

when she had heard the story, "that after all the pains I have taken to make you wear your tailor-made gown every time you step out of the door of your room, you actually entertained her in your sweeping-cap and apron! Louise Ainslee, there's a smooch on your face this minute!"

Louise, in dismay, put her hand to her head. Then she laughed till she sank helpless into a chair. "Anyway, we'll never have still calls with her," she said. And she was right. They had found their first neighbor.

What Christmas meant to Johnny

By Georgene H. Wilder (Mrs. Frank C.)

It was a few weeks before Christmas and Johnny was wiping the dishes. "I want a drum, and a box of candy, and some soldiers, and a train set, and a toy automobile, and a—." Johnny paused reminiscently to recall other desires while the pile of dishes on the tray grew higher and higher, aided by mother's quick fingers.

"Come, come, Johnny, wipe faster. I haven't a spot on the tray to put this bowl. Of course you mustn't expect to get ALL you want. Santa Claus has so many children to carry gifts to, and there is more to Christmas than just getting presents you know. Whose birthday is it, dear?"

The boy turned his wide blue eyes on her in surprise. "Why Santa Claus' birthday?"

The mother nearly dropped the bowl in her hand from the shock. "Why Johnny Mason! And you six years old and been to Sunday School most all your life!"

The little fellow saw the distress in her face and assembled his wits to remove it. "Oh, yes, it's Jesus' birthday too, isn't it?"

"Jesus' birthday and not Santa Claus' at all," answered the mother gently.

She said no more to him at the time, but all that day as she stood by the ironing board, pressing garment after garment, she studied over the matter. Clearly something was wrong, when the heathen Saint Nick assumed a place of even greater importance than the Christ Child in the mind of her little boy. It was quite plain that the getting of toys and goodies was the dominant thought in his mind, not the birth of Jesus. As a Christian mother she must try to instill new ideas before it was too late.

A few days later Johnny came in from coasting, his round cheeks rosy with the cold and the stubby fingers from which he drew his wet mittens red and stiff with cold. His whole attitude expressed a certain belligerence and bravado. "Isn't there a Santa Claus, mother?" he cried hotly. "Ralph Burgess says there isn't. I'm going to lick him if he says it again!"

Mrs. Mason drew off the little cap and unbuttoned his coat. Here was her "Christian soldier" ready to fight for the saint she had taught him to love and quite unmindful of the Babe in the manger. A lump rose in her throat. "Hang up your things and then come and sit in my lap by this nice fire and get warm," she said.

When he was cuddled in her arms, with his head against her shoulder, she began. "Johnny, Santa Claus is a fairy, a dear, jolly old fairy. Once a minister wrote a poem about him. You know the poem. It begins, 'Twas the night before Christmas, and all through the house!' Since then people have talked very often about him and even dressed up to play Santa Claus. But it's just a myth, a sort of fairy story."

"Why Mother Mason, I thought you said he came down the chimney and had a red nose and a pipe and brought me my toys."

"I don't think I ever told you it was really true," said the mother, "but I repeated the story and let you think it was true. I ought to have explained before."

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"But, oh mother, I want it to be true!" Big tears gathered in the little fellow's eyes and several rolled down the plump cheeks. "And aren't there any fairies either, aren't fairies true?"

"The fairies are just a lovely play, too, dear. We can make believe there are fairies in the forest and among the mountain rocks. Even grown people have often played so. But there is a Christmas story that is much nicer than the Santa Claus myth, dear, and it is every word true." The mother realized how much depended upon her telling the story just right to the disappointed little boy. Love inspired her as she told him the simple, beautiful story of the Babe in the manger and of the shepherds on the hill slope when the angels sang to them.

Every night before supper, during the remainder of the weeks before Christmas, she held him in her lap, and while the wild, winter winds wailed about the

house, they rocked together in front of the big heating stove, whose fire glowed brightly from every little mica window. Then she told him stories of Christmas and recited poems of the Christ Child. He learned to recite, as a Christmas surprise for daddy, Luther's hymn

"Away in a manger
No crib for His bed,
The little Lord Jesus
Laid down His sweet head.

The stars in the sky,
Looked down where He lay,
The little Lord Jesus,
Asleep in the hay.

The cattle on lowing;
The poor baby wakes,
But the little Lord Jesus
No crying He makes.

I love the Lord Jesus;
Look down from the sky,
And stay by my crib
Hearing my lullaby."

He grew familiar with Milton's "Twas in the winter wild, Wherein the heaven-born child." Again and again the child asked for "God rest ye merry gentlemen" and many other beautiful old Christmas poems. But in them all there was not one mention of Saint Nick.

During the day after little John trudged sturdily off for school, through the deep snow, the mother memorized Christmas carols and poems, while busy with her work. She searched her old magazines and books for poems and carols, and would cut them out and pin them over the sink, so that she could learn them while doing the dishes. When she sewed, she placed her hymnbook open on the table by her side and sang the Christmas hymns over and over. At night when she sang them to Johnny she needed no book. Every day her heart grew more full of love and Christmas joy and every evening John's love for the Christ-child increased.

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