

# The Very Heart of Christmas

# GIFTS

By SOPHIE KERR  
Illustrated by EDWARD BUTLER

She was born to management as the sparks fly upward, was Flora Janney. She never cried unless there was a real reason, and then she did it in a business-like way—just a few short, sharp, dry-eyed wails to notify the world of her wrongs. Oh, she was a good hospitable, a model baby, if ever there was one.

And she was a good little girl. She kept her little pinafores clean for a miraculous length of time and played happily with any sort of makeshift toys. And when that dark shadow which was her father's presence entered the home, she was utterly silent, keeping out of his sight and out of reach of his hand.

One day she was a tyrant and a brute, despite a certain dashing handsomeness that made women look after him, whether he was walking steadily or not, and most usually he was not.

Perhaps it was the memory of that dashing youth that he once was that made Mrs. Janney burst into wild tears on the night word was sent from a hospital that he never would come home again to abuse his wife and child. Flora was 5 years old when that happened and she cuddled against her mother.

"Don't cry, Mother," she said protectively. "No use to cry."

Old Miss Carmine, the roomer on the top floor, heard her and said approvingly "Listen to that child—she's got sense."

Things went more smoothly after the dashing Osceola returned no more. The roomers stayed longer and the old city house, which was tied up some way by an entail and could not be sold, bricked up a little. Flora, at the age of 7, was doing errands competently. And when she was 8 she could sweep the pavement and dispense clean towels to the roomers. Also she had insisted on having neat dotted swiss curtains for all the front windows.

When Flora was 9 Mrs. Janney decided to marry Mr. Pentz, the first-floor front: a bald-headed, young, old man, not in the least like the lamented Osceola! He had been head salesman in the Ladies' department of the Ready Cash Shoe Emporium ever since the Ready Cash had such a department. He would never rise any higher, but it was doubtful if he would ever fall any lower, for he was a good salesman and deservedly popular.

Since he was a man and in business, Mrs. Janney, who was a born learner, had frequently demanded his advice. Mr. Pentz gave her his help, and his help, and in gratitude she insisted on sewing on buttons, darning his socks, looking after his laundry—delicate attentions of a rather intimate nature, these, and bound to suggest to the receiver thereof the comforts and pleasures of family life.

So Mrs. Janney became Mrs. Pentz, and she and Flora no longer lived in the basement, but moved upstairs and inhabited the whole first floor of two rooms and bath, which was to Flora's young mind; a very grand way to live indeed. Flora was now of Mr. Pentz and affectionately called him "Pentzy," having declined to call him father. "He's a lot more nicer'n father was, to call father," she said firmly when her mother suggested it.

But when the first Pentz baby arrived Flora became an adult with a mission. To see her rolling little Emmeline's carriage down the block to the green triangle of park, to observe her air of conscious superiority, was domestic drama on a high scale.

When a year later young Clifford Pentz made his appearance, Emmeline became even more wholly Flora's—but presently she had taken on Cliffy, too. Cliffy now rode in the carriage and Emmeline toddled beside it, and Flora managed both handsily. She was 11 and getting tall for her age, and instinct for management was increasing every minute. Pentzy and her mother never thought of having a family conveyance without Flora—and the child's judgment was surprising sound, especially on matters financial. They had the roomers, to be sure, but the neighborhood was rather running down and prices of rooms with it. There was Mr. Pentz's salary, a steady asset; but the house wanted many repairs. Besides, there were more babies. After Emmeline and Clifford, arrived, in due course of time, Marguerite, Lester, and Violet. Flora washed, dressed, fed and ruled the five younger with great capability, smooth justice and a devoted affection. She was far more of a refuge and a strength to them than their mild father or their fear-headed mother. They courted her approbation—they were obedient to her. Mudder and fadder might be openly flouted—but not Flora.

By the time she was through high school she was a better executive than any woman on the block. The placidity of her childhood had stayed with her and so had the pink cheeks. Her brown hair was gold-flecked and alluring. She was straight and slender and, if not so very tall, she was tall enough. But the plain dull clothes she wore denied what beauty she possessed.

No one will ever know the epic of savings that went to make up Flora Janney's tuition for the business school which she presently attended. At first it was just a "savings," but after a while it became a "college fund." The matter of banks paying interest having been made clear to her in a certain arithmetic lesson, the money deposited in the nearest saving bank and her bank book became her greatest treasure. It was a tremendous race with time as to whether she'd have enough when she was ready to take the course; but Flora won. And when she was 18 and a half she had gone through business college "like a streak," and became a stenographer and typist in a big commission house at the magnificent salary of \$14 per week.

The money eased the financial situation, but her youth of concentrated thrift had moulded her definitely. "We've got to save to put the children through college, now," she said to her mother and Pentzy. "I want them to have good educations, so they'll be somebody when they grow up."

It sounds like a drab, dreary chronicle, the story of Flora Janney's childhood and youth! But it was full of laughter, and of loving, for the little

half-brothers and sisters was to that. And Flora's was no denied and thwarted nature. She liked to rule and rule she did, with an extraordinary amount of foresight and good judgment. The savings account began to swell and plump (just again). The very set and tile of Flora Janney's square little chin gave the family something to live up to. She hauled them all upward and on by sheer will power. The commission house where she was employed raised her salary every year as regularly as the calendar changed, and handed her a pretty sum for bonus besides. The saving bank account grew into four figures, and was invested in safe and sure bonds.

Emmeline had been pushed, pulled, and prodded through high school and was reluctantly entering college when Flora was 23. Cliffy had another year in high school to go, and then he too was college-bound, eventually to become a doctor; Marguerite, Lester, and Violet were all making their way on the lower rungs of the educational ladder which Flora's will impelled them to tread, when—

Roscoe Neal made his appearance on the Pentz-Janney horizon. He was the nephew of a childhood friend of Miss Carmine's and had been sent by his aunt to look up the old lady. He came strolling rather uncertainly down the street, his eye squinting at the old faded street numbers, just as Flora got back from her day's work. She passed him, and he noted her plain dress, her quick light step, with approval. She was at her door, putting in her key, when he stopped at the foot of the steps.

"Why this is number 45," he said, half to himself and half to Flora who looked down the stoop and saw a big, square young man with a sort of countenanced air about him.

"You are looking for number 45?" she inquired crisply.

Roscoe took off his hat. "I'm looking for Miss Carmine," he explained. "Miss Minnie Carmine. Do you know if she lives here?" His voice was soft and deep, with that kindly inflection that so many men have who talk but little.

"Come in," said Flora. "I'll see about it. For of course she was not going to let any stranger who came along bother her. Miss Carmine, it might be one of these grants—you never can tell."

She brought Roscoe into the Pentz sitting room, found out his business and all about him, and had sent Violet up to tell Miss Carmine before the bewildered Roscoe realized what was happening. But his mental processes were sure, if not volcanic. This competent blue-eyed young woman who so calmly asserted and arranged him caught and interested him. As he waited for Miss Carmine he observed that she had kissed the children, whisked the room into better order, deciding a wavering question or two of her mother's and then, as Miss Carmine appeared, she said, pleasantly, "You just sit and have your visit right here. We're all going downstairs." Whereupon, the whole troop had disappeared.

"Who is that young lady?" asked Roscoe presently, when his identity as Ella Fowler—that was—nephew had been established and Miss Carmine had told him that the last time she saw him he was a little red-headed baby riding in his go-cart and as solemn as a judge.

Miss Carmine explained, adding, as was usual, "I tell you, that's one girl with sense."

To this Roscoe made no answer. He proceeded slowly but certainly forward.

"I guess I might call you Aunt Minnie," was his first step, and the way old Miss Carmine smiled and bridled was earnest that his sense of direction was good.

"I've been right lonely and dull since I've been in New York—not knowing anybody. I hope you won't mind if I come around again soon."

Miss Carmine hoped he'd come so often as he could. She'd introduced him to Flora and the other children, and Mr. and Mrs. Pentz—they'd all been so good and kind—why, when she had the flu last winter, Flora had nursed her three weeks on end, sitting up night after night, and going to business daytimes.

He said, well now, she must be a fine girl. And since the hotel he was staying at wasn't very homelike, how about it if he and his new-found Aunt Minnie went around somewhere and had a bite of supper together. He added that maybe Miss Janney could tell them a good place to go. The prospect made old Miss Carmine hilarious and excited. She called breathlessly downstairs for Flora.

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Flora came up, not removing the apron which she had on preparatory to getting supper. Its blue and white

check made her look younger, more approachable.

"Do you think, Flora, if I wore my black and white foulard—oh, I wish I had my white gloves cleaned last week, like I meant to."

"I'll come right and help you get 'em," said Flora heartily. "Don't worry about the gloves—you've got your black ones and they're newer."

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"They sat down and figured it out, all through one long evening. At the end of the evening they looked at each other and smiled, and Roscoe kissed her fervently.

"All the same, I fell like a traitor."

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It was half the easing of anxiety, half the overwhelming joy of seeing them all again that made Flora simply speechless with happiness when Roscoe said, one evening late in December:

"Let's run up to New York and spend Christmas with your folks. Surprise 'em."

Of course her first answer was in character. "But it's such a long trip, Roscoe. Do you think we can afford it?"

And he answered with great gravity. "No; it will undoubtedly drive us into bankruptcy."

Whereupon she said he was a darling and how did he know that it was the one thing she really wanted to do.

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Still Flora did not speak. But she was seeing. All around the room were signs of pleasant luxury: a talking machine, new cushions, a pair of painted vases, some bright pictures, a smoking set for Pentzy. Violet took up the tale, proudly anxious to display all the new delights to this dearly loved sister.

"And we got new furniture in Emmeline's room and the 'stallment man comes every week to collect on it, and we go to the movies two'n three times a week, all of us; an' listen, Flora, we got a turkey for tomorrow—a great big turkey! My, I'm glad you're here to have some of that turkey. We got fruit cake, too, and mince pie, and plum pudding, and lots of vegetables, and celery and cranberry sauce, and Pa brought home a 10-pound box of the very best chocolates. And now you and Roscoe're here and can have some of all of them."

Turkey! Turkey in the city was 55 cents a pound. Flora knew that. Fruit cake, mince pie, plum pudding—a five-pound box of the very best chocolates. And all of them dressed to the nines—rhinestone pins showing in Pentz's hair, and she had a string of gaudy beads around her neck that suited very well the fancy beaded blouse she was wearing, just such garments as she had always yearned for, but Flora never would let her have. And she had on silk stockings, too. And so, as Flora's eyes informed her, did Violet, and Marguerite.

They had stockings. They had shoes. They had the very instant she had taken her restraining hands from them, run back into the channels of their own natures. Her people—hers! They were like every other family on the block—selfish, wasteful, hand-to-mouth, laughing at the thought of a rainy day. Stormy sobs rose in her throat, choking her, her eyes were bright with scalding, hopeless tears.

But even through these tears she saw something in the air. In their abashed, constrained silence there was still that ardent, tender love for her that she had always treasured. And in the love was a queer wistful appeal that she would understand, would let them still keep their place in her affections.

Flora drew in her breath sharply. Why, they were afraid of her, afraid of what she might say, what she might do.

Al' but Violet. For Violet was still glowing over the thought of the pleasure they could share with Flora. She put her engaging yellow head (wearing a ribbon that must have cost a dollar a yard) Flora noted dumbly against her sister's shoulder and said with the utmost expansiveness: "Isn't it perfectly grand."

that we've got so many nice things. Flora! Gee, I'm so glad you're here to have some."

The room stirred uneasily. Would Flora? Oh, how they hoped she would!

And she did!

She must not fall them in this moment. She must make them see that she loved them as they were in reality, not for what she wished them to be.

She kissed Violet's topknot and answered, with just the suspicion of a gasp in her voice, "I'm glad to be here to have some, too, baby. And," she looked around at them, embraced them with her glance, "and yes, it's perfectly grand that you've got them all. I'm glad of that, too. Awfully glad."

The tension loosened, everybody began to laugh and talk again, a little hysterically from the relief and joy of Flora's attitude. She was their Flora. And they were hers, as never before. Every word they said, every look they gave her, told her so.

And she was aware of a curious and precious peace. She had given them a great gift. But they had given one to her also. They had given her the revelation that each life must be lived to itself, in its own way, inviolate. They had loosened their lives from her rule. No more would she need to worry and fret and build for them. She would have all her strength, all her energy, for—

Why, of course, for Roscoe. There he sat across the room, her own husband, her own man. He was looking at her, too, and she knew that he had seen all, and had understood from the very depths of his loving heart.

Presently she slipped across and spoke to him. "The shops'll be open tonight," she whispered. "Let's slip out and get some more presents for 'em. I don't want to disappoint 'em." He nodded. Oh, yes, he understood—everything. Good night girl, Flora," he whispered tenderly.

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Large and disquieting silence ran over the hilarity and ironed it out flat.

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Still Flora did not speak. But she was seeing. All around the room were signs of pleasant luxury: a talking machine, new cushions, a pair of painted vases, some bright pictures, a smoking set for Pentzy. Violet took up the tale, proudly anxious to display all the new delights to this dearly loved sister.

"And we got new furniture in Emmeline's room and the 'stallment man comes every week to collect on it, and we go to the movies two'n three times a week, all of us; an' listen, Flora, we got a turkey for tomorrow—a great big turkey! My, I'm glad you're here to have some of that turkey. We got fruit cake, too, and mince pie, and plum pudding, and lots of vegetables, and celery and cranberry sauce, and Pa brought home a 10-pound box of the very best chocolates. And now you and Roscoe're here and can have some of all of them."

Turkey! Turkey in the city was 55 cents a pound. Flora knew that. Fruit cake, mince pie, plum pudding—a five-pound box of the very best chocolates. And all of them dressed to the nines—rhinestone pins showing in Pentz's hair, and she had a string of gaudy beads around her neck that suited very well the fancy beaded blouse she was wearing, just such garments as she had always yearned for, but Flora never would let her have. And she had on silk stockings, too. And so, as Flora's eyes informed her, did Violet, and Marguerite.

They had stockings. They had shoes. They had the very instant she had taken her restraining hands from them, run back into the channels of their own natures. Her people—hers! They were like every other family on the block—selfish, wasteful, hand-to-mouth, laughing at the thought of a rainy day. Stormy sobs rose in her throat, choking her, her eyes were bright with scalding, hopeless tears.

But even through these tears she saw something in the air. In their abashed, constrained silence there was still that ardent, tender love for her that she had always treasured. And in the love was a queer wistful appeal that she would understand, would let them still keep their place in her affections.

Flora drew in her breath sharply. Why, they were afraid of her, afraid of what she might say, what she might do.

Al' but Violet. For Violet was still glowing over the thought of the pleasure they could share with Flora. She put her engaging yellow head (wearing a ribbon that must have cost a dollar a yard) Flora noted dumbly against her sister's shoulder and said with the utmost expansiveness: "Isn't it perfectly grand."

that we've got so many nice things. Flora! Gee, I'm so glad you're here to have some."

The room stirred uneasily. Would Flora? Oh, how they hoped she would!

And she did!

She must not fall them in this moment. She must make them see that she loved them as they were in reality, not for what she wished them to be.

She kissed Violet's topknot and answered, with just the suspicion of a gasp in her voice, "I'm glad to be here to have some, too, baby. And," she looked around at them, embraced them with her glance, "and yes, it's perfectly grand that you've got them all. I'm glad of that, too. Awfully glad."

The tension loosened, everybody began to laugh and talk again, a little hysterically from the relief and joy of Flora's attitude. She was their Flora. And they were hers, as never before. Every word they said, every look they gave her, told her so.

And she was aware of a curious and precious peace. She had given them a great gift. But they had given one to her also. They had given her the revelation that each life must be lived to itself, in its own way, inviolate. They had loosened their lives from her rule. No more would she need to worry and fret and build for them. She would have all her strength, all her energy, for—

Why, of course, for Roscoe. There he sat across the room, her own husband, her own man. He was looking at her, too, and she knew that he had seen all, and had understood from the very depths of his loving heart.

Presently she slipped across and spoke to him. "The shops'll be open tonight," she whispered. "Let's slip out and get some more presents for 'em. I don't want to disappoint 'em." He nodded. Oh, yes, he understood—everything. Good night girl, Flora," he whispered tenderly.

Old Miss Carmine had understood, too. "I always said she was sensible," she murmured with pride.

educational ladder which Flora's will impelled them to tread, when—

Roscoe Neal made his appearance on the Pentz-Janney horizon. He was the nephew of a childhood friend of Miss Carmine's and had been sent by his aunt to look up the old lady. He came strolling rather uncertainly down the street, his eye squinting at the old faded street numbers, just as Flora got back from her day's work. She passed him, and he noted her plain dress, her quick light step, with approval. She was at her door, putting in her key, when he stopped at the foot of the steps.

"Why this is number 45," he said, half to himself and half to Flora who looked down the stoop and saw a big, square young man with a sort of countenanced air about him.

"You are looking for number 45?" she inquired crisply.

Roscoe took off his hat. "I'm looking for Miss Carmine," he explained. "Miss Minnie Carmine. Do you know if she lives here?" His voice was soft and deep, with that kindly inflection that so many men have who talk but little.

"Come in," said Flora. "I'll see about it. For of course she was not going to let any stranger who came along bother her. Miss Carmine, it might be one of these grants—you never can tell."

She brought Roscoe into the Pentz sitting room, found out his business and all about him, and had sent Violet up to tell Miss Carmine before the bewildered Roscoe realized what was happening. But his mental processes were sure, if not volcanic. This competent blue-eyed young woman who so calmly asserted and arranged him caught and interested him. As he waited for Miss Carmine he observed that she had kissed the children, whisked the room into better order, deciding a wavering question or two of her mother's and then, as Miss Carmine appeared, she said, pleasantly, "You just sit and have your visit right here. We're all going downstairs." Whereupon, the whole troop had disappeared.

"Who is that young lady?" asked Roscoe presently, when his identity as Ella Fowler—that was—nephew had been established and Miss Carmine had told him that the last time she saw him he was a little red-headed baby riding in his go-cart and as solemn as a judge.

Miss Carmine explained, adding, as was usual, "I tell you, that's one girl with sense."

To this Roscoe made no answer. He proceeded slowly but certainly forward.

"I guess I might call you Aunt Minnie," was his first step, and the way old Miss Carmine smiled and bridled was earnest that his sense of direction was good.

"I've been right lonely and dull since I've been in New York—not knowing anybody. I hope you won't mind if I come around again soon."

Miss Carmine hoped he'd come so often as he could. She'd introduced him to Flora and the other children, and Mr. and Mrs. Pentz—they'd all been so good and kind—why, when she had the flu last winter, Flora had nursed her three weeks on end, sitting up night after night, and going to business daytimes.

He said, well now, she must be a fine girl. And since the hotel he was staying at wasn't very homelike, how about it if he and his new-found Aunt Minnie went around somewhere and had a bite of supper together. He added that maybe Miss Janney could tell them a good place to go. The prospect made old Miss Carmine hilarious and excited. She called breathlessly downstairs for Flora.

"Come up here right away, dear. It's important."

Flora came up, not removing the apron which she had on preparatory to getting supper. Its blue and white

check made her look younger, more approachable.

"Do you think, Flora, if I wore my black and white foulard—oh, I wish I had my white gloves cleaned last week, like I meant to."

"I'll come right and help you get 'em," said Flora heartily. "Don't worry about the gloves—you've got your black ones and they're newer."

married. But I own an awful nice bungalow in the new town development. All furnished. Had a chance to buy it at a bargain and thought it was a good investment. Kind of a place women say is easy to keep house in—lots of shelves and—closets, and no stairs, you know. But I've never lived in it. Aunt Ella's let me board with her since Ma died.

before did I have to wait a minute to decide what to do. But this... If there was only some way... "We'll find a way," said Roscoe.

"They sat down and figured it out, all through one long evening. At the end of the evening they looked at each other and smiled, and Roscoe kissed her fervently.

"All the same, I fell like a traitor."

In making one for Thanksgiving and Christmas. What about Lester's report at school? Don't forget the annual household goods sale at Bristol's—probably six new sheets would be enough. If they had that sale of men's furnishings at Glenn's, Pentzy and Cliffy ought to have two new neckties apiece, at not more than \$1 each. Thus did Flora write pages and pages in her neat, clear hand. Sometimes she felt they did not reply with sufficient exactness to her many questions as to the details of their life.

It was half the easing of anxiety, half the overwhelming joy of seeing them all again that made Flora simply speechless with happiness when Roscoe said, one evening late in December:

"Let's run up to New York and spend Christmas with your folks. Surprise 'em."

Of course her first answer was in character. "But it's such a long trip, Roscoe. Do you think we can afford it?"

And he answered with great gravity. "No; it will undoubtedly drive us into bankruptcy."

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