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IMAGINATION OVER KNOWLEDGE

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The Story Of Gretchen and the Christmas Surprise

It was almost Christmas time when one of the white ships that sail across the sea brought a little German girl named Gretchen, with her father and mother, to find a new home in our dear land.

Gretchen knew all about Christmas. She had heard the story over and over, and enjoyed it ever since she could remember.

Every year, a little before Christmas, her shoes had been placed in the garden for Rupert, who is one of Santa Claus's German helpers, to fill, and every year she had found a Christmas tree lighted for her on Christmas Day. She wondered a little, as she came across the ocean, how she would keep Christmas in the new country; and she wondered still more, when they reached a great city, and had their "boxes" carried up so many stairs to a little room in a boarding-house. Gretchen's mother did not like boarding-houses—no, indeed!—and their first thought was to find a place where they might feel at home; but the very next morning after their long journey the dear father was too ill to lift his head from the pillow, and Gretchen and her mother were very sad for many days. Up so high in a boarding-house is not pleasant (even if you do seem

nearer the stars) when somebody you love is sick; and then, too, Gretchen began to think that Santa Claus and Rupert had forgotten her; for when she set her two little wooden shoes outside the door, they were never filled with goodies, and people stumbled over them and scolded.

The tears would roll down Gretchen's fat, rosy cheeks, and fall into the empty shoes, and she decided that the people in America did not keep Christmas, and wished she was in her own Germany again. One day, however, a good woman in the house felt sorry for the lonely little German girl, who could speak no English, and she asked Gretchen's mother if Gretchen might go with her to see the beautiful stores. She was only a poor woman, and had no presents to give away; but she knew how to be kind to Gretchen, and she took her hand and smiled at her very often as they hurried along the crowded street.

It was the day before Christmas, and throngs of people were moving here and there, and Gretchen was soon bewildered, and she was jostled and pushed until she was tired; but at last they stepped into a store which made her blue eyes open wide, for it was a toy store, and the most beautiful place she had ever seen. There were toys in that store that had come across the sea like Gretchen; there were lovely dolls from France, who were spending their first Christmas away from home; there were woolly sheep, fine painted soldiers, and dainty furniture, and a whole host of wonderful toys marked very carefully, "Made in Germany"; and even

the Japanese, from their island in the great ocean, had sent their dolls to help us keep Christmas.

Oh! it was splendid to be in the toyshop the day before Christmas! All the tin soldiers stood up so straight and tall, looking as if they were just ready to march when the big drums and the little drums, which hung over their heads, should call them.



The rocking horses, which are always saddled, were waiting to gallop away. The tops were anxious to spin, and the balls really rolled about sometimes, because it was so hard for them to keep still.

The fine lady dolls were dressed in their best. One of them was a princess, and wore a white satin dress, and had a crown on her head. She sat on a throne in one of the windows, with all the other dolls around her; and it was in this very window that Gretchen saw a baby doll, which made her forget all the rest. It was a real baby doll, not nearly so fine as most of the others, but with a look on its face as if it wanted to be loved; and Gretchen's warm German heart went out to it, for little mothers are the same all the world over.

Such a dear baby doll! She must have been made for a Christmas gift, Gretchen thought; and if the good giver

came to this queer American land, he surely would find her. How could she let him know where she was? She thought about it all the way home, and all day long, till the gas was lighted down in the great city and the stars were lighted up above, and the time of his coming drew very near.

The father was better; but the mother had said with tears in her eyes, that there could be no Christmas tree for them that year. So Gretchen did not worry them, but she wrapped herself up in a blanket and shawl, and, taking her shoes in her hand, she crept down the stairs, through the door, out to the wooden stoop. There had been a light fall of snow that day, but it was a mild Christmas, and Gretchen set her shoes evenly together, and then sat down beside them; for she had made up her mind to watch them until Santa Claus came by.

All over the city the bells were ringing,—calling "Merry Christmas" to each other and to the world; and they sang so sweetly to little Gretchen that they sang her to sleep that Christmas Eve.

That very same night in the great city a little American girl named Margaret had her heart so full of love and joy that she wanted to make everybody happy for Christmas.

She had waked up early the day before Christmas, and all day long she had been doing loving deeds; and when evening came, and the bells began to ring, she started with a basket of toys to a church, where she was to

help Santa Claus by giving gifts to the children of the poor.

Her papa was with her, and they were so glad that they sang gay Christmas carols, and kept time to them with their feet as they hurried down the street, right by the wooden stoop, just as Gretchen fell asleep by her empty shoes. The moon had seen those empty shoes, and was filling them with moonbeams. The stars had seen them, and peeped into them with pity; and when Margaret and her father saw them they cried out to each other, for they had been in Germany, and they knew that the little owner was waiting for the good Saint Nicholas.

"What can we give her?" whispered Margaret's papa, as he looked down at his bundles; but Margaret knew, for she took from her basket a baby doll—one that looked as if it wanted to be loved—and laid it tenderly across the wooden shoes. Then Margaret lifted a corner of the blanket from Gretchen's rosy face and shouted "Merry Christmas!" with so much heartiness that the little girl woke with a start to find, not Margaret and



her papa, for they had run away, but, oh! wonder of wonders! the dearest Christmas gift that ever came to a homesick little girl, and made her feel at home. Oh! all the bells were singing and ringing, and Margaret and her papa answered them with their merry Christmas carol, as they sped on their way.