

Esther's Christmas

By Gwendolen Overton

HERE'S a wagon coming!" Esther announced excitedly. "It's the one from the fort with the things for the Christmas tree." Her mother came to stand beside her in the door of the cabin.

At any time a passing wagon was of interest, here in the heart of the Western mountains, but today it was more than ever an event; for a long winter rain had put a stop to almost all travel; it had lasted through two cold and dreary weeks, and not until this Christmas morning had there been a glimpse of blue sky for a fortnight.

"The roads must have been very bad," said Mrs. Lawton. "It was twelve days ago that they went by, and they ought to have made the trip to the railroad and back in a week."

A month ago Esther had ridden over with her father to Fort Pedrozo to spend the day with Alice Shannon, who was just her own age, and a daughter of a person called the quarter-master sergeant. And Alice had told her wonderful tales about a party she and Netta Anderson were going to have on Christmas night in the amusement hall. It was to be for the soldiers' children, and there would be dolls and toys and candy and beautiful ornaments. Alice had said that she and Netta had worked for a long time making some of the things and earning money to send East for others that they could not make.

Ever since then Esther had thought about it, imagining what it would be like, wishing that she herself could see it. She spent long hours fancying herself going to a party and being surrounded by other children. For she was very lonely all by herself in her home in the forest, where her only playfellows were her dog and her horse, and sometimes a young Indian.

Once she had talked about it, but it had made her mother cry. So Esther had



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been careful not to speak of it again. And this morning she had done her best to seem delighted with the new bridle and the dress and the necklace of Indian beads which she had found by the fireplace. But immediately after breakfast her father had had to take advantage of the fine weather and ride away to another ranch. He would be gone until night. So she and her mother were left by themselves and it did not promise to be a very merry Christmas day for a young girl.

"I wish Henry would stop and see us," she said softly. There was more wistfulness in the tone than she knew, and the tears came again into her mother's eyes. "Oh," cried Esther, flinging her arms about Mrs. Lawton's neck, "I didn't mean to make you feel badly. I'm not so very lonesome."

Her own lip was quivering and her mother smiled bravely and stooped to kiss the upturned face.

At that instant the loud cracking of a whip made them both start. It was followed by another and another, and then by the shouting of a man's voice. The wagon, which both of them had momentarily forgotten, was not in sight, and the truth flashed upon Esther. "They're in the ravine! And I shouldn't wonder if they can't get out." The shouts and the cracks of the whip were repeated. "I'm going to see," said Esther, turning into the house. She came back, wearing a pair of boy's boots that met her skirt at the knee, and she plodded off through the soft ground, disappearing into the ravine.

When she reappeared Henry was with her. He had often stepped into the cabin as he drove his team to and from the post; and to people whose lives were so isolated he seemed almost an intimate friend.

"We're stuck in the mud," he said to Mrs. Lawton. "I'll have to stay here till tomorrow. There's an ambulance coming down from Stone's ranch then that can help us pull out. I guess you'll have to give me my Christmas dinner."

A guest less pleasant than the frank-faced soldier would have been only too welcome; but Esther's thoughts went suddenly to Netta Anderson and Alice and all the children at the fort. "Aren't the things for the Christmas tree in the wagon?" she asked.

"Yes, they are," he told her; "and it it too bad."

"Alice will be so dreadfully disappointed," she protested; "and they worked so hard."

Henry nodded. "But it can't be helped. If the roads would have been all right we would have been back four or five days ago. I know they're getting anxious, too. Colonel Anderson telegraphed to Stone's ranch yesterday to find out where we were. I wired that we'd be along this afternoon sure. If there was any way of doing it I'd let him know so that he could send for the things."

Esther had the imaginations of a child who has always relied upon itself for interests, and she could feel for the others as though the disappointment had been her own. She sat considering, her eyes on the soldier's face. "Why don't you ride one of the mules and take the things in?"

"There are about nine hundred pounds of stuff in that wagon," he informed her. Esther gasped. "All for the tree?"

He laughed. "Not quite; about eight hundred and fifty is supplies and feed."

"Well, you could ride one mule and pack all there is on the see for another."

He shook his head. "They're not riding or pack animals, and a mule doesn't like following any procession, but his own. Besides, I'm in charge of the wagon. If I was to leave it I'd get into trouble. A soldier must always obey orders."

Esther sat in thought for some moments again. Then she asked: "Why couldn't I take the things?" as if as the soldier and her mother began to smile, she urged her plan. "We could put them on Jake. Jake's our little white pack-mule," she explained to Henry; "and I could ride Billy." She cast eager looks from one to the other. "I could do it just as well as not."

"It's eight miles," Henry reminded.

"As if I couldn't ride sixteen miles in a day." She had covered thirty and forty often, and once fifty.

"The roads are in bad shape."

"Not between here and the post. They never are except in one or two places, and there are trails around those, and the for I isn't so very high," she displayed her knowledge of the country. "I could be back before dark."

Henry turned to Mrs. Lawton. "Would you be willing she should do it?" he asked.

Esther gave an audible sigh of relief as her mother answered there did not seem to be any reason against it. All her life Esther had wandered on horseback over the mountains, as freely as a child of more civilized districts might have ridden in a park, and it seemed nothing now to allow her to go a small matter of eight miles.

So it was not long before Jake was equipped with his pack-saddle and precious freight. He was led to the ravine and there loaded with all the packages which were addressed to Miss Netta Anderson. "You'll have to tighten that pack now and then," the soldier said. "Do you think you can?" Esther was sure that she could. She had often helped her father pack.

When at length she was mounted on her pony and ready to start, Henry looked a little dubious. "He's feeling pretty fresh, Jake is," he warned. Esther called back her assurance that she was quite equal to the task she had undertaken. And then she rode off, still rearing her big muddy boots, and well wrapped from the cold air in an old coat of her father's.

But her ability to manage Jake was

soon put to the proof. For the first two or three miles the road was heavy, and he plodded along beside Billy quietly enough. All at once, however, she shied violently at an old deserted tepee which he had passed countless times without so much as pricking up his ears. It was all the excuse for excitement that her own pony needed. He too gave a jump aside. Then his head went down, and with a little squeal of meanness, he began to buck. He was doing his very best to unseat his rider, and there was no question of keeping hold of the pack-mule's rope. Jake pulled away. When Billy had finished bucking he had gone a hundred yards ahead. Until Esther came close by him he paid no attention to her; but when she was just near enough to grasp the rope, he gave a quick jump and started off at a trot. She followed him. The trot grew faster. She tried the effect of bringing Billy to a walk. Instantly Jake stopped short. But the moment she moved, he too advanced. If he had kept to the road it would not have mattered, but his preference was for wandering farther and farther away from it; and he was brushing the pack against the low branches of trees with great danger of its coming loose. Besides the creek was not far ahead, and he was going off along a cattle trail which led to a place where the fording was good in summer, but was dangerous now in winter after the long rains.

"Whoa, Jake," Esther called, growing frightened. "Whoa, there." Jake began to trot. "Whoa," she cried despairingly. But Jake with mulish determination kept on. He reached the edge of the rushing torrent, whose noise completely drowned Esther's frantic shouts. For an instant he hesitated. Then he went into the water. It came to his knees, to his flank, to the edge of the pack. Esther gave a wail of distress. He had lost his footing. He was floundering. He was swimming. The current was sweeping him down and down.

Esther thought of the Christmas presents, but she thought still more of

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"Oh!" cried Esther throwing her arms around Mrs. Lawton's neck.



"Do you suppose they would let me just look at their Christmas tree?"