



THE CHRISTMAS SPIRIT

By Justus Miller

It was the beginning of Christmas week, and a cold, raw Christmas it promised to be. The snow was not deep, for the cold had been too intense. The west wind whipped across the white fields upon the little village of Verchoyle mercilessly. The pale smoke melted into dull leaden skies, and trees cracked that morning as little Bobby and Mary Williams started to school. Poor little tots!—it seemed terribly cold to them. Their mother was a widow, almost worn out with the effort to support herself and two children by washing clothes for the more prosperous of her neighbors, and such other work as a small village offered. The home was cheerless enough, but her mother-love never wavered, and she continued the hard struggle. They lived in a poor old house, a mile to the west of the village, just where the road turned leading to the town of Albert.

So the children on this morning started for school, running at intervals to keep warm, as the keen wind blew through their scanty clothing.

"Wot's to eat to-day, Mary?" asked eight-year-old Bobby.

"Just bread and butter," said Mary, two years his senior, upon whom the cares of the world had started already to rest.

"Got very much?" asked Bobby.

"Three slices each."

Bobby trotted on in silence. He was used to small meals. Insufficiently fed and clothed, he had become accustomed to hardship, so he ceased to comment upon the meagre meal.

As they passed through the village, they stopped at one, and only one store, to warm their feet. A large table placed directly in the center of the floor now held the place of honor. On it were displayed toys of many kinds, and of various values. Bobby's eyes opened wide as he saw a repeating air-rifle—the very kind he had longed for and dreamed over. But never a chance, it seemed, had he of ever getting one. He touched it cautiously and lovingly, with a world of longing in his eyes, cold toes quite forgotten. Meanwhile, Mary had discovered a doll, black-haired, ruddy-cheeked—beautiful in her eyes beyond description. Forgetful of school, they lingered caressing the treasures, until the clock struck nine.

"Oh, Bobby, we'll be late again. We are most every day, and teacher said as how she's keep us in after four next time."

The schoolhouse, owing to the densely-populated farming community in that district, was situated some half-mile south of the village, so they hastened for it, but alas! accidents were fated to happen that day. Mr. Thompson, a wealthy farmer, lived between the village and the school. He had just bought a large, good-natured collie pup, which happened to see the children running. With thick, woolly hair, and laughing jaws, he gambled up to meet them, for of course they wanted to play. He caught Mary's dress playfully, giving a huge bark, but to Mary he was as a happy, murderous brute, bent on mischief. With a scream, she dropped their dinner and ran the faster. The pup was in no way averse to bread, and quickly bolting it, he scampered after the crying children.

Quite unnoticed by the frightened little

boy and girl, Mr. Thompson stood at his gate. As they approached, he stepped out and shouted at the pup, which immediately stopped with front feet spread wide, and ears pointed forward, ready to leap at a moment's notice, sideways or forward, in pure joyful frolic.

The children ran to his side, and he looked down at them kindly.

"So the pup scared you, eh? Well, don't cry. He was only playing; he won't hurt you. You lost your dinner, I see. Come up here at noon and we'll see what we can do for you. I guess you'd better hurry on now, though, because you're late. The bell rang a while ago."

"Mighty little clothes those youngsters have for this kind of weather," said the farmer to himself, shivering in his heavy flannels.

Contrary to their expectations, no unpleasant results followed their lateness. The teacher perhaps thought the severity of the weather sufficient excuse. Perhaps the Christmas Spirit stirred in her heart.

At noon the children walked, cold and shivering, to Mr. Thompson's door, and Mary timidly knocked. Mrs. Thompson opened the door, and her motherly heart warmed to the forlorn-looking pair.

"Come in, dears," she said, heartily, and ushered them in to the warm range. Dinner was ready in a few minutes.

"Six slices of bread and butter," Mary briefly supplemented.

"Got your Christmas goose?" said Mr. Thompson in a matter-of-fact tone.

Mary looked at him in amazement. She had never, to her memory, tasted goose.

"Never had a goose for Christmas unless daddy used to get them, and I don't remember then," said she.

"What will you have on Christmas?"

Bobby paused in his now painful pleasure. "Bread and butter; mebbe potatoes."

"Mebbe sausage," added Mary, after a pause. "Ma does Mrs. Johnson's washin' this week. Last Thanksgiving she gave her enough fur dinner 'an' supper."

"You poor little ones," said Mrs. Thompson.

"Poor little girl! Poor little kid!" said Mr. Thompson, stroking Mary's hair. Again his glance sought that of his wife. Something gleamed in their eyes—tears, or the Christmas spirit!

That night Mr. Thompson stood by the huge box-stove in the store. He watched the school children come in to gloat over the toys which they hoped might become theirs; but his interest was chiefly centered upon Mary and Bobby. He noted the looks of sorrowful longing with which they fondled the doll and gun. His gaze wandered out into the cold, dark twilight. A tender smile played around his mouth, which gradually grew sad, almost bitter. He was

the door, he shivered, and turned up his heavy collar. Then, closing the door, he was lost to view.

"Bobby," whispered Mary, "see, it's dark outside. Let's go home." So together they started on their long, cold walk, cheered by the pleasure of having been near their treasures.

It was the day before Christmas. The intense cold of the last two weeks had abated, and a great many pointed snowflakes were falling.

The house of the widow was cold and cheerless. She was away that afternoon scrubbing the floors in the house of the sickly wife of a wealthy farmer a couple of miles distant. The children had stolen away once more to be near the toys they so valued and loved, but to their sorrow they found that they were gone. They were too bashful and too heart-broken to enquire for them, so spent some time miserably looking over toys that they had hardly noticed before.

The storekeeper and his two clerks were very busy that day. But it was the day before Christmas, and the heart of Ned Moore was overflowing with the Christmas spirit. Besides, he had little ones of his own; so, pausing in a less busy moment, he called, "Here, kids!" and handed Bobby a warm pair of wolverine-lined leather mittens and a thick muffler to Mary. Their eyes danced with delight, and in the joy of receiving this badly-needed clothing, they forgot for the moment their disappointment over the gun and doll.

As they ate their scanty supper, Bobby suddenly remarked, "Say, Mary, I heard the kids say they wrote to Santa Claus and burned the letter. Then he brought what they wanted. Why don't he ever stop here?"—and a puzzled frown spread over his face.

"Mebbe he will," said Mary, "if we write. So the letter was duly written, and burned in the fire in the old cracked cook-stove supported by bricks."

Meanwhile the poor, dejected mother was speechless. Long after the children had crept to bed she sat in her old chair, her hands clasped before her. How bitter was her heart! She was almost ready to give up. Work was uncertain in the small village; at best, wages were low, and the children wore out so many clothes. Oh, if only her husband, Jack, were alive. Tears came to her eyes. Jack had been the strongest man in the neighborhood, good-natured, sober, and hard-working. They had not wanted in those days. But not even his strength could save him when that huge elm had fallen across him eight years before. And Jack had left nothing, for he was only a laborer, and his life had not been insured.

The tears blinded her. And now it was Christmas! For dinner she remembered she had planned a little treat—bread, butter, tea, a large piece of cheese, sausage, and a bottle of pickles. It was a feast for them, but, after all, what were these for a Christmas dinner? Her mother-love welled up strongly. For the little ones' sake she must struggle on. They must be fed and clothed. As her eyes wandered around the forlorn room they rested on the stockings hung so pathetically over a chair-back.

Suddenly her mind was made up. The children should not be wholly disappointed. From her slim purse she took half a dollar, and, throwing on her well-worn coat, hurried to the village. She bought a gaudy train of tin cars for Bobby, and an equally cheap hair-ribbon for Mary. With the few cents left, she purchased mixed candy.

With her gifts she hurried home and tenderly placed them in the long stockings. "There, dears," she murmured, with a happiness she had not known for



"A Merry Christmas."

"Gee, whiz!" gasped Bobby under his breath.

Mary simply stared. It was seldom they could secure enough food to quite satisfy them, even of the plainest nature, and here was abundance and more.

Mr. and Mrs. Thompson exchanged glances as the children hungrily ate. It was nearly Christmas, and the spirit was in the air.

"Well, dear," said Mrs. Thompson to Bobby, with a crafty look, as she gave him his third generous helping of juicy beef, potatoes, and brown gravy, "so Carlo stole your pie to-day."

"Wasn't no pie," said Bobby, with his mouth full of steak.

seeing a tiny face that was now under the snow.

"Hello, Hank," said a lusty voice, as the heavy hand of a friend clapped his shoulder, "Merry Christmas!—if I don't see you again."

"Same to yourself, and many of them," replied Mr. Thompson, and he again looked at the children, with the pleasant smile returning. He moved toward them, paused, thought a moment, and then turned to get his basket of groceries on the counter.

"Night, Hank," said the owner of the store in a pleasant voice.

"Good night, Ned," replied Mr. Thompson, as he departed. As he opened