

## Carry's Christmas.

(By J. E. Anderson.)

It was not till long after December had come and gone that I heard the story of Carry's Christmas.

I was simply one of the four lodgers in the boarding-house where Carry did everything excepting what the landlady did; and as the landlady did nothing, so far as I could see, except dress herself, sit in the drawing-room all day, and receive our rent as it fell due, Carry must have done all the work.

I marvelled greatly at Carry toiling from morning till night, and sleeping—or trying to sleep—I could not tell where. For I had sketched a little plan of the house, showing all the rooms, and I knew that every one of them was occupied; but where Carry got to after we had all gone to bed, for a long time remained a mystery. At last, however, early one morning, I found a prayer-book in the little bath-room, and on the fly-leaf was inscribed—"To Carry, from a friend."

'Carry,' I said, when I met her on the stairs later, 'do you sleep in the bath-room?'

'Yes, sir,' she answered, 'but only when the house is full, and sometimes I sleep in mistress's room.'

I knew the house was full. The four of us quite filled it. I sent for Mrs. Brand, the landlady, and told her that if Carry had to sleep in the bath-room I should leave the house.

'Indeed, sir,' said Mrs. Brand, 'it's only very rarely that the girl sleeps there, and I couldn't possibly carry on with three lodgers. Most times she sleeps in my room. I'm sure no one could be kinder to Carry than I am. She is a perfect treasure. As I says sometimes, you may take everything I have, but leave me my Carry.'

This was all very well, but going out the same morning I heard sounds coming from behind the closed door of the kitchen at the end of the hall; sounds of someone being beaten and thumped, which strangely belied Mrs. Brand's declaration. I stopped in the hall and listened.

Presently Mrs. Brand herself came out, looking flushed and angry, and carrying a stout walking-stick which she had taken from the hall stand. She looked guilty, too, when she met my gaze.

'I've been giving it to Jack,' she said, after a pause (Jack was the retriever). 'He's been and stolen and eaten a young duck I had for to-day's dinner.'

Presently I heard Carry singing softly:

'Peace, perfect peace, in this dark world of sin,'

and I was somewhat reassured, although the voice sounded like a long sob.

We had all tried to show our sympathy for Carry. We put books back where we found them, we did not throw our used matches about or tear up papers. Carry had shown her recognition of these little things by telling us bits of her history. Her father was in prison. Her mother—and Carry's eyes glistened when she told us—lived at Peterborough, and had to work hard to keep her other five children—all younger than Carry, who herself was only sixteen. As for her mistress—Carry could never leave her! Mrs. Brand had come opportunely at the time of that great trouble, and by giving Carry a home and food, had relieved her mother of at least one burden. This was the great debt which Carry owed her mistress, and, in spite of all we suspected, a debt which this simple girl felt must be loyally repaid. Disloyalty to her mistress would be ingratitude.

The third week in December soon came round. We were all off to spend the holidays with our people and have warm and cosy Christmases. Even Mrs. Brand took advantage of the opportunity which our absence would afford, and had arranged to leave home on Christmas Eve and stay over Boxing Day with her friends. And Carry? Carry was not going away.

'You see, sir,' she said cheerfully, 'I couldn't leave the house empty. I should have liked to have seen mother, but mistress says I can go in the summer, when some of you gentlemen are having your holidays.'

We all severally thought of Carry on Christmas Eve, and wondered how she was making the time pass. We learned afterwards that Carry's Christmas was spent in a police cell. Her mistress sent her out in a driving snow-storm to cash a cheque. Carry had cashed the cheque, but when she got back she could not find the money. Her mistress accused her of hiding it so that she might steal off to Peterborough on Christmas Day, to see her mother, and she hurried

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the girl, just as she stood, in an old, much-worn coat, that her mother had spared her, some sizes too large, and a big, rusty-looking umbrella that had been her father's, off to the police-station. An odd-looking object enough she was, but the pale sweet face was not that of a thief, and the inspector hesitated before he entered the charge.

That Christmas Eve the clergyman of the parish took it into his head to go to the police cells and say a few words of comfort to the unhappy inmates. As he went round his attention was attracted by the sound of a hymn. He drew nearer and found Carry singing, actually singing, in the midst of her misfortunes. He heard her story; he asked her some questions; and finally he bailed poor Carry out. He wanted to take her home to the vicarage, but she insisted on going back to Mrs. Brand at once.

'Mistress wanted to go and see her friends, and she will have to stay now if I do not go back; and, sir, she has been that good to me, you can't think. And will you come with me, sir? It's only a few turnings down.'

The clergyman consented. It was snowing again. He opened Carry's umbrella for her. As he did so, something fell with a thud in the snow. It was the little white paper bag containing the lost money, which had fallen out of Carry's hand into the umbrella when she closed it, on reaching home.

Mrs. Brand stared at the pair when she opened the door. Then the good man told her what had happened, and suggested that as she was going away, Carry might spend Christmas with him. But Carry made apologies and excuses until he gave way and left.

Mrs. Brand did not go away, but on Christmas morning, as the express steamed off to Peterborough with Carry inside, holding in her hand the little white bag whose contents were all her own to bring joy and happiness to her mother and brothers, and sisters at home, Mrs. Brand was kneeling in prayer for the same strength which had buoyed Carry up through months of suffering, asking forgiveness, and promising to make Carry's life in the future a bright and happy one.—'Children's Friend.'

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