

BEFORE SHE KNEW

A Christmas Story of a Little Girl, Written by a Little Girl, for Other Little Girls. . .

(By Gertrude E. McGinley, aged 13.)

Show, in the town, falls only to be trampled into mud and slush and to make the traffic in the streets disagreeable. But snow in the country means beauty and dazzling whiteness. And this was just the effect a timely snow storm had on the little valley of Jackson on Christmas eve.

One by one the village lamps were lighted, making the falling snow-flakes glitter in the light of the windows. One by one the children left the hill where they were playing and returned to their cottages hungry and cold. One by one the hardy farmers retired to a cheerful fireside to enjoy a smoke on Christmas eve, while busy housewives went from room to room, preparing the evening meal. Every cottage in the valley seemed alive and busy, except one. In the lowest and most secluded part of the valley stood a tiny brown cottage, alone and dreary. No bright lamp-light streamed through the little window. Nothing but the fitful flame of a tallow candle penetrated the gloomy cold kitchen.

On an old bed, at one side of the room, lay a poor half-starved woman, bitterly awaiting the return of her drunken husband, whom she knew had gone to the tavern on the previous afternoon. Beside her, huddled close in her arms, lay a chubby baby, sleeping peacefully. A little girl of ten watched and tended mother and baby. She now carefully cut the gingerbread which the Squire's wife had sent to the poverty-stricken family, and placed the little teapot on the stove. On a rude kitchen table she put a few broken dishes.

"Oh mother," she exclaimed, as she sorrowfully looked at the dilapidated supper table, "it's dreadful to be poor. It's bad enough to be like the new family up the road, but it's worse to be like us. Just think, Bennie, we won't have anything but tea and gingerbread, and if it hadn't been for Mrs. Jackson, we wouldn't have had even those."

"O well, dear," replied Mrs. Curtis. "It ain't much use grumblin' when there ain't nothin' better to have. Here's Ben and Jacky now. And don't let Ben hear yer grumblin' 'cause it makes him so downhearted. He has had enough times just now, poor boy."

There was a stamping of feet on the doorstep, the little door was flung open and a boy of fifteen, followed by a younger lad entered the room.

"Lots o' wood for the morin' ma," panted Ben, throwing down an armful of logs. "We found a good patch of source up by the Squire's and we'll go back for more after supper. Come Jenny, get the supper on; get the supper on, no matter what it is. I tell you I'm mighty hungry."

"Poor boy," sighed Jennie. "There's only one piece of gingerbread left for him. Never mind, I'll give him mine. 'Twon't matter if I'm hungry for a while. Come Jack and Billy, drink your tea while it's hot, and here, mother, here's your cup of tea."

It did not take long to finish the frugal meal. Baby and four-year-old Billy were put to bed. Ben and Jack went back to the wood patch, and Jennie having washed the dishes, sat down to mend the children's clothes.

It was tedious work patching and mending the ragged little dresses and coats. Wearily the minutes slipped by, as she worked at her task. "Dear me," thought Jennie, "if Billy wouldn't fall down on his knees his socks wouldn't be like this. And Baby will slide down the attic stairs and get his dresses so dirty. And—but, I wonder who's at the door. I'm most afraid to go for fear it might be father."

Jennie jumped down from the high stool and cautiously opened the door. It was kind Mrs. Jackson, who had come to see how the sick woman was. "Well, Jennie! ain't you in bed yet? It's high time dear. My Marjorie is in bed over two hours. Why it's past ten o'clock. Ain't you kind of tired?"

"Oh no," replied Jennie, "must have something for the children to wear tomorrow. It's Christmas, you know, but the children don't know, and 'praps it's just as well they don't, for they won't get nothin' anyhow come see mother. She's been sleepin' awful sound since tea."

Mrs. Jackson went over to the bed, where she saw the sick woman. She saw that the woman was rapidly sinking and would not spend her Christmas in the brown house.

She lifted the sleeping baby into her arms. It was hungry and cold.

She went to the door, said a few hasty words to the driver, who was waiting outside with the sleigh, and returned to the kitchen.

The sleigh bells soon heard again and Mrs. Jackson went to the door to receive the basket the driver had brought.

"Here, Jennie, here is some lunch for you before you go to bed. I'll be down first thing in the morning. Merry Christmas. Go to bed soon." There was a tinkle of sleigh bells as the Squire's wife drove away, and then all was silent. After Jennie had given her brothers a good supper she climbed the rickety stairs to bed. It was a sorrowful awakening for the little girl. For at the dawn of Christmas morning the dying woman had peacefully passed to rest.

On her way home on Christmas Eve, Mrs. Jackson met Bennett and Jack returning. She took Bennie aside and told him of the great loss which was sure to fall upon the family. She said nothing to the smaller children, not even to little Jennie. For the kind Squire's wife was going to give the little girl the happiest Christmas they had ever known.

Christmas morning was dull and grey. The big snow-flakes fell softly to the ground. Jennie was down stairs in the little brown house. "Light!" she yawned, as she tumbled out of bed. "It's awful cold. Dear! I sat at the stove all night. I slipped down the stairs in my night-gown and opened the door."

"Merry Christmas, girlie," Mrs. Jackson's kind face was smiling at the child.

"Not dressed yet? Well! Hurry up and get all the wee ones dressed for going to school. 'Tis Christmas, you know. The sleigh is waiting. Don't make a noise to disturb your mother. Bennie won't come. He wants to keep house till you come back. Hurry up now."

Jennie couldn't get up stairs fast enough to tell the children. Billy, Jacky, and Baby Archie were down stairs in a short time dressed in their simple little clothes. When everything was in readiness, Jennie ran to the bedside to give her mother a farewell kiss. Poor little girl. She did not realize she was motherless. The tears started in Mrs. Jackson's eyes. But no one noticed.

"Come along dears," she said, trying to keep the secret from the children. "Jump in Jack and Billy in with you. I'll take Archie and Jennie in with me."

"Wouldn't mother enjoy a ride in this sleigh. There's lots o' rugs to keep her warm. Jennie!" exclaimed Billy, peeping out from under the great fur rug.

The little party chattered until they reached the door. The great horse in which the Squire lived. It received its name from the tall locust trees standing like sentinels on either side of the driveway.

The Squire's only child, a girl of ten, was waiting on the front veranda for the expected party. She was very different from little Jennie, and at first did not like the idea of having her house opened to strange, dirty children. But her proud little heart had been softened when she heard the secret that was being kept from the little family.

After making the acquaintance of all the children, she led them into the house followed by the four eager little ones.

It was like a great palace to little Jennie. She felt awkward and shy for a moment she was back in her little cottage. But that feeling left her when the Squire lifted her into his arms as if she had been his own daughter. "Just follow Mary upstairs and she'll take off your wraps," said he, placing little Jennie on the stairs.

The children were shown into Marjorie's bedroom, much against that young lady's will. It was a very pretty little room. Everything matched from the little blue forest-green curtains to the tiny dollies to the blue flowers on the carpet. A dainty, snow-white bed was at one side of the room, while a white bedroom set completed the furnishings. Soft white curtains, tied back, with broad blue ribbons, hung from the windows. There was an admiration. She could have spent a whole day in that pretty little room.

But just then Mrs. Jackson came in with a little pink dress over her arms. "I wonder if this little muslin dress wouldn't fit you," she said. "Marjorie is growing so tall that this is far too short now for her. Just slip it on. I'll see one off, Jennie. But, oh, my, you couldn't wear a black undershirt under this."

"Mary," she added, "just get a little white undershirt."

In a few minutes she returned with the sweetest little ruffled skirt. Jennie had ever seen. She slipped it on. Quickly the child was dressed in the muslin dress which looked very pretty with her light hair and blue eyes. The curly yellow hair was taken out of its tight little braids and tied with a big pink bow. Heavy boots and old stockings would never do with so pretty a dress. So a pair of new stockings and shoes were fitted on the tiny feet and what a different little Jennie walked down the stairs half an hour later!

The boys' old suits were also exchanged for new ones. The old boots were replaced by bright and shiny shoes, all the gift of their kind hostess.

When the children's toilet was finished, they were led into the dining room. Here they made a hearty breakfast, after which they were taken to the drawing room and seated before a green curtain. What happened next was never forgotten by the little ones.

The Squire drew aside the curtain and in an adjoining room, all sparkling and shining, stood a beautiful Christmas tree, its branches laden with presents, fruit and candy, while colored candles sparkled on every bough. And on the top was a silver star which shone in the light.

"O! If mother could only see it," exclaimed unselfish little Jennie, when she had recovered her speech. "Oh, it's beautiful. I never saw anything like it. No, never."

"I'm glad you like it, dearie," answered Mrs. Jackson, as she placed presents and candies and fruit for everyone. Marjorie is going to distribute them."

"Come dear," she added, "You may begin now, store up the presents. Marjorie went to the tree and chose first a large white bundle, for Jennie, whose blue eyes sparkled as she tugged at the cord. The cord was so long that she succeeded in unwrapping it. There, in a soft heap, lay the softest warmest shawl for a little girl of ten."

"Oh!" she exclaimed, as she threw it around her shoulders. "I do wish dear mamma was up here to see me. I'll have to wear it home."

Billy and Jacky got new stockings and caps to match, besides toys and books. Baby Archie got a new

THE ELEVENTH HOUR

At the close of the day I sat before the comfortable blaze which burned on the hearth. The fantastic shadows cast by the freight fitted across the walls. Outside the bleak December wind chanted a dirge; the snow beat against the window panes, and a fierce storm raged. By contrast, the warmth and comfort of my bachelor chamber were more accentuated. I drew closer to the fire for an hour of solitude, and as the storm raged, I breathed a hope that no duty would call me out again that night.

As the wind and storm increased, the windows rattled, but despite this, in the intervals between the howling of the winds, muffled sounds of footsteps reached my ear, telling of some belated traveller returning home laden with gifts to be sent on the morrow as remembrances of the occasion, bearing a message of love and friendship to the recipient—for it was Christmas Eve.

As I pondered over the day and all that it meant, there came back to my mind a scene I had witnessed just a year ago tonight.

I was about to retire, when the frantic ringing of my night bell summoned me to the door, and a messenger asked me to accompany him to the hospital to which I was attached as visiting physician. Dressing hastily I was soon at the bedside of my patient.

The man had but traces of a hard life. The eyes were sunken, and the face convulsed with pain. A few hours earlier he had been surprised in the act of robbing an office on the second floor of a building. All other avenues of escape cut off, he had jumped from a window in the rear. But, in falling, his head struck a stone step and he received a fracture of the skull.

He had been taken by the officer on the district to the hospital. Here I saw him.

It was useless to attempt to save the man; and all I could hope was to make the end as easy as possible. After rendering what assistance I could, I sat down to await the passing.

After a few moments of silent watching, the lips of the man began to move. At first the sounds were inarticulate. Gradually, however, the sounds grew into disjointed words, and the disconnected words grew into sentences, and the wandering brain revealed the thoughts that had been in the mind of the man.

Out of the rambling flow I heard the word, "Mother," and I knew that the span between the past and the present was bridged over, and the sufferer was living again the days of childhood.

Slowly the story fell from the lips, and as I listened, my own mind went back to other days, and the vision of a kind-faced mother, long since gone, came back to me.

Nor was there anything new in the story. Discontent with the monotony of the life at home, eager for the world

blue suit and a warm overcoat, while a thick muffler and warm gloves were to be taken to Bennett.

How quickly the minutes slipped by, and dinner time came only too soon. After the children had feasted on a plenty of turkey, pies, puddings and cake, the waitress brought in a paper. From a hole in the centre there hung bright pieces of ribbon. Each child took an end and when Squire Jackson said, "Hurray for the Christmas Pie," gave a quick pull, and out popped a number of presents.

Jennie got a bracelet, Jacky a mouth organ, Billy a bugle and Archie a box of blocks.

The children played together all afternoon with their toys and presents. Discontent with the supper was being prepared, all the little ones, with Squire Jackson, went for a long sleigh drive. It was quite late when they returned to Locust. A hot meal was waiting for them. At each place was a Santa Claus filled with chocolates and a bonbon each. They talked merrily over the supper table and Mrs. Jackson told the children many stories. About eight o'clock, when they were all gathered around the fire place by the Christmas tree, the Squire told them that story so familiar to all. Of the babe born in Bethlehem's manger, of the star which guided the wise men to the Holy Child.

It all seemed like a dream to Jennie. She would never see another Christmas like this one. But the time was rapidly drawing near when she should know all that had so carefully been concealed from her. The sleigh was in the door.

"Come children," said Mrs. Jackson, bringing the little coats, "I hope my little visitors have spent a happy Christmas. I'm sure I have. Jennie, dear, here is some supper for Bennie. And don't forget his presents."

Mrs. Jackson helped the little Curries into the sleigh, and tucked them in. "I'll see you all home. You can't bear to go home with them to see their sorrow on entering their home."

"Merry Christmas! Merry Christmas!" was the cry that rose up from the departing sleigh.

"Well," sighed Jennie, as she leaned against the soft cushions at her father's side. "That was the best Christmas I ever saw. What mother say when she sees this new shawl. I'll put it right on her. I'll keep her warm. She'll be better in no time with all the good things Mrs. Jackson sent to her."

The wind blew harder, driving the falling snow-flakes against Jennie's little flushed face. Gradually her curly head dropped on her breast and by

of big things, he had gone out to taste of the sweets of the greater world. But he found more glitter than gold; for time more elusive than he had anticipated. But pride would not permit him to acknowledge his failure. Then began the downfall. Evil associates claimed him, and the career, which was about to close, began.

For an hour the wandering mind pointed out his story. Then came a pause. The eyes opened and for a few minutes reason again took her throne in the mind of the dying man.

Sitting me seated at his bedside, a look as of a haunted animal leaped into the face, but with the realization that it was not, after all, an officer of the law, the man fell back on to his pillow.

Pity for the unfortunate wretch overcame me, realizing though I did not tell her how I tried again and again to be straight, but the habit of "good will to all" came upon me and I hoped to hear a word of prayer for forgiveness before I died.

Nothing me to draw nearer, the sufferer grasped my hand.

"Doctor, it's all up, I guess. They'll never get me straight. I tried again and again to be straight, but the habit of 'good will to all' came upon me and I haven't time to tell you any more, but I'm sorry now that I didn't follow the straight path. I'll be Christmas soon, and I hope that my mother for the past will give me a place in the land the good old mother used to tell me of when I was young. Do you think I've got a chance yet?"

Assuring the poor fellow that the Child of Bethlehem came not to save the good but the wicked, I calmed his troubled spirit. In a few moments the eyes closed in peaceful sleep, a great calm spread across the hardened face, the breathing grew less distinct and less regular, the lips moved all the while in prayer, then came a long pause.

"Mother," I heard the lips murmur, then came a fluttering of the breath, the end of the long and weary life had closed and I breathed a silent prayer, the first in many a year, that the Christmas morn would find the criminal, like the patient thief, converted at the end, among the celestial choir.

Drawing the coverlet over the dead, I opened the letter he had placed in my hand. Inside I found a letter such as only a mother could write, and going home I wrote one myself telling of the end and parting message, enclosing the Christmas gift from a long absent boy.

the time the bend in the road near her home was reached she was fast asleep. It had been the happiest day of all her short life and she soon to be followed by the saddest.

AS TO CHEWING GUM.

(New York Tribune.) The London Daily Express recently permitted itself to say that the gum-chewing habit was becoming popular in England, and this had the unfortunate result of raising false hopes in the mind of a gentleman from Wichita, Kansas, who had already reconciled himself to a compulsory abstinence. Writing to the Daily Express, he delivers his soul as follows:

"I am in London for the first time, and before I came everybody in Wichita, Kansas, who had visited your islands said I would not like it and that I could not get anything I liked—namely, ice-cream, sweet-corn, Milwaukee beer, or chewing-gum, or other necessities of life."

"In one respect at least they are right. I found a hotel where the waiter had been trained to put ice-cream on the table, and I secured sweet-corn for dinner last night after a struggle, but I can not get chewing-gum anywhere. I tried three or four drug stores (which the hall porter called 'chemists') and they never heard of it."

EXCEEDED HER PART.

The occasion was a choice little tea party on the lawn, and the hostess was beaming among her guests.

"Yes," she remarked, "my little girl is very clever. She can imitate almost anyone."

"She can, my dear," echoed the host delightedly. "Come, Alice: show them you can do. Pretend to be the housemaid."

The little girl, eagerly enough, came forward and bowed to one of the guests.

"Will you take some more tea, madam?" she asked politely. Then she turned to another guest.

"May I move your chair, madam? The sunlight is very strong."

At this the guests were exceedingly interested and asked for more. Backing away from her father, Alice exclaimed in a terrified tone: "Sir, let me go! Don't touch me, sir! Give you a kiss, indeed. Supposing the missus was to hear you?"

Then the clever little darling was waited away suddenly. — Denver Times.

TIME TO KICK.

There was excitement in the old inn at the cross roads. The ancient proprietor was bristling up like an angry porcupine.

"It's got to stop!" he thundered, as he brought his fist down on the ink-bespattered register. "Be good, it's got to stop or I'll close up the hotel!"

"What's the trouble?" asked the coffee drummer.

"Trouble enough. I could stand those sleep-walking motorists crawling under the bed and hammering on the springs 'cause they thought they were under an automobile, but I'll be blown if I am going to put up with dreaming aviators climbing up in the ceiling and knocking all the plastering down just 'cause they imagine they are tinkering with their flying machines. No, sire, it's got to stop."

A WISE PRECAUTION.

"Mr. Grimes," said the rector to the vestryman on the Sunday morning before Christmas, "this morning we had better take up the collection before the sermon."

"Indeed!" said the vestryman.

"Well," answered the rector, "I am going to preach on the subject of economy."

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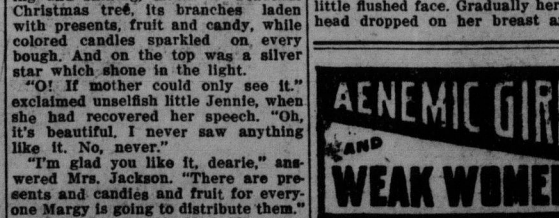
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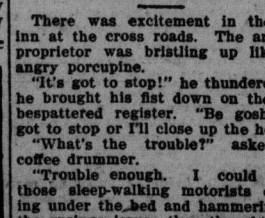
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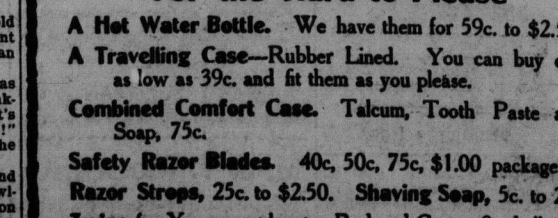
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