

## THE HOME CIRCLE

### Robin Adair.

A Christmas Story. Written for Farm and Home by Isabel Gordon Curtis.

MISS MARJORAM touched her horse lightly with the whip as they turned down the high road that led out of Old Wyben. "Don't be a lonfer, Timothy," she cried briskly. "David here will do all the loafing that is necessary in the Marjoram household," and she turned with a mischievous smile to a small black boy, who sat beside her. David twisted about uneasily for a moment, then he looked up with a grin which showed a mouthful of splendid white teeth.

"I'm improvin', Miss Marjoram," he said, slyly. "Hannah says so." "It is Christmas time that is doing missionary work. You've learned all about Santa Claus within a month, and you know it is no use for downright loafers to hang up their stocking. That's what it is, David, and before New Year's Hannah will have to prod you again with the boller stick every time she wants a hod of coal or a—what's that?"

She touched Timothy again with the whip, this time to some purpose. The horse beatrilled himself and carried them swiftly to a tumble down cottage, which was half hidden by scraggly fir trees. In front of the gate stood a wagon in which a man sat, listlessly, puffing at a corn-cob pipe. He looked up, to find Miss Marjoram's eyes on him, and he lifted his fur cap clumsily.

"What is happening in there?" she asked, and she pointed her whip at the cottage. She could hear stifled sobs and a heart-braken moan or occasionally a shriek of agony had brought her hurrying down the road the scream was not repeated, but the husky sobs were pitiful.

"It's old Reub," said the stolid man. "We're takin' him to the poor farm, an' a pretty fuss he's makin' about it, too."

Miss Marjoram laid the reins in David's hands and jumped lightly from the carriage. She was not a young woman, but she had the agility of girlhood. She walked quickly up the path through the neglected yard. The door stood open and she stepped in. She could hear a gruff, expostulatory voice, and between it long, husky sobs. Jim Farren, the poor-master, stood beside an old man with a long, white, untrimmed beard. He wore an ancient blue army cloak over his worn clothes and a rusty sword lay beside him on the settle. His face was hidden in his hands. He did not look up when Miss Marjoram spoke.

"You're taking him home, are you?" she said.

The poor-master turned and lifted his hat. Miss Marjoram was the wealthiest woman in Old Wyben and honored by everybody in the village.

"I'm trying to take him with me, ma'am, but he's like plenty who come to my place; he'd rather die than have county hospitality. Queer, too. You wouldn't think he'd understand." And he touched his forehead with his forefinger.

Miss Marjoram nodded gravely. "Who is he?" she whispered.

"Nobody knows. The first time I saw him was 10 years ago, when he was harvesting for Reynolds, up the Gravel road. He didn't know no more than he does to-day, only then he could work. This place has been abandoned five years. It's fallin' to pieces, you see," and he pointed to a hole in the roof through which Miss Marjoram could see a patch of cold, gray sky. "The folks round here say he come to this shanty three or four years ago. He had a bundle with him along on that old sword."

"Is he a soldier?" she asked, gently. "I reckon so. There's a mark on his head that looks as if he'd got it cut open once."

"Poor old soul; our country ought to treat him better than this."

"The Blacks come after me last night," Farren continued. "They found him here about freeze stiff and starvin' to death. Nobody's seen him for a week. They reckon he's been here all that time without food or fire. I'm goin' to take him to the poor farm. After

that I'll see what we can do about gettin' him into the soldiers' home at Bath."

The old man raised his dull eyes. "The poor farm," he wailed. "I haven't come to that yet. I won't go. I tell you I won't go. I haven't harmed anybody. I haven't asked anybody for anything, have I? Why can't you let me alone?" He shouted it fiercely in a hoarse voice.

"You can't stay here," said Farren, kindly. "I shan't take you to the poor farm. I'll have you at my house to spend Christmas. It's three days from Christmas, did you know that?"

"Christmas, is it?" The old soldier's sobs grew faint and low. "Christmas—I was going home for Christmas—to her—to my wife. 'An't some of you tell me where home is? It's here, somewhere. There's the old bridge, I know that, but everything else is changed. Nothing's the same. I don't know whether I've come to the right place or not. There's mother and—my wife. You look like mother," and his listless eyes suddenly looked up into Miss Marjoram's face. He clasped one of her strong, warm hands between his chilled, shaking fingers and clung to her. The woman laid her other hand on his thin gray hair. "I am—I am—your mother," she said, in a low, broken voice. "I've come to take you home with me." She smoothed his hair gently.

"You're a good woman," said Farren, emphatically. The old man rose to his feet and looked into her face. "I don't know," he said, brokenly. "I can't quite seem to make it feel true. It's so many years ago."

"Come," said Miss Marjoram, "we are waiting for you at home. Come."

He took the arm she held out for him and he walked feebly beside her down the frozen path. She stopped beside the gate and spoke to Farren in a low voice. "Send your man away—out of sight. I think I can manage him without any trouble. You're a kind heart, Mr. Farren, and you make the poor farm more of a home than such places generally are, only—America ought to open other doors than yours for the men who have fought her battles." The color came into Miss Marjoram's face and she spoke almost fiercely.

"I know it," said Farren, humbly.

He lifted the old man into Miss Marjoram's comfortable carriage. David crouched down at the back and laid the rusty sword across his knee. The drive to the big house at the foot of the hills was a silent one. The old soldier seemed to hear nothing, see nothing. He wrapped his nerveless fingers in the warm rug that Farren had tucked about him and he gazed ahead listlessly at the dreary, frozen road with its fringe of leafless trees.

Old Hannah opened the door when they drove up to the side porch. She was accustomed to her mistress bringing home protégées of all sorts—David had been the latest—so she lent her aid silently in making the old soldier comfortable.

It was dusk when the doctor put on his fur mittens in the hall and turned for a few last words with Miss Marjoram about her patient. "He will pull through all right. I think," he said, cheerily. "He has a splendid constitution and I don't believe he is as old as he looks. I doubt if he is much over sixty."

"He looks eighty."

"He is aged by hardship and starvation. It is a wonder he is alive. That wound in his head must have been a terrible one, the skull must have been almost cloven open, by a bayonet. I should fancy."

"Will he recover his memory, doctor?" she asked, anxiously.

"I cannot tell without a much more careful examination. One hears strange stories of memory coming back after years of forgetfulness. Give him good care, keep up the illusion that he has returned home and leave the rest to nature."

Next day the old soldier was well enough to be up and about. Miss Marjoram had sent to the village for a barber and a tailor. In a comfortable new suit and with neatly trimmed beard, looked very different from the shivering old figure in the blue army cloak. Hannah and her mistress watched him anxiously. He wandered restlessly about the house, peering into unused rooms and staring outdoors at the whitened landscape, for a fall of snow had brought Christmas weather. He accepted every comfort and kindly attention with grateful gravity and asked no questions. Once he seized Miss Marjoram's hands and gazed anxiously for a minute or two into her sweet

face. Then he turned away, shaking his head and whispering, "No, no."

"I believe you remind him of somebody," said Hannah, as he dropped her mistress's hands and turned restlessly to climb the stairs again.

"Poor old wanderer. I guess, Hannah, the memory of Robin makes me very pitiful over old soldiers."

Hannah patted the white hand which lay beside her on the table.

"You are pitiful, Miss Cynthia, to everybody that needs your pity," she said softly.

It was the afternoon before Christmas. Hannah was busy in the kitchen over preparations for a bounteous dinner, and delicious smells came wandering in whenever the doors opened that led to the hall. Miss Marjoram was trimming the house with green stuff. David followed her about the house with an armful of evergreen wreaths and a basket of holly. She twined a wreath of the freshest holly and mistletoe about a painting which hung between the windows in her sitting room. It was a portrait of a young soldier with an eager, handsome face. The dark hair was tossed carelessly back from his wide forehead and a smile hovered about his mouth. Miss Marjoram almost stumbled as she stepped from the chair, she could scarcely see through her tears. The old soldier put out his hand.

"Who is that?" he asked, eagerly.

"A soldier—like yourself," she said, slowly. "He fell at Fredericksburg."

"What was his name?"

"Robert Adair," she answered with a sob, then she ran upstairs and shut herself in her room.

The early dusk of the December afternoon was clothing the hills in a gray mist, when Miss Marjoram opened the gate of the little family graveyard under a clump of tall pines. There was no path cut through the snow and the gate moved reluctantly on its rusty hinges. She pushed through the light drifts till she reached a low headstone beneath a sheltering pine. She hung across it a wreath of green laurel she had carried on her arm. Then she bent down to brush away the snow that had drifted over the grave. She found what she was searching for, a clump of Christmas roses. Their waxy petals were as white as the snow, but there was a gleam of pale gold in their hearts. A shadow fell across the grave and Miss Marjoram rose to her feet with a faint cry. She had not heard a footstep in the soft snow, but beside her stood the old soldier. He leaned on his stick and was looking past her at the gray stone where the drifting snowflakes had blotted out any record.

"Who sleeps there?" he asked.

"Robert Adair," said Miss Marjoram. "The friend I told you of. But—you ought to be in the house. You will be ill again. This walk through the cold snow will hurt you. Come."

He turned obediently and followed her indoors. She made him lie down on the wide lounge in the sitting room. For a moment he frightened her. His eyes had lost their dull, unmeaning stare, they were bright and restless. He pushed back the thin gray hair about his forehead with an impatient motion.

"Lie down," urged Miss Marjoram. "You are tired and feverish. Shall I play for you? Do you care for music?"

The old man nodded. He laid his head among the pillows. He tucked a soft afghan about him, then she rose and went to the piano. Her fingers wandered over the keys. She played snatches of old tunes. She remembered how she had sat in this very spot 26 years ago, playing the same old tunes alone in the dusk of Christmas eve. She had been a girl then, a girl of eighteen, and her heart was throbbing with happiness. To-morrow her husband was coming, the boyish husband who had left her five minutes after the ceremony in the little sitting room. He had begged so impetuously to make her his wife before he joined his regiment that her father had yielded. In the dusk she was living over again that day in June. The minister had scarcely finished the simple service when Robin had clasped her in his arms, covered her face with kisses, whispered, "Good-by," and lifted his musket to dash across the field and join his comrades. She had watched him with tear-blinded eyes. She stood on the front porch with her father's arms about her. Far down the road they saw the soldiers marching from Old Wyben, and a band was playing the merriest music. Robin waved a last good-by from the stile in the meadow, then he melted into the little band of blue-clad men. They

faded into the distance; all that was left was a swirl of dust and a dim echo of "The Girl I Left Behind Me." Then the awful days of waiting for news, the terrible lists of dead and slain—then the letter from Robin telling of a furlough for Christmas. She had trimmed the house with holly and mistletoe, just as she did to-day, and she sat singing at the piano, when her father laid his hand on her shoulder. She had looked up in his face with a happy smile and screamed, "Robin!" His dear old face seemed furrowed with a sudden sorrow—her sorrow. They brought Robin home and buried him among her own people. Somehow she had taken up life again. She had to for her father's sake. She had not taken Robin's name. It was 26 years ago and she was an old woman alone, quite alone.

She was weeping now. She could feel the tears dripping on her hands. They were moving softly over the keys and she was playing the tune she had played so often for him. She began to sing the words. Her voice was still fresh and sweet.

"What's this dull town to me?"

Robin's not near.

He whom I wish'd to see,

Wish'd for to hear.

Where's all the joy and mirth,

Made life a heav'n on earth?

Oh! they're all fled with thee,

Robin Adair.

"But now thou'rt far from me,

Robin Adair;

But now I never see

Robin Adair;

Yet him I lov'd so well,

Still in my heart shall dwell.

Oh! I can ne'er—"

Suddenly out of the darkness came a voice that made her quiver. "Cynthia," it called, "Cynthia, my wife!"

She leaped to her feet and stood with one hand on the piano, swaying as a woman does who is about to faint.

"Cynthia," she heard it say again. "Cynthia, I've found myself. My darling, it is Robin. I cannot tell you where I have been, but I have come back."

Then she felt herself clasped in strong arms and with a last faint heart-beat she fancied she was going out of life. When she returned to consciousness, Hannah was kneeling beside her and David, with a bowl of water in his hand, was crying miserably. She opened her eyes and looked up into Robin's face. She wondered vaguely why she had not recognized him immediately. Thirty-six years should not have made such a difference in the face she loved.

There was no Christmas moon, but in the stillness of the sleeping house, Cynthia sat at midnight with her husband's arm about her, gazing at a luminous star, which seemed to glow right over the clump of pine trees that shadowed the snow-drifted grave where the Christmas roses bloomed.

"Robin," she whispered, "I believe that is the star of Bethlehem, or—is there a star of the resurrection?"

**Briefly Noted**—Prof Charles W. Johnson of Chicago, testing a method of wireless telegraphy which he says is different from Marconi's, succeeded in telegraphing through fireproof vaults, walls and live wires without difficulty. Prof Loeb of the university of Chicago, in experiments conducted on the Massachusetts coast, believes he has succeeded in hatching the unfertilized eggs of sea urchins by immersing them in solutions of sodium and magnesium. If life can be developed by chemical means, a new and vast field is opened. Prof Loeb's experiments may point to a remedy for cancer. The theory is held that cancer is an effort of the individual cells of the tissue of the body to reproduce themselves.

Women will be employed both as enumerators and as clerks in the compilation of the census of 1900, and it is expected that numbers of them will apply for these positions. Women were first employed at this labor in 1850. In 1890 women again found occupation as clerks and as census takers, though then, as now, the fact that women were eligible to these positions was not as widely known as it should have been. The work lasts only a few weeks or months.

The religious life of rural communities was discussed at the Methodist church congress in St. Louis, following similar discussions in states farther east. The impression prevails among church officials that religion and faith are losing ground in the farming districts.