped, and they were quite enough; but Carol had pleaded to give them something "for fun." "I know they need the clothes," she had said, when they were talking over the matter just after Thanksgiving, "but they don't care much for them, after all. Now, Papa, won't you please let me go without part of my presents this year, and give me the money they would cost, to buy something to amuse the Ruggleses?"

"You can have both," said Mr. Bird, promptly; "is there any need of my little girl's going without her own Christmas, I should like to know? Spend all the money you like."

"But that isn't the thing," objected Carol, nestling close to her father; "it wouldn't be mine. What is the use. Haven't I almost everything already, and am I not the happiest girl in the

world this year, with Uncle Jack and Donald at home. You know very well it is more blessed to give than to receive; so why won't you let me do it? You never look half as happy when you are getting your presents as when you are giving us ours. Now, Papa, submit, or I shall have to be very firm and disagreeable with you!"

"Very well, your Highness, I surrender."

"That's a dear Papa! Now what were you going to give me? Confess!"

"A bronze figure of Santa Claus; and in the 'little round belly that shakes when he laughs like a bowlful of jelly,' is a wonderful clock — oh, you would never give it up if you could see it!"

"Nonsense," laughed Carol; "as I never have to get up to breakfast, nor go to bed, nor catch trains, I think my old clock will do very well! Now, Mamma, what were you going to give me?"

"Oh, I hadn't decided. A few more books, and a gold thimble, and a smelling-bottle, and a music-box, perhaps."

"Poor Carol," laughed the child, merrily, "she can afford to give up these lovely things, for there will still be left Uncle Jack, and Donald, and Paul, and Hugh, and Uncle Rob, and Aunt Elsie, and a dozen other people to fill her Christmas stocking!"

So Carol had her way, as she generally did; but it was usually a good way, which was fortunate, under the circumstances; and Sarah Maud had a set of Miss Alcott's books, and Peter a modest silver watch, Cornelius a tool-chest, Clement a dog-house for his lame puppy, Larry a magnificent Noah's ark, and each of the younger girls a beautiful doll.

You can well believe that everybody was very merry and very thankful. All the family, from Mr. Bird down to the cook, said that they had never seen so much happiness in the space of three hours; but it had to end, as all things do. The candles flickered and went out, the tree was left alone with its gilded ornaments, and Mrs. Bird sent the children downstairs at half past eight, thinking that Carol looked tired.

"Now, my darling, you have done quite enough for one day," said Mrs. Bird, getting Carol into her little nightgown. "I'm afraid you will feel worse tomorrow, and that would be a sad ending to such a charming evening."

"Oh, wasn't it a lovely, lovely time," sighed Carol. "From first to last, everything was just right. I shall never forget Larry's face when he looked at the turkey; nor Peter's when he saw his watch; nor that sweet, sweet Kitty's smile when she kissed her dolly; nor the tears in poor, dull Sarah Maud's eyes when she thanked me for her books nor" --

"But we mustn't talk any longer about it tonight," said Mrs. Bird, anxiously; "you are too tired, dear."

"I am not so very tired, Mamma. I have felt well all day; not a bit of pain anywhere. Perhaps this has done me good."

"Perhaps; I hope so. There was no noise or confusion; it was just a merry time. Now, may I close the door and leave you alone, dear? Papa and I will steal in softly by and by to see if you are all right; but I think you need to be very quiet."

"Oh, I'm willing to stay by myself; but I am not sleepy yet, and I am going to hear the music, you know."

"Yes, I have opened the window a little, and put the screen in front of it, so that you won't feel the air."

"Can I have the shutters open? and won't you turn my bed, please? This morning I woke ever so early, and one bright, beautiful star shone in that eastern window. I never noticed it before, and I thought of the Star in the East, that guided the wise men to the place where the baby Jesus was. Good-night, Mamma. Such a happy, happy day!"

"Good-night, my precious Christmas Carol — mother's blessed Christmas child."

"Bend your head a minute, mother dear," whispered Carol, calling her mother back. "Mamma, dear, I do think that we have kept Christ's birthday this time just as He would like it. Don't you?"

"I am sure of it," said Mrs. Bird, softly.

VII

The Birdling Flies Away

The Ruggleses had finished a last romp in the library with Paul and Hugh, and Uncle Jack had taken them home and stayed a while to chat with Mrs. Ruggles, who opened the door for them, her face all aglow with excitement and delight. When Kitty and Clem showed her the oranges and nuts that they had kept for her, she astonished them by saying that at six o'clock Mrs. Bird had sent her in the finest dinner she had ever seen in her life; and not only that, but a piece of dress-goods that must have cost a dollar a yard if it cost a cent.

As Uncle Jack went down the rickety steps he looked back into the window for a last glimpse of the family, as the children gathered about their mother, showing their beautiful presents again and again, — and then upward to a window in the great house yonder. "A little child shall lead them," he thought.

"Well, if — if anything ever happens to Carol, I will take the Ruggleses under my wing."

"Softly, Uncle Jack," whispered the boys, as he walked into the library a while later. "We are listening to the music in the church. The choir has sung 'Carol, brothers, carol,' and now we think the organist is beginning to play 'My ain countree' for Carol."

"I hope she hears it," said Mrs. Bird; "but they are very late tonight, and I dare not speak to her lest she should be asleep. It is almost ten o'clock."

The boy soprano, clad in white surplice, stood in the organ loft. The light shone full upon his crown of fair hair, and his pale

face, with its serious blue eyes, looked paler than usual. Perhaps it was something in the tender thrill of the voice, or in the sweet words, but there were tears in many eyes both in the church and in the great house next door.

"I am far frae my hame,
I am weary aften whiles
For the langed-for hame-bringin'.
An' my Faether's welcome smiles
An' I'll ne'er be fu' content.
Until my e'en do see
The gowden gates o' heaven
In my ain countree.

"The earth is decked wi' flow'rs,
Mony tinted, fresh an' gay.
An' the birdies warble blythely.
For my Faether made them sae;
But these sights an' these soun's
Will as naething be to me,
When I hear the angels singin'
In my ain countree.

'Like a bairn to its mither,
A wee birdie to its nest,
I fain would be gangin' noo
Unto my Faether' s breast;
For He gathers in His arms
Helpless, worthless lambs like me.
An' carries them Himsel'
To his ain countree."

There were tears in many eyes, but not in Carol's. The loving heart had quietly ceased to beat, and the "wee birdie" in the great house had flown to its "home nest." Carol had fallen asleep! But as to the song, I think perhaps, I cannot say, she heard it after all!

So sad an ending to a happy day! Perhaps — to those who were left; and yet Carol's mother, even in the freshness of her grief, was glad that her darling had slipped away on the loveliest day of her life, out of its glad content, into everlasting peace.

She was glad that she had gone as she had come, on the wings of song, when all the world was brimming over with joy; glad of every grateful smile, of every joyous burst of laughter, of every loving thought and word and deed the dear last day had brought.

Sadness reigned, it is true, in the little house behind the garden; and one day poor Sarah Maud, with a courage born of despair, threw on her hood and shawl, walked straight to a certain house a mile away, up the marble steps into good Dr. Bartol's office, falling at his feet as she cried, "Oh, sir, it was me an' our children that went to Miss Carol's last dinner-party, an' if we made her worse we can't never be happy again!" Then the kind old gentleman took her rough hand in his and told her to dry her tears, for neither she nor any of her flock had hastened Carol's flight; indeed, he said that had it not been for the strong hopes and wishes that filled her tired heart, she could not have stayed long enough to keep that last merry Christmas with her dear ones.

And so the old years, fraught with memories, die, one after another, and the new years, bright with hopes, are born to take their places; but Carol lives again in every chime of Christmas

bells that peal glad tidings, and in every Christmas anthem sung by childish voices.

The Life and Adventures Of Santa Claus

by
Amelia C. Houghton

Draw close to the fire, all you who believe in the spirit of Christmas, whether you call it Santa Claus, or simply good will to men; and listen to the story of Nicholas the Wandering Orphan who became Nicholas the Woodcarver, a lover of little children. Follow him through his first years as a lonely little boy, who had the knack of carving playthings for children; then as a young man, busy over the little toys; then as a prosperous, fat, rosy old man, who overcomes all sorts of difficulties in order to attain his ambition, a toy for every child in the village. Learn how he started to drive a beautiful sleigh drawn by prancing reindeer; why he first came down a chimney; how he filled the first stocking; where the first Christmas tree was decorated; and finally how he came to be known as "Saint Nicholas" and "Santa Claus."

Chapter 1
Nicholas Loses His Family

Once upon a time, hundreds and hundreds of years ago, in a little village on the shores of the Baltic Sea, there lived a poor fisherman and his wife and their two children—a four-year-old son, Nicholas, and a tiny baby girl, Katje. They were only poor fisherfolk, and their home was a simple, one-room cottage, built of heavy stone blocks to keep out the freezing north wind, but it was a cheery little place in spite of the poverty of its occupants, because all the hearts there were loving and happy.

On cold winter nights, after the fisherman had come home from his hard day's work out on the open sea, the little family would gather around the broad open fireplace,—the father stretching his tired limbs before the warm fire, puffing peacefully at his after-supper pipe, the mother knitting busily and casting now and then a watchful eye on the two children playing on the floor. Nicholas was busy over a tiny piece of wood, which he had decked with gay bits of cloth and worsted, while little Katje watched him with round, excited blue eyes, finally reaching out her eager, fat little hands to take the doll Brother Nicholas had made for her. The glad crowing of the baby over her new toy aroused the father, who turned to look at the scene with amused eyes, and then a rather disapproving shake of the head.

"Eh, Mother," he said, "I'd rather see Nicholas down at the boats with me learning to mend a net than fussing with little girls' toys and forever carrying Katje about with him. 'Tisn't natural for a boy to be so. Now when . . . "

"Hush, man," interrupted the woman. "Nicholas is hardly more than a baby himself, and it's a blessing that he takes such care of Katje. I feel perfectly safe about her when she's playing with her brother; he's so gentle and sweet to her. Time enough for him to be a fisherman when he grows too old to play with his baby sister."

"True enough, wife. He's a good lad, and he'll be a better man for learning to be kind to little ones."

So for another year Nicholas went on fashioning rude little playthings for Katje, and the mother went about her many household tasks busily and happily, and the father continued earning his family's daily bread in the teeth of biting gales and wild seas. In this way the little family might have gone on for years, until the father and mother had grown old, until Katje had become a beautiful young maiden taking the burden of the housework from her mother's shoulders, and until Nicholas had become a tall, strong youth, going out every day in his father's little fishing boat. All this might have been, but for the events of one wild, tragic night.

Little Katje lay in her crib tossing feverishly. The mother bent over her fearfully, taking her eyes from the hot little face only to glance anxiously now and then towards the door, and straining her ears between each wail of the sick baby for sounds of footsteps on the stone walk outside the cottage. For the father was late, — late tonight of all nights, when he was needed to run to the other end of the town for the doctor. As the minutes dragged on, the storm outside grew in fury, and the fear in the woman's heart over the absence of her husband and the painful whimpering of the child finally goaded her into action. She arose from her position beside the crib and swiftly putting her shawl over her shoulders, spoke to Nicholas, who was trying to comfort little Katje.

"Listen, my son," she said quickly, "your father is late and I'll have to go for the doctor myself. I'll have to leave you alone with Katje. You'll take care of her, won't you, Nicholas, until Mother gets back? Just see that she stays covered, and wet this cloth now and then for her poor, hot little forehead."

Nicholas nodded solemnly—of course he would take care of Katje. The mother patted his head and smiled, and then was out in the wet, black, windy night. And Nicholas watched Katje until she suddenly stopped tossing the coverings aside, and her hot little forehead grew cooler and cooler and then cold to his touch; and as the embers in the fireplace grew black and then gray, his head nodded, and he fell asleep on the floor beside the crib.

And that's the way the villagers found him the next morning, when they carried home his father, drowned when his boat was caught in the storm, and his mother, stricken down by a falling tree. So, of the once happy little family of four, there was now only Nicholas, the orphan.

Chapter 2
His First Christmas Gift

The fishermen of the village smoked one pipe after another, and scratched their heads for a long time over the problem; their good wives gathered together and clacked their tongues as busily as their knitting needles; and the main topic of every conversation was— "What is to become of that boy Nicholas?"

"Of course," said fat Kristin, wife of Hans, the rope-maker, "no one wants to see the child go hungry or leave him out in the cold; but with five little ones of our own, I don't see how we can take him in."

"Yes," chimed in Mistress Elena Grozik, "and with the long winter well set in, and the men barely able to go out in the boats, no fisherman's family knows for certain where the next piece of bread is coming from. And with the scarcity of fuel . . ."

All the ladies shivered and drew closer to Greta Bavran's comfortable log fire, and sighed heavily over their knitting. Mistress Greta arose and poked the fire thoughtfully.

"We could take him for a while," she meditated aloud. "Jan had many a good catch last season, and we have somewhat laid by for the winter. We have only the three children, and there's that cot in the storehouse where he could sleep . . . Mind you," she interrupted herself sharply as she noticed the look of relief spreading over the others' faces, "mind you, we might not have a crust to eat ourselves next winter, and besides, I think everybody in the village should have a share in this."

"Quite right, Mistress Bavran," spoke up another. Then, turning to the group, "Why can't we all agree that each one of us here will take Nicholas into her home for, say a year, then let him change to another family, and so on until he reaches an age when he can fend for himself?"

"I suppose Olaf and I can manage for one winter," said one woman thoughtfully.

"You may count on me," added another. "Not for a few years, though; we have too many babies in the house now. I'll wait until Nicholas gets a bit older."

Greta Bavran gave the last speaker a sharp look. "Yes, when he's able to do more work," she muttered under her breath. Then aloud—"There are ten of us here now. If we each agree to take Nicholas for a year, that will take care of him until he's fifteen, and without a doubt, he'll run away to sea long before that."

The ladies laughed approvingly, then feeling very virtuous at having provided for Nicholas until he reached the age of fifteen, they arose, wrapped up their knitting, and proceeded to wrap themselves up in shawls and woolens before going out into the sharp winter air.

"Will you find my Jan at the shop, and tell him to fetch Nicholas from the Widow Lufvitch where he's been staying?" called Greta after the last woman.

"That I will, Greta; then I must hurry to my baking. I almost forgot the Christmas feast tomorrow, with all this talk about the orphan."

So it was that Nicholas came to his first home-for-a-year on Christmas Eve, to kindly people who tried their best to make a lonely little five-year old boy forget the tragic events of the past

week. In spite of the festivities of the day, he curled himself up in a corner of the storeroom, and with heartbroken sobs for his lost mother and father and beloved Katje, tried to drown out the sounds of merrymaking in the cottage. But the door opened, and a little form was seen in the ray of light.

"What do you want?" asked Nicholas almost roughly. "Go away; I want to be alone."

The other little boy's mouth quivered. "My boat's broken," he cried, "my new boat I got for the Christmas feast, and Father's gone out, and Mother can't fix it." He held up a toy fishing boat.

Nicholas dried his eyes on his sleeves and took the broken toy in his hands. "I'll fix it for you," and he turned back to his corner.

"Oh, come in here where there's more light," said the youngest Bavran.

So Nicholas went in where there was more light, and more children, and more laughter.

As the year passed, the little boy gradually forgot his grief in the busy, happy life of the Bavran household. The other three children played with him, quarreled with him, and came to accept him as one of themselves. Nicholas, in his turn, was not too young to appreciate the happy year he spent with his new brother and sisters, and when he heard talk in the household that Christmas Day would soon bring to a close his stay with the Bavrans, his mind was confused with many different thoughts. There was sorrow in his heart at leaving, a fear of what unknown life was awaiting him in the next house, and a growing desire to do something, no matter how small, to show his benefactors how much he loved them and their children. The only things he owned in the world were the

clothes he wore, an extra coat and trousers, a sea-chest and a jack-knife which had belonged to his father. He couldn't part with any of these, and yet he wanted to leave some little gift. A happy thought struck him—Katje had always loved the little dolls and animals he had made for her out of bits of wood; maybe now, with the help of the jack-knife, he could fashion something even better. So, for the last two weeks of his stay, he worked secretly in the dark storeroom, hiding his knife and wood when he heard anybody approaching, and struggling furiously the last few days so that all would be finished by Christmas morning; because, since it was Christmas when the Bavrans had taken him last winter, he must be passed along in exactly a year's time.

The toys finally were finished. Nicholas gave them a last loving polish, and looked at them admiringly—a handsome doll, dressed in a bright red skirt, for Margret, the eldest; a little doll-chair, with three straight legs and one not so straight, for the next little girl, Gretchen; and a beautiful sleigh for his playmate, Otto.

So the next day, when the three children were weeping loudly as they watched the little sea-chest being packed, and their father was waiting at the door to take Nicholas to Hans the rope-maker's house, the departing orphan slowly drew from behind his back the rough little toys he had made, and forgot to cry himself as he watched the glee with which the children welcomed their gifts. And a lovely glow seemed to spread itself over his heart when he heard their thanks and saw their happy faces.

"Well, I'll be going now. Good-by, Margret; good-by, Gretchen; good-by, Otto. Next year I can make the toys better. I'll make you some next Christmas, too."

And with this promise, Nicholas bravely turned his back on the happy scene, to face another year someplace else. His small form looked smaller still as he trudged along in the snow beside the tall figure of Jan Bavran. His thin brown face, surrounded by a shock of yellow hair, seemed older than his six years, saddened as it was by this parting, but the blue eyes were still gay and warm at the thought of the happiness he had left behind him.

"Well," he thought to himself as they approached the rope-maker's house, "maybe the five children here will be just as nice to me as the Bavrans, and I can make toys for them, too. Christmas can be a happy day for me, too, even if it is my moving day."

Chapter 3
The Race for a Sled

The Christmas days that followed were happy, not only for Nicholas, but for all the children he met in his travels from house to house. At the rope-maker's cottage, most of the winter evenings were spent by the children learning to wind and untangle masses of twine, and to do most of the simple net-mending. Nicholas discovered that by loosening strands of flaxen-colored hemp he could make the most realistic hair for the little wooden dolls he still found time to carve. When he left at the end of the year on Christmas Day, the rope-maker's five little children found five little toys waiting for them on the mantel of their fireplace, and Nicholas did not forget his promise to the three Bavrans, but made a special trip to their house Christmas morning with their gifts.

And so it happened, as the years went on, and Nicholas grew more and more skillful with his father's jack-knife, that the children of each household came to expect one of Nicholas' toys on Christmas Day. Not one child was ever disappointed, for the young wood-carver had a faculty for remembering exactly what each child liked. Fishermen's sons received toy boats built just as carefully as the larger boats their fathers owned; little girls were delighted with dolls that had "real hair," and with little chairs and tables where they could have real tea-parties.

All this time, Nicholas had been busy with many other things besides toy-making. As he grew into a tall, strong boy, there were many tasks in which he had his share, and which he did willingly and well. In the spring, he learned to dig and plant

the hard northern soil with the vegetables the family lived on during the winter; all summer he helped with the boats, mended nets, took care of chickens, cows, horses, and in one well-to-do household, even reindeer. He was an especial favorite with the mothers, because the babies and younger children would flock to Nicholas, who would play with them and care for them, thus giving the tired mothers a chance to attend to the housework. During the winter months, Nicholas attended school with the other boys and girls of the village, learning his A B C's in exchange for carrying in the wood for the schoolmaster's fire.

So on one particular winter's day we find Nicholas on his way to school, trudging along a snowy country road, dragging behind him a sled loaded with logs of wood. He is now fourteen years old, a tall, thin boy, dressed in the long, heavy tunic coat of the village, home-knit woolen leggings, and a close-fitting black cap pulled down over his yellow hair. His eyes are blue and twinkling, and his cheeks rosy from the keen winter air. He whistles happily, because, although in a week it will be Christmas-time once more, and he will have to make his final change, he remembers the chest full of finished toys—one for every child in the village. It is the first year he has been able to do this, and the thought of his trips on Christmas morning, when he will personally deliver to every child one of his famous toys, makes him almost skip along, burdened though he is with the heavy sled of wood.

Finally he reached the yard of the schoolmaster's cottage, and was immediately attracted by the group of schoolboys, who, instead of running about playing their usual games and romping in the snow, were gathered together in one big group, excitedly discussing something. As Nicholas entered the yard,

they rushed over to him and began talking all at once, their faces aglow with the wonderful news they had to tell.

"Oh, Nicholas, there's going to be a race . . ."

". . . on sleds—Christmas morning—and the Squire is going . . ."

". . . He's going to give a prize to the one who . . ."

"No, let me tell him. Nicholas, listen. It's going to start . . ."

Nicholas turned a bewildered look from one eager speaker to another.

"What are you all trying to say? One at a time, there. Let Otto talk. Otto, what's all this about a prize, and races, and the Squire?"

Otto drew a long, important breath, and began to talk fast so no one would interrupt him.

"There's going to be a big sled race on Christmas morning. All the boys are to start with their sleds at the Squire's gate at the top of the hill, and the first one who gets back to the big pine behind the Squire's vegetable garden on the other side of the house wins the prize—and—what is the prize? A big new sled . . ."

"With steel runners!" all the boys chorused delightedly.

"With steel runners!" echoed Nicholas in an awed whisper. "Go on, Otto. How are you supposed to go up a hill on a sled? And where else does the race go?"

Otto frowned at the others for silence, and continued. "Well, you coast down the long hill, and that will carry you across the frozen creek at the bottom. Then there's that patch of trees near the woodcutter's cottage. Well, here's where the fun comes in. Every place you can't coast, you have to pull or

carry your sled. There are about three fences to go over— the Groziks', the Bavrans', and the Pavlicks'; then you have to go through the Black Wood, where you know there are some clear, hilly stretches, and other places where you can't coast because of the trees. After you go through the wood, there's a long slide down to the village pasture; then you go back across the creek at the rapids, where it isn't frozen, then up the long hill behind the Squire's to the big pine. There, how's that for a race?"

Otto paused for breath triumphantly, and the others all started in again.

"Nicholas, you'll enter, won't you? That's not a bad sled you have, even if you did . . ."

"Hush, Jan," whispered another. "It isn't nice to remind Nicholas that he made his own sled, just because our fathers had ours made for us."

But Nicholas was not listening to the conversation. He was thinking swiftly. Finally he turned to the others and asked, "What time does the race begin?"

"Nine o'clock sharp on Christmas morning," was the answer.

Nicholas shook his head doubtfully.

"I don't know whether I can be there," he said slowly. He was thinking of the chest full of toys he had planned to deliver to almost every house in the village. He had so many chores to do when he got up in the morning, that he didn't see how he could possibly finish his work, make his rounds with the gifts, and still be in time for the start of the race at nine o'clock.

The other boys looked at him, suddenly silenced by the thought that came to every mind. They knew what Nicholas

was thinking of when he said he wasn't sure that he'd be there, and although every child had come to expect a toy from Nicholas on Christmas morning, these boys were too embarrassed to put into words the fact that because Nicholas was so good to them, and especially to their smaller brothers and sisters, he might not be able to enter this race, which was so exciting to every boy's heart. And for all his gentleness, Nicholas was a real boy, and felt the desire to enter this race and win the big sled with steel runners, just as much as any boy present.

"By getting up very early, and hurrying, I could get there," he was thinking. "If it only weren't for the doll I have to bring to Elsa, away outside the village . . . Oh, I have it!" his eyes gleamed with excitement. He suddenly remembered that Elsa's father was the wood-cutter, and that their cottage was right in the path of the race. The doll could easily be dropped off in a few seconds, and he could continue.

"I'll be there! I'll be there! At nine o'clock sharp, and then you'd better watch out for the prize," he shouted gleefully. "My old home-made sled may be heavy for the pulls and the places we have to carry, but that will make it all the faster on the coasts. I'll go by you just like this!"

And he made a lunge past little Josef Ornoff, which tumbled the astonished little fellow into a deep snowbank. All the other boys laughingly piled Nicholas in with Josef, and the whole meeting broke up in a fast and furious snow battle.

* * * * * * *

When the children of the village arose on Christmas morning, they found a bright sun streaming in through the cottage windows and gleaming on the hard crusted snow on the roads. But they also found that Nicholas had been there,

and probably even before the sun, because every doorway in the village was heaped with the little toys—the result of a whole year's work. After the excitement over the gifts, all the boys made an anxious last-minute inspection of their sleds, made a trial run or two, and then the whole village started in a body for the starting-point of the race.

Nicholas, meanwhile, was back in his little shed, desperately working on a broken runner. It had collapsed at the last house under the strain of the extra-heavy burden of wooden toys, and even as Nicholas was feverishly lashing heavy bits of rope and twisted cord around the bottom of his sled, he could hear the faint echo of the horn from the Squire's house at the top of the hill, announcing the start of the race. He could have sobbed with disappointment, because he knew that he never could get there in time to start with the others, but he also realized he had to get to the wood-cutter's house anyway, so he turned the mended sled upright, and made a mad dash for the hilltop, where he found the villagers already looking excitedly after a group of black specks speeding down the hill, and shouting words of encouragement at the racers. As Nicholas panted his way through the crowd, they all made way for him, with loud expressions of sympathy that he hadn't arrived there in time.

"Come on, Nicholas lad," shouted Jan Bavran. "I vow I'd rather see you win than my own Otto. Here, men, let's give him a good push. One— two—three—off he goes!"

And down the hill sped Nicholas, his face and eyes stinging in the swift rush of wind, his hands cleverly steering the heavy sled which gained more and more speed so that the wooden runners seemed hardly to touch the packed snow. On and on he went, swifter and swifter; and now his eyes glowed with excitement as he saw that the boys' figures ahead of him were

black specks no longer, and that he must have gained a good bit of ground.

Then, as the hill sloped more gently and the pace slackened, he noticed something ahead which puzzled him. The boys had all stopped on the other side of the frozen creek! Instead of going on through the patch of woods on the other side, they had, one and all, calmly alighted from their sleds, and were now standing stock-still, watching Nicholas approach. As his sled slowed down, and finally stopped, he looked bewilderedly from one to another, and started "What in the world . . . "

"Come on, Nicholas," spoke up little Josef; "we would have waited for you at the top, but the Squire got impatient and made us start when the horn blew. But of course you knew we'd wait for you."

"Yes," shouted Otto, "go throw that doll in Elsa's doorway, and then let's go! And from now on, see how long we'll wait for you! First come, first served with the sled with the steel runners!"

Nicholas put his hand on the nearest boy's shoulder. His eyes glistened with moisture, but it must have been from the sharp wind on the coast. He didn't say anything, but he was so happy at this boyish way of showing friendship that his heart was full.

Twenty boys delivered a doll to astonished little Elsa, and then, with a wild shout, they were off again, dragging their sleds after them, knocking against tree-trunks, getting their ropes tangled in low scrubby bushes, stumbling over rocks, climbing over fences, jumping on now and then for a stretch of coasting, bumping each other—laughing, excited, eager, happy boys!

And Nicholas was the happiest of all, even though his sled was heavy to pull and clumsy to lift over fences. (His friends had waited for him!) Up would go the strong young arms and the sled was over the fence into the next field. (They did like him, even though he was an orphan and had no house of his own, but had to be passed around!) Over a steep grade he would drag the sled and then fling himself down for a wild rush. (And he had finished his morning's work too; every child in the village was playing with a toy Nicholas had made!) The long slide down to the village pasture with only one boy ahead of him! (I'll show them; I'll never let a Christmas pass without visiting every child in the village!) Now carrying the heavy sled on his shoulders while he felt slowly for a foothold on the flat stones of the part of the creek that was not frozen; he was the first boy to cross! (Up at the top of the hill, there's a beautiful sled with steel runners. It's big! It will hold twice as many toys as this old thing.) Up the hill, panting, hot, yellow locks flying in the wind, digging his toes in the hard snow, pulling for dear life at "the old thing," turning around excitedly once or twice to see how close the next boy was; then—suddenly, he heard the shouts of the villagers and he was at the top! He leaned against the big pine; he was home— he had won the race!

The big sled with steel runners was beautiful, but it was more beautiful still to see the defeated boys pulling Nicholas home on his prize, while the littler children hopped on behind and climbed lovingly all over the victor, and each mother and father smiled proudly as though it had been their own son who had won the race.

Chapter 4
The Night Before Christmas

After the crowd of villagers had dispersed on that merry Christmas Day of the race, Nicholas was stopped at the door of the fisherman's cottage he had lived in for a year, by a lean, dark-looking man who looked as though he had never smiled in his life. He had deep lines in his forehead, shaggy gray eyebrows which overhung and almost completely hid his deep-set gray eyes, and a mouth which went down at the corners, giving him an expression of grouchiness which never seemed to change. It was Bertran Marsden, the wood-carver of the village, and all the children called him Mad Marsden, because he lived alone, spoke to hardly anybody in the town, and chased the children away from his door with black looks and harsh words.

He now edged up to Nicholas, who was busy dragging his beloved new sled to his work-shed behind the house.

"You haven't forgotten, Nicholas, that you move to my house today," Marsden said gruffly.

Nicholas looked up. No, he had not forgotten, and he well knew why Marsden had offered to take him in for the last year of his life as a wandering orphan. The old wood-carver had no children for Nicholas to take care of, he did no farming or fishing, and therefore did not need a boy to help him out in that direction. The only reason he was willing, even eager, to feed and clothe the orphan was because for almost five years now he had watched the work Nicholas had been doing with his knife and carved woods, and realized that he could get a good

apprentice cheap, without paying even a cent for the good work he knew he could get out of him.

Knowing all these things, and thinking of the bleak little cottage he would have to live in for a year, where there was no laughter and sound of children's voices, it was with a heavy heart that Nicholas piled up his few belongings in the new sled, said a grateful farewell to the family he was leaving, and followed Mad Marsden home to the low, mean-looking cottage on the outskirts of the village.

On entering the cottage, he stepped immediately into the main workroom of the wood-carver. Here were found his bench, his table, his tools, and his woods. A broad fireplace almost filled another side of the room, and black pots and greasy kettles showed plainly that no scouring housewife had set foot in the cottage for years. A pile of tumbled blankets in one corner was evidently Marsden's bed, and near the window was a table, littered with the remains of his morning meal. These and a few rickety chairs completed the furnishings of this one dark room.

Marsden led the way in and pointed to a door in the corner.

"You can stow your belongings in there," he said over his shoulder to Nicholas, who was standing in the middle of the untidy room, looking around him in dismay. "There's a cot you can sleep on, and you may as well put that pretty sled away for good. We have no time here to go romping in the snow."

Nicholas nodded silently, too puzzled at the old man's living quarters to be hurt by the harsh words. He could not understand why Marsden should live so meanly, because, as the only wood-carver in the village, he was kept busy all the time filling orders for his hand-carved tables, chairs, cabinets, bridal chests, sleighs, and several other useful household

articles that the villagers were in constant need of. The poorer people paid him in flour, vegetables, fish—whatever they could send him; the more well-to-do gave him good gold coin for his work. Not only that, but it was a well-known fact that he did work for the people in two or three neighboring villages, where there was no other wood-carver. In spite of the fact, then, that he probably had more money than any of the poor fishermen in the village, his cottage was meaner and shabbier than any of the well-scrubbed houses in which Nicholas had spent the past nine years.

"Come now, Nicholas, don't stand there gawking. Put away your belongings; you have much to learn here. I'm going to make a good wood-carver of you. No time for silly little dolls and wooden horses; you'll have to earn your keep here. And mind you, I won't have this place filled with screaming little brats. You keep that tribe of young ones that's always following you about out of here, do you understand?"

His eyes gleamed fiercely beneath the shaggy brows. Nicholas stammered in a frightened voice, "Yes—yes, master. But," he pleaded, suddenly struck by the thought that he might not see any of his little friends anymore, "but they don't do any harm, the children—they only like to watch me work, and I wouldn't let them get in your way or touch anything . . ."

"Silence!" roared the old man, shaking his fists in the air and glaring at the frightened boy. "I won't have 'em, do you understand? I want to be alone. I wouldn't have you here if the work didn't pile up so that I need a helper. But you'll have to work, and there'll be no time for Christmas visits to children and all that nonsense."

Nicholas bowed his head and went silently to work putting away his small bundle of clothing, his few books, his father's

sea-chest and jack-knife. The year ahead of him stretched forth bleakly, and only the thought that he was now fourteen years old and almost a man kept him from crying himself to sleep that night in his dark, cold little room.

So Nicholas started to work for the mad old wood-carver, and learned many things. He learned that his father's old jack-knife was a clumsy tool compared with the beautiful sharp knives and wheels that Marsden used; he learned to work for hours, bent over the bench beside his master, patiently going over and over one stick of wood until it was planed to the exact hundredth of an inch that his teacher required; he learned to keep on working even though the back of his neck almost shrieked with pain, and the muscles of his arms and hands grew lame from so much steady labor. All this he grew used to in time, for he was a strong, sturdy lad, and young enough so that his muscles became accustomed to the hard work; but what he felt he never could get used to was the dreadful loneliness of the place. His friends, the children, gradually gave up trying to see him after they had been shooed away from the door by the cross old wood-carver; Marsden himself rarely talked, except to give brief instructions about the work, or to scold him for some mistake. So Nicholas was sad and lonely, and longed for the days when he had been in friendly cottages, surrounded by a laughing group of children.

In addition to his duties at the work-bench, he also attempted to straighten out the two miserable little rooms where they lived. Marsden was surprised one morning on awakening to discover that Nicholas, who had risen two hours earlier, had swept and scrubbed the floor and hearthstone, taken down the dirty hangings from the two little windows and had them airing in the yard, and was now busily scrubbing with clean sea-sand the dirt-incrusted pots and pans. The table was

set in front of the fire with a clean white cloth and dishes, and the kettle was bubbling merrily on the hearth.

Marsden opened his mouth to speak, then closed it without saying a word. Nicholas took the kettle from the fire, poured the boiling water over the tea-leaves, spread some bread with fresh, sweet butter, and said simply, "Your breakfast, master."

Marsden ate wordlessly, looking at Nicholas from under his wild eyebrows. The boy went on with his work, which consisted now in bundling up the tumbled bed-clothing and throwing it over a line in the yard. Marsden finished his breakfast and finally spoke.

"You'll find some meal in that corner cupboard," he said. "We might have some porridge tomorrow morning." Nicholas nodded. "Now, stop all that woman's work and let's get on with that chest. I've promised it for next Wednesday, and even if that silly Enid Grondin is fool enough to get married, we must have our work out when it is promised."

But after that morning, Marsden was careful to shake out his bed-clothing after he arose, and to clean up the dishes after his breakfast. And the cottage gradually came to look more like a place where human beings could live.

One night, as Marsden sat in front of his fire, silently smoking his long pipe, he noticed that Nicholas was still bent over the work-bench.

"Here, lad," he said almost kindly, in his gruff voice, "I'm not such a hard master that I have you work night as well as day. What's that you're doing? Why don't you go to your bed, hey?"

Nicholas answered hastily. "It's just a piece of wood you threw away, master, and I thought I'd see if I could copy that

fine chair you made for Mistress Grozik. This is a little one—a toy," he ended fearfully; for he well knew that the word "toy" would mean children to old Marsden, and for some strange reason just to mention a child in his presence sent him into a rage.

Tonight, however, he contented himself with merely a black look, and said, "Let me see it. Hmm—not bad, but you have that scroll on the back bigger on one side than the other. Here, give me that knife."

Nicholas hastened with the tool, and watched admiringly as the old wood-carver deftly corrected the mistake.

"There," Marsden said finally, holding his work away from him, "that's the way it should be done."

Then, instead of handing the little chair to Nicholas, who was waiting expectantly, he continued holding it in his hands, while a bitter and yet rather sad expression came into the fierce old eyes, and a smile,—Nicholas blinked and looked again,—yes, a real smile was tugging at the corners of that stern mouth which had been turned down for so many years.

"It's a long time since I made one of these wee things," he murmured half to himself. "Yet I made plenty, years and years ago, when they were little."

Nicholas ventured a timid question. "When who were little, master?"

The corners of Marsden's mouth went down again; his eyes turned fierce and angry once more. "My sons," he roared. "I once had two sons, and when they were as big as you, they ran away to sea, and left me all alone, left me to grow old and crabbed, so the children call me Mad Marsden. Children, bah! Do you wonder why I'll have none of them around my house?

Do you wonder when I can't stand their baby voices babbling around here, where once . . ." His voice broke, and he buried his old head in his hands.

Nicholas wasn't afraid of him anymore; he went over and put his pitying young hands on the old shoulders. "I'll be your son, master; I won't leave you," he whispered.

Marsden lifted his head, and looked at the strong young face with the kind blue eyes bent over him. "You're a good lad, Nicholas. And," he added almost shyly, for it wasn't easy for a harsh man to change so quickly, "I think I'd like to help you with some of those little things you make. We'll make them together these long winter evenings, eh, shall we, Nicholas? So you can go around next Christmas Day in that fine sled of yours. Then you won't leave me alone again, will you, lad?"

He grasped Nicholas' arm almost roughly, then a peaceful expression crept into the lonely old face as the boy answered simply, "No, master, I'll stay here with you just as long as you want me."

So every winter evening saw two heads bent over the work-bench—a gray head with thick, shaggy hair, and the smooth yellow head of the boy. They worked feverishly during the weeks preceding Christmas; and with the old man helping with the carving, Nicholas was able to add delicate little touches to the toys which made them far more handsome than any he had ever made before. He painted the dolls' faces so that their eyes were as blue and their cheeks and lips were as rosy as the little girls who would soon clasp them in their arms; the little chairs and tables were stained with the same soft colors that Marsden used on his own products; the little boys' sleighs and boats and animals were shiny with bright new paints,—red and yellow and green.

So, two nights before Christmas, everything was finished,—a toy for every child in the village was packed in the sled with the steel runners; yet Nicholas and the old man were still working at the bench. This time, they were desperately trying to finish a chest which had been ordered by a wealthy woman in the next village, twenty miles away. She had said definitely that she wanted the chest finished in time for Christmas Day, because she was giving it to her daughter as a betrothal gift and the feast was to be celebrated then. Marsden and Nicholas worked feverishly most of that night and the following day, and there still remained a few little finishing touches, and here it was Christmas Eve. Marsden could have it done in time to be delivered tomorrow, but of course Nicholas would have to borrow the nearest neighbor's horse and drive over with the chest on Christmas Day itself, --the day when he had planned to make his tour of the village with his gifts, to show the children that he had not forgotten them, even though they had not seen much of him during the past year.

"I'm sorry, Nicholas," said old Marsden. "I'dgo myself, but I'm not as strong as I used to be, and it's an all-day trip—twenty miles over, then you'll have to wait several hours to rest the horse, and twenty miles back. And with the snow not crusted, it'll be hard going."

Nicholas was sitting in front of the fire, leaning on his elbows, staring thoughtfully into the flames.

"If she only didn't want the chest tomorrow for sure," he said. "And if we had only finished it before today, I could have delivered it sooner, and had plenty of time tomorrow."

"Well," answered his master, "we did promise it, and it has to be delivered. Now the toys weren't promised . . ."

"No, but I always have given them," interrupted Nicholas.

"I was just going to say, lad, that they weren't promised for Christmas Day. Now, you know that little children go to bed early. Why can't you . . ."

"Oh, I understand," cried Nicholas, leaping from his chair. "I deliver the gifts tonight, Christmas Eve, after the children have gone to bed, and when they wake up tomorrow morning, they'll find them there, at their doors! Oh, master, that's a wonderful idea! Why, it's even better than before. I never did like the idea of walking up to a house in broad daylight and hearing people thank me and everything. What time is it, quick? Eleven o'clock! I'll have to hurry. Where's my list? Where's my sled?"

So the two rushed around and finally got the sled out in the yard. Nicholas bundled himself up in his close-fitting hat shaped like a stocking, his long belted tunic coat edged with fur, his black leggings and heavy boots, pulled on his mittens, and was off through the snow, dragging the toy-laden sled behind him.

Christmas Eve in the village—a bright winter moon shining in the star-filled sky; glistening white snow banked everywhere—on the roads, on the roof-tops, on the fences, and in the doorways; houses darkened and the inmates all sleeping soundly; not a soul stirring in the streets but one figure, which stole silently from door to door, leaving a pile of tiny objects every place he stopped, until there was nothing left in the bottom of the sled. It was three o'clock on Christmas morning when Nicholas turned away from the last doorway, his sled lighter to pull, his feet tired from dragging through the heavy snow, but happy that it was Christmas morning and he had once more kept his unspoken promise to the children.

Chapter 5
Nicholas, The Wood-Carver

Nicholas did not leave the wood-carver on Christmas Day, or the next year, or the next. He stayed on in the little cottage, which was now bright and clean, and a happy dwelling for two happy people. For old Marsden had forgotten his grouch in the daily association with Nicholas' sunny disposition; he cheerfully taught Nicholas all he knew of his difficult trade, so that as the boy grew in years and strength, his knowledge of wood-carving soon matched that of his old master. Marsden bought a horse and sleigh for the trips outside of town, which were also used by Nicholas on his Christmas Eve visits to the children in the village. For although the little ones he had played with had grown up and stopped playing with toys, there were new babies in every household every year, and each one was taught to expect from Nicholas, the wood-carver, a little toy on Christmas morning.

One bright summer morning, Nicholas was sitting on a bench outside the cottage door, carving away at a half-finished chair leg and whistling cheerfully as he worked. He was then twenty years old, a tall young man, the yellow hair a little darker, but with the same blue eyes, rosy cheeks, and ready smile. He stopped his work to listen to the birds singing in the trees overhead and to enjoy the warm sunlight shining down on him. Suddenly two children ran up the path leading to the cottage door, bursting with news.

"Nicholas," one of them panted, "Nicholas, there are two men in the village who have been asking where old Marsden

lives. They are on their way here now. Who do you suppose they are? They said . . ."

"Hush," said the other child, "here they are now."

Two men, about ten or fifteen years older than Nicholas, were coming slowly up the path. They seemed surprised to see him working at the bench, and one of them spoke.

"Excuse me, but they told us in the village that we would find Bertran Marsden here. If we have made a mistake, . . ."

"No," answered Nicholas, "this is Bertran Marsden's cottage. I am only his apprentice. I'll call him. He has a nap every afternoon now. You see, he's getting rather old."

The two men looked at each other with shamed eyes.

"Yes, he must be old now. Don't disturb him. We'll come back."

"No, here he is now," said Nicholas.

Marsden had appeared in the doorway and was looking from one to the other with puzzled eyes.

One of the men stepped forward. "Father," he began.

"Father!" Marsden tottered a little; Nicholas put out a steadying arm.

"Yes, don't you remember us, Father? I am Henrik and this is Lons. We left you years ago, but we finally made our fortune and are ready to take you home."

"Take me home!" Old Marsden straightened himself. "This is my home, and you are two strange men to me."

"No, Father," answered Lons.

"We are your two sons. We are sorry we left you alone years ago, but boys are thoughtless, and we wanted only the

adventure and didn't think how much we might be hurting you. If you'll forgive us now, . . ."

The old man looked at his two sons for a long moment.

"Yes, of course I'll forgive you. If you had come back a few years ago, I couldn't have done it. I have found another son. This is Nicholas, who lives with me, and who does most of my work now."

The sons looked at Nicholas, then back at their father again, uncertain how to go on. Finally Henrik spoke.

"We've just bought a house in the next village, Father. Lons and I have a fishing boat there, and we're doing well. We want you to come there and live with us. We want to make up to you for the years we were away."

Marsden shook his head. "No, my lads; I have my little cottage here, and Nicholas helps me with my work. I don't need anything, and I couldn't live without working."

Lons answered quickly. "But you could go on working in our village, Father. There's no wood-carver there, and if you insist, there are many people who would give you something to do. We so want to have you; we've been planning all through our travels how, when we came home again, we'd take care of you and live with you and make you forget that we were ever heedless boys who ran away for an adventure. And Nicholas here,—why, he could easily take over the business in this village, if he's as good as you say. He's young, and probably ambitious; why don't you give him a chance, Father?"

None of the arguments seemed to make much impression on the old man until the end; then he listened attentively and paused a while before he spoke.

"Yes," he said slowly. "Nicholas deserves something like this. He could do it easily. He's a bright lad . . ."

Nicholas interrupted. "Don't think of me, master. If you don't want to go with them, we'll go on living here together just the same as before. I don't want to take your business."

"There, lad," said Marsden, laying a hand on Nicholas' shoulder, "I don't want to leave you either, but you're young, and youth should be given a chance. Besides," he paused, and looked at the two tall men standing before him, as anxious and nervous as boys, their eyes pleading silently with their father, "besides, these are my own sons, and I think they need me as much as I need them."

Henrik and Lons sprang over to the old man's side.

"Father, does it mean you will . . ."

Marsden nodded his head, grown almost white in the last few years. "Yes, I'll just move along to the next village with you, my sons, and I'll leave this cottage and my tools with my other son, Nicholas."

He put a loving hand on Nicholas' shoulder, and then the four went inside the house to discuss how and when the move would be made.

A week later, Nicholas found himself the owner of a two-room cottage, a perfect set of wood-carver's tools, and a well-established business which should keep him housed, fed, and clothed for life. At first he was lonely in the little cottage after Marsden had left with his sons, but he soon became interested in his work, which kept him so busy he had no time to feel alone. Then, too, there was almost always a child or two chatting to him or playing with its toys on the cottage floor.

Nicholas divided his day now so that he spent only part of his time on the orders he received; the rest of the day and most of the evenings he worked on toys for the next Christmas; for he now had such a long list of children it took months to complete the set of gifts he had to make.

He continued his practice, established the year he had to deliver the chest on Christmas Day, of making his rounds on Christmas Eve; and one year, he was considerably surprised and touched to see that the children had hung on their doors little embroidered bags filled with oats for his horse. So now, instead of leaving the toys piled up in the doorway, he put them in the little bags.

So it was a busy, happy existence that Nicholas led in the little wood-carver's cottage on the outskirts of the village, and as he grew older, the sound of children's voices lifted in their play became dearer and dearer to him; and the children, in their turn, loved to be near the tall, kind man with the light-colored beard whom everybody called Nicholas, the wood-carver.

Chapter 6
The First Christmas Stocking

Laurens and Fredrik were two little newcomers in the village. Their mother and father were even poorer than most of the other families, which made them poor indeed, because nobody in the village had a great deal of money. Ever since the day of their arrival, they had been met by misfortune. Their father was a fisherman and used to be able to keep his family supplied with enough food to eat and enough fuel to keep them warm; but one day his boat had been caught in a storm, and the heavy mast had fallen on him, paralyzing him so that he had been forced to stay in bed and watch his little family grow thinner and thinner from lack of enough food to eat.

Their neighbors gave them as much of their meager supplies as they themselves could spare, and the mother worked occasionally in the household of the Squire or some of the more well-to-do families of the village, but there were still many meals in the little cottage which consisted solely of a piece of dried bread or fish, or a dish of thin gruel.

Laurens was now the man of the family, although he was only eight years old. He built fires, shoveled the heavy snow from the cottage door, kept the house neat and clean while his mother was out working, and took care of his little brother Friedrik. One of his principal duties was going into the forest and helping the wood-cutter, receiving in return for this service enough wood to keep his family supplied with fuel. He rather enjoyed this task, for he met many of the other boys while he was out. Although he worked while they played, he enjoyed

being with children his own age after long hours spent in the house with his sick father and four-year-old brother.

One cold winter afternoon, as he was returning from the forest with his sled piled with the wood he had helped cut, he met a merry group of boys who were building a snow fort a few hundred yards away from the cottage of Nicholas, the wood-carver.

One of the boys noticed the little figure dragging the heavy sled and called out, "Ho there, Laurens! Want to be on our side?"

Laurens paused and looked wistfully at the boys playing in the snow. "I guess not," he answered. "I ought to get this wood home before nightfall."

"Oh, you have plenty of time," one of them replied. "There's a good hour yet before the sun goes down, and we'll help you drag your wood if you'll stay."

Laurens hesitated, then dropped the rope of his sled and joined the group. After all, his mother was home that afternoon, so his father and Friedrik would be taken care of, and there was enough fuel in the house to keep the fire going until evening. And it was a long time since he had played in the snow. So for a merry, carefree hour he forgot the troubles and duties of his house, and was only an eight-year-old boy having a good time. When it was his turn to storm the fort, he joined his side, and with breathless courage, braved the storm of snowballs, climbed the icy walls of the fort, and took noisy possession. Then it was his turn to help his comrades hold the fort, so he warily kept out of sight, watching his chance to rise now and then above the white edge of the stronghold and hurl snowy missiles at the oncoming foe, and pausing every once in a while to make himself a new supply of ammunition.

It was during one of these moments, while he was busy collecting snow and packing it into firm round balls, that he heard a glad shout from both sides, from his comrades inside the fort and his enemies outside,—"Nicholas! Hey, fellows, here's Nicholas!"—and looked up to see the tall figure of the wood-carver approaching the group. As he came nearer, he lifted his mittened hand to wave to the boys; his rosy, kindly face beaming a welcome, his blue eyes twinkling at the sight of the good time everybody seemed to be having.

"Well, well, a snow-fight!" he said in his deep voice. "It's a long time since I've had one of them; and when I was a boy, we knew how to take a fort. Now, I'd go about it like this."

He stooped swiftly and gathered up a handful of snow, and quickly packing and shaping it in his hands, took the finished snowball, and threw it with sure, accurate aim at the tallest boy behind the fort. It knocked the surprised fellow's hat clean off, and the other side, delighted with this new ally, rushed forward, Nicholas in their midst, and took the fort amid loud shouts and hurrahs.

Laurens looked at the tall man shyly. Of course he knew who Nicholas was; he had heard of him ever since his family had moved into the village last summer. He knew that he was the man who kept the children supplied with toys and gifts on Christmas Day, but of course he also supposed that Nicholas only remembered the children he really knew.

The snow-party started to break up then, as most of the boys had to be home before nightfall, and the sun was already sinking in the west. They started towards home then, accompanying Nicholas as far as his cottage. At the gate, the wood-carver paused a moment, looking over the group with keen eyes that seemed to see everything.

"Is this a new boy in the village?" he asked, laying a hand on Laurens' shoulder, and looking down kindly into the shy brown eyes.

"Yes, his name is Laurens, and he has a little brother Friedrik . . ."

"And his father is paralyzed, and doesn't work, and his mother . . . "

One of the boys dug his elbow sharply into the side of the last speaker.

"Now you've done it," he said angrily. "Why can't you hold your tongue? You've hurt his feelings by talking about his family right out like that. Here, I'm going after him. Come on, fellows."

And they ran after Laurens, leaving Nicholas alone at the gate, with a wise smile on his lips and a knowing shake of his head.

The group finally caught up with Laurens, who furtively wiped his eyes and mumbled something about having to be home anyway. The boys tried to distract his attention from the thoughtless remarks by talking about the man they had just left.

"That's Nicholas, the wood-carver, he's wonderful," volunteered one boy. "Every Christmas now, at least ever since I can remember, he's been leaving gifts at the doors in the village."

"Not every door," said another. "He only leaves them at the houses where he sees an embroidered bag. My mother told me that since the village has grown, Nicholas doesn't know every child the way he used to, so how does he know which house has children and which hasn't unless there's a bag there?"

"Yes," chimed in another, "and how would he even know how many gifts to leave unless there was a bag for each one?"

So they went on and on about the wonderful things Nicholas gave them, quite forgetting little Laurens, trudging along with his heavy sled, and his heart growing just as heavy with each step.

When he reached home, his mind was still occupied with the information he had heard that afternoon. It would be wonderful for little Friedrik to have a gift from that kind man. Of course, it did not matter so much about him; he was eight years old and didn't mind—at least, not very much—if he didn't get a toy; because when in the world would he have time to play with toys? But the problem that began to spin round and round in his head was,—how could he fix it so that Nicholas would know there was a little boy in their house?

That night he tried to get his mother interested.

"Mother," he began somewhat doubtfully, for he well knew how tired she must be, and probably unwilling to listen to nonsense about Christmas toys when her mind was occupied with the problem of where the next meal was coming from. "Mother, do you suppose we have a bag in the house?"

"A bag! What kind of bag, child?" she asked, astonished.

"Well, it should be an embroidered bag, really, but I suppose any kind of bag would do. You hang it outside the door Christmas Eve, and then when Friedrik wakes up the next morning, there's a fine toy for him. It's Nicholas, the wood-carver, who does it, and I thought that if there was only some kind of a bag around here . . ."

The mother sighed. "Things like potatoes and flour come in bags, child, and those are things we haven't seen for many

days. And goodness knows, with all my worries, I have no time to make you one. Forget about this Nicholas person anyway," she finished bitterly. "I don't suppose he'd come to poor children like you, anyway."

So Laurens was forced to abandon the idea of a bag to hang outside the door for Friedrik's Christmas gift, but he couldn't forget about Nicholas. Why, out there in the forest, he looked like such a kind, jolly man; he wouldn't pass by a child's house just because he was poor. He thought and thought, until finally Christmas Eve arrived. He was sitting by the fire helping his little brother to undress. He sat staring into the fire while Friedrik capered around in his little night-shirt, taking advantage of his big brother's thoughtful moment to play just one more minute before going to bed. Laurens absent-mindedly began to make a neat pile of the little fellow's clothing so it would be ready for him in the morning. As he picked up a little stocking, long and warm and woolly, he held it up, and said jokingly, "Now, that would hold some kind of gift, just as well as any embroidered bag . . ."

He stopped short, and stared intently at the stocking. "Why not?" he murmured, half to himself. "Why not?"

Little Friedrik looked frightened. "Laurens, Laurens, what are you looking at my stocking for? What are you going to do with it?"

Laurens gave a joyful shout. "Do with it? I'm going to hang it outside the door!" and with one leap, he flung open the cottage door.

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Christmas Eve in the village—a bright winter moon shining in the star-filled sky—glistening, white snow banked everywhere—on the roads, on the rooftops, on the fences, and in the doorways; houses darkened and inmates all sleeping soundly; not a soul stirring in the streets but one figure, which stole silently from door to door, leaving bulging bags filled with gifts. At Laurens' doorway the figure paused. In the bright moonlight, there was a funny object to be seen dangling outside the door—a child's woolen stocking! Nicholas laughed silently, a kind, tender laugh, then reached down into his pack and filled the lonely little stocking to the top. And with a snap of his whip and a jingling of sleigh bells, he was off to the next house.

The next morning, little Friedrik was presented with not one, nor two, but five tiny little toys—boats and horses and sleighs; and in the bottom of the stocking, way down in the toe, were five large pieces of gold, enough to keep a whole family through the winter. Little Friedrik shouted with joy, the father almost sat up in bed in his excitement, the mother's eyes were bright with happy tears, and Laurens hugged close to his heart the first Christmas stocking.

Chapter 7
Nicholas' First Red Suit

Squire Kenson, the richest man in the village, came driving up to Nicholas' cottage door one day, with a commission to carve a new chest for his youngest daughter, who was planning to be married. Nicholas was attracted by the sound of silver bells and reindeer's hoofs on the snow; he looked out of his window and saw the beautiful equipage the Squire traveled about in,—a shiny, red sleigh, drawn by two beautiful reindeer—Donder and Blitzen they were called by the children of the village, because they traveled so swiftly, like thunder and lightning. Nicholas gazed at the two beautiful animals and thought how much more rapidly they would carry him about on Christmas Eve than his old horse, who was getting slower and slower as the years went on.

Then Nicholas hastened to open the door for the Squire, who stated his errand briefly and gave directions about the size of the chest and when he expected it to be finished. All the while he was talking, the wood-carver was gazing admiringly at the fine suit of red deerskin his visitor was wearing. As he nodded and made notes of the instructions, his eyes missed no detail of the Squire's outfit; the suit was made in the fashion of the district—that is, the coat rather long and belted at the waist, the trousers loose and caught in at the calf by shining leather leggings. Soft, white ermine bound the coat at the collar, the cuffs, and around the bottom; the same beautiful fur was around the close-fitting red hat.

After the Squire had finished his errand, and had driven off, led by Donder and Blitzen's flying hoofs, Nicholas went on

with the task in hand, but with his mind on the beautiful red suit.

"There's no reason why I can't have one, too," he said to himself. "I have all my winter supplies in and the wood all paid for, and there is still a bag of gold coin that I will never be able to spend. The Widow Arpen could well make use of some of it, and they say that she is the cleverest needlewoman in the village. I think I'll drive over there tomorrow and see what can be done. I've gone around looking like a poor orphan instead of a well-to-do wood-carver long enough."

So the next day Nicholas paid a visit to Widow Arpen's cottage.

"I want a fine red suit, Mistress Arpen," he stated. "You know the one the Squire wears?" The woman nodded. "Well, of course, I can't afford such fine, soft deerskin; besides, there's no time to have all that skin dressed and prepared; and I know very well I can't have mine trimmed with real ermine. Now what could you suggest?"

The widow thought a moment.

"Well," she said finally, "we could get a good bolt of strong homespun from the weaver, and I could dye it myself. I have had a wonderful red from stewing rowan berries. Then I'm sure we could get enough pure white rabbit skins from Lief the trapper to trim the neck and cuffs. It would make a fine suit, and you'd look splendid in it, Nicholas."

Nicholas rose, well pleased with the plan for the work. He took out of his pocket a handful of gold coins and laid them on the table.

"There," he said, "I think that will take care of the material and the labor."

"But—but, Nicholas, it's more than enough!" the widow exclaimed. "Why, half of this would keep my family all through the winter."

"Then keep it, woman," smiled Nicholas. "You've had a hard time since your good man died to keep your little family warm and well fed. I have enough and to spare, so let's not quibble over a few gold coins. I'll not be the man to die with a chest of them found buried under my hearth-stone."

The widow stood at her door and watched Nicholas drive away through the snow. "Eh, there's a fine man," she murmured, the gold pieces jingling through her fingers. "A fine, big man."

So she bought the homespun, which she dyed a beautiful bright red. And then a strange thing happened. She had no pattern to go by, as Nicholas was wearing the only tunic he owned, and could spare no time from his work to have a fitting, so the widow cut and sewed the suit with the image of a fine, big man constantly before her. Nicholas was not a short man by any means, but he was rather thin, and yet as Mistress Arpen planned and pieced the suit together, she knew she was sewing for a fine, generous man, and made the suit to fit Nicholas' heart instead of his body.

On the day the work was finished, and the last loving stitch had been placed in the soft rabbit trimming, Nicholas arrived to try on his suit. He went into the widow's little inner room, and came out a few minutes later—and what a picture he made!

"I can't see it, Mistress Arpen," said Nicholas doubtfully, "for that little piece of glass in your room shows only a portion of me at a time. Yet it did seem to go on rather—rather loosely," he finished tactfully, not wishing to hurt her feelings.

The widow gave one look and burst into tears. "Oh, Nicholas, I've spoiled your suit; I've spoiled it! I thought you were bigger; whatever made me cut it so wide? Oh, what shall I do?"

Trying to comfort the woman, Nicholas forgot his own dismay at the size of his garments.

"There, we won't worry about it. Look, the length is all right. It's only that I'm not as fat as I might be. Why if I ate all the vegetables and meal the villagers send me, I'll warrant in a few months' time you'd never notice the extra cloth in this coat. And the trousers will be all right as soon as I buy a pair of leggings to stuff them in. And what a fine cap this is! See how close it fits, and how warm-looking this fur band is!"

So gradually he made the widow forget her disappointment, and to reassure her that he really did not mind the ludicrous figure he must make with his tall, gangly form clothed in loose, baggy folds, he insisted on wearing it home, and sat up high on the seat of his sleigh and seemed not to notice the stares and nudges of the villagers.

When he arrived home, however, he sat down in the huge suit and burst into loud laughter. "What a sight I'll make going around like this for months to come! And yet I'll have to wear it out; it would be sinful to waste good material."

Then another funny thought struck him. He slapped his knee and laughed again. "Perhaps I could even stuff some of my toys into my suit. How the children would laugh! But there's only one thing to be done. It's very clear that I'm too thin for my height. I shall really have to eat oatmeal in the morning instead of just a piece of bread; and I must drink more milk, and cook some of those vegetables that go to waste in the storeroom."

So Nicholas kept his big red suit, and soon the villagers became used to the tall figure in the bright red trousers and tunic, the close-fitting stocking-cap trimmed with white fur, and the shiny black leather belt and leggings. And what do you think happened after Nicholas had carefully eaten vegetables and milk week after week? His face became full and rosy, his chest filled out, his arms and legs grew more muscular and rounded, and he even began to acquire—whisper it—a belly!

Chapter 8
Donder and Blitzen

One Christmas Eve Nicholas did not have such an easy time making his rounds of the village houses. To begin with, he was considerably amused and rather dismayed to discover that, instead of one embroidered bag for each house, the children had followed little Laurens' example, and had each put out a woolen stocking. So with some families having five or six children, there was often quite a row of stockings nailed up on the door. Of course, Nicholas could not very well put just one toy in each stocking, it made the rest of it look so flat and empty; but since he hadn't stocked his sleigh with enough gifts so that there would be several for each child, he found himself with an empty sleigh, and only half-way through his list!

"Lucky I have that extra supply of toys at home in the chest," he said to himself as he made a flying trip back to the cottage for more gifts. He loaded the sleigh again and started out once more, with the night half gone and his list not completed.

Poor old Lufka, his horse, tried his best, but he was getting old and could not make very fast progress through the heavy snow. He kept turning a patient head around at Nicholas, who spoke to him encouragingly. "Come on, now, lad; only two more houses. You can make it; the sleigh's not so heavy now with all that double load delivered."

Lufka wagged his head at his master's voice and tossed it in the air as though to say, "Yes, but tonight we had to make an extra trip back to the cottage, and when I thought I was going

to be nicely bedded down for the night, off you went again! And I must say I like the snow better when there's a crust on top, instead of this heavy stuff. I'm always stumbling—there, now!"

Down went the good old beast into a ditch, and crack went one of the sleigh runners. Nicholas climbed down, and after reassuring himself that Lufka had no broken bones, shook his head ruefully at the sight of the old sleigh.

"I guess that's the end of that, old boy," he remarked to Lufka, who had stumbled upright and was now busy trying to flick the snow off with his tail. "Looks as though we'll have to get a new sleigh, and I'm afraid your traveling days are over, too. You're getting a little old for this heavy driving."

Nicholas had to finish his Christmas visits on foot, and the first rosy streaks of dawn were brightening the sky when he and Lufka finally returned to the cottage,—Nicholas, fat and rosy, puffing heavily; Lufka dragging his tired old bones straight to the door of his stable.

For many days after that particular Christmas Eve, the villagers and children who passed Nicholas' door noticed that he was not working at his bench. Instead, there could be heard sounds of hammering and sawing from the large shed where he kept his supply of wood and where he did the larger pieces of work which required more room.

The villagers said to each other, "Must be some beautiful bridal chest that keeps Nicholas so busy these days. Or maybe it's a boat he's building for himself," they joked.

Spring came, the late northern spring, and Nicholas was again seen at his work-bench. When curious townsfolk questioned him on his long, secret task of the winter, he would only shake his dark yellow head (the yellow was now beginning

to show streaks of white) and say with a sly smile, "You'll see soon enough. Just you wait."

Soon, however, the villagers forgot their curiosity in a new, exciting piece of news which was spreading over the village. Nicholas heard most of it at his work-bench, where people of all ages gathered now and then to chat with the wood-carver.

"What's this I hear about the Squire, Otto?" Nicholas asked his old friend, with whom he had lived as a boy.

"Ah," said Otto, puffing contentedly at his pipe and settling down to a long gossip. "They say things haven't gone so well with him these past five years or more. First there were those ships of his that didn't come home; then they say that his overseer ran away with a good part of a year's rents . . ."

"Yes," put in old Hans Klinker, "then there was that matter of a mine that his son persuaded him to invest in."

"Too bad," they all sighed, with a sort of self-satisfied air that they would have done nothing so foolish with their money, if they had ever had any to be foolish with.

"And now," continued Otto, leaning forward with the most interesting part of his story, "now he has to sell most of his lands and household goods to pay the creditors and start in again. Will you be going up to the sale tomorrow, Nicholas?"

Nicholas looked up from the piece of wood he was planing, to ask, "Now what would I be buying from the Squire? I don't want any more land, and I can make for myself as fine furniture as any he has in his house."

"He has some good animals up there," said old Hans. "Those two horses now, and that set of reindeer."

"True enough," said Nicholas, finally interested enough to put down his work. "Lufka's too old to be much help to me

now. I think I might go up there with you boys tomorrow and see some of the excitement."

So the next morning found Nicholas in the center of an eager, curious crowd—farmers who hoped to get some of the Squire's good land cheap; fishermen who were interested in the two or three boats the Squire owned; housewives who thought they might like a chair or a table from such a fine household; and scores of others who had come along just to watch the rest of the crowd.

Nicholas wandered down to the stables, and was instantly surrounded by a group of men who knew he was interested in horses and were ready to give him much free advice.

Nicholas, however, walked past the stables where the horses were lodged, and made directly for the larger stalls.

"He's after Donder and Blitzen," the men whispered among themselves. "He always admired them, they went so fast."

Yes, there was Nicholas, his round figure in the bright red suit standing at the door of the stable, his hands on his roomy hips, gazing thoughtfully in at the darkened stalls. Two deer, inside, excited at the noises of the crowd, thrust their frightened heads through the top part of the door.

"Well," said Nicholas softly, "you poor beasties don't look much like thunder and lightning now. Not afraid of me, are you?" He put a reassuring hand on the larger deer's shoulder. The melting brown eyes looked trustingly into the blue ones. The deer whimpered and thrust its warm black nose into Nicholas' hand.

"I guess we'll get along all right," said Nicholas in a satisfied tone. "Now to find your master and see about this sale."

"Here's the Squire now," called out one of the men. "Nicholas wants to buy Donder and Blitzen, Squire."

The Squire, a bent old man with a worried look on his face, seemed dazed by this mob of people taking possession of his house and goods.

"Well, he can't have Donder and Blitzen, alone," he said almost fretfully. "That set of reindeer goes together or not at all. Why, Donder would go raving mad if you tried to separate her from the rest of her family."

"Family!" exclaimed Nicholas. "Why, Squire, I need only two reindeer. How many more . . ."

Suddenly there was a loud crash of breaking wood, a mad rush of people away from one of the stalls, and seemingly in one brown streak, there was a little reindeer running madly about the farmyard, pursuing one unfortunate villager who couldn't run as fast as the others.

"That's Vixen," shouted the old Squire, distracted. "Here, catch him quick. He's a young imp. He'll hurt somebody."

Everybody ran about in a frenzy, but Vixen was nimble, and even paused in his mad rush to look impudently over his shoulder at his pursuers. Then he would give a naughty toss of his head as if to say, "Come, catch me," and was off again, leaping over carts and farming implements, knocking a man's hat off with the young horns just beginning to grow, finally clearing a high fence with one bound, and paused panting on the other side to gaze through the bars mischievously at the hot, breathless group of men.

Nicholas had not joined in the chase; he was standing at the door of the stalls, holding on to his fat stomach and shaking all over with mirth.

"I'll take the lot of them," he cried out. "I don't know what the others are like, but I must have that little Vixen. I haven't laughed so much in years. Why, just to see the neat way he clipped off Ivan Prosof's hat!" He went into another gale of laughter, then made his way through the crowd to the Squire, where he finally concluded the bargain, and acquired not two, but eight reindeer,—Donder and Blitzen, the mamma and papa, with their six children, Dasher and Dancer, Comet and Cupid, and Prancer and Vixen.

Chapter 9
Vixen, The Naughty Reindeer

You'd never recognize the wood-carver's cottage now as the peaceful little dwelling it once had been. In order to shelter his eight reindeer, Nicholas had to build an extra shed which was almost as large as the cottage itself. All would be well if the animals stayed where they belonged, but Vixen seemed to take delight in butting his head against the door of his stall so that Nicholas had to rebuild it three times. He would hear a loud crash and look up from his work with a sigh. "I suppose that's Vixen again. Now if he were only as quiet and gentle as his brothers—well, I don't suppose I'd like him as well," he concluded with a rueful shake of his head.

The little reindeer returned his master's affection, but chose the most noisy means of expressing it. He wanted to be as close to Nicholas as possible and would break down one partition after another, in order that he might finally caper up to the door of his cottage and leap around delightedly until his friend noticed him.

Nicholas tried to be severe. "Now, this time, you'll be punished. I have too much work to do to bother chasing you around." And he would make a mad dash after the young imp, who only treated it as a game and retreated quickly behind a neighboring tree, poking his head drolly around the trunk and almost laughing with glee at Nicholas' fat form panting for breath as he tried to catch him.

Then Nicholas would try coaxing. "There now, be a good little reindeer. If you don't behave, I won't take you out

with me on Christmas Eve, and you know we all want to have a fine showing. There's that secret I told you about, in the shed." He finally reached Vixen's side, and placing his arm lovingly around his neck, talked gently and soothingly to the little animal, who looked with soft, delighted eyes at his master.

And Nicholas would lead him back to his stall and return to his work satisfied that once more he had quelled this young rebel. He had no trouble at all with the old deer, Donder and Blitzen; and Prancer, Dasher, Dancer, Cupid, and Comet were gentle creatures who patiently endured all the nips on the ear which was Vixen's way of teasing his more settled brothers.

Nicholas was completing plans for a Christmas Eve grander than any he had ever had. He worked day and night to finish his toy-making; he made a final inspection of the mysterious object in the wood-shed; he scrubbed and curried his reindeer until their hides were sleek and shining. Finally the great night arrived. Nicholas made many trips back and forth to the wood-shed, his arms laden with bright little dolls, houses, boats, and animals. After three hours of preparation, everything seemed to be ready. It was almost midnight. Nicholas opened the stall where his reindeer were waiting and led them out into the yard.

"Donder and Blitzen at the head," he said, "then Dasher and Dancer, because they're the next strongest, and then Comet and Cupid; and then Prancer and—why where's Vixen?"

The other deer looked resignedly at their master and settled down to wait. You might know Vixen would be up to something at such an important time!

Nicholas dashed madly in and out of the stable, calling, "Vixen! Vixen! you young imp, where are you? If I catch you, I'll . . ."

Suddenly there was an answering whimper from somewhere over his head. He looked up; Donder and Blitzen looked up at their bad child; Prancer, Dasher, Dancer, Cupid, and Comet looked up at their mischievous young brother, who was perched on the roof of the cottage, playfully butting the chimney with his horns.

"You bad reindeer! How did you get up there? Oh, I see. Climbed the low shed and then jumped over to the cottage roof. And how are you going to get down, hey? Well, I'll tell you," Nicholas shouted, really angry now, for he would stand no trifling about his Christmas visits to the children. "I'll tell you; you won't get down. You'll stay there, for all I care. I'll leave Prancer at home and take only six. I suppose you are afraid to jump down again, you bold imp! Well, I'll not help you. I'm through with you."

Vixen whimpered again. He was really sorry, and he was really frightened, so frightened that he couldn't remember clearly how it was he had reached the roof. He leaned against the chimney, and wet tears ran down his nose. He looked beseechingly down at Nicholas, but his master turned sternly away and began harnessing the other deer together. Vixen became annoyed. How dare they leave without him! He stamped an angry little hoof on the hard crust of snow. Crack went the crust, and Vixen toppled over on the roof and felt himself carried down the slope, swiftly, swiftly; carried right over the edge, and landed head first in a soft snow-bank right at Nicholas' feet. All you could see of the naughty little fellow were his four hoofs waving madly in the air. Nicholas began to laugh, the other reindeer lifted their heads in the air and

seemed to enjoy the scene too, and it was a thoroughly ashamed and meek little reindeer who finally scrambled out of the snow-bank and took his place quietly beside Prancer.

Now for the big show! Nicholas finished tying the eight reindeer to each other with a harness bright with jingling silver bells; he slowly backed them to the wood-shed door, which he opened, disclosing a most beautiful sight. There stood a bright, shining red sleigh, trimmed with silver stripes and stars, the runner curving up in front to form a swan's head, the back roomy enough to hold toys for several villages full of children. Nicholas backed his reindeer into the shafts; he climbed up on the high seat, beautifully padded with cushions made of soft doe-skin; he took out of the socket a long, shiny black whip, snapped it in the air, and they were off!

The villagers were awakened from their sleep by a merry jingling of silver bells, by the stamp of reindeer's hoofs on the hard snow, by the snap of a whip. They peeked out from behind their curtains and saw a brave sight. They saw by the white light of the moon, a shining red sleigh drawn by eight prancing reindeer, whose flying hoofs went as fast as lightning; they saw a well-loved figure perched high up on his seat, snapping a long, black whip in the air with one hand and guiding his reindeer with the other—a big, round man dressed in a red belted tunic, trimmed with white fur, baggy trousers stuffed into high black leggings, and a close-fitting red stocking-cap which flew in the wind. They were not close enough to see how the sharp rush of air made his rosy cheeks even rosier, and nipped his nose so that it, too, was almost the color of his suit, and stung his bright blue eyes so that they twinkled and glistened like the Christmas snow; they were not close enough to see his face, but one and all, as they returned to their warm beds, murmured out of full

hearts, "That's Nicholas, on his way to the children. God bless him!"

Chapter 10
Nicholas Goes Down the Chimney

One year, when Nicholas was about fifty years old, and his hair and beard were getting as white as the snow around his cottage, and he was growing as round as the balls he gave the children, a strange family came to live in the village. Not much of a family, to be sure—just one little old man, as brown and wrinkled as a nut, and a thin little girl, who shrank away from the crowd of villagers who had gathered, as they always gathered when something new and strange was happening.

"His name is Carl Dinsler," one woman whispered. "The old Squire's housekeeper told me about him. They say he's very rich. He must be to have money enough to buy the big house on the hill."

"He may be rich," remarked another, "but he certainly doesn't look it. Why, that poor old nag he drove into the village must be almost a hundred, and did you see how poorly and shabbily he was dressed?"

"Yes, and that poor little mite he had with him; she looks as though a good meal wouldn't do her any harm. Who is she, anyway?"

"That's his granddaughter. The child's parents died just a short while ago, away down in the southlands, and they say this old man bought the house up here to be alone."

"He can stay alone, then," sniffed another woman. "Did you see the black looks he turned on us all, when we only came out to welcome them to the village?"

"Yes," sighed another, "but somehow I pity that little one. Who's to take care of her up in that big barn of a place?"

It was lucky the villagers had a chance to get a good look at the newcomers on their first appearance in town; for after that day, little was seen of them. The little girl seemed to have vanished completely; the old man descended the hill only to buy small amounts of food—some fish and some flour. And the very curious ones, who climbed the hill just to see what was going on, came back to the village with strange news indeed!

"Do you know what he has done?" demanded one small boy of an interested group. "He's nailed up all the gates and left only the front one open, and even that he keeps locked with a bolt as long as this." He spread his hands about a yard apart. His listeners gasped. "Yes, and that's not all. I don't know how you could get into the house, for he's put up boards where the front and side doors used to be and on all the windows. There's not one sign of life in the old place now. You'd never know a soul lived there."

"Why, the man must be crazy," they all said, astounded. "He must be afraid of somebody."

"Afraid, nothing!" one man remarked scornfully. "Unless he's afraid someone will steal his wealth away from him."

"He's a surly old wretch," added the schoolmaster. "I tried to see him the other day to ask if he was going to send the child to school. He wouldn't let me get any farther than the front

gate. He wanted to know all about the school, and when I told him the children usually brought vegetables or meat or a few coins each week to pay for their schooling, he snarled at me, and told me to go about my business; that he'd take care of his grandchild's education."

"The poor little thing," exclaimed one motherly-looking woman, "I'd like to tell that old miser what I think of him."

"Well, this is a piece of news that will interest Nicholas, the wood-carver," said another. "One more child in the village, and a lonely one, too."

"Nicholas knows all about her," they heard a deep voice say, and all turned to see that it was the wood-carver himself, who had joined the group unnoticed. "Her name is Katje. I once knew a little girl named Katje," he went on with a sad, faraway look in his usually merry blue eyes, "and that's why I'd like to do something for this poor child."

"Why, how did you find out her name, Nicholas?"

"She was wandering around in the yard like a forlorn little puppy who's been locked in," Nicholas answered. "I was passing that way and stopped at the gate to talk with her. She says she's not allowed to go outside the fence, and that she can play in the yard only an hour each day. She also told me that her grandfather doesn't want her to mix with the village children for fear she'll talk about the gold he has."

The honest villagers were indignant. "As if we'd touch his old money," they said angrily.

"I don't know what we can do about it," said Nicholas thoughtfully. "We can't force our way into the house, and after

all, it's his own grandchild. I guess we'll just have to wait around and see what happens. I can't believe anyone could stay as hard as that with a little child in the house."

The others shook their heads. "He's hard all through, that old rascal. Why, I'll wager he wouldn't even let her put out her stocking on Christmas Eve."

"That's a safe wager," laughed Nicholas. "He wouldn't open his front door even to let something free come in."

The crowd dispersed, and Nicholas went back to his workbench; but all through the months that followed, his mind was occupied with the thought of the lonely little Katje. He saw her several times after that, and learned that it was true that she would not be allowed to hang up her stocking. The last time he visited her he had been seen by old Dinsler, who waved his stick at him and told him angrily to keep away from his house and his grandchild. And after that day, Katje was to be seen no more.

Hoping for the best, however, Nicholas carefully made a few little toys for Katje and packed them away with his other gifts, and went on thinking and thinking until, just about a week before Christmas, when he was taking a walk around the big boarded-up house, hoping to catch a glimpse of Katje, a wonderful idea struck him. He had been staring up at the forbidding-looking house, all barred and locked, when his attention was caught by the huge stone chimney on the roof. His eyes brightened; he slapped his thigh and chuckled to himself. "I'll try it! I may get stuck, but it's worth the attempt."

Christmas Eve that year was a dark, moonless night. The wind whistled mournfully through the deserted streets, and a

cold sleet stung Nicholas' face and covered his sleigh and reindeer with a shining coat of ice.

"Come on now, my good lads," he encouraged his deer. "Trip's almost over; we've only the house on the hill now. It'll probably take me the rest of the night," he muttered to himself, shivering in his red coat and looking like a big snow-man, with the rain and sleet forming icicles on his snowy white beard.

He tied the deer to the front gate and then, taking his sack from the back of the sleigh, climbed from his high seat to the top bar of the fence, and in a moment was down in the yard. He stopped to listen; not a sound could be heard but a few shutters banging in the wind and the sighing of the big pines.

He crept over to the side of the house, where a sort of porch covered one door and made an excellent ladder to the roof. He had a hard time, fat and bulky as he was and encumbered by the sack on his back; but he finally puffed his way up to the top of the porch, and in a few minutes was crouched on the sloping roof of the house.

Now was the dangerous part. The roof was slippery with the sleet and rain that had fallen; he had to take out his little knife and hack away the ice, to form wedges where he could get a foothold. Once he paused breathless, when he thought he heard footsteps in the darkness below. He listened intently, but discovered it was only the impatient stamping of one of his reindeer.

Finally a big shape loomed up above him—it was the chimney. Nicholas stopped to rest a moment, then leaned over the wide edge and looked down into inky blackness.

"Just as I thought," he murmured in a satisfied tone. "The old miser lets his fire go out nights, even such a bitter cold one as this."

He climbed over the edge and then began his slow, perilous descent, feeling carefully with his feet for jutting bricks, pressing one hand flat on the sides, and bracing his back firmly against the walls, and so slowly made his way through the sooty chimney until he finally felt solid earth beneath his feet.

He stepped out of the fireplace into a room which was only slightly lighter than the black chimney. When his eyes became accustomed to the darkness, he made out the dim outlines of a table and, groping around, found the stub of a candle, which he lit. Then he set to work swiftly. He drew out from his pack a bright blue woolen stocking, which he filled to the brim with little toys and nuts and raisins, for he thought the hungry little girl might like a few sweets. Then he hung the fat stocking right on the fireplace, weighted down with a heavy brass candlestick. He stood back a moment to survey his work and was just leaning over the candle to blow it out and make his difficult way back up the chimney, when he was startled by the sudden opening of a door, and a furious figure dashed into the room.

"Sneaking into my house, eh? After my gold, I suppose! I'll show you how I treat thieves; I'll show you!"

The old man picked up a heavy pair of iron fire-tongs and made a lunge at Nicholas, who rapidly sprang aside, so that the table was between him and the mad old miser.

"Don't be such a fool, man," he said quickly, realizing that the other was in such a rage he was dangerous. "I haven't come here after your gold. Look . . ."

"You haven't, eh? Then what brings you here, if it isn't some thieving purpose? Why do you break into an honest man's house in the dead of night if it isn't for the wealth I'm supposed to have?"

"What brings me here? Look behind you at that stocking there. The other children in the village leave theirs outside their doors, but you have that poor child so frightened she's afraid to ask you for anything. I only wanted to make her feel she was just as good as the others, that she could get gifts the same as they find on Christmas morning."

"Gifts," exclaimed the old man, bewildered, lowering his dangerous-looking weapon. "You *give* things away?" He looked at Nicholas as though he were some strange kind of animal.

"Yes," answered Nicholas, relieved to see the fire-tongs out of sight. "I'll even give you a Christmas gift, you foolish old man. Here, if gold's all you care for, here's more—and more—and more, to add to your hoard!"

And he reached into his deep pockets and poured a stream of bright gold on the table under old Carl's astonished eyes.

"There, that's just to show you how unimportant *I* think money is compared to the love of a little child, which you might have. Did you ever try to make Katje's eyes twinkle at you? No, you only see the bright glitter of this stuff, and so her eyes are sad, pitiful things when you look into them. Did you ever feel her warm little hand tuck itself into yours? No. Your fingers are satisfied with the cold touch of gold. I pity you, old man, but don't you dare touch that stocking or I'll make you sorry for yourself as well. And now," he finished his tirade and brushed some soot from one eye, "now, will you please show me the way

to the door. I don't intend to climb up that chimney. I'll never get this suit clean again!"

He marched out of the room, a ridiculous, stout figure, covered with soot from head to toe, and yet somehow a very impressive person to old Carl, who hastened ahead of him and silently let him out into the black, stormy night.

* * * * * * *

The village buzzed with excitement during the following week. Something had stirred up the old miser on the hill! He had ripped off the boards from his doors and windows; he had bought a new horse and sleigh; he had stocked his larder with huge quantities of food-stuffs. Next, he interviewed the schoolmaster, and within a few days, Katje and her grandfather were seen on the road leading to the school, the little girl's face beaming up at the old man, her feet skipping along to catch up with his long strides and her warm little hand tucked close in his gnarled old fist.

And all because Nicholas had climbed down a chimney to fill a stocking!

Chapter 11
The First Christmas Tree

Very close to Nicholas' cottage was a thick grove of pine trees,—tall, beautiful dark green trees which lifted their branches high up into the sky and formed a perfect shelter for the ground beneath. Scattered in among the larger trees were clusters of firs, brave little trees, which kept their sturdy branches green all through the cold northern winter and came through each heavy snowstorm with their shiny needles still pointed to the sky.

The children used to love to play in this grove, because no matter how stormy the weather was outside, here they could find a warmer, more sheltered spot away from the bitter winds on the hills and roads. And in the summer time, it was a charming place, with the sharp, keen scent of the pine trees, and the soft murmuring of their branches in the breeze.

Nicholas loved this little grove, for in order to get there, the village children had to pass his cottage, and hardly a group went by his door without one or more of their number dashing in to say "Good-day" to their old friend and to watch him work at his fascinating little toys.

One winter day, toward the end of the year, Nicholas looked out of his cottage window and noticed an entire group of children, all running for dear life away from the grove. At first he thought it was some sort of game, but as they drew nearer, he saw that something must have frightened them. A few of the smaller ones were crying loudly, and the larger boys and girls were dragging them along, not one pausing for breath until

they reached the wood-carver's cottage, where they all flocked in and stood still for a minute, panting for breath.

Nicholas picked up one of the babies and tried to soothe him. "Why, what's all this about? All you big boys looking so frightened! Did you see a bogie-man in the woods?"

The larger children began to look a little ashamed of themselves; then all began explaining why they had run so fast.

"We were playing robbers in the pine grove, and it was Niki's turn to take his side hiding so that they could spring out at us. We were the travelers who were going to be robbed, you see," the speaker explained to Nicholas, who nodded his white head understandingly.

"Well," the boy went on, "I was leading the band of travelers, so I took them back a little way so we wouldn't see where Niki had hidden his robbers. We waited long enough for them to get away, then we started marching back. And just as we reached the spot where we had left the others"—here the boy's voice seemed to tremble a little, and the other children shivered and drew closer to Nicholas—"I saw a clump of evergreens move a little, so I shouted, 'Robbers!' and we all ran over there, and— and . . ."

"And a big black man walked out!" shrieked a little fellow hysterically.

"He wasn't really all black, you know, Nicholas," said Niki. "We heard the other fellows say, 'Robbers!' so we ran out of our hiding place, and we saw him too. He had long black hair and a terrible-looking mustache, and he had gold rings in his ears. And he looked at us and said something we couldn't understand. So we turned around and started to run, and we ran right into a whole lot more black men, and there were women and babies with them too."

"Yes, and when they saw us running, they all laughed at us, and said things to us in a strange language," added a little girl. "I wasn't afraid after I saw the babies. Really bad men don't go around with babies, do they, Nicholas?"

"No, I expect not, Sonya. They may have looked bad because they were different from the men you see in the village, but I think I know who they might be. Did they have any horses or carts with them?"

"Yes," answered one boy. "I saw three or four thin-looking horses standing by a big covered wagon."

"I saw the wagon, too," said Niki. "It was big, but one of the wheels had rolled right off, and it looked as though that cart would stay in the snow for a long time."

"You know, I think they might be gypsies," said Nicholas.

"Gypsies!" exclaimed all the children at once. "We never had any in the village before; are they robbers, Nicholas? Will they live here?"

"I don't know, children. Gypsies usually don't wander north in the winter time; this tribe may have lost their way. At any rate, they can't get any farther south now until the spring. Very few travelers can get over the pass in the mountains, and if their horses are old and their wagons broken down, they would be foolish to attempt it."

"But where will they live, Nicholas?" asked gentle little Sonya in a worried tone. "Those poor little babies and their mothers can't stay out in the cold all winter, can they? And there aren't any houses in the village where they can stay."

Nicholas shook his head. "That's true, my dear. But I guess gypsies are used to all sorts of weather. Why, I bet those babies

would cry if they woke up at night and saw a roof over their heads instead of the stars."

"I'd like to live out in the open all the time like that," said one of the little boys who had been the most frightened. "Only, how can they hang up their stockings if they have no doors?"

This question drew forth an eager stream of still more questions.

"Yes, Nicholas, you couldn't visit those children, could you?"

"They haven't even a chimney like the old miser's grandchild, but they'd like toys too, wouldn't they? They're like other children, aren't they, Nicholas?"

"Yes, those little gypsies out there in the pine grove are real children just like you, even if their curls are black and yours are yellow." And Nicholas tweaked the locks of the nearest flaxen-haired child, and then Vixen poked his head through the window to see if he was missing anything. So the children forgot the bad scare they had received and started to play robbers with the naughty little reindeer, who was a splendid playmate, because he was always willing to be the one to do the chasing.

It was a band of gypsies the children had seen, and just as Nicholas had supposed, they had been caught in an unexpectedly early winter storm which closed all the roads and prevented them from reaching the warmer southlands. A few of the men talked the language of the village and tried to explain their troubles to the sympathetic townsfolk, who generously gave them as much food as they could spare. So the gypsies were not in any danger of starving to death, but there was no chance of anyone having shelter to offer them. They would just have to make the best of their few wagons and tents

in the sheltered pine grove, with the thick little evergreens keeping out the bitter blasts of the winter winds.

Once the children of the village had recovered from their first fright they soon made friends with the little black-haired gypsies, and there were many fun times in the camp. The gypsy fathers would build big fires, then all would gather round, yellow heads shining in the firelight close to gleaming dark heads. And the children would teach each other new words, and the gypsy youths and maidens would dance strange wild dances and sing their sweet haunting songs.

Towards Christmas, the village children entertained their visitors with long stories about Nicholas,—how he came every Christmas on a beautiful sleigh drawn by eight fine reindeer; how he was dressed in a bright red suit trimmed with fine white fur; how he went around from house to house filling stockings with beautiful toys and sweets and nuts; and how he even went down a chimney one Christmas because there was no other way of getting into the house.

The gypsy children were much impressed, and listened with wide-open black eyes at the stories. Then they would look down at their ragged dresses and trousers, or glance over at the rough tents and cluster of fir trees that were their houses, and would shake their heads.

"He couldn't visit us," they said. "We have no doors, and no chimneys, and we never wear stockings."

Little Sonya, who wanted everybody to be happy, reported some of these things to Nicholas, and came away from his cottage with a contented mind, for she knew that the wise smile on his lips meant that he had a plan in his kind old head.

Christmas Eve finally arrived, and this year, after he had finished going to each house in the village, Nicholas, to the

astonishment of his reindeer, drove them right past the cottage and out into the forest. He stopped at the edge of the pine grove, where he was met by a dark figure. It was Grinka, the leader of the gypsy band.

Nicholas handed the man some white objects.

"Here are the candles, Grinka. Remember what I said you're to do?" The man nodded. "Good! You do your part, and I'll follow along with these things."

"These things" consisted of Nicholas' sack, which he carried along with him as he followed Grinka. The gypsy paused at every little fir tree in the grove, deftly twisting a piece of cord around the base of each candle, and so tying it to a branch. Then Nicholas would finish decorating the tree, tying to the green branches shiny red apples, brown nuts, and of course, a sample of every one of his hand-carved toys. It was a long task, because there were over ten of the little evergreens to be trimmed; but Nicholas insisted on having a tree for every family of gypsy children. So it was almost dawn when they finally finished their work.

"Now for the lights," said Nicholas.

They both went around quickly from tree to tree, touching a taper to each candle, until the whole dark grove was twinkling and glowing like the center of a warm hearth-fire.

"I think that's the prettiest part of it all," said Nicholas, "and you must be sure to awaken the children before the sun gets through the pine trees and spoils the effect."

"All right," said Grinka, "I'll go and wake them up now, before you go."

"Oh, no!" said Nicholas alarmed. "They mustn't see me. The children must never see me. It would spoil it all. Now I must go!"

And he jumped into his sleigh and was off, with a jingling of silver bells and a crack of his long black whip.

A few moments after his departure, Grinka had aroused all the children in the camp, and Nicholas should have stayed just to see the joy on the thin little faces as they capered around among the trees, each one discovering something new to exclaim about.

"It's the lights on these lovely little dark green trees that make everything so beautiful," said one child.

"No, it's the gifts!" exclaimed another. "Just look at this pretty little doll I have!"

"It's the fruit and nuts," added one half-starved-looking little waif, who was stuffing his mouth with goodies.

"I think everything is beautiful because it's Christmas," decided one wise little boy.

"Yes, yes, because it's Christmas!" they all shouted, dancing around. "And these are our Christmas Trees!"

Chapter 12
A Present for Nicholas

Holvig was one of those timid little girls who hated to go to bed, not just because it was bedtime, but because it was so dark in her little room after the cheery living room of her parents' cottage. She would shriek with fear when a tiny mouse ran across her path, and she would walk miles to avoid going by the village pasture, where terrifyingly big yet gentle cows were grazing. She was a somewhat lonely little girl, too, because certain of the big boys in the village, after discovering how timid she was, used to tease her by making sudden noises behind her back or by jumping at her from dark corners. So most of the time she played by herself or with the smaller children of the neighborhood.

Her father used to grow impatient with his daughter.

"What is to become of her?" he would ask his wife. "Why, she's afraid of almost every living thing and makes up a few extra ghosts and hobgoblins from the other world as well. I'm really worried. Sometimes I think the child must be daft."

"That she's not," returned his wife warmly. "Holly has a good sound little head on her shoulders, and it's only this streak of timidity that makes her seem different from other children. Someday something will happen that will make her forget her fears; I feel sure of it. She's such a good, affectionate child, she'd do anything for someone she loved, even if it took the last ounce of her courage."

"Well, perhaps you're right," answered her husband, "but I hate to see her going on like this. It isn't natural for a child her age to go about alone all the time."

"As long as Holly has her flowers, she'll never be alone," said the mother. "She has such a way with them, our garden is the loveliest in the village, even for the short summer we have."

"Flowers!" exclaimed the big man in disgust. "We have them in the yard in the summer, and then she putters over those flower pots all winter in the house. Silliness, I call it!"

He stamped impatiently out of the cottage and left his wife smiling half-sadly at a little window-box of the "silly" blossoms.

Holly's love for flowers and the luck she had in raising them in the harsh northern climate were really remarkable. As her mother had said, the little yard around the cottage was lovely all through the summer with flowers of every hue. Then, when the first sharp frost of the autumn was felt in the air, Holvig tenderly transplanted into boxes and jars those of the flowers and plants which would keep in the house, and carefully gathered seeds from the others for the spring planting.

Of course, like all the other children of the village, Holvig hung her stocking on the door every Christmas Eve and every Christmas morning discovered the same lovely gifts and sweets. Being an affectionate child, she became passionately devoted to good old Nicholas, an affection second only to her love for her flowers. But, unlike the other children in the village, she couldn't take for granted the open-handed generosity of the wood-carver. She wanted to express in some way her gratitude and appreciation that someone did not think her queer and odd because she didn't run about with the other children.

But what could she do? She thought and thought, and finally hit upon something which might please Nicholas. She would give him something that gave her more pleasure than anything else in the world: she would share her flowers with him. She always had enough; in the summer the garden was a riot of color, and in the winter she usually had such a careful way of handling her plants, that there were always some in blossom.

So, thoroughly pleased with her idea, the little girl selected a small bouquet of bright blossoms from her window-boxes, for it was now winter, and bundled herself up in her cloak and cap and started for Nicholas' cottage.

"I'm glad he lives at the edge of the wood," Holvig thought to herself, as she trudged along the road through the deep snow. "I don't think I'd ever get to see him if he lived way in the wood. I never could bear to go that far from the village."

As she approached the wood-carver's cottage, she was wondering what would be the best way of presenting her offering.

"I'd like so much to see him and talk to him," she said to herself. "I'm sure he doesn't know me, for they say he's getting so old now he doesn't remember all the children in the village, but just fills a stocking wherever he sees one. But I think it would be more fun just to leave the flowers outside the door, the way he leaves his gifts. That's what I'll do," she decided, and skipped along until she reached the gateway to the cottage. She stole silently across the yard, and was just about to leave her posies on the doorstep when she was startled by a loud crash from the near-by stable. Her heart almost stopped beating, then raced and pounded with fear as she saw a big animal rushing right towards her. She was too terrified to move; her

feet remained rooted in the snow; her icy hands held desperately to the little bouquet of flowers. The awful thing made his way straight to her; she shut her eyes and thought wildly, "I'm going to die. He'll surely kill me." A moment which seemed like a year passed, while she waited silently for death, and then finding herself still alive and not hearing a sound from the wild beast, she slowly opened her eyes and stared straight into a pair of beautiful soft brown ones, which were gazing at her with mild curiosity.

"Oh, it's a reindeer," she said to herself, losing a little of her fear. "It must belong to Nicholas, only it might be dangerous, just the same."

She was still too frightened to move, and finally the reindeer, growing tired of standing still, came nearer and nearer, until his nose touched the little bouquet. He opened his mouth and nibbled a posy. He seemed to like the taste of it, for he started to nibble another. Holvig, too astonished to save the first flower, awoke from her frightened trance when she saw her whole bouquet in danger of being devoured. She flew into a rage. She snatched her flowers away from the deer's mouth and held them behind her back with one hand, while with the other she pushed the surprised head away from her and started to deal sharp rapid blows on his shoulders and back. The reindeer stood his ground for a moment, then turned and fled, followed closely by Holvig, who was still so angry she supposed she could catch the fleet-footed animal.

Suddenly she heard a voice behind her. "Here, here; what are you doing to my Vixen? You're frightening him!"

Holvig turned and saw Nicholas standing in the doorway, fat and rosy, his white hair standing like a halo around his head.

"I frightened him!" gasped Holly. "I frightened something?"

"Yes, of course you did," said Nicholas. "Don't you know deer are timid creatures and you shouldn't chase them?"

"But he was eating your bouquet, and I became angry, and—do you really mean to say he was frightened of me?"

Nicholas laughed a little impatiently. "Yes. My goodness, child, why do you keep saying that? Didn't you think you could frighten an animal like that?"

"No," stated Holvig in a wondering tone. "I never scared anybody in my life. Somebody's always frightening me, you know."

Nicholas looked gravely down into the solemn little face. "Come into my workroom and talk awhile," he said quietly. "I think we shall have to get acquainted."

Then, after they were comfortably installed in the cheery little room and Holvig had been given a bowl of warm milk, Nicholas continued, "What is your name, my dear?"

"Holvig is my real name, but everyone calls me Holly," the little girl answered. "Oh, I almost forgot!" she exclaimed, and she dashed out in the yard again and returned in a few seconds bearing a somewhat bedraggled bunch of flowers.

"They look terrible now," she said sadly. "You see, that Vixen ate some of them, and then I dropped them in the snow when I started to chase him; but I guess there's enough left, if you'd like them. I brought them for you," she finished shyly.

Nicholas was so pleased by this offering, that he wanted to know all about Holly's garden, and her winter plants, and her house, and her parents, and everything. So gradually the story came out, and the kind-hearted old wood-carver soon had a

good picture of the kind of life the little girl had led,—timid, always shrinking away from something, never quite happy unless she was alone among her flowers.

"Why, I'd never think you were a timid little girl," he said encouragingly. "I think you did a very brave thing to save my bouquet."

"Oh, do you?" asked Holly eagerly. "I was really afraid at first," she confessed truthfully.

"Yes, perhaps you were, Holly. But to do something you think is dangerous when you're really afraid is more courageous than if you didn't feel any fear at all. Always remember that, my dear," he said kindly, laying a hand on the yellow curls.

"Yes, Nicholas, I will," promised the child solemnly, "and I'll bring you some more flowers next week."

Then Holly said good-by and left the cottage. As she crossed the yard, she noticed Vixen poking his head at her from behind a tree. Her heart skipped a little, but she shut her lips together firmly, and walked over to the reindeer.

"Boo!" said Holly to Vixen.

And Vixen turned and ran for deer life.

Chapter 13
Holly Gets Its Name

Often after that, Holly brought a bouquet of her flowers to Nicholas, and she and the wood-carver soon became very good friends. Nicholas would sit at his bench and work at his little toys, and Holly would sit on a stool at his feet and talk and talk. Without the little girl's suspecting it, her old friend would lead her to tell him of her fears, and she discovered that talking about them here in this cozy little room made them seem somehow less important.

"Did a mouse ever sit still and look at you?" asked Nicholas.

"Oh, no," said little Holly terrified. "I'd die if he did that."

"Well now, why do you suppose he runs when he sees you? Does he ever run at you?" pursued the old man, with a twinkle in his bright blue eyes.

"No, he always runs the other way," said Holly.

"Now I wonder why he does that," remarked Nicholas. Holly laughed,—a somewhat ashamed little laugh. "I suppose he's afraid of me," she said slowly, discovering a new idea.

"Exactly," said wise old Nicholas.

Another time he said in a conversational tone, "Now take rabbits, for instance. Are you afraid of rabbits, Holly?"

"Oh, no," answered the little girl proudly. "That's one thing I know to be even more timid than I am. Why, they'd even run at my shadow!"

"That's true; they are fearful little creatures," said Nicholas. Then he continued, "Did you ever see where rabbits live, Holly?"

"Yes, they go down into little holes in the ground, don't they?"

"Mmmm," answered Nicholas, seeming to be busy examining a little doll's face he was carving. "They must be terribly dark, those little holes don't you think so, Holly?"The little girl nodded her head. "And yet those little animals you think are so timid go way down there to bed every night and probably don't think anything of it."

Holly's forehead wrinkled. "I see what you mean, Nicholas. But if my room were really as dark as a rabbit's hole, maybe I wouldn't mind; but you see, it's only half dark, and the chairs and tables look so terrible in the dim light that comes through the window. I sometimes think they are goblins."

Nicholas put down his toy and turned a surprised face towards the little girl. "Goblins!" he exclaimed. "Now here am I well past sixty years old, and I never heard of goblins. What are they, Holly?" he asked in an interested tone.

Holly looked confused, then a doubtful expression crept into her voice. "Why, I don't exactly know," she confessed.

"But I've always heard of them," she ended firmly.

"You little silly," laughed Nicholas tenderly, drawing the child up on his knee. "Now, you listen to me, Holly," he went on seriously. "We're friends, aren't we?"

The little girl smiled lovingly at the kind, rosy face so close to hers and nodded her head vigorously.

"And you believe I wouldn't tell you something that wasn't true, don't you?"

Holly nodded again.

"Well, I'm going to tell you something. There aren't any goblins, and there aren't any bogie-men, and there aren't any terrible creatures who just run around trying to harm little children. If you're a good girl, and say your prayers before you go to bed every night, nothing can harm you. Do you hear me? Nothing."

Holly looked very much impressed.

"It'll be hard at first," she said. "But if I think I see a goblin in my room, I'll just say to him, 'Nicholas says you just aren't, you old goblin!' "

They both laughed, and Nicholas hugged the little girl and told her it was time to run home to her supper.

The winter months passed this way, and when spring arrived, just when it was time for planting, Holly fell sick. All through the short summer weeks, she lay on her bed, weakened by a fever, recognizing no one, not even her beloved Nicholas. He brought flowers to her, hoping that they might bring back the wandering little mind, but she only pushed them away and went on with her delirious ravings of big black giants and horrible goblins. For with her illness, all her almost-forgotten fears had returned, and with a heavy heart, Nicholas realized that all their friendly little talks during the winter had been completely wiped from her mind.

She gradually recovered. The fever left her the same pale timid little girl she had been when she had first brought a bouquet to Nicholas' door. She trembled in her dark little room and, during the day, sat at the window and stared dejectedly out at the bare, cold little yard, where there were no flowers. It was winter again, but this year the interior of her

cottage was just as bare of blossoms as the garden, because there had been no flower-growing during her illness.

Holly was more heavy-hearted than she had ever been during her entire life. Everything seemed black to her. Her nights were terror-filled in spite of all Nicholas had told her; but more than anything else she worried because she had no flowers. For long months to come, she would have nothing to bring to Nicholas,—nothing for her kind old friend, who had tried to do so much for her. She pressed her thin little face against the window pane and looked with tear-filled eyes out into her bleak front yard.

Two boys were passing the gate and paused to wave kindly at her. Holly waved back and wiped her eyes. She pushed open the casement a little and called out, "What's that green stuff you have under your arm, Karl?"

The boys came over to the window. Karl held up an armful of beautiful branches,—lovely little warm red berries scattered among shiny pointed green leaves.

"Why, it's beautiful!" exclaimed Holly, clasping her hands, and her dull eyes beginning to sparkle a little. "What is it? Where did you get it, Karl?"

"We got it in the woods,—way back in the part they call the Black Forest. It grows like this, right in the middle of the winter. I don't know what the name of it is."

"Oh, it's pretty," said Holly again. "But—but—did you say the Black Forest?"

"Yes," answered Karl, "and it's black all right. The sun hardly ever gets through those trees, and if you get lost there, I guess you'd stay lost."

"Yes, sir," added the other boy. "I wouldn't go there alone, I can tell you. Well, come on, Karl. We've got to go."

The two boys went on their way, leaving Holly with the picture of the bright red berries and shiny green leaves still in her mind. How Nicholas would love that cheery little plant! The warm little berries somehow reminded her of him, so bright and rosy. But the Black Forest! She shuddered.

"There must be all kinds of terrible things in that place," she thought. "Wild animals and strange noises, and maybe, behind the trees,—goblins!"

She shook a little; then, suddenly, she had a mental picture of herself in Nicholas' cottage, saying, "I'll just look at him and say, 'Goblin, Nicholas says you just aren't!'"

Holly buried her tortured little face in her hands. "Oh, if I only dared to do it," she almost sobbed. "He says to do a thing when you are really afraid is braver than if you felt no fear at all. But that's a horrible place; even the boys are afraid to go there alone. But I haven't any flowers for him! And he's so kind to us children, and spring is so far away!"

So she sat there for a long time, her mind turning from one decision to the other. "I've got to do it, to show him. No, I can't, I can't! Something terrible would happen to me. But he said nothing could harm a good child, and I've tried to be good. It's a bright day; maybe there would be some sun in the forest. If I hurried and found the berries quickly, maybe I could be back again before nightfall. I—think—I'm going to do it!"

And she almost ran for her cloak, before she had a chance to change her mind, and before her mother returned from the village.

Nicholas looked up from his work and saw a little figure flying along the road, right past his cottage and into the woods.

"That looked like Holly," he thought startled. "No, it can't be. She's not well yet,—besides," he shook his head sadly, "the poor little thing would be too terrified to go into the woods. It must be some other village child."

An hour later, however, he was interrupted in his work by a frantic woman. It was Holly's mother. "Oh, I thought she was here," the woman said distracted. "When I came home and found her gone, I was angry that she had gone out while she was still so weak, but I was sure I'd find her with you. Oh, where has she gone? She's lost! And it's beginning to storm!"

Nicholas was rapidly pulling on his bright red coat and fur-trimmed cap. "I'll find her, don't you worry." He looked out at the gray afternoon sky, filled with leaden-colored clouds. Already the air was filled with millions of snowflakes, scurrying and tumbling in every direction, and striking fear in the heart of the man and woman who knew there was a little girl out somewhere in the storm.

"I know where to look," said Nicholas. "I'll take the small sled and Vixen; he's the best one for narrow passing, and he's sure-footed over rocks and steep places. You sit down here and get comfortable, and I'll have your Holly here before the snow covers my front walk."

So the round little figure bustled about, energetic and sound in spite of his sixty-odd years, and in a few moments was lost in the wild flurry of snow.

Holly, meanwhile, had found the red berries with the shiny green leaves, and her joy on seeing the cheerful little plant almost chased away the thoughts of what awful things might be lurking behind the huge tree trunks or hiding on the boughs

waiting to spring down at her. She gathered a large armful of the plants, and then started back again, her heart beginning to pound once more as the light inside the forest grew dimmer and dimmer.

"I can't understand it," she murmured, her knees trembling as she tried to find the narrow path. "It can't be any later than three o'clock and the sun was quite bright when I came in here. Oh!" she finished in a terrified tone, as she felt the cold touch of a snowflake on her cheek, then another, then another. "I don't mind the snow so much," she continued as she hurried along in the dim light. "The trees grow so thick I don't think there would be enough snow to block my way, but it's getting darker and darker."

She started to run now, as the snow whirled in white mists around her, wrapping the trees in its ghostly mantle and making little white spirits out of low bushes and shrubs. The wind whistled through the branches and moaned high up in the tree-tops; it caught at Holly's cloak and whirled it around her head. In her terrified fancy, it seemed that some ghostly hand was plucking at her and trying to keep her in this terrible place.

She began to run, her arms clutching her bundle of berries, her head bent to breast the storm, her feet tripping over rocks and stumps hidden in the snow. She breathed heavily; in spite of the biting wind, she felt her head grow hotter and hotter; her heart was pounding so hard she thought it would burst through her ribs.

"I can't see anything," she sobbed. "It's getting darker and darker; I can't lift my feet; the trees are falling on me. OH!" she shrieked aloud as her terrified eyes saw a huge form looming at her through the clouds of snow. She closed her eyes and fell face down in front of Nicholas and Vixen.

When she next opened her eyes, she was in the wood-carver's cottage. Her mother was holding her in her arms; Nicholas' kind face was bent over her.

"Where are my flowers?" was her first question. "I went in the Black Forest alone to get them for you. Where are they?"

Nicholas put the red berries in her arms. "Here they are, dear. Did you bring them to me?"

"Yes, Nicholas. And I was afraid; but I never will be again. I know that now."

Nicholas wiped his eyes. "You shouldn't have gone so soon after you were sick. But I love the little blossom. What is its name?"

"I don't know, but I liked it because it reminded me of you; it's so round and red and shiny," said the little girl with a mischievous laugh.

"That's funny," answered Nicholas, "it reminded me of you, somewhat. It's so brave growing out there in the darkness and the cold, and the little berries have the blood-red of courage in them. So I think I'll christen your little flower. From now on we'll call it 'Holly.'"

Chapter 14
The Last Stocking

Ten more years passed, and every Christmas morning the children found their stockings filled with toys and candy and nuts. Poor families found baskets filled with good things to eat,—wild fowl, vegetables, flour, and meal. Sometimes even bundles of clothing for every member of the family were placed on the doorsteps. For Nicholas was now a prosperous old man and shared all he had with the less fortunate townsfolk.

But as the years went on, and his good deeds increased, he was growing more and more feeble. The villagers, who loved and venerated him, grew sad when their children prattled happily on Christmas morning over their toys, and the fearful thought in every parent's heart was,—maybe next Christmas he won't be with us.

One year, a group of men and women called on Nicholas at his cottage with a suggestion.

"We thought, Nicholas," said one man a little hesitantly, "we thought that since it's so cold filling stockings outside the door, and sometimes there are five or six to each family, why couldn't the children leave their stockings inside by the fireplace?"

"Then you could come in and get warm and take your time about it," added one woman kindly.

Nicholas raised his white head from the work he was always doing and smiled all over his rosy face. He placed one gnarled hand, grown old in service for others, on a man's shoulder.

"The idea of you coming here to tell me how to do my work," he joked. "Why, I remember filling an embroidered bag for you when you were tinier than your own children are now. And then they started putting stockings out instead of bags, and now you're going to pull the stockings in. Well, times change, I suppose, and I must keep up with the times. So indoors I will go, and I thank you all for your warm fires."

So after that year, Nicholas would creep into houses on Christmas Eve, and would settle his bulky old form comfortably before the fire and fill the stockings leisurely. The firelight would leap up merrily as if to help him at his work, and the peaceful old face with the halo of white hair and beard would beam warmly at the little toys he stuffed into the stockings, and the wrinkled hands would caress lovingly the little boats and dolls that a child's hands would fondle the next morning.

One Christmas Eve, old Nicholas found it more and more difficult to leave each fireplace for the next house. The warm blaze made him drowsy, and his old bones protested as he heaved himself up wearily to be on with his work. It was slow progress he made from house to house, but he finally reached his last stop, his back tired from the bulky sack, his head drooping with sleepiness, and his heart heavy as he realized how old he must be when the task he had done for so many years was now beginning to wear him out.

The last house was reached, and Nicholas dropped in the settle by the fire with a deep sigh of relief. It was a long time before he recovered sufficiently to start filling the stockings; even then he did it slowly, reaching painfully down to his sack, and each time straightening himself with growing difficulty. He filled four of the five stockings that were hanging over the

fireplace; then, with the fifth one still empty in his hands, the old head drooped drowsily, and Nicholas was fast asleep.

He awoke with a start an hour later when a man anxiously shook him by the shoulder.

"Are you all right, Nicholas?" asked a worried voice. "I got up to see if the fire had gone out and found you still here, and look, it's almost dawn!"

Nicholas shook himself, then stood up wearily. "Yes, lad, its Christmas morning, and I haven't finished my work," he said sorrowfully.

"I'll do the last one for you, Nicholas," answered the man kindly. "You just leave the toys and things here and go home to bed. I'll finish it. Go along now, before the children get up and see you."

Nicholas, thinking of his warm comfortable bed, handed the stocking to the man and went out into the gray dawn.

Five minutes later, a little night gowned boy stood in the doorway of the living room. "Why, Father," he exclaimed in a disappointed tone, "I thought it was Nicholas who gave us the toys, and here you are filling my stocking!"

The child looked ready to cry, but his father, caught with the half-filled stocking in his hand, hastened to reassure him.

"Your Nicholas is getting old, my boy," he said, "and sometimes he gets so tired we parents have to help him in his work. But don't you forget, it's always Nicholas who leaves you the toys."

"That's all right then!" said the little fellow. "It isn't half so much fun when you think your mother and father prepare the gifts."

"I should say not," said the father sternly, "and you must never doubt Nicholas. Why, he might be so hurt at a little boy thinking he didn't fill the stockings, that he might never come to his house again. Think how terrible that would be!"

"Yes," whispered his son in a frightened voice. "What would Christmas be without Nicholas?"

Chapter 15
The Passing of Nicholas

Holly was no longer little Holly; she was a lovely slender young girl and led a happy life, her childish terrors long forgotten. She hummed a little carol that Christmas morning, as she walked along the road towards Nicholas' cottage, her arms filled with the bright red berries that bore her own name. She still continued the practice of bringing flowers all year round to her old friend, and every Christmas Eve she would go into the Black Forest to gather holly with which to decorate his cottage on Christmas morning.

It was almost noon, and as she approached the house, she noticed how silent and empty it looked without Nicholas' head at the window, bent over his work, and with no smoke coming from the chimney.

"Poor thing," thought the girl affectionately. "He's probably all tired out from his trip last night. I won't waken him. I'll just go in and make his fire and put the holly around."

She stole silently into the cold little cottage, and soon had a warm blaze crackling on the hearth. She cast an anxious glance now and then towards the closed door that led to Nicholas' bedroom; she was so afraid of disturbing his slumber. But she heard no sound and busied herself decking the walls and windows with branches. Then, with one spray still in her hand, she looked around uncertainly, and not finding another bare spot in the living-room, she decided to bring it in to place beside Nicholas, so the branch of holly would be the first thing he'd see when he opened his eyes.

She opened the door quietly and stole over to the bed.

"Why, the darling was so tired he fell asleep with his clothes on," she murmured tenderly.

For the fat round figure lay there, still dressed in the bright red suit with the white fur and the shiny black leggings and close-fitting stocking cap.

"Here's your holly," whispered the girl, bending over Nicholas. Then, with a startled exclamation, she dropped the blood-red blossoms all over the still figure and sprang back, frightened.

"Nicholas, Nicholas!" she screamed. "Oh, he's dead! He's dead!"

She ran bareheaded out into the snow, stumbled blindly down the road into the village, and with tears streaming down her face, called loudly for the townsfolk.

They gathered in little groups to listen to her story. The women murmured in broken tones, between sobs, "He's dead!" and clasped their wondering little children closer, as if to comfort them for the loss of their dearest friend. The men looked down to the ground and up at the sky and every place but into each other's eyes, for no man wanted to see the tears that stood there.

"Yes, he's dead," they all sighed deeply. "Who's dead, Mother? Is it Nicholas?" asked the children. "Won't he come to us any more on Christmas Eve?"

And the parents had to turn away from the wide childish eyes because they didn't want to say to them that awful sentence, "Yes, Nicholas is dead."

The bells tolled, and the village was in darkness Christmas night. Vixen and his brothers whimpered in their stalls, and the holly glowed red over a still loving heart in a red suit.

Chapter 16
Santa Claus

It was a sad year that followed the Christmas morning of Nicholas' death. All through the long cold winter and brief summer the villagers were reminded of the old friend who had left them every time they saw his closed cottage, with a holly wreath still in the window. They had tenderly put him to rest in the pine grove close to the friendly little evergreens and near the spot where the village children came to play. The eight reindeer were no longer in the stalls behind the cottage; they had been taken back to the big stables on the top of the hill by Katje Dinsler. Many a time in the months that passed, a mother would pick up a little carved doll from the floor and gently wipe the dirt from its face, with a suddenly tear-dimmed eye for the generous heart who had given the toy.

It gradually entered even the most babyish mind that Nicholas was dead and would come to fill their stockings no more. They cried a little, then the image of the fat, cheerful old man faded from their forgetful childish memories, and so the year passed until it was again Christmas Eve.

"Mother, are we going to hang up our stockings?"

"No, no, child. Have you forgotten that Nicholas is dead and can't come to fill your stockings anymore?"

This question was asked and answered sadly in almost every house in the village that Christmas Eve, so different from the other years, when every fire in every hearth glowed warmly on happy, expectant little children who were busy choosing their best and longest stocking to hang over the fireplace. This

year, the little boys and girls went despondently to bed, and the night before Christmas was just like any ordinary night, with the parents silently banking the fires and bolting the doors that once had been left open to receive a merry, fat figure in a red suit.

And Nicholas might have been forgotten if it hadn't been for one boy, little lame Stephen, who had a still-warm memory of the kind old man and a childish faith that somehow a big heart like his could never die. So Stephen's parents were astonished when he calmly went about hanging up his stocking, just as he had done every Christmas Eve since he could remember.

"But Stephen," his mother reminded him sadly, "you know Nicholas is dead. You saw him carried from the cottage to the little pine grove; you saw his sleigh and reindeer being taken up to Mistress Katje's house. There's no Nicholas any more, child; don't you understand?"

"But I've got to hang up my stocking, Mother; I've got to. I don't believe God would keep him away from the children on Christmas Eve. I believe that he will come back . . ."

"Hush! You mustn't say things like that," exclaimed the mother in a frightened tone. "The dead must rest, my son, and it's not for you to say what God is to do with them. But you may hang up your stocking if you want to," she ended, feeling that even though her son suffered a cruel disappointment, the only way to convince him was to have him find his stocking empty on Christmas morning; then he wouldn't spend the rest of his life thinking that his mother might have been wrong.

So that was how, while all the other houses had fireplaces that were growing darker and colder, and the doors were bolted and windows tightly locked, there was one cottage in

the village where the latch-string was left out, where the fire still burned warmly on the hearth, and where a lone little stocking was hanging bravely, an emblem of faith in a doubting world.

During the night an old, old woman awoke and moved restlessly in her bed, muttering still half-asleep, "I thought I heard the jingling of silver bells and the tramping of reindeer's hoofs on the snow. No, it must have been a dream," she sighed, and went back to sleep.

Christmas morning dawned bright and clear. It might have been the first Christmas morning of the world, the sun was so warm, the air was so pure and fresh, the snow so virgin-white and glistening as it lay piled up along the fences and doorways. The little village street lay peaceful in the early morning quiet.

Suddenly the tranquility of the place was broken by a wild shout, the door of one cottage burst open, and the figure of a boy dashed out into the snow, one thin bare leg dragging a little as he limped through the gateway, and one arm waving wildly in the air,—a long, fat, bulging woolen stocking!

"He isn't dead!" shrieked Stephen, his thin face transfigured by a beautiful joy. "Look at my stocking! It's filled, just the same as last Christmas! And there's a big new sled by our fireplace. I knew it! Look, everybody! Wake up, wake up! Nicholas isn't dead!"

Men, women, and children leaped from their beds to see what all the noise was about, and the children leaped right into the largest piles of toys they had ever seen,—all around the fireplaces, on the tables and chairs, and even beside their beds. The entire village opened its doors and poured out into the street, the children dragging handsome new sleds loaded with the most beautiful toys the village had ever seen.

"Did you see this? Look at my boat!"

"He must have come down the chimney when he found the door locked. There was some soot on the floor."

"Isn't it wonderful? It's the happiest Christmas we've ever had!"

"Little Stephen found a fir-tree on his table, decorated with more gifts and fruit and candles, just the way the gypsy children had their gifts, many years ago."

"Yes, and Stephen says there is a big shining star way up on the topmost bough."

"That's because Stephen believed in him," they said, ashamed of themselves. "But now, we believe too. He isn't dead!"

So the bells pealed out on Christmas morning,—a joyful, happy sound, so different from the mournful tolling of a year ago; and the happy villagers almost sang the universal refrain, "He isn't dead!"

The children danced and ran around with their toys; the men looked at each other with solemn, awe-filled eyes; the mothers held their babies close and murmured, "He isn't dead, my pet; you'll grow up and Nicholas will still come to us."

One old woman, she who thought she had heard silvery bells in the midnight air, with her eyes half on another world, said in her cracked old voice, "He's a saint, that's what he is!"

"Yes, he's Saint Nicholas now!" They all took up the shout, and the whole town joined the glad cry, "Saint Nicholas!Saint Nicholas!"

A baby's voice tried to add his stumbling speech to the general shout. "Sant' Clos! Sant' Clos!" he lisped.

"We believe now," the children and the fathers and the mothers all said to each other with the light of faith that little lame Stephen had inspired on their faces. "We believe that Saint Nicholas will always come to us as long as there is one child alive in the village."

"In the village!" echoed little Stephen. "In the whole world!" he shouted triumphantly.

The Christmas Porringer

By
Evaleen Stein

Karen Asks About Christmas

Over the old Flemish city of Bruges the wintry twilight was falling. The air was starry with snowflakes that drifted softly down, fluttering from off the steep brown roofs, piling up in corners of ancient doorways, and covering the cobblestones of the narrow streets with a fleecy carpet of white.

At a corner of one of the oldest of these and facing on another no wider than a lane, but which bore the name of The Little Street Of The Holy Ghost, a number of years ago there stood a quaint little house built of light yellow bricks. It had a steep gabled roof, the bricks that formed it being arranged in a row of points that met at the peak beneath a gilded weather-vane shaped like an arrow. The little house had no dooryard, and a wooden step led directly from its entrance to the flagstones that made a narrow, uneven walk along that side of the street.

Icicles hung from the edge of the brown roof and twinkled in a crystal fringe around the canopy of the little shrine up in the corner of the dwelling. For, like so many others of the old city, the little house had its own shrine. It was a small niche painted a light blue, and in it, under a tiny projecting canopy of carved wood, stood a small figure of the Virgin Mother holding the Christ-child in her arms. Now and then a starry snowflake drifted in beneath the canopy and clung to the folds of the Virgin's blue robe or softly touched the little hands of the Christ child nestling against her breast.

And, by and by, as the wind rose and blew around the corner of the house, it began to pile up the snow on the sills of the casement windows whose small panes of glass lighted the

room within, where sat an old woman and a little girl. The woman was clad in a plain black gown, such as is still worn by the humbler of the Flemish dames, and on her silvery hair was a stiffly starched cap of white.

The little girl was dressed much the same, save that her light brown hair was not hidden but braided in two plaits that were crossed and pinned up very flat and tight at the back of her head.

The woman was bending over a rounded pillow, covered with black cloth, which she held in her lap; it was stuck full of stout pins, and around these was caught a web of fine threads each ending in a tiny bone bobbin, and beneath her skillful fingers, as they deftly plied these bobbins in and out, a delicate piece of lace was growing; for it was thus that she earned bread for herself and the little girl.

Indeed, the lace of Bruges, made by the patient toil of numberless of her poorer people, has for many centuries been famous for its fineness and beauty. And those who so gain their livelihood must often begin to work while they are still children, even as young as the little girl who sat there in the twilight by the window of the little yellow house.

She, too, was bending over a black-covered pillow, only hers was smaller and had fewer bobbins than that of the white-capped woman beside her; for the child was just beginning to learn some of the simpler stitches. But though the bit of lace on the pillow showed that she had made good progress, she was working now slowly and had already broken her thread twice, for her mind was full of other thoughts.

She was thinking that the next night would be Christmas eve, and that she would set her little wooden shoes by the hearth, and that if she had been good enough to please the

Christ-child, he would come while she was asleep and put in them some red apples and nuts, or perhaps—perhaps he might bring the little string of beads she wanted so much. For Flemish children do not hang up their stockings for Santa Claus as do the children of our land, but instead, at Christmas time, they set their little shoes on the hearth and these they expect the Christ-child himself to fill with gifts.

As the little girl by the window now thought and thought of Christmas, her fingers dropped the thread at last and, looking up from her task with her blue eyes full of dreams, "Grandmother," she said softly, "will the Christ-child surely come again tomorrow night? And do you think he will bring me something?"

"Why, yes, Karen, thou hast been a good child," answered Grandmother, who was trying hard to finish a difficult part of her lace pattern before the dark fell.

"And, Grandmother," went on Karen, after thinking a little longer, "is it really his own birthday?"

"Yes, yes, child," said Grandmother.

"Then," said Karen, as a bewildered look crept into her eyes, "why is it that he brings gifts to me, instead of my giving something to him? I thought on people's birthdays they had presents of their own. You know on my last one you gave me my blue kerchief, and the time before, my pewter mug." Karen considered a moment more, and then she added: "Is it because we are so poor, Grandmother, that I have never given the Christ-child a Christmas present?"

Here Grandmother's flying fingers paused an instant, though still holding a pair of the tiny bobbins, as she answered, "It is true we are poor, Karen, but that is not the reason. No one gives such gifts to the Christ-child. Thou must give him

obedience and love; dost thou not remember what Father Benedicte told thee? And then, too, thou knowest thou art to carry a wax candle to the cathedral for a Christmas offering at the shrine of the Blessed Virgin and Child."

"But," continued Karen perplexedly, "does no one give him something for his very own?"

"There, there, child," said Grandmother, with a note of weariness in her patient voice, "I cannot work and answer thy questions!"

And Grandmother bent still closer over the flower of lace which she was trying so hard to finish, and the little girl became silent.

After a while, from the beautiful tall belfry that soared into the sky from the center of the city, the chimes rang out the hour, and, no longer able to see in the gathering dusk, Grandmother rose and laid aside her work.

"Come, Karen," she said, "put up thy work, and get thy shawl and go fetch some water for the tea-kettle."

The little girl carefully placed her lace-pillow on a shelf at one side of the room; and taking a knitted shawl from a peg near the doorway, she ran to the dresser and lifted down a copper tea-kettle, polished till it shone. Then she unbarred the door and sped out into the snowy dusk.

She had but a short distance to go to the quaint pump that served the neighborhood. It stood among the cobblestones of the narrow street, and had been made long, long ago, when the workmen of even the commonest things loved their craft and strove to make everything beautiful that their fingers touched. So the pump had a wonderful spout of wrought iron shaped like a dragon's head; and as Karen tugged at the long, slender

handle of the same metal, she laughed to see how the icicles hung from the dragon's mouth like a long white beard. She liked to pretend that he was alive and wanting to eat her up, and that she was very brave to make him fill her tea-kettle; for Karen loved fairy stories and lived a great deal in her own thoughts.

Meantime, the dragon had not eaten her, and the copper tea-kettle was brimming over with cold water, seeing which she stooped and lifting it in both hands, carefully carried it back to the little yellow house and set it on the hearth where Grandmother had raked out some glowing coals. Then she lighted a candle, and helped prepare their simple evening meal of coarse brown bread and coffee, though this last was for Grandmother; for Karen there was a pewter mug full of milk.

When they had finished their supper, Grandmother placed her lace-pillow on the table close to the candle and again busied herself with her work. For the wife of Burgomaster Koerner had ordered the lace, and it must be finished and sent home the next day.

And Grandmother sorely needed every penny she could earn; for, since Karen had neither father nor mother, there was no one but herself to gain a livelihood until the little girl grew older and could help carry the burden. To be sure, Grandmother was not really so old as she looked, but many years of toil over the lace-pillow had bent her back and taken the color from her face. While Karen's father had lived they had known more of comfort; but when he died and the mother had followed soon afterward, leaving her baby girl to Grandmother's care, there had been but little left with which to buy their bread. That had been eight years before, but Grandmother had struggled bravely on; she was one of the most skillful of the scores of lace-makers of the old city, and so she had managed still to keep the little yellow house in which

she had always lived, and to shield Karen from knowing the bitterest needs of the poor.

But Grandmother was weary; and as now she bent over the fairylike web of lace in which she had woven flowers and leaves from threads of filmy fineness, she was glad that the piece was almost finished, and that she would have the blessed Christmas day in which to rest.

And while Grandmother's fingers flew back and forth among the maze of pins, Karen was busy tidying up the hearth and the few dishes which she neatly set back on the old-fashioned dresser near the fireplace. Then she drew a little stool close to the hearth, and, resting her chin on one hand, looked dreamily into the fire.

She was still thinking of Christmas Eve, and the more she thought the more she wanted to give something to the Christ-child. For she was a generous hearted little girl and loved to share any little pleasures with her friends, especially those who had been so good to her. And she considered the Christ child the most faithful friend she knew, "for," she said to herself, "as far back as I can remember, he has come every Christmas while I was asleep, and has always put something in my wooden shoes! And to think that no one gives him any present for himself!" For Karen could not see how giving him one's obedience or love (for, of course, everyone expected their friends to love them anyway!), or offering a wax candle in the shrine at the cathedral, could take the place of some little gift that he might have for his very own.

Surely, she thought, the Christ-child must like these things just as other children do. If only she had some money to buy something for him, or if only she had something of her own nice enough to offer him! She went over in her mind her little

possessions; there was her blue kerchief, her pewter mug, her rag doll, her little wooden stool; but none of these things seemed just right for the Christ-child. And, besides, she felt that he was so wonderful and holy that his present should be something not only beautiful, but also quite new and fresh.

Poor Karen gave a sigh to think she had not a penny to buy anything; and Grandmother, looking up from her work, said, "What is the matter, child?" And as Karen said nothing, "Where is thy knitting?" asked Grandmother, " 'tis yet a little while till bedtime; see if thou canst remember how to make thy stitches even, the way I showed thee yesterday." "Yes, Grandmother," answered Karen; and going into the little room that opened off from the living-room, she came back with a bit of knitting and again seating herself on the wooden stool, began carefully to work the shining needles through some coarse blue yarn. For little Flemish girls even as young as she were not thought too small to be taught not only the making of lace, but how to knit; and their hands were seldom allowed to be idle.

Indeed the folk of the humbler class in Bruges had to work long and industriously to keep bread on their tables and a shelter over their heads.

The city had once been the richest and most powerful in all Flanders, and up to her wharves great ships had brought wonderful cargoes from all over the world; and the rulers of Bruges and her merchant citizens had lived in the greatest splendor. The wealthy people were wealthier and the poorer people less poor in those old days. But then had come bitter wars and oppression; the harbor had slowly filled up with sand brought down by the river Zwijn, till at the time when Karen lived, Bruges was no longer the proud and glorious city she had once been, but was all the while becoming poorer and poorer.

It was true there were many ancient families who still lived at ease in the beautiful old carved houses facing on shady squares or built along the edges of the winding canals that everywhere threaded the once busy city; though the quiet water of these now scarcely rippled save when the trailing branches of the overhanging willow trees dipped into them, or a fleet of stately white swans went sailing along. But in the poorer parts of the city the people must work hard, and there were whole streets where everyone made lace; and all day long women and girls, old and young, bent over the black-covered pillows just as Karen's Grandmother was at that moment doing.

Grandmother's fingers steadily plied the tiny bobbins in and out long after Karen had put away her knitting and crept into the little cupboard bed which was built into the wall of the small room next to the living-room.

At last, as the candle burned low, the lace was finished; and carefully unpinning it from the pillow, Grandmother laid it in a clean napkin; and then she raked the ashes over the embers of the fire on the hearth, and soon her tired eyes closed in sleep as she lay in the high-posted bed close to Karen.

Buying the Porringer

The next morning was bright and clear, and the sunshine sparkled over the freshly fallen snow and touched all the icicles with rainbow light.

Karen and her Grandmother were astir early. The little girl fetched down some wood from the small attic, over the living-room, where they kept their precious supply for the winter; and then she set the table as Grandmother prepared the porridge for their breakfast.

After breakfast Grandmother took her lace pillow and began arranging her pins and bobbins for another piece of work; and when Karen had dusted the simple furniture and swept the snow from the doorstep, she put on her knitted hood and shawl, and pinning together the napkin in which Grandmother had placed the piece of lace, she set out for the home of Madame Koerner.

Down the narrow street she passed, and then across an old stone bridge that spanned one of the lazy canals that wandered through the city. The ice had spread a thin sheet over this, and the beautiful white swans that swam about on it in the summertime had gone into the shelter of their little wooden house, which stood on the bank under a snowy willow tree. One of the great shining birds, looking herself like a drift of snow, stood at the door of the little shelter house preening her feathers in the sunlight, and Karen waved her hand to her with a smiling "Good-morning, Madame Swan!" for she loved the beautiful creatures, numbers of which are still seen on all the water-ways of Bruges, and she always spoke to them, and

sometimes brought them crumbs from her bits of coarse bread at home.

Beyond the bridge she sped on past rows of tall brown houses with here and there a little shop crowded in between, and presently her way led across the Grande Place, a large, irregular square in the center of the city. Here there were many shops, and people passing to and fro; and among them went numbers of great shaggy dogs harnessed to little carts filled with vegetables or tall copper milk cans, and these they tugged across the cobblestones to the ancient Market Halles from which towered the wonderful belfry of which everyone in Bruges was so proud.

Karen paused to listen while the silvery chimes rang out, as they had rung every quarter hour for more than three hundred years.

Then she passed on into a long, quiet street where the houses stood farther apart and had rows of trees in front of them. Some of them had high walls adjoining them, and behind these were pretty gardens, though now, of course, all were covered with the wintry snow.

Presently Karen stopped at a wooden gate leading into one of these gardens, and pushing it open made her way along a winding path to the door of a tall house with many gables and adorned with rare old carvings. This was the home of Madame Koerner; the house really faced on the street, but the little girl did not like to go to the more stately entrance, and so chose the smaller one that opened into the garden. She knocked timidly, for she was a little in awe of Madame Koerner, who seemed to her a very grand lady. But the maid who opened the door knew Karen and led her in and took her at once to the upstairs room

where Madame Koerner sat with a fine piece of needlework in her lap.

Madame Koerner smiled kindly at the little girl, who had several times before brought Grandmother's lace to her. "Good-morning, Karen," she said, "I am so glad to have the lace, for now I can finish this cap, which I want for a Christmas gift." And then as she unfolded the napkin and looked at the lace, "O," she cried, "how lovely it is! No one in all Bruges does more beautiful work than thy Grandmother, little one! And some day, I dare say, thou, too, wilt do just as well, for I know thou art learning fast." And she smiled again, and patted Karen's hands as the little girl held out the lace for her to see.

Karen colored with pleasure to hear Grandmother's work praised, as indeed it deserved; for the delicate scrolls and flowers and leaves of it looked as if made of frost and caught in a net of pearly cobwebs.

Madame Koerner was so pleased with it that when the little girl laid it down, she looked in her purse and gave her a generous gold piece for Grandmother, and then she added a smaller piece of silver for Karen herself; "That is for thee, little one," she said. "And I hope thou wilt have a very happy Christmas."

Karen thanked her shyly, and as with shining eyes she turned to go, Madame Koerner said, "Go out through the kitchen, child, and tell Marie, the cook, to fill thy napkin with some of the little cakes she is baking."

So when once more Karen tripped out into the street, her heart was very light and her mind full of happy thoughts as she tightly clasped in one hand the gold piece for Grandmother, and in the other the franc of silver which Madame Koerner had given for her own, and the napkin filled with the Christmas

cakes. These were the kind that all Flemish children delight in, and were made of fine gingerbread and filled with candied orange peel and red cherries.

As Karen came near the Grande Place and saw the Market Halles, her eyes fairly danced, for she knew the Christmas market was going on there, and all the way from Madame Koerner's she had kept saying to herself: "Now I can buy a present for the Christ-child and one for Grandmother!"

Outside the Halles the cobblestones had been swept clean of snow, and a few hardy dealers had placed their wares for sale out of doors. But these were chiefly sellers of leather harnesses for the patient Flemish dogs, of wooden shoes and coarse baskets; and some had piled in front of them small bundles of fire-wood and fagots. But none of these wares interested Karen, and so she stepped inside the Halles where one might find all manner of things for sale. Here were stalls piled with different colored cloths, with kerchiefs and laces; in others were displayed great earthen pots and pans and other gear for the kitchen. And there were sellers of Christmas trinkets, and wax candles, and what not; of the milk in the tall copper cans the dogs had drawn thither in their little carts; of winter vegetables, and food and sweetmeats of various kinds.

"See!" called a white-capped woman, who sat behind a stall heaped with little cakes, "here are caraway cookies fit for the king's children, and only four sous the dozen!"

But Karen felt very rich with the Christmas cakes in her napkin, and so was not to be tempted. As she stepped slowly along, looking first at one side and then the other, presently she came to a stall where colored beads and trinkets of many kinds were arranged on a long strip of scarlet cloth. As she saw these, she could not help but stop and look longingly at a little

necklace of blue beads, the very kind she had wanted for so long a time!

At this stall sat another white-capped woman dealer, who, seeing the wistful look in Karen's face, said: "Well, my child, if thou canst give me ten sous, thou canst take home with thee this pretty trinket. 'Tis a fair match for thine eyes, little maid!"

Karen's blue eyes began to brim with tears, for she knew ten sous were only half a franc, and she did want the beads so very, very much! But after one more longing look she resolutely passed on, still tightly holding her silver franc; for, much as she wanted the necklace, she was determined that the Christ-child and Grandmother should have their gifts, and she was afraid even her wonderful franc might not be enough for all.

So she went on, still looking carefully at each stall she passed, and all the while growing more and more perplexed trying to decide which were the very prettiest things she could buy. She had gone more than half the length of the market, and was becoming bewildered and a little frightened as she hugged her shawl about her and made her way as best she could among the different groups of buyers and sellers. And then, by and by, her face lighted up with pleasure as she stopped in front of a pottery dealer's stall. This was presided over by a kindly faced man in a workman's blouse. On a smooth board in front of him were all kinds of the coarser wares of Flanders, and also some pieces made by the peasant folk of Normandy and Brittany, countries not far away; and among these smaller pieces Karen had spied a little porringer. It was just a humble little earthen dish such as the peasants of Brittany make for their children to use for their bread and milk; but it was gayly painted, and Karen thought it the most beautiful porringer she had ever seen. Its flat handles were colored a bright yet soft blue, and around the inner edge of its bowl were bands of blue and red, and right in

the bottom was painted a little peasant girl; she wore a blue dress and a white and orange colored apron, and on her head was a pointed white cap. She carried in one hand a red rose, and on either side of her was a stiff little rosetree with red blossoms. It was all crudely done, yet had a quaint charm of its own, a charm lacked by many a more finely finished piece; and it stood there leaning against a tall brown jar behind it, the little girl in the porringer seemed to smile back at Karen as she paused, rapt in admiration.

For Karen was quite sure that at last she had found the very thing for the blessed Christ-child. Indeed, she felt it was the one thing of all the things she had seen, that she most wanted to buy for him. And then, too, just beyond the porringer, a little farther down on the board, she saw a small, green jug that she was sure Grandmother would like. She wondered if they cost very much, and hardly dared to ask the pottery dealer. But presently she summoned up her courage, and, pointing to the little porringer and the jug, she said in a timid voice, "Please, sir, tell me, can I buy these for my franc?"

And she held out to him her little palm, where lay the silver franc all warm and moist from the tight clasp of her rosy fingers.

The dealer looked at her anxious face and smiled at her as he said: "Dost thou want them so very much, little one? Truly thou canst have them for thy franc. My price would be some fifteen sous more, but for the sake of thy sweet face and the blessed Christmas time thou shalt have them." And he put them into Karen's arms as she smiled her delight.

The little girl was so happy that she fairly skimmed over the snowy cobblestones. When she came to the old bridge spanning the icy canal, the white swan was still standing on the bank blinking in the sunlight, and Karen called out merrily,

"Dear Madame Swan, I have bought the most wonderful things!" And then she laughed a little silvery laugh, for her heart was so light it was fairly bubbling over with happiness.

When she reached the little yellow house she bounded up the step, and, standing on the sill close to the door, she called "Grandmother! Grandmother! Please let me in! I cannot open the door!"

Grandmother, hearing her, hurried to unlatch it, and Karen burst in with "Oh, Grandmother, see these beautiful Christmas cakes that Marie gave me! And here is a gold piece for your lace!"

And then having freed one hand, she pulled her shawl tightly together over the other things, and smiling delightedly, cried "And Madame Koerner gave me a silver franc for my very own, and I spent it in the Market Halles!"

"Thou hast already spent it?" asked Grandmother reprovingly. "Karen! Karen! wilt thou never learn to save thy pennies? What hast thou bought?"

"Oh," answered Karen, as her face fell, "I wanted one of them to be a secret till tomorrow! They are Christmas presents! But I wanted to show the other"—here she broke off confusedly; she had meant to say she wanted to show the porringer to Grandmother, but now she had not the heart. "But, Grandmother," she went on earnestly, "it was my own franc, and I love to buy gifts! And you know I couldn't last year because I had no pennies."

"Well, well, child," said Grandmother softening, "thou hast a generous heart, only thou shouldst not have spent all thy franc; thou hadst done better to put some by for another time."

Karen said nothing, though the tears of disappointment sprang to her eyes. She had wanted so much to show the porringer and share her joy in it with Grandmother. But now she felt that it would not be approved of since Grandmother thought her so foolish to spend all her franc, and especially since she had said that no one gave Christmas presents to the Christ-child. But though that had seemed to settle the matter for Grandmother, it only made Karen the more anxious to do so. She said to herself that if no one gave the Christ-child presents, it was all the more reason why she should—surely somebody ought to! And so she was not in the least sorry that she had not saved any of her franc. And she tried to think, too, that perhaps Grandmother would like a Christmas present herself, for all she said the money should not have been spent; perhaps when Grandmother saw the little green jug, she would think it so pretty that she would be glad that Karen had bought it. But she was not to see it till Christmas morning, for Karen meant to put it in her shoe just as the Christ-child did for children.

So presently her face brightening up, while Grandmother went on with her work, she ran into the other room and pulling open a deep drawer from a clothes-press that stood against the wall, she thrust the precious gifts under the folded clothes to stay hidden until she wanted them.

After dinner Grandmother began to prick the pattern for the new piece of lace she was beginning, and Karen knitted a while until it was time for the vesper service in the old cathedral of Saint Sauveur, whose tall tower rose above the steep housetops not far away.

When the bells began chiming, Grandmother and the little girl, laying aside their work, made themselves ready; and each carrying a white wax candle, which Grandmother had taken

pains to provide some time before, they trudged off down the street.

When they reached the cathedral and entered through the great carved portal, the late afternoon light was falling in softly colored bars through the multitude of richly stained windows. As Karen gazed around at the many shrines where hundreds of wax tapers brought by other worshippers were already dotting the brightly colored air with their tiny golden flames, they looked so beautiful that for a moment she wondered if perhaps after all the Christ-child might not like the wax candles best. But the more she thought, she decided that he would surely be pleased to have something for really his own; for, of course, the candles were partly for God and the Blessed Virgin; and so she was glad she had the porringer that should be entirely his.

After the vesper service was over, and they were back again in the little house, the rest of the day passed very quickly for Karen. After supper Grandmother dozed a while in her chair beside the hearth; and then Karen ran into their sleeping-room and hurriedly took out the porringer and the green jug from their hiding-place in the clothes-press. Grandmother had put on some old slippers in place of the heavy wooden shoes she had worn all day, and these sabots were standing on the floor near her bed.

The room was dark, but Karen felt around till she found the sabots; and then she gave a little suppressed laugh of pleasure as she thrust the little green jug as far as it would go in one of them. She knew Grandmother would not find it till morning, for they never thought of having a light by which to go to bed; a candle for the living-room was all they could afford.

After placing the green jug in Grandmother's shoe, Karen stood for a moment thinking where she would put the

porringer. She wanted the Christ-child to find it without any trouble; for he must be in a great hurry with so many children's houses to visit and sabots to fill. She thought first that when she took off hers for the night and stood them on the hearth to wait for him, she would set the porringer beside them. But then she remembered that at midnight, when he would come, the room would be quite dark; for Grandmother would put out the candle, and cover up the fire with ashes. And while, of course, the Christ-child expected sabots to be ready for him on the hearth and so could fill them in the dark, just as she had put the jug in Grandmother's, still, he might miss the porringer as that he would not be expecting, and so would not look for it.

Then, all at once, Karen remembered that out of doors it was moonlight; for, when she had fastened the wooden shutters at the front windows, the moon was rising round and silvery above the peaked roofs across the way. As she thought of this her perplexity vanished, and again a smile came to her lips as she said to herself: "I will set it outside on the doorstep, and the Christ-child will be sure to see it when he comes, and, of course, he will know it was meant for him, for he knows all about Christmas presents!"

Karen was greatly pleased with this plan; and so giving one more look at the little girl in the porringer, she took up two of the Christmas cakes from the dish on the table, and, squeezing them into its bowl, she went to the door and softly unbarred it; then, setting the porringer on the doorstep where the moonlight touched it, she again shut and fastened the door.

Grandmother roused from her doze before long, and sent Karen to bed, while she herself stayed up to knit to the end of her skein.

But long after the little girl lay in her cupboard bed her blue eyes were wide open with excitement. On the hearth in the living-room stood her little wooden shoes waiting for the visit of the Christ child, and she longed with all her might to see him! And she longed, too, to know if he would be pleased with the porringer. But Grandmother had always told her that he did not like to be watched, and would not come till children were asleep.

By and by, after what seemed to Karen a very long time, her eyes began to blink, and she fell asleep and slept so soundly that she did not know when Grandmother put out the candle and covered up the fire and came to bed. Nor did she waken later on when peals of bells from the tall belfry and the cathedral and all the many churches of Bruges rang in the Christmas, and the sweet echoes of chanting voices and the songs of innumerable choristers floated over the city as the holy midnight mass was celebrated.

The rain of music thrilled and quivered through the frosty air, and then slowly it died away; and the Christmas stars shone and twinkled, and the great silver moon flooded the quiet night with a white radiance.

Robber Hans

The midnight music had ceased for some time, and The Little Street of the Holy Ghost was very quiet and deserted, as indeed it had been all the evening. But presently anyone looking up it might have seen a man moving swiftly along. He did not walk like honest folk, but trod softly on the narrow flagstones close to the tall old houses, and seemed to try to keep within their shadows; and his eyes were all the while alertly watching everything about him.

As he came in front of the little yellow house the moon was slowly sinking behind a high gable across the street, but a last ray of silvery light fell across the doorstep, and just touched the edge of the porringer as it stood where Karen had placed it.

The man's keen eyes caught the gleam of something there, and though he could not tell exactly what it was, as the moonlight was waning fast, he nevertheless stooped quickly, and seizing the porringer in his hand, thrust it into the great pocket of his ragged coat. Then he hurried on and turned the corner and soon was lost in the shadows of a narrow passageway between two old houses.

Now, this man was known among evil-doers as "Hans the Robber," and many times the watchmen of Bruges had tried to catch him and punish him because he had stolen so many things from honest folk.

But always he managed to get away from them; or, if they came to the miserable hut where he lived at the edge of the city, he had some story to tell that deceived them so they could

prove nothing against him, or else he contrived to hide until they got tired searching for him.

But people suspected him and shunned him as much as possible. On this night he had gone out hoping that while many were in the churches attending the midnight mass, he might find a chance to creep into some house and rob the owner of whatever he could. But he had not had good success in his dishonest work. To be sure, he had stolen a silver cup from one place; but then he had been frightened off before he could secure more, and so he had decided to try another and quieter part of the city; and as he came along the deserted Little Street of the Holy Ghost and saw the porringer on the doorstep, he took it, because he always took everything he could.

When, after dropping it into his pocket, he went around the corner and into the passage-way, he reached his hand stealthily through the half closed shutters of a tall house beside him and tried to unfasten the window so that he might steal in. But just then he heard someone stirring within, and angrily muttering to himself, he fled away.

Here and there, as he hurried along, the waning moonbeams still shed a lingering light; and besides, it was getting so near dawn time that at last he decided that it was no use trying to get in anywhere else that night; and so he went back to his hut. When he reached this, he first carefully hid the silver cup he had stolen, by putting it in a cranny under a loose board in the floor; then throwing himself down on a rude bed of straw heaped in a corner, he soon fell into a heavy sleep.

When Hans the Robber awoke next morning, the hut was cold and cheerless. He rose from his wretched bed, and found a few billets of wood with which he kindled some fire on the untidy hearth.

In the bare cupboard he found little save crusts of black bread; and as he ate these he sat down on a rickety bench, which he pulled close to the fire, and drew his ragged coat closer around him.

Everything looked very dreary and desolate to him; and, as he heard the Christmas bells beginning to ring, a bitter look came into his face, for it had been many years since Christmas had meant anything to Robber Hans. He shrugged his shoulders, and thrust both hands into the pockets of his coat. As he did so, he felt something in one of them which he had forgotten all about; and then drawing out the little porringer, which still held the two Christmas cakes, he stared at it in surprise.

"Now, where could I have picked up that?" he said to himself, as he set it down on the bench beside him. Then he remembered how he had taken some object from the doorstep of a little yellow house that stood on a corner.

He took up one of the little cakes and broke it, and, as he was hungry, in two bites he had eaten it. As he took the other one in his fingers, he began to look at it curiously and to think.

Robber Hans had not eaten a little cake like that for years and years. All at once, with a start, old memories began to waken in his mind; for the little cake made him think of when he was a little boy and his mother had made just such wonderful little ginger cakes full of orange-peel and red cherries. And then, as he looked at the empty porringer, he stared at it with an almost startled look, for he remembered how he used to eat his bread and milk from a porringer exactly like that; only instead of a little girl painted in the bowl, in his was a little boy. Robber Hans could remember precisely how that little boy looked in his blue blouse and wooden shoes, and

on his head a broad-brimmed hat of Breton straw, with a red ribbon on it.

For Robber Hans as a child had lived in the old seaport town of Quiberon, in Brittany, where his father was a fisherman. His mother's home before she married had been in Bruges, and so it was that at holiday time she always made for the little family of children the Christmas cakes like that which Robber Hans now held in his hand.

As he remembered all these things he forgot all about being cold and hungry. Presently, laying down the little cake, he took up the porringer and looked closely at the little girl holding the red rose in her hand.

Robber Hans in those far-away days had had a little sister whom he dearly loved; and the more he looked at the little girl in the porringer, the more he thought of his little sister Emschen, till presently he was sure that the face looking up at him from under the stiff white cap was the face of Emschen. It did not matter whether it looked like the little sister or not, for before the eyes of Robber Hans memory was bringing back her face so clearly that to him it seemed really there. Yes, and he was quite sure, too, that Emschen had worn a little apron like that; and there was the rose in her hand, and he remembered how she had loved roses!

It all came back to him how when they were children together he had made a little flower bed for her, close by their cottage door, and how both of them had carried white scallop shells from the edge of the sea and laid them around it, making a pretty border; and how pleased Emschen had been when her first little rosebush had a blossom, and how wonderfully it had flourished in the salt sea air, as do all the roses of Brittany.

And then more and more things came back to his memory, and the longer he looked and thought, his own face began gradually to soften, till, by and by, the oddest thing happened—a great tear fell into the porringer and lay there like a drop of dew on one of the painted rose-trees!

At this he roused himself, and, quickly brushing his hand across his eyes, he angrily thrust the porringer from him, and the bitter look came back into his face. For his memory, having started, would not stop with the pleasant days when he was a little boy in Quiberon, but went on and on, bringing freshly back to him how father, mother, and Emschen, all were gone; the father drowned in the stormy Breton sea, and the mother and Emschen sleeping in the wind-swept God's acre of Quiberon, with no one to lay on their graves even so much as a green holly leaf at Christmas time, or a wild poppy flower on Midsummer day. He saw in memory his brothers grown up and scattered from the old home, and himself become a sailor roving the sea to many lands; and then later on drifting ashore in the Flemish country, and overtaken by misfortune after misfortune, till at last he had fallen so low that here in Bruges, his mother's old home, he was known only as Robber Hans!

He rose to his feet, and, in a fit of sudden anger, because of his wasted and unhappy life, he seized the little porringer which had reminded him of what he had lost, and was about to dash it to pieces on the bricks of the hearth. But, just as he raised his hand, something seemed to stop him. He could not tell why, but instead of breaking the porringer he slowly walked over to the empty cupboard and placed it on the shelf. Then, bewildered by his own action, he stood a moment and stared at it.

Presently, as his unhappy thoughts came crowding back again, his bitterness and anger rose as before, and he wanted to

be rid of the porringer. But instead of trying to break it this time, another idea occurred to him. "There!" he muttered gruffly to himself, as he turned away from the cupboard, "It can stay there till tomorrow, and then I will take it with the silver cup and sell it at the thieves' market!"

That was a place in the old city where those who lived by stealing from others were accustomed to dispose of their spoils; and so among themselves they called it the "thieves' market." The dealer who kept the place and who bought their stolen articles knew how to send them around quietly and sell them, usually in other cities, where there was less danger of their being discovered by their rightful owners.

Robber Hans had many times before disposed of his dishonestly gotten things to the keeper of the thieves' market; and so when he made up his mind to sell the porringer along with the silver cup, he knew very well where to take them. But he knew, too, that he would have to wait till the next day, for the dealer would probably not be in his place until Christmas was over.

Having thus made up his mind how to rid himself of the porringer, and meantime having nothing to do in the hut, he thrust on his battered cap, and pulling it down over his eyes, he strode out into the street.

After wandering aimlessly about for some time, at last he made his way to a certain quay, or open space, on the edge of one of the many old canals of the city. There were numbers of these embankments which had been made, in the days of Bruges' prosperity, as mooring places for the freighted barges that carried her commerce. And though the barges had long since deserted all but a few of the quiet waterways, still the quays bore their old Flemish names. Thus, the one to which

Hans had wandered was called the Quai du Rosaire. Here a moss-grown stone bridge crossed the water, and in a paved square nearby and in a tumbledown old brown house facing the square, for three days of every week a fish market was held. And here, on holidays, the rougher folk of Bruges would gather to amuse themselves.

Robber Hans crossed the paved square and entered the old house, where he was greeted boisterously as he joined the noisy company. But somehow their rough talk and rude actions did not please him as they had often done before. He was silent and moody, and at last the others taunted him so with his sour looks, that he got up from a bench where he was sitting beside a tipsy fishmonger, and, flinging back some scornful words, he left the place and went out.

Again he wandered aimlessly along the snowy streets; till after a while the wintry wind blew through his ragged coat and he shivered with cold. He was, by this time, near the great square where the belfry rose from the Halles, and making his way to this, he crept into the shelter of its entrance. Then, in a little while, he ventured inside and dropped down on the long, wooden seat between its tall windows. And though many who came and went through the Halles looked at him suspiciously, no one cared to make him go away, for it was the blessed Christmas day, and so the hearts of all were kindlier for the while.

As he leaned back against the wall, by and by the warmth of the room made him drowsy and he fell asleep. And, as he slept, there flitted through his brain a great many confused dreams; and with almost all of them the thoughts started by the little porringer seemed somehow to be connected. Sometimes he dreamed he was a little boy again, in Quiberon; and then Emschen would seem to be running toward him with a red rose

in her hand; but always when she came near to him, though she put out her hands to him, he could not touch her, and the red rose faded and fell apart. And then the dreams trailed off so dim and shadowy that when at last he awakened Hans could not remember just what it was that he had been dreaming. He only vaguely knew that it had something to do with the porringer and that it had made him unhappy; and as he stumbled to his feet and set out for his hut, he again determined to get rid of it as soon as he could.

Robber Hans and the Porringer

The next morning Hans thrust in his pocket the silver cup and the porringer, which he took pains not to look at again, and went out to find the dealer to whom he might sell them.

He threaded his way through the narrow, crooked streets till by and by he came to a rickety wooden house standing behind some tall old warehouses that fronted on a canal. These had once been piled high with rich stuffs in the great days of Bruges, but now they were deserted and falling into decay.

Hans, after looking cautiously about him, quickly approached the rickety house and knocked in an odd way, which was his signal, so that the dealer within would know it was not one of the officers of the city come to arrest him. For, of course, it was against the law to buy stolen goods; though the laws then in Bruges were not so well looked after as they should have been. And so the dishonest trade within the old house had been carried on for some time undisturbed.

As Hans now entered the heavy wooden door, which he quickly closed and barred behind him, he found himself in a dimly lighted room where the brown rafters showed hung thick with cobwebs. This was the place known to him and his kind as the "thieves' market." Around the walls were a number of shelves and on these were arranged all manner of things; some of them costly and others of little value, but all stolen from one place or another; for this was a favorite spot for evil-doers to dispose of their plunder.

As Hans strode to the middle of the room and stood before a narrow counter that divided it, a little old man, who was busy

sorting some wares behind a pile of boxes, turned around with "Good day, Robber Hans! And what hast thou brought to Father Deaf-and-Blind?" For so the little old man, with his cunning eyes and hard, wicked face, was called by those who dealt with him; because he always pretended that he neither saw nor heard that the things they brought to sell had been stolen from their rightful owners.

But Hans was in no mood for talk as sullenly he drew from his pocket the silver cup and without a word placed it on the counter.

"Ah!" cried the little old man, greedily seizing the cup and looking closely at it. "This mark must come off; yes, and this coat-of-arms! Hm, 'twill be some trouble to do that skillfully!" And then turning it round again and considering the coat-of-arms, "Let me see," he went on inquiringly, still looking at it.

"There! now I have it! 'Tis the mark of the Groene family. Have they 'presented' this to thee lately, or is it one of the 'gifts' of last month, when several families were so generous to thee, eh?"

This pretending that they were presents was the usual way in which Father Deaf-and-Blind asked about stolen goods; and as now he chuckled and fixed his shrewd eyes upon Hans, the latter muttered a low reply, and, after some chaffering, the old man took a bag from an iron box under the counter and counted out a sum of silver, which Hans swept into his pocket. Then he took out the porringer and set it beside the cup.

"Ho," said the old man contemptuously, "I'll warrant such peasant gear was never sheltered under the same roof as this silver cup!" For in the stately old homes of Bruges, such as that of the Groene family, where things had been handed down from generation to generation, even the pots and pans in the

kitchens were of fine and costly workmanship. And the moment he looked at it, Father Deaf-and-Blind knew very well that the little earthenware porringer had been made by peasant folk for the use of humble people like themselves.

And so the old dealer, giving it another brief glance, added: "Thou must have picked up that while paying a visit to the children's God's-House!" For so the people of Bruges called the almshouse where the homeless children of the poor were sheltered and cared for.

Hans had turned away his eyes when he set the porringer down, for he did not want to see it again and have the old memories come back to haunt him. But now, before he knew what he was doing, he looked down in the bowl, straight into the face of the little girl; and immediately it became the face of Emschen, and her eyes looked up so mournfully into the eyes of Robber Hans, and the little smile on her lips was so sad it was as if her heart was breaking! And Hans, turning very white, scarcely knew what he did as he put out his hand tremblingly and carefully lifted the porringer from the counter.

"Hold!" cried Father Deaf-and-Blind, who was surprised at Hans' action, and who really thought the porringer a quaint and pretty bit of earthenware, " 'tis not so bad for some burgher customer. I will give five sous for it."

But Hans had already replaced the porringer in his pocket, and without another word he turned, and going straight to the door, he unbarred it and went out.

As the old man swiftly crossed the room to refasten the door, he muttered to himself, "I wonder what ails friend Hans this morning? He is as cross as a fishwife when the catch is bad, and he acts as if he had been robbed of his wits or else left them behind in his miserable hut!" And then he went back to the

counter and began to weigh the silver cup and consider how he could best smooth away the tell-tale marks.

As for Robber Hans, when again he found himself walking the snowy streets, he walked as one in a dream. It was no use trying to avoid it; the sad little face of Emschen seemed to hover before his eyes wherever he turned; and another thing, of which he had not before thought, began to trouble him. Old Father Deaf-and-Blind's chance speech about the children's God's-House had reminded him that the porringer he had stolen must have belonged to some poor child and, for the first time in a great many years, Hans really began to feel ashamed of himself. He tried again to remember just where he had picked up the porringer; and though it had not occurred to him at the time he took it, now he said to himself: "Why was it outside on the doorstep? 'Twas a queer place to find it!"

Hans wished with all his heart that he had let it stay there, since it was making him so uncomfortable and seemed so impossible to get rid of, or even to get it out of his thoughts! For still his mind went on puzzling to account for the porringer having been on the doorstep. Finally, however, he decided that as it was on the night before Christmas that he had taken it, probably it was a gift that some friend had brought for a child who must live in the little yellow house; and perhaps no one had been at home to open the door, and so the porringer had been left on the step.

Having explained it to himself in this way, for the first time such an idea had troubled him since he had become a robber, the feeling came to him that he ought to take it back where it belonged—it seemed so shameful to rob a child, and a poor child at that! But, he thought, he could not take it back in broad daylight! No, he decided, if he did so, it must be after night, when no one could see him.

As he was thinking all this over, without noticing where he was going, his steps had brought him to the part of the city where there were a number of shops, and he remembered that he was hungry, for he had had no breakfast. He went into one of the shops and asked for some food. The shopkeeper looked at him suspiciously. "Thou art a burly beggar!" he said. "There are far too many needy poor in Bruges to give to such as thou!"

"I am no beggar!" said Hans, angrily, displaying one of his silver coins. "Here is silver for thy meat and bread, and see to it thou dost not cheat me!"

The shopkeeper, muttering to himself, supplied a dish of food; though he was glad when Hans had finished eating it and left the shop, for he did not think that he looked like an honest man or that he had come by the silver honestly. Now, on Hans' part, when in order to pay the shopkeeper he had put his hand in his pocket for a piece of the silver he had received for the stolen cup, his fingers touched the porringer first; and, he could not have told why, he took the rest of the silver out and put it in the pocket on the other side of his coat.

Perhaps, in some vague way, he did not quite like to have that ill-gotten money right there with the picture of Emschen; for to his mind the little girl in the porringer had become so bound up with Emschen that it might as well have really been her picture.

And then as Hans went farther along the street, he did another queer thing; he deliberately turned down a narrow way that led to one of the many old quays of the city, and began to look at the ships that were lying moored close beside it.

In the days of the bygone glory of Bruges, her harbor, now choked up with sand, and her many canals, had been thronged with vessels from all over the world, and every quay had been a

place of busy work all day long and often through the night. And now, though most of them were deserted and moss-grown, still on the banks of one canal, which connected Bruges with the not far distant sea-port city of Ostend, there were several quays to which came small fishing vessels and various ships that traded along the coast of Flanders.

It happened that on that day there were two or three schooners lying at the quay to which Hans had come. He had come there because with all the thoughts of his childhood that had been stirred to life by the little porringer, there had wakened the memory of the sea as it rolled and surged beyond the grey rocks of the Quiberon coast. He began to long for the familiar tang of the fresh salt air blowing over the curling green waves, and to sail over these as he had once done in the old days when he had first set out to make his way in the world. For, like most of the folk of the Breton coast, Hans seemed to belong to the sea. And he had been a good sailor in those days. But though he had drifted away from that old life and his old friends, and had for so long a while gained his living by robbery that all thought of the past seemed dead within him, as he now looked at the vessels rocking on the water by the quay, stronger and stronger grew his newly awakened longing for the sea, till at last it swept over him like a fierce gust of the north wind that he had often seen dashing the white-capped waves against the crags of Quiberon.

And along with this great longing, all the while stronger and stronger grew another wish; though, curiously enough, Hans himself could not for the life of him have told that he had it. It was a wish to lead an honest life once more; it had really always been down in the bottom of his heart, but it had gotten so covered up and hidden by all sorts of robber thoughts that now it was like a ray of light trying to shine through a window

all covered with dust and cobwebs. And so all Hans knew about it was that he wanted more than anything else to be a sailor on one of those vessels.

Hans walked along the quay till he came alongside the nearest of the schooners he had been watching, and then he hailed the captain, who was standing on the deck.

"What do you want?" asked the captain, looking at Hans, and not with favor.

"Do you need another hand on your boat?" asked Hans.

"No," answered the captain shortly, and turned away contemptuously without paying any further attention.

Hans' temper began to rise as he strode along toward where the next vessel lay. Two of her crew were unloading her cargo under the direction of the captain. After looking at them a moment, "Ho!" called Hans abruptly to the men, "you handle that gear like the veriest landlubbers! Give me a chance, and I'll show you how to unload yonder bales in a quarter the time it is taking you!"

Of course this was a very poor way to go about it if he wanted to get work on that boat; but Hans had little tact at best, and moreover he had been stung by the manner of the captain of the other vessel, and so his ill humor had gotten the better of him.

At his speech, the two men looked up in surprise, and seeing Hans' ragged figure, one of them, who knew him by sight, cried out jeeringly, "Hold thy tongue, thou impudent beggar! I'll warrant thou couldst lighten one of these bales in a twinkling couldst thou but get thy thieving fingers upon it! Begone!"

Hans' eyes blazed, and he strode forward with fist clenched to strike the man. But the latter was too nimble; for the two, having finished their work, ran up the gang-plank and drew it in, so that Hans could not reach them, and they laughed scornfully as they taunted him from their place on the deck.

Hans was very angry and his heart full of bitterness. He turned on his heel and half started away from the quay. But, like many other people of strong will, to be crossed in what he wished to do only made Hans more unwilling to give it up. And so the harder it seemed to be to get a place on one of those vessels the more he wanted it. And turning back again, he determined to try once more.

This time he went to the far end of the quay, where a fishing vessel was moored. The captain was standing on the bank near the side of the boat, and Hans, walking up to him, said: "I am going to ship as sailor on this vessel."

Captain Helmgar, for this was his name, gave a short laugh as he looked at the man in front of him. "Ho," he said, "not so fast, my man! I am owner of this craft, and I choose my own crew! I'll wager thou dost not know the tiller from the forecastle!"

"Just try me!" cried Hans eagerly. "Your craft is in fair order, but yonder sail was shrouded by a bungling hand!" and Hans pointed to one of the masts of the vessel, where the sail was furled in a way that his practiced eye at once saw was clumsy.

At this the captain opened his eyes and stared at Hans; for it was perfectly true that one of the crew was a lazy, ignorant fellow who had no fondness for the sea and who bungled everything he touched, and Captain Helmgar was really anxious to replace him with an experienced sailor. As he now

began to question Hans, he soon discovered that he knew all about ships and shipping, as did almost all the men brought up on the coast of Brittany; and then, too, Hans' experience as sailor had been chiefly on fishing vessels.

The captain did not like Hans' raggedness and unkempt looks, and, though he knew nothing about him, was rather suspicious of his honesty. But then he needed a man, and Hans certainly seemed to know his trade. Captain Helmgar, moreover, was a good-hearted man, and thought to himself, "There is little on a fishing vessel he could steal, even if he is a thief." The captain, too, rather liked Hans' determination to ship with him; so after thinking a few minutes, he said "Well, my man, we leave for a week's cruise tomorrow morning at eight o'clock, and, if you report on time, I will take you on trial."

Hans Turns Sailor

As Hans turned away from the quay his heart was lighter than it had been for many a day. He straightened up, and no longer sought all the narrower by-ways as he had long grown used to doing; but beginning to feel already like an honest man, he walked boldly down the chief streets of the city. And though now and then people glanced at him and drew away from him, he looked straight ahead, his mind busy with plans for the future.

He crossed the Grande Place, and presently, as he passed the doorway of the cathedral of Saint Sauveur, he saw an old woman crouching against the wall and begging for alms. With a sudden impulse he thrust his hand into the pocket where lay the silver pieces Father Deaf-and-Blind had paid for the stolen cup, and drawing them out he dropped them into the old woman's lap, and hastened on before she could speak for amazement.

When he got back to his hut it was almost dusk. He made a fire with the last bit of wood, and ate the last crusts of bread he could find in the cupboard; and then, filled with thoughts of the next day, and saying over to himself with a sort of pleased surprise, "I am really going to be a sailor again! I am going to the sea!" he went to sleep and slept soundly until daybreak.

As soon as Hans awakened he remembered what he was to do, and so he made himself as tidy as he could; which was not much, to be sure, but still he looked a little less unkempt than usual. Just before he started out, he happened to put his hand in his pocket and there was still the porringer! He quickly drew

away his fingers from it as if it burned them—but then again he put back his hand and took out the little dish.

He scowled a little as he looked at the troublesome porringer and remembered that after he had left old Father Deaf-and-Blind the morning before, he had meant to take it back as soon as dark fell and leave it on the doorstep where he had found it. He was annoyed that his mind had been so full of his new plans that he had forgotten all about it when night came, and now he knew he would not have time to hunt up the little yellow house, even if he wanted to restore the porringer by daylight and run the risk of having to make explanation of his act.

So holding it a moment uncertainly, presently he walked over to the empty cupboard and stood it up at the back of the shelf. He thought that when he came back at the end of the week, he would see about taking it to the little house. Then he pulled the door shut behind him, and leaving the hut set out for the quay.

At the end of a week the fishing vessel was again moored in the old canal of Bruges. The catch had been good, and there was a great chattering among the fish-wives who came to buy the fish as they were unloaded from the vessel. By and by, a group of them caught sight of Hans, who was busily helping carry the cargo to shore.

"Look!" they cried, pointing their fingers at him, "There is Hans the Robber! We have missed him for a whole week! So he has turned sailor again! Ho! Ho! Hans, Hans! Didst thou rob the captain of that coat?"

"No!" said Captain Helmgar, who was close by and listening sharply to their wagging tongues, "No! Hush your clamor! I gave him the coat myself, and he is the best sailor that

ever trod yonder deck!" and he waved his hand toward the vessel beside him.

Now, Captain Helmgar quickly understood from the fish-wives' talk that Hans had indeed borne a bad name, as he had suspected the day he had first talked with him. But, nevertheless, he determined to give him a fair chance to earn an honest living. In the week Hans had been on the vessel he had proven a fine sailor and had worked hard and faithfully; and Captain Helmgar thought it a shame not to help him if he was really trying to do better. So, when he paid him his wages for the week's work, he shook him heartily by the hand and told him that he had done well, and that the next day they would set out again and that he would expect Hans to go with them. "And you might as well live on the boat while you work for me," added Captain Helmgar kindly, "for perhaps you have no home of your own."

"No," said Hans, "I have none; nothing but an old tumbledown hut that I would be glad never to see again!" But just then he remembered the porringer, which had quite passed out of his mind in the busy week of the new life he had begun. He felt that he must get it if it was still where he had left it; for though he considered that the little dish had caused him no end of bother, he had not given up the idea of taking it back where it belonged.

So turning again to Captain Helmgar, he said, "It is only a miserable place, the old hut, but there is something there I must get before I come to stay on the boat."

"Very well," replied the captain, "go and get whatever you want; but be sure and be back by afternoon, for there will be plenty of work here to get ready for sailing tomorrow."

As Hans started off down the street he decided that this was as good a time as any to hunt for the little yellow house; for if he could slip away from the fishing vessel for a little while that evening, as he hoped, he wanted to know exactly where the house stood so he need waste no time finding it.

So he threaded his way through the maze of cobble-paved streets as nearly as he could remember in the direction he had gone on the night before Christmas. At last he turned into The Little Street of the Holy Ghost, and, looking down it, yes, he was certain this was the one for which he was searching.

Slackening his steps, as he walked slowly along he kept looking out for the little house, which he had passed hurriedly that Christmas eve and without especially noticing it; though he remembered that it stood on a corner, and he felt sure he would know it again.

Before long he came to it, and, sure enough, he knew it at once. There was the wooden step on which the porringer had stood, and Karen, with her little shawl pinned about her shoulders, was sweeping it. As Hans walked slowly by, suddenly he stopped and said to Karen, "What is thy name, little girl?"

Karen timidly lifted her blue eyes to his, and "Karen, sir," she answered simply.

"Hast thou any brothers or sisters?" continued Hans.

"No, sir," said Karen wonderingly, "there is no one but Grandmother and me. Did you want to see Grandmother?"

"No, no," muttered Hans hastily; and then, feeling that he must make some excuse for his questions, "I was only hunting where someone lives," he added, and with an awkward bow to the little girl he passed hurriedly on; though in doing so his

keen eyes had noticed Grandmother at the window bending over her lace-pillow.

"So," he said to himself, "that is the child the porringer belongs to; and her Grandmother is a lace-maker!" And again shame came to him because he had taken the gift he felt sure had been meant for the little blue-eyed girl.

He went on to the old tumbledown hut and pushed open the door. No one had disturbed the place since he had left it; indeed, it had been deserted when Hans had taken possession of it, and since then no one had dared molest it. The hut looked very bare and forlorn as Hans stepped into it, and there was really nothing in it that he cared to take with him; that is, nothing but the little porringer, which still stood back in the dusty corner of the old cupboard. As he lifted it down and looked at it, he fancied that Emschen smiled up at him happily from between the rose-trees of the bowl; and he tucked it very carefully into the pocket of the decent coat Captain Helmgar had given him.

"Then he went back, retracing his steps all the way till he reached The Little Street of the Holy Ghost. When again he came to the yellow house the door was closed; and he had half a notion that he would hurriedly set the porringer down on the step, even if it was daylight.

But as he glanced up at the two little windows, there were Grandmother and Karen, and he could not do it right under their eyes!

Hans frowned; it seemed as if he never could get rid of this last bit of stolen property. For though he really wanted to give the porringer back to Karen, he could not bring himself to take it to her and tell her he had stolen it; nor could he bear to have

her see him leave it on the step and guess that he had been a thief.

So there seemed nothing left for him to do but to carry it on to the fishing vessel and put it in the locker where he kept his few clothes, and then wait for evening or some other chance to restore it. But the chance did not come that evening, for Captain Helmgar had many things for the sailors to do on the vessel, and so Hans had to put off taking home the porringer till some other time when he would return to Bruges.

And the odd part about it all was that the longer Hans had the little porringer near him, the more attached to it he grew, and the more he came to hate the thought of giving it up! He kept it in his locker, and every day he looked at it until he became almost superstitious about it. Sometimes the little girl in it made him think of Karen, but more often it was Emschen, and always when he tried hard to do well he thought the face smiled at him but when sometimes at first the work seemed hard and he would half think of going back to his old robber life, then the little girl in the porringer looked so sad and mournful that Hans always gave over those half formed ideas and kept honestly on, doing his work so well that Captain Helmgar came more and more to trust and depend upon him.

At the Rag Market

While the fishing vessel was going up and down the Flemish coast, and every little while coming back to the quay at Bruges, the winter was wearing away, and along the water-courses and open squares of the city the chestnut and willow trees were putting on their April greenery.

Crocuses and hyacinths were blooming in many little nooks by the lazy canals where the white swans and ducks sailed happily, guiding their downy flocks of young. Sweeping the placid mirror of the Minne-Water out by the ancient city gateway, the stately elms were hung with pale green tassels, and, hidden among these, nightingales fluted all night long. While in the gardens by the tall brown houses in the older parts of the city, cuckoos and starlings sang all day from blossoming apple and cherry boughs.

Though on The Little Street of the Holy Ghost the dwellings stood close to the cobblestones, and so had no dooryards for grass or flowers, nevertheless through the open windows of the little yellow house the spring wind blew in softly, laden with April fragrance. But by the window in the living-room Grandmother could not be seen bending over her lace-making as for so many years before. Instead, she lay propped up in her bed, too ill and weak to guide the bobbins full of delicate thread that hung idly from the pillow nearby.

Poor Grandmother had been unable to work for several weeks; and, though better of her illness, strength came back but slowly to her trembling hands. Karen had had a sad and sorry time, too; for she was only a little girl, and every day there was

so much work to do. Their neighbor folk had been good and kind, and had done all they could to help take care of Grandmother; but the little savings she had laid away were almost gone, and her great fear now was that she would be forced to go to one of the God's Houses; for besides those for children, there were many other almshouses in Bruges that bore this name. There were many of these because poverty lay heavily on the poorer people, and if they fell ill it meant bitter suffering.

Grandmother wished passionately to be able to stay in the little home where she had always lived, and to keep Karen with her.

So long as she could work at her lace-pillow she could manage this; but now her hands were idle, and Karen too young and her little fingers as yet untrained save for the simplest stitches; and so the pinch of want had come upon them, and with all Grandmother's pride it seemed no longer possible to live unless help came in some way.

Madame Koerner would no doubt have befriended them had she known their need. But Madame Koerner was not then in Bruges. She had been called to the city of Ghent by the illness of her own mother, and, in her anxiety for her, she did not know of the sore straits to which Grandmother and Karen had come.

As Grandmother now lay in her bed, she was thinking hard of how they might get a little money to keep them in food until she could gain enough strength to work again.

Presently, "Karen!" she called to the little girl who was in the living-room bending over her lace-pillow and trying hard to make some of the stitches she had been taught last. But the thread was so fine and it was so hard to manage the bobbins

exactly right that her forehead was all puckered and the tears lay very near her eyes.

"Yes, Grandmother," she answered, as she laid down the bobbins, and jumping up from her stool went and stood by the bedside.

"Karen," said Grandmother, in a weak voice, "I have been thinking that to-day is the day for the rag-market down by the Quai Vert, and neighbor Radenour told me yesterday that she had some extra cloth from her weaving and she means to take it there to sell. And, Karen,"—Grandmother's voice was very low and sad, but she went bravely on,—"canst not thou go with her and take the two brass candlesticks? It may be thou canst sell them for a fair price, and we are sorely in need of money. Frau Radenour will help thee and see that none cheat thee. Run now and ask if thou canst go with her." And Grandmother shut her eyes and lay back on her pillow.

Karen listened with her blue eyes wide open, for she had not known how close they were to want. Grandmother had never told her how little she had been able to save; and, anyway, Karen had but small idea of the value of money. But now she realized that they must be terribly poor, or Grandmother would never part with the brass candlesticks of which she had always been very proud. These were really beautiful in their simple but good design and their honest workmanship; both were ornamented with a pattern of beaten work, and with them went a tiny, pointed snuffer; they had been made by hand, long before, and had been in Grandmother's family for many generations. Grandmother prized the candlesticks very highly, and so did Karen, who knew how to polish them till they fairly shone. For even among the poorer folk of old Bruges many things of household use

were made of brass or copper, and every one kept these things scoured and polished with the greatest care.

As Karen passed through the living-room on her way to ask Frau Radenour she looked at the treasured candlesticks shining from the dresser shelf, and the tears filled her eyes just as they did Grandmother's, who was weeping quietly as she lay back in her bed.

In a few minutes Karen came back and told Grandmother that Frau Radenour would gladly take her along to the market and look after her, and that she must be ready to start in just a little while.

"Stay close to her, Karen," warned Grandmother, "and do with thy wares whatever way she thinks best, for she is a good bargainer and will see that thou art dealt with fairly. Now, bring the candlesticks for me to see them once more before thou must take them away."

As Karen, lifting them from the dresser, brought them to her bed, Grandmother's thin fingers caressed them lovingly; for both had belonged to her mother and her mother's mother before her, and were the most treasured of the few possessions she had hoped to hand down to Karen. But they must have bread; and so with a sigh presently she withdrew her hands and folded them over the coverlet.

Karen placed the candlesticks carefully in her blue apron, and, holding up its hem tightly in one hand, she kissed Grandmother and smoothed her covers, and then she went over to Frau Radenour's house and together they set out for the rag-market.

Bruges has always been a city of many kinds of markets; and this one whither they were going was held every week or two on an open plot of ground on the banks of one of the quiet

old canals and near the Quai Vert. It was called the rag-market because there on the grass under the double row of gnarled chestnut trees, dealers and humble folk of the poorer class spread out their wares.

Some brought only rags; though oftentimes others, driven by want, offered for sale something really beautiful: perhaps a bit of lace or a piece of old copper or brass handed down, as were Karen's wares, from the days when the poorer people were less poor and when in the making of even the simplest things for use in their homes the workmen had put their loving thought and skill.

When Karen and Frau Radenour reached the place, a number of people were already there arranging the things they had brought. Frau Radenour, who often came to the market, knew almost everyone, and with a smile and a "good day!" to those about her, she chose a place and spread out the bits of cloth she had for sale. "Do thou sit down here beside me," she said kindly to Karen, "and place thy things so," and she pointed to a spot in front of them.

As Karen placed her precious candlesticks on the ground, the polished brass gleamed in the fresh green grass like a cluster of yellow crocuses. Karen's face looked like a little spring flower, too, only very pale, and her eyes had a pathetic droop, as she sat under the flickering shadows of the young chestnut leaves. The cap that covered her plaited hair was very stiff and white, and as she smoothed her little blue apron over the black dress she wore, she looked wonderingly around at the people who were beginning to loiter along the path between the trees and now and then to stop and price or perhaps buy some of the wares for sale.

Karen had once or twice before been to the rag-market with Grandmother; but that was to buy and not to sell, and she thought it a very different matter now.

Presently one, and then another woman stopped and looked at the candlesticks in front of Karen. But when they asked the price and Frau Radenour, who took charge of the matter, insisted on ten francs, they shook their heads and turned away. The poor little girl's eyes filled with tears, but Frau Radenour, who was a shrewd bargainer, said: "Cheer up, little one, thy wares are worth the price, and we will not give them to the first one who asks!"

Karen, though, was quite sure that no one else would come; and while she hated the thought of parting with the pretty candlesticks, neither did she wish to go back to Grandmother without carrying her the money, which she knew they must need so dreadfully. And so, that Frau Radenour might not see her tears, she turned away her face.

The sunlight glinting between the trees touched the quiet water of the canal nearby and flecked it with silver. By the mossy piers of the picturesque old bridge that spanned it a family of black and white ducks were swimming about, every now and then dipping their broad, yellow bills into the water and spattering it in twinkling drops over their glossy feathers. And quite near to Karen a beautiful white swan drifted along arching her neck proudly and looking toward Karen as if she expected the happy smile and "Good day!" with which the little girl always greeted these stately white birds she so admired.

But poor Karen had no heart to talk to even her beloved swans; yet she put up her hand and brushed away the tears, and tried to be interested as Frau Radenour, after a little bargaining, sold her bits of cloth to a woman in a black dress with a fringed

kerchief crossed over her shoulders. The woman was making a piece of rag carpet at home and needed a few more strips of cloth to finish it, and she found Frau Radenour's to her liking.

Just as the bargain was finished, a man came strolling along smoking a pipe. He seemed to have no special business there but just to smoke his pipe and enjoy the spring air as it blew softly between the chestnut trees. Now and then he stopped and glanced at some of the wares spread out for sale on either side of the path; but more often his eyes wandered down the length of the canal to a little gap between the brown roofs of the old houses that fringed its winding course. For through this little gap one could see the tall masts of a cluster of schooners moored at a quay beyond a not far distant bend.

The reason these interested the man more than anything else was because he was a sailor; and as his boat happened to be waiting for some cargo to be made ready, he was taking a little stroll in the meantime. But the reason that the sailor stopped still when he came to Frau Radenour and Karen, and looked hard at the little girl, was because he happened to be none other than Hans.

Now, Hans still had the little porringer, and though he had been back in Bruges several times since he went to live on Captain Helmgar's boat, he had not perhaps taken so much pains as he might to restore it. He had always meant to take it back, but always there was something to do that seemed to interfere, and perhaps, too, he had been almost glad of one excuse or another to delay returning it; for still the longer he had it, the more he hated to part with it. And, curiously enough, although he had stolen it, he somehow felt that if it had not been for it he would still be Robber Hans, and he found an honest life very much better and more agreeable than he had thought. And then, too, since he was leading a life in which he

could respect himself once more, the memories which the porringer awakened no longer pained and angered him as they had done at first when he had tried to destroy it. For though he had thought then that it was with the porringer, it was really with himself that he had been angry, because he had made his life so worthless that he did not like to compare it with the happier days of his childhood that the porringer had recalled to him. But now he liked to look at it and think of the old Quiberon days; and still the little pictured face of Emschen smiled up at him from its bowl and spurred him on to do the best he could.

But though Hans still kept the porringer, he knew very well that he ought to return it to the little girl he had seen sweeping the steps of the yellow house on the corner; and notwithstanding he had delayed so long, he still honestly meant to try to find a chance to restore it to her.

Now, as he saw her sitting there on the grass beside Frau Radenour, he knew her at once, though he thought her face looked thinner and less rosy than when he had seen her before. As he stared at Karen, presently Frau Radenour looked up curiously at him, and "Good day, Ma'm!" said Hans awkwardly, taking the pipe from his mouth.

"Good day!" replied Frau Radenour, and Karen looked up, too. But though she half remembered Hans' face, she could not place him; for it had been only a minute or two that he had stopped at the doorstep that day he had spoken to her, and then he had looked much more closely at her than she at him.

"Hast thou something to sell?" asked Hans, looking down at the candlesticks still nestling in the grass in front of the little girl.

"Yes," spoke up Frau Radenour, "the price is ten francs for the pair, and anyone can see that is little enough for them!"

"They are good work," said Hans, still awkwardly, as he stooped down and lifted them in his hands. And, indeed, Hans in his robber days had taken enough things to be a judge of values.

"Yes, sir," ventured Karen in a low voice, as he admired the candlesticks, "I think they are pretty, and we would not sell them only Grandmother is sick and we must have the money."

It was the first time Karen had spoken, and "Hush, child!" said Frau Radenour aside to her. "Let me manage the bargaining!"

But Hans had already set the candlesticks down, and was searching his pockets, his face red with confusion and mortification. He would have given anything to be able to buy them and at a much larger price than that asked, for he thought vaguely that he might thus make up to the little girl for having taken the porringer which of course was worth only a few sous. But he did not possess the ten francs! Again he felt desperately in his pockets, but scarcely half that sum was all he could muster.

The fact was Hans had not been wasting his earnings as a sailor, but had spent some of his first honest money to buy himself the decent clothes of which he was sorely in need; and then afterward he had used all he could spare to pay some old debts which he was ashamed to think had stood so long against him. His wages on the fishing vessel were not large, and so it had taken some time to do these things, and now barely five francs was all Hans possessed in the world.

As he thus stood confusedly, wishing with all his heart that he had more money to offer for the candlesticks, it happened

that another man came along and began to look at them. This man was the owner of a little shop in the city and dealt in brass and copper wares, and he knew the rag-market and often picked up beautiful things very cheaply there; for the poor people who brought them for sale did not expect to receive the full value of their wares, but, pressed sharply by their need, had to be content to sell them for what they could.

As the dealer now examined Karen's candlesticks he quickly saw that they were of beautiful workmanship and that, as Frau Radenour declared, ten francs was little enough for them. But though he felt perfectly sure that he could sell them from his shop for a great deal more, he was unwilling to pay the ten francs until Frau Radenour had exhausted all her skill as a saleswoman. At last, slowly drawing the francs from his purse, he handed them over and carried off the candlesticks; and though Frau Radenour insisted that he had bought them for but half their value, she knew it was probably the best they could have hoped for in the rag-market.

While this chaffering was going on, Karen had sat mute and sad-eyed, and Hans, too, had not moved away, but still stood helplessly, not quite knowing what to do. But when the dealer had walked off, he drew a step nearer Karen, and, again turning very red with confusion, he extended to her his hand in which lay the five francs, and, "Little girl," he stammered, "won't you please take these? They are all I have."

At this Karen drew back timidly and looked up at him in bewilderment, while Frau Radenour stared with surprise. In a moment, however, the latter recovered herself and said, with a touch of sharpness in her voice, "Many thanks, sir, but keep your money; the child is no beggar!" Indeed, with the sturdy pride of the hard-working poor, Frau Radenour resented Hans' well-meant offer, and she knew, too, that Karen's

Grandmother would be greatly displeased had she allowed Karen to accept the charity of a stranger.

But as she took the little girl's hand and they both rose to their feet and started off for home, she wondered over and over why the strange sailor had stared so at Karen and had wanted to give her all his money.

As they walked away, Hans, on his part, looked gloomily after them as he reluctantly replaced the five francs in his pocket.

He was deeply disappointed that he had not been able to give them to Karen, for he now realized that she and her Grandmother must be much poorer than he had supposed. The little yellow house looked comfortable, and better than those of most of the lace-makers, and Hans had not before thought that the two who lived there had found life a hard struggle.

As this began to sink into his mind he began to wake up. Indeed, Hans' better nature had been asleep so long while he was leading his evil life that it took quite a while for it to waken entirely; though every day for those three months past he had been rousing up more and more.

As he now turned again and strode along the path by the old canal, "What if it were Emschen?" he kept saying to himself. "She isn't even so big as Emschen was, and the Grandmother is sick and they have no one to work for them!" And then another idea came into the mind of Hans, and it interested him so that he forgot to finish smoking his pipe and he almost ran into a great, shaggy dog harnessed to a little cart full of brass milk cans.

"Look out!" cried the woman trudging along beside the cart. "Thou art a great clumsy fellow!"

And Hans, muttering a shame-faced apology, turned up a narrow street and made his way back to the quay where the fishing vessels were moored.

Grandmother and Karen

When Frau Radenour and Karen came back to The Little Street of the Holy Ghost and drew near the corner where Karen lived, Frau Radenour, who had carefully carried the money for the candlesticks, now gave it to the little girl and with a cheery good-by went on to her own home.

Karen hurried up the steps and pushing open the door went into the room where Grandmother lay in her bed. Bending over her patient old face, she kissed her, and then laying the ten francs on the counterpane said, "See, Grandmother! Frau Radenour says this will keep us in bread for quite a long time! And you know we did not need the candlesticks."

Then Grandmother stroked Karen's hand and said: "Thou art a dear child, Karen, and thou hast done well. Grandmother is better now and we will get along."

She told Karen to go to a little shop not far away and buy them some food, of which they had but a scanty supply.

After their humble little dinner Grandmother felt so much better that she was able, with Karen's help, to put on her dress and sit by the open window for a while.

In a few days she had improved so much that she took up the lace-pillow again, and began work. Day by day, beneath her deft fingers, the delicate threads grew into white flowers and frosty tissues; and Karen, sitting by her side, learned to make a flower shaped like a little hyacinth bell, and Grandmother smiled proudly and said she would be a fine lace-maker. And

then Karen tried harder than ever to learn how to use the tiny bobbins.

Sometimes, through the pleasant spring days, they sat on the doorstep and worked. There was a convent not far away where the nuns taught the children of the poorer folk of Bruges. And often, as Grandmother looked at Karen working so hard over her little black pillow, she grieved much that the little girl could not go to this school at least a part of every day, for she wanted her to have a chance to learn something; but she could not spare her. For though Grandmother was better, she was not strong and could not work so steadily as she had done before. Karen had to help as much as she could about the house and in every way relieve her, which kept the little girl busy.

Early in the summer Madame Koerner, who had returned from Ghent, had Karen come every afternoon to play with and look after her little boy, and, in this she earned a little money, till Madame Koerner was called away again.

But yet, in spite of all their efforts, Grandmother and Karen had hard work to keep themselves from want. And from time to time Grandmother's tired hands would tremble so she would have to stop work for a little while. And then Karen would have to go again to the rag-market with Frau Radenour and carry with her some one of their few possessions. In this way they parted with the little brass coffee-pot which, next to the candlesticks, had been the pride of Grandmother's heart; and then, later on, went a pitcher, and even Karen's pewter mug, and one or two pieces of the precious linen which Grandmother had tried to store up for the little girl against the time when she grew up and would perhaps have a home of her own.

So, gradually, the little house grew more and more bare within, though Grandmother and Karen still bravely struggled on, and in one way and another managed to keep from the almshouse.

But though the little girl had to work so hard, she had her simple little pleasures, too. Sometimes Grandmother finished her lace for some one of the ladies who had seen her work at Madame Koerner's and who lived in that part of the city. And then it was one of Karen's chief delights to take the work home; for she loved to walk through their gardens where old-fashioned roses and poppies and blue corn-flowers bloomed, and snapdragons and larkspurs and many other gay blossoms splashed their bright color along the box-bordered paths, for Bruges has always been famous for her beautiful flowers. And often when the little girl came home it would be with her hands full of posies that had been given her, and these brightened up the bare little house and helped make them forget the many things they had been obliged to part with. Though not all the flowers stayed within, for Karen always took pains to pick out the very prettiest one, and then with this in her hand she would lean from the sill of the window nearest the little shrine at the corner of the house, and there she would tuck the flower within the little hand of the Christ-child's image. For it did not seem to her fitting that the house should be decorated within and the shrine left bare.

Another thing Karen loved to do was to go with Grandmother, sometimes on Sunday afternoons when they had a holiday, out to the pretty little lake called the Minne-Water, which lay just within the old city walls. Here, where the great elm trees cast their dappled shadows, many white swans were always to be found floating about. Karen always saved part of her bread on Sundays that she might have the delight of

feeding the lovely great birds, who would swim up as she leaned over the edge of the water and eat the morsels from her rosy palm.

Indeed, it takes but little to give pleasure when one works hard all week long. And as Karen bent over her lace-pillow day after day, she would dream about the gardens and the swans on the Minne-Water till sometimes she would drop her bobbins and tangle her thread, and Grandmother would have to bid her be more careful; and then she would set to work again and her little fingers would fairly fly.

Day by day, up in the wonderful belfry, the silvery chimes rang out the hours, till the summer had passed away and the autumn came. Soon the starlings and cuckoos all flew away to warmer lands, and in the open spaces of the city the green leaves of the chestnut trees curled up and fluttered down to the ground, and the great willows, that here and there overhung the old canals, slowly dropped their golden foliage to float away on the silvery water below.

In the little yellow house Grandmother and Karen now had to burn some of their precious hoard of wood even after their bit of cooking on the hearth was done; and Karen could no longer put a flower for the Christ-child up in the little shrine of the house.

Indeed, as winter drew on, bringing with it thoughts of the Christmas time, Karen said to herself sadly that this year she would have no money to spend for the little gifts she so loved to make. She remembered how pleased she had been the Christmas before to select and buy the green jug for Grandmother and the pretty porringer for the Christ-child. Grandmother had liked the jug as well as Karen had hoped she would; and she hoped, too, that the Christ-child had been

pleased with the porringer—she was sure he had found it on the doorstep, because it was gone the next morning.

She wished she might buy presents for both of them again, but she knew that even if some of the ladies Grandmother worked for should give her a silver piece as had Madame Koerner the year before, she would have to spend it for the food they must have and for which it seemed so hard to get the money.

There was one thing though that, poor as they were, Grandmother felt they must provide against the Christmas time; they must have their wax candles to take to the cathedral even if they had to do without light themselves.

So when the time wore on and the day before Christmas came, just as they had done as far back as Karen could remember, they set out for the ancient cathedral, each carrying a white taper to be blessed and lighted and add its tiny golden flame to the hundreds twinkling through the dim, perfumed air.

When the vesper service was over, and again they walked slowly back to the little house, its steep roof was powdered over with light snowflakes that were beginning to pile up in soft drifts on the points of the gable and to flutter down to the street below.

As Karen looked up at the little shrine hung with its wintry fringe of twinkling icicles, and at the image of the Christ-child within, she wondered if the real Christ-child would bring her something again at midnight. And she wondered, too, for the thousandth time, how he could bring gifts to so many children in a single night, and how it was that he did not grow very tired and cold, as she was then, and she had been no farther than the cathedral.

But Grandmother said he did not feel the cold nor grow tired like other children so long as they kept him warm with their love; but that if he found a child whose heart was cold and who did not try to obey him, then he shivered in the snow and his little feet grew so weary! Karen could not see how any child could help loving him when he was so good to them all; and she wished again that she had some little gift to show him that she thought about him, and cared for him.

She gave a little sigh as they went in, but soon she was busy helping set out their supper, and then when they had finished, and put the dishes back on the dresser, she and Grandmother sat by the hearth in the flickering light of the fire.

And as they looked into the embers, they both saw visions and dreamed dreams. Grandmother's dreams were of long ago, when Karen's mother was a little girl like Karen herself; while Karen dreamed of the time when she would be grown up and able to do wonderful things for Grandmother.

Christmas Eve Again

As Grandmother and Karen still sat in the firelight, dreaming their dreams and thinking of many things, not far away, along The Little Street of the Holy Ghost, a man was walking rapidly. Of course there was nothing odd about that, but it was curious that this man was the very same one who had hurried down that very street exactly a year before—and yet anyone who had seen him then would never have believed that it could possibly be the same.

For instead of Hans the Robber, unkempt and ragged, walking stealthily and keeping a constant sharp lookout lest he be surprised in some of his evil doing, this man Hans was decently clad and bore himself fearlessly. He carried something in his hands, and he seemed to be looking for some place.

Presently he came to the corner where stood the little yellow house, and there he paused for a moment and a look of disappointment came into his face; for there seemed to be no light in the house and it looked as if no one were home. But as Hans came opposite to one of the little windows, he glanced in and could see Grandmother and Karen sitting hand in hand by the hearth. Then he looked carefully about him and noticed across the street a narrow passageway that lay in the shadow between two rambling old houses, and he gave a little smile of satisfaction.

The next thing he did was to place the objects he had been carrying in his hands in a row on the doorstep, close in front of the door, so that any one opening it could not help but see them—that is, if the room within had been light, for otherwise

the deep, old-fashioned doorway was quite in shadow. There was no street lamp near, and, though the snow had ceased, the night was moonless and the stars partly hidden by clouds. A few lights shone faintly from some of the houses opposite, but these did not help any, as they did not touch the doorstep; and as Hans realized that the things he had placed there could thus scarcely be seen, he looked troubled for a moment, but suddenly he broke into a low laugh as he said to himself: "Lucky I thought to put in candles!"

And then, fumbling in his pockets, at last he found a bit of paper which had been wrapped around his tobacco; for his pipe was the one indulgence that Hans allowed himself, and this he seldom left behind if he could help it. Having found the bit of paper, he hastily twisted it into a tiny taper, and then he looked up and down the street to be sure it was quite deserted, for he wanted to have things to himself for a few minutes.

There was no one in sight, and he could hear no footfalls; so quickly thrusting the taper into the bowl of his pipe, he held his hand around it and blew softly on the glowing coals till in a moment the taper caught fire. Then, instantly, he stooped and laid it to the tips of two tall, shimmering white objects in the row he had set on the step, and which proved to be candles held in a pair of brass candlesticks. Hans had little trouble in lighting them, for the air was perfectly still and the space in front of the door deep enough to shelter the candles well. When the tiny golden flames sprang up, they showed that between them on the step was what seemed to be a little bowl with blue handles, only instead of being full of sweetmeats, as one might perhaps expect on Christmas Eve, it was filled with something that glistened with a silvery light.

But Hans did not stop to look at these things, for the moment the candles began to burn he gave a knock on the

door, and then, quick as a flash, he darted across the narrow street, and drew back in the dark shadow of the passageway he had noticed. For, while he did not wish to be seen, he wanted to watch and be sure that the things he had brought were safely received and not stolen by some night prowler such as he himself had been a year before.

Hans had scarcely hidden himself when he heard Karen tugging to unbar the door; and, in another moment, as she pulled it open, he saw her stand perfectly still in the golden candlelight, clasping her hands in utter amazement, while the startled wonder grew in her blue eyes as she stared down at the things at her feet.

Then presently, "Grandmother! Grandmother!" she cried excitedly in a high, sweet voice, "come quickly and see what the Christ-child has brought!"

Hans could see Grandmother hurry to Karen as the little girl knelt on the floor and lifting up the lighted candles exclaimed, "Look, Grandmother! Here are Christmas candles in our very own brass candlesticks!"

And then as Grandmother, speechless with amazement, took the candles from her and Karen lifted up the dish that had stood between them, "Why—why, it is full of silver money!" she cried in bewilderment; and then, as she looked at the blue handles and the stripe of color around its edge, she exclaimed, "And oh, Grandmother, I do believe this is the very porringer I gave the Christ-child last Christmas!"

She rose to her feet and carried the porringer over to the table where Grandmother had already set the candles, and Hans heard no more.

Indeed, at that moment Hans was standing up very straight with a startled look growing on his own face, and with Karen's words still ringing in his ears.

"What?" he repeated to himself. "The very porringer she gave the Christ-child?" and he began to think very hard.

In a moment it all straightened itself out in his mind. Hans drew a deep breath, and then he said to himself slowly: "So that was why it was outside on the doorstep! And it was no gift someone had brought her—but a present from her to the Christ-child!—And—and—I took it!" And Hans gasped and turned pale; for even in his worst robber days he would as soon have thought of stealing something from the cathedral as the Christ-child's porringer, had he known what it was.

"And to think," he went on to himself, with a horrified look in his face, "that I tried to break it, and to sell it at the thieves' market, and then kept it all this while—and what if I had not brought it back!" Here Hans fairly shivered with fear; for he felt that he had been guilty of a particularly dreadful sin when he took that little porringer, and he began to wonder what punishment he would receive for it.

But all at once he heard Karen's happy laughter ring out from the little house, for in their excitement the door still stood partly open. And then a ray of light from a lamp in one of the brown houses beside him shone out through a window, and, crossing the narrow street, touched the front of the little yellow house, and wavered, and presently flitted for a moment into the little shrine up in the corner; and, as Hans looked, it beamed over the face of the Christ-child, who seemed to be gazing down right into the eyes of Hans and smiling happily. And at that moment, Hans could not have told why, but all his fear vanished and he began to smile happily himself.

As he came from his hiding-place and started off briskly down the street, and up in the beautiful belfry the chimes played sweetly through the frosty air, he found himself whistling softly a little tune keeping time with the bells; and he knew his heart had not been so light since he was a little boy in Quiberon.

Karen Perplexed

While Hans went thus whistling happily down the street, Grandmother and Karen were still breathless with excitement over the good fortune that had come to them.

With trembling hands Grandmother had emptied the contents of the porringer on the table, and as she looked at the little pile of shining silver coins that had filled it she knew it was enough to keep them for months—yes, with their simple wants, they might live on it for a year! And already she felt stronger and better able to work since the fear of the almshouse was thus gone—at least for a long while.

But where had the money come from? She stood dazed before it, so bewildered trying to account for it that presently Karen asked her in surprise, "Why, Grandmother, wasn't it the Christ-child who brought everything?" And then she answered slowly and softly, with awe and wonder quivering through her voice, "Yes, little one, it must have been none other than the Christ-child!"

And, of course, it was; and that he had chosen Hans to be his messenger was quite his own affair. If the little silver coins could have spoken, they might have told Grandmother and Karen how Hans had saved them one by one. Indeed, it was less than a week after he had seen Karen selling the candlesticks in the rag-market that he had been offered a place as sailor on a large vessel about to start on a voyage to far-away China; and Captain Helmgar, though sorry to part with him, had been glad of his good luck, for Hans was really a fine sailor and he could earn better wages on the larger vessel. And so it was that the first silver pieces found themselves put into a little bag, and

every month more and more coming to keep them company. They might have told, too, how on ship-board Hans was called a miser, because when the vessel anchored at strange cities he spent nothing for amusements and the things which sailors usually like to do when on land; and how Hans, though he hated to be thought stingy, had yet smiled to himself the larger his hoard grew; for he knew very well that he was really no miser and that he had his own reasons for saving the silver pieces.

And then, if the candlesticks could have talked, they might have taken up the story and told how, when a certain large vessel from China had moored at Ostend the week before, a sailor named Hans had come back to Bruges and had inquired if they were still in the shop of the dealer he had seen buying them in the rag-market. And how he had spent just enough from his bag-full of silver to buy them and take them away from the shelf where they had stood so long because the dealer, a grasping man, had set so high a price that no one would buy; and so at last when Hans offered him a fair sum he was glad enough to sell them. And then they could have told how he had gone to the Christmas market in the Grande Place and bought the two white candles.

And, last of all, the little porringer might have finished the tale by saying: "I was really the one, you know, that started it all; for Hans used often to look at me, and my little girl with the rose in her hand—he called her Emschen—used to smile at him, and always reminded him of Karen and how Karen needed someone to help her, and how I really belonged to her,—for he did not know then that she had bought me for the Christ-child. At any rate, he kept saving the silver just so he could fill my bowl with them and bring me back to Karen, and so here I am!"

But though, if they could have spoken, they might have told all these things to Grandmother and Karen, the Christmas candles contented themselves with filling their little flames with golden light, and the candlesticks just shone and twinkled, and the silver coins gleamed softly, and the little girl in the porringer seemed fairly to laugh with glee as Karen looked into her face.

As for Karen, she was so delighted with it all that she danced about the room like a little mad-cap sprite. But though her heart was brimming over with happiness, there was one thing that perplexed her: while she knew perfectly well that their good fortune had come from the Christ-child, she could not understand why he had brought back the porringer. With the other things it was different, for, of course, he knew how they had hated to part with the candlesticks and how much they needed the money; but the porringer had been meant all the while for him, and so why had he brought it back?

Grandmother, who had never seen it before, listened in bewilderment as Karen, standing beside the table, now told her about buying it for the Christ-child and leaving it on the doorstep the year before; and she scarcely knew what to say when, with a troubled look, the little girl asked: "Do you think he did not like it, Grandmother?"

Grandmother was silent a moment, and then, "No, child," she answered, "else why would he have filled it with silver and stood it between the lighted candles? No, he must have had some reason we do not understand, but I feel sure he was pleased with it."

Karen thought very hard for a few minutes, and at last she said: "I think he must have brought it back because he knew we

had to sell my pewter mug, and that I have only the cup with the broken handle for my bread and milk."

Karen was very well satisfied with this explanation, but somehow she felt that having meant it as a present for the Christ-child she did not want to take the porringer back; and so she hardly knew what to do with it. But in a moment she looked up with a happy smile, and "Oh, Grandmother," she exclaimed, "I thought what to do with it! I will put it up in the little shrine, so if he wants it again he can find it!"

Grandmother thought that would be a very nice thing to do with the porringer; and as the Christmas candles slowly burned away, they sat there talking over the wonderful thing that had happened to them, till it seemed like some marvelous dream, and they would have to rub their eyes and look again and again at the little porringer, and the silver coins, and the white candles tipped with golden flame, to be quite sure that it was all really true.

The Porringer Finds a Resting Place

And if Grandmother and Karen were radiant with happiness that Christmas eve, not less so was Hans the sailor. And on Christmas morning, when all the bells of Bruges pealed out their glad carillons, instead of filling his heart with bitterness as they had done a year before when he sat by his desolate hearth in the forsaken hut, now they sounded sweet and joyous in his ears, and he thought the world a fine and pleasant place to live in after all. And above all he was glad and thankful that the porringer was safely back. But although he had restored it to Karen, he had become so interested in her that he did not mean to lose sight of her; nor did he.

He continued to be a sailor on the large ship, and voyaged to and fro over the sea, but whenever he was on shore he always looked up the little yellow house and tried to learn how life fared with Grandmother and Karen. Before long he found means to become acquainted with them, and in many ways, often unknown to themselves, he befriended them.

But as time went on, he wanted to do more. To be sure, the silver coins he had put in the porringer had brought to the two warmth and light and food and comfort, such as they had not known for many a month; and Grandmother had still been able to lay aside quite a sum of money against a rainy day; and the knowledge that they had this nest-egg to fall back on if either fell ill again brought relief and peace of mind that only those who have struggled for their bread can fully know. And it was with a lighter heart than she had had for years that Grandmother still kept on with her lace-making; and day, by

day, sitting beside her, still Karen tried her best to master the beautiful art.

But whenever Sailor Hans came to see them it distressed him to find them toiling over the little black pillows, and to feel that he himself had no one to do for and yet was so much better able to work than they. For during those months that Hans had saved up the silver coins for the porringer he had made a discovery, and that was that it was very much pleasanter and happier to have some object in life and someone to work for.

But whenever he strove to help them, Grandmother's pride forbade, for, of course, she knew no reason why he should do so. So at last one day Hans quietly told her the story of his life; and, in so doing, to the surprise of both of them, they discovered that Grandmother had known and loved his own mother in their girlhood days in Bruges.

When Hans had finished, he begged Grandmother for the sake of this friendship, and most of all because of what Karen had unwittingly done for Hans himself, that she would let him care for them as if she were his own mother and Karen his own little long-lost sister Emschen; and he begged so earnestly that Grandmother, with all her pride, could no longer refuse, and when she gave her consent nothing had ever made Hans more proud and happy.

From his monthly earnings he began regularly to set aside a certain sum to go to the little yellow house. Often, too, from his voyages he brought back some foreign gift for Grandmother or pretty trinket for Karen; and once, oddly enough, it was a little string of coral beads, so much prettier than the blue ones she had so longed for that day she bought the porringer in the Christmas market that she laughed with

delight, and flinging her arms around his neck, she kissed Hans and declared he was the best friend she had!

Sometimes when he was on shore in summer, he would come up to the little yellow house and Grandmother would sit in the open doorway with her lace-pillow in her lap—for he could not persuade her to give up her work entirely—while Karen and he sat on the doorstep, the little girl industriously working, too. And then Hans, soberly smoking his pipe, would tell Karen every little while that she must not hurt her eyes, as she must save them for the time when she went to school. For one of the first things that Hans had seen to was to arrange for Karen to go to the convent school where Grandmother had wished to send her. And then Karen would laugh and say: "I will just finish this one lace flower, Sailor Hans, and then I will stop."

And always from the little shrine up in the corner of the house the Christ-child nestling on his mother's breast seemed to smile down at them with a wise look in his baby eyes, while down at the edge of Mother Mary's blue robe gleamed the blue handles of the little porringer.

Sometimes, when Karen had a flower, she filled the porringer with fresh water and placed the flower within it. And one day the pigeons found it out, and, fluttering down from the steep roofs nearby, came to drink from it. Karen, seeing this with delight, always after took pains every day to fill it freshly from the wonderful dragon pump, so that the pigeons might not be disappointed. And it was a pretty sight to see them one at a time poising at the edge of the shrine and bending their glossy necks to dip up the water.

When winter came and the icicles hung their rainbow fringe from the carved canopy above, and the white hoar-frost

wreathed the little bowl and trailed from the blue handles like garlands of fairy flowers, then Karen filled it every day with crumbs. For Sailor Hans, for some reason she never knew, always took a great interest in the porringer, and always left a little piece of silver to supply it; and whenever Christmas time came he insisted that it must be kept heaped with barley, so that the birds might have a holiday feast.

And by and by, when Grandmother had come to take life more easily and sometimes folded the patient hands that had wrought so many exquisite things, when Karen had grown a tall girl, sweet and helpful, still filling the little house with happy laughter and with the dreams in her blue eyes growing deeper and deeper, when their staunch friend Hans was no longer sailor but grey-haired Captain Hans, honored and respected by all who knew him, still the little porringer stood in the shrine. And through summers and winters the birds ate and drank from it, and the Christ-child seemed quite content that it should stay there.

This was all many years ago; but unless he has taken it away, no doubt it is still standing in the spot chosen by Karen, close by the feet of Mother Mary and watched over by the Holy Babe she clasps so lovingly to her heart.

Why the Chimes Rang

by

Raymond MacDonald Alden

Why the Chimes Rang

There once, in a far-away country where few people have ever traveled, a wonderful church. It stood on a high hill in the midst of a great city; and every Sunday, as well as on sacred days like Christmas, thousands of people climbed the hill to its great archways, looking like lines of ants all moving in the same direction.

When you came to the building itself, you found stone columns and dark passages, and a grand entrance leading to the main room of the church. This room was so long that one standing at the doorway could scarcely see to the other end, where the choir stood by the marble altar. In the farthest corner was the organ; and this organ was so loud, that sometimes when it played, the people for miles around would close their shutters and prepare for a great thunderstorm. Altogether, no such church as this was ever seen before, especially when it was lighted up for some festival, and crowded with people, young and old. But the strangest thing about the whole building was the wonderful chime of bells.

At one corner of the church was a great gray tower, with ivy growing over it as far up as one could see. I say as far as one could see, because the tower was quite great enough to fit the great church, and it rose so far into the sky that it was only in very fair weather that any one claimed to be able to see the top. Even then one could not be certain that it was in sight. Up, and up, and up climbed the stones and the ivy; and, as the men who built the church had been dead for hundreds of years, everyone had forgotten how high the tower was supposed to be.

Now all the people knew that at the top of the tower was a chime of Christmas bells. They had hung there ever since the church had been built, and were the most beautiful bells in the world. Some thought it was because a great musician had cast them and arranged them in their place; others said it was because of the great height, which reached up where the air was clearest and purest; however that might be, no one who had ever heard the chimes denied that they were the sweetest in the world. Some described them as sounding like angels far up in the sky; others, as sounding like strange winds singing through the trees.

But the fact was that no one had heard them for years and years. There was an old man living not far from the church, who said that his mother had spoken of hearing them when she was a little girl, and he was the only one who was sure of as much as that. They were Christmas chimes, you see, and were not meant to be played by men or on common days. It was the custom on Christmas Eve for all the people to bring to the church their offerings to the Christ-child; and when the greatest and best offering was laid on the altar, there used to come sounding through the music of the choir the Christmas chimes far up in the tower. Some, said that the wind rang them, and others that they were so high that the angels could set them swinging. But for many long years they had never been heard. It was said that people had been growing less careful of their gifts for the Christ-child, and that no offering was brought, great enough to deserve the music of the chimes.

Every Christmas Eve the rich people still crowded to the altar, each one trying to bring some better gift than any other, without giving anything that he wanted for himself, and the church was crowded with those who thought that perhaps the wonderful bells might be heard again, but although the service

was splendid, and the offerings plenty, only the roar of the wind could be heard, far up in the stone tower. Now, a number of miles from the city, in a little country village, where nothing could be seen of the great church but glimpses of the tower when the weather was fine, lived a boy named Pedro, and his little brother. They knew very little about the Christmas chimes, but they had heard of the service in the church on Christmas Eve, and had a secret plan, which they had often talked over when by themselves, to go to see the beautiful celebration.

"Nobody can guess, Little Brother," Pedro would say, "all the fine things there are to see and hear; and I have even heard it said that the Christ-child sometimes comes down to bless the service. What if we could see Him?"

The day before Christmas was bitterly cold, with a few lonely snowflakes flying in the air, and a hard white crust on the ground. Sure enough, Pedro and Little Brother were able to slip quietly away early in the afternoon; and although the walking was hard in the frosty air, before nightfall they had trudged so far, hand in hand, that they saw the lights of the big city just ahead of them. Indeed, they were about to enter one of the great gates in the wall that surrounded it, when they saw something dark on the snow near their path, and stepped aside at it.

It was a poor woman, who had fallen just outside the city, too sick and tired to get in where she might have found shelter. The soft snow made of a drift a sort of pillow for her, and she would soon be so sound asleep, in the wintry air, that no one could ever waken her again. All this Pedro saw in a moment, and he knelt down beside her and tried to rouse her, even tugging at her arm a little, as though he would have tried to carry her away. He turned her face toward him, so that he could

rub some of the snow on it, and when he had looked at her silently a moment he stood up again and said:

"It's no use, Little Brother. You will have to go on alone."

"Alone?" cried Little Brother. "And you not see the Christmas festival?"

"No," said Pedro, and he could not keep back a bit of a choking sound in his throat. "See this poor woman. Her face looks like the Madonna in the chapel window, and she will freeze to death if nobody cares for her. Everyone has gone to the church now, but when you come back you can bring someone to help her. I will rub her to keep her from freezing, and perhaps get her to eat the bun that is left in my pocket."

"But I cannot bear to leave you, and go on alone," said Little Brother.

"Both of us need not miss the service," said Pedro, "and it had better be I than you. You can easily find your way to the church; and you must see and hear everything twice, Little Brother— once for you and once for me. I am sure the Christ-child must know how I should love to come with you and worship Him; and oh! if you get a chance, Little Brother, to slip up to the altar without getting in any one's way, take this little silver piece of mine, and lay it down for my offering, when no one is looking. Do not forget where you have left me, and forgive me for not going with you."

In this way he hurried Little Brother off to the city, and winked hard to keep back the tears, as he heard the crunching footsteps sounding farther and farther away in the twilight. It was pretty hard to lose the music and splendor of the Christmas celebration that he had been planning for so long, and spend the time instead in that lonely place in the snow.

The great church was a wonderful place that night. Every one said that it had never looked so bright and beautiful before. When the organ played and the thousands of people sang, the walls shook with the sound, and little Pedro, away outside the city wall, felt the earth tremble around him.

At the close of the service came the procession with the offerings to be laid on the altar. Rich men and great men marched proudly up to lay down their gifts to the Christ-child. Some brought wonderful jewels, some baskets of gold so heavy that they could scarcely carry them down the aisle. A great writer laid down a book that he had been making for years and years. And last of all walked the king of the country, hoping with all the rest to win for himself the chime of the Christmas bells. There went a great murmur through the church, as the people saw the king take from his head the royal crown, all set with precious stones, and lay it gleaming on the altar, as his offering to the holy Child. "Surely," every one said, "we shall hear the bells now, for nothing like this has ever happened before."

But still only the cold old wind was heard in the tower, and the people shook their heads; and some of them said, as they had before, that they never really believed the story of the chimes, and doubted if they ever rang at all.

The procession was over and the choir began the closing. Suddenly the organist stopped playing as though he had been shot, and everyone looked at the old minister, who was standing by the altar, holding up his hand for silence. Not a sound could be heard from anyone in the church, but as all the people strained their ears to listen, there came softly, but distinctly, swinging through the air, the sound of the chimes in the tower. So far away, and yet so clear the music seemed — so much sweeter were the notes than anything that had been

heard before, rising and falling away up there in the sky, that the people in the church sat for a moment as still as though something held each of them by the shoulders. Then they all stood up together and stared straight at the altar, to see what great gift had awakened the long-silent bells.

But all that the nearest of them saw was the childish figure of Little Brother, who had crept softly down the aisle when no one was looking, and had laid Pedro's little piece of silver on the altar.

This Way to Christmas

by

Ruth Sawyer

Author's Note

The author wishes to acknowledge the courtesy of Mrs. William Sharpe, who has so kindly given her permission for the adaptation of parts of Fiona Macleod's "Muime Chroisd" for the legend of St. Bridget, told here by Johanna. The author found many fragments of the legend in the north of Ireland; but nowhere was it complete as recorded by Fiona Macleod from the Island of lona.

I

The Chapter Before the Beginning

I wonder if you know that stories have a way of beginning themselves? Sometimes they even do more than this. They tell themselves beginning and ending just where they please with no consideration at all for the author or the reader.

Perhaps you have discovered this for yourself; you may have in mind this minute some of the stories that you wished had begun long before they did and others that ended before you thought they had any business doing so. These have a very unpleasant way of leaving your expectations and your interest all agog; and I have not a doubt that you have always blamed the author. This is not fair. In a matter of this kind an author is just as helpless as a reader, and there is no use in trying to coax or scold a story into telling itself her way. As sure as she tries the story gets sulky or hurt, picks up its beginning and ending, and trails away, never to come back; and that story is lost for all time. You may try it yourself if you do not believe me.

Now, if I could have had my way, I should have begun with David in the window nook at dusk-hour, looking out on the Hill Country all white with the gathering snow; and I should have said:

"It was the year after last and the year before next and just seven days before Christmas."

I have begun this way a hundred times, and every time the same thing happens. The story behaves disgracefully. It will have none of my way. I have actually heard it screaming: "No! I won't begin there! I won't I won't -- I won't!" After which it

always runs for the door. As a result I have become completely cowed and I have given in. I am making believe now (and so must you, for it never does to let a story get in a bad humor) that after all this is the best beginning.

It was late fall when David's world dropped away from him; at least to David that is what seemed to happen. When one loses the very things one always expects to have-- big things like mother and father, home and the boys on the block why, there is not so very much of the world left. To David, speeding toward the Hill Country on the big express with Johanna, it seemed as if there was not enough left to fill even one of the many empty days that lay before him.

It had all come about because of father being a scientist. Just what a scientist was David had never felt quite sure, but he knew it meant having a great deal of knowledge and very little time -- time for boys. It also meant forgetting things that even David was supposed to remember; things like going to bed, and coming home at dinner-time, and putting on a coat when it was cold, and rubbers when it rained. Mother always laughed at these and said that father was more trouble to look after than David; and she wondered what she would do if the time ever came when she would have to decide between the two of them, and which needed her most.

And then, without any warning, that time had come. Very suddenly father came home one night and announced that there was a fresh development of an almost unknown bacillus among the soldiers in the Eastern war zone; it was the chance of a lifetime for a scientist, and he would go as soon as he could pack and make necessary arrangements. The next moment he had plunged into his pocket for his notebook, and only David had seen how white and still mother had grown. When she spoke at last there was a funny little catch in her voice that

sounded as if it had tried to be a laugh, but somehow could not manage it.

"I hoped and prayed that this wouldn't happen quite so soon, this having to decide between my big boy and my little boy."

Father had laughed outright. "Nonsense, there is nothing to decide. Of course you stay with David. The war country is no place for either of you, and I shall manage perfectly by myself."

"The war country is no place for David; but there are plenty of women over there working side by side with their husbands. Oh, my dear, my dear!"

Mother's arms had gathered them both in and mother was holding them close. It was to father, however, that she was speaking. "I believe you are my little boy, after all. Manage! Over there! When you can't take care of yourself in your own civilized country! No, my dear, you need a mother more than David does. Besides, there's Johanna; we'll send for her. She will look after David almost as well as I can; but what would she do with you!" This time the laugh had right of way and rippled all over mother's face.

Father had stopped making notes and was looking at them both with that funny wrinkly smile about his mouth that David loved to see.

"Well, sir, what do you think about it?" he said, looking straight at David.

David had squared his shoulders and straightened his chin; but it took two hard swallows before he could answer. "I think, sir, that mother is right. You see I'm eight, going on nine; and

when a man's that old he ought to be able to look after himself for a while. Don't you think so?"

"He certainly ought to; but it seems that there are some who never are quite able." And father's hand had suddenly reached up to mother's, which was about his shoulder.

That is all there had been to it. The next day Johanna had come; good, Irish Johanna, who had taken care of him as a baby and had stayed until he had outgrown his need of her and she had married Barney. The day after, he had said good-by to the boys on the block; and he had said it as one about to depart upon a rare adventure, taking his leave of less fortunate comrades. He did not intend that they should discover how much of his world had dropped away from him, or how he envied them the continued possession of theirs. Moreover, it increased his courage threefold to make believe that what had happened was not so bad, after all. In this manner he was able to assume an added stature, one fitting his newly acquired manhood, when the time came to swing the door of his home tight shut; and he was able to say a brave good-by to father and mother.

Now it was all over. He and Johanna were speeding toward the Hill Country, and he was glad, very glad, to be a little boy again and snuggle into the hollow of Johanna's arm as he had been used to doing in the old nursery days. After all, eight-going-on-nine is not so very old.

David wasted no time. Out of the scraps that were left him he tried at once to build up a new world. He looked out of the car window at the fields and houses flying past, and he thought of all the pleasant things Johanna had promised him. Johanna and Barney were the caretakers of a big summer hotel in the mountains. The summer season was over, the hotel closed, and

he was going to live with Johanna and Barney in the lodge and have a whole mountain-top to play on. He was going to help Barney cut down next year's firewood and drive the sledge for him over the lumber roads. He was going to make a toboggan-slide down the cleared side of the mountain; he was going to skate on the pond above the beaver dam, and learn to ski, and a crowd of other jolly things. And in the spring there were to be the maple trees to tap. Only, in the meantime, there were father and mother traveling farther and farther away; and there was Christmas coming nearer and nearer. And how could he ever stand one without the others?

He turned away from the car window and looked at Johanna; and then out popped the most surprising question from her.

"Hark, laddy! Have ye forgotten all about the fairies and the stories Johanna used to tell?"

David smiled without knowing it.

"Why, no. No, I haven't. A person never entirely forgets about fairies, even if he does grow up does he? I guess I haven't been thinking about them lately, that's all."

"Sure, and ye haven't!" Johanna's voice had the same folksy ring to it that it had in the nursery days. "Faith, 'tis hard keeping them lively when ye are living in the city. Wasn't I almost giving over believing in them myself, after living there a few years? It wasn't till I moved to the hilltops and the green country that I got them back again."

"Have you seen any up there?"

David asked it as one might inquire about the personal habits of Santa Claus or the chances of finding the crock of gold at the rainbow's end, experiences one has never had oneself,

but which one is perfectly willing to credit to another upon receipt of satisfactory evidence. Moreover, fairies were undeniably comfortable to think about just now. And what is more, whenever things happen that seem unreal and that make you feel strange and unreal yourself, that is the very time that fairies become the most real and easy to believe in. David discovered this now, and it made him snuggle closer to Johanna and repeat his question:

"Have you really seen any up there?"

Johanna puckered her forehead and considered for a moment.

"'Tis this way, laddy. I can't be saying honestly that I have laid my two eyes on one for certain; and then again I can't say honestly that I haven't. Many's the time in the woods or thereabouts that I've had the feeling I've just stumbled on one, just missed him by a wink, or beaten him there by a second. The moss by the brookside would have a trodden-down look and the bracken would be swaying with no help o' the wind for all the world as if a wee man had just been brushing his way through."

"It might have been a squirrel," suggested David, the dust of the city still clouding his mind.

"Aye, but I'm thinking it wasn't. And if there's a fairy up yonder in the Hill Country I'm thinking ye'll find him. 'Twill give ye one thing more to do, eh, laddy?" Johanna tightened the arm about him and laughed softly.

"But how would fairies get over here? I shouldn't think they would ever want to leave Ireland; and I thought they never came out in winter."

"They might come because they had been locked out." Johanna's eyes suddenly began to dance mysteriously, and she put her lips close to David's ear that the noise and jar of the train might not drown one word of what she was going to say:

"Whist, laddy! Do ye mind what day it is? 'Tis the very last day of the fairy summer, the last day when they'll be making the rings and dancing the reels over in Ireland."

"Why, it's Hallowe'en," remembered David.

"Aye, that's what! And after this night the fairies bolt the doors of their raths fast with magic and never come out again till May Eve, barring once in a white winter or so when they come out on Christmas Eve. But it happens every so often that a fairy gets locked out on this night. He stays dancing too long, or playing too many tricks, and when he gets back to the rath 'tis past cock-crow and the door is barred against him. Then there's naught for him to do but to bide how and where he can till opening time comes on May Eve."

"And if -- and – if…"

"Sure, if one should get locked out this night, what's to prevent his coming over? What's more likely than that he'd be saying to himself, 'Faith, Ireland'll be a mortal lonely place with the rest o' the lads gone. I'll try my luck in another country.' And with that he follows the rest of the Irish and emigrates over here. And if he ever lands, ye mark my word, laddy, he'll make straight for the Hill Country! That is, if he's not there already ahead of himself."

Johanna laughed and David laughed with her.

"Sure, there's a heap o' sense in some nonsense, mind that! And never be so foolish, just because ye grow up and get a little book knowledge, as to turn up your nose and mock at the

things ye loved and believed in when ye were a little lad. Them that do, lose one of the biggest cures for heartache there is in the world, mind that!"

David turned back to the window. Already, beyond the foreground of passing woods and meadows, he could catch glimpses of the Hill.

Country, hazy and purple, lying afar off. Johanna was right. It was better to think of the locked-out fairy than of himself. He found himself wondering if fairies grew lonesome as humans did, and if it was as hard to be locked out of a rath as a home. He wondered if all the fairies were grown up or if there were boy and girl fairies, and father and mother fairies. He would ask Johanna some time, when he was sure he could ask it with a perfectly steady voice. But most of all, he wondered about opening time; and he wished with all his heart that he knew just when opening time would come for him. Until then, he must keep very busy with the firewood and the sled and the toboggan-slide and the skating and skiing and Christmas.

What kind of a Christmas was it going to be?

The train climbed half-way to the top of the highest hill and there it left David and Johanna. Barney was waiting for them with the horses and the big wagon to carry them up the rest of the way; and to David it seemed a very lonesome way. The stars were out before they reached the lodge, but even in the starlight he could see that they were alone on the hill-top except for the great, shadowy, closed hotel and the encompassing fir-trees.

"Ye'll not be troubled with noise, and ye'll not be pestered with neighbors," laughed Barney, as he helped David to clamber down from the wagon. "Johanna says that in the winter

there is nobody alive in these parts but the creatures and the 'heathens' and ourselves."

II

The Locked-Out Fairy

Two months had passed since David had come to the Hill Country; two months in which he had thrown himself with all the stoutness of heart he could muster into the new life and the things Johanna had promised. He had spent long, crisp November days with Barney in the woods, watching him fell the trees marked for firewood and learning to use his end of a cross-cut saw. When the snow came and the lumber roads were packed hard for sledding he had shared in the driving of the team and the piling of the logs. He had learned to ski and to snow-shoe; already he had dulled his skates on the pond above the beaver dam. Yet in spite of all these things, in spite of Barney's good-natured comradeship and Johanna's faithful care and love, the ache in his heart had grown deeper until his loneliness seemed to shut him in like the snow-capped hills about him. And now it was seven days before Christmas and not a word had been said concerning it.

David had begun to wonder if in all that country of bare hilltops and empty valleys, of snow and fir-tree and wild creature, there was anything out of which one could possibly make a Christmas. And slowly the conviction had been borne in upon him that there was not. The very thought of the toy-stores in the city, of the windows with their displays of Christmas knickknacks, of the street booths covered with greens, of what the boys on the block were doing and talking about, of the memories of all the other Christmases that had been, brought unspeakable pangs to his soul. He wondered

how he was ever going to stand it this Christmas that was no Christmas.

And this is how it happened that at dusk-hour, seven days before Christmas, a very low-spirited boy of eight going-on-nine sat curled up on the window-seat of the lodge, looking out through the diamond panes and wishing with all his heart that he was somebody else in some other place and that it was some other time of the year.

Barney was always bedding down the horses at this time and Johanna was getting supper; and as there was never anything in particular for David to do it had become a custom with him to watch for the lighting of the lamps in the cabins of the "heathen." There were four cabins, only one was a cottage; and he could see them all from the lodge by a mere change of position or window. Somehow he liked them, or thought he should like them if he knew them, in spite of all the unalluring things Johanna had said about them. According to her the families who lived in them were outcasts, speaking strange tongues and worshiping strange gods, and quite unfit to cross the door-steps of honest Christian folk. David hardly knew whether Barney shared this opinion or not. Barney teased Johanna a good deal and laughed at her remarks every time she aired her grievance: that there should be no decent neighbors like themselves on all that barren hilltop. In his own heart David clung persistently to the feeling that he should like them all if he ever got near enough to make their acquaintance.

It was always the "lunger's" lamp that shone out first in the dusk. David could usually tell to the minute when it would be lighted by watching the shadow on the foot-hill. Johanna was uncertain from what country these neighbors had come, but she thought it was Portugal. And Portuguese! Words always failed her when she tried to convey to David the exact place

that Portuguese held among the heathen; but he was under the impression that it must be very near the top. One of these neighbors was sick with bad lungs, so his family had come to try the open-air cure of the hills; and they had been here since early spring. David never saw their tiny spark of a light spring out against the dark of the gathering gloom that he did not make a wish that the "lunger" might be a good deal better the next day.

Across the ridge from the foot-hill lay the lumber-camp, and here David always looked for the second light. The camp was temporarily deserted, the company having decided to wait a year or two before cutting down any more timber, and the loggers had been sent to another camp farther north. Only the cook, an old negro, had remained behind to guard the property from fire and poachers, and he it was that lighted in his shack the solitary lamp that sent its twinkling greeting up to David every night.

Straight down the hill shone the third light from the trapper's cabin, and it was always close to dark before that was lighted. What the trapper's nationality was Johanna had never happened to specify; but she had often declared that he was one of those bad-looking dark men from the East Asia, perhaps; and she had not a doubt that he had come to the woods to escape the law. David's mental picture of him was something quite dreadful; and yet when his light sprang out of the dark and twinkled at him up the white slope he always found himself desperately sorry for the trapper, alone by himself with the creatures he had trapped or shot and his thoughts.

The fourth light came through another window, shining up from the opposite slope of the hill the slope that led toward the station and the village beyond. This was the flagman's light and

it hung in the little hut by the junction where the main railroad crossed the circuit line. It was always lighted when David looked for it, and he always sat watching until he should see the colored signal-lights swing out on the track beyond, for then he knew the flagman's work was over for the day that is, if all was well on the road. It happened sometimes, however, that there was a snow-slide down the ravine above the crossing, or sometimes a storm uprooted a tree and hurled it across the track, and then the flagman was on guard all night. Now, the flagman was German; and Johanna's voice always took on a particularly forbidding and contemptuous tone whenever she spoke of him. David had often marveled at this, for in the city his father had friends who were German and they were very good friends. Once David had spoken his mind:

"I don't see why you call him a heathen, Johanna, just because he was born in the country that's making the war. It wasn't his fault and I don't see why that's any reason for treating him as if he had made the trouble himself."

"Well, how do ye think we'd be treated if we were over there now in that heathen's country? Sure, ye wouldn't find them loving us any to speak of." Johanna's lips had curled scornfully. Ye can take my word for it, laddy, if we were there the same as he's here we would be counting ourselves lucky to be alive at all, and not expecting to be asked in for any tea-drinking parties."

It troubled David, none the less, this strange unfriendliness of Johanna's; and this night the weight of it hung particularly heavy upon him. He turned back to his window-nook with a heart made heavier by this condition of alienage. No family, no neighbors, no Christmas; it was a dreary outlook; and he could not picture a single face or a single hearthside behind those four lights that blinked at him in such a friendly fashion.

He realized suddenly that he was very tired. Half the day he had spent clearing a space on the beaver pond big enough for skating; and clearing off a day's fall of snow with a shovel and a broom is hard work. He leaned against the window niche and pillowed his head on his arm. He guessed he would go to bed right after supper. Wouldn't it be fun now, if he could wish himself into one of those cabins, whichever one he chose, and see what was happening there this minute? If he had found the locked-out fairy Johanna had talked so much about he might have learned wishing magic from him. What had happened to the fairy, anyway? Of course it was half a tale and half a joke; nevertheless the locked-out fairy had continued to seem very real to him through these two months of isolation, and wherever he had gone his eye had been always alert for some sign of him. Unbelievable as it may seem, the failure to find him had brought keen disappointment. David had speculated many times as to where he might be living, where he would find his food, how he would keep himself warm. A fairy's clothes were very light, according to Johanna. Undoubtedly he had come over in just his green jerkin and knee-breeches, with stockings and slippers to match; and these were not fit covering for winter weather like this.

David smiled through half-shut eyes. The fairy might steal a pelt from the trapper's supply; that would certainly keep him warm; and if he were anything of a tailor he could make himself a cap and a coat in no time. Or, better yet, he might pick out one that just fitted him and creep into it without having to make it over; a mink's skin would be about the right size, or a squirrel's. His smile deepened at his own conceit. Then something in the dusk outside caught his eye. Some small creature was hopping across the snow toward the lodge.

David flattened his nose to the window to see better, and made out very distinctly the pointed ears, curved back, and long, bushy tail of a squirrel a gray squirrel. At once he thought of some nuts in his jacket pocket, nuts left over from an after-dinner cracking. He dug for them successfully, and opening the window a little he dropped them out. Nearer came the squirrel, fearlessly eager, oblivious of the eyes that were watching him with growing interest. He reached the nuts and was nosing them about for the most appetizing when he sat up suddenly on his hind legs, clutching the nut of his choice between his forepaws, and cocking his head as he did so toward the window.

The effect on David was magical. He gave his eyes one insistent rub and then he opened the window wider.

"Come in," he called, softly. "Please do come in!"

For he had seen under the alert little ears something quite different from the sharp nose and whiskers of the every-day squirrel. There were a pair of blue eyes that winked outrageously at him, while a round, smooth face wrinkled into smiles and a mouth knowingly grinned at him. It was the locked-out fairy at last!

He bobbed his head at David's invitation, fastened his little white teeth firmly in the nut, and scrambled up the bush that grew just outside. A minute more and he was through the window and down beside David on the seat.

"Ah ee, laddy, where have your eyes been this fortnight?" he asked. "I've whisked about ye and chattered down at ye from half a score o' pine-trees and ye never saw me!"

David colored shamefully.

"Never mind. 'Tis a compliment ye've been paying to my art," and the fairy cocked his head and whisked his tail and hopped about in the most convincing fashion.

David held his sides and rocked back and forth with merriment. "It's perfect," he laughed, "simply perfect!"

"Aye, 'tis fair; but I've not mastered the knack o' the tail yet. I can swing it grand, but I can't curl it up stylish. I can fool the mortals easy enough, but ye should see the looks the squirrels give me sometimes when I'm after trying to show off before them."

There was nothing but admiration in David's look of response. "The coat fits you splendidly," he said.

"Sure 'tis as snug as if it grew on me. But I miss my pockets, and I'm not liking the color as well as if it were green."

David laughed again. "Why, I believe you are as Irish as Johanna."

"And why shouldn't I be? Faith, there are worse faults, I'm thinking. Now tell me, laddy, what's ailing ye? Ye've been more than uncommon downhearted lately."

"How did you know?"

''Could a wee fairy man be watching ye for a fortnight, coming and going, and not know?"

"Well, it's lonesomeness; lonesomeness and Christmas." David owned up to it bravely.

"'Tis easy guessing ye're lonesome; that's an ailment that's growing chronic on this hillside. But what's the matter with Christmas?"

"There isn't any. There isn't going to be any Christmas!" And having at last given utterance to his state of mind, David finished with a sorrowful wail.

"And why isn't there, then? Tell me that."

"You can't make Christmas out of miles of snow and acres of fir-trees. What's a boy going to do when there aren't any stores or things to buy, or Christmas fixings, or people, and nobody goes about with secrets or surprises?"

The fairy pushed back the top of his head and the gray ears fell off like a fur hood, showing the fairy's own tow head beneath. He reached for his thinking-lock and pulled it vigorously.

"I should say," he said at last, "that a boy could do comfortably without them. Sure, weren't there Christmases long before there were toy-shops? No, no, laddy. Christmas lies in the hearts and memories of good folk, and ye'll find it wherever ye can find them!"

David shook his head doubtfully.

"I don't see how that can be; but even suppose it's true, there aren't even good folk here."

The fairy grinned derisively and wagged his furry paw in the direction of the lights shining on the hillside:

"What's the meaning of that, and that, and that? Now I should be calling them good folk, the same as ye here."

"Hush!" David looked furtively toward the door that led into the kitchen. "It wouldn't do to let Johanna hear you. Why, she thinks--"

The fairy raised a silencing paw to his lips.

"Whist, there, laddy! If ye are after wanting to find Christmas ye'd best begin by passing on naught but kind sayings. Maybe ye are not knowing it, but they are the very cairn that mark the way to Christmas. Now I'll drive a bargain with ye. If ye'll start out and look for Christmas I'll agree to help ye find the road to it."

"Yes," agreed David, eagerly.

"But there's one thing ye must promise me. To put out of your mind for all time these notions that ye are bound to find Christmas hanging with the tinsel balls to the Christmas tree or tied to the end of a stocking. Ye must make up your mind to find it with your heart and not with your fingers and your eyes."

"But," objected David, "how can you have Christmas without Christmas things?"

"Ye can't. But ye've got the wrong idea entirely about the things. Ye say now that it's turkey and plum-cake and the presents ye give and the presents ye get; and I say 'tis thinkings and feelings and sayings and rememberings. I'm not meaning, mind ye, that there is anything the matter with the first lot, and there's many a fine Christmas that has them in, but they'll never make a Christmas of themselves, not in a thousand years. And what's more, ye can do grand without them."

David rubbed his forehead in abject bewilderment. It was all very hard to understand; and as far as he could see the fairy was pointing out a day that sounded like any ordinary day of the year and not at all like Christmas. But, thanks to Johanna, David had an absolute faith in the infallibility of fairies. If he said so it must be true; at least it was worth trying. So he held out his hand and the fairy laid a furry paw over the ball of his forefinger in solemn compact.

"It's a bargain," David said.

"It is that," agreed the fairy. "And there's nothing now to hinder my going."

He pulled the gray ears over his tow head again until there was only a small part of fairy left.

"Don't ye be forgetting," he reminded David as he slipped through the window. "I'll be on the watch out for ye the morrow."

David watched him scramble down the bush, stopping a moment at the bottom to gather up the remainder of the nuts, which he stuffed away miraculously somewhere between his cheek and the fur. Then he raised a furry paw to his ear in a silent salute.

"Good-by," said David, softly, "good-by. I'm so glad you came."

And it seemed to him that he heard from over the snow the fairy's good-by in Gaelic, just as Barney or Johanna might have said it: "Beanacht leair."

III

Barney's Tale of the Wee Red Cap

David watched the locked-out fairy go forth into the dusk again. He had always supposed that fairies disappeared suddenly and mysteriously; but this was not so. The little gray furry figure hopped slowly across the patch of white in front of the window, bobbed and frisked, pricked up the alert little ears, and swung his bushy tail, after the fashion of any genuine squirrel, and then dove under the low-hanging boughs of the nearest evergreens. As he disappeared, David felt an arm on his shoulder and turned to blink wonderingly into the face of big Barney bending over him and grinning.

"Well, well, who'd have thought to catch the sandman making his rounds afore supper! What sent ye to sleep, laddy?"

"Asleep!" David scoffed hotly at the accusation. "I was no more asleep than you are, Barney. Why, do you know what I've seen, what's been right here this very minute?"

Barney's grin broadened. 'Well, maybe now it was the locked-out fairy!" For this was the old joke between them.

Little did Barney dream that this time he had not only touched upon the real truth, but he had actually gripped it by the scruff of the neck, as he would have put it himself. David looked wise. He was trying to make up his mind just how best to tell the wonderful news when Barney's next words held his tongue and sent the news scuttling back to his memory.

"And speaking o' fairies, I was just asking Johanna getting supper out yonder did she mind the tale Old Con, the tinker, used to be telling back in the Old Country about his great-

uncle Teig and the wee red cap. Did Johanna ever tell ye, now, about the fairies' red cap?"

David shook his head.

"It serves as an easy way o' travel for them; ye might almost call it their private Pullman car," Barney chuckled. "Ye wait a minute and I'll see is there time to tell the tale myself atween now and supper."

He was away to the kitchen and back before David had much more than time enough to rub the gathering frost from the window-pane and look out for a possible return of his fairy. Nothing was to be seen, however, but the snow and the trees and the trail of tiny footprints; and big Barney was beside him in the window-nook again, with a mysterious "knowledgeable look" on his face.

"Aye, there's time and light enough still in the west to see the tale through." He paused for an instant.

"Ye know, laddy, over in Ireland they're not keeping Christmas the same as ye do here -- the poor, I mean. 'Tis generally the day after, St. Stephen's Day, tho? sometimes 'tis St. Stephen's Eve that they manage a bit of a feast and merrymaking. Them that has little shares with them that has less; and afterward the neighbors gather about the turf fire for a story-telling. Aye, many's the strange tale ye will hear over in Ireland on one of them nights. And here's the tale Old Con, the tinker, used for to be telling about his great-uncle Teig -- the most close-fisted man in all of Inneskillen."

And here again is the tale as Barney retold it and David heard it, as he sat in the window-nook of the lodge at dusk-hour just seven days before Christmas.

It was the Eve of St. Stephen, and Teig sat alone by his fire with naught in his cupboard but a pinch of tea and a bare mixing of meal, and a heart inside of him as soft and warm as the ice on the water-bucket outside the door. The turf was near burnt on the hearth a handful of golden cinders left, just; and Teig took to counting them greedily on his fingers.

"There's one, two, three, an' four an' five," he laughed. "Faith, there be more bits o' real gold hid undther the loose clay in the corner."

It was the truth; and it was the scraping and scrooching for the last piece that had left Teig's cupboard bare of a Christmas dinner.

"Gold is betther nor eatin' an' dthrinkin'. An' if ye have naught to give, there'll be naught asked of ye." And he laughed again.

He was thinking of the neighbors, and the doles of food and piggins of milk that would pass over their thresholds that night to the vagabonds and paupers who were sure to come begging. And on the heels of that thought followed another: who would be giving old Shawn his dinner? Shawn lived a stone's-throw from Teig, alone, in a wee tumbled-in cabin; and for a score of years past Teig had stood on the door-step every Christmas Eve, and, making a hollow of his two hands, had called across the road:

"Hey, there, Shawn, will ye come over for a sup?"

And Shawn had reached for his crutches, there being but one leg to him, and had come.

"Faith," said Teig, trying another laugh, "Shawn can fast for the once; 'twill be all the same in a month's time." And he fell to thinking of the gold again.

A knock came to the door. Teig pulled himself down in his chair where the shadow would cover him, and held his tongue.

"Teig, Teig!" It was the Widow O'Donnelly's voice. 'If ye are there, open your door. I have not got the pay for the spriggin' this month, an' the childther are needin' food."

But Teig put the leash on his tongue, and never stirred till he heard the tramp of her feet going on to the next cabin. Then he saw to it that the door was tight barred. Another knock came, and it was a stranger's voice this time:

'The other cabins are filled; not one but has its hearth crowded. Will ye take us in, the two of us? The wind bites mortal sharp; not a morsel o' food have we tasted this day. Masther, will ye take us in?"

But Teig sat on, a-holding his tongue; and the tramp of the strangers' feet passed down the road. Others took their place; small feet, running. It was the miller's wee Cassie, and she called out as she went by:

"Old Shawn's watchin' for ye. Ye'll not be forgettin' him, will ye, Teig?"

And then the child broke into a song, sweet and clear, as she passed down the road:

"Listen all ye, 'tis the Feast o' St. Stephen,
Mind that ye keep it, this holy even.
Open your door and greet ye the stranger,
For ye mind that the wee Lord had naught but a manger.
Mhuire as truagh!

"Feed ye the hungry and rest ye the weary,
This ye must do for the sake of Our Mary.

"Pis well that ye mind ye who sit by the fire
That the Lord He was born in a dark and cold byre.
Mhuire as truagh!"

Teig put his fingers deep in his ears. "A million murdthering curses on them that won't let me be! Can't a man try to keep what is his without bein' pesthered by them that has only idled and wasted their days?"

And then the strange thing happened: hundreds and hundreds of wee lights began dancing outside the window, making the room bright; the hands of the clock began chasing each other round the dial, and the bolt of the door drew itself out. Slowly, without a creak or a cringe, the door opened, and in there trooped a crowd of the Good People. Their wee green cloaks were folded close about them, and each carried a rush-candle.

Teig was filled with a great wonderment, entirely, when he saw the fairies, but when they saw him they laughed.

'We are takin' the loan o' your cabin this night, Teig," said they. 'Ye are the only man hereabouts with an empty hearth, an' we're needin' one."

Without saying more, they bustled about the room making ready. They lengthened out the table and spread and set it; more of the Good People trooped in, bringing stools and food and drink. The pipers came last, and they sat themselves around the chimneypiece a-blowing their chanters and trying the drones. The feasting began and the pipers played, and never had Teig seen such a sight in his life. Suddenly a wee man sang out:

"Clip, clap, clip, clap, I wish I had my wee red cap!"

And out of the air there tumbled the neatest cap Teig had ever laid his two eyes on. The wee man clapped it on his head, crying:

"I wish I was in Spain!" And whist! up the chimney he went, and away out of sight!

It happened just as I am telling it. Another wee man called for his cap, and away he went after the first. And then another and another until the room was empty and Teig sat alone again.

"By my soul," said Teig, "I'd like to thravel like that myself! It's a grand savin' of tickets an' baggage; an' ye get to a place before ye've had time to change your mind. Faith, there is no harm done if I thry it."

So he sang the fairies' rhyme and out of the air dropped a wee cap for him. For a moment the wonder had him, but the next he was clapping the cap on his head, crying:

"Spain!"

Then whist! up the chimney he went after the fairies, and before he had time to let out his breath he was standing in the middle of Spain, and strangeness all about him.

He was in a great city. The doorways of the houses were hung with flowers and the air was warm and sweet with the smell of them. Torches burned along the streets, sweetmeat-sellers went about crying their wares, and on the steps of a cathedral crouched a crowd of beggars.

"What's the meanin' o' that?" asked Teig of one of the fairies.

'They are waiting for those that are hearing Mass. When they come out they give half of what they have to those that have nothing, so that on this night of all the year there shall be no hunger and no cold."

And then far down the street carne the sound of a child's voice, singing:

"Listen all ye, 'tis the Feast o' St. Stephen. Mind that ye keep it, this holy even."

"Curse it!" said Teig. "Can a song fly afther ye?" And then he heard the fairies cry, "Holland!" and he cried, "Holland!" too.

In one leap he was over France, and another over Belgium, and with the third he was standing by long ditches of water frozen fast, and over them glided hundreds upon hundreds of lads and maids. Outside each door stood a wee wooden shoe, empty. Teig saw scores of them as he looked down the ditch of a street.

"What is the meanin' o' those shoes?" he asked the fairies.

"Ye poor lad!" answered the wee man next to him. "Are ye not knowing anything? This is the Gift Night of the year, when every man gives to his neighbor."

A child came to the window of one of the houses, and in her hand was a lighted candle. She was singing as she put the light down close to the glass, and Teig caught the words:

"Open your door and greet ye the stranger,
For ye mind that the wee Lord had naught but a manger.
Mhuire as truagh!"

"'Tis the de'il's work!" cried Teig, and he set the red cap more firmly on his head. "I'm for another country."

I cannot be telling you half of the adventures Teig had that night, nor half the sights that he saw. But he passed by fields that held sheaves of grain for the birds, and door-steps that held bowls of porridge for the wee creatures. He saw lighted trees,

sparkling and heavy with gifts; and he stood outside the churches and watched the crowds pass in, bearing gifts to the Holy Mother and Child.

At last the fairies straightened their caps and cried, "Now for the great hall in the King of England's palace!"

Whist! and away they went, and Teig after them; and the first thing he knew he was in London, not an arm's-length from the King's throne. It was a grander sight than he had seen in any other country. The hall was filled entirely with lords and ladies; and the great doors were open for the poor and the homeless to come in and warm themselves by the King's fire and feast from the King's table. And many a hungry soul did the King serve with his own hands.

Those that had anything to give gave it in return. It might be a bit of music played on a harp or a pipe, or it might be a dance or a song; but more often it was a wish, just, for good luck and safe-keeping.

Teig was so taken up with the watching that he never heard the fairies when they wished themselves off; moreover, he never saw the wee girl that was fed and went laughing away. But he heard a bit of her song as she passed through the door:

"Feed ye the hungry and rest ye the weary,
This ye must do for the sake of Our Mary."

Then the anger had Teig. "I'll stop your pestherin' tongue once an' for all time!" And, catching the cap from his head, he threw it after her.

No sooner was the cap gone than every soul in the hall saw him. The next moment they were about him, catching at his coat and crying:

"Where is he from? What does he here? Bring him before the King!"

And Teig was dragged along by a hundred hands to the throne where the King sat.

"He was stealing food," cried one.

"He was stealing the King's jewels," cried another.

"He looks evil," cried a third. "Kill him!"

And in a moment all the voices took it up and the hall rang with, "Aye, kill him, kill him!"

Teig's legs took to trembling, and fear put the leash on his tongue; but after a long silence he managed to whisper:

"I have done evil to no one, no one!"

"Maybe," said the King. "But have ye done good? Come, tell us, have ye given aught to any one this night? If ye have, we will pardon ye."

Not a word could Teig say; fear tightened the leash, for he was knowing full well there was no good to him that night.

"Then ye must die," said the King. "Will ye try hanging or beheading?"

"Hanging, please, your Majesty," said Teig.

The guards came rushing up and carried him off. But as he was crossing the threshold of the hall a thought sprang at him and held him.

"Your Majesty," he called after him, "will ye grant me a last request?"

"I will," said the King.

"Thank ye. There's a wee red cap that I'm mortal fond of, and I lost it awhile ago; if I could be hung with it on I would hang a deal more comfortable."

The cap was found and brought to Teig.

"Clip, clap, clip, clap, for my wee red cap. I wish I was home!" he sang.

Up and over the heads of the dumfounded guard he flew, and whist! and away out of sight. When he opened his eyes again he was sitting close by his own hearth, with the fire burnt low. The hands of the clock were still, the bolt was fixed firm in the door. The fairies' lights were gone, and the only bright thing was the candle burning in old Shawn's cabin across the road.

A running of feet sounded outside, and then the snatch of a song:

"'Tis well that ye mind, ye who sit by the fire,
That the Lord He was born in a dark and cold byre.
Mhuire as truagh!"

"Wait ye, whoever ye are!" And Teig was away to the corner, digging fast at the loose clay, as the terrier digs at a bone. He filled his hands full of the shining gold, then hurried to the door, unbarring it.

The miller's wee Cassie stood there, peering at him out of the darkness.

"Take those to the Widow O'Donnelly, do ye hear? And take the rest to the store. Ye tell Jamie to bring up all that he has that is eatable an' dhrinkable; an' to the neighbors ye say,

"Teig's keepin' the feast this night.' Hurry now!"

Teig stopped a moment on the threshold until the tramp of her feet had died away; then he made a hollow of his two hands and called across the road:

"Hey, there, Shawn, will ye come over for a sup?"

"And hey, there, the two o' ye, will ye come out for a sup?"

It was Johanna's cheery voice bringing David back from a strange country and stranger happenings. She stood in the open doorway, a lighted candle in her hand.

"Ye'd hurry faster if ye knew what I had outside for supper. What would a wee lad say, now, to a bit o' real Irish currant-bread, baked in the griddle, and a bowl of chicken broth with dumplings!"

IV

David Goes Seeking the Way to Christmas and Finds the Flagman

All night long the snow fell, and when David wakened the hilltop was whiter than ever, if such a thing could be. The tiny prints in the snow that had marked the trail of the locked-out fairy were gone.

For a moment David wondered if he could have dreamed it all, and then he knew it could not be just a dream. It must be something more, to bring such good Christmas news -- news that lasted all through the night and wakened him with a song in his heart and a gladness that a new day had come. And what a day it was! An orange sun was breaking the gray of the dawn; he could hear the soft push and pound of Barney's shovel clearing a pathway from the door to the road, and he knew he could be off early on his skis, down the hill to where he did not know. But the fairy had promised that if he should start out seeking the way to Christmas he would help him.

He dressed quickly to the swinging rhythm of the reel Johanna was lilting in the kitchen below; for in a little lodge bedroom on a hill-top, with the thermometer outside many degrees below zero, one does not dally in putting on one's clothes. He came down to breakfast for the first time since he had left the old home without having to pretend anything in the way of feelings; and he found beside his plate a letter from father.

"Barney, the rascal, brought it back with him yesterday and carried it about in his pocket all evening, never thinking of it

once," Johanna explained, shaking her fist at that guilty person just coining in.

"Sure, the two of us were that busy entertaining fairies last night we hadn't mind enough for anything else." And Barney winked at David knowingly.

David responded absent-mindedly. His thoughts and fingers were too busy with the letter to pay much attention to anything else. Father had little time for boys, as we have already said, but when he did take time the results were unquestionably satisfactory; the letter proved this. It was a wonderful letter, full of all the most interesting seeings and doings just the things a boy loves to hear about and yet it was written as any grown-up would write to another. That was one fine thing about father. When he did have time for boys he never looked down upon them as small people with little wisdom and less understanding; he always treated them as equals. But it was what came at the very last of the letter that brought the joyful smile to David's lips.

Johanna and Barney saw it and smiled to each other.

"Good news, laddy?" Johanna asked.

"There's nothing about coming home, but there's something about Christmas." David consulted the letter again. "Father says he's been looking around for some time for just the right present to send for Christmas, and he's just found it. He thinks I'll like it about the best of anything, and it ought to get here unless the steamers are awfully delayed on Christmas day."

"That's grand!" Barney beamed his own delight over the news. "What do ye think it might be, now?"

David shook his head.

"I don't know -- don't believe I could even guess. You see, father never bought me a Christmas present before; he always left mother to choose. He said she knew more about such things than he did."

"Then ye can take my word for it, if it's the first one he's ever got ye 'twill be the best ye ever had." Barney spoke with conviction, while Johanna leaned over David's chair and put a loving arm about his shoulder.

"There's some virtue in losing them ye love for a bit, after all, if it makes one o' them think about ye and Christmas. Sure, there's nothing better in life to put by in your memory than rare thoughts and fine letters. And, I'm mortial glad, myself, there's something good coming to ye, laddy, from over yonder, for many's the time Barney and I have been a feared 'twas a lonesome Christmas ye'd be finding up here."

And to the great surprise of every one, David included, David answered cheerfully:

"I don't believe it's half bad. Maybe there's more Christmas round than we know."

The orange sun had paled to yellow and climbed half the length of the tallest pine from the crest of the hill when David, bundled and furred, adjusted his skis outside the lodge door. Carefully he pushed his way over the level stretch of new snow, for one never knew with new snow just how far one might go down before striking the crust of the old. A few yards beyond the nearest clump of evergreen he stopped. From this point the mountain sloped down on three sides; the fourth carried over the ridge to the neighboring hill. Here David could look down on the encircling valley; and though the snow lay unbroken everywhere save on the road leading straight down to the "crossing" and the village beyond, he could almost vision paths

branching out from where he stood and leading down to the three inhabited dwellings on the mountain's side.

Which way should he go? Where would he first strike his trail for Christmas? Would he follow the road or one of the invisible paths? He asked this silently at first, and then aloud, as if there might be someone nearby to hear; and the answer came in the form of a little gray furry coat, a pair of alert ears and a long, bushy tail. Yes, David knew in a twinkling it was the locked-out fairy, come to keep his promise. He did not come close enough for David to see the round, roguish face under the squirrel cap; but he sat up and twitched his head in the direction of the road as if he were saying:

"Come along, David, ye couldn't be wishing for a braver day to go Christmas-hunting. Have ye fetched along your holiday fowling-piece and your ammunition? For 'tis rare sport, I promise ye, a hundred times better than hunting your furred or feathered brothers. Come along!" And away he hopped down the road toward the crossing.

David followed, as you or I would, and never stopped till the fairy led him straight to the flagman's hut and disappeared himself behind the drifts beyond the track. Without a moment's hesitation David turned the knob of the door and walked in.

The hut was a small one-room affair, bare, but clean. The walls were whitewashed and held an array of flags and lanterns, maps and time-tables. An air-tight stove glowed red at one end of the room, and beside it, with his feet on the hob, tilted back in his chair, sat the flagman puffing away at an old meerschaum pipe. He was plainly surprised to see his visitor. His feet came back to the floor with a bang, his pipe came out of his mouth, and he stared at David incredulously for a full minute. Then the

ends of his grizzled mustache bristled upward, his mouth opened and twisted the same way, while his eyes seemed to drop downward to meet it, all the time growing bluer and more friendly. David took the whole effect to be a smile of welcome and he responded with outstretched mittened hand.

"Good morning, sir. It's a -- it's a grand day!"

The knotted fist of the flagman accepted the mitten and shook it warmly.

"Veil veil it ees the knabelein from the hilltop come to see old Fritz Grossman. A child again it ees goot!"

He reached for a little stool, the only other piece of furniture in the room, and pushed it toward David.

"Come take off the greatcoat and seet down. It ees long since old Fritz has had a child to see him. In summer they come sometime from the big hotel, and from the veelage they used to many come. But now ach! Now, since the war, eet ees deefferent. Now I am the enemy the German and here every one hate the German!"

David felt about for something to say and repeated something he had once heard: 'War makes enemies."

"Ach, ja. But here there ees no war. Here we should all be Americans, and not hate peebles for the country where they were born. Gott in Himmel, can there not be one country kept clean of the hate!"

The blue eyes suddenly grew wet, and he blinked them hard and fast to keep the wetness from spilling over into disgraceful tears.

"Tsa! Old Fritz grow more old woman every day! I not mind but for the children not coming; and this time here and

no little tongues to beg tales of the Krist Kindlein and the Weihnachtsman from old Fritz."

David drew closer and laid a friendly hand on the flagman's knee.

"I'd like to hear one; I'd like bully well to hear one!"

The flagman croaked gleefully deep down in his throat.

"Zo but first I know the knabelein has a stomach got. All have."

He rose stiffly and reached back of the stove to where hung his own great bear-coat. From the pocket he brought out a large red apple and handed it to David.

"There, eat. And you shall hear the tale of anodder apple, a Chreestmas apple."

The flagman tilted back in his chair again and replaced his feet upon the hob. David sat with elbows on knees and ate slowly. There was no sound but the occasional dropping of coals in the stove and the soft, deep guttural of the flagman's voice. And here is the story as he told it to David only the broken German accent and the dropping coals are missing.

Once on a time there lived in Germany a little clock-maker by the name of Hermann Joseph. He lived in one little room with a bench for his work, and a chest for his wood, and his tools, and a cupboard for dishes, and a trundle-bed under the bench. Besides these there was a stool, and that was all excepting the clocks. There were hundreds of clocks: little and big, carved and plain, some with wooden faces and some with porcelain ones -- shelf clocks, cuckoo clocks, clocks with chimes and clocks without; and they all hung on the walls, covering them quite up. In front of his one little window there was a little shelf, and on this Hermann put all his best clocks to

show the passers-by. Often they would stop and look and someone would cry:

"See, Hermann Joseph has made a new clock. It is finer than any of the rest!"

Then if it happened that anybody was wanting a clock he would come in and buy it.

I said Hermann was a little clock-maker. That was because his back was bent and his legs were crooked, which made him very short and funny to look at. But there was no kinder face than his in all the city, and the children loved him. Whenever a toy was broken or a doll had lost an arm or a leg or an eye its careless rnutterchen would carry it straight to Hermann's little shop.

"The kindlein needs mending," she would say. "Canst thou do it now for me?"

And whatever work Hermann was doing he would always put it aside to mend the broken toy or doll, and never a pfennig would he take for the mending.

"Go spend it for sweetmeats, or, better still, put it by till Christmas-time. 'Twill get thee some happiness then, maybe," he would always say.

Now it was the custom in that long ago for those who lived in the city to bring gifts to the great cathedral on Christmas and lay them before the Holy Mother and Child. People saved all through the year that they might have something wonderful to bring on that day; and there was a saying among them that when a gift was brought that pleased the Christ-child more than any other He would reach down from Mary's arms and take it. This was but a saying, of course. The old Herr Graff, the oldest man in the city, could not remember that it had ever

really happened; and many there were who laughed at the very idea. But children often talked about it, and the poets made beautiful verses about it; and often when a rich gift was placed beside the altar the watchers would whisper among themselves, "Perhaps now we shall see the miracle."

Those who had no gifts to bring went to the cathedral just the same on Christmas Eve to see the gifts of the others and hear the carols and watch the burning of the waxen tapers. The little clock-maker was one of these. Often he was stopped and someone would ask, "How happens it that you never bring a gift?" Once the bishop himself questioned him: "Poorer than thou have brought offerings to the Child. Where is thy gift?"

Then it was that Hermann had answered:

'Wait; some day you shall see. I, too, shall bring a gift someday."

The truth of it was that the little clockmaker was so busy giving away all the year that there was never anything left at Christmastime. But he had a wonderful idea on which he was working every minute that he could spare time from his clocks. It had taken him years and years; no one knew anything about it but Trude, his neighbor's child, and Trude had grown from a baby into a little housemother, and still the gift was not finished.

It was to be a clock, the most wonderful and beautiful clock ever made; and every part of it had been fashioned with loving care. The case, the works, the weights, the hands, and the face, all had taken years of labor. He had spent years carving the case and hands, years perfecting the works; and now Hermann saw that with a little more haste and time he could finish it for the coming Christmas. He mended the children's toys as before, but he gave up making his regular clocks, so there were fewer

to sell, and often his cupboard was empty and he went supperless to bed. But that only made him a little thinner and his face a little kinder; and meantime the gift clock became more and more beautiful. It was fashioned after a rude stable with rafters, stall, and crib. The Holy Mother knelt beside the manger in which a tiny Christ-child lay, while through the open door the hours came. Three were kings and three were shepherds and three were soldiers and three were angels; and when the hours struck, the figure knelt in adoration before the sleeping Child, while the silver chimes played the "Magnificat."

"Thou seest," said the clockmaker to Trude, "it is not just on Sundays and holidays that we should remember to worship the Krist Kindlein and bring Him gifts but every day, every hour."

The days went by like clouds scudding before a winter wind and the clock was finished at last. So happy was Hermann with his work that he put the gift clock on the shelf before the little window to show the passers-by. There were crowds looking at it all day long, and many would whisper, 'Do you think this can be the gift Hermann has spoken of his offering on Christmas Eve to the Church?"

The day before Christmas came. Hermann cleaned up his little shop, wound all his clocks, brushed his clothes, and then went over the gift clock again to be sure everything was perfect.

"It will not look meanly beside the other gifts," he thought, happily. In fact he was so happy that he gave away all but one pfennig to the blind beggar who passed his door; and then, remembering that he had eaten nothing since breakfast, he spent that last pfennig for a Christmas apple to eat with a crust of bread he had. These he was putting by in the cupboard to eat

after he was dressed, when the door opened and Trude was standing there crying softly.

"Kindlein kindlein, what ails thee?" And he gathered her into his arms.

"'Tis the father. He is hurt, and all the money that was put by for the tree and sweets and toys has gone to the Herr Doctor. And now, how can I tell the children? Already they have lighted the candle at the window and are waiting for Kriss Kringle to come."

The clock-maker laughed merrily.

"Come, come, little one, all will be well. Hermann will sell a clock for thee. Some house in the city must need a clock; and in a wink we shall have money enough for the tree and the toys. Go home and sing."

He buttoned on his greatcoat and, picking out the best of the old clocks, he went out. He went first to the rich merchants, but their houses were full of clocks; then to the journeymen, but they said his clock was old-fashioned. He even stood on the corners of the streets and in the square, crying, "A clock a good clock for sale," but no one paid any attention to him. At last he gathered up his courage and went to the Herr Graff himself.

"Will your Excellency buy a clock?" he said, trembling at his own boldness. "I would not ask, but it is Christmas and I am needing to buy happiness for some children."

The Herr Graff smiled.

"Yes, I will buy a clock, but not that one. I will pay a thousand gulden for the clock thou hast had in thy window these four days past."

"But, your Excellency, that is impossible!" And poor Hermann trembled harder than ever.

"Poof! Nothing is impossible. That clock or none. Get thee home and I will send for it in half an hour, and pay thee the gulden."

The little clockmaker stumbled out.

"Anything but that; anything but that!" he kept mumbling over and over to himself on his way home. But as he passed the neighbor's house he saw the children at the window with their lighted candle and he heard Trude singing.

And so it happened that the servant who came from the Herr Graff carried the gift clock away with him; but the clockmaker would take but five of the thousand gulden in payment. And as the servant disappeared up the street the chimes commenced to ring from the great cathedral, and the streets suddenly became noisy with the many people going thither, bearing their Christmas offerings.

"I have gone empty-handed before," said the little clockmaker, sadly. "I can go empty-handed once again." And again he buttoned up his greatcoat.

As he turned to shut his cupboard door behind him his eyes fell on the Christmas apple and an odd little smile crept into the corners of his mouth and lighted his eyes.

"It is all I have -- my dinner for two days. I will carry that to the Christ-child. It is better, after all, than going empty-handed."

How full of peace and beauty was the great cathedral when Hermann entered it! There were a thousand tapers burning and everywhere the sweet scent of the Christmas greens and the laden altar before the Holy Mother and Child. There were richer gifts than had been brought for many years: marvelously wrought vessels from the greatest silversmiths; cloth of gold

and cloth of silk brought from the East by the merchants; poets had brought their songs illuminated on rolls of heavy parchment; painters had brought their pictures of saints and the Holy Family; even the King himself had brought his crown and scepter to lay before the Child. And after all these offerings came the little clock-maker, walking slowly down the long, dim aisle, holding tight to his Christmas apple.

The people saw him and a murmur rose, hummed a moment indistinctly through the church and then grew clear and articulate:

"Shame! See, he is too mean to bring his clock! He hoards it as a miser hoards his gold. See what he brings! Shame!"

The words reached Hermann and he stumbled on blindly, his head dropped forward on his breast, his hands groping the way. The distance seemed interminable. Now he knew he was past the seats; now his feet touched the first step, and there were seven to climb to the altar. Would his feet never reach the top?

"One, two, three," he counted to himself, then tripped and almost fell. "Four, five, six." He was nearly there. There was but one more.

The murmur of shame died away and in its place rose one of wonder and awe. Soon the words became intelligible:

'The miracle! It is the miracle!"

The people knelt in the big cathedral; the bishop raised his hands in prayer. And the little clockmaker, stumbling to the last step, looked up through dim eyes and saw the Child leaning toward him, far down from Mary's arms, with hands outstretched to take his gift.

That night, back in the kitchen of the lodge after supper, David told the story again to Johanna and Barney. And when he had finished he saw them looking strangely at each other.

'To think," said Johanna, thoughtfully, 'we've been living here for two years and we never got so much from the old man. And who'd have thought to find such a tale bundled up in an old bunch of heathen rags and language like him?"

'Maybe, now, he's not a heathen at all," laughed Barney.

And the others laughed with him.

V

The Pathway to Uncle Joab and a New Santa Claus

No fresh snow fell through the night, and when David slipped his feet into the ski straps at the lodge door next morning he was rejoiced to find that the snow had packed and crusted a little since the day before, which meant better going. Again he made for the crest of the hill beyond the first clump of evergreens and again he stood at the pinnacle of the ways and wondered which he would take.

"I might count," he laughed aloud – "I might count them out." And with that he fell into the school-boy doggerel, nearly as old as boyhood itself: "Eeny meeny miny mo. Catch a tiger by the --"

He came to a sudden stop. In the direction of the lumber-camp, where the evergreens marked the beginning of the road, he had caught a glimpse of a gray squirrel. Was it a real squirrel this time, or was it the locked-out fairy again? There was not a minute to be lost. He must find out.

Over the unbroken snow he slid, balancing himself carefully when he came to the hummocks made by the wind or fallen trees, his eyes coming back constantly to the little gray figure before him. It was sitting erect now, under a green bough, apparently busy investigating the contents of a pine cone. But just as David had made up his mind that this time it was a real squirrel, up went the furry paw to an ear in unmistakable salute, just as the locked-out fairy had done when he hopped from the window-ledge of the lodge. Then, with

ears set back and tail out straight behind, the squirrel flew down the hill. Away went David after him, the tassel of his toboggan-cap out as straight as the squirrel's tail.

Never was there such a race. They dodged trees and fallen branches; they leaped drifts; they spun like tops around the curves. Sometimes David was so close upon the fairy's heels that he could almost have touched him with the end of his steering-cane, but the next moment he generally lost his balance and slipped a ski, and head over heels he would go in the crusty snow. When he righted himself the fairy was always yards ahead, sitting with his shoulders all hunched up as if he were laughing silently at David's tumble. So exciting was the whole race that David entirely forgot his destination until he suddenly found himself almost bumping a corner of one of the lumber cabins, and the fairy nowhere in sight.

He stopped a minute for breath and to wonder what he would do, when he heard the soft, silvery notes of a violin. The music was coming from inside that very cabin, and a voice was humming softly as well. David moved round to one of the windows, hoping he might be tall enough to look in, but the snow had drifted away from that side and he missed the ledge by several inches. It occurred to him, however, that if the snow had drifted from this end it had probably drifted toward the other. He would try it, at any rate. Round the cabin he went, and, sure enough, there the snow had piled up half-way to the window and David found he could look in comfortably.

There was a great fire blazing inside, and by it sat an old negro with the whitest hair and beard David had ever seen. A fiddle was tucked under his chin and slowly and lovingly he was bowing the melody from it, while one foot patted the time on the floor and a plaintive, mellow voice put words to the music. David listened for the words and caught them:

'Yeah come-a-No-ah a-stumblin' tru de dark,
Wif hammah an' wif nails-to-a-build hisself an ark.
An'-a-yeah come de an'rnals-two-a-by two,
De Yippo-ma-pot'mus an' de kick-kangaroo."

The bowing suddenly stopped and David was conscious of a pair of very white eyeballs looking at him through the glass. For the space of a breath or more David was not at all sure that he wanted to get any nearer that strange, bent old figure. He was almost sure that he did not want to go inside. Not that he was afraid. Oh no, indeed! He was not in the least bit afraid; there was nothing to be afraid of. Even Johanna had not said anything harmful about the old cook at the lumber-camp. Nevertheless, there was something mysterious, something not altogether inviting about that inky-black face with the white hair and rolling eyeballs.

David was speedily withdrawing himself, having decided that there was great virtue in distance, when he heard the creak of the cabin door. In a trice the old negro, fiddle in hand, appeared around the corner.

"Wha you goin', honey?" There was unmistakable regret over David's retreating figure.

"Why why, I'm just going back where I came from."

"Wha you come from?"

David pointed upward and the old man nodded comprehendingly.

"'Pears to me dat am a long way fer a li'l boy to come an' den turn 'bout an' go right home. Come in, honey, an' Uncle Joab'll play you somethin' lively on de ole fiddle."

David hesitated, but only for an instant. There was something too lonely and appealing about the man to be denied. David was still not at all sure that he wanted to go, even while he was following the lumber cook round to the door. It was surprisingly cozy and cheerful inside, perhaps because of the open fire, the strips of pine cones, husked corn, and bunches of colored berries that decorated the walls and rafters. Uncle Joab caught David's wondering, curious gaze, and he chuckled.

"Yas, dat's popcorn, honey. An' I reckon Uncle Joab'll have some a-poppin' for you over dese yeah coals in a jiffy."

He mounted stiffly the hewn, polished stump that did service for a stool and pulled down two of the ears. From the corner of the fireplace he brought a corn-popper and, sitting down, he commenced to shell the corn by rubbing the ears together. David drew up a chair nearby and watched him with growing interest. When the corn was shelled Uncle Joab raked away the unburned wood from the fire, leaving a bed of the red coals. Over this he held the corn, shaking the popper gently from side to side. In less time than it takes for the telling sounded the snap-snap-snap of the bursting kernels, and in a moment more Uncle Joab had turned the snowy contents into an earthen bowl and laid it on David's knee with a small dish of salt and the invitation to "Go ahead." Then he took up his fiddle again and played the promised music.

It was a jig, such a rollicking, care-free jig that before it was finished David found himself wondering how in the world he ever hesitated about coming in. Why, here was nothing but another boy like himself, a boy grown old before he had grown up.

"Like dat corn, honey? Wall, you come along yeah 'round Chris'mus an' Uncle Joab'll make you some m'lasses balls."

A sigh escaped with the promise.

"Lordy Chris'mus yeah! Doan't seem like I done hab any Chris'mus sence I left ole Virginy. Seems like it done froze stiff 'fo' ever it got to dese yeah parts."

David laughed at the old man's humor. It had seemed just that way to him a few days ago.

'"Couldn't we thaw it out?" he asked.

'Twould take a monstrous lot o' warm feelin's, honey, an' kind folks, I reckon. An' you'd not find 'em a-hangin' 'round loose yeah in de wintah. Why, dere's no more 'n a han'ful of us, all measured an' mixted; an' as fur as I know dere's not one a-speakin' to another."

David shook his head solemnly. 'That's not much like Christmas, is it, Uncle Joab? Not much "goodwill" when you don't know your neighbors."

The old man grunted, then he chuckled.

"Pears to me it's de critters dat get on yeah more folksy den de real folks an' dat put me in mind of a story my mammy used to tell me when I was your size."

David beamed.

"Will you tell it, Uncle Joab?"

"Co'se I'll tell it, honey." And putting the fiddle down beside his chair he began:

"I reckon you think dat de jolly ole saint wif de red nose an' de dimple somewhas 'twixt his mouf an' his ears only 'members de chillun at Chris'mus. An' dat's not de trouf. Dere was one Chris'mus long time ago, after Pharoe's daughter found Moses

in de bull-grass an' 'fo' Christoper Columbus went a-sailin' 'round to find dis yeah country, dat ole man Santy gib a Chris'mus to de critters. An' dis was de way of it.

"In dose days dere warn't de chilluns dere is now. Dey warn't so plentiful an' dey warn't so perticular; an' each one warn't lookin' fer a whole shed full o' toys jest fer hisself. No, sir, honey! He was bustin' wif tickle if he got one gif an' some barley sugar. An' what's more, dey wasn't so pernicity 'bout what dey got. De dolls didn't have to walk an' talk an' act like real folks an' de trains didn't have to go by demselves. An' everything bein' so comf'able an' easy, ole Santy could tote de pack o' toys 'round hisself on his back an' be home a good two hour 'fo' daylight, wif nothin' to do de rest o' de day but set 'round an' think.

'Wall, in dose days, honey, de folks doan't pester de critters wif workin' dem all de time. No, sir! Dey work dem when dey need dem, an' de balance o' de time de critters trope 'round free an' easy-like. Folks wasn't cotchin' de cur'ous ones to put in de menageries an' de circuses, nor de furry ones to trim up de ladies wif. Times was pleasant an' comf'able fer every one.

"Now it transmigrate one day when ole Santy was a-settin' an' rumminatin' dat he fotch up his thoughts on de critters, an' he says to hisself, says he:

"'Pears like dey has a right to Chris'mus same as de folks. Dey minds dere bus'ness, an' dey works an' dey plays de same, an' dey had dere share in dat fust Chris'mus when de li'l' Lordie was born same as de folks. Didn't de donkey carry Mary to Beflehem? Didn't de mully-cow gib her manger for de li'l' Lordie to sleep in? Didn't de cock crow de news to St. Stephen? An' how do yer reckon de Wise Men could ha' toted dere presents 'cross de sand if it hadn't been fer dem cam'ls?'

"Yas, sir, honey! Ole Santy was right. De critters had as much right to Chris'mus as de folks, an' ole Santy poun' his knee an' swear he gwine to gib dem one.

"So de ole saint he begun fer to study an' to study what he gwine to do fer de critters. He can't come down dere chimbleys 'ca'se dey 'ain't got no houses; an' he can't fill dere stockin's 'ca'se dey doan't wear none; an' he can't fotch dem barley candy 'ca'se dey doan't eat it. Wall, he set dere an' study twell his brain 'mos' bustin' an' bime-by he fotch up wif an idea.

"I know what I'll do,' says ole Santy, says he. 'Dem critters is sure to be like folks; dere's certain to be a lot dat ain't satisfied wif dere pussonalities. Now I'm gwine to trim up a Chris'mus tree wif a lot o' odd tails, an' ears, an' wings, an' legs, an' sech-like, an' any o' de critters dat ain't satisfied can choose jes' what dey want. Dat's what I'm gwine to do,' says ole Santy.

"Wall, thinkin' was doin'. An' by de time Chris'mus come along dat ole saint had de mos' cur'os, hetromologous collection o' an'mal parts you ever done hear tell about. He sent word by de birds all over de world fer de critters to come to a Chris'mus celebration at de fust fir-tree dis side o' de North Pole. 'Fo' dey git dere ole Santy had it all trimmed up wif his presents; an' when de critters trope up dey sure was bustin' wif s'prize when dey see all de tails an' wings an' legs hangin' dere.

An' de an'mals! Bless your heart, honey, you never see such a camp-meetin'! Dere was elephants an' tigers an' lions an' yippopot'-musses an' rabbits an' 'possums an' mouses every livin' kind. An' all de birds dat clip de air an' all de fish dat swum de sea. Dey all come lopin' up wif dere purtiest manners on; an' dey scrape an' dey bow an' ax after ole Missus Santy an' de chilluns. When dey'd axed an' scraped all 'round, ole Santy says, says he:

'Now any o' you-all critters dat want fer to change yer pussonalities can jes' step right up an' choose somethin' new,' says he.

"Everybody was mighty bashful at fust. Dey all tried to hide behind dere neighbors an' look like dey was puffectly satisfied wif dere looks an' dere habits. But bime-by a squeaky li'l' voice calls out:

"'If you please, Ole Man Santy, I'd like a pair o' dem li'l' brown wings, an' thank you mighty much.'

"Santy look down an' see it was one o' de li'l' mouses speakin'; an' he reach up an' take from de tree a cunnin' pair o' li'l' wings an' fastened dem on tight. An' de next minute dat sassy li'l' mouse went flippin' an' floppin' into de air same as if he'd been born wif wings. An' ever since, honey, he an' his chilluns have been flyin' 'stead o' creepin'."

"Did he turn into a bat, Uncle Joab?" David asked.

"Sure. What else you 'spec' he could turn into? Wall, de nex' to walk up was Bre'r Rabbit. He had a lot to say 'bout his ears bein' so short he couldn't hear 'nough, an' his tail bein' so long he couldn't fetch up on it com'fably in de brier patch. He'd be powerful pleased if Santy 'd gib him bigger ears an' take away his tail. Dis made de ole saint chuckle; an' he fotch down de biggest pair he can find an' put dem on, an' den he twist off de rabbit's long, bushy tail. When de other critters see what transmigrate dey like to bu'st dere sides wif laughin'; an' dis scare Bre'r Rabbit so dat he lay back his ears so he can't hear so well, an' he lope off to hide his confusi'n in de brier patch. An' dere you'll find him hidin' to dis yeah day, honey."

David laughed.

"And were there any more who weren't satisfied?"

"Didn't I tell you de critters were like folks? Bre'r Rabbit hadn't more 'n cleared de Chris'mus tree when de squirrel sings out:

"'If you please, Mr. Santy, I'd like Brudder Rabbit's tail. I'd like Brudder Rabbit's tail.'

"'Twon't fit you," says de beaver. It's three sizes too big.'

"'No, it ain't! No, it ain't! No, it ain't!' An' de squirrel carry on so scan'lously dat ole Santy 'bliged to gib him de tail to keep him quiet. But, bless your heart, honey, you know as well as I do dat dat tail am no fit for dat squirrel!

"By dis time de critters was nigh over dere bashfulness, an' dey was clamorin' for what dey wanted. De leopard say his coat too yaller, an' he'd like some nice, stylish black spots to tone it down. Den de zebra say stripes was more stylish dis year den spots, an' he'd 'low he'd like stripes. De elephant say his feet too big to pick up things handy, an' he'd like somethin' extra to pick up things wif.

"Dis set de rest o' de critters to 'sputin' whar de elephant have room on his pussonality fer anythin' extra; an' while dey 'sputin' ole Santy sit still an' study. Bime-by he says, says he:

"'De only spare room am on de end o' your nose. If you want to have it dere, say so!'

"De elephant he say so. So Santy take one o' dese yeah suckers, left over from a debilfish, an' he stick it squar' in de middle o' de elephant's nose. He stick it so hard, an' he stick it so fast, dat it hasn't come loose dese thousand o' years.

'Wall, dat certainly was a busy Chris'mus fer de ole saint. He was fixin' tails an' legs an' ears an' wings 'most all day. De beaver he gets de sulks 'ca'se de squirrel's got Bre'r Rabbit's tail an' he want it. De rest o' de critters try to coax him to take

somethin' else, but 'pears like he crazy fer somethin' behind. He took to moanin' an' wailin' 'ca'se he can't get what he wants twell bime-by he nat'rally gets ole Santy plumb wore out.

"Look yeah," says ole Santy, says he. "You's so sot on havin' somethin' behind, 'pears like I'd hab to gib you somethin' diff' rent an' distinguishin'.' An' wif dat de ole saint claps on him one o' dem flappers dat he'd made fer de li'l' seals to walk on. An' it's been hangin' to de back o' de beaver ever since.

"At las' all de critters were satisfied 'ceptin' de dog an' de horse an' de reindeer.

"What you want?" says ole Santy to de dog.

"I want faithfulness,' says de dog; an' Santy gib it to him.

"What you want?" he says to de horse.

"'I want wisdom,' says de horse; an' Santy whisper it into his ear.

"'Now what you want?' he says last of all to de reindeer.

'"I want to be your servant an' lib always wif you,' says de reindeer. An' from dat minute to dis de reindeer an' his chilluns have been to tin' fer ole Santy.

"An' you listen yeah, honey. If you borrow Bre'r Rabbit's ears to hear wif dis Chris'mus p'raps you'll cotch de tromp o' de reindeer's hoofs an' de jingle o' his bells as he totes ole Santy through de night."

David laughed happily.

"That's a bully story, Uncle Joab, just a bully one!"

The old man chuckled appreciatively.

"Mebbe it's good enough to fotch a li'l' boy back some other day to see dis ole friend."

Johanna and Barney had to hear the story over twice before David went to bed that night. They seemed to like it as much as David had liked it.

"It must get pretty lonesome for the poor man, stormy days and long winter nights with no company but that old fiddle," mused Johanna at last.

"Faith, I wouldn't be minding a bit o' that same company, myself, some night," laughed Barney. 'Tis a sorry time since I've heard any good fiddling."

But David did not say anything. He was looking deep into the fire and thinking very hard.

VI

The Locked-Out Fairy Again Leads the Way and David Hears of a Christmas Promise

David was already beginning to feel very rich in Christmas as he climbed to the crest of the hill the next morning. Yes, the locked-out fairy was right. Real Christmas lay in the hearts and memories of people, and he was sure he was storing up some in his own to last for always.

It was still four days before Christmas, yet he felt all the warm glow of excitement, all the eagerness, all the gladness, that usually attended the very day itself. He was beginning to think that instead of one Christmas he was finding a whole week of it, and for a little boy who had had loneliness fastened to his heels like a shadow for so long the feeling was very wonderful. Not that he did not miss father and mother just the same, but they no longer seemed so far away. There were minutes when he could think them quite close, when they seemed to have a share in all he was doing and thinking, and when that happens with any one we love loneliness vanishes like a shadow at midday.

There were but two paths left for him that morning to choose between -- the path leading to the trapper's and the one to the "lunger's." It was not a particularly cheery day. The sky was a leaden gray -- a hue forecasting snow before day's end. The wind was biting and raw, and had there not been a quest afoot David would have been glad to stay near home and share Barney's cheerful company. As it was, he had about made up

his mind that he should choose the trapper. He knew as little about him as he had known of the others, and he pictured a big, gruff, hairy man something like his old Grimm illustration of Bluebeard. But for all that, he seemed more alluring on such a day than a "lunger."

David very much hoped that the locked-out fairy would be there to take him the way he had chosen to go. He wanted not only the guidance of the fairy, but he wished to see him close again and talk with him. He was looking about for signs when his eyes swept the snow at his feet and there he found the trail laid for him. As far as eye could reach there were the tiny sharp prints of a squirrel's foot, and they led, not down the hillside to the trapper's hut, but, straight as a stone drops, to the foot-hill beyond, where the "lunger's" cottage stood.

David heaved a sigh of disappointment. He would so much rather have gone the other way; but of what use is a fairy counselor and guide if one does not follow his trail? So with something very near to a flagging courage David pushed his way slowly after the tiny footprints.

He missed the exhilaration of the sunshine and air and excitement of the previous days. Somehow he felt this time was going to be a failure and he shrank from facing it; moreover, he thought of what he might have to tell Johanna and Barney afterward, around the fire. A moment before he had felt so rich in the feeling of Christmas. And now, was he going to find an unpleasant memory to take away from the good ones?

There was no sign of life about the little cottage on the foot-hill. The sleeping-porch was deserted, the windows were heavily curtained, the snow was piled up high and unbroken about the door; even the roadway beyond, which led down the other side to the village, was smooth and crusted, showing that

no one had come or gone from the house since the last fall of snow.

"It looks awfully gloomy and deserted," thought David. 'The 'lunger' must have gone away or died!"

The last was a dreadfully dreary thought, and it almost turned David's feet on the very threshold, in spite of the fairy's trail. But the memory of the day before held him back. How nearly he had come to losing a bit of Christmas just because an old white-haired negro had looked at him suddenly through a window! He would mark himself as a quitter and a "'fraid- cat" for all time if he ever let such a thing happen again. And what would the boys on the block think of him?

With heroic boldness David pushed his skis up to the baseboard of the door and hammered hard on the brass knocker. Once, twice, three times he knocked. Then he heard soft feet inside and the turning of the key in the lock. In another minute the door opened, letting in a generous fall of snow and disclosing a tall, oldish woman in black, with very black hair and big, sorrowful black eyes.

''Madre de Dios!" she exclaimed in a soft voice full of surprised wonder. "A nino here, in this freeze country!"

"If you please," began David, politely, 'I came -- I came "

But he did not finish. For the life of him he could not have told just why he had come.

"Entre, come!" And the woman drew him in and closed the door behind him. "A boy! It may be that it will put again the heart in Alfredo to see a boy. Come, chico!"

She opened another door at the end of a hall and led him into a bare, cold, cheerless room. Half a dozen black bentwood chairs stood with backs against the walls; the two rockers of the

same faced each other at opposite sides of the fireplace; and between them stretched a cot covered with heavy blankets. A half-hearted fire burned on the hearth, and watching it listlessly from the cot lay a boy about twice his age, David thought.

"See, Alfredo! See chicito mio, who come here," the woman called. And the sick youth turned his head slowly to look at them.

David saw a thin, colorless face with great, black eyes. They had the same look that was in the woman's eyes, only the woman did not look sick, only sad. As the boy saw David he smiled in a pleased, surprised way, and held out a thin, white hand in welcome. But the hand was so thin David was almost ashamed to put out his own broad, brown little fist to take it. He compromised by leaving on his mitten and he shook it very gently.

"Ah, it is good," said the boy, simply. "I am glad to see you."

"Thank you," David beamed. He was glad he had come. For here there were things that he could do, and first of all he'd tackle the fire.

"It's this way," he explained as he slipped out of his outside things. "I'm spending the winter up on the hill, in the hotel lodge. It's been getting sort of lonesome there lately since winter set in, so I thought – I -- it seemed sort of nice to come around and look up some of the neighbors." David finished out of breath.

Alfredo and his mother exchanged glances.

"That is good," said the boy at last. "You are the first one, and we, too, have been what you call 'lonesome.'

"I'm awfully sorry." And this time David held out the unmittened fist. "Say, do you mind if I build up that fire a little? It looks sort of sick."

"Ah!" The woman held up protesting hands. "Alfredo is too sick but to lie still. And I -- what do I know about building fires in open places with wood? It is only the carbon I know, and the shut stove. And when our servant leave us three four day ago and no one ever comes near to us I think then that we die of the cold before long time."

Tears of utter despair showed in the woman's eyes; and David found his own growing sympathetically moist.

"Oh, no! Barney wouldn't let that happen -- not to anyone."

It really was dreadful to find a sick boy and a woman alone strangers in this country with the cold and the loneliness to fight.

"Now you tell me where the wood is, and I'll have a cracker-jack fire in a minute. Barney's showed me how. I can make 'em burn even when the wood's damp." David did not finish without a tinge of pride in his tone.

He made several trips to the little back room beyond the kitchen which served as wood-shed, and in a few minutes he had a generous stack of logs and kindlings beside the hearth and a roaring fire blazing up the big chimney. The glow and warmth lit up Alfredo's cheeks and kindled a new life in the woman's eyes. Such a little thing it takes sometimes to put the hearts back in people.

"Now, if you want me to, I'll just fill up the kitchen stove and the one in the hall. It's really too cold here for any one," he ended, apologetically.

The woman accepted his offer, mutely grateful; and when both stoves had finally responded to his coaxings and were cheerfully crackling and sending out the much-needed heat, David came back to the open fire and drew up one of the rockers.

"It is a good niño, eh, Alfredito?" said the woman, softly.

David wriggled uncomfortably.

"Say I'll tell you about the flagman, and Uncle Joab at the lumber-camp. Want me to?"

The offer was made as a cloak to his embarrassment; but the next moment, as he launched into his narrative of the two previous days, he had forgotten everything but the tales he had to tell and the interest of his listeners.

When he had finished, David was surprised to see the change in the faces of the two. For the first time they seemed really alive and warm, inside and out. Moreover, they looked happy, strangely happy.

"We had almost forgot, chico mio," the mother said, stroking one of the thin, white hands, "that comes now the Natividad. Ah, who would think to find it here in this freeze country!"

"We are South-Americans," the boy explained. "And down there it is summer now, with the oranges ripe, and the piña growing and the air full of the sweetness from the coffee-fields in bloom and the jasmine and mariposa. We did not know such cold could be or so much snow. Eh, madre?" And the boy smiled wanly.

"But how did you come way up here from your country? Was it the --" David left the question unfinished.

The boy nodded.

"I came first, to be in one of your fine universities. Many South-Americans come here for their education. But before many months I take the cough, and it is then no use to go back to our country. We blow out there like a candle in the wind."

The mother went on.

"But the great American doctor say here there is a chance in the mountains, if he can stand the winter. And oh, at first he grow much better! We see the good health coming. But now, the great cold, the heart-hunger, the alone being, it seem to take his strength. I fear --"

"Hush, madre! This is not good cheer for a guest."

David felt his cheeks burn with the sudden tenderness in the boy's look.

"Come, madre," he went on, "have we not also a tale of Christmas, of the Natividad, to give away?"

"There is that one I have told you a thousand times the one my mother told me when I was a niña, home in Spain. The tale of the Tres Keys and the Christmas promise."

The boy sighed happily.

"There is no better tale in all Spain. Tell it, madre, to our friend here."

And so this was how the third bit of Christmas came to David, by way of a locked-out fairy, a rekindled fire, and a stranger from the far South.

When the Christ-child was born in Bethlehem of Judea, long years ago, three kings rode out of the East on their camels, bearing gifts to Him. They followed the star until at last they came to the manger where He lay, a little, newborn baby. Kneeling down, they put their gifts beside him: gold,

frankincense, and myrrh; they kissed the hem of the little white mantle that He wore, and blessed Him. Then the kings rode away to the East again, but before ever they went they whispered a promise to the Christ-child.

And the promise? You shall hear it as the kings gave it to the Christ-child, long years ago.

"As long as there be children on the earth, on every Christmas Eve we three kings shall ride on camels, even as we rode to Thee this night; and even as we bore Thee gifts so shall we bear gifts to every child in memory of Thee thou holy Babe of Bethlehem!"

In Spain they have remembered what the Christmas kings promised, and when Christmas Eve comes each child puts his sapatico -- his little shoe -- between the gratings of the window that they may know a child is in that house and leave a gift.

Often the shoe is filled with grass for the camels, and a plate of dates and figs is left beside it, for the children know the kings have far to go and may be hungry.

At day's end bands of children march out of the city gates, going to meet the kings. But it always grows dark before they come. The children are afraid upon the lonely road and hurry back to their homes, where the good madres hear them say one prayer to the Nene Jesu, as they call the Christ-child, and then put them to bed to dream of the Christmas kings.

Long, long ago there lived in Spain, in the crowded part of a great city, an old woman called Dona Josefa. The street in which she lived was little and narrow, so narrow that if you leaned out of the window of Dona Josefa's house you could touch with your finger-tips the house across the way, and when you looked above your head the sky seemed but a string of

blue, tying the houses all together. The sun never found its way into this little street.

The people who lived here were very poor, as you may guess; Dona Josefa was poor, likewise. But in one thing she was very rich -- she knew more stories than there were feast-days in the year, and that is a great many. Whenever there came a moment free from work, when Dona Josefa had no water to fetch from the public well, nor gold to stitch upon the altar cloth for the Church of Santa Maria del Rosario, then she would run out of her house into the street and call:

"Niños, niños, come quickly! Here is a story waiting for you."

And the children would come flying like the gray pal mas when corn is thrown for them in the Plaza. Ah, how many children there were in that little street! There were Jose and Miguel, and the niños of Enrique, the cobbler, Alfredito and Juana and Esperanza; and the little twin sisters of Pancho, the peddler; and Angela, Maria Teresa, Pedro, Edita, and many more. Last of all there were Manuel and Rosita. They had no father, and their mother was a lavandera who stood all day on the banks of the river outside the city, washing clothes.

When Dona Josefa had called the children from all the doorways and the dark corners she would sit down in the middle of the street and gather them about her. This was safe because the street was far too narrow to allow a horse or wagon to pass through. Sometimes a donkey would slowly pick its way along, or a stupid goat come searching for things to eat, but that was all.

It happened on the day before Christmas that Dona Josefa had finished her work and sat, as usual, with the children about her.

'Today you shall have a Christmas story," she said, and then she told them of the three kings and the promise they had made the Christ-child.

"And is it so do the kings bring presents to the children now?" Miguel asked.

Dona Josefa nodded her head.

"Yes."

"Then why have they never left us one? The three kings never pass this street on Christmas Eve. Why is it, dona?"

"Perhaps it is because we have no shoes to hold their gifts," said Angela.

And this is true. The poor children of Spain go barefooted, and often never have a pair of shoes till they grow up.

Manuel had listened silently to the others, but now he pulled the sleeve of Dona Josefa's gown with coaxing fingers:

"I know why it is the kings bring no gifts to us. See, the street; it is too small; their camels could not pass between the door-steps here. The kings must ride where the streets are broad and smooth and clean, where their long mantles will not be soiled and torn and the camels will not stumble. It is the children in the great streets, the children of the rich, who find presents in their sapaticos on Christmas morning. Is it not so, Dona Josefa?"

And Miguel cried, "Does Manuel speak true is it only the children of the rich?"

"Ah, chicito mio, it should not be so! When the promise was given to the Nene Jesu there in Bethlehem they said, 'to every child.' Yes, every little child."

"But it is not strange they should forget us here," Manuel insisted. "The little street is hidden in the shadow of the great ones."

Then Rosita spoke, clasping her hands together with great eagerness:

"I know; it is because we have no shoes! That is why they never stop. Perhaps Enrique would lend us the shoes he is mending, just for one night. If we had shoes the kings would surely see that there are little children in the street, and leave a gift for each of us. Come, let us ask Enrique!"

"Madre de Dios, it is a blessed thought!" cried all. And like the flock of gray palomas they swept down the street to the farthest end, where Enrique hammered and stitched away all day on the shoes of the rich children.

Manuel stayed behind with Dona Josefa. When the last pair of little brown feet had disappeared inside the sapateria he said, softly:

"If someone could go out and meet the kings to tell them of this little street, and how the niños here have never had a Christmas gift, do you think they might ride hither tonight?"

Dona Josefa shook her head doubtfully.

"If that were possible. But never have I heard of anyone who met the kings on Christmas Eve."

All day in the city people hurried to and fro. In the great streets flags were waving from the housetops, and wreaths of laurel, or garlands of heliotrope and mariposa, hung above the open doorways and in the windows. Sweetmeat-sellers were crying their wares; and the Keeper-of-the-City lighted flaming torches to hang upon the gates and city walls. Everywhere was merrymaking and gladness, for not only was this Christmas

Eve, but the King of Spain was coming to keep his holiday within the city. Some whispered that he was riding from the North, and with him rode his cousins, the kings of France and Lombardy, and with them were a great following of nobles, knights, and minstrels. Others said the kings rode all alone -- it was their wish.

As the sun was turning the cathedral spires to shafts of gold, bands of children, hand in hand, marched out of the city. They took the road that led toward the setting sun, thinking it was the East, and said among themselves, "See, yonder is the way the kings will ride."

"I have brought a basket of figs," cried one.

"I have dates in a new panuela," cried another.

"And I," cried a third, "I have brought a sack of sweet limes, they are so cooling."

Thus each in turn showed some small gift that he was bringing for the kings. And while they chatted together one child began to sing the sweet Nativity Hymn. In a moment others joined until the still night air rang with their happy voices.

"Unto us a Child is born,
    Unto us a gift is given.
Hail with holiness the morn,
    Kneel before the Prince of Heaven.
Blessed be this day of birth,
God hath given His Son to earth.
    Jesu, Jesu, Nene Jesu,
        Hallelujah!"

The Locked-Out Fairy Again Leads the Way and David Hears of a Christmas Promise

Behind the little hills the sun went down, leaving a million sparks of light upon the road.

"Yonder come the kings!" the children cried. "See the splendor of their shining crowns and how the jewels sparkle on their mantles! They may be angry if they find us out so late; come, let us run home before they see us."

The children turned. Back to the city gates they ran, back to their homes, to the good madres watching for them and their own white beds ready for them.

But one they left behind them on the road: a little, bare-limbed boy whose name was Manuel. He watched until the children had disappeared within the gates, and then he turned again toward the setting sun.

"I have no gift for the kings," he thought, "but there is fresh green grass beside the way that I can gather for the camels."

He stopped, pulled his hands full, and stuffed it in the front of the little blue vestido that he wore. He followed the road for a long way until heavy sleep came to his eyes.

"How still it is upon the road! God has blown out His light and soon it will be dark. I wish I were with the others, safe within the city; for the dark is full of fearsome things when one is all alone. . . . Mamita will be coming home soon and bringing supper for Rosita and me. Perhaps tonight there will be an almond dulce or pan de gloria perhaps. ... I wonder will Rosita not forget the little prayer I told her to be always saying. My feet hurt with the many stones; the night wind blows cold; I am weary and my feet stumble with me. . . . Oh, Nene Jesu, listen! I also make the prayer: 'Send the three kings before Manuel is too weary and afraid!'"

A few more steps he took upon the road, and then, as a reed is blown down by the wind, Manuel swayed, unknowingly for a moment, and slowly sank upon the ground, fast asleep.

How long he slept I cannot tell you; but a hand on his shoulder wakened him. Quickly he opened his eyes, wondering, and saw yes, he saw the three kings! Tall and splendid they looked in the starlight, their mantles shimmering with myriad gems. One stood above Manuel, asking what he did upon the road at that late hour.

Manuel rose to his feet, thrusting his hand inside the shirt for the grass he had gathered. 'It is for the camels, señor; I have no other gift. But you -- you ride horses this Christmas Eve!"

"Yes, we ride horses. What is that to you?"

"Pardon, señores, nothing. The three kings can ride horses if they wish; only we were told you rode on camels from the East."

"What does the child want?" The voice was kind, but it sounded impatient, as though the one who spoke had work waiting to be done and was anxious to be about it.

Manuel heard and felt all this wondering. "What if there is not time for them to come, or gifts enough!" He laid an eager, pleading hand on one king's mantle.

"I can hold the horses if you will come this once. It is a little street and hard to find, señores; I thought perhaps you would leave a present just one little present for the children there. You told the Christ-child you would give to every child. Don't you remember? There are many of us who have never had a gift a Christmas gift."

"Do you know who we are?"

Manuel answered, joyfully: "Oh yes, Excellencias, you are the Three Christmas Kings, riding from Bethlehem. Will you come with me?"

The kings spoke with one accord, "Verily, we will."

One lifted Manuel on his horse; and silently they rode into the city. The Keeper slumbered at the gates; the streets were empty. On, past the houses that were garlanded they went unseen; and on through the great streets until they came to the little street at last. The kings dismounted. They gave their bridles into Manuel's hand, and then, gathering up their precious mantles of silk and rich brocade, they passed down the little street. With eyes that scarce believed what they saw, Manuel watched them go from house to house, saw them stop and feel for the shoes between the gratings, the shoes loaned by Enrique, the cobbler, and saw them fill each one with shining gold pieces.

In the morning Manuel told the story to the children as they went to spend one golden doblon for toys and candy and sugared cakes. And a gift they brought for Dona Josefa, too; a little figure of the Holy Mother with the Christ-child in her arms.

And so the promise made in Bethlehem was made again, and to a little child; and it was kept. For many, many years, long after Manuel was grown and had niños of his own, the kings remembered the little street, and brought their gifts there every Christmas Eve.

There was a long silence after David had finished retelling the story to Barney and Johanna that night. The wind was howling outside and beating the snow in hard cakes against the windows.

"Sure, it's up to someone to keep heart in those two till spring comes," Johanna said at last. "Think o' coming up here from one o' them sizzling-hot places. Holy St. Patrick!"

"Aye, and a sick boy and a woman the frail kind, I'm thinking, not used to lifting her hand to anything heavy."

Barney got up and peered out.

"Well, if the snow's not over our heads the morrow I can beat my way there and keep their fires going for another day."

David got up and joined Barney, sliding a grateful hand through his.

"That would be bully! You know his mother said if they could only keep the big fire going on the open porch and get him out there again she was sure he'd begin to get better. It's been the cold and the staying indoors that has put him back. Do you think, Barney, do you think -- You know I could take my turn at it."

"Sure and ye can, laddy. Wait till the morrow and we'll see what we can do -- the two of us."

VII

The Trapper's Tale of the First Birthday

The snow was still falling steadily next morning and David came down to breakfast with an anxious face.

"Now don't be worrying, laddy," was Barney's reassuring greeting. "It takes a powerful lot o' snow to keep a man housed on these hills when he has something fetching him out."

And Johanna, coming in with her hands full of steaming griddle-cakes, brought more encouragement.

"Sure, it's a storm, but not too fierce for a strong man like Barney to brave for them that's in trouble. And I've a can of good soup jelly and a fresh-baked loaf of bread and some eggs for ye to fetch with ye."

"Oh!" David dug his two hands down deep in his pockets and smiled ecstatically. "I suppose it's too bad going for me." He appealed to Barney.

"Aye, it is that! Wait till afternoon. The storm may break by then and ye could get out for a bit. But there's too much weather afoot for a little lad just now."

So David watched Barney make ready alone. Johanna's things were bundled and strapped on his back that his two arms might be free. Then he made fast his snow-shoes; it was no day for skis and pulling his fur parka down to cover all but his eyes he started off. He looked like a man of the northland. David watched him out of sight, and then he and Johanna fell to the making of a mammoth Christmas cake. There were nuts to be

cracked and fruits to be chopped; all good boy work, as Johanna said, and he was glad to be busy.

At noon Barney returned with great news. He had left the South-Americans comfortable and happy. Alfredo was back on his open porch with a monstrous fire roaring up the outside chimney and wood enough stacked within their reach for them to keep it going for a week. The mother had wept over Johanna's gifts. They had lived for days on canned things and stale bread; and she had blessed them all in what Barney had termed "Spanish lingo."

Sure, ye needn't be fearing about them longer, laddy; they've the hearts back in them again, and, what's more, they'll stay there, I'm thinking."

As Barney had prophesied, the snow stopped at noon; and after dinner David set forth on his last quest. Warnings from Johanna and Barney followed him out of the lodge -- not to be going far and to mind well his trail. All of which he promised. It was not so very far to the trapper's and the trail was as plain as the hillside itself.

There was no sign of the locked-out fairy, and David expected none. There was but one path left to take. Why should anyone come to show him the way? Although the trail lay down the hill David's going was very slow. He sank deep at every step and where the drifts were high he had to make long detours, which nearly doubled the distance. When he reached the hut at last he met the trapper at his very door-sill. The pack on his back looked full, and David guessed he had just been down to the village for supplies. He eyed David with a grave concern through the opening in his parka; and David wondered whether the rest of the face would be grave, or kind, or forbidding.

"Nicholas Bassaraba has few visitors, but you are welcome."

The voice was gruff but not unkindly, and the trapper pushed open the door of his hut and motioned David inside. They stood stamping the snow from their boots; and then the trapper lifted his hood and David saw that he was not at all like the Grimm picture of Bluebeard. He was dark and swarthy-skinned, to be sure, but he wore no beard only a small mustache and his eyebrows were not heavy and sinister-looking and his mouth was almost friendly. If the line of gravity should break into a smile David felt sure it would be a very friendly smile. The trapper proceeded to remove the rest of his outer garments and David did the same. When the operation was over they stood there facing each other solemnly a very large, foreign-looking man and a small American boy.

"Come! This is a day to sit close to the fire and to smoke, if one is big. If one happens to be small, there is-- let me see- I think there is chocolate."

The trapper opened a small cupboard and drew out a tin foiled package which he tossed over to David; then from his pocket he brought a pipe and a pouch. He held the pipe empty between his teeth, while he rebuilt the fire that was low on the hearth. When the fresh wood began to snap he drew up a chair for each of them, close, and proceeded to fill his pipe.

David gazed curiously about the room. It was large and it seemed to serve as kitchen, dining-room, sleeping and living quarters, all combined. The end where they sat by the open fireplace was for living and sleeping; the two comfortable chairs, the table with a reading-lamp, the small case with books, and the couch plainly told this. At the other end was a cook-stove, the cupboard, water-pails, dish-rack, frying-pans and

pots hanging against the wall, and a rough pine table with a straight chair. The walls were covered with skins and guns, cartridge-belts, and knives of all descriptions. Altogether David found it a very interesting place, almost as interesting as the man who lived there. His eyes came back to the trapper, who again was considering him gravely.

"It's a bully good place for a man to live in," was David's enthusiastic comment.

"It is good enough for one who must live a stranger, in a strange land."

For all his rough clothes and his calling, the man spoke more like a scholar than a back-woodsman. David had noticed that the first time he had spoken. He spoke with as educated a tongue as his own father; there was a slight foreign twist to it, that was the only difference.

"Where is your country?" David asked it simply, not out of idle curiosity, but to place the man at home in his own mind.

''My country? Ah, what used to be my country is a little place, not so big as this one state of yours. It is somewhere near the blue Mediterranean, but it is nearer to Prussia. Bah! What does it matter? Nicholas Bassaraba knows no country now but the woods; no people but those." He pointed to the skins on the walls.

"And you kill them!" The accusation was out before David realized it was even on his tongue.

"Ah, what would you have me do? I must live. Is that not so? And is it not better to live on the creatures of the woods than on one's fellow-men? I kill only what I need for sustenance; for the rest I hurt not one."

There was a hidden fierceness back of the soft voice and David felt immediately apologetic:

"Excuse me! Of course it's all right. I only thought when you spoke of them as your people, and then pointed to their pelts hung around, it sounded sort of barbaric. Sort of like the Indians showing off their scalps, or the head-hunters showing their skulls."

The trapper smiled, and the smile was friendly.

"Youth is ever quick to accuse and as quick to forgive. I know. It is hard for you to understand how I can make them my friends through the long summer; and then, when winter comes and there is a price on their fur, trap them and kill them. But Nicholas Bassaraba kills only enough to bring him in the bare needs of life, and then only for one half the year. For the rest, I am a guide; I carry the packs for the gentlemen campers; I build their fires; I draw their water."

The smile changed to a contemptuous curl of the lips. "Such it is to be a man locked out of his own country."

David watched him uncomfortably for an instant. Then he laughed he could not help it.

"You're not the only one. There are two more of us; and I don't know but what you'd call the flagman another, and Uncle Joab, and maybe the South-Americans, too. You see, I'm just sort of locked out, but the others are truly locked out." And David launched into an account of himself and of what he knew of the others, all but the fairy.

"And is that all? I thought you said there was another person," reminded the trapper.

David blushed consciously. Not that there was the slightest reason for blushing. He certainly felt no shame in his

acquaintanceship with the locked-out fairy. It was rather the feeling of shyness in having to put it all into words, and there was always the uncertainty of how a stranger would take it. You never could tell how people were going to take fairies, anyhow. Besides, maybe there were no fairies in what had been this man's country.

'The other is not exactly a person," David began, slowly, "not exactly. Say, did you ever see a fairy?"

A look of amazement filled the face of the trapper. It seemed to well up from his eyes and burst forth from his mouth.

"You mean the little people?" he asked at last. "The nixies and the dwarfs and the kobolds, that live under the earth and play pranks on us unsuspecting mortals?"

David nodded.

"Sort of. Have you ever seen one?"

The trapper shook his head vehemently.

"Well, I have!" And without in the least understanding why he was doing it David told the story of the locked-out fairy.

When he had finished, the trapper was smiling again.

"Ah, the poor manikin! And here there are three, five, seven of us, all locked out from our homelands; and here was I, Nicholas Bassaraba, thinking I was the only one to feel the homesickness. Bah! Sometimes a man is a fool!"

He thought a minute.

"And you say he wore the squirrel coat the very one I missed from the shed door where it was drying? And all the time I think it was the African from the lumber-camp who takes it."

He laughed aloud and stretched his arms out with a little cry of pleasure.

"Ah, it is good, very good, for one outcast to clothe another. Tonight I must put out some bread and honey, as my people used to for the little spirits; the manikin may be hungry."

'Tell me," said David, suddenly, "do your people have any stories -- stories of Christmas?"

"Christmas!"

The trapper repeated it almost as if it were a strange word to him. "Wait a minute keep very still. I will see-- can I think back-- a story of Christmas."

David sat without stirring, almost without breathing, as the trapper puffed silently at his pipe. He puffed the bowl quite empty, then knocking the ashes clean out of his pipe he put it back in his pocket again and looked up at David with the old grave look.

"There is a people in our country who are called wanderers; some say they have been wanderers for two thousand years. You call them gypsies or Egyptians; we call them 'Tzigan.' Now, they are vagabonds, for the most part, dirty, thieving rascals, ready to tell a fortune or pick a pocket, as the fancy takes them; but it was not always so. Some say that they have been cursed because they feared to give shelter to Mary and Joseph and the Child when the King of Judea forced them to flee into Egypt. But the gypsies themselves say that this is not true; and this is the story the Tzigan mothers tell their children on the night of Christmas, as they sit around the fire that is always burning in the heart of a Romany camp."

It was winter and twelve months since the gypsies had driven their flocks of mountain-sheep over the dark, gloomy Balkans, and had settled in the southlands near to the Ægean. It was twelve months since they had seen a wonderful star appear in the sky and heard the singing of angelic voices afar off.

They had marveled much concerning the star until a runner had passed them from the South bringing them news that the star had marked the birth of a Child whom the wise men had hailed as "King of Israel' and "Prince of Peace." This had made Herod of Judea both afraid and angry and he had sent soldiers secretly to kill the Child; but in the night they had miraculously disappeared-- the Child with Mary and Joseph-- and no one knew whither they had gone. Therefore Herod had sent runners all over the lands that bordered the Mediterranean with a message forbidding every one giving food or shelter or warmth to the Child, under penalty of death. For Herod's anger was far-reaching and where his anger fell there fell his sword likewise. Having given his warning, the runner passed on, leaving the gypsies to marvel much over the tale they had heard and the meaning of the star.

Now on that day that marked the end of the twelve months since the star had shone the gypsies said among themselves: "Dost thou think that the star will shine again tonight? If it were true, what the runner said, that when it shone twelve months ago it marked the place where the Child lay; it may even mark His hiding-place this night. Then Herod would know where to find Him, and send his soldiers again to slay Him. That would be a cruel thing to happen!"

The air was chill with the winter frost, even there in the southland, close to the Ægean; and the gypsies built high their fire and hung their kettle full of millet, fish, and bitter herbs for

their supper. The king lay on his couch of tiger-skins and on his arms were amulets of heavy gold, while rings of gold were on his fingers and in his ears. His tunic was of heavy silk covered with a leopard cloak, and on his feet were shoes of goat-skin trimmed with fur.

Now, as they feasted around the fire a voice came to them through the darkness, calling. It was a man's voice, climbing the mountains from the south.

"Ohe! Ohe!" he shouted. And then nearer, "O -- he!"

The gypsies were still disputing among themselves whence the voice came when there walked into the circle about the fire a tall, shaggy man, grizzled with age, and a sweet-faced young mother carrying a child.

"We are outcasts," said the man, hoarsely. "Ye must know that whosoever succors us will bring Herod's vengeance like a sword about his head. For a year we have wandered homeless and cursed over the world. Only the wild creatures have not feared to share their food and give us shelter in their lairs. But tonight we can go no farther; and we beg the warmth of your fire and food enough to stay us until the morrow."

The king looked at them long before he made reply. He saw the weariness in their eyes and the famine in their cheeks; he saw, as well, the holy light that hung about the child, and he said at last to his men:

"It is the Child of Bethlehem, the one they call the 'Prince of Peace.' As yon man says, who shelters them shelters the wrath of Herod as well. Shall we let them tarry?"

One of their number sprang to his feet, crying: "It is a sin to turn strangers from the fire, a greater sin if they be poor and

friendless. And what is a king's wrath to us? I say bid them welcome. What say the rest?"

And with one accord the gypsies shouted, "Yea, let them tarry!"

They brought fresh skins and threw them down beside the fire for the man and woman to rest on. They brought them food and wine, and goat's milk for the Child; and when they had seen that all was made comfortable for them they gathered round the Child -- these black gypsy men to touch His small white hands and feel His golden hair. They brought Him a chain of gold to play with and another for His neck and tiny arm.

"See, these shall be Thy gifts, little one," said they, "the gifts for Thy first birthday."

And long after all had fallen asleep the Child lay on His bed of skins beside the blazing fire and watched the light dance on the beads of gold. He laughed and clapped His hands together to see the pretty sight they made; and then a bird called out of the thicket close by. "Little Child of Bethlehem," it called, "I, too, have a birth gift for Thee. I will sing Thy cradle song this night." And softly, like the tinkling of a silver bell and like clear water running over mossy places, the nightingale sang and sang, filling the air with melodies.

And then another voice called to him:

"Little Child of Bethlehem, I am only a tree with boughs all bare, for the winter has stolen my green cloak, but I also can give Thee a birth gift. I can give Thee shelter from the biting north wind that blows." And the tree bent low its branches and twined a rooftree and a wall about the Child.

Soon the Child was fast asleep, and while He slept a small brown bird hopped out of the thicket. Cocking his little head, he said:

"What can I be giving the Child of Bethlehem? I could fetch Him a fat worm to eat or catch Him the beetle that crawls on yonder bush, but He would not like that! And I could tell Him a story of the lands of the north, but He is asleep and would not hear." And the brown bird shook its head quite sorrowfully. Then it saw that the wind was bringing the sparks from the fire nearer and nearer to the sleeping Child.

"I know what I can do," said the bird, joyously. "I can catch the hot sparks on my breast, for if one should fall upon the Child it would burn Him grievously."

So the small brown bird spread wide his wings and caught the sparks on his own brown breast. So many fell that the feathers were burned; and burned was the flesh beneath until the breast was no longer brown, but red.

Next morning, when the gypsies awoke, they found Mary and Joseph and the Child gone. For Herod had died, and an angel had come in the night and carried them back to the land of Judea. But the good God blessed those who had cared that night for the Child.

To the nightingale He said: "Your song shall be the sweetest in all the world, for ever and ever; and only you shall sing the long night through."

To the tree He said: "Little fir-tree, never more shall your branches be bare. Winter and summer you and your seedlings shall stay green, ever green."

Last of all He blessed the brown bird: "Faithful little watcher, from this night forth you and your children shall have

red breasts, that the world may never forget your gift to the Child of Bethlehem."

The trapper smiled gravely at David.

"And that, my friend, was the robin."

"Yes, I know," said David, simply.

He felt very still and quiet inside, almost as if he had dreamed himself into the Romany camp beside the fire, and seen with his own eyes the coming of the Child. It seemed too real, too close to talk about just then; he even forgot to tell the trapper that he liked it. And then the trapper's next words brought him to his feet.

"You are not knowing, it may be, that the night has fallen and the snow is with it again. Come, I think Nicholas Bassaraba will guide you safely to your hilltop."

One glance through the window told David the truth of the words. It was almost dark outside and snow was very thick in the air.

Silently they put on their garments and fastened their snow-shoes. Then with the command to keep close at his heels, the trapper led the way up the trail.

The first thing of which David was conscious was that his strength was going amazingly fast.

It seemed but a moment since he had started, and the trapper was climbing very slowly; yet David began to find it unbelievably hard to pull one foot after the other. Gritting his teeth, he stumbled on a few yards farther. Then he fell, picked himself up, and fell again. The third time the trapper helped him to his feet, and, coming behind him, he put a strong hand at David's back and pushed. They struggled on this way for another ten minutes until David fell again. This time it was the

trapper's strength alone which righted him, for David's had entirely gone. He stood looking with dazed eyes into the trapper's, ashamed and wholly spent.

"It is all right. It is nothing to be ashamed of." The trapper's voice seemed to come from very far away. "You have climbed many lengths farther than I expected. Now you shall see how Nicholas Bassaraba can pack a hundred pounds when he is guiding for a friend."

He stooped and lifted David on his back, drawing the boy's arms well over his shoulders, and slipping his own firmly under the boy's feet.

That was the last David knew until he felt the ground under his feet again and blinked stupidly at the light Johanna was holding at the open door of the lodge.

"Laddy, laddy, wherever have ye been?"

He heard the distress in Johanna's voice even through his own numbness, and tried to smile reassuringly.

"Barney's been scouring the hill for ye this half -hour."

"He has been to visit a friend, and the friend has brought him back safely," said the trapper. And without another word he disappeared in the snow and the darkness.

VIII

The Christmas that was nearly Lost

It snowed hard all the next day, so hard that even Barney did not venture out; and David spent his time between the kitchen, where Johanna was frosting the Christmas cake, and the woodshed, where Barney was making the "woodpile look mortal weary."

David's mind was full of the happenings of the days that had passed, and of future plans. Everything had been as fine as a boy could wish, but he did not want it to stop. Here it was two days before Christmas, and he was quite sure there was still a lot to be found. The question was, where should he look for it now that the matter of neighbors had been exhausted?

As for the plans, they were growing every minute; but he had decided to say nothing about them to Johanna and Barney until the next day, when they were full-grown. Of one thing David felt certain: nothing could keep Christmas away this year. And so when Barney began to tease him on one of his trips to the woodshed and say that if this weather lasted he guessed the Christmas present from father would get there about Washington's Birthday and that he guessed it would take a Santa Claus with seven-league boots to make the hilltop this year, David just smiled and looked very wise. Something was going to happen; he knew perfectly well that something was going to happen. And so, when it actually did happen, about half-way between dinner and supper time, he was not nearly as surprised as Johanna and Barney, who in a way might have expected it.

They were all three startled by a banging on the door and a stamping and pounding of feet outside. So loud did it sound in the midst of the silence that David thought there must be at least a dozen men. Great was his astonishment, therefore, when Barney swung open the door and a solitary figure stepped in, muffled in fur to the eyes.

"Burrrrrrrrrrr!" boomed the figure, and then he swept off his cap and made a laughing bow.

"Hello, Johanna! Hello, Barney! You never thought I would remind you right in the midst of a Christmas blizzard of that promise you made last summer. Come now, did you?"

"Holy St. Patrick!" gasped Johanna.

"Mr. Peter!" ejaculated Barney. "But how in the name of all the saints did ye ever make it in this storm?"

The man laughed again.

"Just the usual nerve of the tenderfoot. I left my painting-kit, bag, and canvases with the station-agent. He has promised to send them up if the storm ever stops. And I made a wager with him a gallon can of next spring's syrup against a box of cigars that I'd be here by four o'clock. What's the time?"

He had his things off by this time and was looking at his watch.

"Aha! Ten minutes to the good! If your wires are not down, Barney, I'll call him up. He'll be wanting to get ready to tap that maple-tree."

The next moment they could hear his voice booming at the telephone.

"Yes, siree. Here I am, and not even my breath frozen. No, you needn't be sending out that snow-plow after me just yet. Only get my things up here as soon as you can. All right!"

Another instant he was back in the room again, vigorously shaking Johanna's and Barney's hands.

"Yes, here I am, to paint those snow canvases I've been going to do so long, and to dodge Christmas."

Then it was that for the first time he became conscious of David in the window recess.

"Bless my soul! Who's this, Johanna?"

Johanna explained, and David came forward and held out an eager hand. He liked this Mr. Peter tremendously, in spite of his last remark, and he was no end glad he had come.

The man returned David's greeting with equal cordiality, while he screwed up his face into a comical expression of mock disgust.

"And I came up here to dodge Christmas! Say, young man, do you think it's possible for any person to get away from Christmas with a boy around?"

"I hope not," laughed David.

"You don't mean to tell me that Christmas hasn't grown into a very tiresome, shabby affair that we would all escape from if we only had the courage? You don't believe there is anything in it nowadays, do you, except the beastly grind of paying your friends back and thanking your lucky stars it doesn't happen oftener than once a year?"

"I certainly do, sir." David spoke as one with authority.

The man rubbed his hands together thoughtfully and his eyes twinkled.

"I see. Johanna and Barney have gone off to fix a bed for me somewhere, so suppose we discuss this matter thoroughly. I'll tell you my personal feelings and you can tell me yours. In the end, maybe we'll compromise!"

He led the way to the window-seat and spread himself out comfortably in one corner; David curled up in the one opposite.

"To begin with," and the man pounded his knee emphatically, "Christmas is responsible for a very bad economic condition. Every one spends more money than he has; that's very bad. Next, you generally put your money into articles that are neither useful nor beautiful; you give your maiden aunt handkerchiefs and she has ten dozen of them already put by in her closet, while you send a box of candy to the janitor's little girl, who can't go out because she hasn't any shoes to wear. Now if I could borrow an invisible cloak and go around a week before Christmas, peeping in on all the folks that need things and finding out just what they need, and then come back on Christmas Eve and drop the gifts unseen beside their doors -- well, that might make Christmas seem a little less shabby. But as it is, I'm not going to give away an inch of foolish Christmas this year. And I'm not going to say 'Merry Christmas' to a solitary soul."

"Maybe you'll forget," laughed David. "Now, is it my turn?"

Mr. Peter nodded.

"Well, I've found out, just lately, that Christmas isn't things -- it's thoughts. And I've an idea how to make a bully Christmas this year out of nothing."

He hunched up one knee and clasped his arms about it.

"You see, I used to think that you couldn't have Christmas without all the store fixings and lots of presents, just as you do. And when I first came 'way up here I thought it was just naturally 'good-by, Christmas.' Then something happened."

"Suppose you tell me what. We might make a better compromise if I understood just what did happen."

David considered him thoughtfully. Johanna had said while he was out at the telephone that Mr. Peter was a painter, a bachelor chap with no one in particular belonging to him, and David wondered if he would really understand. As Johanna had often said, "There are some things you just can't put through a body's head."

"Things happen 'way up here in the hills that would never happen in the city, never in a hundred years," he began, slowly; and then, gaining courage from the painter's nod of comprehension, he told all about everything. Of course he could not tell all the stories as they had been told to him; there was not time, but he told about them, and particularly about the "heathen."

"And that isn't all," he finished, breathlessly. "I've a great plan for tomorrow night, if Johanna and Barney and you will help."

"We might make that the compromise," smiled Mr. Peter. "What is it?"

David told, and when he had quite finished, the man beside him nodded his head as if he approved.

"What does Johanna say?" he asked.

"I haven't told her yet."

"Well, we'll ask Johanna and Barney tonight. Now let's hunt them up and find out when supper is going to be ready. I'm as hungry as a bear."

But before the plans were unfolded to Barney and Johanna that evening Mr. Peter told a story. He offered it himself as something he had picked up once upon a time, he could not remember just where. He said it was not the kind of a story he would ever make up in the wide world, but he thought it just the kind David might make up.

And here it is as the painter told it two nights before Christmas:

It was four o'clock on Christmas morning and Santa Claus was finishing his rounds just as the milkman was beginning his. Santa had been over to Holland and back again where he had filled millions of little Dutch shoes that stood outside of windows and doors; he had climbed millions of chimneys and filled millions of American stockings, not to mention the billions and trillions of Christmas trees that he had trimmed and the nurseries he had visited with toys too large for stockings. And now, just as the clock struck four, he had filled his last stocking and was crawling out of the last chimney onto the roof where the eight reindeer were pawing the snow and wagging their stumps of tails, eager to be off.

Santa Claus heaved a sigh of relief as he shook the creases out of the great magic bag that was always large enough to hold all the toys that were put into it. The bag was quite empty now, not even a gum-drop or a penny whistle was left; and Santa heaved another sigh as he tucked it under the seat of his sleigh and clambered wearily in.

"By the two horns on yonder pale-looking moon," quoth he, "I'm a worn-out old saint and I am glad Christmas is over.

Why, I passed my prime some thousand years ago and any other saint would have taken to his niche in heaven long before this." And he heaved a third sigh.

As he took up the reins and whistled to his team he looked anything but the jolly old saint he was supposed to be; and if you had searched him from top to toe, inside and out, you couldn't have found a chuckle or a laugh anywhere about him.

Away went the eight reindeer through the air, higher and higher, till houses looked like match-boxes and lakes like bowls of water; and it took them just ten minutes and ten seconds to carry Santa safely home to the North Pole. Most generally he sings a rollicking song on his homeward journey, a song about boys and toys and drums and plums, just to show how happy he is. But this year he spent the whole time grumbling all the grumbly thoughts he could think of.

"It's a pretty state of affairs when a man can't have a vacation in nearly five hundred years. Christmas every three hundred and sixty-five days and have to work three hundred and sixty-four of them to get things ready. What's more, every year the work grows harder. Have to keep up with all the scientific inventions and all the new discoveries. Who'd have thought a hundred years ago that I should have to be building toy aeroplanes and electric motors? And the girls want dolls' houses with lights and running water! I declare I'm fairly sick of the sight of a sled or a top, and dolls and drums make me shiver. I'd like to do nothing for a whole year, I tell you nothing! It's a pretty how d' y' do if the world can't get along for one year without a Christmas. What's to prevent my taking a vacation like any other man? Who's to prevent me?"

The reindeer had stopped outside of Santa's own home and he threw the reins down with a jerk while he tried his best to look very gruff and surly.

"Suppose I try it. By the Aurora Borealis, I will try it!"

And then and there Santa Claus began his vacation.

He closed up his workshop, locked the door, and hung the key in the attic. He turned his reindeer loose and told them to go south where they could get fresh grass, for he would not need them for a year and a day. Then he made himself comfortable beside his fire, and brought out all the books and the papers he had been wanting to read for the last fifty years or more, and settled down to enjoy himself. He never gave one thought to the world or what it would do without him; therefore, it never occurred to him to wonder if the news would get in the papers. But you know and I know that in time everything that happens gets into the papers; so the news spread at last all over the world that Santa Claus was taking a vacation and that there would be no Christmas next year. And what do you think happened then?

First of all the Christmas trees stopped growing. 'What's the use?" they whispered one to another. 'We sha'n't be wanted this year, so we needn't work to put out new shoots or keep especially green and smart-looking." And the holly and the mistletoe heard them, and they said: 'Well, why should we bother, either, to get our berries ready as long as we shall not be needed for decoration? Making berries takes a lot of time, and we might just as well spend it gossiping."

Next, the storekeepers began to grumble, and each said to himself, "Well, if Christmas isn't coming this year why should I spend my time making my shop-windows gay with gifts and pretty things?" And the pastry cooks and the confectioners said

they certainly would not bother making plum-puddings, Christmas pies, or candy canes.

Soon the children heard about it. For a long while they would not believe it, not until Christmas-time came round again. But when they saw the Christmas trees looking so short and shabby, and the Christmas greens without their berries, and the streets quiet and dull, and the shop-windows without the pretty things in them, they grew sober and quiet, too. And in less time than I can tell you the whole world grew stuffy and stupid and silent and unlovely. Yes, the whole world!

Now, in a very small house in a very small town that stands just midway between the North Pole and the equator and halfway between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans (you can find the town for yourself on any map if you look for it with these directions) there lived a small boy. He was sturdy and strong, and he had learned two great lessons-- never to be afraid and never to give up. He saw what was happening all over the world, because everybody believed that Christmas had been lost, and he said one day to his mother:

"Mother, little mother, I've been thinking this long while if Santa Claus could see how things are going with every one down here he would bring Christmas back, after all. Let me go and tell him?"

"Boy, little boy," said his mother, "tell me first how you will find your way there. Remember there are no sign-posts along the road that leads to Santa Claus."

But the boy squared his shoulders and took a firm grip of his pockets and said he, "Why, that's easy! I'll ask the way and keep on till I get there."

In the end his mother let him go. As he walked along slowly he questioned everything he passed-- birds, grass, winds, rain,

river, trees. All these he asked the fastest road to Santa Claus; and each in turn showed him the way as far as he knew it. The birds flew northward, singing for him to follow after; the grass swayed and bent and made a beaten path for him; the river carried him safely along its banks in the tiniest shell of a boat, while the winds blew it to make it go faster. Each horse or donkey that he met carried him as far as he could; and every house door was opened wide to him, and the children shared with him their bowls of bread-and-milk or soup. And wherever he passed, both the children and the grownups alike called after him, "You'll tell him; you'll make Santa Claus come and bring our Christmas back to us!"

I cannot begin to tell you the wonderful things that happened to the boy. He traveled quickly and safely, for all that it was a long road with no sign-posts marking the way; and just three days before Christmas he reached the North Pole and knocked at Santa Claus's front door. It was opened by Santa himself, who rubbed his eyes with wonder.

"Bless my red jacket and my fur boots!" he cried in astonishment. "If it isn't a real, live boy! How did you get here, sirrah?"

The boy told him everything in just two sentences; and when he had finished he begged Santa to change his mind and keep Christmas for the children.

"Can't do it. Don't want to. Couldn't if I did. Not a thing made. Nothing to make anything of. And you can't have Christmas without toys and sweets. Go look in that window and see for yourself." And the old saint finished quite out of breath.

The boy went over to the window Santa had pointed out and, standing on tiptoe, peered in. There was the workshop as

empty as a barn in the spring. Spiders had built their webs across the corners and mice scampered over the floors, and that was all. The boy went slowly back to Santa and his face looked very sad.

"Listen to this," he said, and he took a seashell from his pocket and held it close to old Santa's ear. "Can you hear anything?"

Santa listened with his forehead all puckered up and a finger against his nose.

''Humph! It sounds like somebody crying away off."

"It's the children," said the little boy, "as I heard them while I passed along the road that brought me here. And do you know why they were crying? Because there are no trees to light, no candles to burn, no stockings to hang, no carols to sing, no holly to make into wreaths no gladness anywhere. And they are very frightened because Christmas has been lost."

Then Santa did the funniest thing. He blew his nose so hard that he blew tears into his eyes and down his cheeks.

"Fee, fi, fo, fum I'm a stupid old fool!" said he. "It's too late to do Christmas alone this year; but I might yes, I might get help. The world is full of spirits who love the children as much as I do. If they will lend me a hand, this once, we might do it."

Then he went into his house and brought out his wonderful magic whistle that calls the reindeer; and he blew it once, twice, three times; and the next instant the eight were bounding over the snow toward him.

"Go!" he commanded. "Go as quickly as ever you can to all the spirits of the earth, water, and air, and tell them Santa Claus needs their help this year to bring back Christmas to the children."

Away flew the reindeer, and in less time than it takes a cloud to scud across the sky they were back again and with them the most wonderful gathering that has ever been seen since the world was made. There were giants from Norway and trolls from Sweden; there were dwarfs and elves from the mines of Cornwall and fairies from the hills of Ireland; there were brownies from Scotland and goblins from Germany; the Yule nisse and the skrattle from Denmark; and fairy godmothers from everywhere. And from the ocean came the mermaids and the mermen; and from the rivers and brooks came nixies and nymphs and swan maidens. And they all came eager to help. Santa Claus brought down from the attic the key of the workshop and soon everybody was busy at his own particular craft. Not a word was spoken, and for those three days not a soul rested or slept.

The dwarfs and the elves made hammers and planes and saws, knives and slates, trumpets and drums, rings and pins and necklaces of precious stones, for they are the oldest metal-workers under the sun. And the fairies are the finest spinners; and they spun cloth of silk, ribbons and fine laces, yes, and flaxen hair for dolls. The leprechaun, who is the fairy cobbler, made slippers of all colors and sizes from baby-dolls' shoes to real little girls' party slippers and boys' skating-boots. The giants cut down trees and sawed them into logs and boards while the trolls made them into boats and houses, sleds and beds and carriages. The mermaids gathered shells and pearls for beads; the brownies stitched and sewed and dressed the dolls that Santa himself had made. I don't know what the nixies made, unless it was the sea-foam candy.

There was one little goblin too little to know how to do anything, and as no one had time to teach him he wandered about, very unhappy, until a bright idea popped into his head.

Then away he scuttled down to the timber-lands to tell the Christmas trees to hurry up and try to grow a bit, because the children would need them, after all.

Well, the long and short of it was that on Christmas Eve everything was finished; and never since Santa Claus was a lad himself had there been such an array of toys. They were so fine and they shone so bright that the children going to bed that night said to one another, "Look up yonder and see the Northern Lights!"

The toys were at last packed in the sleigh and the boy climbed in on the seat next to Santa, and they were just driving away when a wee old Irish fairy woman stepped up with a great bundle.

"'Tis stockings," said she. "I've knitted one for every child, for I knew well the poor things would never be hanging up their own this night."

So it happened that the Christmas that was nearly lost was found, after all, and when the children woke up in the morning they saw their stockings full of toys and the tall green trees all trimmed and waiting for them. And when Santa reached the North Pole again, very tired and sleepy, but not at all grumbly, he heard a noise that sounded like running brooks and singing birds and waving grasses and blowing winds all wrapped up together; and he said to himself:

"Dear, dear me! what can that be? It sounds very like the laughter of little children all over the world."

And that is precisely what it was.

When he had finished, Mr. Peter leaned over and whispered to David; and David cleared his throat as if he were

going to make a long speech. Then he told his plan to Barney and Johanna and asked them would they do it.

"The heathens!" was all Johanna said; but she sounded distinctly surprised, almost shocked.

"Why not?" said Barney. "Mind, your calling them that doesn't make them it. And what if they were? Is that any reason?"

"Maybe not," agreed Johanna. "Only when a body's got the habit o' thinking folks are not her kind o' folks; it takes a powerful bit o' thinking to think them different."

"Sure it does. We'll leave ye to do the thinking while the three of us go out to the woodshed and knock together them sign-posts the little lad is wishing for."

And Barney led the way, while a very happy boy and a man with an amused twinkle in his eyes followed at his heels.

IX
St. Bridget

The day before Christmas broke cold and clear; and almost before the sun had crested the hill three fur-clad figures were abroad. Two were large and one was small; each carried a post across his shoulders, while the foremost swung an ax in his free hand. They first took the trail for the trapper's, and a dozen yards from the hut they planted one post, knocking it firmly into the snow with the flat of the ax. There it stood straight as could be and about the height of a little lad, with its white sign pointing up the trail they had come and its bands of Christmas green and red-painted by Mr. Peter at the top warranted to attract attention.

David cast a backward glance of admiration upon it as they turned to cross-cut the ravine and climb the foot-hill that led to the South-Americans' cottage. Yes, it certainly did look fine! And how well the black letters stood out against the white background! With a heart almost bursting with the fullness of contentment David read the sign for the hundredth time:

THIS WAY TO CHRISTMAS

Six O'clock Tonight. Please Come.

David

And the hand pointed straight to the hilltop and the lodge. Another sign was planted by the cottage, and a third by the lumber-camp. Then the trio climbed the hill again. At the lodge Barney picked up a fourth post. He was going down to the

village for some necessary supplies and he had been appointed to leave the sign for the flagman.

"There's just one thing that's the matter," said David, as he and Mr. Peter started out with knives and bags to hunt for ground-pine and other Christmas greens. "It's the South-Americans. I don't see how they could possibly get here. Why, the sick boy has hardly enough strength to walk across the room. And you couldn't expect a lady to climb a mountain on snow-shoes, just for Christmas."

Mr. Peter laughed.

"You can never tell what's going to happen Christmas Eve. Maybe the fairy will loan them his wishing-cap. Or Santa, himself, may swing round here on his way to the city and bring them along. I wouldn't begin to worry about who's not coming until it's too late for them to get here."

All through that crisp winter morning David and Mr. Peter plowed back and forth between the woods and the lodge, carrying green of every description, with intervals spent beside the kitchen stove, warming up. And early in the afternoon they started decorating the hall and living-room, while Johanna and Barney concentrated their efforts in the kitchen. Barney had succeeded in rooting out untold treasures from the shelves of the "variety store" in the village; and he had brought home several cans of silver paint and rolls of red tissue-paper, besides some white and red candles.

With these Mr. Peter and David created miracles. They silvered bunches of the pinecones and hung them on their drooping green branches above the doorways and windows. They trailed the ground-pine across the ceiling from corner to corner, and about the mantel, hanging from it innumerable tiny red bells fashioned from the red paper. They stood two tall

young spruces on either side of the window niche and these they trimmed with strips of pop-corn, silvered nuts and pine-cones and red and white candles. And every window had a hemlock wreath made gay with cranberries.

And Barney and Johanna? They were likewise performing miracles. When David and Mr. Peter had finished and given their work a last survey and exchanged a final round of mutual congratulations they went into the kitchen to behold the others' handiwork.

There was the table lengthened out and covered with a snowy-white cloth. In the center, surrounded by a wreath of green, stood the mammoth Christmas cake; and at the four corners stood tall white candles in crystal candle-sticks. At one end was a cold baked ham resplendent with its crust of sugar and cloves and its paper frill of red and white. At the other was a red Japanese bowl filled with the vegetable salad that had made Johanna famous; while dotted all about the table were delectable dishes of all sorts-- jams and jellies, nuts, raisins, savory pickles, and a pyramid of maple-sugar cream. But it was from the stove that the appetizing odors came: rolls baking, coffee steaming, and chicken frying slowly in the great covered pan.

"It smells too good to be true," cried Mr. Peter, clapping his hands. "Never was there such a Christmas supper! Come, David, boy, we will have to scramble into some festal raiment to do honor to Johanna's cooking, although I am not quite sure that I have anything to dress up in but a pair of gold sleeve-links and a red necktie."

"Ye might be making a prayer while ye're dressing that somebody will come to help eat it up. I've said to Barney a score

o' times since dinner that there's just as much likelihood that not a mortal soul will show his face here this night."

"Why, Johanna!" David protested.

"I know, laddy. But mind, ye've not seen one of them but once, yourself, and I'm a stranger to them. Never matter; only if no one comes ye'll all be eating ham and fried chicken for the rest o' the year." And Johanna ended with a good-humored laugh.

Before six they were gathered in the living-room with the candles lighted and the fire blazing uproariously on the hearth.

"It's all so fine and like mother used to have. I believe I shall be wishing somebody 'Merry Christmas' before I know it," shouted Mr. Peter. Then he held up a warning finger. "Hush! What's that?"

They all listened. There was certainly a noise outside; it sounded as if someone was feeling for the knob. David was away like a flash to the hall and had flung open the door wide. The next moment his voice came back to the others, ringing with gladness:

"Uncle Joab! Oh, Uncle Joab! This is just bully!"

The bent figure of the old man stumbled in out of the night. He carried two bundles under his arm, each wrapped in layers of gunny-sack; and he blinked, open-mouthed, at the lights and the faces that gathered about him.

"It sure is a befo'-de-war Chris'mus!" he ejaculated. Then he sniffed the air like an old dog on a scent. "'Pon ma soul, dat's fried chick'n or Uncle Joab's no sinner!"

They all laughed; and one by one they shook Uncle Joab's hand as David introduced them. Once divested of his outside things, the old man turned his attention to his bundles and

unwrapped them with great care. The first turned out to be his fiddle and he patted it lovingly.

"When I fust cotch sight o' dat yeah post dis mo'nin' I wa'n't sure dat de sign was meant fo' no ole soul like Uncle Joab. Den I look 'round, but dere doan't 'pear to be nobody else. So I brings along de ole fiddle, 'ca'se I reckon dat dey'll be glad to see him if dey 'ain't got no welcome fer me."

"Sure, we're hearty glad to see the both o' ye." And Barney spoke out for them all.

The old man beamed his gratitude as he unwrapped his second bundle. It held a paper sack; and Uncle Joab viewed the contents with approval before he handed it to David.

''M'lasses corn-balls; Chris'mus gif fo' li'l' boy," he chuckled.

David's thanks were cut short by the stamping of feet outside and a clang of the knocker. Again he flew to the door and found the eyes of the trapper looking down upon him with grave pleasure.

"Nicholas Bassaraba, my friend," he said, proudly, and this was the way he made the trapper known to the others.

The flagman came next, the icicles hanging to his scrubby mustache, his little blue eyes dancing with anticipation. He was quite out of breath and it was some minutes before he could respond properly to his warm welcome.

"Zo, Fritz Grossman has some friends this Chreestmas; eetesgoot!" And his eyes danced harder than ever. He felt down in the pockets of his greatcoat and brought out his hands full of red apples. Their glossy skins bespoke much careful polishing. "Chreestmas apples for the knabelein. He remembers the tale? Ja!"

The stillness outside was suddenly broken by the jingle of bells sleigh-bells coming nearer and nearer. This time it was Mr. Peter who reached the door first; he had taken down the hall lantern and was holding it high above his head as he peered out.

"Whoa, there!" came a voice from the dark. "That you, Mr. Peter? I ca'late I wouldn't ha' broken through no road like this for no one else. But here we be, all hunky-dory!"

"Well, I ca'late there isn't another man who could have done it. You bring in the lad and I'll see to the lady." And Mr. Peter went out into the darkness, lantern in hand.

The next moment David knew his cup of happiness had filled to the brim; for in strode the village stage-driver with Alfredo in his arms, while behind them came Mr. Peter supporting the mother.

"It's splendid! It's perfectly splendid!"

David said over and over again, as he helped to unbundle the South-Americans and make the sick boy comfortable in the great lounging-chair by the fire.

"It is wonderful," said the mother, softly.

'To have the aloneness and heart-hunger and then to find the friend!" And her arm slipped about David's shoulders in a way his own mother had.

"Supper's ready," called Johanna from the kitchen. "And, Barney, suppose ye and Mr. Peter fetch out the lad, just as he is in his big chair."

They put Alfredo at one end of the table, while Johanna sat at the other behind the great, steaming coffee-pot. Uncle Joab insisted on serving every one, bustling back and forth from the stove to the kitchen, his black face radiating his pleasure.

"Lordy gracious!" he would burst forth every few minutes. "Dis yeah hasn't served a supper like dis not since he was back in ole Virginy. Jes' smell dat fried chicken! Humm!" And they could not persuade him to take his place among them until everyone else's plate was full.

What a supper it was! The men who had been shifting for themselves alone in their cabins or huts, the South-Americans who had been living on food put up in cans and tins, were quite sure they had never tasted such a Christmas feast. And every one had stories to tell, memories of his own homeland which brought a flush to his cheeks and a sparkling moisture to his eyes. Only David was silent, his ears too full of what he was hearing, his heart too full of what he was feeling, yes, and maybe his mouth too full of Christmas cheer for him to talk.

It was not until the last crumb of the Christmas cake had been eaten and the last drop of coffee been drained by Uncle Joab and they had gathered about the fire once more, that David spoke.

"First, let's have Uncle Joab play some of his jigs and sing with his fiddle just as I heard him that day at the camp. Then let's have Johanna tell us a story. She's the only one who hasn't told a Christmas story."

So of course David had his wish. Uncle Joab tuned up and played all the rollicking airs he knew, following them with the old plantation songs so dear to the hearts of even those who have only sojourned in the South.

And when he was tired and insisted that "de ole fiddle must rest," Johanna drew her chair closer to the hearth and began the story of St. Bridget.

In Ireland St. Bridget is sometimes called "St. Bridhe of the Mantle," and that is because the people of the hills would not

be forgetting the way she came to be at Bethlehem when Our Lord was born, or the rest of the miracle.

It was to the little island of Iona that she came when she was naught but a child, and her coming there was strange. Her father was Doughall Donn, a prince of Ireland; but because of a sin, which he swore was not his, he was banished from his Green Isle. He took the child and left at night in a small boat; and the winds blew and the waves carried them toward Alba. But when they were still a long way off the winds blew into a storm and the waves reared themselves into a tempest and the boat was dashed upon the rocks. It was the dawn of that day that Cathal, the arch-druid of Iona, looked down from his holy hill where he had been lighting the sacrificial fire to the Sun God, for in those days it was before the Lord had walked the earth; and he saw below him on the beach the figure of a man washed up by the storm and lying as if dead. He hurried to the place and found not only the man, but a wee girl child, and she beside him, playing with the shells and digging her pink toes into the wet sand. The man was not dead, only stupid with the sea-water; and Cathal brought them both to a herdsman's hut and saw that they were fed and cared for.

That night he had a strange vision concerning the child; he dreamed that spirits from heaven descended to watch over her while she slept; and when he was for knowing why they should guard her with celestial care they made this answer:

"Know ye, she is holy and blest above all maidens. For some day it shall come to pass that she shall cradle the King of Love upon her breast and guard the Lord of Creation while He sleeps."

And when the vision broke it was Cathal himself that came and watched beside the herdsman's hut where the child slept.

So Doughall Donn was made welcome in Iona for the sake of the child; and the druids gave him a hut and herd of his own and saw to it that neither he nor the child should want for anything.

It was midsummer and the day of Bridget's birth, marking the twenty-first year; and at ring o' day while the dew still clung to the grass Bridget left her father's hut and climbed the holy hill. Of all the dwellers on Iona she alone was let watch the lighting of the sacrificial fire and she alone was let hear the chanting of the druid's hymn to the Sun God. This day she was clad in white with a wreath of the rowan berries on her hair and a girdle of them about her waist; and she looked fair as the flowers of the dawn.

As she climbed the hill the wild creatures came running to her for a caress and the birds hovered above her head or perched on her shoulder. She listened to the chanting of the hymn; she bided till the flames of the fire met and mingled with the shafts of the sun. Then a white bird called from the thicket and she followed. She followed him over the crest of the hill; and behold! when she came out to the other slope, 'twas another country she was seeing!

Here were no longer the green fields and the pastures filled with sheep, or the sea lying beyond. It was a country of sand and hot sun; and the trees and the houses about her were strange. She found herself standing by a well with a strangely fashioned jug in her hand, and her father beside her.

"Bridhe," said he, "ye are a strange lass. Are ye not knowing that the well has not held a drop of water for a fortnight, and did ye think to fill your pitcher now?"

She smiled faintly.

"I was not remembering."

Her father drew her away toward the village that lay beneath them, the village of Bethlehem.

"Bridhe," said he again, "the drouth has been upon us these many months. The wells are empty, even the wine is failing, and the creatures are dying on our hands. I shall leave the inn this night in your care while I take the camels and the water-skins and ride for succor. There is a well, they tell me, in a place they call the Mount of Olives which is never dry; and 'tis a three days' journey or more there and back."

"And what is it that I should be doing, with ye away?" asked Bridget.

They had reached the door of the inn by now, and Doughall Donn opened it for her to pass through.

"Ye are to stay here, birdeen, and keep the door barred against my return. Not a soul is to pass over the threshold while I am gone. Ye are not to open to the knock of man, woman, or child mind that!"

"But, father, what if someone should come in mortal need famished with the hunger or faint with the thirst?"

He led her to the rude cupboard and pointed to the nearly empty shelves.

"There is a cruiskeen of ale and a cup o' water, a handful o' dry dates and some oaten cake; that is all of food or drink left in the inn.

"'Twill no more than last ye till I return, and if ye fed another ye would starve. So mind the promise I put on ye this night. Ye are to shelter no one in the inn while I am gone."

Bridget watched her father drive the camels out of the courtyard; she barred the door on his going and for two days no foot crossed the threshold of the inn. But on the night of the

third day, as Bridget was making ready for bed, she heard the sound of knocking on the door.

"Who is it and what is it ye are wanting this night?" called Bridget from within, keeping the door fast.

"God's blessing on this house!" came in a man's voice out of the dark. 'I am Joseph, a carpenter of Arimathea, and this is Mary who is after needing a woman's help this night. She is spent and can go no farther. Will ye give us shelter?"

"That I cannot. The promise is laid on me to give neither food nor shelter to living soul till my father comes hither. Were it not for that 'tis a glad welcome I'd be giving the both of ye."

And then a woman's voice came out of the darkness, a voice that set her breasts to be trembling and her heart to be leaping with joy.

"Are ye forgetting me, Bridhe astore?" said the voice.

Bridget opened the grating in the door and looked out. There she saw a great-shouldered giant of a man, covered with beard, and beside him was a wee gray donkey, and on the donkey rode a woman, who turned her face to Bridget and smiled. And the wonder of that smile drew Bridget's hand to the latch.

She opened the door wide and bade them enter. She laid before them what ale and dates and oaten cake was left, and watched them eat in silence.

Then she beckoned them to the courtyard.

"Yonder is the byre clean with fresh straw; and the creatures are gentle. Half the promise have I broken this night; I have given ye food. But shelter ye must take outside the inn. Come!"

She led the way to the byre and left them there, hurrying back to bar the door of the inn again. But as she was fastening the latch she heard the sound of much travel abroad, and looking out she saw it was her father's camels returning. There was great gladness in her welcome aye, and there was sadness for the breaking of the promise.

"See," said she, drawing her father in. "I gave them food--only food. They are resting in the byre." But when she went to gather up the dish that had been empty, behold it was filled with dates and oaken cake! And the cruiskeen was filled with ale!

"'Tis a miracle!" said Bridget, the breath leaving her; and even as she spoke the strange thing happened.

Outside came the sound of falling rain, not gentle as a passing shower, but the steady beat, beat, beat of the rainy season.

"'The drouth is broken," said Doughall Donn, adding, with wonder in his voice: "What manner of folk are those yonder? Are ye not minding the prophesy: 'The King of Love, Ruler of the World and All Time, shall be born on the first night of rain following the great drouth; and He shall be born in a byre outside an inn.' Come, let us see!"

He drew Bridget with him across the courtyard, but before ever they entered the byre they saw the holy light and heard singing that was not of this earth. And when they came inside there was Mary upon the hay, and beside her lay a newborn child.

"Aigh! the blessed wee one!" whispered Bridget, kneeling down beside them. "I am thinking ye had better rest, Mary astore; give me the birdeen to nurse while ye sleep." And with

hunger-arms she reached out for the Holy Child and wrapped it in the white mantle that she wore.

"Aye, take Him," said Mary. "I would I might, in the years to come, give my babe to every barren breast. But ye, Bridget, are alone blest."

And through the long night Bridget cradled the Child while Mary slept and the kine looked on, kneeling in their stalls. And when day broke, Bridget closed her eyes and slept, too, for the weariness was upon her.

It was the call of a white bird that wakened her. She started up with a cry of fear and her arms reached over her breast for the Child, but the Child was gone. And when she looked about her she saw she was standing on the crest of the holy hill, while beyond her lay green fields and pastures full of sheep, and her father's hut, and the blue bay of Iona at her feet.

"'Tis all a dream," she said, the wonder on her. And then she looked at the mantle she wore. It was woven with golden threads into marvelous pictures of birds and beasts and angels. And Bridget went slowly down the holy hill, the mantle about her; and when she came to her father's hut she found she had been gone for a year and six months.

X

The Chapter after the End

The last thing David remembered that night was hearing Mr. Peter's voice booming out a "Merry Christmas" to each of the departing guests. Incredible and humiliating as it might seem, Johanna had had to help him to bed! He was so worn out with the work and the joy of all that had happened that day that his eyes would not stay open long enough for him to make the proper going-to-bed arrangements for himself.

And the first thing David thought about when he woke Christmas morning was the locked-out fairy. Yes, even before he thought about the gift that was coming that day from father.

Where was the fairy? He had not seen him for two days, had not come upon a single track that might have been his in all his tramping through the woods for greens. He did not like to think it, but perhaps the fairy was shivering and hungry in some hollow tree or deserted rabbit-burrow, homesick and alone, while he, David, had almost, yes, had almost unlocked the door that led back into his old world almost found opening-time.

It did not seem fair that now the fairy should be left out, when his own happiness was the fairy's doing, after all; when he would never have found the way to Christmas or the way out of loneliness if the fairy had not made the trail for him to follow. He made up his mind at once, even before he was out of bed, that he would spend Christmas day hunting for the fairy and seeing to it that he had all the comforts that mere mortals could supply.

Then he remembered the Christmas gift that was coming. Perhaps it was something he could share with the fairy. He had thought about it a good many times in the days since father's letter had come; and he had speculated a good deal as to what it could be. It might be some strange curiosity from the East; father was tremendously interested in curiosities; or it might be books, as father was fond of books. Of one thing he was certain, it would be something that father would like himself; he could not imagine father choosing anything else.

Breakfast was late. They had seen Christmas day in before the last guest had gone the night before; and when there are no stockings to empty, no presents to unwrap, there is no need to hurry breakfast along or speed the day. Everybody was in rare good humor. Mr. Peter swung David to his shoulder and marched three times round the table, singing, "Good King Wencelas."

"Faith, 'tis the best keeping of Christmas I have seen since I came to this country," was Barney's comment.

"I think 'tis the best I ever had," said Johanna.

"I know what I'm going to do," shouted Mr. Peter. "I'm going to steal the chart and take it back with me to the city; and next year when the notion begins to take me that I want to dodge Christmas again I'll unroll the chart, take a good look at it, and make straight for the right road. And I tell you what!" He put two hands on David's shoulders. I believe it would be just as well to have you along, young man. With you there, and Barney and Johanna, I couldn't go wrong, you know; and we could take a lot of other poor, tired mortals on the road with us and show them such a Christmas as would warm their hearts and keep their memories green for the rest of their lives."

"Aye, that's true," agreed Johanna. "But if ye don't sit down and stop talking, Mr. Peter, ye'll be taking the road to a cold breakfast."

They were not half through when a knocking came at the front door. Barney answered it, and came back in a moment with a puzzled smile on his face.

'Tis your friend, the trapper," he said to David. "He'll not come in; but he wants to be speaking with ye, laddy."

Wondering much what it could mean, David slipped from his chair and went into the hall. The trapper was standing just inside the door, and he was holding something small and gray in his great fur mitten.

"Nicholas Bassaraba has brought you something. It was there this morning, hanging on a peg in the woodshed. See!" He held up the coat of a gray squirrel.

"Where -- How did it get there?"

The trapper shrugged his shoulders.

"Ah -- how should I know? But I can guess. And you? Where are your wits, your fancy, my friend?"

David took the skin between his hands, rubbing his fingers through the soft fur.

"You think he brought it back? That he --"

"Is it not possible? He has gone back to his country his people. He is no longer what you call 'locked out.' So he gives back again what he borrowed from Nicholas Bassaraba the coat. Ah, he is a fairy of honor; and I bring it to you, my friend. It may be that is what the manikin intends when he hangs it on the peg. At any rate, it is yours to keep always; a symbol, a memory of how you found the way to the cabins and the hearts

of some lonely men. Yes, this you shall keep; while we keep other memories. It is well."

He turned toward the door to be gone, but David held him back.

"But it isn't just memories, you know. I'm coming back again and again to hear more stories of the gypsies. And in the spring, Barney says, perhaps you'll help me find a den of young foxes or raccoons. I've always wanted to have some to tame."

The trapper smiled.

"Even so. We will go together. It is not hard to find the litters of young things in the spring; they are very plentiful."

After the trapper had gone David stood a minute thinking before he went back to his breakfast. So this was a white winter. And Johanna had said that about as often as a white winter the fairy raths opened on Christmas Eve just for that night. Somehow the fairy must have known this would happen; and he had gone back to Ireland, back to his rath, a locked-out fairy no longer.

There was a broad smile of happiness on David's face as he took his seat at the table again.

"Ye certainly look pleased with your present," teased Barney. "What did he bring ye now just a squirrel's skin?"

"No, not just! Wait until tonight and I'll tell you and Johanna one of your own Irish stories. Only this one will have American improvements." And David nodded his head mysteriously after Johanna's own fashion.

It was then that the telephone rang and Barney answered it. If there had been a puzzled smile on his face before, when the trapper came, there was a veritable labyrinth of expressions now as he came back to the kitchen. There was a tangle of

mystery, astonishment, delight, incredulity, and excitement; and even Johanna herself could not guess what lay at the heart of it all.

"Speak up, Barney, man," she cried. 'What has happened ye?"

And Mr. Peter slapped him on the back and thundered at him: 'Wake up, sir! You look as if you'd been dreaming about fairies!"

"Maybe I have," chuckled Barney; then he sobered. ''No, 'twas the station-agent that 'phoned. He says the wee lad's Christmas present has come from across the water, and he's sending it up this minute by the stage-driver."

"Is it as large as that?" gasped David in surprise.

"Aye, it's a good size." And Barney chuckled harder than ever.

Johanna looked at him sharply.

"Faith, I'm believing ye know what the wee laddy's getting."

"Maybe I do, but I'm not going to be telling one of ye not till it gets here."

It was a very excited group that gathered in the window nook and waited for the stage-driver to make the trip up to the hilltop. It would take some time, they knew, for the going was slow, as he had reported the night before, and they all waited with a reasonable amount of patience. All but Barney. He strode up and down the living-room, slapping his knees and chuckling to himself as if he were bursting with the rarest, biggest piece of news a man ever had to keep to himself.

''For the love of St. Patrick, can't ye sit down and keep quiet a minute, man?" Johanna asked in desperation. "By the way ye are acting ye'll have the lad thinking his father's sent him a live elephant or someone o' those creatures that run wild in the East."

With a final triumphant whoop Barney sprang to the door and threw it open.

"Tis almost here!" he cried. "I can hear the bells on the sleigh."

"So can I," cried David. "And there's the team and the sleigh and -- Why, there's somebody in it besides the driver!"

He was off from the window-seat and beside Barney at the door, and the others followed quickly, as the driver touched the team with his whip and the sleigh flew into plain view. Yes, there certainly was someone on the seat with the driver!

"Mercy on us!" gasped Joanna.

"Merry Christmas!" shouted Barney and Mr. Peter together.

But David could not shout. He could only keep whispering to himself, over and over: "Mother! It's mother!"

THE END

The Legend of the Christ Child

A Story for Christmas Eve

I want to tell you tonight a story which has been told to little children in Germany for many hundreds of years.

Once upon a time, a long, long time ago, on the night before Christmas, a little child was wandering all alone through the streets of a great city. There were many people on the street, fathers and mothers, sisters and brothers, uncles and aunts, and even gray-haired grandfathers and grandmothers, all of whom were hurrying home with bundles of presents for each other and for their little ones. Fine carriages rolled by, express wagons rattled past, even old carts were pressed into service, and all things seemed in a hurry, and glad with expectation of the coming Christmas morning.

From some of the windows bright lights were already beginning to stream until it was almost as bright as day. But the little child seemed to have no home, and wandered about listlessly from street to street. No one took any notice of him, except perhaps Jack Frost, who bit his bare toes and made the ends of his fingers tingle. The north wind, too, seemed to notice the child, for it blew against him and pierced his ragged garments through and through, causing him to shiver with cold. Home after home he passed, looking with longing eyes through the windows, in upon the glad, happy children, most of whom were helping to trim the Christmas trees for the coming morrow.

"Surely," said the child to himself, "where there is so much gladness and happiness, some of it may be for me." So with timid steps he approached a large and handsome house. Through the windows he could see a tall and stately Christmas tree already lighted. Many presents hung upon it. Its green boughs were trimmed with gold and silver ornaments. Slowly he climbed up the broad steps and gently rapped at the door. It was opened by a large man-servant. He had a kindly face, although his voice was deep and gruff. He looked at the little child for a moment, then sadly shook his head and said, "Go down off the steps. There is no room here for such as you." He looked sorry as he spoke; possibly he remembered his own little ones at home, and was glad that they were not out in this cold and bitter night. Through the open door a bright light shone, and the warm air, filled with the fragrance of the Christmas pine, rushed out from the inner room and greeted the little wanderer with a kiss. As the child turned back into the cold and darkness, he wondered why the footman had spoken thus, for surely, thought he, those little children would love to have another companion join them in their joyous Christmas festival. But the little children inside did not even know that he had knocked at the door.

The street grew colder and darker as the child passed on. He went sadly forward, saying to himself, "Is there no one in all this great city who will share the Christmas with me?" Farther and farther down the street he wandered, to where the homes were not so large and beautiful. There seemed to be little children inside of nearly all the houses. They were dancing and frolicking about. Christmas trees could be seen in nearly every window, with beautiful dolls and trumpets and picture-books and balls and tops and other dainty toys hung upon them. In one window the child noticed a little lamb made of soft, white

wool. Around its neck was tied a red ribbon. It had evidently been hung on the tree for one of the children. The little stranger stopped before this window and looked long and earnestly at the beautiful things inside, but most of all was he drawn toward the white lamb. At last, creeping up to the window-pane, he gently tapped upon it. A little girl came to the window and looked out into the dark street where the snow had now begun to fall. She saw the child, but she only frowned and shook her head and said, "Go away and come some other time. We are too busy to take care of you now." Back into the dark, cold street he turned again. The wind was whirling past him and seemed to say, "Hurry on, hurry on, we have no time to stop. 'Tis Christmas Eve and everybody is in a hurry tonight."

Again and again the little child rapped softly at door or window-pane. At each place he was refused admission. One mother feared he might have some ugly disease which her darlings would catch; another father said he had only enough for his own children, and none to spare for beggar brats. Still another told him to go home where he belonged, and not to trouble other folks.

The hours passed; later grew the night, and colder blew the wind, and darker seemed the street. Farther and farther the little one wandered. There was scarcely any one left upon the street by this time, and the few who remained did not seem to see the child, when suddenly ahead of him, there appeared a bright, single ray of light. It shone through the darkness into the child's eyes. He looked up smilingly, and said, "I will go where the small light beckons, perhaps they will share their Christmas with me."

Hurrying past all the other houses he soon reached the end of the street and went straight up to the window from which

the light was streaming. It was a poor, little, low house, but the child cared not for that. The light seemed still to call him in. From what do you suppose the light came? Nothing but a tallow candle which had been placed in an old cup with a broken handle, in the window, as a glad token of Christmas Eve. There was neither curtain nor shade to the small, square window, and as the little child looked in he saw standing upon a neat, wooden table a branch of a Christmas tree. The room was plainly furnished, but it was very clean. Near the fireplace sat a lovely faced mother with a little two-year-old on her knee and an older child beside her. The two children were looking into their mother's face and listening to a story. She must have been telling them a Christmas story, I think. A few bright coals were burning in the fireplace, and all seemed light and warm within.

The little wanderer crept closer and closer to the window-pane. So sweet was the mother's face, so loving seemed the little children, that at last he took courage and tapped gently, very gently, on the door. The mother stopped talking, the little children looked up. "What was that, mother?" asked the little girl at her side. "I think it was someone tapping on the door," replied the mother. "Run as quickly as you can and open it, dear, for it is a bitter cold night to keep any one waiting in this storm." "Oh, mother, I think it was the bough of the tree tapping against the window-pane," said the little girl, "Do please go on with our story." Again the little wanderer tapped upon the door. "My child! my child," exclaimed the mother, rising, "that certainly was a rap on the door. Run quickly and open it. No one must be left out in the cold on our beautiful Christmas Eve."

The child ran to the door and threw it wide open. The mother saw the ragged stranger standing without, cold and

shivering, with bare head and almost bare feet. She held out both hands and drew him into the warm, bright room. "You poor dear child," was all she said, and putting her arms around him, she drew him close to her breast. "He is very cold, my children," she exclaimed. "We must warm him." "And," added the little girl, "we must love him and give him some of our Christmas, too." "Yes," said the mother, "but first let us warm him."

The mother sat down beside the fire with the child on her lap, and her own two little ones warmed his half-frozen hands in theirs. The mother smoothed his tangled curls, and bending low over his head, kissed the child's face. She gathered the three little ones in her arms and the candle and the fire light shone over them. For a moment the room was very still. By and by the little girl said, softly, to her mother, "May we not light the Christmas tree, and let him see how beautiful it looks?" "Yes," said the mother. With that she seated the child on a low stool beside the fire, and went herself to fetch the few simple ornaments which from year to year she had saved for her children's Christmas tree. They were soon so busy that they did not notice the room had filled with a strange and brilliant light. They turned and looked at the spot where the little wanderer sat. His ragged clothes had changed to garments white and beautiful; his tangled curls seemed like a halo of golden light about his head; but most glorious of all was his face, which shone with a light so dazzling that they could scarcely look upon it.

In silent wonder they gazed at the child. Their little room seemed to grow larger and larger until it was as wide as the whole world, the roof of their low house seemed to expand and rise, until it reached to the sky.

With a sweet and gentle smile the wonderful child looked upon them for a moment, and then slowly rose and floated through the air, above the treetops, beyond the church spire, higher even than the clouds themselves, until he appeared to them to be a shining star in the sky above. At last he disappeared from sight. The astonished children turned in hushed awe to their mother, and said, in a whisper, "Oh, mother, it was the Christ Child, was it not." And the mother answered in a low tone, "Yes."

And it is said, dear children, that each Christmas Eve the little Christ Child wanders through some town or village, and those who receive him and take him into their homes and hearts have given to them this marvelous vision which is denied to others.

Birth of Jesus

From the King James Version
of the Holy Bible

The Shepherd and the Angels
From Luke 2 (King James Version)

And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Cæsar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed. … And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judæa, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:) To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child.

And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.

And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.

And the angel said unto them, "Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying:

"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men."

And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, "Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us."

And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child. And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds. But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart.

And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them.

And when eight days were accomplished for the circumcising of the child, his name was called JESUS, which was so named of the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

The Wise Men from the East
From Matthew 2 (King James Version)

Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judæa in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, Saying, "Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him." When Herod the king had heard these, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born. And they said unto him, "In Bethlehem of Judæa: for thus it is written by the prophet, And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel." Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, inquired of them diligently what time the star appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, "Go and search diligently for the young child; and when ye have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also." When they had heard the king, they departed; and, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy. And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh. And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way.