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The Waif's Christmas

It was Christmas Eve and the great city was wrapped in a mantle of glittering snow. Up and down the broad thoroughfares, carpeted in white, the long lines of street lamps, stretching away to interminable distances, threw their yellow glare out into the frosty night and millions of scintillating diamond points, Nature's flashing gems, reflected the rays from the snowy surface. The dark blue firmament was studded with a myriad of winking stars. Icicles hung from every projection. It was bitterly cold. Along the fashionable avenues the tinkling of silver bells was heard as sleighs passed rapidly by, or drew up at the curb to discharge their rosy-faced occupants muffled in warm furs and fleecy head-coverings. Laughter and song were in the very atmosphere and happiness seemed to reign supreme, for it was the day of good will toward men.

Up one of these avenues lined with the mansions of the wealthy crept an incongruous figure—a small waif from the slums, thinly-clad, ragged, with a pale, pinched face sunken at the temples and with the preternaturally old look seen on the countenances of neglected and suffering children. Over his shoulder hung an old sack half filled with coal, for Patsy had been on a foraging expedition and had "swiped" his find from an unguarded arcaway. Christmas had no significance to him, except that it was a holiday and on holidays his father got drunker than usual and beat him and his mother. In his little heathen heart he loved and pitied the poor woman who never struck him even in her tipsiest moments. In his mind's eye he saw how now in the desolate attic he knew as home, cowering over the cheerless stove, hugging a ragged shawl about her shoulders and weeping maudlin tears over her misfortunes. The bag of coal that he was taking home would change all that and he felt a boyish pride in his ability to make so good a haul.

The moral quality of his act of pilfering did not trouble Patsy at all, for he had been taught to believe that the "Cop" was the only law to be feared and so far the cops had not molested him.

He stopped suddenly before one of the most splendid of these mansions, which was brilliantly alight from bottom to top. Through the window beneath the partially-raised shade he saw a gorgeous spectacle which stunned his senses. It was a huge Christmas tree ablaze with vari-colored electric lights and glittering tinselled gewgaws. Dropping his sack of coal inside the iron fence he crept, fascinated, up the broad steps until his eyes were on a level with the window and there he stood revelling in the happiness of others, shivering in the biting air, wet to the skin with the snow that had ceased falling only a half hour before. He saw a fine gentleman taking packages from the generously-loaded branches and distributing them to happy recipients, among them a pretty lady and a little girl with curly golden hair. It was a vision of fairyland to the little waif. Such magnificence he had never seen, never even dreamed of. As the white parcels were handed down each recipient untied the silver-gilt strings or bright-hued ribbons with a smiling, eager face and broke out in exclamations of pleasure as the contents were disclosed. As each package was distributed he would rub his half-frozen little hands together with trembling anticipations and during the untying of the string would dance up and down in an ecstasy of excitement. When finally a long, carefully-wrapped box, the biggest package of all, was handed to the curly-haired child, Patsy almost screamed with nervous expectation.

"I hope der little kid gits de best of 'em all," he eagerly said aloud to himself, and when a big, sumptuously dressed dollie was lifted out of the box amid the child's screams of delight, Patsy could contain himself no longer. "I knew it!" he shouted. "I knew der big box was 'all to der candy. I knew it, I tell yer!" and his teeth chattered as he violently beat his breast with his arms to keep alive the spark of life in his chilled and meager frame. Poor Patsy! He was too young to make comparisons and his tender years had not yet suggested to him that eternal, burning question of the proletariat: "Why?" But his little heart did suffer a pang when he thought of his poor mother waiting for the coal he was bringing her. Just a minute more and he would go.

To his surprise he now saw the pretty lady put a warm wrap on the curly-haired girl and don a capacious fur coat herself as though intending to go out of doors. The vestibule door opened and with the instinct of his class he turned to run. A wave of delightfully warm air touched his face and to Patsy, almost on the point of succumbing to the intense

cold, it was an invitation impossible to resist. He stepped doubtfully inside the vestibule and looked through the half-opened door. Now he was face to face with a world stranger to him than any foreign country, a world of jewels and soft furs and warm-hued carpets, of childish glee and happy laughter, a world, in short, of delight. Poor Patsy! A pathetic figure he made there in the gloom—a pale spectre of want, starvation and friendlessness gazing upon the very apotheosis of luxury and happiness.

The fine gentleman standing within with his hand on the doorknob, waiting for the pretty lady and the child, smiled contentedly as his eye took in the brilliant scene and the shower of goodly gifts which his purse had made possible, and murmured to himself: "After all, how much more blessed it is to give than to receive!" He threw open the door and for an instant stared blankly at the ragged apparition in the dark vestibule; but only for an instant. Before Patsy could see he had caught him by the collar.

"Ah! you little rascal!" he exclaimed. "I've caught you! You won't get away this time—!" and he shook him roughly.

The pretty lady came hurriedly forward.

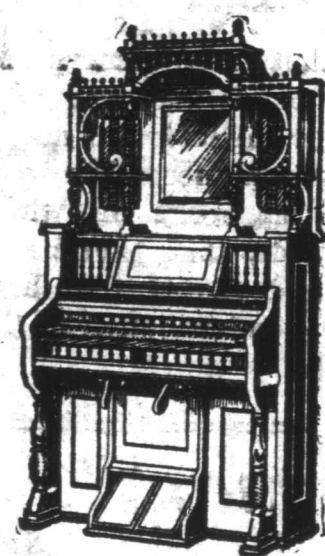
"What is the matter, Charles?" "It's one of those little sneak-thieves," replied her husband, "looking for a chance to steal. Perhaps he's the same one who stole my fur gloves last week."

"Oh! It cannot be," she replied. "You didn't want to steal anything, did you, little boy?"

"Nope," said Patsy. "I was jes' a-lookin' in."

"Yes," interrupted the gentleman ironically; "you were just a-looking in. Well, we'll just look in at the police station. Mootie" (turning to his wife), "you and baby run ahead to Aunt Mary's and I'll be with you in a few minutes." Grasping Patsy's collar firmly he left the house, his wife and the little girl following.

"Let him go, Charles!" pleaded the lady, following him to the corner.



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"Perhaps you have made a mistake. See his wretched, ragged clothes and how blue his lips are and his poor little red hands—Oh! let him go for this time for the sake of Christmas!" "No! No!" insisted her husband. "It only encourages such people. You run across and I'll join you immediately. I propose to put a stop to this petty thievery."

Patsy said nothing and showed little emotion. The children of the gutter do not cry easily. His captor felt the little body tremble under his clutch—with guilt and fright as he thought; but the force that shook him was the grip of the pitiless frost. The lady said nothing more, but pressing her muff to her lips hurried with the little girl across the avenue.

A car came rattling merrily down the street and as it neared the corner, with clanging bell, a scream from the lady caused her husband to turn quickly. The little girl had suddenly left her mother's side to run back for the dollie's hat which had dropped on the track. The father in one anguished moment realized the child's danger. He saw the motor-man vainly tugging at a defective brake and his hand dropped from Patsy's shoulder as he stood dazed and unmanned for the fraction of an instant. Then he leaped forward. But Patsy was quicker. In an instant he had reached the child and thrown her out of danger. He could save himself had he not stopped to grab the splendid dollie and fling it aside also. As he did so the cruel wheels caught him, crunched their dreadful way over his thigh and dragged him to the very door where he had a few moments before seen his vision of fairyland.

When the mangled little form had been drawn out from under the truck they carried him into the fine gentleman's house and laid him on the couch beside the Christmas tree. The doctor, hastily summoned, gave one glance and shook his head. The child was still conscious, and moaning. They asked him what his name was and all he could tell them was "Patsy." They heard his weak little voice mutter something about "der coal for me mudder," but they did not understand. The fine gentleman bent over him and in a voice broken with sorrow and remorse begged Patsy to forgive him. The boy's eyes wandered around the room until they fell on the child and he asked: "Did the little goil get all dat was a-comin' to her?"

"Yes, oh, yes, Patsy," broke out the sobbing mother, snatching up the little one and her doll to show them to Patsy, "you saved her and her dollie, too."

"Dat's all right," whispered Patsy, smiling faintly.

"Get well, my boy," said the gentleman, "get well, and we'll make every day a Christmas day for you."

"Youse is awful nice to me youse is," said the little fellow brokenly, "and so is der pretty lady."

His voice grew suddenly weaker; but he tried, with a pitiful show of bravery, to make light of his great trouble, as he whispered, his little chest heaving with anguish: "I guess I got wot's comin' to me, too, didn't I?"

The pretty lady, unable to speak, bent over and kissed the pale forehead. When she drew back a spasm of agony shook the little frame and death stamped its gray seal on the countenance.

From the starry heights a kindly Eye looked down upon the Christmas tree and the torn remnant of human driftwood beside it and the Great Soul which gave to Christmastide its nobler significance and which said to suffering humanity: "I am the Tree," saw to it that from its branches of love, laden with unearthly blessing, Patsy, too, got what was coming to him.

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