



The Real Christmas

By Grace Ethelwyn Cody

"Do you hear this, papa?" Carl and Ted say they spent every cent of their money when they were down-town yesterday, and they've just remembered that they didn't buy a thing for the cousins at Bloomington. And now to-morrow is Christmas, and those Bloomington presents ought to have gone on this morning's mail!"

Doctor Harmon laid down the newspaper he had been scanning, and looked across the table at his older daughter, who was presiding over the silver coffee-urn with girlish dignity. The light from the window behind her shone through the fluff of fair hair about her face, and the doctor thought with a pang how she was growing to look like the mother whose place she had been trying to fill for four long years.

Then the anxious expression on the young face brought him back to what she had been saying, and he turned on the boys almost sternly.

"What kind of a performance is that for a pair of twelve-year-old boys?" he derided. "You're getting large enough now so that you ought to be a help to Ruth in these matters, instead of making her take all the responsibility for you. Don't you know it?"

"The twins," as they are collectively called in the family, made no answer. Carl did shrug his shoulders a little and give a nervous laugh, but Ted kept his eyes on his plate and applied himself strictly to his breakfast.

"Very well," continued the doctor, with growing displeasure, "if you're so indifferent, you may take the consequences. The Bloomington cousins may go without their presents."

"Oh, but papa, we can't do that!" Ruth protested. "You know Aunt Mary always has them send Carl and Ted such lovely things."

"There it is—the give and take idea!" her father replied. "It's spoiling Christmas the world over! No, Ruth, I've spent all the money I shall on this year's Christmas—and four times as much as I could afford, too."

"But, papa dear, please don't be unreasonable," persisted Ruth. "We simply can't leave the Bloomington cousins out, and there's one other thing that's troubling me, too. It's about Mrs. Halliday. You know she sent me that beautiful necklace last year. It seems as if I must do something for her, and yesterday I saw just what I'd like to give her."

"Yes," put in Ted, suddenly coming to life as a chance to tease presented itself, "and Gray Halliday is coming home from college to-night, and he'd appreciate Ruth's giving his mother a nice present, wouldn't he, Ruth? Say, sis, you don't expect a fellow that's been off at college a whole quarter to take any interest in a high-school girl, do you?"

"Theodore, apologize to your sister, instantly!" commanded Doctor Harmon, sensitive to the flush of mortification that spread over Ruth's face.

"Oh, I didn't mean a thing, Ruth! Honest!" Ted responded, quickly, with a look of love at his sister that went to her heart.

"I know it, dear; it's all right," she whispered, as they rose from the table, and just at that moment came a ring at the door-bell, followed by an unusual commotion in the front hall. An expressman had come puffing in with a huge, mysterious burden of some sort, and the whole family flocked out to see what it could be.

While Ted and Carl stripped off the wrappings and disclosed a spacious leather armchair, the doctor was leading the card attached to one of its arms.

Merry Christmas to Doctor Harmon! With love and appreciation from the Mertons.

As he read, a look of dissatisfaction spread over the doctor's face.

"Now there's an example of it!" he exclaimed to Ruth. "That's the result of my sending Robby Merton a few flowers three years ago. First they came back at us with silver, so that last year we thought we had to give them something—what was it, a cut-glass pitcher? And now look at that chair! What am I going to do?"

It was a laughable picture the Harmons made at that moment. There stood the beautiful chair with the message of "love and appreciation," and there stood the whole family, fairly scowling at it. Even eight-year-old Nan, who had been silently taking in all the Christmas worry, was puckering her face with the frown of an anxious little young old woman.

"We'll, papa," ventured Ruth, after a moment, "I saw some perfectly beautiful spoons yesterday. Of course one of them wouldn't be worth anything near as much as this, but we might get—"

"Get! get!" repeated Doctor Harmon, almost savagely, as he tossed the card of Christmas greeting into the chair, and began to thrust his feet into his overshoes. "No, daughter, I'm through! I'll get nothing. They can come and take their chair away if they want its exact value. It's too much, I tell you! It's ridiculous! Look at that chair!" and with one last vindictive glance at the inanimate offender, he buttoned his greatcoat around him and started for the door.

"But, papa, you can't mean it!" Ruth persisted. "We must do something about it, and for the Bloomington cousins, too." "No, dear," said the doctor, more gently, but with absolute decision. "I mean what I say. This thing has to stop somewhere, and it may as well stop here."

There was no appeal from that, Ruth knew, but she was far from agreeing with it, and the doctor had no sooner started for his office than she made Carl and Ted bring out their purchases of the day before.

"Why, you've bought three or four presents apiece for each other!" she commented, after a secret session with each of them.

"Course!" replied Ted. "Everybody does that nowadays. One present isn't anything!"

"Well, it will have to be this time," declared Ruth. "We'll just do up some of these things and send them to Bloomington as fast as we can."

The boys demurred at first, but the end of it was that they helped tie up the Bloomington package, and trudged off to the express office. Then Ruth dropped into a chair and ran over her Christmas list.

There was her Sunday-school class, provided for and checked off; the presents for the family were ready—she had sat up half the night before to attend to that; all the gifts that had to be sent any distance had been safely started. But there were provisions to be ordered, and all the house to be made tidy, for the one maid in the Harmon kitchen was far from being equal to all the duties of the house, and there was a lace tie half-finished, which Ruth planned to give to one of her girl friends. Her head ached with weariness, and besides all the rest, there was a sore spot of disappointment about that present for Mrs. Halliday. With a long face she began counting up her Christmas expenses once more.

"O dear!" wailed Nan, just then. "Papa's about right, anyway. I think Christmas is the hardest time!"

"Don't interrupt me now, Nan," murmured Ruth, in the midst of a column of figures.

"Tis, though!" persisted Nan, talking away to herself, as she struggled to tie up a trumpery teapot which she had bought to present to her nine-year-old chum. "Bertha Fraser won't like it a bit because I haven't got something for her, but I don't see how I could help it. Thirty people to buy things for, and only

three dollars for the whole crowd! I just wonder if those wise men knew, when they brought their presents, what a terrible tax Christmas was going to be!"

"Why, Nan Harmon!" cried Ruth, suddenly waking up. "You mustn't say such dreadful things! Don't you know what Christmas means?"

"Yes, of course. But it's hard just the same, and you know it, Ruthie! It's the only time in the whole year that you get cross."

Ruth's conscience gave a twinge at that, but before she had time to answer, Nan burst out, with a shout, "Oh! oh! There comes the postman, with his arms just full of things!"

"Wait, Nan—do be quiet!" cried Ruth, following the excited child to the door, and forgetting, just as she had begun to remember, that Christmas was not the time to be cross.

"Don't jump around so, Nan! No, you're not to look at one thing until to-morrow. Oh, don't be so noisy, dear! Come, let me have every one of those packages!" And with a severe secrecy, but not a bit of the fun of Christmas mystery, Ruth carried the bundles off into her own room, while Nan went solemnly back to the troublesome teapot that would persist in thrusting its snout through the tissue-paper she was trying to wrap round it.

But as Ruth, alone in her room, was laying the packages away in a drawer, one of them, addressed to herself and with covering partly torn off, caught her curiosity. Yielding to a sudden temptation, she slipped off the rest of the wrapping, and spread out upon her lap a beautiful lace fichu.

The card with it bore the name of her Aunt Louise, in Philadelphia, but Ruth's expression as she gazed at the fichu was one of unmingled bewilderment. It was beautifully made, with rows of little French knots in black heading the dainty lace fichu—but it was suitable for a matron of sixty!

"Aunt Louise hasn't seen me for so long, she must think I'm terribly old!" was Ruth's first thought. "Oh, it would be just the thing for Mrs. Halliday!" was her second. Her face flushed, and she gave a guilty look at the closed door. "Aunt Louise would never know," the thought ran on. "And it really isn't suitable for me to wear. It's so dainty, I'm going to do it!"

And before she had time to repent, Ruth had written a Christmas message, enclosed it with the fichu in a dainty package, and coaxed long-suffering Nan to fly to the mail-box for "positively the last time."

Then she plunged into household duties with a will. By two o'clock in the afternoon she had accomplished wonders, and was just ready to sit down to work on the lace tie when a telegram was brought to the door. It was addressed to Miss Ruth Harmon, and she hastily tore open the yellow envelope to read the startling words:

Return fichu sent by mistake. Your gift follows. Merry Christmas! Aunt Louise.

The message fluttered to the floor as Ruth dropped into a chair, covering her burning face with both hands. Nan and the twins were outside at play; there was no one to see, and for several minutes she sat there, silent. Then suddenly she jumped to her feet.

"It serves me right!" she said aloud. "I knew as well as any one that it wasn't nice to give away a present that had been made for me. I'm going straight up to Mrs. Halliday and tell her what I've done."

Five minutes later she was on the way. Twice, before she found herself in Mrs. Halliday's parlor, she thought that Gray would have to know about it almost stung her into turning back; but once she was face to face with the sweet, white-haired lady she had come to see, she forgot Gray and everybody else in the comfort of resting her head on a motherly shoulder and sobbing out all the Christmas troubles.

"Dear, dear child," murmured Gray's mother, "I am so glad it happened, for it brought you to me, and perhaps I can help. I had a Christmas lesson myself years ago, and shall I tell what it taught me? Never to give a Christmas present to any one solely because that person had given one to me, or solely because the giving had become a habit."

"But, Mrs. Halliday, how can you help that? There are a lot of the girls who are probably just bored to death by having to send me presents, but it doesn't seem as if I could risk hurting their feelings by being the first to break it off."

"And yet I don't doubt that the majority of them would thank you for doing it. It is almost certainly safe to assume it, because everybody is overburdened in some way nowadays. Next year I want you to have the courage and the grace to write each of those girls a loving Christmas letter without a gift—and without even mentioning a gift. Ruth, dear, suppose we make next Christmas a new kind—or, rather, the dear old kind? We will try thinking about our friends, and finding out their little wants long before the Christmas rush begins, and if it turns out they would prize something we can make with our own hands, so much the sweeter. Above all, we'll have courage to banish the commercial exchange idea that keeps us from enjoying a present unless we have repaid it; and when the beautiful day comes we will meet it without worry, and make it the sweet, joyful festival of peace we know it ought to be. May I help, dear, and will you try?"

And the end of it was that, instead of

waiting for another Christmas, Ruth had begun to try before she went home that day.

"What makes you so fine and gay, sis?" cried Ted, that evening, when Ruth was insisting on hanging up her father's stocking with the rest. "This morning you looked so solemn I just hated Christmas, but to-night it's fine."

Ruth did not say much then, but after the younger ones had gone to bed, she confessed, like a little girl, in her father's arms.

Doctor Harmon listened gravely to all the story. "It's my lesson, too, daughter," he said, at last. "I needed it as much as you did. Come, let's go and sit in that beautiful chair. Mrs. Halliday has done this much for me. I'm going to take it now in the spirit in which it seems to be given, and enjoy it, too!"

The next morning the Harmon house rang with shouts of "Merry Christmas!" At breakfast the children sang the Christmas hymn, just as their mother always had done, and although the doctor's eyes were wet, they knew that he was glad. Then came the "stocking-time," as Nan called it, and that was one great frolic from beginning to end.

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