

* * The Story Page * *

Gertie the Grumbler.

BY CARROL WATSON RANKIN.

It was not complimentary, of course, but that was what Gertrude Tucker was called by all her brothers, sisters, cousins and acquaintances.

"Gertie the Grumbler," was just a little brown-haired, brown-eyed girl with a turned-up nose and about a dozen freckles. The other little Tuckers looked much like Gertie, but in one respect, at least, they were entirely different. The others merry, pleasant children, easily pleased and comfortable to live with; but if Gertie had ever been pleased about anything in all her fourteen years of existence, no one had discovered the fact.

The others came in hungry at meal time, and ate whatever was set before them, without a murmur or complaint, until there was nothing left but the table-cloth and the empty dishes; but Gertie grumbled over the soup, over the shape and size of the crackers, over the temperature of her plate, which no one had ever succeeded in heating to the proper degree, and over all the rest of the dinner, down to the dessert.

If the dessert was pie, Gertie had been longing for pudding. If it was pudding, Gertie was positively suffering for ice cream; and if there was ice cream, it was sure to be too cold, or too soft, or too—something.

However, Gertie always managed to eat quite as much as any of the others, but it was with the air of a martyr at the stake—at the stake, Johnny said—rather than a cheerful little girl at a well-spread table.

When it came to clothes, it was very much the same. The other little Tuckers were always delighted with a new garment of any description, and even welcomed the "hand-me-downs," as the garments which passed from Johnny to Ned, or from Gertie to Jennie, and so on down to the baby, were called. Jennie, only a year younger than Gertie, but a good deal smaller, had never had anything else but "hand-me-downs;" but she took them all cheerfully, as a matter of course, and never even so much as dreamed of objecting because her red dress was not blue, or her brown dress was made with a full skirt when she wanted it gored.

But if, by any chance, Gertie happened to be pleased with the cloth selected for her, no one could possibly make the garment to suit her.

"Dear me," sighed long-suffering Mrs. Tucker, "that child is for all the world just like her Grandfather Tucker! If there ever was a chronic grumbler, he was that one, and nothing ever broke him of the habit. Why, nobody would have been a bit surprised if he had sat up and grumbled about his coffin!"

"I can remember visiting him once, and seeing the whole family try their hands at making toast to suit him. It was the same way with eggs, they always had to boil about nine before they got one that he would think of eating. The discarded eggs always went back into the kettle, and the rest of the family had to ruin its digestion eating those hard-boiled eggs, in order to save them."

But perhaps Gertie was most trying when it came to Christmas or birthday gifts. Her mother stayed awake at nights trying to think of just the right thing to buy for Gertie, the Grumbler, but she might better have gone to sleep so far as the result was concerned. The children, too, devoted most of their pennies to the purchase of something unusually fine for Gertie, even if the others had to go without.

If Gertie got a book, she had been longing for a doll; if she found a ring in the toe of her stocking, she "supposed it would have to do," but she hoped to find a gold trinket.

One day early in December Gertie received an invitation to spend a month, including the Christmas holidays, with her Aunt Anna, who lived in a city where marvelous sights were to be seen. In spite of heroic efforts, Gertie could find no cause for complaint about the invitation, but Mrs. Tucker was discouraged when she found that Gertie's wardrobe would need replenishing.

"It's hard enough," said she, "to make one new garment at a time, but to think of trying to please her with two new dresses, a jacket and a hat, is enough to give one nervous prostration."

Gertie's big brother Tom returned from his medical college for the holidays a few days before her departure for the city, and was much concerned about the little girl's unfortunate habit.

"Gertie," he said, "stop grumbling. It isn't ladylike, and the habit is growing on you. It's getting to be chronic, and you'd better stop it while you're young. Think of Grandpa Tucker!"

When the day came for Gertie's departure, her father presented her with a crisp, new five-dollar bill. Gertie's eyes sparkled, for she had never possessed such a sum before, and she was about to exclaim, "Oh, thank you, papa!" But she remembered in time to pull down the corners of her mouth, and say mournfully:

"Dear me! I wonder if I can get it changed into silver. I should like it so much better."

"You are to use it for anything you wish," said Mr. Tucker. "I thought you might like to spend it in some of those great big stores."

Although Gertie did so much grumbling at home, she was too shy and too polite not to give up the unpleasant habit among strangers. Gertie, on her good behavior, was really such a delightful little maiden, that her Aunt Anna and her Uncle Dick were greatly pleased with her.

She enjoyed the noise and bustle of the great city, and all the unusual sights, but perhaps what she liked best of all was visiting the stores and making her Christmas purchases. She planned to send a large box by express, which was to reach all the big and little Tuckers the day before Christmas, and was planned to fill them all with joy and gratitude. She spent much time and thought and all her pocket money upon the contents of the box, and in addition she carefully hemmed a gingham apron for her mother, and made a doll's dress for little Betty out of the bits of gingham that were left. Altogether, Gertie was delighted with her box; and when at last it was nailed up and directed plainly in big black letters, and carried to the express office, she could hardly wait for the postman to bring her the thanks of the astonished and grateful Tuckers.

It was really a nice box. Considering Gertie's inexperience she had used excellent judgment, and all the big and little Tuckers were delighted with their gifts.

"I must write to her at once," said Mrs. Tucker. "She will be so anxious to know if we like our presents."

"Mother," said Tom, "I have an idea."

"Goodness!" said saucy Johnny. "How in the world did you manage to get it?"

"I believe," said Tom, "that I have discovered a remedy for Gertie's habit of grumbling."

"Hurrah for our doctor!" shouted Ned.

"My idea," Tom went on, placidly, "is to give her a good dose of her own medicine. It will do the work. I will write notes of thanks for all of you, and you are to copy and sign them, and unless I am very much mistaken Miss Gertrude Tucker will resolve on New Year's day to stop grumbling forever."

It took time to persuade gentle Mrs. Tucker to consent to Tom's plan, but finally she did; and three days after Christmas the mail-bag contained a remarkable collection of letters—all addressed to Miss Gertrude Tucker.

"I have stopped smoking," wrote her father, "so have no use at present for the extraordinary tobacco-pouch, upon which you must have expended as much as fifteen cents. I suppose you found it upon some bargain counter."

"Fifteen cents indeed!" exclaimed Gertie. "It cost a half a dollar, and he said before Christmas he needed one."

"I was already supplied with more aprons than I needed," wrote mother, shedding tears of pity while she penned the cruel words, "and I should have preferred any other color to brown; but I suppose I shall have to be satisfied. The Chinese lily bulbs are a nuisance to plant, and the odor of the blossoms is sickening. I wish you had sent hyacinths instead."

"And she liked that one Mrs. Brooks gave her last winter the best of anything she had!" wailed Gertie.

"I am sorry," wrote Tom, "that you wasted your money on a shaving-paper case for me. I am thinking of raising a beard."

Complacent Johnny, who had never been known to complain of anything short of the toothache, wrote that handkerchiefs were no doubt useful, but that if there was anything on the face of the earth less acceptable than a handkerchief as a Christmas gift, he didn't know what it was, unless it might be a handkerchief with a letter J embroidered in the corner.

"If you must buy cheap perfumery," wrote Ned, "don't bestow it upon me. Give it to the cook, or keep it yourself."

"Ned always helps himself to mine, when I have any," said bewildered Gertie.

"How could you buy such homely plaid hair-ribbons?" wrote Jennie, the patient wearer of hand-me-downs. "The book you sent me does not look at all interesting, and I should have preferred a tooth-brush or most any old thing to the photograph-frame you sent."

"The dress," printed Betty, "is too small for my old doll, and the new one you sent has yellow hair. Don't they have any with brown curls?"

But the last straw was from the baby, who made her mark with much assistance from Tom.

"Got too many bibs already, and the red comes off the rattle and makes me sick."

Poor Gertie could not believe her eyes. "Why the things were beautiful," said she, "and I never supposed I had such impolite relations! They might at least have pretended to like them. I'm sure I should not say such things—"

Then an unpleasant thought came to her.

"I do believe those letters sound like me! Dear me!

Is it possible that I am really so disagreeable! I will write to mother right away, and tell her that I did not like the pretty waist she sent me, although—" Gertie blushed when she thought of it—"I was going to say that I should have been better pleased with a pink one."

Three days later she received a very different letter from Mrs. Tucker, who was too tender-hearted to let her suffer long, but Doctor Tom's medicine had had time to effect a permanent cure, and "Gertie, the Grumbler," gradually came to be known as "Gertrude, the Good."—Youth's Companion.

A Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Mothers.

"Can you help me a few minutes, Marion?"

"I should like to, but I don't see how I can." The tone was not impatient, but hurried. "I have this essay to finish for the society this evening. I must go to our French history class in an hour, then to a guild meeting, and get back to my German lesson at five o'clock."

"No you can't help me, dear. You look worn out yourself. Never mind. If I tie up my head perhaps I can finish this."

"Through at last," said Marion, wearily, giving a finishing touch to "The development of religious ideas among the Greeks," at the same time glancing quickly at the clock. Her attention was arrested by a strange sight. Her tired mother had fallen asleep over her sewing. That was not surprising, but the startled girl saw bending over her mother's face, two angels, each looking earnestly at the sleeper.

"What made that weary look on this woman's face?" asked the stern, strange looking angel of the weaker, sadder one. "Has God given her no daughters?"

"Yes, but they have no time to help her!"

"No time!" cried the other. "What are they doing with all the time I am allowing them?"

"Well," replied the Angel of Life, "I keep their hands and hearts full. They are affectionate daughters, much admired for their good works; but they do not know they are letting the one they love most slip from my arms into yours. Those grey hairs come from overwork and anxiety to save money for music and French lessons. Those pale cheeks faded while the girls painted roses and pansies."

The dark angel frowned.

"Young ladies must be accomplished now," said the other. "Those eyes grew dim sewing for the girls, to give them time to study ancient history and modern languages; those wrinkles came because the girls had not time to share the cares and worry of every day life. That sigh comes because their mother feels neglected and lonely while the girls are working for the women of India; that tired look comes from getting up so early, while the poor exhausted girls are trying to sleep back the late hours they gave to study or spent at the concert; those feet are so weary because of their ceaseless walk."

"Surely, the girls help her, too?"

"What they can. But their feet get weary enough going around begging for the hospital and the church, and hunting up the poor and the sick."

"No wonder," said the Angel of Death, "so many mothers call me. This indeed is sad—loving, industrious girls, giving their mother to my care as soon as selfish, wicked ones."

"Ah, the hours are so crowded," said Life, wearily. "Girls who are cultured or take an active part in life, have no time to take care of the mother who spent so much in bringing them up."

"Then I must place my seal on her brow," said the Angel of Death, bending over the sleeping woman.

"No, no!" cried Marion, springing from her seat. "I will take care of her if you will only let her stay."

"Daughter, you must have the nightmare. Wake up, dear. I fear you have missed your history class."

"Never mind, mama, I am not going today. I am rested now, and I will make those button-holes while you curl up on the sofa and take a nap. I'll send word to the guild professor that I must be excused today, for I am going to see to supper myself and make some of those muffins you like."

"But, dear, I dislike to take your time."

"Seeing you have never given me any time! Now go to sleep, mamma dear, as I did, and do not worry about me. You are of more consequence than all the language and classics in the world."

So, with a tender kiss from her daughter—usually too busy for such demonstrations—Mrs. Henson fell into a sweet, restful sleep.

"I see we might have lost the best of mothers in our mad rush to be educated and useful in this hurrying, restless day and generation," Marion soliloquized, as she occasionally stole a glimpse at the sleeping mother.

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