



Ririro

READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

The Little Sister's Vacation

Winifred M. Kirkland

It was to be a glorious Christmas at Doctor Brower's. All "the children"—little Peggy and her mother always spoke of the grown-up ones as "the children"—were coming home. Mabel was coming from Ohio with her big husband and her two babies, Minna and little Robin, the year-old grandson whom the home family had never seen; Hazen was coming all the way from the Johns Hopkins Medical School, and Arna was coming home from her teaching in New York. It was a trial to Peggy that vacation did not begin until the very day before Christmas, and then continued only one niggardly week. After school hours she had helped her mother in the Christmas preparations every day until she crept into bed at night with aching arms and tired feet, to lie there tossing about, whether from weariness or glad excitement she did not know.

"Not so hard, daughter," the doctor said to her once.

"Oh, papa," protested her mother, "when we're so busy, and Peggy is so handy!"

"Not so hard," he repeated, with his eyes on fifteen-year-old Peggy's delicate face, as, wearing her braids pinned up on her head and a pinafore down to her toes, she stoned raisins and blanched almonds, rolled bread crumbs and beat eggs, dusted and polished and made ready for the children.

Finally, after a day of flying about, helping with the many last thing, Peggy let down her braids and put on her new crimson shirtwaist, and stood with her mother in the front doorway, for it was Christmas Eve at last, and the station 'bus was rattling up with the first homecomers, Arna and Hazen.

Then there were voices ringing up and down the dark street, and there were happy tears in the mother's eyes, and Arna had taken Peggy's face in her two soft-gloved hands and lifted it up and kissed it, and Hazen had swung his little sister up in the air just as of old. Peggy's tired feet were dancing for joy. She was helping Arna take off her things, was carrying her bag upstairs—would have carried Hazen's heavy grip, too, only her father took it from her.

"Set the kettle to boil, Peggy," directed her mother; "then run upstairs and see if Arna wants anything. We'll wait supper till the rest come."

The rest came on the nine o'clock train, such a load of them—the big, bluff brother-in-law, Mabel, plump and laughing, as always, Minna, elfin and bright-

eyed, and sleepy Baby Robin. Such hugging, such a hubbub of baby talk! How many things there seemed to be to do for those precious babies right away!

Peggy was here and there and everywhere. Everything was in joyous confusion. Supper was to be set on, too. While the rest ate, Peggy sat by, holding Robin, her own little nephew, and managing at the same time to pick up the things—napkin, knife, spoon, bread—that Minna, hilarious with the late hour, flung from her high chair.

It seemed as if they would never be all stowed away for the night. Some of them wanted pitchers of warm water, some of them pitchers of cold, and the alcohol stove must be brought up for heating the baby's milk at night. The house was crowded, too. Peggy had given up her room to Hazen, and slept on a cot in the sewing room with Minna.

The cot had been enlarged by having three chairs piled with pillows, set along the side. But Minna preferred to sleep in the middle of the cot, or else across it, her restless little feet pounding at Peggy's ribs; and Peggy was unused to any bedfellow.

She lay long awake thinking proudly of the children; of Hazen, the tall brother, with his twinkling eyes, his drolleries, his teasing; of graceful Arna who dressed so daintily, talked so cleverly, and had been to college. Arna was going to send Peggy to college, too—it was so good of Arna! But for all Peggy's admiration for Arna, it was Mabel, the eldest sister, who was the more approachable. Mabel did not pretend even to as much learning as Peggy had herself; she was happy-go-lucky and sweet-tempered. Then her husband was a great jolly fellow, with whom it was impossible to be shy, and the babies—there never were such cunning babies, Peggy thought. Just here her niece gave her a particularly vicious kick, and Peggy opposed to her train of admiring thoughts, "But I'm so tired."

It did not seem to Peggy that she had been asleep at all when she was waked with a vigorous pounding on her chest and a shrill little voice in her ear:

"Ch'is'mus, Ch'is'mus, Ch'is'mus! It's mornin'! It's Ch'is'mus!"

"Oh, no, it isn't, Minna!" pleaded Peggy, struggling with sleepiness. "It's all dark still."

"Ch'is'mus, Ch'is'mus, Ch'is'mus!" reiterated Minna continuing to pound.

"Hush, dear! You'll wake Aunt Arna, and she's feed after being all day on the chou-chou cars."

"Merry Ch'is'mus, Aunty Arna!" shouted the irrepressible Minna.

"Oh, darling, be quiet! We'll play little pig goes to market. I'll tell you a story,

only be quiet a little while."

It took Peggy's utmost effort to keep the little wriggler still for the hour from five to six. Then, however, her shrill, "Merry Ch'is'mus!" roused the household. Protests were of no avail. Minna was the only granddaughter. Dark as it was, people must get up.

Peggy must dress Minna and then hurry down to help get breakfast—not so easy a task with Minna ever at one's heels. The quick-moving sprite seemed to be everywhere—into the sugar-bowl, the cooky jar, the steaming teakettle—before one could turn about. Urged on by the impatient little girl, the grown-ups made short work of breakfast.

After the meal, according to time-honoured Brower custom, they formed in procession, single file, Minna first, then Ben with Baby Robin. They each held aloft a sprig of holly, and they all kept time as they sang, "God rest you, merry gentlemen," in their march from the dining-room to the office. And there they must form in circle about the tree, and dance three times round, singing "The Christmas-tree is an evergreen," before they could touch a single present.

The presents are done up according to custom, packages of every shape and size, but all in white paper and tied with red ribbon, and all marked for somebody with somebody else's best love. They all fall to opening, and the babies' shouts are not the only ones to be heard.

Passers-by smile indulgently at the racket, remembering that all the Browsers are home for Christmas, and the Browsers were ever a jovial company.

Peggy gazes at her gifts quietly, but with shining eyes—little gold cuff pins from Hazen, just like Arna's; a set of furs from Mabel and Ben; but she likes Arna's gift best of all, a complete set of her favourite author.

But much as they would like to linger about the Christmas tree, Peggy and her mother, at least, must remember that the dishes must be washed and the beds made, and that the family must get ready for church. Peggy does not go to church, and nobody dreams how much she wants to go. She loves the Christmas music. No hymn rings so with joy as:

Jerusalem triumphs, Messiah is king.

The choir sings it only once a year, on the Christmas morning. Besides, her chum Esther will be at church, and Peggy has been too busy to go to see her since she came home from boarding-school for the holidays. But somebody must stay at home, and that somebody who but Peggy? Somebody must baste the turkey and prepare the vegetables and take care of the babies.

Peggy is surprised to find how difficult it is to combine dinner-getting with baby-

tending. When she opens the oven-door, there is Minna's head thrust up under her arm, the inquisitive little nose in great danger by reason of sputtering gravy.

"Minna," protests Peggy, "you mustn't eat another bit of candy!" and Minna opens her mouth in a howl, prolonged, but without tears and without change of colour. Robin joins in, he does not know why. Peggy is a doting aunt, but an honest one. She is vexed by a growing conviction that Mabel's babies are sadly spoiled. Peggy is ashamed of herself; surely she ought to be perfectly happy playing with Minna and Robin. Instead, she finds that the thing she would like best of all to be doing at this moment, next to going to church, would be to be lying on her father's couch in the office, all by herself, reading.

The dinner is a savoury triumph for Peggy and her mother. The gravy and the mashed potato are entirely of Peggy's workmanship, and Peggy has had a hand in most of the other dishes, too, as the mother proudly tells. How that merry party can eat! Peggy is waitress, and it is long before the passing is over, and she can sit down in her own place. She is just as fond of the unusual Christmas good things as are the rest, but somehow, before she is well started at her turkey, it is time for changing plates for dessert, and before she has tasted her nuts and raisins the babies have succumbed to sleepiness, and it is Peggy who must carry them upstairs for their nap—just in the middle of one of Hazen's funniest stories, too.

And all the time the little sister is so ready, so quickly serviceable, that somehow nobody notices—nobody but the doctor. It is he who finds Peggy, half an hour later, all alone in the kitchen. The mother and the older daughters are gathered about the sitting-room hearth, engaged in the dear, delicious talk about the little things that are always left out of letters.

The doctor interrupts them.

"Peggy is all alone," he says.

"But we're having such a good talk," the mother pleads, "and Peggy will be done in no time! Peggy is so handy!"

"Well, girls?" is all the doctor says, with quiet command in his eyes, and Peggy is not left to wash the Christmas dishes all alone. Because she is smiling and her cheeks are bright, her sisters do not notice that her eyes are wet, for Peggy is hotly ashamed of certain thoughts and feelings that she cannot down. She forgets them for a while, however, sitting on the hearth-rug, snuggled against her father's knee in the Christmas twilight.



Yet the troublesome thoughts came back in the evening, when Peggy sat upstairs in the dark with Minna, vainly trying to induce the excited little girl to go to sleep, while bursts of merriment from the family below were always breaking in upon the two in their banishment.

There was another restless night of it with the little niece, and another too early waking. Everybody but Minna was sleepy enough, and breakfast was a protracted meal, to which the "children" came down slowly one by one. Arna did not appear at all, and Peggy carried up to her the daintiest of trays, all of her own preparing. Arna's kiss of thanks was great reward. It was dinner-time before Peggy realized it, and she had hoped to find a quiet hour for her Latin.

The dreadful regent's examination was to come the next week, and Peggy wanted to study for it. She had once thought of asking Arna to help her, but Arna seemed so tired.

In the afternoon Esther came to see her chum, and to take her home with her to spend the night. The babies, fretful with after-Christmas-crossness, were tumbling over their aunt, and sadly interrupting confidences, while Peggy explained that she could not go out that evening. All the family were going to the church sociable, and she must put the babies to bed.

"I think it's mean," Esther broke in. "Isn't it your vacation as well as theirs? Do make that child stop pulling your hair!"

If Esther's words had only not echoed through Peggy's head as they did that night! "But it is so mean of me, so mean of me, to want my own vacation!" sobbed Peggy in the darkness. "I ought just to be glad they're all at home."

Her self-reproach made her readier than ever to wait on them all the next morning. Nobody could make such buckwheat cakes as could Mrs. Brower; nobody could turn them as could Peggy. They were worth coming from New York and Baltimore and Ohio to eat. Peggy stood at the griddle half an hour, an hour, two hours. Her head was aching. Hazen, the latest riser, was joyously calling for

more.

At eleven o'clock Peggy realized that she had had no breakfast herself, and that her mother was hurrying her off to investigate the lateness of the butcher. Her head ached more and more, and she seemed strangely slow in her dinner-getting and dish-washing. Her father was away, and there was no one to help in the clearing-up. It was three before she had finished.

Outside the sleigh-bells sounded enticing. It was the first sleighing of the season. Mabel and Ben had been off for a ride, and Arna and Hazen, too. How Peggy longed to be skimming over the snow instead of polishing knives all alone in the kitchen. Sue Cummings came that afternoon to invite Peggy to her party, given in Esther's honour. Sue enumerated six other gatherings that were being given that week in honour of Esther's visit home. Sue seemed to dwell much on the subject. Presently Peggy, with hot cheeks, understood why. Everybody was giving Esther a party, everybody but Peggy herself. Esther's own chum, and all the other girls, were talking about it.

Peggy stood at the door to see Sue out, and watched the sleighs fly by. Out in the sitting-room she heard her mother saying, "Yes, of course we can have waffles for supper. Where's Peggy?" Then Peggy ran away.

In the wintry dusk the doctor came stamping in, shaking the snow from his bearskins. As always, "Where's Peggy?" was his first question.

Peggy was not to be found, they told him. They had been all over the house, calling her. They thought she must have gone out with Sue. The doctor seemed to doubt this. He went through the upstairs rooms, calling her softly. But Peggy was not in any of the bedrooms, or in any of the closets, either. There was still the kitchen attic to be tried.

There came a husky little moan out of its depths, as he whispered, "Daughter!" He groped his way to her, and sitting down on a trunk, folded her into his bearskin coat.

"Now tell father all about it," he said. And it all came out with many sobs—the nights and dawns with Minna, the Latin, the sleighing, Esther's party, breakfast, the weariness, the headache; and last the waffles, which had moved the one unbearable thing.

"And it is so mean of me, so mean of me!" sobbed Peggy. "But, oh, daddy, I do want a vacation!"

"And you shall have one," he answered.

He carried her straight into her own room, laid her down on her own bed, and tumbled Hazen's things into the hall. Then he went downstairs and talked to his

family.

Presently the mother came stealing in, bearing a glass of medicine the doctor-father had sent. Then she undressed Peggy and put her to bed as if she had been a baby, and sat by, smoothing her hair, until she fell asleep.

It seemed to Peggy that she had slept a long, long time. The sun was shining bright. Her door opened a crack and Arna peeped in, and seeing her awake, came to the bed and kissed her good morning.

"I'm so sorry, little sister!" she said.

"Sorry for what?" asked the wondering Peggy.

"Because I didn't see," said Arna. "But now I'm going to bring up your breakfast."

"Oh, no!" cried Peggy, sitting up.

"Oh, yes!" said Arna, with quiet authority. It was as dainty cooking as Peggy's own, and Arna sat by to watch her eat.

"You're so good to me, Arna!" said Peggy.

"Not very," answered Arna, dryly. "When you've finished this you must lie up here away from the children and read."

"But who will take care of Minna?" questioned Peggy.

"Minna's mamma," answered a voice from the next room, where Mabel was pounding pillows. She came to the door to look in on Peggy in all her luxury of orange marmalade to eat, Christmas books to read, and Arna to wait upon her.

"I think mothers, not aunts, were meant to look after babies," said Mabel. "I'm so sorry, dear!"

"Oh, I wish you two wouldn't talk like that!" cried Peggy. "I'm so ashamed."

"All right, we'll stop talking," said Mabel quickly, "but we'll remember."

They would not let Peggy lift her hand to any of the work that day. Mabel managed the babies masterfully. Arna moved quietly about, accomplishing wonders.

"But aren't you tired, Arna?" queried Peggy.

"Not a bit of it, and I'll have time to help you with your Caesar before—"

"Before what?" asked Peggy, but got no answer. They had been translating famously, when, in the late afternoon, there came a ring of the doorbell. Peggy found Hazen bowing low, and craving "Mistress Peggy's company." A sleigh and two prancing horses stood at the gate.

It was a glorious drive. Peggy's eyes danced and her laugh rang out at Hazen's drolleries. The world stretched white all about them, and their horses flew on and on like the wind. They rode till dark, then turned back to the village, twinkling with lights.

The Brower house was alight in every window, and there was the sound of many voices in the hall. The door flew open upon a laughing crowd of boys and girls. Peggy, all glowing and rosy with the wind, stood utterly bewildered until Esther rushed forward and hugged and shook her.

"It's a party!" she exclaimed. "One of your mother's waffle suppers! We're all here! Isn't it splendid?"

"But, but, but—" stammered Peggy.

"But, but, but," mimicked Esther. "But this is your vacation, don't you see?"

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