

# Just WHY



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# AROUND THE HEARTH

Written for the Canadian Home Journal

By JENNIE ALLEN MOORE

"For somehow, not only at Christmas, But all the long year through, The joy that you give to others Is the joy that comes back to you."

CHRISTMAS 1911

INSTEAD of my usual Christmas talk, I am going to give the readers of my page a little story, founded on fact, hoping it will carry its moral alike to men and women, whose lack of sentiment dulls the lives of their families and friends. Those who have read my former Christmas articles, know that I regard much of the giving at that season as an imposition on mind and purse, yet firmly believing in it as a family institution, making a bright spot in each year by the bestowal of some necessary, useful or ornamental gift, that one has longed for, and which rouses all that is tenderest in the family life and affections. It seems a fitting climax for the year, to banish for a time self-interest, and lavish some thought on husband, wife, and children, with such relatives as are needy, and upon "the poor, whom we have with us always."

Many readers will not be able to understand the vastness of the great West, where neighbors are miles apart, and which made it possible for those little children to be unacquainted with Santa Claus, but the Western folk know, and the distance, with the painful silence between the parents on this one subject, made the conditions as they happened to exist when the tale was told to me. Wishing all the readers of our CANADIAN HOME JOURNAL a very Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year, I submit my little Christmas story.

"MOTHER, oh, Mother!" shouted little Georgie Holden, not quite seven, as he bounded into the house from school. "Say, Mother, who is Santa Claus? All the boys and girls say he is coming at Christmas, and he fills their stockings with toys, and nuts, and candy, and everything. Only they must go to bed early, and leave them hanging, and he comes down the chimney, and out of a big pack, he takes the dolls, and drums, and things. Tell us about him, Mother, 'cause I saw his picture in a paper one of the boys had; say, he looks jolly, and has a red face and white whiskers."

Mrs. Holden smiled at her little boy's enthusiasm, and Nettie, and little three-year-old Billy-boy stood at her knee, looking from her face to Georgie, flushed with his wonderful nerve, all eager to hear what her answer would be.

"Tell us what else they said about this jolly old man," she said, in order to give herself time to frame her reply.

"Oh, I can't remember all the boys and girls said, but they can scarcely wait, and they must hang clean, clean stockings with no holes in, else the candy would drop out, and the presents are all mixed in with the goodies, and, oh, say, won't we have a dilly time? And he caught the two eager-eyed little ones in his arms, and hugged them tightly. The laugh awakened baby sister in her cradle, and her rosy cheeks and cute smile brought them all to their knees beside her.

"P'raps he'll bring baby a kitty," said Nettie, "oh, come on, Georgie, and tell us every word."

So Georgie, who felt quite a hero, carried baby to mamma, and looked quizzically into her face, for he noticed an expression of sadness there. "Mother, did you ever hear of him before? Did he live when you were a little girl?"

She smiled. "Oh, you do know about him. Tell us, please, Mother."

AWAY back over the years her memory swept, and she was hanging her stockings by the old fireplace along with seven other pairs. She was snuggling down beside her little sister, talking in whispers, guessing what the morning would reveal. The country was new, and money was scarce, but the week before Christmas there was always a journey to the nearest town, and always

a mysterious box which mother slipped out of sight very suddenly, and its contents came to light when sixteen little hands trembling with delight, emptied the bulging and unshapely stockings early in the morning of the glad day.

How pleased they were with the simple gifts, and the sweetmeats, the candy animals and the walking sticks, and a big rosy apple in each stocking to fill up! Then the new mittens that mother somehow managed to knit when they were in bed or at school, and a delicious plump doughnut that was irresistible, and kept the little ones wondering when others that looked and tasted just like them appeared on the table during Christmas week. Then as they grew older, and prosperity came to them, there was the bestowal of richer gifts to each other, and she remembered her father pinning a pretty cameo brooch on mother, telling her he wished it was made of diamonds for she was worthy of the best. She saw again the glad look in her mother's face, as he kissed her, and held her close to him, and how she had wondered why her eyes filled with tears.

The old memories held her silent, as she recollected the one great pleasure of the year—the sleigh ride—when big and little were all bundled into the big sleigh, half filled with straw, and warm, woolen quilts were tucked around them. Father and mother, with the youngest between them, or on mother's knee, occupied the seat in state, and were protected by the one "buffalo skin," occasionally turning to ask, "Are you all warm, children?"

Then she married and went West, away out on a lonely ranch, a childless couple being their nearest neighbor on the one side and an old bachelor on the other. The first Christmas a box full of presents was sent, and the two lonely young hearts, so far from their friends were gladdened because they were remembered. The next year she lay at death's door, with a little wailing infant in her arms, and two more anniversaries followed without much notice being taken, for times were hard, and it was a struggle to keep going. Then little Georgie was three years old, and Nettie one, and the nice box that appeared annually, arrived as usual. She hung the little stockings that year, and put in the presents to the little ones, the little red boots, the picture book, and woolly dog, and told the happy little fellow that Santa Claus had put them there. He was too young to remember about that day, and the stockings were never hung again. Away out on the prairie, there was one house where Christmas passed as uneventful as other days, except that a goose or turkey graced the table, and the old bachelor was invited to dinner.

"MOTHER, what are you thinking about, that your eyes look so big, and you won't answer us?"

"How would it be if I told you about Santa Claus at bedtime?" she asked. "Run away, now, and have a little play, while I get tea ready."

Then she laid her head upon the table and cried, great sobs that rent her heart. When the storm had passed, she dried her eyes, placed baby in her chair, saying, "Mother's lovey, some day perhaps we can have a Santa Claus."

Then she prepared the supper, and wondered why her husband did not come in, sending Georgie to the barn in search of him. Presently he appeared, not from the outer door, but emerged from the front room, a peculiar look on his face. "Are you ill, James," Mrs. Holden asked anxiously.

"No," he said, "I was all done out shaking those heavy sacks, so I dropped on the couch for a few minutes' rest, and fell asleep."

Yes, that was what happened, but the children's voices and chatter had roused him, and he listened to all that was said. Then he witnessed the heartbroken wife, as she wept bitter tears by herself, and memory began its work. For an hour and more, a stinging remorse had lashed him. What sort of a husband and father had he been? He recalled the morning when Georgie had said in

his childish prattle, "See, Daddy, see my pretty red boots, Santa Claus gave them to me."

"No such thing," he retorted, "your auntie May sent them to you," and turning to his wife, he said in an angry tone, "What's the use of filling a child's mind up with a lot of that silly twaddle?" Then he had gone out to see his dead thoroughbred colt, and indulge in the bitterness of its loss, and which had led up to the stage of irritability that made the little lips quiver, and baby eyes fill with tears. It led up to something else also, for as Mrs. Holden held the repulsed baby heart close to her own, she made a resolve, and she had kept it—no more stockings ever were hung up on Christmas Eve.

He determined he should hear the story that night, and consequently prepared to write some letters, but kept a listening ear to the merry voices in the kitchen. Presently they all went upstairs, closing the stair door behind them. He softly opened it, and sat with bated breath hearing the old, old story of Christ born in Bethlehem, the little babe in the manger, and the questions the eager little ones put to her showed at what high pressure their young minds had attained listening to the wonderful tale. Then they must know all her experiences of Santa Claus, and she went back to the days of her childhood, and told them the joys of finding her stockings full on Christmas morning, and what a happy day it always was for them, and how they looked forward to it the whole year round.

"AND now dearies, say your prayers and jump into bed." Georgie knelt a long time, kissed mother good night, and was very quiet. Nettie knelt at her knee, and asked God to bless everybody, then added, "And dear Jesus, send Santa Claus to us this Christmas. We want our stockings filled, too, and don't forget our mamma's and daddy's, and our baby's little ones, for Jesus sake. Amen."

"I want a little dog," said Billy-boy, "that wuns on wheels." The door below closed as softly as it had been opened, and Mr. Holden was busy with his letters when his wife descended the stairs, set the lamp on the table, and picked up a little blue slipper, upon which she worked quickly and silently. Her thoughts were a medley, and at times she sighed unconsciously; then again her lips closed firmly, and a set look appeared on her usually placid face. Nothing was lost to her husband, who watched her furtively as he pretended to write. He would have given worlds to hear her say, "James, let us give the children the merry Christmas they deserve after being cheated out of it so long." But she never spoke, her mind seemed elsewhere, and he felt very much alone. Not for one instant did he falter in placing the fault at his own door; he had repulsed her warm loving heart in an angry temper, and she had closed it effectually on this one point. It was his to make the advance, but how? She seemed so invulnerable that it would be like storming a fortress to break down this barrier of his own making. A thought struck him; he wrote on thoughtfully until the clock struck ten.

Christmas was drawing nearer, and the children talked scarcely of anything else, asking questions of both parents. Sometimes Mrs. Holden looked anxiously at her husband, lest he should dampen their childish anticipations with a rude awakening, but he usually evaded the direct question, and smiled indulgently, while she kept her own counsel, asking no favors for the day, but was ever ready to help on the happy delusion. In a locked drawer was a gift for each, of her own making, and she had sent with her neighbor for a picture book, a china cup and saucer, a little tin horse and cart, and a rattle. With the gifts that were sure to come from the East, she meant that her children should not be disappointed. The battle was on, and whether she faced opposition or not was a small matter in her present mood,

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