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Miss Anne's Christmas Visitors

By
Lena M. McCauley

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WHO IS willing to play Santa Claus? What shall we do with the children?"

This being the final question, the chairman of the board of managers sat down to wait for an answer. St. Elizabeth's orphanage was facing a Christmas without festivities, owing to the marriage of the matron, and a disabled heating plant.

An interval of silence followed Mrs. Blunt's appeal, though every one of the motherly hearts of the women present overflowed with sympathy for the 45 homeless boys and girls without prospect of Christmas cheer. They had come prepared with check books and the usual offerings of cake and confections for the holiday, but the personal entertainment of 45 shivering children was something they had not looked for.

Little Mrs. Thompson, confessing a brood of six boys and girls of her own, was the first to speak.

"Suppose we invite the orphans home with us; I know many town-folk would be glad to help us out. It will be a treat to them. I can take two."

"Bravo!" said the chairman, clapping her gloved hands. "I will take two little girls myself."

"Of course they will have their company manners on. I will take a boy with curls. Mr. Jones dotes on boys, and we have only girls, but I must be permitted to pick him out," cried the secretary, joining in.

"I'd rather have a child choose me. I'll go into the school room and ask those who would like to visit me to leave their names on the desk. If they choose me, I am sure they will like me. I can take four just as well as two. Our house is so large," said Mrs. Cliff, the Lady Bountiful of the village.

When the chorus had quieted, 20 children were provided for, and there was every reason to believe that all



"Of Course I Want You."

would be settled in homes before night. That afternoon a score of hospitable villagers visited the orphanage, and it proved that there were more invitations than were needed. As the children were checked off from the monthly school room list, it happened that a group of five quarantined in the attic hospital for the mumps were overlooked. It may be that the over-cautious doctor had omitted their names, or that some villager had hesitated, but the days slipped on towards Christmas, and they received no invitations.

Up in the sunny attic, Alice Martin and her brother Tom had long since recovered, and said lessons and played games in the sun-parlor with John Bell, Jane Smith and little Mary Moore, who had been held on suspicion, and who remembered too late that they had had the mumps years before. They relieved the loneliness of the nurse, who had become attached to the happy group, and she was in no hurry to send them downstairs. The morning of Christmas eve came, and the five were permitted to take breakfast in the big dining hall. The nurse herself was going home for Christmas. They heard the great news for the first time. The three girls and two boys realized that they had nothing in view, but youth is hopeful, and they argued that the next hour might bring an invitation.

St. Elizabeth's had never known so gay an occasion. All the orphans were dressed in their best, and one by one they were bundled into sleighs and carried away, the last going at sunset.

"I wonder who is coming for us?" cried Tom Martin, in vexation. The five friends were gathered on the steps watching the others go. "Somebody must come before long. The kids said ladies picked them out, or they picked out ladies they liked. I wish I had a chance to choose."

"Don't mind, Tom," said Alice, consolingly. "Mrs. Brown, the cook, promised to let us play in the kitchen, and have candies, and hang up stockings to-night. We can live with her till the others come back."

"I should like a truly home to night," said Tom. "And you know which house I'd pick out if I had a chance."

"I know," said Jane Smith. "I know. It's the house with Christmas trees around it, and turkey gobblers in the yard."

"That's where Miss Anne lives," said John Bell. "It's a big house, and I'd think she would get real lonesome with only Peter and Rebecca."

"Is it the house where the lamp shines like a star all night?" asked Mary Moore.

"That's the very one. Sh-sh. I have an idea," cried John, drawing the five together for his secret, for he was always full of plans.

Mrs. Brown, the cook, looked out from her window and saw the conference. "Of course nobody wants children getting over the mumps," she said to herself. "But I'll make them have a good time. I'll go upstairs right away and gather all the candle ends, and then I'll call them in and make candy."

In the old colonial house surrounded by evergreens lived Miss Anne Armstrong. Her windows overlooked the pasture where the children played beside the orphanage on the hill. Miss Anne was the last of her family. She ordered her life carefully and saw that her maid Rebecca kept the house spotless and her man Peter kept the garden weedless, while she knit endless patterns of lace.

Christmas was coming, she knew by the calendar, and that evening as she walked home from the postoffice she had witnessed the reception of orphans at more than one house of her acquaintance. Even Widow Simpkins, the washerwoman, had taken a little boy who asked to visit her jolly young family.

"Dear me, I feel left out," said Miss Anne as she saw the young strangers taken in the door. "I wonder if anyone would have elected to go with me, if I had gone to the orphanage. I must send Mrs. Simpkins some red Jonathans for the children."

Miss Anne saw the big flame of her arched lamp blaze in her window like a star sending its light across the snowy fields to the group on the orphanage steps. Then she met Rebecca at the door and seated herself beside her bountiful teatable.

"I do not believe that I shall have a single visitor this Christmas," sighed Miss Anne, a feeling of loneliness creeping over her. "But why should anyone think of me, when I do not think of others as I should."

At that moment there was a clatter of feet on the porch, and the brass knocker dropped with a resounding clang. It startled Rebecca and Peter in the kitchen, and both rushed into the hallway.

Rebecca drew the bolt and turned the knob of the door which the wind tore from her grasp, letting in a whirl of snowflakes and five children, hand in hand. They went straight to Miss Anne at the table before the blazing fire.

"We've come to spend Christmas with you. We choose your house, because you have lots of room, and it has Christmas trees all around it, and because you are kind," said John Bell, confidently.

"Well, I never," said Rebecca to Peter. "What do you think of that? Come, girls, let me take off your wraps."

"Don't you want us?" asked Tom. "Alice said this was a really home."

Then Miss Anne found her voice. She rose from her chair, and putting her arm around the shivering boy, said: "Of course I want you. I'm glad you came. Peter shall find you a Christmas tree."

A little later when she looked at the circle of happy faces around her table and the passing plates of cake and marmalade, she said to herself: "I have visitors, after all, and I shall keep them always in a really home."

Little Mary Moore having finished her supper, slipped from her chair and climbed on Miss Anne's lap. That lady did not see the orphanage gingham and the clipped hair, she only saw the divine hope of childhood. She drew Mary into her arms and her feeling of loneliness vanished forever.

"Tell me, little one, why you came to my house?"

Mary looked up into the kind face and said: "I came because you were all alone, and your lamp shone like a guiding star."

Peter, snawing at an evergreen in the yard, looked in at the window. He rubbed his eyes and shook his hoary head, saying: "They picked us out for themselves. Who would have thought it?"

CHRISTMAS.

The earth has grown old with its burden of care.

But at Christmas it always is young. The heart of the jewel burns lustrous and fair.

And its soul full of music breaks forth on the air.

When the song of the angels is sung. It is coming, Old Earth, it is coming to-night!

On the snowflakes which cover the sod. The feet of the Christ-Child fall gentle and white.

And the voice of the Christ-Child tells out with delight.

That mankind are the children of God. On the sad and the lonely, the wretched and poor.

That voice of the Christ-Child shall fall, And to every blind wanderer opens the door.

Of a hope that he dared not dream of before. With a sunshine of welcome for all.

The feet of the humblest may walk in the field.

Where the feet of the holiest have trod. This, this is the marvel of mortals revealed.

When the silvery trumpets of Christmas have pealed.

That mankind are the children of God. —Phillips Brooks.



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