





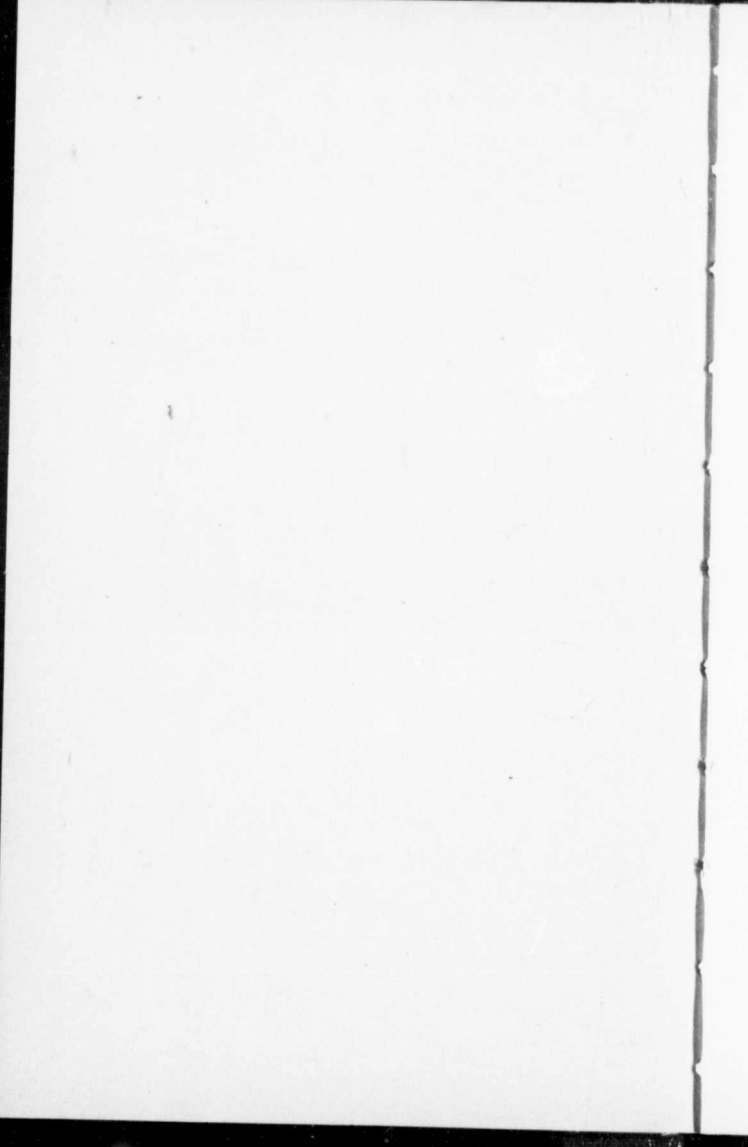
*My First
Christmas
Memory*

During the Chicago
Fire of 1871

by

MARTHA LOUISE BLACK,

O.B.E., F.R.G.S.





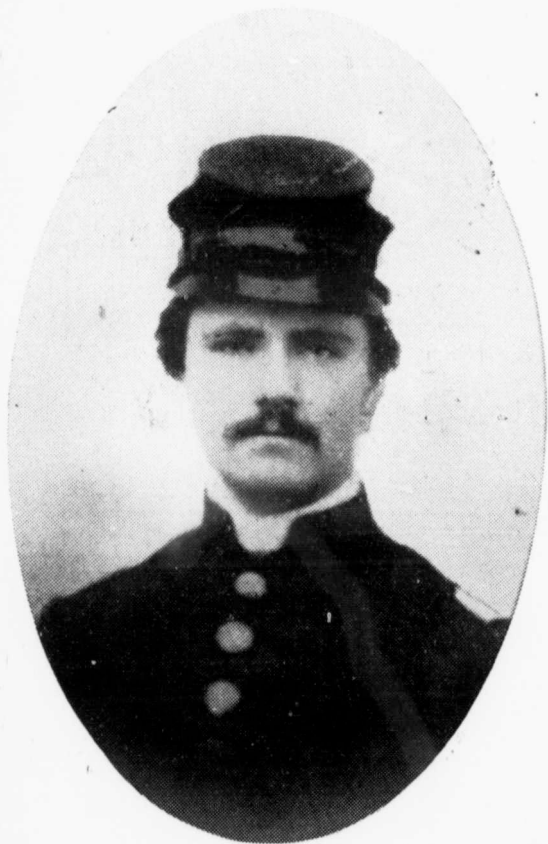
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My Father
George M. Munger

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My first outstanding Christmas memory was of the Chicago fire in early October of 1871. We had a cook-general in our little two-storey house, an Irish-Catholic very devout woman. She had not returned from church at her usual time that evening which worried Mother dreadfully. My mother was sitting in the big bay window of what she called our sitting room with my crippled baby sister, her illness is what we would now probably call polio, in her crib in front of mother. From our bay window we could watch the flames over the city rise higher and more lurid. The wind was very high; in fact we could see heavy boards from the mills spreading fire from place to place. Naturally mother was quite anxious but, as

in many other cases, I never saw her display any great anxiety. She always seemed to be placidly comfortable that the future would bring her no harm. Of Southern birth, she was brought up in that style and was able to take trouble and anxiety as it came.

It was October 8th and because of the early part of the month mother had expected my father and his two brothers would be rather late in coming home but as the wind seemed to be carrying the flames nearer to us she was really anxious, not about ourselves, but about her husband and his brothers.

Finally our cook-general, Ellen, came in and bursting into tears said "St. Patrick's is burning"—that was her church several miles distant. Mother commenced immediately to put my little sister's clothes to one side and do what she could to save the family silver. I was allowed to help, and possibly hinder, as much as I wished.

About midnight my father came in with his two brothers, all of them looking like grimy coal-heavers. Father said to mother, "Susan, everything I have has gone up in flames, I haven't any money at all." Mother, in her usual placid Southern style said, "George, I have \$2,000 right here for you." To which I was afterwards told, Father paid

no attention until mother repeated it several times and I finally walked over to father and, pulling his coat, said, "Listen to what mother says, she has \$2,000.00." Father finally listened to my insistent words and turning around said "where is it?" Mother putting her hand in her bosom pulled out the money and said, "My dear husband, this was the money you gave me for my sealskin jacket and velvet dress, and my trip home, but I have never spent any of it." Father looked amazed and, for the first time in my young life, I saw tears roll down his cheeks as he said "Susan, you're a life-saver to all of us."

Father paid \$1,000 of that over to the owner of a one-horse wagon and we left our West Van Buren Street home for the last time. The driver turned his horse and wagon over to my father in fee—simple for \$1,000. The driver left us with his thanks and blessings and I have often wondered what became of him later.

One of my younger uncles took the driver's seat and started for the lakeshore by the shortest route that could be figured out. It was quite a long drive as I remember, with my memory assisted by relatives and friends, to the lakeshore. Mother had saved her silver, some of which I have to this day, and her big trunk with her clothes and

my baby sister's clothes and some of mine. If my memory does not prove me false, we were the last to cross the Van Buren Street Bridge in safety, from thence going as far south in our westward journey as possible until we finally landed on the lakeshore. My little sister, who must have been in a very serious condition, was ill and merely whimpering, while an Aunt Edith who was with us, was absolutely silent. Time after time my mother told me that I had asked why Auntie Edith was so quiet. They told me nothing at the time, save that she was very tired, but in two or three days we knew that she had left us forever.

We reached our final destination which happened to be a stretch of vacant land on the South Side first known, I believe, as Wapansse Avenue. There were, even then, new wooden shanties being put up on the vacant ground by the Government. As we were a fairly good-sized family, my father, mother, my little sister and myself, with two uncles, we were allowed a shanty with five rooms. Mother had brought with her as a bride from the South a set of green horsehair furniture. I remember to this day how my small girl companions envied me that beautiful furniture; while a long sofa was the envy of all as I was allowed to sit at the head and slide down its slippery

surface. The sofa and one chair had been saved, the old-fashioned frames of mahogany with carved grapes heading several places.

When we reached what was to be our destination, Wapanse Avenue, for some time our goods were unloaded and put into the five-room shanty. Mother has told me the story many times that after we were settled there I was anxious to play with some children living two or three blocks distant in a fine home on the South Side that had not been touched by fire. When I went across the street to play with the children I was ruthlessly told to go home by their nurse as she said "get away from here—my children are not allowed to play with anyone from Poverty Flats." That was the first time in my life I knew where we were living.

One day father came to our temporary home in Poverty Flats and said to mother, "Well, Susie, it's too bad that we let my old Army uniform go." Mother looked at him and said, "George, I put it in the old trunk but you ridiculed me so for packing things that would be of no use." Father looked at her saying "and you have that uniform?" And mother said, "Yes, not only the uniform but two or three pictures of you that were taken when you wore it."

Mother always seemed to be able to come to the rescue at the right moment. The uniform was brought out from the under part of the old trunk and when I criticized the creases in it Mother said "Well, daughter, if it hadn't been for me the uniform would have been burned with many of our other treasures." When some men came to our temporary home on the lakeshore one of them said: "Munger, I wish you had one of your old uniforms as we would swear you in at once. The troops will be here from the East in the morning." To which mother replied: "I have the uniform and it will soon be properly pressed." And I, in my foolishly childish way thought at once, well, this will show those girls how proud I can be of my father. I'm sure their fathers won't be in any uniform. Father had been a Captain in the "Guthrie Grays" during the Civil War and once again he would be wearing his country's uniform. In two days the lakeshore and all the new camps were filled to overflowing with regular Army men from the East and Chicago for some time was under Martial Law. That is about my final memory of the great Chicago fire. My moment of pride came later when Father had been sworn in as a special officer for our camp and we frequently had visiting officers call on us at Poverty Flats. I'm afraid I

was a vain little girl but had much to take it out of me at different times.

During that summer my uncle and aunt, Mr. and Mrs. Charles Morse, had been abroad to what was then the Paris Exhibition. When they returned they brought with them plenty of clothes for my mother and me from New York and Paris. Among my treasures were two dolls, one large enough to wear a two-year-old child's clothes, and the other a boy with musical clappers on each hand which, when wound up, made what was supposed to be a musical sound. After that, when the family across the street found out who our relatives were, what I was and what I had, came across to visit me. Mother told the story of how a little girl of one family walked up to ask me to come over to their house to play and I drew myself up with all the airs of a tragedy queen "if you won't play with Matty in her gingham dress, you shan't play with Matty in her white dress." Mother, hearing part of the conversation, called me over to her quietly and told me that no little lady ever talked that way to anyone but I'm afraid no matter what she said it fell on deaf ears.

We had our Christmas in the row of gerry-built Government houses and I well remember that when I went upstairs to our

plain little bedroom Father had placed the tumbler of milk and the piece of plain cake on a plate for Santa Claus for, of course, we all believed in St. Nicholas in those days. When we joined the family on Christmas morning the cake and milk were gone but, unfortunately, the last good glass Mother had left had been broken. Father excused Santa Claus by saying it would be impossible for such a big fat man with a bundle full of presents to get down that narrow chimney. I think almost any fairy tale was welcomed by children of that age and generation.

My grandparents had come up from their beautiful farmhouse in Southern Illinois and they were staying with friends not too far distant from us. So on Christmas morning we had our usual stockings filled with gifts from the relatives who had been in Paris and London. Mother has told me that it was with a great flair of pride I shook out my new clothes and boasted "those girls in the big houses will want to play with me now because they haven't any clothes like these." Mother, believing in quenching too much childish pride, told me she was not going to allow me to wear my new clothes until Spring.

We had our usual Christmas dinner to which Mother had invited several near

neighbours to come in and share it with us as by that time the uncle and aunt and my grandparents had brought us ample to share with less-fortunate friends. Thus ended to me the first Christmas I really remember. There have been many others very delightful, especially those when I had my little family of boys with me in Dawson. We always had a number of people whom we knew had no home and to this late date I have tried to keep up that habit. As time goes on it seems to me that only the happy days remain. There were troubles, there were hardships, that at moments seemed unbearable, but they have all been forgotten, only the pleasant remain.

My husband joins me in wishing all our friends a very happy Christmas and satisfactory New Year. Even although we are thousands of miles away from some of you, we think of you all with pleasant memories.

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