



Ririro

READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

Where the Christmas Tree Grew

Mary E. Wilkins Freeman

It was afternoon recess at No. 4 District School, in Warner. There was a heavy snow-storm; so every one was in the warm school-room, except a few adventurous spirits who were tumbling about in the snow-drifts out in the yard, getting their clothes wet and preparing themselves for chidings at home. Their shrill cries and shouts of laughter floated into the school-room, but the small group near the stove did not heed them at all. There were five or six little girls and one boy. The girls, with the exception of Jenny Brown, were trim and sweet in their winter dresses and neat school-aprons; they perched on the desks and the arms of the settee with careless grace, like birds. Some of them had their arms linked. The one boy lounged against the blackboard. His dark, straight-profiled face was all aglow as he talked. His big brown eyes gazed now soberly and impressively at Jenny, then gave a gay dance in the direction of the other girls.

"Yes, it does — honest!" said he.

The other girls nudged one another softly; but Jenny Brown stood with her innocent, solemn eyes fixed upon Earl Munroe's face, drinking in every word.

"You ask anybody who knows," continued Earl; "ask Judge Barker, ask — the minister —"

"Oh!" cried the little girls; but the boy shook his head impatiently at them.

"Yes," said he; "you just go and ask Mr. Fisher to-morrow, and you'll see what he'll tell you. Why, look here" — Earl straightened himself and stretched out an arm like an orator — "it's nothing more than reasonable that Christmas-trees grow wild with the presents all on 'em! What sense would there be in 'em if they didn't, I'd like to know? They grow in different places, of course; but these around here grow mostly on the mountain over there. They come up every spring, and they all blossom out about Christmas-time, and folks go hunting for them to give to the children. Father and Ben are over on the mountain to-day —"

"Oh, oh!" cried the little girls.

"I mean, I guess they are," amended Earl, trying to put his feet on the boundary-line of truth. "I hope they'll find a full one."

Jenny Brown had a little, round, simple face; her thin brown hair was combed

back and braided tightly in one tiny braid tied with a bit of shoe-string. She wore a nondescript gown, which nearly trailed behind, and showed in front her little, coarsely-shod feet, which toed-in helplessly. The gown was of a faded green color; it was scalloped and bound around the bottom, and had some green ribbon-bows down the front. It was, in fact, the discarded polonaise of a benevolent woman, who aided the poor substantially but not tastefully.

Jenny Brown was eight, and small for her age — a strange, gentle, ignorant little creature, never doubting the truth of what she was told, which sorely tempted the other children to impose upon her. Standing there in the school-room that stormy recess, in the midst of that group of wiser, richer, mostly older girls, and that one handsome, mischievous boy, she believed every word she heard.

This was her first term at school, and she had never before seen much of other children. She had lived her eight years all alone at home with her mother, and she had never been told about Christmas. Her mother had other things to think about. She was a dull, spiritless, reticent woman, who had lived through much trouble. She worked, doing washings and cleanings, like a poor feeble machine that still moves but has no interest in its motion. Sometimes the Browns had almost enough to eat, at other times they half starved. It was half-starving time just then; Jenny had not had enough to eat that day.

There was a pinched look on the little face upturned towards Earl Munroe's.

Earl's words gained authority by coming from himself. Jenny had always regarded him with awe and admiration. It was much that he should speak at all to her.

Earl Munroe was quite the king of this little district school. He was the son of the wealthiest man in town. No other boy was so well dressed, so gently bred, so luxuriously lodged and fed. Earl himself realized his importance, and had at times the loftiness of a young prince in his manner. Occasionally, some independent urchin would bristle with democratic spirit, and tell him to his face that he was "stuck up," and that he hadn't so much more to be proud of than other folks; that his grandfather wasn't anything but an old ragman!

Then Earl would wilt. Arrogance in a free country is likely to have an unstable foundation. Earl tottered at the mention of his paternal grandfather, who had given the first impetus to the family fortune by driving a tin-cart about the country. Moreover, the boy was really pleasant and generous hearted, and had no mind, in the long run, for lonely state and disagreeable haughtiness. He enjoyed being lordly once in a while, that was all.

He did now, with Jenny — he eyed her with a gay condescension, which would have greatly amused his tin-peddler grandfather.

Soon the bell rung, and they all filed to their seats, and the lessons were begun.

After school was done that night, Earl stood in the door when Jenny passed out.

"Say, Jenny," he called, "when are you going over on the mountain to find the Christmas-tree? You'd better go pretty soon, or they'll be gone."

"That's so!" chimed in one of the girls. "You'd better go right off, Jenny."

She passed along, her face shyly dimpling with her little innocent smile, and said nothing. She would never talk much.

She had quite a long walk to her home. Presently, as she was pushing weakly through the new snow, Earl went flying past her in his father's sleigh, with the black horses and the fur-capped coachman. He never thought of asking her to ride. If he had, he would not have hesitated a second before doing so.

Jenny, as she waded along, could see the mountain always before her. This road led straight to it, then turned and wound around its base. It had stopped snowing, and the sun was setting clear. The great white mountain was all rosy. It stood opposite the red western sky. Jenny kept her eyes fixed upon the mountain. Down in the valley shadows her little simple face, pale and colorless, gathered another kind of radiance.

There was no school the next day, which was the one before Christmas. It was pleasant, and not very cold. Everybody was out; the little village stores were crowded; sleds trailing Christmas-greens went flying; people were hastening with parcels under their arms, their hands full.

Jenny Brown also was out. She was climbing Franklin Mountain. The snowy pine boughs bent so low that they brushed her head. She stepped deeply into the untrodden snow; the train of her green polonaise dipped into it, and swept it along. And all the time she was peering through those white fairy columns and arches for — a Christmas-tree.

That night, the mountain had turned rosy, and faded, and the stars were coming out, when a frantic woman, panting, crying out now and then in her distress, went running down the road to the Munroe house. It was the only one between her own and the mountain. The woman rained some clattering knocks on the door — she could not stop for the bell. Then she burst into the house, and threw open the dining-room door, crying out in gasps:

"Hev you seen her? Oh, hev you? My Jenny's lost! She's lost! Oh, oh, oh! They said they saw her comin' up this way, this mornin'. Hev you seen her, hev you?"

Earl and his father and mother were having tea there in the handsome oak-panelled dining-room. Mr. Munroe rose at once, and went forward, Mrs. Munroe looked with a pale face around her silver tea-urn, and Earl sat as if frozen. He

heard his father's soothing questions, and the mother's answers. She had been out at work all day; when she returned, Jenny was gone. Some one had seen her going up the road to the Munroes' that morning about ten o'clock. That was her only clew.

Earl sat there, and saw his mother draw the poor woman into the room and try to comfort her; he heard, with a vague understanding, his father order the horses to be harnessed immediately; he watched him putting on his coat and hat out in the hall.

When he heard the horses trot up the drive, he sprang to his feet. When Mr. Munroe opened the door, Earl, with his coat and cap on, was at his heels.

"Why, you can't go, Earl!" said his father, when he saw him. "Go back at once."

Earl was white and trembling. He half sobbed: "Oh, father, I must go!" said he.

"Earl, be reasonable. You want to help, don't you, and not hinder?" his mother called out of the dining-room.

Earl caught hold of his father's coat. "Father — look here — I — I believe I know where she is!"

Then his father faced sharply around, his mother and Jenny's stood listening in bewilderment, and Earl told his ridiculous, childish, and cruel little story. "I — didn't dream — she'd really be — such a little — goose as to — go," he choked out; "but she must have, for" — with brave candor — "I know she believed every word I told her."

It seemed a fantastic theory, yet a likely one. It would give method to the search, yet more alarm to the searchers. The mountain was a wide region in which to find one little child.

Jenny's mother screamed out, "Oh, if she's lost on the mountain, they'll never find her! They never will, they never will! Oh, Jenny, Jenny, Jenny!"

Earl gave a despairing glance at her, and bolted up-stairs to his own room. His mother called pityingly after him; but he only sobbed back, "Don't, mother — please!" and kept on.

The boy, lying face downward on his bed, crying as if his heart would break, heard presently the church-bell clang out fast and furious. Then he heard loud voices down in the road, and the flurry of sleigh-bells. His father had raised the alarm, and the search was organized.

After a while Earl arose, and crept over to the window. It looked towards the mountain, which towered up, cold and white and relentless, like one of the ice-hearted giants of the old Indian tales. Earl shuddered as he looked at it.

Presently he crawled down-stairs and into the parlor. In the bay-window stood, like a gay mockery, the Christmas-tree. It was a quite small one that year, only for the family — some expected guests had failed to come — but it was well laden. After tea the presents were to have been distributed. There were some for his father and mother, and some for the servants, but the bulk of them were for Earl.

By-and-by his mother, who had heard him come down-stairs, peeped into the room, and saw him busily taking his presents from the tree. Her heart sank with sad displeasure and amazement. She would not have believed that her boy could be so utterly selfish as to think of Christmas-presents then.

But she said nothing. She stole away, and returned to poor Mrs. Brown, whom she was keeping with her; still she continued to think of it all that long, terrible night, when they sat there waiting, listening to the signal-horns over on the mountain.

Morning came at last and Mr. Munroe with it. No success so far. He drank some coffee and was off again. That was quite early. An hour or two later the breakfast-bell rang. Earl did not respond to it, so his mother went to the foot of the stairs and called him. There was a stern ring in her soft voice. All the time she had in mind his heartlessness and greediness over the presents. When Earl did not answer she went up-stairs, and found that he was not in his room. Then she looked in the parlor, and stood staring in bewilderment. Earl was not there, but neither were the Christmas-tree and his presents — they had vanished bodily!

Just at that moment Earl Munroe was hurrying down the road, and he was dragging his big sled, on which were loaded his Christmas-presents and the Christmas-tree. The top of the tree trailed in the snow, its branches spread over the sled on either side, and rustled. It was a heavy load, but Earl tugged manfully in an enthusiasm of remorse and atonement — a fantastic, extravagant atonement, planned by that same fertile fancy which had invented that story for poor little Jenny, but instigated by all the good, repentant impulses in the boy's nature.

On every one of those neat parcels, above his own name, was written in his big crooked, childish hand, "Jenny Brown, from —" Earl Munroe had not saved one Christmas-present for himself.

Pulling along, his eyes brilliant, his cheeks glowing, he met Maud Barker. She was Judge Barker's daughter, and the girl who had joined him in advising Jenny to hunt on the mountain for the Christmas-tree.

Maud stepped along, placing her trim little feet with dainty precision; she wore some new high-buttoned overshoes. She also carried a new beaver muff, but in

one hand only. The other dangled mittenless at her side; it was pink with cold, but on its third finger sparkled a new gold ring with a blue stone in it.

"Oh, Earl!" she called out, "have they found Jenny Brown? I was going up to your house to — Why, Earl Munroe, what have you got there?"

"I'm carrying up my Christmas-presents and the tree up to Jenny's — so she'll find 'em when she comes back," said the boy, flushing red. There was a little defiant choke in his voice.

"Why, what for?"

"I rather think they belong to her more'n they do to me, after what's happened."

"Does your mother know?"

"No; she wouldn't care. She'd think I was only doing what I ought."

"All of 'em?" queried Maud, feebly.

"You don't s'pose I'd keep any back?"

Maud stood staring. It was beyond her little philosophy.

Earl was passing on when a thought struck him.

"Say, Maud," he cried, eagerly, "haven't you something you can put in? Girls' things might please her better, you know. Some of mine are — rather queer, I'm afraid."

"What have you got?" demanded Maud.

"Well, some of the things are well enough. There's a lot of candy and oranges and figs and books; there's one by Jules Verne I guess she'll like; but there's a great big jack-knife, and — a brown velvet bicycle suit?"

"Why, Earl Munroe! what could she do with a bicycle suit?"

"I thought, maybe, she could rip the seams to 'em, an' sew 'em some way, an' get a basque cut, or something. Don't you s'pose she could?" Earl asked, anxiously.

"I don't know; her mother could tell," said Maud.

"Well, I'll hang it on, anyhow. Maud, haven't you anything to give her?"

"I — don't know."

Earl eyed her sharply. "Isn't that muff new?"



"Yes."

"And that ring?"

Maud nodded. "She'd be delighted with 'em. Oh, Maud, put 'em in!"

Maud looked at him. Her pretty mouth quivered a little; some tears twinkled in her blue eyes.

"I don't believe my mother would let me," faltered she. "You — come with me, and I'll ask her."

"All right," said Earl, with a tug at his sled-rope.

He waited with his load in front of Maud's house until she came forth radiant, lugging a big basket. She had her last winter's red cashmere dress, a hood, some mittens, cake and biscuit, and nice slices of cold meat.

"Mother said these would be much more suitable for her," said Maud, with a funny little imitation of her mother's manner.

Over across the street another girl stood at the gate, waiting for news.

"Have they found her?" she cried. "Where are you going with all those things?"

Somehow, Earl's generous, romantic impulse spread like an epidemic. This little girl soon came flying out with her contribution; then there were more — quite a little procession filed finally down the road to Jenny Brown's house.

The terrible possibilities of the case never occurred to them. The idea never entered their heads that little, innocent, trustful Jenny might never come home to see that Christmas-tree which they set up in her poor home.

It was with no surprise whatever that they saw, about noon, Mr. Munroe's sleigh, containing Jenny and her mother and Mrs. Munroe, drive up to the door.

Afterwards they heard how a wood-cutter had found Jenny crying, over on the east side of the mountain, at sunset, and had taken her home with him. He lived five miles from the village, and was an old man, not able to walk so far that night to tell them of her safety. His wife had been very good to the child. About eleven o'clock some of the searchers had met the old man plodding along the mountain-road with the news.

They did not stop for this now. They shouted to Jenny to "come in, quick!" They pulled her with soft violence into the room where they had been at work. Then the child stood with her hands clasped, staring at the Christmas-tree. All too far away had she been searching for it. The Christmas-tree grew not on the wild mountain-side, in the lonely woods, but at home, close to warm, loving hearts; and that was where she found it.

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