

The Goose

A Christmas Story - by J. J. BELL

AUTHOR OF "WEE MacGREGOR," ETC.

[Published by Special Arrangement].



1
BOVE the rattle of the sewing machine rose two shrill young voices in conflict.
"I want a turkey!"
"I want a goose!"
"Shut up, Lucy!"
"Don't push me, you horrid boy!"
"Well, don't scratch!"
"Oh—oh, you've bit

me!"
"You shouldn't have put your hand in my mouth!"
"I didn't!"
"You did!"
There was a scuffle, a yell, a thud and a low wail.

The sewing machine stopped.
"Children, children," said a sweet, tired voice, "don't squabble. Bobby, help Lucy up, and say you didn't mean to hurt her."
"That would be a big fib," said Bobby, panting.
"Then say you're sorry you knocked her down."
"But I'm not. She slapped me first—and she's bigger'n me."
"Bobby," the mother said reproachfully, "To please me!" she added, gently, persuasively.

The little boy's fit of temper passed quickly. He extended a hand to his sobbing sister.
"Get up, you silly old ninepin," he said lightly.

"I don't want to get up."
"Come, Lucy dear," said the mother. "Bobby wants to be friends, you know. And I'm going to stop sewing for five minutes, and you can tell me what the trouble was about. Come here, both of you."

The little girl rose slowly, dried her eyes on her pinafore, and followed her brother to the table, above which the gas was already lit, for the December afternoon was of the wettest and gloomiest. The room was warm enough and comfortable in a shabby fashion. Though love had not flown out of the Leslies' window, it was obvious that poverty had come in at the door, and not quite recently; indeed, it had made its first entrance not very long after the Leslies' marriage.

"Now, what was it all about?" Mrs. Leslie inquired, with a smile. She was still pretty, though worried. "You first, Lucy."

"He said he must have a goose for Christmas, and I said a turkey would be far nicer."

"'Twouldn't! A great big fat goose would be—"
"You've never tasted a goose!" cried Lucy.

"Neither have you! But I smelt the one next door last year. You couldn't smell it, because you had a stuffy nose. So I know—"

"That will do, Bobby," said Mrs. Leslie mildly. "I don't think we'll have a goose this year—"

"Hooray!" cried Lucy, jubilant.
"Or a turkey, either, my dear. I'm telling you now because I don't want you to be disappointed when Christmas Day comes. But that's not to say that we shan't have a splendid dinner, all the same."

There was a rather distressing silence.
"Mother!" Bobby exploded at last, "how can we have a splendid Christmas dinner without a—goose?"

"Turkey!" said Lucy, with a threatening of fresh tears.

"Just wait and see," replied the mother with all the cheerfulness at her command. "After all, you know, geese and turkeys are not very good for us; we're apt to require medicine afterwards."

"I wouldn't mind that," the son declared. "I'd take a whole bottle—"
"I wouldn't eat too much turkey, mother," the daughter protested.

Mrs. Leslie shook her head. "What do you say to a chicken with lovely stuffing and—"

"A chicken!"
"Whoever heard of a chicken for Christmas?"

"Mis'erable little thing!"
"I hate chicken!"

Mrs. Leslie sighed, then laughed for her sense of humor had survived in spite of care. "I think I'll be able to make you change your little minds about that," she said. "Wait till you smell my chicken! Now get back to your play. I've heaps to do before tea-time, and the old machine is in a naughty temper."

The children moved away.
"Let's ask Daddy when he comes home," said Bobby.
"No!" There was a ring of authority in the mother's voice. "Promise me, both of you, that you'll say nothing to Daddy about geese or turkeys. Lucy—Bobby—you promise?"

Somehow she replied soothingly to their protests and questions, and finally gained the required words. But there was no smile at her lips as she returned to work. And there was a heaviness in her heart. She wished Christmas a year away. To some of us the season has its terrors. The machine rattled once more; the children fell to playing amicably together; the windows grew black with night.

II.

Robert Leslie had two distinct recollections of being called a fool by his wealthy uncle. The epithet had been uttered in response to his announcement of his approaching marriage and of his decision (a couple of years later) to commence business on his own account. Since the latter occasion Robert had applied the word to himself pretty frequently, though not in his uncle's hearing. As a matter of fact, he had not spoken with his uncle since the day of quitting his employment. Chance encounters on the street—and these were rare—had been limited to a curt nod and mumble on either side. Pride is an excellent thing in its way, but it seldom pays, and often costs even more than money.

And now, for the first time in eight years, Robert, on his way home from business, went round by the street in which his uncle's offices were situated. He could not have told why he did so. The night was bitterly cold, and a drizzling rain made the darkness wretched. He was behind his usual time, too. He was fain for his wife and children and fireside, though in these days, alas! he carried home a sorry headache, and his smile for even the youngsters was wan.

As he drew near the old-fashioned yet handsome building his pace slackened, and presently he came to a halt opposite it, glancing furtively across the street with its dwindling traffic. How familiar everything was, how suggestive of solid business and generous profit, of security from want and safety from sordid petty cares! Over there he had spent the working hours of his youth and early manhood—he could tell the windows behind which his years in the different departments had been passed. He could tell, also, those of his uncle's private room, wherein cold good-byes had been exchanged eight years ago. Most of the windows were now dark and as he watched, the last of the lights went out—extinguished by the caretaker, he guessed.

Robert sighed, and made to turn away. Stay! There was still some light in the private room—a lowered gas-jet and the flickering glow of a fire. Perhaps his uncle was coming back later. Robert remembered how in the old days just at this time of the year, the master of the great business was wont to spend a few evenings at his desk after dinner. Should he wait on the chance of gaining an interview with the old man? Five minutes ago he had not dreamt of such a thing, but now—somehow—was it the sight of the familiar windows, the cosy flicker that had moved him?—he felt a craving to stand in the old place once more.

What an utter, unpardonable fool he had been ever to leave it—to throw up a sure, generous and increasing salary for the will-o'-the-wisp of a fortune to be derived from a business of his own! Where now was the fortune, where the business of his own! Where the capital he had invested in it? Gone—gone—shadow, bones and all! For himself, he was now slaving in a situation yielding him barely half the salary enjoyed in his uncle's office. Again he gazed at the fire-lit window. He shook his head.

No! He could not face his uncle. Besides, they would be worrying about him at home; he must hasten. He turned away, despairingly, sick at heart.

That night, in bitter mood he told his wife of the impulse that had sent him along the once familiar street.

"I don't suppose I could have faced him; and if I had, I'd probably have got snubbed for my pains. He doesn't forgive failures. But oh, Marjorie, what a fool I've been!" he concluded.

"Don't reproach yourself, dear," she

Sandwiches for School Lunches

The most nourishing sandwich is buttered bread or toast spread lightly with Bovril.

It is excellent for building body and brain and specially valuable for growing children.

BOVRIL

IS ALL THAT IS GOOD IN BEEF

The 1-lb. size is the most economical to use.

replied for perhaps the thousandth time in recent years. "I don't care what your uncle may think; I know that you did everything for the best. It hasn't been your fault, Robert—never!"

He shook his head wearily. "You're a brick, Marjorie," he said sadly; "but I know what you suffer."

"Nonsense! Things might be ever so much worse. The children keep well and there's enough to eat, and—and—oh, don't give way, my dear!"

"It's this Christmas business that breaks my heart, I believe," he said bitterly. "You haven't a penny to spend on yourself or the kiddies, and as soon as Christmas is past those over-due bills will come flowing in again. I wish we could all go to sleep for Christmas week. One gets one's poverty rubbed in just now. What a mess I've made of things! What trouble I've brought you to!"

"No, no," she said bravely, though her lips quivered. "We'll pull through somehow, Robert. But do you mind telling me, have you ever really felt like going to your uncle for—help?"

"Why do you ask?"
"Because I want you to understand that you must never humble yourself for my sake, dear."

"Ah, Marjorie, for whose sake would I go to him? But my idea would be to go to him for employment—not charity. Possibly"—bitterly—"he would regard me as a beggar all the same."

Mrs. Leslie was silent. She had never met the rich man. At times she had hated him, though all she knew about him was that he had refused to attend her wedding and had sent a cheque for a hundred pounds with his card, also that he had resented Robert's leaving his office to embark on a new business. She imagined him as an elderly gentleman with a dislike of women and a short temper, and, to tell the truth, she had encouraged her husband when he had first talked of a business of his own. Poor girl, she had even dreamed of the young man becoming the envy of the old.

"You are the most loyal little woman that ever was," said Robert suddenly. "I'll go and see him to-morrow—or the day after. If he snubs me, it will be no more than I deserve."

She protested for a time, but she was very, very tired, body and mind, and at last pride gave in.

"If you like, Robert," she whispered, "tell him it was my idea—you go right to see him."

But when Robert called at the big offices a few days later he was shortly, if politely, informed that his uncle was engaged.

"You gave him my name," he stammered to the clerk, a stranger happily. "He sent no message?"

"No."

Robert hesitated, then turned from the inquiry counter, his last hope shattered.

"If you were to call later," the clerk began less stiffly.

"Thank you," said Robert; "I may do so."

But years of failure had weakened his never very robust spirit, and he knew he could not face the possibility of another rebuff.

As he crossed the street a minute later his uncle watched him from the window.

III.

Mrs. Leslie could not afford a servant in the house, but twice a week a small female, whose age might have been anything between fifteen and fifty, came in to assist with the rough work.

On the afternoon of the 23rd day of December the small female was engaged in scrubbing the narrow hall (which she ought to have done in the morning) when a cab drew up opposite the door.

A smartly-dressed gentleman with white side whiskers alighted, looked about him, frowned, told the driver to wait, frowned again, and approached the door. Whereupon the small female withdrew her inquisitive nose from the letter-flap, and waited, crouching and panting, for the

bell to ring. When it did ring she paid no attention for several seconds; then she marked time with her feet as if hastening to obey the summons, and slowly raised her head to the glazed portion of the door. She also applied wet fingers to her front hair. It was her first chance of admitting a visitor, but she knew exactly what to do, having read all about it in a penny book.

"Is Mrs. Leslie at home?"
"Yes, sir. Will you please step in, sir." She threw the door wide, knocking over the pail of water.

The visitor removed a very shiny hat, but ignored the grubby hand outstretched to receive it.

There was a somewhat awkward pause until the small female, recovering some of her wits, led the way to the sitting-room.

"What name if you please, sir?"
"Kindly say to Mrs. Leslie that a gentleman desires to see her."

"Oh—all right," said the small female, forgetting the words of the book. "Take a seat, and I'll tell her. She's just dressin' herself. Behave yourself, Master Bobby!" she added in a stage whisper. "Here's a gentleman to see your ma."

The visitor found himself in a room as untidy as two healthy children left to themselves for an hour or so could make it. And his ears were assailed by the sound of quarrelling.

"Turkey!"
"Goose!"

"Bobby, don't be nasty. You promised to pray for a turkey—"
"I'll pray for a turkey for next year, if you'll pray for a goose for this year. Hurry up, Lucy, or perhaps God won't have any geeses left."

"But I want a—"
They perceived the visitor and were silent, abashed. Taking hands, they stared at him for a moment or two, then edged towards the door, eyeing him suspiciously.

The gentleman coughed. "You needn't run away," he said with something of an effort, but in quite a mild tone of voice. "I have called to see your mother—Mrs. Leslie is your mother, I presume—but you might speak to me until she comes."

Lucy halted. "Don't push, Bobby!" she whispered. She regarded the visitor with a quaint dignity, and said gravely, "But we don't know you."

"Perhaps you've heard of me," he returned, a trifle grimly. "Will you come and shake hands? And I'll tell you who I am."

"Are you a great friend of mother's?" the little girl asked after a pause.

"Well, I can hardly say that, for I've never met your mother. Still, I hope I am not an enemy."

Lucy considered, while her companion tugged at her hand.

"I think we'll wait to see what mother says," she said at last.

"Oh—but perhaps you've heard of me," he said again. "My name is George Leslie, and I am your father's uncle—your great-uncle, you know. You have heard your parents speak of me?"

Both children shook their heads emphatically.

"H'm!" muttered the great-uncle. "Perhaps you won't object to telling me your names; I'd like to know them."

"He's Bobby," said the girl, indicating her brother.

"She's Lucy," said the boy, finding his voice. And all at once taking courage, he left his sister and stepped forward a couple of paces.

"Do you like turkey or goose best?" he demanded.

Mr. George Leslie laughed. "Why," he said, "I never seriously considered the matter; but on the whole, I think I may say goose." He laughed again, quite pleasantly.

Within the moment the triumphant Bobby's hand was in his.

"But," protested Lucy, "Bobby has never tasted turkey, and he has only smelt goose once. I've tasted turkey—when he was too young to get any. I'm sure I'd hate goose." She eyed the visitor in

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 12).