

# BOYS AND GIRLS

## Uncle Elias's Christmas Dinner

(Sophie Swett, in the 'Northwestern Christian Advocate'.)

'I've got a letter from Angenette! She has invited me to spend Christmas with them. I shall hear the Christmas music in the city!'

Polly Johnson rushed into the great big kitchen breathless and blooming.

'Oh, mother, do you know—Aunt Sarah, you hardly listened! Oh, Buffkins! She held the yellow kitten aloft with playful, affectionate squeezes. 'Oh, Towzer!' She looked earnestly into the great dog's humanely wistful eyes—'do you know what it means to me to go to the city to hear the Christmas music?'

Towzer, feeling that a good deal was expected of him, barked madly, and the yellow kitten, returned to the floor, arched her small back and spit.

'Oh, I know I'm making a great fuss!' said Polly penitently, quelling the uproar, 'but in all the nineteen years of my life no such bit of good fortune ever came to me before.'

'Seems as if 'twouldn't have hurt Angenette and her mother to have thought of it before,' said Aunt Sarah. 'I expect Adeline has found it pretty hard to get along, anyhow, since Alpheus died,' said Polly's mother apologetically. 'She has to eke out what little he left her by doing embroidery to sell and Angenette is all fitted for college and can't get money enough to go.'

'That's so hard,' said Polly, sighing deeply. Polly knew what it was not to be able to get money enough to take music-lessons when, as she said, music was the only thing there was in her.

'Where's Adeline's brother 'Lias? He's an old bach and been real thrifty and saving,' said Aunt Sarah. 'He could afford to send Angenette to college if he was a mind to.'

'He's only a half-brother,' said Mrs. Johnson. 'He belongs to the first family and they never had any patience with Adeline's shiftless ways. His mother was a real smart housekeeper and so were his own sisters.'

'Angenette is so ambitious!' breathed Polly sympathetically. 'Oh, I think it's so good of her to remember to ask me at this Christmas time! And I have enough left of the damson preserves money to pay my fare!'

'I only hope Adeline won't expect you to scrub her floor. There's always them that gets their floors scrubbed for 'em and them that has to scrub 'em for other folks,' said Aunt Sarah.

'Aunt Adeline was always kind to me, and Angenette used to help me with fractions when we went to school together,' said Polly. 'But I had almost got over hoping that they would invite me.'

Off went Polly the day before Christmas, thankful for the becomingness of her best hat and with a happy sense of the sufficiency of the plum-preserve money.

It was Christmas in Cherryfield, white, thrilling, solemnly glad.

In the village church they would sing Christmas hymns and Polly delighted to

hear 'While she-e-pherds wa-a-atched their flo-ocks by night,' although Deacon Pengo's tenor was thin and husky and Miss Jenkins was especially liable to flat upon special occasions.

Sentiment is not dependent upon esthetic sense, thank God! and Polly's heart was warmer than her ear was fine.

And yet with all her musical soul she longed to hear the Christmas hymns and carols, the Christmas sentiment, as the great masters gave it utterance, as she knew one heard it in the great city churches and cathedrals. She had the musical taste that is sometimes strangely independent of training and a musical talent that was only secondary, so she laughingly said, to her talent for making preserves.

They only eked out the necessities of life on the stony little farm and there was almost nothing that a girl could do to earn money in Cherryfield.

Polly saw no hope that the way would open before her and tried to be contented with playing, by ear, on the wheezy old melodeon and helping out the village festivities with Jo Barham's violin, which she could play much better than Jo, although she was all untaught.

And for once—'for once!'—she would satisfy her soul with sweet sounds and store up echoes to fill the long, dumb winter days. The great apartment house on the narrow city street towered aloft until its top was almost lost in the blue, like old Tumble-Down mountain, at home. Polly went up, up, under the auspices of an apathetic elevator boy, until her breath was almost taken away, and was astonished to find that Aunt Adeline's tiny flat was only half way to the top.

Angenette greeted her with earnest apologies for failing to meet her at the station. 'Of all strange things to happen, Uncle Elias has come to spend Christmas!' she said. Her long reflective face was pale and her high forehead showed all its incipient lines. 'We were all upset when he wrote,' she continued, breathing hard with excitement. 'We never expected he would! He wrote that he had heard that I was ambitious and he liked to have ambition in the family if it was the right kind. His mother had an ambition to be the finest cook in Hillsboro' county and his grandmother never let one of her family wear a bit of cloth that she didn't spin and weave! Mother hopes that he will send me to college; he would only have to pay my tuition, you know; R— college is only four miles out of town and I could live at home.'

Angenette looked so eager and wistful that Polly felt almost as if she were Uncle Elias and her fate lay in her hands.

'But I don't believe he is that kind—I mean I don't believe that I am his kind,' Angenette went on breathlessly. 'He thinks that a girl ought to be a good housekeeper first of all, and I am not. And he says that it isn't moral, that it makes people deceitful to live in a little flat, as we do, where everything turns into something else. Thank fortune we have one bedroom with a real bed in it to give him! You won't mind sleeping on the parlor table? it turns into a beautiful bed!'

Polly said, with truth, that she should be delighted to sleep on the parlor table.

Angenette said that they could give her the mantel-bed on which she and her mother slept, which perhaps seemed more like a real bed than the parlor table, but with inexperienced persons that had a way of folding up and standing them on their heads and causing them to fear that they were going to be suffocated. She felt that they were going to be suffocated. She felt that she could not be thankful enough that Miss Maybury, their lodger, had left before Uncle Elias came. If he had been folded up in the bed she was sure he would never have sent her to college! And he was so heavy that they could not possibly have given him the parlor bed.

There was still a great difficulty. Uncle Elias had been inquiring into their cooking!

Angenette whispered, looking fearfully towards the door as she held Polly's hand nervously, in the little entry-way that was scarcely wide enough for two:

'Mother and I are so afraid that he will suspect that it is a bought Christmas dinner! We are going to get a roasted turkey at the delicatessen shop around the corner, and the vegetables will be canned. We knew you wouldn't mind, but he likes an old-fashioned Christmas dinner. He spoke so scornfully of some people who had their Thanksgiving pudding brought from the baker's in a box! He said there wasn't any sacredness about the day when you ate pudding out of a box! He said you wouldn't catch him to eat such stuff. Oh, Polly, do you suppose he will know that our Christmas pudding comes out of a box?'

Aunt Adeline suddenly opened the parlor door and ushered the two girls into the little box-like room which seemed to be filled to overflowing by Uncle Elias' imposing presence.

He was a large man with a dignity that elevated his countryfied aspect into something to be admired and a face whose sternness was unmitigated until one was acquainted with the latent twinkle in his eye. Polly did not even catch a glimpse of the twinkle at first, and her impression was that Angenette's hopes were vain—doubly vain with a make-shift housekeeping that could not be concealed from such keen eyes as looked out from under Uncle Elias' shaggy brows.

'Uncle Elias wants to hear the Christmas music,' said Angenette, when the old man had given Polly one of his sharp glances and a strong handshake and said he believed he knew 'whose little gal' she was. 'I will take you both to-night where the music is glorious. And to-morrow forenoon we will go to our church, where the music is always fine on Christmas day.'

'But I was calculating to stay at home and help your mother and you get dinner Christmas day' said Uncle Silas. 'I know it's considerable work to get a Christmas dinner. I guess going to-night will do for me, anyhow.'

Polly saw the anxiety and dismay on Angenette's face and an idea dawned upon her. She put it away at first; to carry it out involved so great a disappointment. But so much more than Christmas music was at stake for Angenette!

She followed Angenette into the dining-room when she went to lay the cloth for supper. 'I will get a real old-fashioned