

The Birds' Christmas Carol.

(Concluded.)

"My dear child," whispered Uncle Jack, as he took Carol an orange, "there is no doubt about the necessity of this feast, but I do advise you after this to have them twice a year, or quarterly, perhaps, for the way they eat is positively dangerous; I assure you I tremble for that terrible Peoria. I'm going to run races with her after dinner."

"Never mind," laughed Carol, "let them eat for once; it does my heart good to see them, and they shall come oftener next year."

The feast being over, the Ruggleses lay back in their chairs languidly, and the table was cleared in a trice; then a door was opened into the next room, and there, in a corner facing Carol's bed, which had been wheeled as close as possible, stood the brilliantly lighted Christmas tree, glittering with gilded walnuts and tiny silver balloons, and wreathed with snowy chains of popcorn. The presents had been bought mostly with Carol's story money, and were selected after long consultations with Mrs. Bird. Each girl had a blue knitted hood, and each boy a red crocheted comforter, all made by Mamma, Carol, and Elfrida ("because if you buy everything, it doesn't show so much love," said Carol). Then every girl had a pretty plaid dress of a different color, and every boy a warm coat of the right size. Here the useful presents stopped, and they were quite enough; but Carol had pleaded to give them something "for fun." "I know they need the clothes," she had said, when they were talking over the matter just after Thanksgiving, "but they don't care much for them, after all. Now, papa, won't you *please* let me go without part of my presents this year, and give me the money they would cost to buy something to amuse them?"

"You can have both," said Mr. Bird, promptly; "is there any need of my little girl's going without her Christmas, I should like to know? Spend all the money you like."

"But that isn't the thing," objected Carol, nestling close to her father; "it wouldn't be mine. What is the use? Haven't I almost everything already, and am I not the happiest girl in the world this year, with Uncle Jack and Donald at home? Now, Papa, you know very well it is more blessed to give than to receive; then why won't you let me do it? You never look half as happy when you are getting your

presents as when you are giving us ours. Now, Papa, submit, or I shall have to be very firm and disagreeable with you!"

"Very well, your Highness, I surrender." "That's a dear Papa! Now, what were you going to give me? Confess!"

"A bronze figure of Santa Claus; and in the little round belly, that shakes when he laughs, like a bowl full of jelly, is a wonderful clock. Oh, you would never give it up if you could see it."

"Nonsense!" laughed Carol; "as I never have to get up to breakfast, nor go to bed, nor catch trains, I think my old clock will do very well! Now, Mamma, what were you going to give me?"

"Oh, I hadn't decided. A few more books, and a gold thimble, and a smelling-bottle, and a music-box."

"Poor Carol," laughed the child, merrily, "she can afford to give up these lovely things, for there will still be left Uncle Jack, and Donald, and Paul, and Hugh, and Uncle Rob, and Aunt Elsie, and a dozen other people."

So Carol had her way, as she generally did, but it was usually a good way, which was fortunate, under the circumstances; and Sarah Maud had a set of Miss Alcott's books, and Peter a modest silver watch, Cornelius a tool-chest, Clement a dog-house for his "lame puppy," Larry a magnificent Noah's ark, and each of the little girls a beautiful doll. You can well believe that everybody was very merry and very thankful. All the family, from Mr. Bird down to the cook, said they had never seen so much happiness in the space of three hours; but it had to end, as all things do. The candles flickered and went out, the tree was left alone with its gilded ornaments, and Mrs. Bird sent the children down stairs at half-past eight, thinking that Carol looked tired.

"Now, my darling, you have done quite enough for one day," said Mrs. Bird, getting Carol into her little night-dress; "I am afraid you will feel worse to-morrow, and that would be a sad ending to such a good time."

"Oh, wasn't it a lovely, lovely time!" sighed Carol. "From the first to last, everything was just right. I shall never forget Larry's face when he looked at the turkey; nor Peter's, when he saw his watch; nor that sweet, sweet Kitty's smile when she kissed her dolly; nor the tears in poor, dull Sarah Maud's eyes when she thanked me for her books; nor—"

"But we mustn't talk any longer about it to-night," said Mrs. Bird, anxiously; "you are too tired, dear."

"I am not so very tired, Mamma. I have felt well all day; not a bit of pain anywhere. Perhaps this has done me good."

"Perhaps; I hope so. There was no noise or confusion; it was just a merry time. Now, may I close the door and leave you alone? I will steal in softly the first thing in the morning, and see if you are all right; but I think you need to be quiet."

"Oh, I'm willing to stay alone; but I am not sleepy yet, and I am going to hear the music by and by, you know."

"Yes, I have opened the window a little, and put the screen in front of it, so that you will not feel the air."

"Can I have the shutters open; and won't you turn my bed a little, please? This morning I woke ever so early, and one bright beautiful star shone in that eastern window. I never saw it before, and I thought of the Star in the East, that guided the wise men to the place where Jesus was. Good night, Mamma. Such a happy, happy day!"

"Good night, my precious little Christmas Carol—mother's blessed Christmas child."

"Bend your head a minute, mother, dear," whispered Carol, calling her mother back. "Mamma, dear, I do think that we have kept Christ's birthday this time just as He would like it. Don't you?"

"I am sure of it," said Mrs. Bird, softly. VII.—THE BIRDLING FLIES AWAY.

The Ruggleses had finished a last romp in the library with Paul and Hugh, and Uncle Jack had taken them home, and stayed a while to chat with Mrs. Ruggles, who opened the door for them, her face all aglow with excitement and delight. When Kitty m showed her the oranges and nuts they had kept for her, she astonished them by saying that at six o'clock Mrs. Bird had sent her in the finest dinner she had ever seen in her life; and not only that, but a piece of dress goods that must have cost a dollar a yard if it cost a cent. As Uncle Jack went down the little porch he looked back into the window for a last glimpse of the family, as the children gathered about their mother, showing their beautiful presents again and again, and then upward to a window in the great house yonder. "A little child shall lead them," he thought; "well, if—anything ever happens to Carol, I will take the Ruggleses under my wing."

"Softly, Uncle Jack," whispered the boys, as he walked into the library a little while later; "we are listening to the