

Harriet Ann's Christmas

By Mary E. Wilkins Freeman

I was twelve years old three weeks before that Christmas, but I was small for my age and looked no more than ten. There were four of us. I was the eldest. Then there was a girl of ten, one of eight and a half and a boy of seven. 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 profits.

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 twenty 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 secretcies. 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 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 stayed 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 two 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.

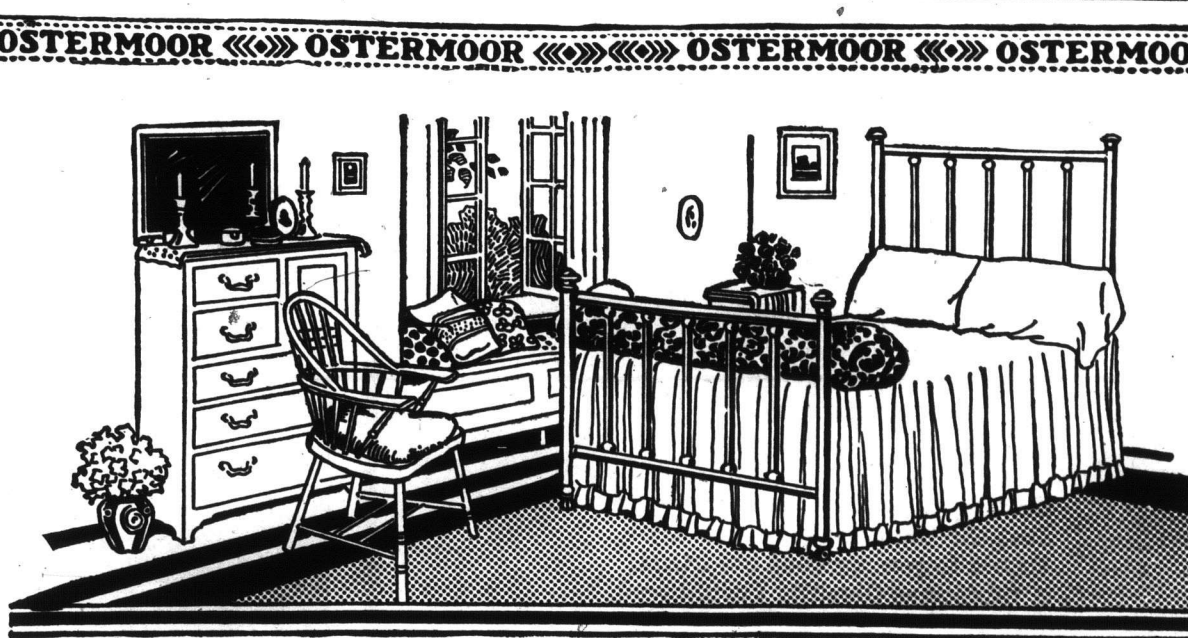
Mother stayed up all that night and baked, and father split up kindling wood and got everything ready to leave. They started early next morning, repeating all their instructions over and over. We felt pretty lonesome when they had gone, I especially, not only because I was the eldest and felt a responsibility 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 twelve 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 constant-



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