



Ririro

READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

Christmas In The Alley

"I declare for 't, to-morrow is Christmas Day an' I clean forgot all about it," said old Ann, the washerwoman, pausing in her work and holding the flatiron suspended in the air.

"Much good it'll do us," growled a discontented voice from the coarse bed in the corner.

"We haven't much extra, to be sure," answered Ann cheerfully, bringing the iron down onto the shirt-bosom before her, "but at least we've enough to eat, and a good fire, and that's more'n some have, not a thousand miles from here either."

"We might have plenty more," said the fretful voice, "if you didn't think so much more of strangers than you do of your own folk's comfort, keeping a houseful of beggars, as if you was a lady!"

"Now, John," replied Ann, taking another iron from the fire, "you're not half so bad as you pretend. You wouldn't have me turn them poor creatures into the streets to freeze, now, would you?"

"It's none of our business to pay rent for them," grumbled John. "Every one for himself, I say, these hard times. If they can't pay you'd ought to send 'em off; there's plenty as can."

"They'd pay quick enough if they could get work," said Ann. "They're good honest fellows, every one, and paid me regular as long as they had a cent. But when hundreds are out o' work in the city, what can they do?"

"That's none o' your business, you can turn 'em out!" growled John.

"And leave the poor children to freeze as well as starve?" said Ann. "Who'd ever take 'em in without money, I'd like to know? No, John," bringing her iron down as though she meant it, "I'm glad I'm well enough to wash and iron, and pay my rent, and so long as I can do that, and keep the hunger away from you and the child, I'll never turn the poor souls out, leastways, not in this freezing winter weather."

"An' here's Christmas," the old man went on whiningly, "an' not a penny to spend, an' I needin' another blanket so bad, with my rhumatiz, an' haven't had a drop of tea for I don't know how long!"

"I know it," said Ann, never mentioning that she too had been without tea, and

not only that, but with small allowance of food of any kind, "and I'm desperate sorry I can't get a bit of something for Katey. The child never missed a little something in her stocking before."

"Yes," John struck in, "much you care for your flesh an' blood. The child ha'n't had a thing this winter."

"That's true enough," said Ann, with a sigh, "an' it's the hardest thing of all that I've had to keep her out o' school when she was doing so beautiful."

"An' her feet all on the ground," growled John.

"I know her shoes is bad," said Ann, hanging the shirt up on a line that stretched across the room, and was already nearly full of freshly ironed clothes, "but they're better than the Parker children's."

"What's that to us?" almost shouted the weak old man, shaking his fist at her in his rage.

"Well, keep your temper, old man," said Ann. "I'm sorry it goes so hard with you, but as long as I can stand on my feet, I sha'n't turn anybody out to freeze, that's certain."

"How much'll you get for them?" said the miserable old man, after a few moments' silence, indicating by his hand the clean clothes on the line.

"Two dollars," said Ann, "and half of it must go to help make up next month's rent. I've got a good bit to make up yet, and only a week to do it in, and I sha'n't have another cent till day after to-morrow."

"Well, I wish you'd manage to buy me a little tea," whined the old man; "seems as if that would go right to the spot, and warm up my old bones a bit."

"I'll try," said Ann, revolving in her mind how she could save a few pennies from her indispensable purchases to get tea and sugar, for without sugar he would not touch it.

Wearied with his unusual exertion, the old man now dropped off to sleep, and Ann went softly about, folding and piling the clothes into a big basket already half full. When they were all packed in, and nicely covered with a piece of clean muslin, she took an old shawl and hood from a nail in the corner, put them on, blew out the candle, for it must not burn one moment unnecessarily, and, taking up her basket, went out into the cold winter night, softly closing the door behind her.

The house was on an alley, but as soon as she turned the corner she was in the bright streets, glittering with lamps and gay people. The shop windows were brilliant with Christmas displays, and thousands of warmly dressed buyers were

lingering before them, laughing and chatting, and selecting their purchases. Surely it seemed as if there could be no want here.

As quickly as her burden would let her, the old washerwoman passed through the crowd into a broad street and rang the basement bell of a large, showy house.

"Oh, it's the washerwoman!" said a flashy-looking servant who answered the bell; "set the basket right m here. Mrs. Keithe can't look them over to-night. There's company in the parlour—Miss Carry's Christmas party."

"Ask her to please pay me—at least a part," said old Ann hastily. "I don't see how I can do without the money. I counted on it."

"I'll ask her," said the pert young woman, turning to go upstairs; "but it's no use."

Returning in a moment, she delivered the message. "She has no change to-night; you're to come in the morning."

"Dear me!" thought Ann, as she plodded back through the streets, "it'll be even worse than I expected, for there's not a morsel to eat in the house, and not a penny to buy one with. Well—well—the Lord will provide, the Good Book says, but it's mighty dark days, and it's hard to believe."

Entering the house, Ann sat down silently before the expiring fire. She was tired, her bones ached, and she was faint for want of food.

Wearily she rested her head on her hands, and tried to think of some way to get a few cents. She had nothing she could sell or pawn, everything she could do without had gone before, in similar emergencies. After sitting there some time, and revolving plan after plan, only to find them all impossible, she was forced to conclude that they must go supperless to bed.

Her husband grumbled, and Katey—who came in from a neighbour's—cried with hunger, and after they were asleep old Ann crept into bed to keep warm, more disheartened than she had been all winter.

If we could only see a little way ahead! All this time—the darkest the house on the alley had seen—help was on the way to them. A kind-hearted city missionary, visiting one of the unfortunate families living in the upper rooms of old Ann's house, had learned from them of the noble charity of the humble old washerwoman. It was more than princely charity, for she not only denied herself nearly every comfort, but she endured the reproaches of her husband, and the tears of her child.

Telling the story to a party of his friends this Christmas Eve, their hearts were troubled, and they at once emptied their purses into his hands for her. And the gift was at that very moment in the pocket of the missionary, waiting for

morning to make her Christmas happy. Christmas morning broke clear and cold. Ann was up early, as usual, made her fire, with the last of her coal, cleared up her two rooms, and, leaving her husband and Katey in bed, was about starting out to try and get her money to provide a breakfast for them. At the door she met the missionary.

"Good-morning, Ann," said he. "I wish you a Merry Christmas."

"Thank you, sir," said Ann cheerfully; "the same to yourself."

"Have you been to breakfast already?" asked the missionary.

"No, sir," said Ann. "I was just going out for it."

"I haven't either," said he, "but I couldn't bear to wait until I had eaten breakfast before I brought you your Christmas present—I suspect you haven't had any yet."

Ann smiled. "Indeed, sir, I haven't had one since I can remember."

"Well, I have one for you. Come in, and I'll tell you about it."

Too much amazed for words, Ann led him into the room. The missionary opened his purse, and handed her a roll of bills.

"Why—what!" she gasped, taking it mechanically.

"Some friends of mine heard of your generous treatment of the poor families upstairs," he went on, "and they send you this, with their respects and best wishes for Christmas. Do just what you please with it—it is wholly yours. No thanks," he went on, as she struggled to speak. "It's not from me. Just enjoy it—that's all. It has done them more good to give than it can you to receive," and before she could speak a word he was gone.

What did the old washerwoman do?

Well, first she fell on her knees and buried her agitated face in the bedclothes. After a while she became aware of a storm of words from her husband, and she got up, subdued as much as possible her agitation, and tried to answer his frantic questions.

"How much did he give you, old stupid?" he screamed; "can't you speak, or are you struck dumb? Wake up! I just wish I could reach you! I'd shake you till your teeth rattled!"

His vicious looks were a sign, it was evident that he only lacked the strength to be as good as his word. Ann roused herself from her stupor and spoke at last.

"I don't know. I'll count it." She unrolled the bills and began.

"O Lord!" she exclaimed excitedly, "here's ten-dollar bills! One, two, three, and a twenty—that makes five—and five are fifty-five—sixty—seventy—eighty—eighty-five—ninety—one hundred—and two and five are seven, and two and one are ten, twenty—twenty-five—one hundred and twenty-five! Why, I'm rich!" she shouted. "Bless the Lord! Oh, this is the glorious Christmas Day! I knew He'd provide. Katey! Katey!" she screamed at the door of the other room, where the child lay asleep. "Merry Christmas to you, darlin'! Now you can have some shoes! and a new dress! and—and—breakfast, and a regular Christmas dinner! Oh! I believe I shall go crazy!"

But she did not. Joy seldom hurts people, and she was brought back to everyday affairs by the querulous voice of her husband.

"Now I will have my tea, an' a new blanket, an' some tobacco—how I have wanted a pipe!" and he went on enumerating his wants while Ann bustled about, putting away most of her money, and once more getting ready to go out.

"I'll run out and get some breakfast," she said, "but don't you tell a soul about the money."

"No! they'll rob us!" shrieked the old man.

"Nonsense! I'll hide it well, but I want to keep it a secret for another reason. Mind, Katey, don't you tell?"

"No!" said Katey, with wide eyes. "But can I truly have a new frock, Mammy, and new shoes—and is it really Christmas?"

"It's really Christmas, darlin'," said Ann, "and you'll see what mammy'll bring home to you, after breakfast."



The luxurious meal of sausages, potatoes, and hot tea was soon smoking on the table, and was eagerly devoured by Katey and her father. But Ann could not eat much. She was absent-minded, and only drank a cup of tea. As soon as breakfast was over, she left Katey to wash the dishes, and started out again.

She walked slowly down the street, revolving a great plan in her mind.

"Let me see," she said to herself. "They shall have a happy day for once. I suppose John'll grumble, but the Lord has sent me this money, and I mean to use part of it to make one good day for them."

Having settled this in her mind, she walked on more quickly, and visited various shops in the neighbourhood. When at last she went home, her big basket was stuffed as full as it could hold, and she carried a bundle besides.

"Here's your tea, John," she said cheerfully, as she unpacked the basket, "a whole pound of it, and sugar, and tobacco, and a new pipe."

"Give me some now," said the old man eagerly; "don't wait to take out the rest of the things."

"And here's a new frock for you, Katey," old Ann went on, after making John happy with his treasures, "a real bright one, and a pair of shoes, and some real woollen stockings; oh! how warm you'll be!"

"Oh, how nice, Mammy!" cried Katey, jumping about. "When will you make my frock?"

"To-morrow," answered the mother, "and you can go to school again."

"Oh, goody!" she began, but her face fell. "If only Molly Parker could go too!"

"You wait and see," answered Ann, with a knowing look. "Who knows what Christmas will bring to Molly Parker?"

"Now here's a nice big roast," the happy woman went on, still unpacking, "and potatoes and turnips and cabbage and bread and butter and coffee and—"

"What in the world! You goin' to give a party?" asked the old man between the puffs, staring at her in wonder.

"I'll tell you just what I am going to do," said Ann firmly, bracing herself for opposition, "and it's as good as done, so you needn't say a word about it. I'm going to have a Christmas dinner, and I'm going to invite every blessed soul in this house to come. They shall be warm and full for once in their lives, please God! And, Katey," she went on breathlessly, before the old man had sufficiently recovered from his astonishment to speak, "go right upstairs now, and invite every one of 'em from the fathers down to Mrs. Parker's baby to come to dinner at three o'clock; we'll have to keep fashionable hours, it's so late now; and mind, Katey, not a word about the money. And hurry back, child, I want you to help me."

To her surprise, the opposition from her husband was less than she expected. The genial tobacco seemed to have quieted his nerves, and even opened his heart. Grateful for this, Ann resolved that his pipe should never lack tobacco while she could work.

But now the cares of dinner absorbed her. The meat and vegetables were prepared, the pudding made, and the long table spread, though she had to borrow every table in the house, and every dish to have enough to go around.

At three o'clock when the guests came in, it was really a very pleasant sight. The bright warm fire, the long table, covered with a substantial, and, to them, a

luxurious meal, all smoking hot. John, in his neatly brushed suit, in an armchair at the foot of the table, Ann in a bustle of hurry and welcome, and a plate and a seat for every one.

How the half-starved creatures enjoyed it; how the children stuffed and the parents looked on with a happiness that was very near to tears; how old John actually smiled and urged them to send back their plates again and again, and how Ann, the washerwoman, was the life and soul of it all, I can't half tell.

After dinner, when the poor women lodgers insisted on clearing up, and the poor men sat down by the fire to smoke, for old John actually passed around his beloved tobacco, Ann quietly slipped out for a few minutes, took four large bundles from a closet under the stairs, and disappeared upstairs. She was scarcely missed before she was back again.

Well, of course it was a great day in the house on the alley, and the guests sat long into the twilight before the warm fire, talking of their old homes in the fatherland, the hard winter, and prospects for work in the spring.

When at last they returned to the chilly discomfort of their own rooms, each family found a package containing a new warm dress and pair of shoes for every woman and child in the family.

"And I have enough left," said Ann the washerwoman, to herself, when she was reckoning up the expenses of the day, "to buy my coal and pay my rent till spring, so I can save my old bones a bit. And sure John can't grumble at their staying now, for it's all along of keeping them that I had such a blessed Christmas day at all."

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