

A Christmas Stocking

It Brought an Unexpected Message of Good Cheer

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"De chil'en is gittin' big enough to understand about Christmas now, and I reckon we better git some toys fo' 'em. Tommy is five yea's old, and Pinkey is nearly fou'. De gen'laman what visit de house las' month gib me some money fo' takin' keer ob his horse, and we kin spend it fo' a fust class Christmas."

"And de lady what was wid him gib me money fo' washin' some lace clothes. We kin hab a fine Christmas this yea'. Missy Alice done tole me she goin' gib us a turkey."

This conversation occurred between Ben and his wife, Sue, a young couple who were slaves on a plantation in Virginia. The time was a week before Christmas, and preparations were being made both by the whites and by the colored people to celebrate the day. From that moment Ben and Sue spent all the time they were allowed for themselves planning to give their children the first Christmas they had ever known or at least could appreciate. The last Christmas little Tom was ill, and his father and mother were hourly expecting him to be taken away from them by death. That he had been spared to them and was now in good health added zest to their preparations to make the coming celebration the Christmas of their lives. Ben secured a rocking horse for Tommy and smuggled it into the cabin when the children were asleep. Sue bought a doll with a fine china head for Pinkey and made the clothes for it herself. Besides the gift of the turkey, a lady living on a neighboring plantation gave them a whole mince pie for their Christmas dinner. A few little things might be expected from the church.

Every night when Ben came home from work Tommy would run out to meet him, and the father would take his child up in his arms and say:

"Christmas comin', honey."

"Wha's Kismas?" the boy would ask with shining eyes, knowing that it was something enjoyable, but ignorant of its nature.

"Christmas is de day de blessed Lord was bo'n. Fust yo' wake up in de

maw'nin' and holler 'Merry Christmas, pop! Merry Christmas, mom! Merry Christmas, Pinkey!' and we all holler 'Merry Christmas!' to you. Den we go to de stockin's hangin' to de chimbley and see what Santa Clause brung fo' de chil'en. And we take 'em out and gib yo' you's and Pinkey hers. Den we hab a fine dinner ob turkey and stuffin' in it and mince pie, and yo' chil'en play wid yo' toys all day. Won't dat be fine?"

And the boy would share his gratification by tightening his arms about his father's neck and covering his face with kisses.

The preparations went on and the anticipations continued to rise till the day before Christmas. Then Ben surprised Sue by coming to the cabin an hour earlier than usual, and the moment she looked at him she knew that something terrible had happened. His face had taken on that sickly hue which in the colored race corresponds to pallor in the whites. He came in and threw himself face down on the bed.

"Oh, Ben," cried his wife, "what is it?"

There was no reply.

"Tell me, Ben! Do tell me what's de matter."

"Tommy's sold."

The mother dropped as if she had been shot. Ben had been told the news by his master and sent home to break it to the wife and mother. Colonel Torrance, the planter, had for some time intended to get rid of some of the children he owned. He had no idea of doing so at this Christmas season, but a trader had come along, had made an offer of \$300 for Tommy, and his master had concluded to accept it.

The southern gentleman planter was usually a kind man, whose slaves were fond of him. But a slave was a chattel representing a certain sum of money, and a thrifty owner would naturally make the most of his capital. Colonel Thomas was one of this class. He disliked to separate families, but under the system of slavery it at times became to his interest to do so. And

what was his interest he considered his duty to himself and his family.

Ben, hearing his wife fall, sprang up and took her limp body in his arms and laid it on the bed. Just as she came to herself the children toddled into the room and Tommy, seeing that something was the matter, began to cry. This started his sister. The two went to the mother, who, seeing her boy, arose and with a moan took him in her arms.

"Oh, what a Christmas eve!" wailed the father.

There was a rap at the door.

"Don't come in heah!" cried the mother fiercely. "Yo' shan't take ma boy! I'll kill him befo' I'll let him be taken away from his mother!"

Nevertheless, the door was opened. The face of a young girl appeared.

"What do you mean, Sue? I haven't come to take your boy. I've come to bring you the turkey for Christmas. Here it is." And she held up a four pound bird.

"Oh, Missy Alice," said the father, "we don't want no turkey. Dey ain't no Christmas fo' us. De Lawd hab struck us down. Mars' done sold Tommy to a trader, and de tra'cer gwine take him down souf. Take de turkey away, Missy Alice. We ain't got no use fo' it."

The visitor, Alice Wharton, was a girl of twenty, whose face bespoke the kindness of her nature. But over kindness triumphed indignation.

"It is brutal!" she exclaimed.

The mother continued to moan. Several times Alice essayed to speak words of comfort, but her lips refused to say what was untrue. There was no comfort for her to speak. Colonel

Torrance prided himself upon his strength of will to do whatever he considered it to be his duty. He had had such unpleasant episodes in his life before and had never shrunk from carrying out his plans. Alice took the hand of the father in one of hers, the mother's hand in the other, pressed them, and with the words, "God help you," turned and left the cabin.

It was, as Ben had said, a melancholy Christmas eve. Little Tommy was put to bed early, his mother lying beside him. On the morrow he would pass out of their lives.

It was near midnight when there came a rap at the door. Ben arose and opened it. A boy stood in the opening, but he was as black as the night and consequently invisible. Ben heard a voice say:

"Missy Alice tole me to tote yo' de stockin' fo' to hang up on de chimbley. She sais she done tole Santa Claus to bring somepin nice fo' Tommy."

Ben felt a stocking shoved into his hand, heard the departing footsteps, closed the door, hung up the stocking and returned to bed.

When it began to be light Tommy, who did not know that anything had occurred to interfere with Christmas, shouted:

"Merry Christmas, pop! Merry Christmas, mom! Merry Christmas, Pinkey!"

The only reply he received from his parents was a sigh. They lay for a while, dreading to get up. It was Christmas day, but the day as well that their little boy was to be taken from them. Finally Ben, urged by the children, arose and uncovered Tommy's rocking horse and Pinkey's doll. He glanced at the stocking Miss Wharton had sent, but, seeing that it gave no more sign of contents than when he had hung it up the night before, paid no further attention to it. But Sue, with a woman's inclination for investigation in such matters, took it down, put her hand into it and pulled out a bit of paper. This she opened, and on it in large printed letters that she and Ben could read was written:

Merry Christmas! I have bought Tommy.
ALICE WHARTON.

The father and mother looked at each other for a moment before the full meaning of the words penetrated their brains; then, taking the two children in their arms, all were united in a single embrace.

In a twinkling all was changed. Miss Wharton now being the owner of Tommy, his parents knew well that he would never be separated from them. The girl was beloved by the colored people, both her father's slaves and those on other plantations, for she devoted all her time to ministering to them. She had a little money of her own, and as soon as she knew of Tommy's sale went to the trader, offered him a good profit on his purchase, it was accepted, and the boy passed into her ownership.

As soon as Ben and Sue felt assured that Miss Wharton had arisen they started for her home to hear the good news from her lips and thank her for having been the means of sparing them a suffering worse than their child's death. She met them with a smile not less happy than their own. Ben tried to speak his thanks, but failed. Sue then tried, but did not get very far before she broke down in tears.

And so it was that the Christmas which came so near being a day of agony was saved to this humble family by an angel of mercy. The children enjoyed the toys and the turkey and the mince pie. But there was in their parents that which did not come of several things, for theirs was a great comfort of the soul. That which they held most dear had been taken on Christmas eve and returned on Christmas morning.

Tommy remained for several years

with his mother, it being his owner's intention to give him free papers as soon as he was of an age to take care of himself. But before that time came around a great change had come over the colored people of the south. It was reserved for another to give Tommy his freedom. Abraham Lincoln one day wrote his name, and all the slaves were free.

The Roman Forum.

The Forum was originally a market place and only by degrees became the center of Roman civic and political life. About B. C. 470 it became the place of assembly of the people in their tribes and was gradually adorned with temples and other great public buildings. The Roman Forum—the Acropolis at Athens alone excepted—is perhaps the most thrillingly interesting spot on earth to such as know and appreciate the teachings of history. From the Forum came the august laws which governed the then known world for more than a thousand years.

Raising Chickens.

The suburban man was all sympathy.

"What's the trouble, my dear?" he asked as he came home and found his wife in tears.

"T-rouble enough," sobbed his young wife. "You k-know that five d-dollar incubator the man sold me? Well, it exploded today and blew all the chickens through the roof."

"Oh, well, cheer up, Martha. The man said it would raise chickens, and you see it did."—Chicago News.

An Accommodating Man.

"You see," said the old farmer as he measured out the green tomatoes to the grocer, "I brought along my spade by accident, but it was a good thing I did."

"Wagon get stuck in the road?" was asked.

"Oh, no!—I was coming along about a mile back when I saw a feller in a field. He had a crooked stick in his hand, and a little boy with other crooked sticks was following him along. The man was knocking a wooden ball along the ground."

"Hello," says I as I stopped.

"Hello yourself."

"What you doing?"

"Holing a ball in the ninth."

"Hard work, hain't it?"

"Yes."

"Then let me help you a little. Nothing mean about me."

"And I grabbed the spade, climbed the fence and dug that ninth hole out till it was as big as a bar'l, and the feller laid right down and rolled over and over and laughed so much he couldn't find words to thank me."—Rochester Democrat-Chronicle.

Made His Position Clear.

An old Pennsylvania German living in the mountains had a hard three hours' dusty walk to accomplish one morning, and he rose very early to make his start. He had gone but a little way when he was overtaken by an automobile. The driver picked up the old man, and they were at his destination in about twenty minutes.

"Danks so much awfully mit de ride. If I had known myself to be here already two hours in front of de clock yet I vud be at home fast asleep already to start unless I knew you vud not have picked me up since."—Housekeeper.

Severe Punishment.

Belle—And did you make her eat her own words? Beulah—Eat 'em? I made her Fletcherize 'em.—Yonkers Statesman.

Unless you bear with the faults of a friend you betray your own.—Syrus.



WILL JONES