

SNOW CHILDREN

A Christmas Story

(By Josiah Dwight Whitney, in the Evening Post.)

This is the story of the only man who ever can truthfully say that he has seen the dance of the Snow Children in Ellenburg.

The Ellenburg graveyard lies on the side of a beautiful hill facing a great meadow, and in the center stands the most beautiful spruce tree that ever was seen with the roughest, most symmetrical lines, tapering to an exquisite point at the top. Every year it seems to grow prouder and more hardy than the year before, although the oldest inhabitant says that the seedling was brought over from Norway by the settlers of the village more than a hundred years ago. As no one in Ellenburg is as old as that, or even feels that old, the story is only a story.

However, everyone in Ellenburg except the village cobbler, who is by occupation and temperament a narrow-minded person, knows perfectly well that the Snow Children celebrate Christmas eve around the Norway spruce every 24th of December, just as the clock is striking midnight. It is not given to everybody to see them—in fact, nobody but John Christian ever really saw them. They say that those who go to the hillside out of mere curiosity neither hear nor see anything, while some who have accidentally sprayed their minds busied over the prospective happiness of their children on the morrow have heard sweet music playing, of a sort that no orchestra in Ellenburg, Inseborn, or Jensen's Ford has ever been known to produce. It came from the direction of the great spruce, and some say they heard shouts of childish laughter mingling with the music. But when they crept cautiously over toward the tree and peeped out from behind a broad headstone to see what the festivity might be, forgetting entirely their own chicks and the morrow, the spruce was dark and deserted, save that most people declared that a bright star in the east seemed to be burning more brightly than any star was ever known to burn, directly over the beautiful tapering summit of the Snow Children's tree.

Hans Engelborg, the oldest inhabitant, says that the spruce was planted by one of the early settlers whose little daughter died in the middle of winter. The child was buried, so Hans says, with wild strawberries and snow-flower, on a Christmas eve, in the white place; and the seedling spruce was placed over her grave, where, though the ground was frozen as deep as the grave-diggers penetrated, it took root and grew into a goodly tree before the fawns set in. The father came and placed the toy he had bought at the foot of the evergreen, and while he sat on the new-made mound with his face in his hands, he saw a vision of the infant Jesus, lying in a manger in Bethlehem, and there were angel voices singing joyous doxologies which left the father very, very sad, but said nothing to cure the bitterness in his heart. The spruce has grown for these hundred years—at least, that is what Hans Engelborg says. Perhaps he embroilers on the story as the years go by, but at any rate Hans never says that all the little ones who have been laid away on that hillside since the first settlers' little girl celebrate Christmas eve by dancing about the great spruce. And Hans and all the other people in Ellenburg call them the Snow Children, although they have never seen them; and they say that the reason why John Christian saw them was that he loved little children as much as any mortal man could, and happened to be on the hillside one Christmas eve when he came very near to giving his life for one of them.

It was a bitter night, that starlit evening when the stockings were being hung! John Christian had risen from a sick-bed and gone across country five miles afoot, in fulfillment of his annual custom of taking a basket of Christmas things—fat goose, some cranberries and apples, red-checked Spitzerbergs and plum-pudding, to an aged dame who lived alone in a cottage by a wood. Once upon a time, a dozen, yes, more than a dozen and a half, years ago, the old woman had done a single kindly act to a flaxen-haired child, three who called Christian father; and John had never forgotten, though on a night like this he would have preferred to stay at home and make himself as comfortable as a sick man might about his own rooming, that the old woman, "Shades of Thor, 'tis a cold night, mother!" he cried, as he entered the little cottage and sank into a chair. "And the fields are rough between here and Ellenburg."

"Cold weather makes a merry Christmas," croaked the old dame. "And the good Lord should send you, who remembers this old week like a son, a merry Christmas to you, John!" "It's little to remember you, mother, and a sorry Christmas that John Christian will be having, as usual. It was eighteen years ago, mother, eight years ago, that the little Christina was taken away on the flood; and twelve since the wife was taken and left John Christian alone in the world. And Christmas, when the children have the happiest time, brings the little Christina back—and she laughs and I hear her say 'Daddy, I have a hug for you' and the joy in my heart goes out and leaves a cruel lump instead."

"John, you should forget all that," said the dame who tried once a year to be soothing, for Christian was about the only visitor she had. "The Master will comfort, for he took the little snow-flower to be his own. Who knows? Perhaps she dances with the Snow Children to-night."

"No, no! Not that!" said Christian. And then for a long time he sat gazing at the flames as they leaped up about the hickory logs in the fireplace. And definitely he bade the dame good-night and went out.

It was colder than ever as Christian took his way homeward through the fields, drawing his sheepskin coat closer about him. The ground was white with the thinnest simpering covering of feathery snow; the moon threw

the shadows of the tall chestnuts and beeches in long, pale streamers across the brilliant earth; and amidst the tracery of the woods lay a soft, ineffable mist. Presently a flake of snow fell on John's nose. Then a breeze sprang up and drove clouds up from the horizon till the moon was hidden. At last the flakes flew thick and fast and Christian swung his arms lustily to drive the chill away.

The last mile of his walk carried him by the rustic bridge over the little stream which winds its way through the meadow overlooked by the burial-ground. The snow was blinding now, John Christian's blood suddenly tingled and ran hot at the sound of a faint cry of distress from the near bridge. To him it was the same voice of a child which had called to him in terror eighteen years before, when the darkness and flood had closed about the one child which God had given him—Oh! Help! Oh, the cold water—some one! Christian stumbled down the embankment and saw a struggling figure in the water. He ran out on the ice, and it broke with him also. Then a pair of hands clutched him under the neck and dragged him under, tightening on him, like the grip of death. "For her sake! It might have been Christina!" he cried to himself, as the chill water cut to the marrow of his bones and the hands choked him till he sank completely under.

It was not difficult to release the choking hands, but John Christian, sick, cold and exhausted, found it harder to extricate himself and the owner of the hands from the hole. Each time that he tried to lift himself up, the ice broke. So the struggle went on till at last, when Christian succeeded in pulling himself out, on the shore with his precious burden, he was nearly exhausted.

It was she that was helping him now. "Come," she seemed to be saying, "we must run. We shall freeze. Run! It means death to stay here." And the hands that had before choked now helped Christian to his feet.

Oh, but it seemed cold to poor John Christian! The wind drove the snow into his face and bit his flesh like needles; his temples seemed to be sheathed in a helmet of ice; and his wet clothes became as steel and tor his flesh as he walked. Yet he must get home! Over the bridge through the burial-ground, just as the town clock sounded the midnight hour, "It might have been little Christina," he kept muttering.

Suddenly all Christian's suffering ceased and the air about him became as warm and balmy as a summer's day. He gave a Christmas spruce before him in a blaze of light, and the Snow Children were "oh-ing and ah-ing" about it. The branches had never looked quite so beautiful, and at the very top shone a star which was brighter than the brightest flaming aur-light you ever saw. There were twinkling candles which burned in all the most dazzling colors; and apples and oranges of the reddest red and the yellowest yellow hanging on the tips of the boughs. The Snow Children looked up at the pretty bangles on the tree, the tinsel and pop-corn strings, the colored glass balls and the brightly painted toys. Then they laughed a joyous laugh and danced round the tree holding hands.

The ground under the tree was covered with sparkling snow; it seemed as soft as velvet, and the children's feet left no marks. The children all wore thin white dresses, and did not seem to be cold at all, and for that matter, neither was Christian, who felt himself surrounded by the most delicious warmth and heard a chorus as of a thousand angels chanting carols in the sky.

"Christina! Christina!" he cried aloud. But no little flaxen-haired child answered the call. The Snow Children stopped their dancing and stood looking at him wistfully. One said: "He would have given his life for us."

Christian could not have told you how it was that he woke up later in his own bed, feeling very weak, with a yellowing nurse standing beside him, wearing the same wistful expression he had seen on the faces of the Snow Children. "You have been very sick, you are getting over pneumonia," she said. "What has happened to me?" asked Christian, never moving his eyes from the nurse.

"Yes, dragged me out of the water on Christmas eve. I was coming to Ellenburg on a hurry call that night—Hans Engelborg is a great grandfather now! I had never been here before—at least, not for a great many years. I missed the turn at the bridge in the blinding snow and walked into the creek. You pulled me out. It was brave of you. You did it because you once loved a little girl of your own."

Christian lay silent for a long time after this. He was thinking back over the years to the time when the spring frosts had come down with such unheeded violence and swept nearly the whole town of Ellenburg away as suddenly as a chess player sweeps the board with a stroke of his arm. He saw his three-year-old child clinging to a board and crying piteously to be helped, then carried beyond sight.

"Yes, there was a little girl whom I loved once," said Christian at last. "She was carried away in a flood that we would should be too big for us, and—no never—found her. Perhaps she is alive today, perhaps not. She had golden hair like yours, and the largest brown eyes, which was strange for one of us, but beautiful. She gave her father more than any grown woman could give—that perfect love and confidence of a child. If she were a father is a rough, mannerless dog, with no claim to anybody's love or admiration. But in those days she was too young to know. He was the best man in the world to her eyes, and in return she was adored."

"And her name was Christina," said



the nurse, hastily. She had turned away from Christian and was looking out of the window, shading her eyes with the muslin curtain. "How did you know?" asked the man in bed. "Because when you were freezing to death in the burial ground you cried out 'Christina!' twice, and I thought it was strange you did not have told what color those eyes were as she turned them on him, so full of tears were they—'And, father—daddy—I've got a hug for you!'"

THE NIGHT BEFORE CHRISTMAS.

'Twas the night before Christmas, when all through the house Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse

The stockings were hung by the chimney with care, In hopes that St. Nicholas soon would be there.

The children were nestled all snug in their beds, While visions of sugar plums danced in their heads;

And mamma in her kerchief, and I in my cap, Had just settled our brains for a long winter's nap.

When out on the lawn there rose such faint, faint, faint noises, I sprang from my bed to see what was the matter.

Away to the window I flew like a flash, Tore open the shutters and threw up the sash.

The moon, on the breast of the new-fallen snow, Gave a lustre of midday to objects below.

When what to my wondering eyes should appear, But a miniature sleigh and eight tiny reindeer.

With a little old driver so lively and quick, I knew in a moment it must be Saint Nick.

More rapid than eagles his coursers they came, And he whistled, and shouted, and called them by name:

"Now Dasher! Now Dancer! Now Prancer! Now Vixen!"

On, Comet! On, Comet! On, Dunder and Blitzen!

To the top of the porch, to the top of the wall! Now dash away, dash away, dash away—fly.

As dry leaves that before the wild wind lie, When they meet with an obstacle, mount to the sky.

YULETIDE FAIRY TALE FOR THE BOYS AND GIRLS

A FLOOD, A TRAMP AND A FAIRY.

It had rained and rained and rained. For ten days this particular part of Nebraska had been soaked and soaked by water which fell out of the sky.

The Kaw River was twice its normal size, and all the rivers and brooks and creeks which empty into the Kaw were roaring and spluttering, and making the Kaw more and more dangerous.

The railroads had stopped trying to run trains. Many bridges were gone, and many more were weak and twisted out of shape.

But the rains could not stop the Tramp. On and on he came, searching for work, the first time in three years.

Why his fine resolution. He had begun to think of his wife and baby, that's why.

Now he was nearing the town of Fairburg, and about one mile west of the bridge and railroad yards (where he expected to find work, for he had once been a railroad man) he came upon a bridge over which the water was pouring.

And the Tramp stopped—and prayed. Could it be, he asked God, that just at the time when he was about to try to become a man once again, the storm would stop him?

As the big, ragged man stood near the bridge, which it did not seem he could possibly cross, a little child suddenly appeared before him and looked into his eyes.

"Of course, the Tramp was surprised. For something like three years all children had run away when he came near them.

"What wouldst thou, big man?" asked the child.

So up to the house-top the coursers they flew, With the sleigh full of toys and Saint Nicholas, too, And then in a twinkling I heard on the roof

The prancing and pawing of each little hoof. As I drew in my head and was turning around,

Down the chimney Saint Nicholas came with a bound.

He was dressed all in fur from his head to his foot, And his clothes were all furnished with

ashes and soot; A bundle of toys he had flung on his back

And he looked like a peddler just opening his pack, His eyes, how they twinkled, his dimpled

cheeks how merry! His cheeks were like roses, his nose like a cherry.

His droll little mouth was drawn up like a bow, And he heard on his chin as the snow

fell as the snow! The stump of a pipe he held tight in his teeth,

And the smoke, it encircled his head like a wreath. He had a broad face and a little round

belly, That shook when he laughed like a bowl full of jelly.

He was chubby and plump—a right jolly old elf, And I laughed when I saw him in spite

of myself. A wink of his eyes and a twist of his head,

Soon gave me to know I had nothing to dread. He spoke not a word, but went straight

to his work, And filled all the stockings, then turned

with a jerk, And having his finger aside of his nose,

And giving a nod, up the chimney he rose. He sprang to his sleigh, to his team gave

a whistle, And away they all flew like the down

fall of snow, But I heard him exclaim ere he drove

out of sight: "Merry Christmas to all, and to all a good night."

WHERE SHE SPANKED.

A little boy had eaten too much unadventurous pie for his Christmas supper and was now reacting lustily.

His mother's visitor was much disturbed. "If he was my child," she said, "he'd not get a good sound spanking."

"He deserves it," the mother admitted, "but I don't believe in spanking him on a full stomach."

"Neither do I," said the visitor, "I'd turn him over."

The evening that these were all prepared proved cold and threatening. The east wind rushed intermittently down the canyon, a coyote howl in the mountain side, and now and again away up the crevices a rush and roar of snow and rock sliding down

some of the sheer cliffs that are so lonely and wild, but grandly beautiful were the surroundings of this isolated cabin home.

Not too early did our guests arrive; native etiquette and Indian pride forbids that any shall appear too eager to accept hospitality, kindness or gifts.

When we heard the canoes, or rather the chatter of the Indians as they beached their canoes we went out to the porch to wait their coming and to show that we cordially welcomed them. Each one of the ten, even to the little tot Charlie, came to me first with a bow and the greeting, "Hyas Kloshe Christmas."

Amongst these people a woman, the oldest present, is first in all household or family affairs. All gifts are from her; all smallness and meanness is credited to her; a man has no voice in sale, barter, gifts or hospitality.

As they entered the living room Captains George and Jim stopped short on the threshold with an emphatic "Who!" expressive of admiration. Lucy and Mary laughed at their respective "men" and gently chided them on their bad manners.

But the old men absolutely turned their backs on Indian etiquette, and boldly walked about looking and admiring, as they exclaimed, "Whoo, Skookum, hyin Skookum!" (Ah, good very good!) And Mary and Lucy sat with their children about them and said meekly, "Oh, I shamed my old man act so bad!" And then when I exclaimed in mock sternness, "Don't you say that! Those two fine old men; my husband's tillikums; hyas Kloshe tillikums!" (Highly valued, or extremely good friends).

CABIN DAYS RECALLED

A CHRISTMAS STORY BY ELLEN R. C. WEBBER, in Vancouver Sunset

Nika tiken mika glatawa oook nika house, mas Kloshe pola khi saghalie Lyhee klatawa oook ilahie. Tenas cultus potlach, hyin cultus hee.

Mika wa-wa halo,—nika hyin sick tumtum;—hyin cly!

I was living just beyond the ragged fringe of civilization when these invitations were sent out to my neighbors, just across the river; the only neighbors within ten miles.

My cabin home was in the heart of the Cascades and just on the bank of the Fraser where it comes tumbling, white flecked and roaring still, high-walled canyon.

The river is narrow here; and just on the other side lived Capt. George and Capt. Jim, two brothers, with their families.

It was early in December when "Lucy George" came across in her canoe to visit me and tell me of her anxieties about the great holiday season.

Lucy was slim and pretty, with hair glossy smooth and braided. Her print dress was clean, her white apron spotless and her head and shoulders, was neatly folded and hung over the back of an unmade chair.

"Baptiste is more bad," she told me sadly, "the priest, he say we must not go to the mission this Christmas day to meet all the people, cause this east wind he blow so cold melbe Baptiste he be dead in the canoe. Baptiste, he heap cough sick; some day he not get out his bed; he not eat nothin' and he no more fat stop his bones."

"I think pretty soon he go way long o' Ales, he not come back no more, no more!"

The words came with a plaintive moan as the little mother who had lost one boy just a few months before through this same dreaded white plague, clasped her hands and rocked her body forward in grief for her oldest son; her first-born.

It came that we planned our Christmas party and that these curious invitations were sent out. We hurried on an order off to the store for toys and gifts for our friends, and then we cooked and baked. In all probability it was Baptiste's last Christmas here, and it must be made a happy and merry one.

Now, I had often imagined I was somewhat weak in Chinook grammar and construction, and the note of acceptance written by Baptiste and delivered by Jimmie, jun., strengthened my doubts on that subject.

This is Baptiste's note: Mrs. Webber, Your nice kind letter ask us come over to your house, make me very glad, also make my father glad, and make my mother glad, and my brothers and sisters, they were glad also.

I read your very welcome letter my self. We think you like learn Chinook, some day we learn you talk it alright. So good-by; we much oblige you; we sure come over in our canoe on the big day for your potlach and good time.

Your friend, Baptiste. The novelty of the preparations for this unique Christmas party gave zest and employment to every hour of labor expended upon it.

British Columbia woods hold many treasures for the decorative art. Scarcely less than the long coral-like green mossy vines, everlasting, and a plant so closely resembling English holly that it is difficult to detect the points of difference. No labor was spared in this line, and in one corner of the large living room the laden tree, ribbon-trimmed and bedecked proved attractive to the children, white and Indian alike. Across the other corner a big damp sheet was stretched, and excited much curiosity. The long table down the center of the room held three very attractive pieces, aside from pies, cookies and wild duck, the jelly, the decorated Christmas cake, and two large tissue paper "pies" made in large milk pans, and each "pie" showing eighteen bits of baby ribbon protruding from the "crusts."

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They laughed gleefully and looked at their lords more in pride than shame.

My children soon had their play-mates before the tree and each was eagerly choosing which gift he hoped was his, but not a child, not even little Charlie, aged only three, touched that spread table or asked for a thing to be given them. Neither at any time was a child's voice raised above a low soft tone that could not annoy my elders, and there were five besides my own, who were not so well behaved! so far as excitement led them on.

The sheet seemed to attract much attention, so I told them if they would sit in the dark I would show them what it hid. They looked like frightened children, but played bravely. I took the lamps behind the scenes where I had arranged for shadow pictures. First a lone mountain shone on the curtain, then an antlered deer came across, followed by an Indian with a gun. Round and up one slope and down the other. The race was long and the excitement of the audience was great and their advice to hunter was no doubt good, but at last the deer raced skyward and out of sight while the hunter was left on the top of the mountain. "Whoo! Tamamoo!" exclaimed the men, which meant that the deer was magic or ghostly.

Next came a canoe race which ended by each canoe slipping down the open mouth of a big strugon, causing much laughter. Many games were played, games that did not seem to entertain very pleasantly, and then came the tree. Baptiste dressed in fur coat, pillows, seal skin cap, and cotton hatting heard made a jolly old Santa Claus.

He was a pupil of the Mission school, so he could read the names on the gifts nicely. Ribbons, dolls and aprons, as well as the goodies, went to each child exactly alike, and the boys also fared equally.

But when Santa called Captain Jim's name, and gave him, as he stood before the tree, a long-haired, blue-eyed doll. I really thought the women would go into hysterics with laughter, while the old man hugged, kissed and petted it, till little Katie, his daughter, pulled it from his arms, when he professed great disappointment that it was for her rather than for himself.

I never saw a Christmas party so thoroughly enjoyed each gift or so joyously appreciated each little joke.

Upon leaving the table, each Indian guest placed in a clean handkerchief the remnants of cake, pie, fruits, etc., left upon the plates. This was to signify that they had received more than they could possibly desire of food, good and tempting to be refused or rejected; a delicate compliment you understand, to the hostess.

The bran pie with its luscious gifts came next, and amid much giggling and changing of strings all waited Captain Jim's signal to pull. With a "Wah how, wah how!" Captain Jim and his relatives, everlastingly, gave mighty pulls, and hauled forth small gifts; more laughter and noise and trading of prizes, and the second pie was eagerly rounded.

The zest of ransacking was in this, to fish for a prize and enjoy for a brief moment the uncertainty, the "might be" of the half doubtful, half hopeful results.

After this the entertainment of the elders proved a puzzle. Baptiste with his paint box, his pattern books or flower and landscape, and his natural history had gone into a corner by himself and was lost in the enjoyment of his gifts. The children were looking at their picture books and caressing their dolls; and there is no little mother more loving than the little Indian girl over her dolls.

But suddenly an inspiration came to me, and I flew to the bean bag. I soon taught my guests the mysteries of "Birds in the Bush" and over the loss or gain of those beans they grew hilariously excited till I was almost afraid they would become crazed. The women never lost their heads, though they enjoyed the game hugely, but when the men's laughter or intense watchfulness became too noticeable, they would seize their arms and shake them into a realizing sense of where they were, with a few sharp words in their native tongue.

"Birds in the Bush" kept them well entertained till midnight, when with words of thanks and kindly farewell they bade me good night.

In April of the next year little Annie Jim was laid to rest with her flaxen-haired doll in her arms. Later from the hop fields came a letter to me from Baptiste. "I think you like to hear about dear little Charlie. He's dead. He just sick little while, died quick. He take that little tin gun you gave him for present in bed and Jim gave him. My mother, she put in it grave long him, maybe he like take it long of him. I think maybe nothing up there he like better. Maybe so I go see little Charlie pretty soon now. Your true friend, Baptiste."

But Baptiste waited still, till the fall of the leaf in this same "New year," and his paints and his books were his last companions, when weeks of confinement and inability to walk about fell to his lot at last. His last gift to me was a string of bear's teeth, a necklace that should ensure me from danger and secure to me always a brave heart.

Dear little Charlie, and Annie, and Baptiste, I trust and believe that in that better land each day is a "Happy Christmas" and that your gifts are many, and your joys unending, and may your white friend be worthy to receive your welcome "maybe so, pretty soon."

