

# Her Christmas

By Mary E. Wilkins Freeman



GRACE MAYBE looked happily at the stocking stuffed bunchily from toe to top, hanging beside the open fireplace, then at Flora Greenway. "Yes," she said, "it is crammed full. Little Grace will be so tickled she won't know what to do."

Flora laughed pleasantly. "I wish I could see her when she takes the presents out," said she. Flora was a large, plain girl with a sweet expression on her high, benevolent forehead. She was engaged to be married to Grace's brother-in-law, Oliver Maybe. She taught school for a living and supported her orphan niece, little Annie Greenway.

"I do wish you could see her take the presents out," said Grace, "but I expect she will be up by dawn."

"Too early for me," laughed Flora, "and you know I have to see to Annie's Christmas stocking too, dear."

"So you have."

Flora looked at the stocking which was capped with a sprig of holly. "I have some holly too," said she. "Annie has hung her stocking and I have a sprig of holly on top."

"I had to use one of my own stockings," said Grace. "Little Grace's would not have begun to hold the things. She really has almost too nice and expensive presents this year. There are, a little gold ring with a tiny pearl from her Aunt Emma, and a gold locket and chain from her Uncle Oliver, and her Grandma Maybe sent her a lovely coral string, and her grandpa a five dollar gold piece. Then the doll I have been dressing for her will have to sit on the floor under the stocking. Of course that will not go in, and her father is going to bring home a sled tonight, and a doll's house."

"You will spoil her," said Flora. Then she added hastily, "But you can't, dear, I know. She is such a darling. You can't spoil such a child as little Grace, and I can't spoil my Annie."

"What have you got for Annie?"

Flora colored. "I could not buy her much except necessary things," she said; "but I have dressed a doll and I have found a real cunning set of dishes for a quarter at Simmons's. She won't know the difference."

Grace rose hastily. "Wait a minute, dear," she said. "I have a box of candy and a game I want to give you to put in Annie's stocking."

"You are very kind," said Flora, gratefully.

"I have them all ready, tied up with ribbons," said Grace. They are in my room. I will bring them right down."

When Grace came back, trailing her blue teagown, she had her hands full. "Here dear," she said. "I want you to take this box of handkerchiefs, and this boy doll, too. I got them for little Grace but they simply will not go into the stocking, and she has enough as it is."

Flora was standing at the window as Grace entered. She was looking at a stand of geraniums in blossom. The shade was up, and one could see outside the snowy landscape, and the full moon overhead. Flora had put on her old fur-lined cloak while Grace was out of the room. She turned with it wrapped around her and extended a hand for Grace's gifts and thanked her sweetly.

"Annie will be so pleased," she said, "and to tell you the truth, I have been feeling rather sad all day because I had so little to put in the dear child's stocking. You know I have hard work to make both ends meet."

"I know," said Grace sympathetically. "What made you put on your cloak, dear? Isn't the room warm enough?"

"Oh, yes. But I really must go. I don't feel quite easy about leaving Annie alone in the house any longer."

"Why, Flora, aren't you going to wait for Oliver? He must be home before long now. The Mason's meeting never lasts much over ten."

"No. I don't think I can."

"I expect Joe, too, every minute. He will go home with you."

"No. I think I had better not wait, really, Grace."

All this time Grace had been standing with her back towards the fireplace.

"Aren't you afraid?" she asked, anxiously. Flora laughed. "Afraid on the village streets, in broad moonlight." Why, it is as light as day," she answered, "and it is such a short distance anyway. Tell Oliver I am sorry not to see him, but I felt that I ought not to wait."

Grace went to the door with Flora, and afterwards stood at the window behind the stand of geraniums, watching her hurry down the street. The street and sidewalk, hard packed with snow, gleamed like a track of silver. Flora's dark figure, bulging at one side with the parcels which she carried under her fur-lined cloak, was clearly outlined until she passed out of sight. She lived about half a mile down the street.

Then Grace turned around and her eyes instinctively sought the Christmas stocking. It was not there. Grace stared bewildered. She rubbed her eyes. It seemed to her that she must be mistaken—that the stocking must be there. She

over, Maggie could prove an alibi. Maggie was not in the house—had not been in the house since noon. However, Grace went up-stairs to Maggie's room to find it empty, and Maggie's feathered hat, which always decorated her dresser when not afield, was missing. On her way down stairs Grace peeped into little Grace's room. Little Grace's room was separated by a narrow closet from her parent's apartment and was a rosy nest with wall paper strewn with garlands of rosebuds, the daintiest white furniture painted with a charming rose design, white muslin curtains tied with pink ribbons, and a rose pattern rug by the white bed. In this little bed lay little Grace, as pink and white as a rose, herself, with her tangle of curly brown hair, and her closed eyes with long dark fringes against her flushed cheeks.

"The little precious," thought Grace. Then she thought with dismay how disappointed the darling would be when she did not find the stocking which she had hung with such innocent faith before she had gone to bed. Of course there would be the big doll, and the sled, and the doll's house, but none of them would go into a stocking. What would poor little Grace do?

When Grace went down stairs she heard

staring stupidly at his wife, who spoke stammeringly, giving the facts—the utterly unreasonable, impossible facts.

When she had done, Joe continued to stare for a second. Then he said, "Sure the stocking was there?"

"Joe Maybe, are you losing your wits? Didn't you help me fill that stocking before you went down street?"

"So I did. Are you sure you didn't take it away, hang it somewhere else?"

"I know I did not."

"Where is Maggie?" then asked Joe, feebly.

"I gave her an afternoon out. She went right away after luncheon, and has not been home since."

"How long were you out of the room?"

"Perhaps ten minutes. Not longer."

"And Flora was there when you went upstairs?"

"Joe Maybe."

Joe flushed angrily. "You don't think that I think—" he spluttered.

"I hope you aren't quite such a fool, Joe Maybe."

"I don't believe, for my part, that the stocking was there when you went out," declared Joe, with an air of wise decision.

"Joe Maybe, don't you believe I can see with my own eyes?"

"I think you sometimes get rattled."

Then Grace waxed indignant. "I dare say you think I am rattled now," said she. "Perhaps you think the stocking is there, after all."

Suddenly Grace seized her husband by his high fur-lined shoulders and gave him a twist towards the open library door. From where they stood the fireplace was distinctly visible. "Look," she said, imperiously.

"It ain't there," admitted Joe, re-lapsing into the vernacular of his boyhood, through consternation.

Then Grace committed the very error for which she had chided her husband. "Where is it?" she said, helplessly.

"How in creation do you suppose I know?" asked Joe. "Haven't I just come in? and the last thing I saw when I went away was that confounded stocking hanging there, with the sprig of holly on top."

The two stood staring at each other, but Grace was the first to recover a measure of equanimity. "Well, the stocking is gone," said she, with decision, "and that isn't the question now. The question now is, how are we to manage so that that precious darling shall not have her dear little Christmas spoiled? She must have her stocking filled with something. Of course we cannot replace all those lovely things our relatives have sent her, but it must be stuffed full, Joe Maybe."

"Have you got anything to put in it?" asked Joe.

"Not a thing except a box of candy. I gave everything I had left over to Flora for Annie." Both Grace's and Joe's faces contracted as with an unspoken, uneasy thought at the mention of Flora.

"Are all the stores shut?" asked Grace.

"Simmons's wasn't when I left, and I dare say if I hurry it won't be before I get back there."

Grace gave him a push. "Then just hurry as fast as you can," she cried. "Get everything to fill a stocking. Get games, boxes of children's paper, balls, kaleidoscopes, anything. Run just as fast as ever you can, Joe Maybe."

Joe was fairly pushed out the door, and he raced down the moonlight street with his head in a whirl like the very kaleidoscope which his wife had mentioned. All sorts of toys of childhood seemed revolving before his mental vision making endless queer and bewildering combinations.

Meantime, Grace went upstairs and got the mate to the missing stocking and brought it down. Then she sat waiting for Joe's return. Again she tried to bring reason out of the unreasonable situation, and again her mind labored in vain. Then Oliver, her husband's brother, came in and found her sitting there. He glanced first at her, then at the fireplace.

"Hello," said he. "Where's Flora? What on earth is the matter, Grace? Where is the kid's stocking?" The three questions were fired very rapidly

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went over to the fireplace and actually felt of the brass hook on which the bellows usually hung, and on which the stocking had been suspended, and there was absolutely nothing there. "It can't be that I feel wrong as well as see wrong," Grace said aloud, in a stupid fashion. She stood quite still, staring. She was dazed. She had gone upstairs leaving her dearest friend and her sister-to-be in that room with that Christmas stocking. Now her friend was gone, and the stocking was gone. Her mind refused to grasp the facts. Finally she sat down beside the hearth and tried to think, to reason out the matter, but it was all in vain. It was like trying to solve an algebraical problem not fairly stated. The premises was all awry. There was no solution in reason. Grace thought blindly of Maggie, the one servant in the house. Maggie was honest beyond question, and, more-

a click in the lock of the front door, and knew with a throb of relief that Joe, her husband, had come. When the door was open she flung herself towards him with a hysterical sob. Joe Maybe, who was a large, happy-faced young man in a fur-lined coat, carefully set some package on the floor, then turned his attention to his wife. "Why, Grace, dear," he asked, anxiously, "what is the matter?"

"Little Grace's stocking has gone."

Grace sobbed.

"Gone?"

"Yes, gone—se."

"Where?"

"Don't be a goose. If I knew where, do you think I would be so upset?"

"But where?" asked Joe, inconsequently, again.

"Joe Maybe, if you ask me where again you'll drive me raving mad."

Then Joe said nothing at all. He stood