

her little store of provisions had lessened under the stress of hunger until even the corn-meal had vanished, and it became necessary to send corn to be ground at the only mill in all that region. Early in the day, Robert and Rupert with their sister Lucy had been sent to the miller's, for it was well understood that each corner must await his turn at the mill. This grinding in those early days was slow work, and much of the day had passed before Mrs. Olcott expected them to return.

But when the sky grew dark and the snow began to fall, the loving mother grew anxious. She drew the great arm-chair, in the cushioned depths of which poor, pale-faced little Roger lay curled, far into the fireplace; and then, when anxiety grew to fear, she threw over her head the hooded red cloak that all the Puritan matrons wore, and hurried over the hill, as fast as the drifting snow would permit, to the house of her nearest neighbor, Master John Hawley.

As she drew the latch and walked in with impetuous haste, up sprung John Hawley and stalked to the corner, where, ever ready, stood his trusty musket.

"Indians, Rachel?" shrieked Mrs. Hawley, springing to drop the curtain that hung above the one window of the room.

"Put up your musket, friend," gasped Mrs. Olcott. "It is my boys who are in danger. They went to the mill with grist. Lucy is with them. Oh, save them!" she pleaded.

"They're young and tough; they'll weather it through, and be home by supper-time," said John Hawley, the staunch Puritan, dropping his musket to its corner. "I'll step over after supper and see. Go home, and don't worry."

To him, nothing less than Indians seemed worth a moment's uneasiness.

When he turned, Rachel Olcott was gone, and his wife was at the door, watching the red cloak as its wearer urged it through the snow.

"A woman has no business to look as she does," exclaimed Mrs. Hawley, closing the door.

"She's had trouble enough in Plymouth, goodness knows!—her husband lost, and that crippled child to care for night and day, those boys to bring up, and hardly enough money to keep soul and body together. And there she goes this minute with a face like a sweet-brier rose"; and John Hawley demanded his supper at once.

He had it, his wife looking as stern as any Puritan of them all, as he put on his greatcoat and went out, saying:

"If those youngsters have come home, I'll be right back."

But he was not "right back." Midnight came down on all the Atlantic coast, and he had not returned.

The supper for the young Olcotts was baked at the hearth, and set back to await their coming. The blazing logs filled the long, low kitchen with light. There was no need of a candle, as the mother sat, to sing her poor boy to sleep. But Roger could not sleep.

"Tell me something more about England, Mother," he pleaded, again and again. "It keeps me from thinking of Lucy and the boys, when you talk."

The firelight illumined the white face and made the blue eyes of the boy more pitiful than ever in their plaintive asking that night.

The mother's thoughts and her heart were out in the snowdrifts searching with her neighbors for her bright, rosy darlings, but her words and her hands were ministering to this child, bereft of almost everything belonging to the outside world of work and endeavour.

"Well, then, Roger, shut your eyes and try to go to sleep, while I tell you something about Christmas—the way we used to keep it—before Mamma was a Puritan, you know."

Then she told the boy of old-time customs in her native land; of her father's house, and the great rejoicings that came at Christmas-time, and lastly, with a vague feeling of regret in her heart, she came to the story of the great green bough that was lighted with taper and hung with gifts for the good children.

"What made you be a Puritan, Mother? Why didn't you stay at home," asked Roger.

"Don't ask me, my boy," she said, touching the shining face with a kiss. "Remember that heaven is a much finer place than England."

"Do they have any Christmas-boughs there, Mother?"

"Something better than boughs, my boy!"

"Mother, I'd like it, if God would let me, to go to heaven around by the way of dear England, so that I could see a Christmas-bough just for once before I die."

At that moment the door was thrust in, and the boys, Robert and Rupert, clad in snow, entered the room. The mother, dropping Roger's mite of a hand, sprang to meet them with untold gladness in her eyes, that still looked beyond them in search of something more.

"Lucy's all right, Mother!" cried Robert. "If it

hand't been for Mr. Hawley, though, and Richard Cooper, and the rest, we'd have had a night of it in the old cedar-tree. We couldn't get a bit farther with the meal and Lucy; so we scooped out the snow in the big hollow, put Lucy in first, when we had made sure there wasn't a fox or anything inside; crawled in ourselves, with a big stick apiece to keep off enemies, and were getting very hungry and sleepy, when a light flashed in our eyes."

"But where is Lucy?" interrupted Mrs. Olcott.

"Oh, they are bringing her! And Mother, Mr. Hawley has been scolding us half the way home for going to mill on such a day. And we never told him that we hadn't meal enough in the house to last till to-morrow. We took it brave."

"That's right, my good boys; but how did they find you?" Mrs. Olcott demanded.

"They didn't; we found them," cried Rupert.

"They had a lantern, and we saw it; and then we made a dash after the light, and brought them back to the hollow. When they drew Lucy out, she was fast asleep, and as warm as toast, 'cause Robert gave her his jacket, and I tied my muffler on her, too."

"And she's fast asleep this minute, I do believe!" added Robert, as two vigorous young men entered, one drawing the sled-load of meal and the other bearing Lucy in his arms.

From that night in November little Roger grew more and more away from the bleak New England life. It was evident to every one who saw the lad that he was going to the Shining Shore, although the little Puritan boy had never heard much of its being a shining shore—and I think that was the reason he fell to thinking so much of the beautiful Christmas-bough. He talked of it when awake, he dreamed of it when he slept; and he told his dreams and said, with tears on his cheeks, how sorry he was to awake and find that he hadn't seen it after all—and, oh, he wanted to so much!

The time of Christmas in that far, far-away year drew near, and in all the land there was not a Christmas-bell, a Christmas-tree, nor even a Christmas-gift.

Beautiful Mrs. Olcott felt that her little Roger was getting very near to the heavenly land. A physician from Boston had come down, and told her that the lad must die. This bright little mother wished, oh, so much! to make her child happy, and his little heart was set on seeing a Christmas-bough before he died. She could not withstand his wishes, and she said to herself, "If I am punished for it as long as I live, Roger shall see a Christmas-bough." So she took her boys, Robert and Rupert, and little Lucy, outside the house one day, just a week before Christmas, and told them what she was going to do.

"O Mother!" exclaimed Robert, the eldest son, "They'll persecute you to death; they'll drive us into the wilderness; we shall lose our home and everything!"

"Remember, boys, your mother has been into the wilderness once, and she isn't afraid of that. We shall have the Christmas-bough! I am going up to Boston to-morrow, if the day is fine, and I'll fetch back some nice little trinkets for poor Roger. May be a ship has come in lately; one is expected."

On the morrow, clad in the scarlet cloak, Mrs. Olcott set forth for Boston. She had not been there since the day she went up to see the ship sail, with her husband on it—the ship that had never been heard from. But that was more than three years before, and it was in going home from Boston that Roger had been so hurt and maimed that his little life was spoiled.

Great was the astonishment in Plymouth when it was learned that the Widow Olcott had gone to Boston. Why had she to go to Boston? She had no folk living there to go to see; and what had she been buying, they wondered, when she came back. Mrs. Hawley went down the hill that same day to make inquiry, and found out very little.

As soon as Mrs. Olcott was well rid of Mrs. Hawley, she called her boys, and bade them go to the pine-woods and get the finest, handsomest young hemlock-tree that they could find.

"Get one that is straight and tall, with well-boughed branches on it, and put it where you can draw it under the wood-shed, after dark," she added.

The boys went to Pine Hill, and there they picked out the finest young tree on all the hill, and said, "We will take this one." So, with their hatchets they hewed it down and brought it safely home the next night when all was dark. And when Roger was quietly sleeping in the adjoining room, they dragged the tree into the kitchen. It was too tall, so they took it out again and cut off two or three feet at the base. Then they propped it up, and the curtains being being down over the windows, and blankets being fastened over the curtains to prevent any one looking in, and the door being doubly barred to prevent any one coming in, they all went to bed.

Very early the next morning, while the stars shone on the snow-covered hills—the same stars that shone sixteen hundred years before on the hills when

Christ was born in Bethlehem—the little Puritan mother in New England arose very softly. She went out and lit the kitchen fire anew from the ash-covered embers. She fastened upon the twigs of the tree the gifts she had bought in Boston for her boys and girl. Then she took as many as twenty pieces of candle and fixed them upon the branches. After that, she softly called Rupert, Robert, and Lucy, and told them to get up and dress and come into the kitchen.

Hurrying back, she began, with a bit of a burning stick, to light the candles. Just as the last one was set aflame, in trooped the three children.

Before they had time to say a word, they were silenced by their mother's warning.

"I wish to fetch Roger in and wake him up before it," she said. "Keep still until I come back!"

The little lad, fast asleep, was lifted in a blanket and gently carried by his mother into the beautiful presence.

"See! Roger, my boy, see!" she said, arousing him. "It is Christmas morning now! In England they only have Christmas-boughs, but here in New England we have a whole Christmas-tree."

"O Mother!" he cried. "O Lucy! Is it really, really true, and no dream at all? Yes, I see! I see! O Mother! it is so beautiful! Were all the trees on all the hills lighted up that way when Christ was born? And, Mother," he added, clapping his little hands with joy at the thought, "why yes, the stars did sing when Christ was born! They must be glad, then, and keep Christmas, too, in Heaven. I know they must, and there will be good times there."

"Yes," said his mother; "there will be good times there, Roger."

"Then," said the boy, "I shan't mind going, now that I've seen the Christmas-bough. I—What is that, Mother?"

What was it that they heard? The little Olcott home had never before seemed to tremble so. There were taps at the window, there were knocks at the door—and it was as yet scarcely the break of day. There were voices also, shouting something to somebody.

"Shall I put out the candles, Mother?" whispered Robert.

"What will they do to us for having the tree? I wish we hadn't it," regretted Rupert; while Lucy clung to her mother's gown and shrieked with all her strength, "It's Indians!"

Pale and white and still, ready to meet her fate, stood Mrs. Olcott, until, out of the knocking and the tapping at her door, her heart caught a sound. It was a voice calling, "Rachel! Rachel! Rachel!"

"Unbar the door!" she cried back to her boys;

"It's your father calling!" Down came the blankets; up went the curtain; open flew the door, and in walked Captain Olcott, followed by every man and woman in Plymouth who had heard at break of day the glorious news that the expected ship had arrived at Boston, and with it the long-lost Captain Olcott. For an instant nothing was thought of except the joyous welcoming of the captain in his own home.

"What's this? What is it? What does this mean?" was asked again and again, when the first excitement was past, as the tall young pine stood aloft, its candles-ablaze, its gifts still hanging.

"It's welcome home to Father!" said Lucy, her only thought to screen her mother.

"No, child, no!" sternly spoke Mrs. Olcott. "Tell the truth!"

"It's—a Christmas-tree!" faltered poor Lucy.

One and another and another, Pilgrims and Puritans all, drew near with faces stern and forbidding, and gazed and gazed, until one and another and yet another softened slowly into a smile as little Roger's piping voice sung out:

"She made it for me, Mother did. But you may have it now, and all the pretty things that are on it, too, because you've brought my father back again; if Mother will let you, he added.

Neither Pilgrim nor Puritan frowned at the gift. One man, the sternest there, broke off a little twig and said:

"I'll take it for the sake of the good old times at home."

Then every one wanted to take a bit for the same sweet sake, until the young pine was bereft of half its branches. But still it stood, like a hero at its post, candles burning and gifts hanging, until all but the little household had departed; and even then, the last candle was permitted to burn low and flicker out before the last gift was distributed, so glad were the Olcotts in the presence of the one great gift of that Christmas morn; so eager were they to be told every bit of the story, the wonderful story, of their father's long, long voyage in a poor, little, storm-beaten and disabled ship which, at last, he had been able to guide safely into port. His return voyage had been made in the very ship that Mrs. Olcott had hoped would arrive in time for her Christmas tree.

That morning brought to Roger something better than Christmas-trees, better, if such a thing were possible, than the home-coming of the hero-captain—