

THE TRUE SPIRIT OF CHRISTMAS

A Story of How the Christmas Spirit and Cupid Worked Together

By KATE H. MILES



CHRISTMAS without much money to spend is hard, but Christmas without any of the true spirit of the day is unbearable."

Nancy Langford spoke the words aloud, although there was no one to hear. She was so thoroughly in earnest that she felt she must relieve her feelings by getting some of those heated thoughts off her mind, so spoke them out to the crisp, frosty, December air, through which she was traveling swiftly, settled comfortably in the warm musk ox robes which made the light and daintily built pung a luxurious resting place, and drawn by a spirited little chestnut mare, who seemed to enjoy the pace she was setting over the smooth, well-packed snow of the country road. There seemed no reason, if one could judge by appearances, why the driver of this turnout, herself arrayed in a big fur coat, fur-gauntled gloves, and fur hat with a scarlet wing on its side, should bemoan the lack of that spirit which it seems at this particular season should permeate everybody within the radius of Christianity and the Christmas story. Indeed, one could not discern, even after a careful survey of the attractive face beneath the close fur hat—almost the color of the little tendrils of hair which curled up around its edge—any deep-rooted evidence of discontent or melancholy. It was a serious face, and just now there was a pucker between the golden brown eyes, and a little droop of sadness to the mouth. Yet the eyes observed and twinkled in sympathy with a squirrel who whisked with business-like haste along a fence rail, and the corners of the drooping mouth went up in a smile which sent a glow straight to the heart of the small boy who received it as he stood fastened in his tracks by the snowdrift into which he had plunged and waited for her to pass.

"There are all the Wheelers, or as many as can get near the window," she mused, the droop returning, although she did not forget to wave her hand to the faces in the window, watching so expectantly. "Poor kiddies, they think I'm going to town to buy their Christmas presents, I suppose, and of course they won't be able to understand when they find they have been left out entirely. It seemed the right thing when Mother and I decided that, as we couldn't afford to spend as much money for Christmas gifts as we usually do, we should cut the neighborhood families out of our list. We have saved money and time, for the cooking has been so much less with only our own family to consider; but we've lost, I know we've lost so much more happiness than the actual reducing of household expenses can ever repay. I know Mother isn't satisfied, and I'm actually sorry I have to go to town—and it's the day before Christmas."

Soliloquizing along this line, Nancy let her little mare dash over the smoothly-frozen road at its own pace and they were soon opposite the town which lay stretched along the bank of the broad river, whose covering of pure and glistening crystals was sparkling and glittering in the sunlight. She guided the lively little beast down the bank, then sighed deeply.

"It's a beautiful world and ideal Christmas weather. I must try and catch some of the right spirit which insufficient attention or something has failed to develop in myself."

She did her best to keep the pucker from her forehead and the droop from the corners of her mouth, but it was hard to set these mood vanes for fair, when, after leaving her horse at a stable and finishing her few last-minute errands, she wandered through the busy, good-natured crowds in the shops and saw the toys and books and inexpensive gifts in such quantities—and the poor little Wheelers were waiting and watching so hopefully.

"Oh, you poor kiddies," she thought in despair. "Why are you so many? I couldn't get one little gift for each and have a parcel worth while without the candy and cookies and other things which I haven't got home."

Things before the golden brown eyes grew misty, so their owner was startled when a voice at her elbow spoke her name.

"Hullo, Miss Nancy? Up to your eyes in shopping?"

She managed to smile at the big broad-shouldered fellow who had worked his way to her corner, and she hoped he did not notice the droop and the lack of cheerfulness. His glance seemed to rest on something satisfying to its owner, and his expression would lead one to believe that there was no lack in what he had found.

"Not half as far up to my eyes as I would like to be," she confessed in a tone which plainly implied that there was more to tell.

Nancy knew this man, Harold Binney, the young manager of one of the local banks, very well, as she did all the eligible young men about town, but she was surprised at her feeling of pleasure in this

encounter and at her sudden desire to pour out to him her tale of woe.

"I never heard a lady make a remark like that before. You arouse my curiosity, for, strangely enough, I was just thinking along this very line—wishing I knew of some poor young beggars who would appreciate a few pennies spent on them. That's the real Christmas idea in my mind—not this empty meaningless exchange of obligations. I have just got away from the bank and I've been wishing I had some real Christmas shopping to do. Was that your idea—sighing for suitable subjects for your efforts? I dare say we can find some if we go about it properly."

Nancy's golden brown eyes were clear and direct and sparkling as she gazed at the pleasant face above her in a speculative fashion as though debating whether or not she would speak.

"I see you've got something on your mind, Miss Nancy, so can't you share it? If you know of someone who will fill the bill for our Christmas philanthropic efforts, it's your plain duty to confide in me. If you will you'll be distributing kindness in more than one direction."

"I believe," said Nancy slowly and uncertainly, "I believe I'll tell you about the Wheelers."

"Good for you. I knew you had a good card. Tell me about the Wheelers by all means, and while you are telling me can't we test that shopper's lunch which the 'Palms' people advertise?"

A very few minutes had wrought a marvellous change in Nancy's feelings. Her poor little Wheelers were looking and longing for a share, a wee tiny share, of Christmas; this big-hearted and big-bodied man was anxious for a suitable opportunity to show his faith in the season's teaching. Surely it would be right for all concerned that she should unburden her heart. Thus she reasoned as they worked their way up the crowded street, chatting gaily, and noting now and again, with newly-aroused interest, some special figure in the throng, which touched them with its unconscious joy or pathos. An old man, poorly clad and bent with age and rheumatism, stumping along with a cane, brought a lump to Nancy's throat when she saw the brightness of his face and the smile of interest and admiration he cast, as she and her attendant passed close by. When she saw a group of happy youngsters standing entranced before a Santa Claus, who was performing in a shop window, her heart warmed towards the would-be patron of her un-Santa Claused ones.

"And now for the Wheelers," smiled her companion across the little table as they waited for the shoppers' luncheon of baked beans and brown bread and aromatic coffee.

"It's rather hard to tell you all about it," confessed Nancy, looking out of the window with unseeing eyes, "but I'll have to try or you won't understand." Bravely, with now and then a little glance of appeal for sympathy at the silent and interested listener, she told of the necessity for lessening the Christmas expenses and of the doleful result as far as the Wheelers were concerned.

"I didn't even make some cakes and candy for them, and I just can't bear to think of their disappointment. I have known all week that something was wrong and to-day it came to me in full force what it was."

"Thanks," said the man simply when she had finished her story. "I'll show my belief in your true spirit by saying I'm glad your Wheelers are unprovided for, and glad and grateful for the opportunity you are giving me. Let's eat something and then make a list of the entire Wheeler family with suggestions for gifts for each. Why, the prospect of some real Santa Claus work gives me an appetite that makes these beans look good to me."

Nancy was happy, and when Binney produced pencil and notebook and bade her begin with a list of possibilities from which they might later choose a reality for the Christmas pleasure of Mrs. Wheeler she gave herself over to the joy of the task. Through the family they went, from Miss Valerie Wheeler, aged fifteen, whose name struck awe to her fairy godfather, down the seven steps to Nancy, the baby of two years.

"Nancy," murmured Binney absent-mindedly, as he wrote the name, "brown eyes and hair with real live gold in them. Nancy must have something crimson, roses perhaps."

"If you could see little Nancy's auburn curls you would shudder at the thought of crimson," laughed the possessor of the red-locked one's name. "A nice, comfortable, unbreakable dolly will make Nancy the happiest baby in the land. You don't know what a fine thing you are doing."

"I know what a fine time I am having," he retorted. "All I regret is that this afternoon must end. I've got to spend Christmas in a boarding house, refused three dinner invitations, and just decided to stay by myself and be miserable. Do you wonder I'm eager to seize the only bit of real Christmas which is coming my way?" Then, looking at his watch, he said reluctantly, "I suppose we must go and begin on Mother Wheeler, for it will take time to shop this afternoon."

"Yes, and I must get home in time to make those cakes—I'm going to do it even at this late date. Thanks to you the Wheelers will have their Christmas yet."

"All thanks is to you," he reminded her, "but, I say, can't you do without the cakes? We'll buy enough sweets to make the whole family sick."

"I must call Mother up," she said, as they made their way back to the shops. "I'll speak to her about the cookies. I'll leave you in the toy department and then we won't be wasting time."

On Nancy's return from the telephone booth she discovered the busy Binney on all fours on the floor, quite oblivious of the crowds, explaining to an entranced youngster of diminutive stature, the intricate mechanism of a toy engine.

"I'm sorry," he explained sheepishly when aware of his companion's presence, "I had to wait until you came back. I couldn't decide such a momentous question on my own responsibility. What is your good news?"

Nancy's eyes proclaimed wonderful things, and her smile endorsed the announcement.

"Why," she said, interpreting those signals of joy, "Mother has been cooking all day, she couldn't bear not to have any mince pies and Christmas cakes to give away. And she and Dad want you to come down and spend Christmas with us."

Binney wondered swiftly what part of the pleasure in her face he might take as his share in the matter. Aloud, he said, "Really? I say, that's awfully nice of your mother. Do you think I ought to accept the invitation?"

"Why, of course. If I hadn't thought so, I wouldn't have told Mother about you. You know you can help me take the parcels to the Wheelers to-night after the kiddies are in bed."

If Harold Binney was a bit disappointed by the frank unconcern of her reply, the thought of the walk under the Christmas Eve stars comforted him.

"I can't refuse such a chance. I'll go with pleasure."

"Now we must get to work," reproved Nancy in her most business-like tone.

Like two children they attacked that list and worked their way through it, not without much hard thinking and planning, for Nancy insisted on being practical as regards the amount Binney should spend, and was so considerate of the individual tastes of each of the subjects in hand that they were involved in many complicated questions. At last they were through. Baby Nancy's rag doll of prodigious size had been purchased. Binney had gone for his bag and returned, laden with a big box of flowers—crimson of course—and a basket of sweets. The little mare had been brought out, fresh and eager for the return trip, the parcels were stowed away with that necessary overflow of the larger ones from under the sides of the robes, which seems so characteristic of the season, and they were started for home.

Binney drew a deep breath as Nancy, having skilfully guided her frisky trotter past a big team and down the river bank in a breakneck fashion, shook the lines and they dashed across the expanse of white, now touched with the last ray of lingering daylight towards the west, and marked with the first shadow of abrupt twilight in the east, which lay far down, down, down that seemingly endless stretch of lifeless silence.

"I believe we'll go down the river," Nancy decided, suddenly, pulling the mare into a road which branched off from the one they were following.

"The Wheelers won't see us pass if we go this way." "It seems a shame to break into this long white line," Binney observed.

"Yes, but there is always a never-ending stretch ahead," his companion reminded him, and so he found it, for when they turned up a bank, which, to Binney, seemed an unmarked spot in an unbroken line of snowbank, there it went, on and on, now drawing the mantle of quietness and mystery more closely over it. There was something unreal to the city-bred man in this expanse and silence and he did not shake the spell of it from him until the lights of the rambling old farmhouse flashed a welcome to them and Nancy's father shook his hand and bade him be at home.

The farm kitchen, alive with light and warmth and satisfying odors, the hospitable dining-room and the table with its abundance of dainties, the whole house charmed Binney, and seemed a fitting setting, he thought, for the girl who had been revealed to him that day. And when, later, they trudged happily along under the stars, laden with the Wheeler's Christmas joy, the spell of the charm was still on him.

Quietly they crept to the back door of the little house, from whose windows all the expectant faces had vanished. Nancy tapped gently, and the door was opened quickly. It was good to see the expression of relief and pleasure which came to the face of the worn, patient-looking woman.

"Come in, Miss Nancy," she said in a subdued voice, lowered as if to avoid waking some sleeper in the adjoining room.

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