



Ririro

READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

The Queerest Christmas

Grace Margaret Gallaher

Betty stood at her door, gazing drearily down the long, empty corridor in which the breakfast gong echoed mournfully. All the usual brisk scenes of that hour, groups of girls in Peter Thomson suits or starched shirt-waists, or a pair of energetic ones, red-cheeked and shining-eyed from a run in the snow, had vanished as by the hand of some evil magician. Silent and lonely was the corridor.

"And it's the day before Christmas!" groaned Betty. Two chill little tears hung on her eyelashes.

The night before, in the excitement of getting the girls off with all their trunks and packages intact, she had not realized the homesickness of the deserted school. Now it seemed to pierce her very bones.

"Oh, dear, why did father have to lose his money? 'Twas easy enough last September to decide I wouldn't take the expensive journey home these holidays, and for all of us to promise we wouldn't give each other as much as a Christmas card. But now!" The two chill tears slipped over the edge of her eyelashes. "Well, I know how I'll spend this whole day; I'll come right up here after breakfast and cry and cry and cry!" Somewhat fortified by this cheering resolve, Betty went to breakfast.

Whatever the material joys of that meal might be, it certainly was not "a feast of reason and a flow of soul." Betty, whose sense of humour never perished, even in such a frost, looked round the table at the eight grim-faced girls doomed to a Christmas in school, and quoted mischievously to herself: "On with the dance, let joy be unconfined."

Breakfast bolted, she lagged back to her room, stopping to stare out of the corridor windows.

She saw nothing of the snowy landscape, however. Instead, a picture, the gayest medley of many colours and figures, danced before her eyes: Christmas-trees thumping in through the door, mysterious bundles scurried into dark corners, little brothers and sisters flying about with festoons of mistletoe, scarlet ribbon and holly, everywhere sound and laughter and excitement. The motto of Betty's family was: "Never do to-day what you can put off till to-morrow"; therefore the preparations of a fortnight were always crowded into a day.

The year before, Betty had rushed till her nerves were taut and her temper snapped, had shaken the twins, raged at the housemaid, and had gone to bed at midnight weeping with weariness. But in memory only the joy of the day remained.

"I think I could endure this jail of a school, and not getting one single present, but it breaks my heart not to give one least little thing to any one! Why, who ever heard of such a Christmas!"

"Won't you hunt for that blue—"

"Broken my thread again!"

"Give me those scissors!"

Betty jumped out of her day-dream. She had wandered into "Cork" and the three O'Neills surrounded her, staring.

"I beg your pardon—I heard you—and it was so like home the day before Christmas—"

"Did you hear the heathen rage?" cried Katherine.

"Dolls for Aunt Anne's mission," explained Constance.

"You're so forehanded that all your presents went a week ago, I suppose," Eleanor swept clear a chair. "The clan O'Neill is never forehanded."

"You'd think I was from the number of thumbs I've grown this morning. Oh, misery!" Eleanor jerked a snarl of thread out on the floor.

Betty had never cared for "Cork" but now the hot worried faces of its girls appealed to her. "Let me help. I'm a regular silkworm."

The O'Neills assented with eagerness, and Betty began to sew in a capable, swift way that made the others stare and sigh with relief.

The dolls were many, the O'Neills slow. Betty worked till her feet twitched on the floor; yet she enjoyed the morning, for it held an entirely new sensation, that of helping some one else get ready for Christmas.

"Done!"

"We never should have finished if you hadn't helped! Thank you, Betty Luther, very, VERY much! You're a duck! Let's run to luncheon together, quick."

Somehow the big corridors did not seem half so bleak echoing to those warm O'Neill voices.

"This morning's just spun by, but, oh, this long, dreary afternoon!" sighed Betty, as she wandered into the library. "Oh, me, there goes Alice Johns with her arms

loaded with presents to mail, and I can't give a single soul anything!"

"Do you know where 'Quotations for Occasions' has gone?" Betty turned to face pretty Rosamond Howitt, the only senior left behind.

"Gone to be rebound. I heard Miss Dyce say so."

"Oh, dear, I needed it so."

"Could I help? I know a lot of rhymes and tags of proverbs and things like that."

"Oh, if you would help me, I'd be so grateful! Won't you come to my room? You see, I promised a friend in town, who is to have a Christmas dinner, and who's been very kind to me, that I'd paint the place cards and write some quotation appropriate to each guest. I'm shamefully late over it, my own gifts took such a time; but the painting, at least, is done."

Rosamond led the way to her room, and there displayed the cards which she had painted.

"You can't think of my helplessness! If it were a Greek verb now, or a lost and strayed angle—but poetry!"

Betty trotted back and forth between the room and the library, delved into books, and even evolved a verse which she audaciously tagged "old play," in imitation of Sir Walter Scott.

"I think they are really and truly very bright, and I know Mrs. Fernell will be delighted." Rosamond wrapped up the cards carefully. "I can't begin to tell you how you've helped me. It was sweet in you to give me your whole afternoon."

The dinner-bell rang at that moment, and the two went down together.

"Come for a little run; I haven't been out all day," whispered Rosamond, slipping her hand into Betty's as they left the table.

A great round moon swung cold and bright over the pines by the lodge.

"Down the road a bit—just a little way—to the church," suggested Betty.

They stepped out into the silent country road.

"Why, the little mission is as gay as—as Christmas! I wonder why?"

Betty glanced at the bright windows of the small plain church. "Oh, some Christmas-eve doings," she answered.

Some one stepped quickly out from the church door.

"Oh, Miss Vernon, I am relieved! I had begun to fear you could not come."

The girls saw it was the tall old rector, his white hair shining silver bright in the

moonbeams.

"We're just two girls from the school, sir," said Rosamond.

"Dear, dear!" His voice was both impatient and distressed. "I hoped you were my organist. We are all ready for our Christmas-eve service, but we can do nothing without the music."

"I can play the organ a little," said Betty. "I'd be glad to help."

"You can? My dear child, how fortunate! But—do you know the service?"

"Yes, sir, it's my church."

No vested choir stood ready to march triumphantly chanting into the choir stalls. Only a few boys and girls waited in the dim old choir loft, where Rosamond seated herself quietly.

Betty's fingers trembled so at first that the music sounded dull and far away; but her courage crept back to her in the silence of the church, and the organ seemed to help her with a brave power of its own. In the dark church only the altar and a great gold star above it shone bright. Through an open window somewhere behind her she could hear the winter wind rattling the ivy leaves and bending the trees. Yet, somehow, she did not feel lonesome and forsaken this Christmas eve, far away from home, but safe and comforted and sheltered. The voice of the old rector reached her faintly in pauses; habit led her along the service, and the star at the altar held her eyes.

Strange new ideas and emotions flowed in upon her brain. Tears stole softly into her eyes, yet she felt in her heart a sweet glow. Slowly the Christmas picture that had flamed and danced before her all day, painted in the glory of holly and mistletoe and tinsel, faded out, and another shaped itself, solemn and beautiful in the altar light.

"My dear child, I thank you very much!" The old rector held Betty's hand in both his. "I cannot have a Christmas morning service—our people have too much to do to come then—but I was especially anxious that our evening service should have some message, some inspiration for them, and your music has made it so. You have given me great aid. May your Christmas be a blessed one."

"I was glad to play, sir. Thank you!" answered Betty, simply.

"Let's run!" she cried to Rosamond, and they raced back to school.

She fell asleep that night without one smallest tear.

The next morning Betty dressed hastily, and catching up her mandolin, set out into the corridor.

Something swung against her hand as she opened the door. It was a great bunch of holly, glossy green leaves and glowing berries, and hidden in the leaves a card: "Betty, Merry Christmas," was all, but only one girl wrote that dainty hand.

"A winter rose," whispered Betty, happily, and stuck the bunch into the ribbon of her mandolin.

Down the corridor she ran until she faced a closed door. Then, twanging her mandolin, she burst out with all her power into a gay Christmas carol. High and sweet sang her voice in the silent corridor all through the gay carol. Then, sweeter still, it changed into a Christmas hymn. Then from behind the closed doors sounded voices:

"Merry Christmas, Betty Luther!"

Then Constance O'Neill's deep, smooth alto flowed into Betty's soprano; and at the last all nine girls joined in "Adeste Fideles." Christmas morning began with music and laughter.

"This is your place, Betty. You are lord of Christmas morning."

Betty stood, blushing, red as the holly in her hand, before the breakfast table. Miss Hyle, the teacher at the head of the table, had given up her place.

The breakfast was a merry one. After it somebody suggested that they all go skating on the pond.

Betty hesitated and glanced at Miss Hyle and Miss Thrasher, the two sad-looking teachers.

She approached them and said, "Won't you come skating, too?"

Miss Thrasher, hardly older than Betty herself, and pretty in a white frightened way, refused, but almost cheerfully. "I have a Christmas box to open and Christmas letters to write. Thank you very much."

Betty's heart sank as she saw Miss Hyle's face. "Goodness, she's coming!"

Miss Hyle was the most unpopular teacher in school. Neither ill-tempered nor harsh, she was so cold, remote and rigid in face, voice, and manner that the warmest blooded shivered away from her, the least sensitive shrank.

"I have no skates, but I should like to borrow a pair to learn, if I may. I have never tried," she said.

The tragedies of a beginner on skates are to the observers, especially if such be school-girls, subjects for unalloyed mirth. The nine girls choked and turned their backs and even giggled aloud as Miss Hyle went prone, now backward with a whack, now forward in a limp crumple.

But amusement became admiration. Miss Hyle stumbled, fell, laughed merrily, scrambled up, struck out, and skated. Presently she was swinging up the pond in stroke with Betty and Eleanor O'Neill.

"Miss Hyle, you're great!" cried Betty, at the end of the morning. "I've taught dozens and scores to skate, but never anybody like you. You've a genius for skating."

Miss Hyle's blue eyes shot a sudden flash at Betty that made her whole severe face light up. "I've never had a chance to learn—at home there never is any ice—but I have always been athletic."

"Where is your home, Miss Hyle?" asked Betty.

"Cawnpore, India."

"India?" gasped Eleanor. "How delightful! Oh, won't you tell us about it, Miss Hyle?"

So it was that Miss Hyle found herself talking about something besides triangles to girls who really wanted to hear, and so it was that the flash came often into her eyes.

"I have had a happy morning, thank you, Betty—and all." She said it very simply, yet a quick throb of pity and liking beat in Betty's heart.

"How stupid we are about judging people!" she thought. Yet Betty had always prided herself on her character-reading.

"Hurrah, the mail and express are in!" The girls ran excitedly to their rooms.

Betty alone went to hers without interest. "Why, Hilma, what's happened?"

The little round-faced Swedish maid mopped the big tears with her duster, and choked out:

"Nothings, ma'am!"

"Of course there is! You're crying like everything."

Hilma wept aloud. "Christmas Day it is, and mine family and mine friends have party, now, all day."

"Where?"

Hilma jerked her head toward the window.

"Oh, you mean in town? Why can't you go?"

"I work. And never before am I from home Christmas day."

Betty shivered. "Never before am I from home Christmas day," she whispered.

She went close to the girl, very tall and slim and bright beside the dumpy, flaxen Hilma.

"What work do you do?"

"The cook, he cooks the dinner and the supper; I put it on and wait it on the young ladies and wash the dishes. The others all are gone."

Betty laughed suddenly. "Hilma, go put on your best clothes, quick, and go down to your party. I'm going to do your work."

Hilma's eyes rounded with amazement. "The cook, he be mad."



"No, he won't. He won't care whether it's Hilma or Betty, if things get done all right. I know how to wait on table and wash dishes. There's no housekeeper here to object. Run along, Hilma; be back by nine o'clock—and—Merry Christmas!"

Hilma's face beamed through her tears. She was speechless with joy, but she seized Betty's slim brown hand and kissed it loudly.

"What larks!" "Is it a joke?" "Betty, you're the handsomest butler!"

Betty, in a white shirt-waist suit, a jolly red bow pinned on her white apron, and a little cap cocked on her dark hair, waved them to their seats at the holly-decked table.

"Merry Christmas! Merry Christmas!"

"Nobody is ill, Betty?" Rosamond asked, anxiously.

"If I had three guesses, I should use every one that our maid wanted to go into town for the day, and Betty took her place." It was Miss Hyle's calm voice.

Betty blushed. It was her turn now to flash back a glance; and those two sparks kindled the fire of friendship.

It was a jolly Christmas dinner, with the "butler" eating with the family.

"And now the dishes!" thought Betty. It must be admitted the "washing up" after a Christmas dinner of twelve is not a subject for much joy.

"I propose we all help Betty wash the dishes!" cried Rosamond Howitt.

Out in the kitchen every one laughed and talked and got in the way, and had a good time; and if the milk pitcher was knocked on the floor and the pudding bowl emptied in Betty's lap—why, it was all "Merry Christmas."

After that they all skated again. When they came in, little Miss Thrasher, looking

almost gay in a rose-red gown, met them in the corridor.

"I thought it would be fun," she said, shyly, "to have supper in my room. I have a big box from home. I couldn't possible eat all the things myself, and if you'll bring chafing-dishes and spoons, and those things, I'll cook it, and we can sit round my open fire."

Miss Thrasher's room was homelike, with its fire of white-birch and its easy chairs, and Miss Thrasher herself proved to be a pleasant hostess.

After supper Miss Hyle told a tale of India, Miss Thrasher gave a Rocky Mountain adventure, and the girls contributed ghost and burglar stories till each guest was in a thrill of delightful horror.

"We've had really a fine day!"

"I expected to die of homesickness, but it's been jolly!"

"So did I, but I have actually been happy."

Thus the girls commented as they started for bed.

"I have enjoyed my day," said little Miss Thrasher, "very much."

"Yes, indeed, it's been a merry Christmas." Miss Hyle spoke almost eagerly.

Betty gave a little jump; she realized each one of them was holding her hand and pressing it a little. "Thank you, it's been a lovely evening. Goodnight."

Rosamond had invited Betty to share her roommate's bed, but both girls were too tired and sleepy for any confidence.

"It's been the queerest Christmas!" thought Betty, as she drifted toward sleep. "Why, I haven't given one single soul one single present!"

Yet she smiled, drowsily happy, and then the room seemed to fill with a bright, warm light, and round the bed there danced a great Christmas wreath, made up of the faces of the three O'Neills, and the thin old rector, with his white hair, and pretty Rosamond, and frightened Miss Thrasher and the homesick girls, and lonely Miss Hyle, and tear-dimmed Hilma.

And all the faces smiled and nodded, and called, "Merry Christmas, Betty, Merry Christmas!"

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