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The Soft Spot in 606.

BY ANNIE HAMILTON DONNELL.

Bells were peeling faintly somewhere in the distance, when B 606 was released from the punishment cells. Somewhere there was merriment and chiming of bells—but not in the great grim walls of the English prison; not in the grim, hardened heart of convict B 606.

He wore the blue cap that branded him "dangerous." The warders noted it significantly, and looked to the readiness of their defenses.

"Tough 'un, he is," one guard muttered to another in passing. "Blest if I ain't sorry he's in my gang. Wot'll yer say to swap 'im for any six o' your lags, Davy?"

"Swap 'im? No, yer don't!" laughed the other guard. "I ain't got standin' room for 'im in my gang—no, sir! You're welcome to 'im-an' no charge made!"

B 606 was in one of the quarrying gangs, but for the six days just past he had been on bread and water in one of the punishment cells. He had been violent and abusive again to one of the warders. It was an old story with B 606—a flash of rage, and then the bread and water, the chains, the solitary cell, and the loss of all "privileges." All these things were common enough, but not repentance—never repentance. B 606 was a "tough 'un." In Portland prison no one was more closely watched in all the sullen, gray-coat ranks.

"Merry Christmas!" some one chanted in his ear as he shuffled into line with his mates on the parade ground. A loud laugh followed, as if it were a good joke to be Merry Christmas in Portland prison. "Merry Christmas"—the words sounded sacrilegious and out of tune there. The grim walls seemed to send back the laugh, and the dash of the sea on the breakwater outside echoed it deeply. Merry Christmas at Portland!

But the man—he was still a man—with the round badge marked with "B 606" on his gray jacket started discernibly at the sound of the two words in his ear. Under the hard mask of his sullen face something like pain worked dimly. When had he heard those two words before? Who had said them in his ear?

The prison walls, the vast desolate parade ground, the endless monotony of the sea, the files of gray coats, the shuffling feet, the warders' hoarse commands—the very years themselves, nine of them—faded away in the sudden mist that drifted before those fierce eyes underneath the "dangerous" blue cap. Into the mist another picture crept—other sounds stole sweetly.

"Merry Christmas!" somebody cried in his ear. "Merry Christmas, daddy!" And a little nightgowned figure danced across the mist. A little child's blue eyes laughed up at him. A child's plump Christmas stocking waved in his face. "Merry Christmas, daddy!"

O, God, when had he heard that voice, before? Would it never be stilled again? Must he hear it over and over—"Merry Christmas! Merry Christmas, daddy!" Must he always see that laughing little face above the little white nightgown?

"Front rank, two paces to left—march!"

The gray-coated figures defiled across the parade ground with the aimless slouch of men who have lost all ambition. There were shamed faces here and there—a few—and fierce, untamed ones. Most of them were only sullen or hopeless. There were one or two blue caps, picked out as color spots against the monotonous gray.

The governor of the prison strode about, giving low-voiced orders to the guards. His keen, shaven face was softened a little by the Christmas "peace, good will," that had crept into it, perhaps, when a little nightgowned child had wished him Merry Christmas. He laughed out cheerily, now and then, and spoke a kind word to some numbered convict in the lines. At sight of B 606 the stern lines tightened about his lips again. The Christmas look vanished.

"Keep a lookout, Charley," he muttered to the nearest warder. "He's a slippery one—there's blood in his eye to-day. No knowing how he'll celebrate Christmas!"

"He's a lunny," growled the warder, surlily. "Twon't noways disconvenience me w'en he slings his hook. They ain't no soft spot in 'im."

"Well, keep a lookout a while longer, Charley. Watch out sharp. He'll be out in a matter of six months now."

"Glory be!" the warder muttered behind his beard. What's six months' time to nine years and a half? But B 606 felt no exultation. He had long since ceased to tell off the months on his fingers. It did not matter one way or another that he was almost "out." The old despair and numbness in his heart had deadened hope long since. To-day what mattered was the shrill, sweet little child-voice in his ear—that was all. Drown that out and let him settle back to misery in peace. He was used to misery. The little voice—it was over nine years since he had heard that. O no, he was not used to the little voice!

The day lagged on inside the walls of Portland prison. Outside it was Merry Christmas, and the people made

merry among their own. In the afternoon the chief warder approached the convict in the blue cap with the number B 606 on his jacket, with a message from the governor. He was wanted at the receiving office.

"Compny?" questioned a fellow-convict, jibingly. "Old 'ooman, maybe, or sweetheart—hey? My, ain't you in luck!"

"Mind you give us a squint at the Christmas present she's brought along!" another laughed hoarsely. But B 606, unnoticing, strode along beside the warder indifferently. It did not occur to him to wonder at the unusual summons. It could only mean some fresh indignity or punishment—it didn't matter. What mattered was—But they had arrived at the receiving office. A little child was standing there beside a calm-faced sister of charity. The convict stared at them both in dull wonder. But at the sound of the child's voice he stared violently.

"Merry Christmas, daddy!" it said shyly in his ear. The slender little figure crossed to him and slipped a small brown hand into his hand. "Won't you say 'Merry Christmas,' back, daddy? It was such a piece of work to get here!" the child said wistfully. "I guess you'd never think how hard it was to get an order to come! It was the sister who did it. You see, she promised mother to bring me. Mother's dead."

For a moment it was silent in the dismal room. The governor turned away to gaze out of the window, and the warder's rough face softened. Then the childish voice began again:

"She tried to wait, daddy—I guess you'd never think how hard she tried! But when she knew she couldn't she got everything ready for you and told me to wait instead. I'm waiting now, daddy. I—it's lonesome—you'd never think how lonesome it is! But I keep counting the days off. Every night I cross one out. Daddy, I s'pose you know—there's only a hundred an' eighty-seven left. There won't be but a hundred an' eighty-six to-night, after I've crossed out. Mother always kept count—my, there used to be thousands o' days once! You can begin to expect when there's only a hundred an' eighty-six, can't you, daddy?"

She was stroking his hand as she chattered. He had not uttered a word, but she went on bravely—she had it all to say:

"When it's only one day left—my, think of that, daddy! Mother used to. An' I know just what I'm going to do then—just ex-actly! Mother and I used to practice together, I guess you'd never guess how many times. She told me just how I was to tidy up the kitchen an' put the kettle all ready to boil, an' be sure to remember the chair you always liked to sit in—an' the granium. O, daddy, mother an' I used to hope so it would be in bloom that day! An' the supper—mother showed me how to make the muffs, you know, an' broil the bit of steak an' set the cups an' plates on tidy. There wasn't anything mother didn't show me about, when she found she couldn't wait. She said for me to put on her white apron an' stretch up tall, an' smile. I guess you'd never think how much we practiced! The last time mother cried a little, but that was because she was tired. I cried too. It was that night mother died. I—it's very lonesome now, daddy, but I'm waiting. You'll come right home, won't you, daddy? That was why she wanted the sister to bring me—to make sure."

The great hard fingers had closed around the small brown ones. The tears were trailing over the rough cheeks of B 606. The sister's calm face was broken into lines of weeping.

"I'm most twelve now, daddy. You mustn't mind how little I am—I can stretch up tall! An' you'll laugh to see how I can keep house for you. There's a woman on the third floor helps me when I forget how mother said to do. I've got a hundred an' eighty-six days more to practice in, daddy. Daddy, won't you say 'Merry Christmas'?"

If he said it no one heard but the child. He caught her to him and buried his face in her soft hair. The sound of his sobbing seemed to fill the room.

The new year came and grew on familiar terms with the world. Spring crept into the lanes and turned them green, and even the files of gray-coated convicts at their quarrying drew in the warm, sweet breaths and, in their way, rejoiced. The heart of one of them lightened within him as day followed day. On the walls of his cell he crossed off each one as it passed, and counted eagerly those that were left. They grew very few.

"She won't have much longer to wait. She'll be putting the kettle to boil soon, now," he thought, with a slow smile dawning in his grave face. "She'll put on the white apron and 'straighten up tall' and fine, and stand at the window, waiting."

He "practiced" the homegoing over and over, alone in his cell. It kept him happy and softened the fierce, angry light in his eyes. He grew peaceable and quiet among his mates. The warders talked of it in amazement.

"The tough 'un's tamin' down most remarkable,"

they said. "He's that mild you couldn't touch 'im up with a club."

"Yes, he's playin' good. He ain't goin' to get any more marks to lengthen out his dose. He's goin' out straight, he is."

And one summer day B 606 "went out." Across the strip of sea a child was waiting for him. The room was tidied and the kettle on to boil, and in the sunny window the geranium was all in bloom. A new life had begun, and the prison shackles fell away from him. He was no longer B 606. He was a man among men, and a child's faith and love strengthened him.—New York Advocate.

❀ ❀ Keeping A Secret. ❀ ❀

It was when Molly was getting over the measles that mamma told her about Tom's birthday party. It was to be a bicycle party, and the boys were all to bring their bicycles; and Tom's father was going to give him one for a birthday present.

"Oh, goody!" cried Molly, jumping up and down. "Won't Tom be just too happy for anything?"

"Now, Molly," said mamma, "you must be very careful not to tell Tom anything about it. You mustn't even look as if you knew about it."

"Can't I tell anybody? Not even Arabella Maria?" asked Molly. "'Cause I shall surely burst if I don't."

"Yes," said mamma, laughing, "you can tell Arabella Maria, but no one else."

This was hard. That very afternoon Tom came rushing in from school, and told Molly about Billy's new improved safety.

"I'd give something if I just knew I'd get a wheel for my birthday," said he. "But, when father was telling about the scarcity of money last night, I knew that meant no safety for this year."

"Bye low, bye low," sang Molly to Arabella Maria, who, because she was made of rags, and lumber, Molly loved, as she said she was so nice and "huggy." Molly kept her eyes shut tight for fear Tom would see a nickel-plated bicycle in them.

"Why don't you talk and be a comfort?" demanded Tom. "I suppose, if it was your birthday coming, you wouldn't mind. You'd rather have an old mushy doll like that!" indicating the beloved Arabella Maria with a scornful finger.

This was too much for Molly to bear. Her eyes flew open with a flash. "It isn't so at all!" she said. "I wouldn't want another doll at all, and I do want a bicycle. Every girl in the block has one but me. And Arabella Maria is not mushy, and she knows a great deal that you would be glad to know."

And then Molly, feeling that she was getting on dangerous ground, flew upstairs, holding Arabella Maria close up against her mouth.

Uncle Tom and mamma were sitting on the porch quite near the open window, and heard all this conversation. Uncle Tom was much amused, and mamma very proud.

"I can make her tell me," said Uncle Tom.

"Try," said mamma, as she went indoors to toast the muffs for tea.

Molly presently found herself seated on Uncle Tom's knee; and after she had told him all about the measles and how it was a great surprise to everybody that Arabella Maria didn't take them, "But she's the best thing!" said Molly. "I told her not to, 'cause I couldn't nurse her; and she didn't."

"What is this about Tom's birthday?" said uncle Tom. "I want to know about it."

But Molly immediately shut her mouth up tight and looked up at the sky. "It's a secret," she said finally.

"But not from me, is it? You know he's my namesake; and how do you know I won't get him the same things?"

Molly looked troubled. "There is a danger," she said; "but, if I should tell you, you might let it out—not on purpose—but 'cause it's so hard not to. I don't want to ever have the responsibility of another secret, never."

"Well, well, and so you can't trust me," said uncle Tom.

"I wouldn't mind trusting you at all if I hadn't promised I wouldn't tell," said Molly. "And me and Arabella Maria must keep our word, you see. Now, if it was about my birthday, I could tell you just as well as not, 'cause I wouldn't know—"

But Uncle Tom was laughing so hard that Molly stopped. "Good for you, Molly," he said; "you're a trump!"

Molly didn't know at all what he meant, but she was much relieved that he was not offended.

When Tom's birthday, with the party, the safety and all, really came, it was hard to tell which was the happier, Tom or Molly.

Every time that Tom felt things boiling within him to such an extent that he couldn't possibly stand it an-