



Ririro

READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

The Christmas Gift That Came To Rupert

Bret Harte

A STORY FOR LITTLE SOLDIERS.

It was the Christmas season in California,—a season of falling rain and springing grasses. There were intervals when, through driving clouds and flying scud, the sun visited the haggard hills with a miracle, and death and resurrection were as one, and out of the very throes of decay a joyous life struggled outward and upward. Even the storms that swept down the dead leaves nurtured the tender buds that took their places. There were no episodes of snowy silence; over the quickening fields the farmer's ploughshare hard followed the furrows left by the latest rains. Perhaps it was for this reason that the Christmas evergreens which decorated the drawing-room took upon themselves a foreign aspect, and offered a weird contrast to the roses, seen dimly through the windows, as the southwest wind beat their soft faces against the panes.

"Now," said the Doctor, drawing his chair closer to the fire, and looking mildly but firmly at the semicircle of flaxen heads around him, "I want it distinctly understood before I begin my story, that I am not to be interrupted by any ridiculous questions. At the first one I shall stop. At the second, I shall feel it my duty to administer a dose of castor-oil, all around. The boy that moves his legs or arms will be understood to invite amputation. I have brought my instruments with me, and never allow pleasure to interfere with my business. Do you promise?"

"Yes, sir," said six small voices, simultaneously. The volley was, however, followed by half a dozen dropping questions.

"Silence! Bob, put your feet down, and stop rattling that sword. Flora shall sit by my side, like a little lady, and be an example to the rest. Fung Tang shall stay, too, if he likes. Now, turn down the gas a little; there, that will do,—just enough to make the fire look brighter, and to show off the Christmas candles. Silence, everybody! The boy who cracks an almond, or breathes too loud over his raisins, will be put out of the room?"

There was a profound silence. Bob laid his sword tenderly aside, and nursed his leg thoughtfully. Flora, after coquettishly adjusting the pocket of her little apron, put her arm upon the Doctor's shoulder, and permitted herself to be drawn beside him. Fung Tang, the little heathen page, who was permitted, on this rare

occasion, to share the Christian revels in the drawing-room, surveyed the group with a smile that was at once sweet and philosophical. The light ticking of a French clock on the mantel, supported by a young shepherdess of bronze complexion and great symmetry of limb, was the only sound that disturbed the Christmas-like peace of the apartment,—a peace which held the odors of evergreens, new toys, cedar-boxes, glue, and varnish in an harmonious combination that passed all understanding.

"About four years ago at this time," began the Doctor, "I attended a course of lectures in a certain city. One of the professors, who was a sociable, kindly man,—though somewhat practical and hard-headed,—invited me to his house on Christmas night. I was very glad to go, as I was anxious to see one of his sons, who, though only twelve years old, was said to be very clever. I dare not tell you how many Latin verses this little fellow could recite, or how many English ones he had composed. In the first place, you'd want me to repeat them; secondly, I'm not a judge of poetry, Latin or English. But there were judges who said they were wonderful for a boy, and everybody predicted a splendid future for him. Everybody but his father. He shook his head doubtingly, whenever it was mentioned, for, as I have told you, he was a practical, matter-of-fact man.

"There was a pleasant party at the Professor's that night. All the children of the neighborhood were there, and among them the Professor's clever son, Rupert, as they called him,—a thin little chap, about as tall as Bobby there, and as fair and delicate as Flora by my side. His health was feeble, his father said; he seldom ran about and played with other boys, preferring to stay at home and brood over his books, and compose what he called his verses.

"Well, we had a Christmas-tree just like this, and we had been laughing and talking, calling off the names of the children who had presents on the tree, and everybody was very happy and joyous, when one of the children suddenly uttered a cry of mingled surprise and hilarity, and said, 'Here's something for Rupert; and what do you think it is?'

"We all guessed. 'A desk'; 'A copy of Milton'; 'A gold pen'; 'A rhyming dictionary?' 'No? what then?'

"'A drum!'

"'A what?' asked everybody.

"'A drum! with Rupert's name on it?'

"Sure enough there it was. A good-sized, bright, new, brass-bound drum, with a slip of paper on it, with the inscription, 'FOR RUPERT.'

"Of course we all laughed, and thought it a good joke. 'You see you're to make a noise in the world, Rupert!' said one. 'Here's parchment for the poet,' said

another. 'Rupert's last work in sheepskin covers,' said a third. 'Give us a classical tune, Rupert,' said a fourth; and so on. But Rupert seemed too mortified to speak; he changed color, bit his lips, and finally burst into a passionate fit of crying, and left the room. Then those who had joked him felt ashamed, and everybody began to ask who had put the drum there. But no one knew, or if they did, the unexpected sympathy awakened for the sensitive boy kept them silent. Even the servants were called up and questioned, but no one could give any idea where it came from. And, what was still more singular, everybody declared that up to the moment it was produced, no one had seen it hanging on the tree. What do I think? Well, I have my own opinion. But no questions! Enough for you to know that Rupert did not come down stairs again that night, and the party soon after broke up.

"I had almost forgotten those things, for the war of the Rebellion broke out the next spring, and I was appointed surgeon in one of the new regiments, and was on my way to the seat of war. But I had to pass through the city where the Professor lived, and there I met him. My first question was about Rupert. The Professor shook his head sadly. 'He's not so well,' he said; 'he has been declining since last Christmas, when you saw him. A very strange case,' he added, giving it a long Latin name,—'a very singular case. But go and see him yourself,' he urged; 'it may distract his mind and do him good?'

"I went accordingly to the Professor's house, and found Rupert lying on a sofa, propped up with pillows. Around him were scattered his books, and, what seemed in singular contrast, that drum I told you about was hanging on a nail, just above his head. His face was thin and wasted; there was a red spot on either cheek, and his eyes were very bright and widely opened. He was glad to see me, and when I told him where I was going, he asked a thousand questions about the war. I thought I had thoroughly diverted his mind from its sick and languid fancies, when he suddenly grasped my hand and drew me toward him.

"'Doctor,' said he, in a low whisper, 'you won't laugh at me if I tell you something?'

"'No, certainly not,' I said.

"'You remember that drum?' he said, pointing to the glittering toy that hung against the wall. 'You know, too, how it came to me. A few weeks after Christmas, I was lying half asleep here, and the drum was hanging on the wall, when suddenly I heard it beaten; at first, low and slowly, then faster and louder, until its rolling filled the house. In the middle of the night, I heard it again. I did not dare to tell anybody about it, but I have heard it every night ever since.'



"He paused and looked anxiously in my face. 'Sometimes,' he continued, 'it is played softly, sometimes loudly, but always quickening to a long-roll, so loud and alarming that I have looked to see people coming into my room to ask what was the matter. But I think, Doctor,—I think,' he repeated slowly, looking up with painful interest into my face, 'that no one hears it but myself.'

"I thought so, too, but I asked him if he had heard it at any other time.

"'Once or twice in the daytime,' he replied, 'when I have been reading or writing; then very loudly, as though it were angry, and tried in that way to attract my attention away from my books.'

"I looked into his face, and placed my hand upon his pulse. His eyes were very bright, and his pulse a little flurried and quick. I then tried to explain to him that he was very weak, and that his senses were very acute, as most weak people's are; and how that when he read, or grew interested and excited, or when he was tired at night, the throbbing of a big artery made the beating sound he heard. He listened to me with a sad smile of unbelief, but thanked me, and in a little while I went away. But as I was going down stairs, I met the Professor. I gave him my opinion of the case,—well, no matter what it was.

"'He wants fresh air and exercise,' said the Professor, 'and some practical experience of life, sir?' The Professor was not a bad man, but he was a little worried and impatient, and thought—as clever people are apt to think—that things which he didn't understand were either silly or improper.

"I left the city that very day, and in the excitement of battle-fields and hospitals, I forgot all about little Rupert, nor did I hear of him again, until one day, meeting an old classmate in the army, who had known the Professor, he told me that Rupert had become quite insane, and that in one of his paroxysms he had

escaped from the house, and as he had never been found, it was feared that he had fallen in the river and was drowned. I was terribly shocked for the moment, as you may imagine; but, dear me, I was living just then among scenes as terrible and shocking, and I had little time to spare to mourn over poor Rupert.

"It was not long after receiving this intelligence that we had a terrible battle, in which a portion of our army was surprised and driven back with great slaughter. I was detached from my brigade to ride over to the battle-field and assist the surgeons of the beaten division, who had more on their hands than they could attend to. When I reached the barn that served for a temporary hospital, I went at once to work. Ah, Bob," said the Doctor, thoughtfully taking the bright sword from the hands of the half-frightened Bob, and holding it gravely before him, "these pretty playthings are symbols of cruel, ugly realities.

"I turned to a tall, stout Vermonter," he continued very slowly, tracing a pattern on the rug with the point of the scabbard, "who was badly wounded in both thighs, but he held up his hands and begged me to help others first who needed it more than he. I did not at first heed his request, for this kind of unselfishness was very common in the army; but he went on, 'For God's sake, Doctor, leave me here; there is a drummer-boy of our regiment—a mere child—dying, if he isn't dead now. Go, and see him first. He lies over there. He saved more than one life. He was at his post in the panic this morning, and saved the honor of the regiment.' I was so much more impressed by the man's manner than by the substance of his speech, which was, however, corroborated by the other poor fellows stretched around me, that I passed over to where the drummer lay, with his drum beside him. I gave one glance at his face—and—yes, Bob—yes, my children—it WAS Rupert.

"Well! well! it needed not the chalked cross which my brother-surgeons had left upon the rough board whereon he lay to show how urgent was the relief he sought; it needed not the prophetic words of the Vermonter, nor the damp that mingled with the brown curls that clung to his pale forehead, to show how hopeless it was now. I called him by name. He opened his eyes—larger, I thought, in the new vision that was beginning to dawn upon him—and recognized me. He whispered, 'I'm glad you are come, but I don't think you can do me any good.'

"I could not tell him a lie. I could not say anything. I only pressed his hand in mine, as he went on.

"But you will see father, and ask him to forgive me. Nobody is to blame but myself. It was a long time before I understood why the drum came to me that Christmas night, and why it kept calling to me every night, and what it said. I know it now. The work is done, and I am content. Tell father it is better as it is. I should have lived only to worry and perplex him, and something in me tells me

this is right.'

"He lay still for a moment, and then, grasping my hand, said,—

"'Hark!'

"I listened, but heard nothing but the suppressed moans of the wounded men around me. 'The drum,' he said faintly; 'don't you hear it? The drum is calling me.'

"He reached out his arm to where it lay, as though he would embrace it.

"'Listen,' he went on, 'it's the reveille. There are the ranks drawn up in review. Don't you see the sunlight flash down the long line of bayonets? Their faces are shining,—they present arms,—there comes the General; but his face I cannot look at, for the glory round his head. He sees me; he smiles, it is—" And with a name upon his lips that he had learned long ago, he stretched himself wearily upon the planks, and lay quite still.

"That's all. No questions now; never mind what became of the drum. Who's that snivelling? Bless my soul, where's my pill-box?"

Stories help us explore cultures, learn moral lessons, connect with nature — or simply have fun. That's why riri.ro offers 3,000+ free stories — fairy tales, fables, bedtime stories, myths and more — for every age, in 13 languages, with free printable PDFs and often audio. Reading should be a right, not a privilege. Share riri.ro and spread the joy of reading.

Instagram: [@riri_ro_reading](https://www.instagram.com/riri_ro_reading) · Pinterest: [pinterest.com/ririocom](https://www.pinterest.com/ririocom)