

SPECIAL  
ARTICLES

## Our Contributors

BOOK  
REVIEWSUNTO US A CHILD: A CHRISTMAS  
STORY.

Margaret H. Olyde.

The congregational meeting of the Presbyterian church was a tumultuous one. The old question of building a parsonage was up again. Mr. Marksman, the shrewd president of the board of trustees, was there early. He had long contended that it was a disgrace for a church of their size and ability to provide so inadequately for their pastor. The matter could easily be arranged, he was confident. "A subscription list to begin with, a few oyster suppers and strawberry festivals to continue with, a debt of a few hundred dollars to end with, and the thing would be done.

On the opposite side of the room sat Elder White, unquestionably the spiritual pillar of the church. He had always argued that there was no need of a parsonage. The early apostles had gone forth without purse or scrip, they had entered, strangers, into strange cities, and they had been cared for. Would God be less provident for his servants to-day? As for these worldly methods of money-getting, had not Christ said: "Make not my Father's house an house of merchandise?"

There were many opinions expressed. With a new minister coming within a month the time had come for decision. The cost of building materials was discussed, possible sites for the house suggested, propositions made and objections interposed, and still the question remained unsettled. Then Mr. Marksman, singularly inactive thus far, rose and made a startling announcement.

The Judge Mason property, next door to the church, was for sale, he said. Miss Sybilla had decided to part with it and the church might have it at a remarkably low figure by accepting the offer at once.

Miss Sybilla! The congregation stared, for Miss Sybilla Mason was the arch enemy of the church. She was a kind of ancient landmark, one of the village curiosities. Just as one showed visitors that curious rock-formation up the mountain side, called the Devil's Den, so one pointed out the forbidding house on the main street from behind whose closed blinds she flouted religion. For thirty years she had not been inside a church, and when on one occasion the minister had called at her house, she had shut the door in his face. Her townspeople regarded her with a kind of deprecating pride. That the spirit of Satan should so possess a woman's heart was deplorable. But, nevertheless, she was picturesque. Not every country village could boast a genuine atheist. And here she was offering them a house for their minister. Surely the day of miracles was not past.

Miracle or not, the chance was too good to lose. The bargain was struck and the building turned over to the carpenters, plasterers, painters and paper-hangers, who speedily converted the old office where Judge Mason had practiced law for many a year, into a modern dwelling.

"It's not a bad house," conceded Elder White, eyeing it from the church window on Sunday morning. And many others of the congregation agreed.

If the church members on the east regarded the parsonage with complacency, Miss Sybilla Mason on the west regarded it with consternation. For when the house became the property of the church the most surprised person in the whole village was that lady herself. She would sooner have out off her right

hand than so much as acknowledged the existence of the church.

In short, the whole affair was one of Mr. Marksman's wily schemes. Miss Mason's western investments, reported to be large in the vagueness of village rumor as hills loom high in the fog, had been giving her trouble. It became necessary to raise some money promptly. Her lawyer, being consulted, advised the sale of the office property adjoining her house. The suggestion seemed good. Between long periods of vacancy and short periods of slow-paying occupancy, the building had been nothing but a trouble to her for years. She agreed to let it go at almost any figure for the sake of the few hundreds she must have at once. The lawyer undertook to arrange the sale, and not until the deed came to be signed by Mr. Marksman, as president of the board of trustees, did she discover that he was acting in an official, not a personal, capacity. So the house became the property of the Presbyterian church, and she could only grind her teeth in futile rage.

It was the last of August when the new minister moved in. Anger had by this time given place to that curiosity which is peculiar to the solitary. She stationed herself behind her green blinds and made an inventory of the minister's possessions. The dining-table was much too large for the room, she decided. And did all those boxes contain china and silver?

At noon there came a lull in proceedings and she had time to get a hasty dinner. But she had hardly washed the last plate and hung up the dishpan when she heard another wagon-load arriving. She scurried to her post, Blackstone following in unseemly haste. Blackstone rarely forgot himself thus. He was ever mindful of the dignity for whom he was named. Whether engaged in sitting by the kitchen drain to watch for spiders or in following his mistress about begging for milk, he wore always an air of judicial calm. Miss Sybilla had finally dusted the books in the Judge's old library for too many years not to be on familiar terms with their names. Yet she would have been surprised, I think, if you had told her that Blackstone was a man as well as a book. And she might have hesitated to bestow his name upon the small companion of her solitude. But the name fitted. Wasn't he the blackest cat that ever lived!

Blackstone took his place upon the bench—the bench beside the window, I mean—and watched developments. His absorption was equal to Miss Sybilla's, but his calm was greater. She was obviously excited. "Look," she cried, "them little cases must be for books. Glass doors to 'em in front. Looks as if they'd took a real bookcase and pulled it to pieces." Blackstone yawned.

"That bedroom crockery ain't well packed. He'll find some of it broken, I'll be bound."

The minister was bustling about, un-

packing the boxes, carrying smaller articles into the house, pulling the wrappings from larger ones as they stood on the porch.

Another load arrived. "Bedding, Blackstone, and here comes a big old-fashioned four-poster, 'most like the one we've got in the spare room. His grand-mother must have left it to him or something. What's he untrapping now? It's brass, a little brass—why, it's a crib! Blackstone, they've got a baby."

At half-past three the minister dusted off his knees, picked the superfluous excelsior from his coat, and settling his hat upon his head, started off to meet

the train. Miss Sybilla watched impatiently for his return. "If he expects 'em now," she commented, "he'll have to hurry to get them beds up before night."

Blackstone offered no response. He had selfishly gone off to sleep. He did not even wake up in time to see them arrive, the minister, the minister's wife and the baby. The baby proved to be a boy, quite big enough in his own estimation to take care of himself. He surveyed the premises with the air of a specialist. He seemed to decide that this parsonage compared favorably with other parsonages of his experience and agreed to take possession.

The minister's wife was slim and girlish. She took off her hat and fanned her flushed face, sitting on a packing-box to get the general effect before entering the house. Her brown hair wandered in little curls across her brow. It was very undignified hair, especially for a minister's wife.

"Robert," remarked the minister's wife a few days later, "I've been asking about that queer old maid next door. They say her father died nearly thirty years ago and she's lived all stark alone ever since. I should think she'd go crazy."

"Maybe she has."

"Honestly, Robert? Then I'd better keep Bob's shut up in the house. He might wander over there and—and—. Do you really think she's—"

"Nonsense; no, Mary, I'm only joking. She's all right, and besides, you might as well try to chain lightning as to keep that boy in the house."

"Now, Robert," she pleaded, for the subject was a familiar one, "you're too hard on him. He hasn't run away once since we've been here."

"Of course not. He hasn't finished investigating the house and the yard yet. Give him time, my dear. He's not the great-grand-nephew of an African explorer for nothing."

"If the African explorer had been your great-uncle instead of mine," replied his wife with dignity, "you wouldn't have so much to say about him."

"Certainly not, certainly not. Modesty would forbid it. But I rejoice to have married into a distinguished family, and I am proud to see my son following in the footsteps of his illustrious ancestor."

"Robert, what I started to tell you was that I've found out what is the matter with that woman. She was—now don't laugh—she was disappointed in love."

"Disappointed in love! Well from her general appearance to a vinegar bottle I should have said it was a clear case of love being disappointed in her."

"And that," continued the minister's wife undisturbed, "is why she wears her dresses to her shoe-tops and a little red shawl, and why she scrubs the porch on her hands and knees before we're fairly up, for she won't have anyone come to the house to work for her. She has plenty of money, but she hardly spends a cent except to buy food for herself and that cat. I think it's dreadful. If being disappointed in love makes people look like that I'm glad I—I—was n't."

The minister's anticipation was soon realized. Bobs exhausted his own domain and set out upon a quest which brought him in due time to Miss Sybilla's back porch. With the flat of one hand he beat against the door. With the other he clutched a struggling mass of black fur.

"Is this your cat?" he inquired, as the door opened about two inches. "I