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Ririro

IMAGINATION OVER KNOWLEDGE

Ririro

Old Father Christmas

The custom of Christmas-trees came from Germany. I can remember when they were first introduced into England, and what wonderful things we thought them. Now, every village school has its tree, and the scholars openly discuss whether the presents have been 'good,' or 'mean,' as compared with other trees in former years. The first one that I ever saw I believed to have come from Good Father Christmas himself; but little boys have grown too wise now to be taken in for their own amusement. They are not excited by secret and mysterious preparations in the back drawing-room; they hardly confess to the thrill—which I feel to this day—when the folding doors are thrown open, and amid the blaze of tapers, mamma, like a Fate, advances with her scissors to give every one what falls to his lot.

Well, young people, when I was eight years old I had not seen a Christmas-tree, and the first picture of one I ever saw was the picture of that held by Old Father Christmas in my godmother's picture-book.

'What are those things on the tree?' I asked.

'Candles,' said my father.

'No, father, not the candles; the other things?'

'Those are toys, my son.'

'Are they ever taken off?'

'Yes, they are taken off, and given to the children who stand around the tree.'

Patty and I grasped each other by the hand, and with one voice murmured; 'How kind of Old Father Christmas!' By and by I asked, 'How old is Father Christmas?' My father laughed, and said, 'One thousand eight hundred and thirty years, child,' which was then the year of our Lord, and thus one thousand eight hundred and thirty years since the first great Christmas Day. 'He LOOKS very old,' whispered Patty.

And I, who was, for my age, what Kitty called 'Bible-learned,' said thoughtfully, and with some puzzledness of mind, 'Then he's older than Methuselah.'

But my father had left the room, and did not hear my difficulty.

November and December went by, and still the picture-book kept all its charm for Patty and me; and we pondered on and loved Old Father Christmas as children can love and realize a fancy friend. To those who remember the fancies of their childhood I need say no more.

Christmas week came, Christmas Eve came. My father and mother were mysteriously and unaccountably busy in the parlour (we had only one parlour), and Patty and I were not allowed to go in. We went into the kitchen, but even here was no place of rest for us. Kitty was 'all over the place,' as she phrased it, and cakes, mince pies, and puddings were with her. As she justly observed, 'There was no place there for children and books to sit with their toes in the fire, when a body wanted to be at the oven all along. The cat was enough for HER temper,' she added.

As to puss, who obstinately refused to take a hint which drove her out into the Christmas frost, she returned again and again with soft steps, and a stupidity that was, I think, affected, to the warm hearth, only to fly at intervals, like a football, before Kitty's hasty slipper. We had more sense, or less courage. We bowed to Kitty's behests, and went to the back door.

Patty and I were hardy children, and accustomed to 'run out' in all weathers, without much extra wrapping up. We put Kitty's shawl over our two heads, and went outside. I rather hoped to see something of Dick, for it was holiday time; but no Dick passed. He was busy helping his father to bore holes in the carved seats of the church, which were to hold sprigs of holly for the morrow—that was the idea of church decoration in my young days. You have improved on your elders there, young people, and I am candid enough to allow it. Still, the sprigs of red and green were better than nothing, and, like your lovely wreaths and pious devices, they made one feel as if the old black wood were bursting into life and leaf again for very Christmas joy; and, if only one knelt carefully, they did not scratch his nose. Well, Dick was busy, and not to be seen. We ran across the little yard and looked over the wall at the end to see if we could see anything or anybody. From this point there was a pleasant meadow field sloping prettily away to a little hill about three quarters of a mile distant; which, catching some fine breezes from the moors beyond, was held to be a place of cure for whooping-cough, or kincough, as it was vulgarly called. Up to the top of this Kitty had dragged me, and carried

Patty, when we were recovering from the complaint, as I well remember. It was the only 'change of air' we could afford, and I dare say it did as well as if we had gone into badly drained lodgings at the seaside.

This hill was now covered with snow and stood off against the gray sky. The white fields looked vast and dreary in the dusk. The only gay things to be seen were the berries on the holly hedge, in the little lane—which, running by the end of our back-yard, led up to the Hall—and the fat robin, that was staring at me. I was looking at the robin, when Patty, who had been peering out of her corner of Kitty's shawl, gave a great jump that dragged the shawl from our heads, and cried: 'Look!'

I looked. An old man was coming along the lane. His hair and beard were as white as cotton-wool. He had a face like the sort of apple that keeps well in winter; his coat was old and brown. There was snow about him in patches, and he carried a small fir-tree.

The same conviction seized upon us both. With one breath, we exclaimed, 'IT'S OLD FATHER CHRISTMAS!' I know now that it was only an old man of the place, with whom we did not happen to be acquainted and that he was taking a little fir-tree up to the Hall, to be made into a Christmas-tree. He was a very good-humoured old fellow, and rather deaf, for which he made up by smiling and nodding his head a good deal, and saying, 'aye, aye, to be sure!' at likely intervals. As he passed us and met our earnest gaze, he smiled and nodded so earnestly that I was bold enough to cry, 'Good-evening, Father Christmas!'

'Same to you!' said he, in a high-pitched voice.

'Then you ARE Father Christmas?' said Patty.

'And a happy New Year,' was Father Christmas's reply, which rather put me out. But he smiled in such a satisfactory manner that Patty went on, 'You're very old, aren't you?'

'So I be, miss, so I be,' said Father Christmas, nodding.

'Father says you're eighteen hundred and thirty years old,' I muttered.

'Aye, aye, to be sure,' said Father Christmas. 'I'm a long age.'

A VERY long age, thought I, and I added, 'You're nearly twice as old as Methuselah, you know,' thinking that this might have struck him.

'Aye, aye,' said Father Christmas; but he did not seem to think anything of it. After a pause he held up the tree, and cried, 'D'ye know what this is, little miss?'

'A Christmas-tree,' said Patty.

And the old man smiled and nodded.

I leant over the wall, and shouted, 'But there are no candles.'

'By and by,' said Father Christmas, nodding as before.

'When it's dark they'll all be lighted up. That'll be a fine sight!'

'Toys, too, there'll be, won't there?' said Patty.

Father Christmas nodded his head. 'And sweeties,' he added, expressively.

I could feel Patty trembling, and my own heart beat fast. The thought which agitated us both was this: 'Was Father Christmas bringing the tree to us?' But very

anxiety, and some modesty also, kept us from asking outright.

Only when the old man shouldered his tree, and prepared to move on, I cried in despair, 'Oh, are you going?'

'I'm coming back by and by,' said he.

'How soon?' cried Patty.

'About four o'clock,' said the old man smiling. 'I'm only going up yonder.'

'Up yonder!' This puzzled us. Father Christmas had pointed, but so indefinitely that he might have been pointing to the sky, or the fields, or the little wood at the end of the Squire's grounds. I thought the

latter, and suggested to Patty that perhaps he had some place underground like Aladdin's cave, where he got the candles, and all the pretty things for the tree. This idea pleased us both, and we amused ourselves by wondering what Old Father Christmas would choose for us from his stores in that wonderful hole where he dressed his Christmas-trees.

'I wonder, Patty,' said I, 'why there's no picture of Father Christmas's dog in the book.' For at the old man's heels in the lane there crept a little brown and white spaniel looking very dirty in the snow.



'Perhaps it's a new dog that he's got to take care of his cave,' said Patty.

When we went indoors we examined the picture afresh by the dim light from the passage window, but there was no dog there.

My father passed us at this moment, and patted my head. 'Father,' said I, 'I don't know, but I do think Old Father Christmas is going to bring us a Christmas-tree to-night.'

'Who's been telling you that?' said my father.

But he passed on before I could explain that we had seen Father Christmas himself, and had had his word for it that he would return at four o'clock, and that the candles on his tree would be lighted as soon as it was dark.

We hovered on the outskirts of the rooms till four o'clock came. We sat on the stairs and watched the big clock, which I was just learning to read; and Patty made herself giddy with constantly looking up and counting the four strokes, toward which the hour hand slowly moved. We put our noses into the kitchen now and then, to smell the cakes and get warm, and anon we hung about the parlour door, and were most unjustly accused of trying to peep. What did we care what our mother was doing in the parlour?—we, who had seen Old Father Christmas himself, and were expecting him back again every moment!

At last the church clock struck. The sounds boomed heavily through the frost, and Patty thought there were four of them. Then, after due choking and whirring, our own clock struck, and we counted the

strokes quite clearly—one! two! three! four! Then we got Kitty's shawl once more, and stole out into the backyard. We ran to our old place, and peeped, but could see nothing.

'We'd better get up on to the wall,' I said; and with some difficulty and distress from rubbing her bare knees against the cold stone, and getting the snow up her sleeves, Patty got on to the coping of the little wall. I was just struggling after her, when something warm and something cold coming suddenly against the bare calves of my legs made me shriek with fright. I came down 'with a run' and bruised my knees, my elbows, and my chin; and the snow that hadn't gone up Patty's sleeves went down my neck. Then I found that the cold thing was a dog's nose and the warm thing was his tongue; and Patty cried from her post of observation, 'It's Father Christmas's dog and he's licking your legs.' It really was the dirty little brown and white spaniel, and he persisted in licking me, and jumping on me, and making curious little noises, that must have meant something if one had known his language. I was rather harassed at the moment. My legs were sore, I was a little afraid of the dog, and Patty was very much afraid of sitting on the wall without me.

'You won't fall,' I said to her. 'Get down, will you?' I said to the dog.

'Humpty Dumpty fell off a wall,' said Patty.

'Bow! wow!' said the dog.

I pulled Patty down, and the dog tried to pull me down; but when my little sister was on her feet, to my relief, he transferred his attentions to her. When he had

jumped at her, and licked her several times, he turned around and ran away.

'He's gone,' said I; 'I'm so glad.'

But even as I spoke he was back again, crouching at Patty's feet, and glaring at her with eyes the colour of his ears.

Now, Patty was very fond of animals, and when the dog looked at her she looked at the dog, and then she said to me, 'He wants us to go with him.'

On which (as if he understood our language, though we were ignorant of his) the spaniel sprang away, and went off as hard as he could; and Patty and I went after him, a dim hope crossing my mind—'Perhaps Father Christmas has sent him for us.'

The idea was rather favoured by the fact he led us up the lane. Only a little way; then he stopped by something lying in the ditch—and once more we cried in the same breath, 'It's Old Father Christmas!'

Returning from the Hall, the old man had slipped upon a bit of ice, and lay stunned in the snow.

Patty began to cry. 'I think he's dead!' she sobbed.

'He is so very old, I don't wonder,' I murmured; 'but perhaps he's not. I'll fetch father.'

My father and Kitty were soon on the spot. Kitty was as strong as a man; and they carried Father Christmas between them into the kitchen. There he quickly revived.

I must do Kitty the justice to say that she did not utter a word of complaint at the disturbance of her labours; and that she drew the old man's chair close up to the oven with her own hand. She was so much affected by

the behaviour of his dog that she admitted him even to the hearth; on which puss, being acute enough to see how matters stood, lay down with her back so close to the spaniel's that Kitty could not expel one without kicking both.

For our parts, we felt sadly anxious about the tree; otherwise we could have wished for no better treat than to sit at Kitty's round table taking tea with Father Christmas. Our usual fare of thick bread and treacle was to-night exchanged for a delicious variety of cakes, which were none the worse to us for being 'tasters and wasters'—that is, little bits of dough, or shortbread, put in to try the state of the oven, and certain cakes that had got broken or burnt in the baking.

Well, there we sat, helping Old Father Christmas to tea and cake, and wondering in our hearts what could have become of the tree.

Patty and I felt a delicacy in asking Old Father Christmas about the tree. It was not until we had had tea three times round, with tasters and wasters to match, that Patty said very gently: 'It's quite dark now.' And then she heaved a deep sigh.

Burning anxiety overcame me. I leaned toward Father Christmas, and shouted—I had found out that it was needful to shout—"I suppose the candles are on the tree now?"

'Just about putting of 'em on,' said Father Christmas.

'And the presents, too?' said Patty.

'Aye, aye, TO be sure,' said Father Christmas, and he smiled delightfully.

I was thinking what further questions I might venture upon, when he pushed his cup toward Patty saying, 'Since you are so pressing, miss, I'll take another dish.' And Kitty, swooping on us from the oven, cried, 'Make yourself at home, sir; there's more where these came from. Make a long arm, Miss Patty, and hand them cakes.'

So we had to devote ourselves to the duties of the table; and Patty, holding the lid with one hand and pouring with the other, supplied Father Christmas's wants with a heavy heart.

At last he was satisfied. I said grace, during which he stood, and, indeed, he stood for some time afterward with his eyes shut—I fancy under the impression that I was still speaking. He had just said a fervent 'amen,' and reseated himself, when my father put his head into the kitchen, and made this remarkable statement: 'Old Father Christmas has sent a tree to the young people.'

Patty and I uttered a cry of delight, and we forthwith danced round the old man, saying, 'How nice; Oh, how kind of you!' which I think must have bewildered him, but he only smiled and nodded.

'Come along,' said my father. 'Come, children. Come, Reuben. Come, Kitty.'

And he went into the parlour, and we all followed him. My godmother's picture of a Christmas-tree was very pretty; and the flames of the candles were so naturally done in red and yellow that I always wondered that they did not shine at night. But the picture was nothing to the reality. We had been sitting almost in the dark,

for, as Kitty said, 'Firelight was quite enough to burn at meal-times.' And when the parlour door was thrown open, and the tree, with lighted tapers on all the branches, burst upon our view, the blaze was dazzling, and threw such a glory round the little gifts, and the bags of coloured muslin, with acid drops and pink rose drops and comfits inside, as I shall never forget. We all got something; and Patty and I, at any rate, believed that the things came from the stores of Old Father Christmas. We were not undeceived even by his gratefully accepting a bundle of old clothes which had been hastily put together to form his present.

We were all very happy; even Kitty, I think, though she kept her sleeves rolled up, and seemed rather to grudge enjoying herself (a weak point in some energetic characters). She went back to her oven before the lights were out and the angel on the top of the tree taken down. She locked up her present (a little work-box) at once. She often showed it off afterward, but it was kept in the same bit of tissue paper till she died. Our presents certainly did not last so long!

The old man died about a week afterward, so we never made his acquaintance as a common personage. When he was buried, his little dog came to us. I suppose he remembered the hospitality he had received. Patty adopted him, and he was very faithful. Puss always looked on him with favour. I hoped during our rambles together in the following summer that he would lead us at last to the cave where Christmas-trees are dressed. But he never did.

Our parents often spoke of his late master as 'old Reuben,' but children are not easily disabused of a favourite fancy, and in Patty's thoughts and in mine the old man was long gratefully remembered as Old Father Christmas."