

"Yes, he will."

The ring of authority in Stanton's voice quickly recalled the shopwalker to his usual polite attention.

"Please reach that muff!" he commanded, shortly.

The shopwalker instantly directed an assistant to bring the coveted article.

"Go and show him which it is, Jimmy," directed Stanton affably.

His rise succeeded, and as soon as the boy's back was turned, he drew out his purse.

"Get me a note made out for the muff, and take this," he said hurriedly, holding out three guineas to the astonished shopwalker. "But you must take the boy's threepenny piece; he must think that he has bought it. You understand?"

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir," stammered the man nervously, now all obsequiousness.

As he turned to obey, the boy came proudly down the shop with his soft, white treasure, surmounted by a cluster of scarlet berries, which the assistant took off, preparatory to placing the muff in the box.

"Oh, please leave them on," pleaded the boy. "Auntie Leslie will like the pretty Christmas berries!"

At a gesture from Stanton the man obeyed.

The boy, after solemnly paying his own little coin, left the shop, his face radiant with satisfaction.

In the doorway he paused, and looked up gratefully at the kind gentleman who had taken his part.

"Why wouldn't the man sell me the muff till you made him?" he asked curiously. "And—how did you know my name was Jimmy?"

Stanton laughed.

"Suppose I must have guessed. Well, now, Jimmy, never mind that stupid man. Tell me, how is it you are out shopping all by yourself?"

"The boy's face became suddenly serious. 'Well, you see, I was 'bliged to come by myself, else Auntie Leslie wouldn't have been surprised on Christmas Day. So when she went out, I just crept away without Mrs. Clarkson seeing me. Mrs. Clarkson takes care of me when Auntie is at the office; she typewrites, you know,' he explained disjunctively.

"I see. And where do you live?"

"In Bellona Place—just along that other road."

Being no wiser, Stanton earnestly suggested that, as he was going the same way, they might as well walk on together. Nothing loth, the boy slipped his hand confidently in that of his new friend, and chattered on artlessly, giving his companion an unconscious resume of his life with Auntie Leslie, since mother went away to take care of the Manger-Baby.

As they neared the window where the mechanical toys were displayed, Stanton paused; but the boy, after the first wistful glance, determinedly averted his head.

"If you hadn't spent your money on that muff, you might have bought yourself a signal-box," suggested Stanton, tentatively.

"An' if Auntie Leslie hadn't bought me this nice coat, she might have bought a muff for herself, 'cause her hands are very cold!" he retorted indignantly.

The gleam of amusement in Stanton's eyes gave place to a sudden warm glow, and his face softened.

"I thought everyone just bought what they wanted for themselves," he said, apologetically.

"Then you don't know my Auntie Leslie," returned the boy quickly—"or—any nice people," he finished pittingly.

"I'm afraid I must not," admitted Stanton humbly. "But I should like to." He paused, as if struck by a new thought.

"I say, I've just remembered that I want to get some things for—for a boy. What do you say if we go back to the toy-shop? You might come in with me and help me to choose them."

Jimmy's eyes danced at the suggestion.

"That will be fun!" he said gleefully; "almost"—the little voice grew wistful—"almost as good as buying them myself."

Guided by the enthusiastic Jimmy, Stanton soon had a goodly array of toys, including several complicated mechanisms such as boys delight in, piled up on the counter, and after giving an address to which they could be sent, he left the shop.

"Willie Carver is going to a Christmas party," volunteered Jimmy, as they resumed their walk.

"Indeed? And are you going to one, too?" asked Stanton.

The boy shook his head sorrowfully. "No. My friends don't have parties, an' Auntie Leslie says she can't 'ford'."

Stanton was silent for a moment; then boldly took the plunge.

"I know a lady who wants to give a children's party," he said mendaciously, "but she doesn't know many nice little boys and girls that could come. I wonder if you know any? Perhaps you could come, for one? Would you care to?"

"Wouldn't I exclaimed Jimmy excitedly. 'Do you think she would ask me if she knew me?'"

"I'm sure she would. She would invite any friend of mine, if I asked her."

"Am I your friend?" asked the child, artlessly.

Certainly. And if you have any little friend you would like inviting also, just let me have their names and addresses."

Stanton laughed as Jimmy breathlessly poured out a string of names forthwith.

"Wait a bit, sonny; I can't write shorthand! Go a bit slower," he pleaded.

When Stanton had completed a list of some fifteen names, Jimmy regretfully announced his ability to suggest any more.

"Oh, I think these will be enough to make a real jolly party," said Stanton, reassuringly.

"They are going to have a real Christmas-tree at Willie's party," hinted Jimmy longingly.

"Are they?" laughed Stanton. "Then I think I must tell my lady friend that hers won't be a real party without one."

"Does your friend do everything you tell her?" asked Jimmy.

"Well, almost. She is my aunt, you see, and a very dear old soul."

"Are they?" asked Jimmy, protesting Jimmy reproachfully. "Of course, aunts are always good." Then, as the word recalled him to the importance of his errand, he added anxiously, "I hope I get in before Auntie Leslie, 'cause I want to hide her present. Our house is just down here, so I think I'll run." He held out a hand hostilely. "Good-bye, sir! You are a very nice friend—and you won't forget about the party?"

Stanton solemnly assured him that his invitation should arrive without fail the next morning, and the boy left him in a fever of delight, wildly waving the treasure parcel as he reached the door of the dingy-looking house where Auntie Leslie had her rooms.

Jimmy waited with ill-suppressed impatience for the morning's post, and with a significant effort he contrived to keep his own counsel when Auntie Leslie sat puzzling over a dainty, scented note which had accompanied his own invitation to the children's party, and in which Mrs. Winstanley expressed the pleasure it would be to her if Miss Wardrop would be kind enough to come

and help her to make the evening an enjoyable one for the children.

"It's very strange, but I really don't know any Mrs. Winstanley in Park Lane," she murmured, in puzzled tones.

Jimmy digested the news on his foot to the other, but remembering the "apprise muff" now reposing safely beneath his barrow, he suppressed the explanation trembling on his lips.

"But you will go—and take me?" he asked anxiously. "Marjory and Eric an' such a lot of boys are coming."

The girl's face cleared suddenly, and she smiled.

"Oh, I see! Some kindly-disposed lady giving a children's party? A sort of new departure in philanthropy, in place of the usual slum children's Christmas treat. Then we will go, Jimmy, both of us."

There was great excitement amongst Jimmy's numerous friends over the unexpected invitations, and Jimmy felt it a great sacrifice to be obliged to forgo the importance he would have assumed in their eyes if only he could have enlightened them as to his own share in the affair.

But he carefully guarded his secret until after he had produced his gift of Christmas morning—a gift which created an even greater surprise for Auntie Leslie than he had anticipated. Indeed, his little heart felt slightly aggrieved that, instead of the kind of delight which he had expected, he was overwhelmed with a torrent of questions as to how he had come by such a gift. And at his somewhat incoherent explanations he was further surprised to see a suspiciously angry flush mount the girl's face, and became painfully conscious that in some strange, unaccountable way his gift had more troubled than pleased her.

After considerable debate within herself, Auntie Leslie determined, in spite of all, to fulfil her engagement; but Jimmy's pleasure was considerably damped by her refusal to use the white muff, insisting, instead, on taking it unwrapped, neatly tied up in the box in which it had come, though, as a concession to his pleading, she fastened the spray of red berries in the belt of the soft, white dress she wore.

When gentle, silver-haired Mrs. Winstanley came forward to greet her young guests there was a perceptible softening of Auntie Leslie's proud young face; but the slim figure was ready to stiffen with a dignified aloofness at the first glimpse of Jimmy's "nice man," as he called his new friend, but whom the girl had indignantly called an impertinent fellow in her own mind.

But tea passed—a merry meal, presided over by the gentle old lady, who speedily won her way into the girl's susceptible heart—and the first part of the evening wore quickly on with good old-fashioned games and merry laughter.

Thus beguiled, Auntie Leslie gradually ceased to hold herself on the defensive against the as yet unknown masculine intruder, whom she had all the time been expecting to meet.

At last the children gathered excitedly round the large Christmas-tree; but as the door opened and a servant solemnly announced the advent of the guests, a sudden hush fell upon the wondering group. With intensest anticipation they gazed at the open door, and at last a burly white figure entered.

Santa Claus, bowed down beneath the weight of a bulky-looking sack, stood and surveyed them with smiling eyes beneath a pair of bushy white eyebrows, then, dropping the sack at his feet, he wished them all the good old wish.

In an incredibly short time he had rifled the tree of its pretty trifles, and, slowly opening his sack, presented each awestruck child with a mysterious parcel.