



Ririro

READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

Christmas or The Good Fairy

Harriet Beecher Stowe

"Oh, dear! Christmas is coming in a fortnight, and I have got to think up presents for everybody!" said young Ellen Stuart, as she leaned languidly back in her chair. "Dear me! It's so tedious! Everybody has got everything that can be thought of."

"Oh, no!" said her confidential adviser, Miss Lester, in a soothing tone. "You have means of buying everything you can fancy, and when every shop and store is glittering with all manner of splendors, you cannot surely be at a loss."

"Well, now, just listen. To begin with, there's mamma! What can I get for her? I have thought of ever so many things. She has three card-cases, four gold thimbles, two or three gold chains, two writing desks of different patterns; and then, as to rings, brooches, boxes, and all other things, I should think she might be sick of the sight of them. I am sure I am," said she, languidly gazing on her white and jeweled fingers.

This view of the case seemed rather puzzling to the adviser, and there was silence for a few moments, when Eleanor, yawning, resumed.

"And then there's cousins Ellen and Mary. I suppose they will be coming down on me with a whole load of presents; and Mrs. B. will send me something she did last year; and then there's cousins William and Tom. I must get them something, and I would like to do it well enough if I only knew what to get!"

"Well," said Eleanor's aunt, who had been sitting quietly rattling her knitting needles during this speech, "it's a pity that you had not such a subject to practice on as I was when I was a girl. Presents did not fly about in those days as they do now. I remember when I was ten years old, my father gave sister Mary and me a most marvelously ugly sugar dog for a Christmas gift, and we were perfectly delighted with it. The very idea of a present was so new to us."

"Dear aunt, how delighted I should be if I had any such fresh unsophisticated body to get presents for! But to get and get for people that have more than they know what to do with now— to add pictures, books, and gilding, when the center-tables are loaded with them now and rings and jewels when they are a perfect drug! I wish myself that I were not sick and sated and tired with having everything in the world given me!"

"Well, Eleanor," said her aunt, "if you really do want unsophisticated subjects to practice on, I can put you in the way of it. I can show you more than one family to whom you might seem to be a very good fairy, and where such gifts as you could give with all ease would seem like a magic dream."

"Why, that would really be worth while, aunt."

"Look right across the way," said her aunt. "You see that building."

"That miserable combination of shanties? Yes, I."

"Well, I have several acquaintances there who have never been tired of Christmas gifts or gifts of any other kind. I assure you, you could make quite a sensation over there."

"Well, who is there? Let us know!"

"Do you remember Owen, that used to make your shoes?"

"Yes, I remember something about him."

"Well, he has fallen into a consumption, and cannot work any more, and he and his wife and three little children live in one of the rooms over there."

"How do they get along?"

"His wife takes in sewing sometimes, and sometimes goes out washing. Poor Owen! I was over there yesterday; he looks thin and wistful, and his wife was saying that he was parched with constant fever and had very little appetite. She had, with great self-denial, and by restricting herself almost of necessary food, got him two or three oranges, and the poor fellow seemed so eager after them."

"Poor fellow!" said Eleanor, involuntarily.

"Now," said her aunt, "suppose Owen's wife should get up on Christmas morning and find at the door a couple of dozen of oranges, and some of those nice white grapes, such as you had at your party last week. Don't you think it would make a sensation?"

"Why, yes, I think very likely it might. But who else, aunt? You spoke of a great many."

"Well, on the lower floor, there is a neat little room that is always kept perfectly trim and tidy. It belongs to a young couple who have nothing beyond the husband's day wages to live on. They are, nevertheless, as cheerful and chipper as a couple of wrens, and she is up and down half a dozen times a day to help poor Mrs. Owen. She has a baby of her own about five months old, and of course does all the cooking, washing, and ironing for herself and her husband. And yet, when Mrs. Owen goes out to wash, she takes her baby and keeps it whole days

for her."

"I'm sure she deserves that the good fairies should smile on her," said Eleanor. "One baby exhausts my stock of virtue very rapidly."

"But you ought to see her baby," said Aunt E. "So plump, so rosy, and good-natured, and always clean as a lily. This baby is a sort of household shrine; nothing is too sacred and too good for it. And I believe the little thrifty woman feels only one temptation to be extravagant, and that is to get some ornaments to adorn this little divinity."

"Why, did she ever tell you so?"

"No, but one day when I was coming downstairs, the door of their room was partly open, and I saw a pedlar there with an open box. John, the husband, was standing with a little purple cap on his hand, which he was regarding with a mystified, admiring air, as if he didn't quite comprehend it, and trim little Mary gazing at it with longing eyes."

"I think we might get it," said John. "Oh, no," said she, regretfully, "yet I wish we could. It's so pretty!" "Say no more, aunt. I see the good fairy must pop a cap into the window on Christmas morning. Indeed, it shall be done. How they will wonder where it came from and talk about it for months to come!"

"Well, then," continued her aunt, "in the next street to ours, there is a miserable building that looks as if it were just going to topple over. And away up in the third story, in a little room just under the eaves, live two poor, lonely old women. They are both nearly on to ninety. I was in there day before yesterday. One of them is constantly confined to her bed with rheumatism, the other, weak and feeble, with failing sight and trembling hands, totters about her only helper. And they are entirely dependent on charity."

"Can't they do anything? Can't they knit?" said Eleanor.

"You are young and strong, Eleanor, and have quick eyes and nimble fingers. How long would it take you to knit a pair of stockings?"

"I!" said Eleanor. "What an idea! I never tried, but I think I could get a pair done in a week, perhaps!"

"And if somebody gave you twenty-five cents for them, and out of this you had to get food, and pay room rent, and buy coal for your fire, and oil for your lamp..."

"Stop, aunt, for pity's sake!"

"Well, I will stop, but they can't. They must pay so much every month for that miserable shell they live in, or be turned into the street. The meal and flour that

some kind person sends goes off for them just as it does for others, and they must get more or starve, and coal is now scarce and high priced."

"Oh, aunt, I'm quite convinced, I'm sure. Don't run me down and annihilate me with all these terrible realities. What shall I do to play a good fairy to these poor old women?"

"If you will give me full power, Eleanor, I will put up a basket to be sent to them that will give them something to remember all winter."

"Oh, certainly I will. Let me see if I can't think of something myself."

"Well, Eleanor, suppose then, some fifty or sixty years hence, if you were old, and your father and mother and aunts and uncles, now so thick around you, laid cold and silent in so many graves. You have somehow got away off to a strange city where you were never known. You live in a miserable garret where snow blows at night through the cracks, and the fire is very apt to go out in the old cracked stove. You sit crouching over the dying embers the evening before Christmas. Nobody to speak to you, nobody to care for you, except another poor old soul who lies moaning in the bed. Now, what would you like to have sent you?"

"Oh, aunt, what a dismal picture!"

"And yet, Ella, all poor, forsaken old women are made of young girls who expected it in their youth as little as you do, perhaps..."

"Say no more, aunt. I'll buy, let me see, a comfortable warm shawl for each of these poor women, and I'll send them, let me see, oh! some tea. Nothing goes down with old women like tea. And I'll make John wheel some coal over to them. And, aunt, it would not be a very bad thought to send them a new stove. I remember the other day, when mamma was pricing stoves, I saw some such nice ones for two or three dollars."



"For a new hand, Ella, you work up the idea very well," said her aunt.

"But how much ought I to give, for any one case, to these women, say?"

"How much did you give last year for any single Christmas present?"

"Why, six or seven dollars for some. Those elegant souvenirs were seven dollars. That ring I gave Mrs. B was ten."

"And do you suppose Mrs. B was any happier for it?"

"No, really, I don't think she cared much about it. But I had to give her something because she had sent me something the year before, and I did not want to send a paltry present to anyone in her circumstances."

"Then, Ella, give ten to any poor, distressed, suffering creature who really needs it, and see in how many forms of good such a sum will appear. That one hard, cold, glittering diamond ring, that now cheers nobody and means nothing, that you give because you must, and she takes because she must, might, if broken up into smaller sums, send real warm and heartfelt gladness through many a cold and cheerless dwelling and through many an aching heart."

"You are getting to be an orator, aunt, but don't you approve of Christmas presents among friends and equals?"

"Yes, indeed," said her aunt, fondly stroking her head. "I have had some Christmas presents that did me a world of good. A little bookmark, for instance, that a certain niece of mine worked for me with wonderful secrecy three years ago when she was not a young lady with a purse full of money. That bookmark was a true Christmas present. And my young couple across the way are plotting a profound surprise to each other on Christmas morning. John has contrived, by an hour of extra work every night, to lay by enough to get Mary a new calico dress. And she, poor soul, has bargained away the only thing in the jewelry line she ever possessed to be laid out on a new hat for him."

"I know, too, a washerwoman who has a poor lame boy, a patient, gentle little fellow who has lain quietly for weeks and months in his little crib, and his mother is going to give him a splendid Christmas present."

"What is it?"

"A whole orange! Don't laugh. She will pay ten whole cents for it, for it shall be none of your common oranges, but a picked one of the very best going! She has put by the money, a cent at a time, for a whole month, and nobody knows which will be happiest in it, Willie or his mother. These are such Christmas presents as I like to think of, gifts coming from love and tending to produce love. These are the appropriate gifts of the day."

"But don't you think that it's right for those who have money to give expensive presents, supposing always, as you say, they are given from real affection?"

"Sometimes, undoubtedly. The Savior did not condemn her who broke an alabaster box of ointment very precious simply as a proof of love, even although the suggestion was made, 'This might have been sold for three hundred pence and given to the poor.' I have thought he would regard with sympathy the fond efforts which human love sometimes makes to express itself by gifts, the rarest and most costly. How I rejoiced with all my heart when Charles Elton gave his

poor mother that splendid Chinese shawl and gold watch because I knew they came from the very fullness of his heart to a mother that he could not do too much for, a mother that has done and suffered everything for him. In some such cases, when resources are ample, a costly gift seems to have a graceful appropriateness. But I cannot approve of it if it exhausts all the means of doing for the poor. It is better then to give a simple offering and to do something for those who really need it."

Eleanor looked thoughtful. Her aunt laid down her knitting and said in a tone of gentle seriousness, "Whose birth does Christmas commemorate, Ella?"

"Our Savior's, certainly, aunt."

"Yes," said her aunt, "and when and how was he born? In a stable, laid in a manger. Thus born, that in all ages he might be known as the brother and friend of the poor. And surely it seems but appropriate to commemorate His birthday by an especial remembrance of the lowly."

"The poor, the outcast, and distressed. And if Christ should come back to our city on a Christmas day, where should we think it most appropriate to his character to find him? Would he be carrying splendid gifts to splendid dwellings, or would he be gliding about in the cheerless haunts of the desolate, the poor, the forsaken, and the sorrowful?"

And here the conversation ended.

"What sort of Christmas presents is Ella buying?" said cousin Tom, as the waiter handed in a portentous-looking package, which had been just rung in at the door.

"Let's open it," said saucy Will. "Upon my word, two great gray blanket shawls! These must be for you and me, Tom! And what's this? A great bolt of cotton flannel and gray yarn stockings!"

The doorbell rang again, and the waiter brought in another bulky parcel and deposited it on the marble-topped center table.

"What's here?" said Will, cutting the cord. "Whew! a perfect nest of packages! Oolong tea! oranges! grapes! white sugar! Bless me, Ella must be going to housekeeping!"

"Or going crazy!" said Tom. "And on my word," said he, looking out of the window, "there's a drayman ringing at our door, with a stove, with a tea-kettle set in the top of it!"

"Ella's cook stove, of course," said Will. And just at this moment, the young lady entered, with her purse hanging gracefully over her hand.

"Now, boys, you are too bad!" she exclaimed, as each of the mischievous youngsters were gravely marching up and down, attired in a gray shawl.

"Didn't you get them for us? We thought you did," said both.

"Ella, I want some of that cotton flannel, to make me a pair of pantaloons," said Tom.

"I say, Ella," said Will, "when are you going to housekeeping? Your cooking stove is standing down in the street. 'Pon my word, John is loading some coal on the dray with it."

"Ella, isn't that going to be sent to my office?" said Tom. "Do you know I do so languish for a new stove with a tea-kettle in the top, to heat a fellow's shaving water!"

Just then, another ring at the door, and the grinning waiter handed in a small brown paper parcel for Miss Ella. Tom made a dive at it, and staving off the brown paper, developed a jaunty little purple velvet cap with silver tassels.

"My smoking cap! as I live," said he, "only I shall have to wear it on my thumb, instead of my head. Too small entirely," said he, shaking his head gravely.

"Come, you saucy boys," said Aunt E, entering briskly, "what are you teasing Ella for?"

"Why, do see this lot of things, aunt? What in the world is Ella going to do with them?"

"Oh, I know!"

"You know; then I can guess, aunt, it is some of your charitable works. You are going to make a juvenile Lady Bountiful of El, eh?"

Ella, who had colored to the roots of her hair at the expose of her very unfashionable Christmas preparations, now took heart and bestowed a very gentle and salutary little cuff on the saucy head that still wore the purple cap, and then hastened to gather up her various purchases.

"Laugh away," said she, gaily, "and a good many others will laugh too over these things. I got them to make people laugh, people that are not in the habit of laughing!"

"Well, well, I see into it," said Will. "And I tell you I think right well of the idea, too. There are worlds of money wasted at this time of the year, in getting things that nobody wants and nobody cares for after they are got. And I am glad, for my part, that you are going to get up a variety in this line. In fact, I should like to give you one of these stray leaves to help on," said he, dropping a \$10 note into her paper. "I like to encourage girls to think of something besides breastpins and

sugar candy."

But our story spins on too long. If anybody wants to see the results of Ella's first attempts at good fairyism, they can call at the doors of two or three old buildings on Christmas morning, and they shall hear all about it.

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