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THE GIFT OF LOVE

A Christmas Story

By MARY E. WILKINS

(Continued from page 10.)

all subtle, was seized with an inspiration. "I can smell the fir balsam on your clothes," said she, "real strong." That diverted Julia for the time from the odor of tobacco from the clothes of John Leavitt that had permeated the room. "Well, I suppose you do," said she; "you notice it almost before you open the vestry door. It seems as if it was stronger than usual this year."

"Maybe the fir balsam is sweeter some years than others," remarked Caroline, following up her advantage. "Maybe it is," said Julia, taking off her wraps, and going with them into the entry. "It's queer," she said, returning, "but I can smell that same small out in the entry. The baker-boy didn't come here by the front door, the way I've told him not to, did he, Caroline?"

"No." "I wouldn't have had you go out in that entry for anything, let alone his impudence in coming to the front door; it's as cold as the north pole out there," Julia looked at the clock. "Mercy! it's half-past five," said she. "I must get supper."

Caroline trembled. Julia looked sharply at her. "I don't care what you say," she declared, "you look about ready to drop."

"I am all right," Caroline replied, faintly.

"You don't look all right. Well, maybe you'll feel better after you've had a good hot cup of tea."

Caroline reflected quickly that the tea was out in the kitchen closet, and not in the long pantry where John Leavitt was concealed.

"I guess I'll make some cream toast, too," said Julia, and Caroline reflected that the bread jar was in the kitchen closet.

"Yes, I guess I would relish some cream toast," said she; "but her heart sank when Julia said she would have some peach preserve with the toast, because the preserves were kept in the sitting-room pantry."

"Somehow I don't feel a mite like peach preserves," she said, faintly.

"Well, we'll have pear, then," said Julia, in a magisterial voice, and Caroline's heart sank again, because the pear preserve was also in the sitting-room pantry.

"I don't care myself if we don't have any preserves," she said in a feeble voice.

"Well, I'm going to have some, whether or no," said Julia. "I wouldn't give a cent for cream toast without preserves, and I guess you'll eat some when it's set before you. It is good for your cold. I'm going to have some apple pie, too. I'll warm it while I'm loafing the bread. I guess I'll go out now, and see to getting the bread out."

The apple pie also was in the sitting-room pantry. Caroline felt as if she were going to faint, but she knew that she must not. She held on to herself with a resolute will until Julia returned from the kitchen. "I guess I may as well get that apple pie in the oven now," she said; "it may be frozen," and she made toward the pantry door. Then Caroline fairly grew desperate. She did something for which she never fairly forgave herself. She resorted to deception; at least it was almost deception, to say the least, and she had never in her whole life been deceptive. Just as Julia put out her hand towards the latch of the pantry door, she began to cough. It was easy enough, for she had in fact a hard cold, a bronchial cold. She had been restraining her cough all day, now she bent over and coughed, and coughed. It was almost as if she had the croup. Julia took a step away from the pantry door and stood regarding her with an odd expression; something between anxiety and severity. She was evidently worried almost to death, but there was a certain anger withal that her sister should cough so.

"There is no use talking any longer," she said. "I've doctored you all I know how, and now I'm going to call somebody else in. If you have pneumonia, I don't mean to have myself to blame. I don't think much of Doctor Edgum; never did. I'm going to call him in anyhow. You haven't coughed since you had your cold the way you are coughing now."

ed since you had your cold the way you are coughing now."

Julia made a stride toward the entry where she had deposited her wraps. Caroline continued to cough. Indeed, it was quite true that now she could not stop. Julia thrust her arms into the sleeves of her coat. "I'd cough down to the cellar while I was about it, if I were you," said she, and again her voice was full of the utmost love and anxiety, and yet with a certain anger. She tied the strings of her bonnet with a jerk.

"I hate to have you go," Caroline managed to wheeze out, and that was hypocritical, and later on she prayed to be forgiven. Then she continued to cough, while Julia went out of the door, closing it after her with a bang. Immediately after the door closed the pantry door opened and John Leavitt appeared. He looked anxious, for he had not altogether understood Caroline's manoeuvres.

Caroline could not stop coughing immediately, but she cast a reassuring glance at John. "It's not so bad—as it sounds," she gasped out presently. "But if—Julia hadn't gone—she—she—would have gone into the—pantry, and—found you."

"Oh," said John, but he still regarded Caroline with loving concern. She managed to stop coughing. "I know I was wicked," she said, "but I let the cough—when I suppose I might, if I had tried hard, have—stopped it, for I couldn't have Julia go in the pantry, and find you."

John regarded her a moment, then he grimed. "Well," he said, "I don't know what Julia would have done if she had come into the pantry and found me, that's a fact."

"You had better go now, I guess," Caroline said anxiously. "It isn't far to the doctor's, and she may be right back."

"Well, I am coming again, and she has got to make up her mind to it," said John.

Caroline began to weep again. "Oh, dear," she said, half strangled between her sobs and her cough. "I never can leave her. I never can. You don't know how good she has been to me, you don't, John."

"She hasn't been any better to you than I would have been if I had been given the chance," said John.

"I can't leave her," said John. "Do you mean to say that you really will give me up again on account of your sister?" asked John sternly.

"I've got to; I can't help it. Oh, John!"

John stood looking at Caroline for a moment. "You can't care very much for me after all, then," he said.

"Oh, John!"

"You can't. Well, then, if you won't leave her, you won't. I am not going down on my knees to any woman, especially after all these years, and, —the lonely life I've led. Good-by, Caroline."

John Leavitt went out without another word. Caroline looked dully out of the window, and saw him going down the road. She felt benumbed. She felt too benumbed even to bemoan herself over her hard fate. It seemed, after John had gone out of sight, almost incredible that he had been there at all. After a while she saw the doctor's buggy come in sight. He was bringing Julia back with him. When he came in she answered his questions mechanically. She watched him prepare some medicines for her, still with the same numbness. When the doctor went, Julia followed him into the entry, and she heard the dull murmur of their voices without the slightest curiosity. When Julia re-entered the room she had an air of forced jocularity. She went about briskly getting supper. "The doctor says your cold is all on the bronchial tubes," said she cheerfully. "He says you will be all right in a few days."

Caroline was too sunken in concealed misery that John had been there and had gone away again forever to attempt any reply. She sat still, looking at the frozen landscape fast disappearing in the night. "After a while it will be over with me, just as this day will be over for the world," thought she, "and then it will not matter whether it has been a winter or a summer day."

Julia kept glancing at her as she set the table. Since Caroline had been ill with a cold, they had eaten in the sitting-room, because it was warmer. "What is the matter with you, you don't act half alive!" said she.

"Nothing," replied Caroline gently. Julia went to the secretary and opened the top drawer. Then she came with a little box in her hand to Caroline.

"Here," said she, "I meant to have hung this on the tree for you, but now you can't go, you may as well have it now."

"Thank you, sister," said Caroline. She tried to look pleased as she opened the little box. It held a little pin set with pearls.

"I thought you would like it; you didn't have a real nice pin," Julia said, and there was a wistful accent in her voice.

"I do like it, and it is lovely, Julia," said Caroline.

Caroline remembered a brooch; one of John Leavitt's returned presents. That had been a cluster of pearl grapes with gold leaves, on onyx, and even this gift which Julia had planned for her pleasure hurt her.

After supper, Julia carried away the dishes, and put everything in order; then she brought her wraps in from the hall. Caroline looked at her with a dull surprise. "Now, Caroline," said Julia, "I am going out again, I've got to, but I am not going far, and I shall not be long. I will lock the front door, and take the key. You won't be afraid?"

"No," replied Caroline meekly, "I won't be afraid, Julia."

Julia stood looking at her after she had on her wraps. Her strong face worked strangely under the crest of velvet roses. "I am going to bring your Christmas present, Caroline," said she. "Why have you given it to me?"

"This is another," said Julia, and

her voice had never been more impressive. Then she went out.

Caroline, left alone, continued to sit in her rocking-chair. After a while tears commenced to roll slowly down her delicate cheeks. She was conscious of no anger or rebellion against fate or her sister, who had been in a way her fate, but she was realizing the sharp pain in her heart; it had been benumbed at first.

Julia was not gone long. It was scarcely half an hour before Caroline heard the key turn in the lock of the front door. She wiped her eyes and straightened herself.

Then Julia came in with John Leavitt. He stalked behind Julia, beaming, but his face was working with emotion, which he tried to restrain. Julia was very pale. She looked at her sister as she had never looked before.

"I heard from the doctor that he had come," she said simply, "and I made up my mind that after supper I would go over and see him. The doctor said he wasn't married. I didn't know but he might be, and I didn't know but he might have changed his mind about you, and I didn't want to fling my sister at any man's head. But I saw the minute he looked at me that he hadn't changed. I don't see why he should have. You are just as good looking as you ever were. He has told me how he has been here and hid in the pantry. You must have been scared to death of me, both of you, like a couple of children," Julia laughed. "The doctor said it was more your mind than your cold that was to be worried about. I won't stand between you any longer. He's a good man, and I hope you'll be happy. He's your Christmas present I told you about."

Caroline began to weep. She ran toward her sister, then she altered her course, and made for the secretary. "Oh, I forgot," she sobbed out wildly, for she was fairly hysterical. "I forgot your Christmas present, Julia." She pulled open a drawer, and produced a neat white parcel. "It's—it's a scarf I embroidered for your bureau," she sobbed. She thrust the parcel into Julia's hand, and flung her arms round her neck. "Oh, Julia, you came first, and—I won't leave you unless you are sure you don't mind," whispered Caroline, her cheeks against Julia's.

But Julia put her away firmly. "No body with Christian feelings should rebel at anything that comes in the course of nature," said she. "I did wrong, and I ain't afraid to say so. But you are young yet and you will have a good many happy years before you. And I shan't live alone, I'm going to send for Cousin Marie Fisher to come and live with me. She's as poor as Job's old ox, and I know as well as I want to that she doesn't have half enough to eat, and she lives alone, and she was always afraid of her shadow. I am going to write her to come, and she'll have a good home with me as long as she lives. Don't you worry about me. I ain't a child, and when I fairly sense what is right I hope I've spunk enough to do it. Take your Christmas present."

Caroline being pushed by Julia toward John stood before him. Both were smiling and flushing. John pulled a little box out of his pocket, and spoke abruptly to Julia. "Here's a little present for you," he said, in a nervous voice. Julia took the box. "Thank you, John," she said.

"It's a little pearl breast-pin. I meant it for Caroline, if she would take it," said John, "but you take it now, and I'll buy her another."

"No, let her keep this," said Julia.

"Julia, if you don't take it, I can't bear it," sobbed Caroline.

"Well, thank you very much, John," said Julia. Then she gave a look at Caroline. Caroline's face had not with a wonderful change. She looked as beautiful as she had ever looked in her youth. A lovely color flamed in her cheeks, her blue eyes gleamed. Julia laughed outright as she looked at her. "Well, I must say I never saw anybody get over a cold so quick in my life," said she.

Her voice was full of loving sarcasm. She went out of the room, and upstairs to her own. Then she sat down beside the window and thought. Her room was warmed by a register in the floor from the room below in which the lovers sat. She could hear a faint murmur of voices, but no distinct words, until she heard Caroline say quite distinctly: "Take your Christmas present, Caroline." She held in her heart what she had never held in any Christmas before—the Gift of Unselfish Love.

"TAKING TURNS."

How Jack and Betty Doubled Their Good Time One Christmas Morning. (Katherine Williams in December St. Nicholas.)

Last Christmas morning Betty and Jack found their stockings hanging in front of the fireplace. Santa Claus had not forgotten them—in fact, their stockings looked bigger and fatter and fuller than ever before. Leaning against the mantelpiece at the foot of Betty's stocking was a big, jolly "Teddy bear," and Betty clasped him in her arms with joy. And at the foot of Jack's stocking were three big, red books, for Jack loved to read.

"Oh, Jack, let's take turns with our stockings," said Betty. "You pull something out of yours and look at it, and then wait till I take something out of mine. Will you?"

At first Jack did not like to say "Yes," for he was so eager to see what Santa Claus had brought him. But Jack loved his sister Betty dearly, and was always kind to her; so he said: "All right, Betty, and you go first. But please be quick, for I can't wait a minute!"

So Betty tugged at her stocking and drew out a beautiful little dolly. "Oh! oh! oh! the very thing I wanted!" she exclaimed as she set little Miss Dolly down on the floor. And little Miss Dolly looked up, just as if she were trying to watch Betty take the other gifts out of the stocking.

Then Betty said: "Now, Jack, it's your turn," and Jack brought out a round package, and when he took the paper off he shouted: "Oh, Betty, see! a beautiful, bouncing, red rubber ball!" And he

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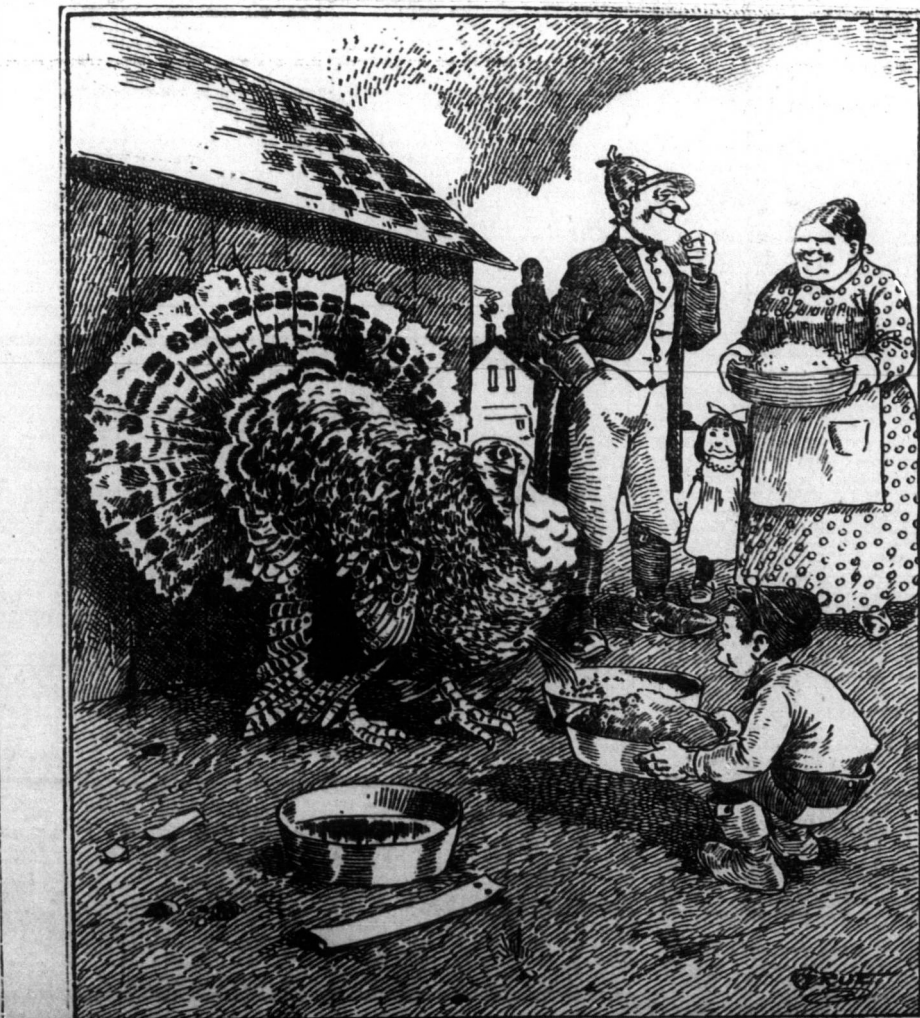
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bounced it up and down two or three times, and then put it beside him on the floor.

"Your turn again, Betty!" said Jack, and this time Betty drew out a straight, long, narrow parcel and unwrapped it, and found it was a lovely stick of candy, with red stripes all around it. She told Jack to bite off the end of it, and then said: "Now it is your turn again."

This time Jack drew out a queer-shaped wooden thing, with joints and a queer handle, and cried out: "Oh, it's a kind of— But wait, Betty! Here's a card with it that says: 'Merry Christmas to Jack from his namesake, Jumping Jack!' Isn't that great?"

Now, I haven't room to tell you all the other things they found in their stockings, so you must guess what they were. But this Christmas when you open your stockings try the "taking-turns" plan. Jack and Betty say it is great fun.



THERE IS A REASON.

The Turk—These are the nicest people I ever saw. They are giving me all the grub I want.