



Ririro

READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

Captain Christy's Thanksgiving

Carolyn Sherwin Bailey

"You're going beyond the life line, and the water's so rough you'll never be able to swim. O, Donald, don't! Come back. Don't go out so far!" the voice of the boy's little sister, Nan, shrilled out over the singing surf and was lost before it reached him.

The water of the bathing beach at Fishers Point was temptingly warm for so late in the season. Inside the boundaries of the safety line that the coast guard had stretched to mark the danger line there was a crowd of merry bathers. No one heard Nan's warning to her brother. No one saw his brown head bobbing on the far side of the rope or noticed his arm waved above the surf in a gay challenge and good-by. Donald was always daring in sport, but fighting ocean breakers was hard for a twelve-year-old boy who could count his strokes in still water. For a moment his white face showed above the waves. Then Donald disappeared from sight.

"Donald! O, save my brother, Donald!" Nan cried, plowing her way through the foam and up the beach.

"Boy gone down! Where is the coast guard? He's gone down twice." The crowd knew now, and shouted, and made futile efforts to get out to him.

But a slim, gray boat suddenly swung out to sea from the upper end of the beach, nosing its way among the white caps like a setter scenting a fresh trail. It was manned and rowed by a crew of four sailors who sent it flying to the rescue. In its prow knelt an old man, his white hair and greenish gray coat making him look like Neptune. Suddenly he turned to give a quick order to the crew, and the boat came to a stop.

"Captain Christy! He'll get the boy all right." The words of the huddled bathers watching comforted Nan as she ran up the beach toward the pier from which the boat had started.

"He's been captain of the volunteer life guard for fifty years and can't remember how many lives he's saved. He's taught the boys and girls who come here in the summer to swim and pulled them out when they went in too deep."

Nan could hear no more, for she had reached the end of the tumble-down pier from which Captain Christy had started, and for which the boat was pulling now.

"Don't cry, little petrel!" the Captain cried as he saw Nan in her black and white bathing suit, and stretching out her arms toward him. "The lad's here, a bit cold but not much the worse for his visit to the fishes."

As he spoke the boat slid alongside the pier and the Captain stepped out with Donald in his arms.

"Come up to my house," he said to Nan. "There's a fire going there and that's what the lad needs most now, heat and a hot drink." He strode ahead and Nan followed to the little weather-beaten shack that had been his only home for over half a century. It looked like the hulk of some old wreck washed up there on the beach, but it was bright with orange nasturtiums that bloomed in the tiny garden and a few flaming red chrysanthemums had opened like the sun setting in red over the sea.

Inside the shack there were a few comforts. The Captain laid Donald on the narrow bunk and poked the fire that smoldered in the little sheet-iron stove. Then he set a pot of some thick, savory stuff on it and stirred it as the savory smell began to fill the one tiny room.

Donald lay quietly for a moment. Then he opened his eyes and color came to his cheeks. All at once he pulled himself up to a sitting position.

"Clam chowder!" he said, looking about him.

"Yes, and you don't deserve it, you rash young scamp," Captain Christy said as he dipped up a brimming tin mug of the chowder and put it into Donald's eager hands. "What made you frighten your little sister so, and send me off on a chase through the surf after you when I was just putting a mess of chowder on to warm for my dinner?" But the Captain's harsh words ended in a chuckle as he gave Donald a resounding slap on his back. "I know what you were up to. You were trying to brave the sea, and that's a fine spirit to have if only you're sure enough of yourself. I must take you in hand and see that you learn how to swim better."

"O, thank you, Captain. I'm so much obliged," Donald said, getting on his feet.

"And so will mother and father thank you," Nan said. "We're going home in a week, but we'll come over and see you every day. We ought to go now, for some one may have told mother about Donald, and she would be so frightened."

Captain Christy went to the low door of the shack and looked out over the bare length of the beach and the cottages that would soon be empty.

"Going home!" he repeated. "You'll see lights in the streets at night, and you'll hear clanging bells on cars instead of the lighthouse lamp and the ringing of the bell buoy out in the cold."

"Don't you ever go away from here, not all winter?" Nan asked, wistfully.

"I haven't seen a city or kept a holiday in twenty years," Captain Christy said. "The summer folks go, but I stay here and keep warm with drift wood and listen for the cries from the wrecks. I'm as busy in the winter as in the summer, and terribly lonely, little mates."

The last days at the beach flew. Donald and Nan told Captain Christy good-by, boarded the little steamer that crossed to the mainland, took the train, and the family was at home once more in the city. The beginning of school made them forget the Captain waving good-by to them from the pier. It was nearing Thanksgiving when their father read a newspaper headline aloud at the breakfast table.

"Fishing Boat Wrecked. Saved by Veteran Captain Christy of the Fishers Point Volunteer Guard." Then he laid down the paper. "That man's a hero," he exclaimed. "It's cold as Greenland up at the Point now, and he's close on seventy years old."

"He told us about the winter," Nan said. "The lighthouse lamp is all he can see and the bell buoy all he can hear." She thought a minute. Then she ran over to her father's chair. "I've had a splendid idea!" she said. Then she suggested something to him. "Donald and I were planning it for some time, but wouldn't it be beautiful for Thanksgiving? It could be done, couldn't it, daddy?"

Her father considered a moment. Then, "Why, yes, it could. We will," he said.

Thanksgiving came in with a northeaster at Fishers Point. The crew of the life boats straggled down to the pier and stamped to keep warm as they looked out over the choppy sea.

"The steamer won't make the trip to-day," they said. "She hasn't come across in a week now. Over yonder they're eating turkey in the families. Wonder if they ever think of the sailors who haven't seen the mainland since cranberries were planted." Then they fought the wind back to the Captain's and sat around the stove, trying to make their own cheer.

Captain Christy put in a few more hunks of wood. As he bent over the wood basket one of the men nudged another.

"See him hold his back," he whispered. "The Captain's getting old."

"More lives than he can count, he's brought in," the other whispered back. They started to help the Captain, but they were interrupted by three shrill blasts of a whistle that sounded from the direction of the sea. New vigor in his old limbs, the Captain sprang to the door, opening it to a blast of wind that cut like a knife.

"It's the boat from the mainland," he shouted. "Maybe she's brought the mail. She's weathered the storm for Thanksgiving, boys!"

Then he got down his glasses. "She's unloading passengers! Who ever heard of that in a gale like this? They've got cargo with them!" At last he voiced the climax. "Shiver my timbers, lads, but the passengers and the cargo are coming this way!"

Donald came first, breathless from his run up the beach, his arms full, and followed by Nan.

"A happy Thanksgiving, Captain," he shouted. "We've come to spend it with you. Father had to pretty nearly buy the steamer to get us over, but here we are."

"And we've brought you a few things to make the winter easier," Nan said.

"And our chauffeur and father are bringing more things," Donald added.

Tinned meats and vegetables and coffee and milk and tea, blankets, books and magazines, a roasted turkey, a big cake, jellies—it did not seem possible that their arms could have brought so much comfort and good cheer.

Captain Christy could not speak at first. Then he brushed a suspicious mist from his eyes and reached out his hand to Donald.

"I'm more than grateful," he said huskily. "I know it's all the little mates' doing." Then he turned to his crew.

"Clear the decks, you lazy lubbers!" he laughed. "The ship's going to set sail for Thanksgiving."

They all managed to crowd around the little deal table that had a piece of sail cloth spread over it for a tablecloth and a bunch of coral in the center to decorate it. A tin pot of coffee on the stove and the warming turkey perfumed the shack.

"Isn't it jolly!" Donald whispered to Nan as he sat on an upturned keg in front of his tin plate.

Ssh!" Nan said. "The Captain's going to ask a blessing."



"For strong boats and willing arms and for folks who remember us on the mainland, we give Thee thanks, our Lord of the sea," the Captain said.

There was a moment's hush and then Donald stood up.

"Father says I may give you this," he said, pulling from his pocket a leather box. He snapped it open and a flashing gold medal was disclosed on a satin cushion. "It's for you for being so brave, and he's arranged for you to come down to us

whenever you feel like it, for we've got a room for you in the Sailors' Snug Harbor. It's a beautiful place, just for sailors, with ships going by all the time, and green lawns, and everybody will want to see you and hear you tell stories." He stopped for breath.

"Three cheers for the Captain!" said one of his crew. They all shouted them, and Captain Christy pinned on his medal with shaking fingers.

"Thank you; thank you!" he said, tremulously, when they had quieted and begun on the turkey. "That Snug Harbor sounds fine. I'll come to it some day, but this Thanksgiving has put me in trim for a lot of storms yet, thanks to the little mates. That's how it puts heart in an old sailor when the mainland remembers him," he finished, gratefully.

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