

HARRIET ANN'S CHRISTMAS.

BY MARY E. WILKINS.

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I was 12 years old three weeks before that Christmas, but I was small for my age and looked no more than 10. There were four of us. I was the eldest. Then there were a girl of 10, one of 8½ and a boy of 7. In October we had moved to the house on the shore of Lonesome lake, which was very lonesome indeed. It was a solitary little sheet of water on the top of a hill, almost a mountain. There were no neighbors nearer than a mile. Father had moved to this farm on Lonesome lake because his father had died that fall, and the property had to be divided between him and his brother, Uncle William. Uncle William was not married, though he was older than father, and he and father and grandfather had always lived together and worked the home farm, sharing the profit.

After grandfather's death father and Uncle William had some difference. I never knew what it was about. One night after I had gone to bed I heard them talking loud, and the next morning father and Uncle William looked very sober at breakfast, and mother had been crying. That afternoon she told us that we were going to move because the property was to be divided, and we were to have the farm on Lonesome lake, near Lebanon. Lebanon is a little village about ten miles from Wareville, where we were living then. Mother said she was sorry to go away because she had lived there so long, and she was afraid she would be pretty lonesome in the new home, but she said we must make the best of it. Uncle William was the eldest son and had a right to the first choice of the property, and of course since he was a bachelor it would be very hard for him to go to live at Lonesome lake.

We children rather liked the idea of moving and began packing at once. Flory and Janey had their dolls and their wardrobes all packed within an hour. Flory was the sister next to me, and I thought her rather old to play with dolls. I had given up dolls long before I was as old as she.

Two weeks after grandfather died we were all moved and nearly settled in our new home. There had been no one living in the house for several years, except when father and Uncle William went up there every year in haying time to cut and make hay. Everything seemed pretty damp and dismal at first, but when we got our furniture set up and the fires started it looked more cheerful. The house was large, with two front rooms looking on the lake, which was only about 20 feet distant. One of these rooms was our sitting room; the other was our parlor. Back of these rooms was a very large one, which was our kitchen and dining room. There were a dark bedroom in the middle of the house, a bedroom out of the kitchen, one where

father and mother slept, out of the sitting room, and four chambers.

Thanksgiving came about a week after we had moved, and we had a rather forlorn day. We all missed grandfather and Uncle William. I am sure mother cried a little before we sat down to the table, and father looked sober.

When Thanksgiving was over, we began to think about Christmas. Mother had promised us a Christmas tree. The year before we had all had the measles and been disappointed about going to the tree at the Sunday school, and mother had said, "Next year you shall have a tree of your own if nothing happens." Of course something had happened. Poor grandfather had died, and we had moved, and we wondered if that would put a stop to the tree. Mother looked a little troubled at first when we spoke of it. Then she said if we would not be disappointed if we did not have many presents and the tree did not have much on it except popcorn and apples she would see what she could do.

Then we children began to be full of little secreties. Mysterious bits of wool and silk and colored paper and cardboard were scattered about the house, and we were always shutting doors and jumping and hiding things when a door was opened. Each of us was making something for father and mother, even Charles Henry. He was working a worsted motto, "God Bless Our Home." Then, of course, we were all making presents for one another.

It was a week and one day before Christmas. We had our presents almost done, and mother had promised to take two of us the very next day and go down to the village to do some shopping—we had been saving money all the year for some boughten presents—when the news about Uncle William came. A man rode over from Wareville quite late at night and brought word that Uncle William was dangerously sick and father and mother must come at once if they wanted to see him alive. Mother said there was nothing for it but they must go. She said if they had not come away just as they had, with hard words between father and Uncle William, she would have let father go alone and staid with us children; but, as it was, she felt that she must go too. She and father, though I can understand now that they felt anxious while trying to conceal it from us, did not think there was any real danger in our staying alone. They reasoned that nobody except the people in the village would know we were alone, and there was not probably one ill disposed person there, certainly not one who would do us harm. Then, too, it was winter, and we were off the main traveled road, and tramps seemed very improbable. We had enough provisions

in the house to last us for weeks, and there was a great stock of firewood in the shed. Luckily the barn was connected with the house, so I did not have to go out of doors to milk—it was fortunate that I knew how—and we had only one cow.

Mother staid up all that night and baked, and father split up kindling wood and got everything ready to leave. They started early next morning, repeating all their instructions over and over. We felt pretty lonesome when they had gone, I especially, not only because I was the eldest and felt a responsibility for the rest, but because father had given me a particular charge. I was the only one who knew that there was \$583, some money which father had from the sale of a wood lot in Wareville a month after we had moved and had kept in the house ever since, locked up in the secret drawer in the chest in the dark bedroom.

Father had been intending to drive over to Wilton, where there was a bank, and deposit the money, but had put it off from one week to another, and now Wilton was too far out of his way for him to go there before going to see poor Uncle William.

Father called me into the parlor the morning they started, told me about the money and charged me to say nothing concerning it to the others. "It is always best when there is money to be taken care of to keep your own counsel," said father. He showed me the secret drawer in the chest in the dark bedroom, the existence of which I had never suspected before, though I was 12 years old, and he taught me how to open and shut it. If the house caught fire, I was to get the children out first, then go straight to the secret drawer and save the money. If there had been no possibility of fire, I doubt if father would have told me about the money at all, and I would have been saved a great deal of worry.

The money was on my mind constantly after father and mother were gone. I kept thinking, "Suppose anything should happen to that money while I have the charge of it." I knew what a serious matter it would be, because father had not much money and was saving this to buy cows in the spring, when he expected to open a milk route. I was all the time planning what I should do in case the house caught fire and in case the robbers came. The first night after father and mother went I did not sleep much, though the others did. We three girls slept in one room, with Charley in a little one out of it, and we were all locked in.

The next night I slept a little better and did not feel so much afraid, and the next day Samuel J. Wetherhed came, and we all felt perfectly safe after that. He came about 10 o'clock in the morning and knocked on the south door, and we all jumped. I don't suppose anybody had knocked on that door three times since we had lived there. It was such a lonesome place. We were scared and did not dare to go to the door, but when he knocked the second time I mustered up enough courage. I told Flory, who was as large as I and stronger, to take the carving knife, hide it under her apron and stand behind me. Of course I thought at once of the money and that this might be a robber. Then I opened the door a crack and peeped out. The minute I saw the man who stood there I did not feel afraid at all, and Flory said afterward that she felt awful ashamed of the carving knife and

afraid that he might see it and be hurt in his feelings.

He stood there, smiling with such a pleasant smile. He did not look very old, not near as old as father, and he was quite well dressed. He was very good looking, and that, with his pleasant smile, won our hearts at once. He more than smiled—he fairly laughed in such a good natured way when he saw how we were all peeping, for the younger children were behind Flory, and I found afterward that Charley, who had great notions of being smart and brave, though he was so little, because he was a boy, had the poker, shaking it at the stranger. The man laughed and said in such a pleasant voice, pleasanter than his smile even: "Now, don't you be scared, children. I am Samuel J. Wetherhed."

The man said that as if it settled everything, and we all felt that it did, though we had never heard of Samuel J. Wetherhed, in our lives. We felt that we ought to know all about him, and Janey said that night that she was sure she had seen his name in The Missionary Herald, and he must be a deacon who gave a great deal to missions.

Samuel J. Wetherhed went on to tell us more about himself, though I am sure we should have been satisfied with the name. "I have a married sister who lives in Wareville. She married a man of the name of Stackpole," said he, and we all nodded wisely at that and felt that it was an introduction. We knew Mr. Stackpole. He was the man to whom father had sold his woodland. "I went to visit my sister last week," said the man. "I haven't got any settled work. Yesterday my sister's husband saw your father, and he told him how he had left you all alone up here and felt sort of worried, and I thought as long as I was just loafing around and no use to anybody I might just as well come up here and look after you a little and stay till your folks got back and look out there didn't any wolves or robbers or anything get you." The man laughed again in such a pleasant, merry way when he said that, and then he went on to tell us that his sister's husband said Uncle William was better and the doctor thought he would get well, but he guessed father and mother would have to stay there for awhile. We asked the man in, and he made himself at home at once.

It seemed to me I had never seen a man so very kind as he was, and he was so quick to see things that needed to be done. He went out of his own accord and drew a pail of water, and he brought in wood for the sitting room fire. We children all agreed when we went up stairs to bed that night that there never was a man so good, except father. We had told him our plans for Christmas, and he was so much interested. He said of course we could have a tree. He would cut a fine tree, and if Uncle William was not well enough for father and mother to leave him on Christmas day he would go to Wareville himself and stay with Uncle William, so they could come home. He said, too, that he could go down to the village on foot, and if we would make out a list of the things we wanted he would go down and buy them for us. He went the very next day. We gave him all our money, and he brought back everything we wanted. We decided to make him some presents, too, and I began a little wash leather money bag, like the one I had made for father. Flory made a penwiper and