

The Boy's Christmas Tree

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HOLLY wreaths, ma'am? Fifteen cents a piece, two for a quarter, an' full of berries."

The door shut quickly without an answer more than a shake of the head, and the young vender trudged on to the next house. He was experienced enough to be philosophical over a rebuff, and yet he acknowledged to surprise. "She don't look like the sort to slam a door in a feller's face," he reflected, "but you can't never tell."

Could the boy have looked beyond the closed door and seen the woman who had repulsed him, his surprise would have deepened. She had dropped to the floor in a little heap, her eyes closed, and her hands pressed to her ears to shut out the sounds and sights that emphasized continually her loss. How they had planned for that Christmas, she and the Boy! In the drawer of her desk upstairs — the sacred drawer, that held a baby curl and other treasures — she had the list he had written out from which she was to choose his Christmas present. "A Shott gun," it began. Spelling was never the Boy's strong point. But her tears had blotted the words so that no eye but her own could recognize the blunders.

If it were only over, this cruel Christmas-time with its heart-breaking memories. It had been days since she had ventured out. The windows filled with toys, the crowds in the streets, the happy, busy mothers hurrying on with their loads of mysterious packages, all seemed to mock her desolate home. The smell of the evergreen on the street corners turned her faint. The tread of children's feet on the pavement seemed to be trampling on her aching heart. Oh, for it to be past and gone, this dreaded "Merry Christmas!"

She went upstairs at last. Slowly, almost reluctantly, as if drawn by some invisible force, her feet turned down the long hall to the locked play-room at the end. The key turned gratingly. She pushed open the door and went in.

The tree would have stood in the bay-window. They had talked it all over not many months before. They had chosen the play-room instead of the library because the tree could stand there longer. It was always a sober day for the Boy when the tinsel came off and the tree came down, and he felt that Christmas was really over. She had always planned for an extra pleasure to chase the shadows from his face.

A thought came to her as she stood there amid the dust-covered toys in the room so oppressively silent. Why should she not cheer herself by trimming a Christmas tree? Even though she knew it was but a pretence, it might help to bridge over the desolate holidays. She would carry out all the plans they had made together. She would work as she had worked so often, listening for a foot on the stair, watchful against surprises. She drew a half-laughing, half-sobbing breath. It was just the thing — a Christmas tree for the Boy in heaven!

She hurried into her street dress, fearful that the elation of her fancy might desert her. But her empty heart welcomed the trickery. She bought a handsome spruce, spending some time on her selection. She purchased an extravagant amount of holly. She went from shop to shop spending with unusual freedom. How the Boy had watched for the Christmas packages, flattening his nose against the pane, and becoming excited as soon as the delivery wagon turned the corner. How he had fingered the packages, eager to guess their contents, and yet afraid that he would find out. She tried to fancy that he was watching at the window at home, and bought some bonbons of a sort he especially fancied. Under her black veil she was smiling.

The tree was set up in the play-room and the door locked before her husband came home. She guessed at once that he would not approve of her fancy. It might even trouble him. He had not quite understood her shrinking from the thought of Christmas. Still less could he understand the comfort she had so strangely found.

Her thought went upstairs to the tree many times as they sat together in the library. With that and the holly berries bright against the leaves, in that locked room, it was easy to think that the Boy was asleep and dreaming in his own little room across the hall. John Packard watched his wife's face closely that evening. There was something in it that puzzled him. It was not resignation, rather a strange elation that gave him a vague sense of uneasiness.

For the three days following, Mrs. Packard worked busily at the tree. Wreaths of tinsel and glittering ornaments turned the green cone into a thing of kaleidoscopic radiance. She unwrapped and displayed the new toys she had bought, trying to picture a boy's face breaking into

smiles above each one. The closed shutters gave no hint to the passers-by of the holly wreaths hanging in the window and the Christmas cheer that filled the room, already full of memories of the Christmas days gone by. And the mother, cherishing her fond delusion, sometimes almost found herself listening for the step of the Boy coming in from school.

The day before Christmas her husband came home early. She had finished her preparations, and she slipped out into the hall, locking the door hastily. She wondered as she went to meet John how she could escape his watchful eyes long enough to light the candles. She decided that it would be safer to steal away after he was asleep.

Her husband had several packages in his arm. He put them aside as he kissed her, and she saw the embarrassed color creeping up into his cheeks. As she looked at him in puzzled expectancy, waiting for him to speak, he cleared his throat, and seemed to be trying to find words.

"Come into the other room, dear," he said, at last. "I've been buying a few little things; I don't know as you'll care to see them," he hesitated. "It might hurt you. They're boy's things, you see."

His wife looked up at him without a word. A silence fell between them which was like a chasm over which two might yet clasp hands.

"I know how hard these last few weeks must have been for you," he went on, tenderly, "and my thoughts, too, have been with the Boy. I wanted to keep this Christmas day as a sort of memorial of him."

She was still silent, but her manner seemed to invite him to go on. He sat down beside her, and took her hand in his.

"There's a little chap that sells me a paper every evening. I've had my eye on the boy for a year and more. He has a face you would notice. I've talked with him from time to time, and I found he was the oldest of a family of five. Five boys and no father, Lucy! I went there yesterday. They have three rooms, neat, but cruelly bare. The mother is a frail-looking little creature who toils early and late to keep her boys together, and whose pride in them is something pathetic. They're manly little fellows, ambitious, industrious. The second of them is just the age of the Boy."

His voice broke, and he was silent for a moment. Then he went on resolutely: "I mean to bring a little sunshine into their lives, Lucy. If you are willing, I'd like to have you go with me; but don't put too great a tax on yourself. Only I feel as if I want to make a happy Christmas for some little lads, for the Boy's sake."

It was some time before he could understand her tears and her self-reproach. "You are so much better than I, John," she sobbed. "I've been so selfish — so wickedly selfish!"

She led him upstairs at last, and flung open the door into the room which hid the Christmas cheer as if it had been a guilty secret. The lights flashed upon the Christmas tree, with its gay decorations and profusion of toys — the tree that she had trimmed to cheat her sorrow, when

all the time there were destitute children in the world.

"This is the place for the boys, John," she told him. "They must have their Merry Christmas here. You'll have time to take the invitation before dinner. No, wait, I'll go with you."

They were promptly on hand the next evening, the six of them. "O' course, we can't leave ma," the second boy had said, quickly ; and the mother whose boy *had* left her, loved him for his outspoken thought. She was quick to assure him that on no account would they have failed to include his mother in the invitation. And so the little woman who scrubbed office-buildings for a livelihood, and whose self-forgetful love shed a certain radiance over her worn face and work-bowed figure, came with her sons to the Boy's Christmas tree.

At first they were a little conscious of their freshly scrubbed faces and sleek hair, and were inclined to walk on tip-toe, and speak with painful precision, and look at the ceiling, instead of the person addressing them. But the Boy's mother thought that this constraint vanished as they entered the play-room, as though a suggestion of a boy's presence still lingered there and made them feel at ease. She had never loved her husband so well as when she saw him putting aside the sadly sweet memories of the hour, and helping their boy guests to feel at home.

The last vestige of unnaturalness had disappeared when Mrs. Packard found the little lad who had especially won her affections, standing before the Boy's picture, his uplifted face grave to the point of reverence.

"That's your boy, ain't it ? " he asked, without turning his eyes.

"Yes, dear." Somehow the question did not hurt as she expected.

"He looks as though a feller could have lots of fun with him. It's a pity he couldn't 'a been here tonight, to see what a good time we had. But maybe " — the small boy spoke reflectively — " maybe somebody'll tell him."

"Perhaps so, dear," said Mrs. Packard. Her heart was lighter than for many a day. The Boy up in heaven would be glad if he knew, and just then it did not seem hard to believe that in his far-off joy a whisper might reach him.

She stole up to the playroom after they all had gone. The dismantled tree stood dark in the bay window. The candles had burned out. Stillness reigned where the sound of boyish feet and boyish laughter had made music earlier in the evening. She bowed her head as she stood in the shadow. And the thought in her heart found shape in words.

"O my Father !" she prayed. "Keep me from selfish sorrow. For my Boy's sake, make me a help to other boys. Amen !"

She went out, leaving the door of the play-room open. It was not to be locked again. Her sorrow was no longer to shut its eyes and cover its ears and shrink from the sunlight. Her love, purified by grief, was ready for its ministry.

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