

HOME
FOR
CHRISTMAS



By LLOYD C. DOUGLAS
Author of THE ROBE and THE BIG FISHERMAN

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HOME FOR CHRISTMAS

Books by

LLOYD C. DOUGLAS

HOME FOR CHRISTMAS

WHITE BANNERS

GREEN LIGHT

PRECIOUS JEOPARDY

FORGIVE US OUR TRESPASSES

MAGNIFICENT OBSESSION

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used as they
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The old Clayton house, which for many years had drowsed lonesomely through the holiday season, was crowded to capacity on Christmas night.

HOME FOR CHRISTMAS

BY
LLOYD C. DOUGLAS

Illustrated by David Hendrickson

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FIRST CHAPTER

CHAPTER ONE

SNUGGLING her finely modeled Clayton nose into the saddle of a platinum pince-nez, Mrs. Eldridge slit open the bulky envelope with her unused butter-spreader and muttered, ‘Nan will be up to something.’

Jason peered dutifully over the top of his crackling paper but noting his wife’s absorption promptly drew in his periscope and submerged again into the editorials. ‘Doubtless,’ he mumbled, for no reason at all, it being well known that he liked Nan and often commented on her good sense.

‘My talented sister,’ reported Gertrude, after a few moments of busy silence, ‘is now in the process of doing something I have feared for years. Listen to this, please. It’s pretty dreadful.’

Submissively folding the paper, Jason exhaled a sigh that puffed his cheeks, furtively peeked at his watch, and indicated that he was ready to receive the bad news.

‘We Claytons,’ continued Gertrude, in a grossly overdone imitation of her schoolma’am sister’s didactic manner, ‘are all going home for Christmas. Several days of it. We are to recover our childhood. Popcorn and maple taffy, evergreen and tinsel, holly and candles, sleds and snow-fights, songs and shouts, roast goose and a bad cold——’

‘Followed, perhaps, by pneumonia,’ assisted Jason, in the same key.

‘It’s no joking matter. You were never there in the winter.’ Gertrude shuddered. ‘I can’t think of anything I’d rather not do.’

‘Sounds quite jolly to me.’ Jason pushed his cup across the table and gave signs of becoming actively interested. ‘Might be a lot of fun. I’m willing to go if you want to.’

‘Thanks,’ crisply. ‘You’re not invited. None of the in-laws. No children. Just the five of us Claytons, happily skipping about through the old house as when we were little. Nan’s notion of a grand time. She never grew up. It will be a ghastly bore.’

‘Why do it, then?’ inquired Jason, reasonably enough, he thought. ‘You’re not really obliged to, are you?’

Gertrude Clayton Eldridge meditated for a moment with pursed lips and narrowed eyes, then slowly nodded a reluctant affirmative. By the terms of their parents' will, to which they had all agreed heartily, Nan, youngest of the family, had inherited the old home. Living in Detroit, Nan could run out there occasionally and see to things. It was expected that she would find a tenant for the farm and enjoy whatever income was to be had. Instead, she had put old Timmie Ruggles and his sister Ellen into the house as caretakers.

'As you know,' explained Gertrude, 'Nan has gone to a great deal of bother and expense to keep the old home intact. For years she has been coaxing us to meet her there in the summer. We've always made excuses. Now she's determined on a family reunion, this Christmas. There's her letter. Read it.'

Jason fumbled through the pages.

'Nan says you haven't all been together for nine years. Has it really been that long, Gertrude?'

'I'm afraid so. Not since Mother died. I suppose we all ought to be ashamed.'

'Umm—doubtless,' agreed Jason pre-occupiedly. 'She says here that Jim has consented to come.'

'That's just it. Jim never could arrange his affairs, and we couldn't have a family reunion without him. Either he wasn't able to leave Chicago because of some important business, or there were guests expected out in Winnetka. The rest of us never needed an excuse. Jim's was sufficient. Now, as you see, Nan has wangled a promise out of him, Madge having planned to spend the holidays in England with her sister.'

'But how about Claire?' wondered Jason. 'Surely she won't be able to leave Doc and the boys in Louisville to look after themselves on Christmas.'

'You'll come to that presently. Claire's boys are spending the holidays at their fraternity house, rehearsing for the student opera. No—Nan is going through with it this time. Has her heart set on it. Says we're all to be children again. Meaning, I suppose, that she'll expect us to act like a lot of half-wits.'

'I think,' drawled Jason, in his best legal manner, 'that your jocular brother Fred—I see he's coming all the way from San Diego—might be able to play that rôle without any make-up.'

‘Yes, there will be marbles in the soup,’ predicted Gertrude gravely, ‘and hickory nuts in the beds. All that sort of thing.’

‘I recall the dead frog we slept with on our honeymoon,’ said Jason, aware that he was stirring the embers of an ancient debate.

‘You brought that all on yourself,’ growled Gertrude, ‘trying to be urbane with your new relatives in the country. Told the youngster you’d never had a good look at a frog; so, he——’

‘Very obliging fellow, your brother. Well—it’s clear enough you’ll have to go. It wouldn’t be sporting of you to refuse, and spoil the fun by your absence. They will depend on you to be the life of the party.’

Mrs. Eldridge stiffened slightly and reminded her husband that he was rarely at his best when attempting to be funny, which made him laugh. Sobering instantly to match her dour mood, Jason remarked, practically, ‘We’ll consider that settled, then. Miriam and I will be expected to fend for ourselves, eh?’

‘No. That’s another thing. Miriam has been hinting again that she would like to spend the holidays in Atlanta with Doris. You remember she wanted to, last year, and we wouldn’t give her up.’

Jason remembered and thought they should let the child go. Both she and her roommate would be out of college by another Christmas. ‘Quite proper,’ he assented. ‘That leaves everybody taken care of—but me.’ He drew a brief sigh of resignation, implying that he stood ready to suffer for the pleasure of his loved ones. ‘But no matter about that,’ he added courageously. ‘I suppose I could run down to Bermuda for a week.’

‘Now wouldn’t that be just too bad!’ Gertrude accented each syllable with a peckish little nod. ‘The poor dear has to go away down to ugly old Bermuda while his pampered wife is having great fun wading snow to her knees.’

‘Oh—there’ll be a path, doubtless,’ chuckled Jason. He glanced at his watch. ‘May I go now, darling? I’ve a hard day ahead of me at the office.’

‘That’s good,’ murmured Gertrude absently. ‘You might ask one of your minions to make a reservation for me on The Wolverine for the twenty-second. We’re supposed to assemble on the twenty-third. Met by a bobsled at Wimple.’ She winced; then grinned a little. ‘Fred will not have seen any snow for a long time. He’ll probably freeze his ears.’

Jason said he hoped so. ‘And James—I fancy he hasn’t been cold for years. A heater in his limousine—and all that.’

‘It will be pretty hard on him, I’m afraid. Dear, dear! How that luxury-loving old thing will enjoy standing in line waiting his turn at the bath.’

‘There is a bath, then? I’d forgotten. I must go now. Good-by, sweetheart.’ He tipped back her head, caressed a graying curl at her temple with protective fingers, and received the customary pat on the back of his hand.

‘Take care of yourself today,’ said Gertrude.



HOME
SWEET
HOME

SECOND CHAPTER

CHAPTER TWO

ACCORDING to their agreement Gertrude, arriving in Detroit shortly after eight, waited at the Book-Cadillac until her sister Claire appeared half an hour later, rosy, radiant, and ready for breakfast.

‘I suppose you received a copy of Nan’s program,’ remarked Gertrude, when affectionate greetings had been exchanged and the coffee was poured.

Claire nodded, drew an enigmatic smile, and produced a typed sheet of ‘instructions’ from her handbag. ‘Some of this,’ she observed, spreading out the letter on the table between them, ‘isn’t going to be so easy to do. A good deal of water has gone over the dam since any of us lived the simple life.’

‘Well, I do sincerely hope it doesn’t turn out to be a silly farce. I don’t care to participate in any fun-making that ridicules the poverty we endured as children.’ Gertrude’s tone was so smug that her vivacious sister’s brown eyes danced with mischief. Nothing could be funnier, reflected Claire, than Gertrude’s efforts to forget that the Claytons had once been poor. It simply goaded one to pursue the subject.

‘I can’t recall that we fretted much about it,’ said Claire, complacently. ‘Perhaps it was good for us; helped us to appreciate what we have now.’

‘Maybe,’ conceded Gertrude. ‘But this idea of Nan’s that we try to put ourselves back into that state of mind—for a whole week—is too absurd. It’s inevitable that we will be making a joke of our memories; acting the clown over things that were dear to Father and Mother. I’m afraid Jim will think it’s in the worst possible taste. He’s such a serious old duffer.’

So—they fell to talking about brother Jim, their idol and patron saint, who had single-handedly hoisted them all out of their homespun and pointed the way to the prosperity they enjoyed. Jim had been eight when Gertrude was born. The others had come along biennially, all except Nan, wider spaced—and somewhat more indulged. Jim had been dishwashing his way through the state university when the others were still young. How lucky he had been from the very first, peddling that acetylene lamp during vacations, making money hand over fist. Then had come his little factory, its sudden expansion, the new windshield business. Rich at thirty, he had sent the girls to Vassar and Fred to Ann Arbor, all plentifully supplied with money. There

hadn't been very much he could do for Father and Mother, who preferred to live in their accustomed simplicity. He had paid off the mortgage, repaired the barn, built a windpump and a new sheepfold, but there wasn't much more they wanted.

'Remember the big fuss Jim stirred up,' asked Claire, laughing, 'when he bullied them into consenting to the bathroom?'

'We should be glad enough now,' declared Gertrude, 'that Jim persisted. And I suppose Nan must have modernized the house at least a little.'

'You needn't suppose anything of the kind,' chuckled Claire. 'Except for the removal of the partition between the parlor and living-room—I mean settin'-room—the old house is exactly as it was. But I don't care. It will be fun to renew the old days. Even the old inconveniences; we can put up with them for a few days. I wouldn't mind pumping water again, in a howling blizzard, struggling to keep my feet on the sheet of ice that covered the well. It was such a comfort to get back safely into the warm kitchen. And I hope the old kitchen smells just as it did—sort of a medley of charred spruce, spiced peaches, garden herbs, fresh bread, newly ironed linen, and the brown smell that seeped through from the smokehouse.'

'The brown smell,' echoed Gertrude, reminiscently. 'That certainly describes it. A brown, dry musty smell. All the old men's clothes smelled of it—on Sundays.'

'And at funerals. Remember how we always used to go to them?'

Gertrude shuddered momentarily, and replied with a brief smile, 'I'm afraid we found some of them quite entertaining. It makes me ashamed when I think of it.'

They returned to Nan's novel bulletin. This affair, Nan had remarked on page one, was not to be an ordinary family reunion. To capture the mood she hoped her brothers and sisters would want to share, there should be a minimum of talk about contemporary matters.

'Our spouses and offspring, if any,' admonished Nan's prospectus, 'are to be reported on with brevity, or—better still—not at all. We are returning home to be the children we once were—mighty poor ones, if you recall. There are to be no expensive presents exchanged. Very simple gifts, preferably of home manufacture, will be in order.

'We will have a tree, and as nobody in our neighborhood ever thought of buying one, it is presumed that the male members of the family will go into the woods and do their best. The tree will be decorated in the afternoon.

Gifts will be sneaked onto the tree in the night. Persons accidentally meeting on the cold stairway in their nightgowns will pretend blindness and invisibility.’

Gertrude interrupted to say, ‘No furnace?’

‘Don’t be silly!’ muttered Claire, impatient to continue.

‘At five on Christmas morning the house will be roused for the distribution of gifts. To insure against tardiness, the task of waking the family will be assigned to Fred. All sluggards are hereby notified that the management will not be held responsible for any discomforts incident thereunto.

‘On Christmas night an entertainment will be given, attended by adult neighbors and former schoolmates. Appropriate pieces will be spoken. If any member of the Clayton family turns up without preparation, a piece will be provided by the committee in charge. Miss Packer, still wiry at eighty-three, has promised to preside; and, as elderly people have no difficulty remembering what they did while young, participants in this show—all of whom have been warmly paddled and tweaked by this ancient pedagogue—should bear it in mind that “Old Packy” wouldn’t be above boxing an inattentive ear.’

‘Have you decided what you’re going to do—at the entertainment?’ inquired Gertrude, anxiously.

‘I think it would be jolly if we three girls put on that little dialogue about “Waiting for Santa.” We did it once at the Sunday School tree. It closed, I remember, with our singing “Jingle Bells” at the top of our lungs.’

‘Now *wouldn’t* that be jolly?’ moaned Gertrude. ‘Seems to me that’s carrying things a bit too far. Sounds rather sacrilegious to me.’

‘Trudie—you’re really too funny for words.’ Claire laughed delightedly. ‘I can see that this is going to be pretty rough on you.’

‘Are you intending to call me “Trudie” while we’re up here?’

‘Why not? That was your name, wasn’t it, before the family began putting on airs? Look here, old gal’—Claire held up a warning finger—‘if you’re planning to act the snoot, you’ve let yourself in for a nightmare! Fred and Nan will see to that.’

‘And if Nannie and Fritz don’t see to it,’ observed Gertrude dryly, ‘I presume our Clairie will. I hate to contemplate what good old Jim is going to think of all this nonsense. He’s always so dignified and businesslike.’

‘Pooh!’ scoffed Claire. ‘He’ll love it!’

THIRD CHAPTER

CHAPTER THREE

NAN CLAYTON, attractive in a brown fur-trimmed ensemble that accented the tawny hair, and attended by a tall young fellow with a big C on his sweater, was waiting on the station platform when the snow-covered local—spouting billows of pungent steam from every valve and coupling—lumbered to a stop at the little Wimple station.

An impish smile puckered her lips as she watched an obliging trainman descend the steps with both arms and hands full of swagger baggage. She glanced up at her youthful companion and gave him a slow wink. Everything, she reflected happily, was proceeding as she had hoped.

‘Claire, my dear,’ Gertrude had confided, after the red-cap in Detroit—apologetic because there was no parlor-car—had disposed the baggage in the racks above their heads, ‘I have a feeling that Nan purposely recommended this awful train.’

‘I rather like it,’ Claire had replied. ‘I haven’t been in a day-coach since I don’t know when. Takes me back to the days when a train-ride was high adventure. There’s something about the smell of it—coal cinders, red plush, varnish, all scrambled together—that erases half a lifetime.’

Gertrude regarded her with a sardonic grin and observed that this poky train would probably erase the other half before they arrived. Eventually, however, the trainman was shouting Wimple!—exactly as in the old days, with such heavy stress on the first syllable that a bored traveler, unacquainted with the country, might be thought to say to himself, ‘Odd name for a town—*Wimp!*’

They came down the slippery steps gingerly and found themselves warmly embraced by their sister.

‘You remember Ruth Meade, girls,’ said Nan, indicating the handsome young man who was gathering up their baggage.

‘Of course—but I wouldn’t have known her,’ chaffed Claire. ‘Her son, I suppose.’

‘Right,’ he said. ‘Jack Bailey.’

‘He drove me over,’ explained Nan. She hugged her sisters again. ‘So glad,’ she cried. ‘So glad you’re really here. I can hardly believe it’s true.’

‘Haven’t the boys come?’ asked Claire, as Nan led the way to the bobsled. ‘I thought they were getting in early—from Chicago.’

‘It’s too funny,’ shouted Nan. ‘Climb in and I’ll tell you all about it. . . . No, Gertrude, there’s no mounting step—if that’s what you’re looking for. You climb right in, same as ever. I suppose it has been a long time since you bared a leg, going over the side of a bobsled.’

They sat down on the straw-strewn floor and Jack tucked the robes about them. Claire drew up the familiar old buffalo-pelt close to her face and, with half-closed eyes, drew a long breath.

‘Oh, you—and your smells!’ muttered Gertrude. ‘This woman,’ she added, in an aside to Nan, ‘has only one sense-organ that’s really active.’

‘But, darling!’ said Claire. ‘It’s the same old robe that we used to play on, with our dolls!’

Jack had shouted to Timmie Ruggles’s shaggy nags and they had stirred from their apathy. The heavy sled-runners squeaked in the frozen snow, and the expedition moved forward to the tinkle of sleigh-bells—the same old sleigh-bells; big, open-throated bells, inherited from Grandpa Clayton. ‘Hundred years old, probably,’ Father had said.

‘Yes, the boys came, all right,’ Nan was explaining. ‘Timmie met them early this morning. . . . Slowly, Jack, through the town, please. . . . I want you to be nice to this boy,’ she whispered, drawing her sisters into a huddle. ‘He’s a pet of mine. Senior at Cornell. Mighty lonesome here through the holidays. . . . Look! There’s the old Hardgrove place. Remember how you always loved that iron deer in the yard, Claire?’

‘Oh—they’ve torn down the old schoolhouse,’ lamented Gertrude, ‘and built a big ugly new one. Isn’t that a pity?’

‘So—on the way from the train,’ continued Nan, ‘the boys were inquiring of Timmie if he had any old-fashioned homemade sausage on hand, and he confessed that he hadn’t, and they badgered him into promising he would butcher a pig. They were so full of enthusiasm over this exploit that they volunteered to help.’

‘It’s a great lot of help they’d be,’ put in Gertrude. ‘Fancy their imposing on that good old man with promises to assist in a butchering!’

‘Well—you wait till I tell you the rest of it!’ Nan’s eyes sparkled with delight as she craftily built up the suspense. ‘You know, old Timmie has severe seizures of lumbago. They come on, unexpectedly, when there’s anything like heavy work to be done.’

‘This,’ murmured Claire, ‘sounds as if it had great possibilities. Hurry, please.’

‘So—the three of them went out and killed the pig. But it seems that when Timmie was lifting the pig into the big scalding-kettle he wrenched his back. That quite put him out of business, of course, so the boys have had to finish the job. They were in the thick of it when I left. You should see them! They have literally mopped that pig—as a whole, and in its various parts—all over the back lot and the back steps and the woodhouse and the smokehouse and the kitchen——’

‘James?’ queried Gertrude, dizzily. ‘Do you mean to say that James ——?’

‘And having the time of his life!’ exulted Nan. ‘You probably won’t recognize him. Rubber boots and a slicker. Smear’d to his ears. Fred’s worth seeing, too. When I left them, he had just succeeded in breaking the handle off the sausage-grinder and was starting across the fields to borrow one from the Hunters.’

‘The Hunters!’ Claire echoed the name as if it were haunted. ‘I hadn’t thought of them for years.’ She laughed, reminiscently. ‘Fred ought to know the way, as many times as he sneaked over there to see Jean. What a pretty thing she was! Whatever became of her?’

‘Memphis. Married well, too. Widow now. You’re not expected to know this’—Nan lowered her voice—‘Jean is home visiting her mother over Christmas.’

‘Wouldn’t it be funny?’ speculated Claire, glancing at Gertrude, who scoffed, ‘Nonsense! That old bachelor!’

‘That’s the kind you want to look out for,’ declared Nan.

‘Well—you ought to know,’ said Claire. ‘I think the whole situation is delicious. Local boy makes good. Returns home sporting a fortune and a forty-inch belt. Widowed sweetheart comes back to renew old scenes. He takes the familiar path to her door. But—ah—how different their lots! Once he was but a barefoot boy with patches on his pants, and she nothing but a little ninny in pigtails——’

‘And now,’ broke in Nan, ‘he arrives magnificently arrayed in Timmie Ruggles’s old cap and bearskin mittens and—honestly, friends—you never saw a worse-looking pair of old felt boots. Blue denim overalls. Grimy old mackinaw.’

‘And finds the girl of his dreams,’ declaimed Gertrude, melodramatically, ‘no longer the shy little nobody of yesteryear, but proudly feeding her mother’s chickens, with an old shawl tied under her chin. If either of you knows anything funnier than that, I don’t want to hear about it. I don’t believe I could bear it.’ She hadn’t laughed so hilariously for twenty years. Then, sobering, Gertrude shaded her eyes against the dazzle on the snowdrifts and stared ahead where a wisp of grayish smoke curled from a chimney. ‘There it is,’ she murmured, tenderly. ‘Thanks, Nan, for planning our reunion. It is a dear old place. You were very sweet to keep it for us.’

FOURTH CHAPTER

CHAPTER FOUR

THE CLAYTON kitchen had been continuously in use for sixty-five years. On special occasions when there were many guests or a threshing-crew, the kitchen was temporarily cluttered and in disorder. But it had never looked quite like this before.

The elder Clayton, astride a chair, with an apron tied under his chin, was feeding the greasy sausage-stuffer while Fred—at the disbursing end of the machine—coaxed the spiced meat from the tin spout and into the slippery casing; a loathsome job, he deposed, if ever there was one.

It was now three o'clock. The sausage factory was in full blast, making no threat of closing down for some time to come. Ellen Ruggles, who had resolutely abstained from comment, viewed the scene with pursed lips. The sisters came and went, murmured condolences, exchanged winks behind their brothers' backs, and wondered whether these weary men would ever be able to renovate themselves sufficiently to be accepted again in decent society.



THE SAUSAGE FACTORY WAS IN FULL BLAST, MAKING NO THREAT OF CLOSING DOWN FOR SOME TIME TO COME

Ellen Ruggles was no chatterbox. This virtue was the product of a natural taciturnity combined with the untimely loss of all her teeth. She was less communicative than Old Shep.

At rare intervals, however, Ellen briefly emerged from her habitual silence to report dismaying news or utter gloomy forecasts, and she had just now remarked to Nan that the buckwheat cakes tomorrow morning wouldn't be near as good as what their Maw used ter make. This dour prediction, ostensibly confided to Nan, was overheard—as Ellen had hoped—and great consternation prevailed.

Exasperated by his endless labors, James turned to inquire with alarming ferocity, 'And why not?'

'Boughten yeast,' explained Ellen, not displeased at being able to tell the important Mr. Clayton something he didn't know. 'Yer Maw never held with boughten yeast. She made it right here in this kitchen.'

'It's a fact, Jim,' remembered Gertrude. 'Hops and potatoes. They fermented—or something.'

'Very well.' James made a grave gesture with sticky fingers outspread. 'That's the way it shall be done. Ellen, you may prepare the yeast according to the old formula, please.'

Ellen, rummaging in the capacious depths of a cupboard-shelf for a mislaid bag of peppercorns, mumbled an inaudible reply.

'What?' demanded James, a bit testily.

'She says,' volunteered Nan, 'that she doesn't know how; remembers nothing about it except that it takes too long.'

There was another briefer mumble from Ellen, still head-and-shoulders in the cupboard.

'And too much bother,' translated Nan, suppressing a chuckle.

'Nothing,' pontificated James, without looking up, 'is too much bother when a great cause is at stake.'

Another laconic mutter came from the cupboard.

'Too much muss,' relayed Nan, steadying her voice.

'We love muss,' sighed Fred, glancing at Gertrude who soberly confirmed this statement with an impressive bow.

After a considerable pause, there came a more voluminous and truculent torrent of gabble from Ellen which threw Nan and Gertrude into a gale of laughter.

'What was that last?' called James, grinning feebly.

Ellen, at bay, faced them with defiance.

‘I said,’ she growled, ‘that you two men is a-turnin’ this kitchen into a dirty slaughter-house—’n’ I don’t care who knows it.’ Awed by her own impudence, Ellen dabbed at her eyes with the corner of her apron. In deference to her emotion, the hilarity subsided. Nan slipped an arm about her comfortingly.

‘We don’t blame you, dear, for being upset,’ she said, thickly, on the very verge of popping off into another peal of laughter. ‘You must try to be patient with these people. They would be glad enough to escape from this mess if they could.’

Old Timmie, lured to the scene, was leaning against the doorjamb, grinning foolishly. ‘They’s like the feller,’ he drawled, ‘that caught a bear by the tail and dassent let go.’

Straightening his aching spine, Fred fixed the old man with a baleful glance and reminded him that he was far too ill to be at large, to which James added, with dignity, ‘My brother speaks truthfully, Mr. Ruggles. I suggest that you resume your lumbago.’

Claire, who had been up in the attic, examining the ancient stock of baubles for the Christmas tree, now entered with a pensive face and tear-smearing eyes. Surveying the ludicrous situation with a little laugh, she remarked softly, ‘You poor things.’

Ellen, still sniffing but eager to reinstate herself, now remembered that old Granmaw Hunter often made yeast and might have some on hand. ‘I’ll send Timmie over to borrow a set,’ she said.

‘They come in sets?’ inquired James.

‘Don’t be an ass!’ admonished Fred.

‘Timmie isn’t well enough to go,’ said Claire. ‘Here, Fred, I’ll take your place, and you trot over to Hunter’s for the yeast.’ She untied his apron and elbowed him aside, with his quite obvious approval.

‘He has been there once today,’ grumbled James. ‘He’ll wear out his welcome. You’d better let me go. I’m in great need of some fresh air and exercise.’

‘No,’ said Nan, firmly. ‘You’re the only one in the family who knows how to operate this stuffing-machine, Jim. I heard you say so. Let little Freddie go for the yeast. I think he wants to, anyway.’

Fred's eyes anxiously explored his sisters' teasing smiles. Then, wrinkling his nose into a derisive snoot, he impressively bestowed on each of them a 'that's-for-you' bob of the head, accompanied by an unpleasant noise produced by folding the upper lip tightly over the nether lip, after which he retired from the field amid much merriment. Weary-eyed, James glanced about in mystification, and remarked, 'I think I've been missing something.' Gertrude bent over him to whisper, 'We'll tell you presently. It's very amusing.'

Moved to pity for their wretched brother, the three of them now came to his aid. Fred could be heard overhead, splashing. After a while, he came down the creaking stairs, let himself out by the front door, circled the house, and was observed on his way across the fields. In an hour, the sisters and Ellen had extricated James from his predicament. He rose with a groan and staggered upstairs to find the bath-tub rimmed with lard.

'My brother,' said James solemnly to Nan who had followed hard on his heels, 'is a dirty pig.'

'Yes, darling,' cooed Nan. 'Here are some nice towels for you.'

'I hope the sausage will be good,' said James, wistfully.

'At least,' said Nan, 'there'll be enough for everybody.'

FIFTH CHAPTER

CHAPTER FIVE

‘WELL, children’—Nan’s tone was managerial—‘we have hard work to do today, so if nobody wants any more coffee—’

‘I’ll have some,’ said Fred, slipping a wink across the table to his brother.

‘You always were a lazy dog,’ drawled Claire, to which Fred dryly retorted, ‘You’re a pretty one to be going about accusing people of laziness. I remember the bad stomach-aches you used to have when it was time to wash the dishes.’

‘Pardon me,’ contradicted Nan, ‘but that was Gertrude. It was Claire’s wrist that frequently incapacitated her. She had sprained it, uncapping a fruit jar.’

Throughout their leisurely breakfast, they had been nagging one another, effecting an almost perfect re-enactment of youthful spats long since forgotten. Poor old Ellen, unable to understand, fluttered about the table, gallantly endeavoring to distract them from their quarrels by pressing more cakes and sausage upon the most active belligerents, her eyes troubled with apprehension while the free-for-all battle raged; so different, she thought, from their tender talk last night around the crackling fire when they had laughed and wept and laughed again. What a pity they should be so huffy and easily offended this morning.

‘Now for the jobs,’ continued Nan. ‘Gertrude will dress the turkey.’ All present chuckled at this except the victim, Fred gleefully remarking, ‘You’ll be starting from scratch, too, Trudie, for the old bird still has all its feathers on. I saw it.’

‘Claire,’ Nan went on, ‘will bake mince pies, rolls, and a cake decorated with red cinnamon drops.’

‘I haven’t seen a cake like that for thirty-five years,’ said Jim. ‘Do it, Claire, if you can.’

‘Of course she can, while you and Fred are getting the tree, one about eight feet high, and be careful you don’t break it up. I suppose you boys still know how to harness a team.’

‘Can’t Timmie do that?’ whined Fred, in such a faithful imitation of his own indolence at fifteen that they all grinned appreciatively, Nan observing, tartly, ‘Jim will get out the horses then, while you are carrying in enough wood to last through the day and night. Timmie’s back is bad again.’

‘So is mine,’ said Jim. ‘I met with an accident. I’m afraid I’ll not be able to swing an ax. But I can drive the team and select the tree, if Fred will cut it down and load it on the sled.’

In reply to Gertrude’s query about the nature and extent of his injury, her elder brother drew a long face and gave a full report of it. He wasn’t accustomed to sleeping with a hippopotamus. Had chosen to sleep in front, he said, and Fred had monopolized so much of the bed that he had thought he might have better luck on the other side. So he had climbed over the sleeping monster who immediately encroached on him again by rolling to the rear. ‘Then I grew desperate,’ Jim went on, ‘and bracing both feet against the brute, with my back against the cold wall, I pushed with all my might.’

‘And the bed skidded along the floor,’ assisted Fred, ‘and old Gotrocks fell through the crack. Served him right, too. It was a foul thing for a man to do to his only brother.’

Ellen admitted a caller during the merriment stirred by this narrative, and brought him to the dining-room door. It was young Bailey, explaining that he had had an early errand in Wimple and the station-agent had asked him to bring out a telegram for Mrs. Eldridge. Nan invited him to draw up a chair and poured him a cup of coffee. Gertrude, perplexed, tore open the message.

‘That terrible child!’ she exclaimed. ‘She’s arriving this afternoon at four. Her college friend has come down with measles. Miriam was to spend the holidays with her. Jason has sailed for Bermuda. Naturally, Miriam decided to come here. Whatever will we do with her? I’m awfully sorry this has turned up, Nan, but I don’t see what else she was to do.’ Gertrude paused, consulting their faces for sympathetic approval.

‘Of course,’ consented Jim, cordially. ‘Don’t you worry about that. We’ll find a place for her.’

‘Jack,’ said Nan, ‘would you be good enough to run in and meet Miss Miriam Eldridge with your pretty cutter? I don’t suppose she ever had a sleigh ride.’

The boy was trying to put just the right degree of restraint into his quite obvious pleasure over this commission when Fred grumbled, ‘I hope

Gertrude won't mind my saying that I don't like that idea at all. We came here expressly to recover the rough and uncouth old days of our childhood. We were met by a pair of sleepy horses and a bobsled half full of straw. And now the party is to be spoiled by the importation of another guest who's too good for the old rig and has to be brought here in style. She'll get the wrong idea of this party, from the beginning. Not only will she be bored to death but she won't fit in. I suggest that Jack meets her with the old bobsled.'

'So do I,' agreed Gertrude unexpectedly. 'Would you mind doing that, Jack? Just for fun, you know.'

Jack regarded her with a sickly smile and said he supposed he could do it.

'I don't think it's quite fair,' protested Claire. 'I'm sure I wouldn't want to ask one of my boys to do it, and I don't believe they would, either, not even for the pleasure of meeting their pretty cousin.'

'Who ever saw a pretty cousin?' scoffed Fred. 'This is an entirely different matter.'

'All the more reason,' Claire contended, 'why Jack might not want to go for Miriam in the bobsled.'

Feeling that he had had about all of this that was good for him, Jack rose, repeated that he would meet Miss Eldridge, and moved toward the door, Fred following him. On the front verandah, Fred hooked a beguiling finger into Jack's lapel, and, lowering his voice, said, with the air of a conspirator, 'Now, see here, my son—if you would like to make yourself immortal in the regard of this bunch of lunatics, put on the toughest old clothes you can find when you go for that girl. If you haven't any that are bad enough, I know where there are some. I had 'em on, yesterday, myself. There's an old overcoat hanging out in the smokehouse that fastens with a big safety-pin, the kind they use with horse blankets. I wore it to butcher a pig. I'll let you wear it today. You'll look awfully funny in it.'

'Yes,' growled Jack, 'I'm almost sure I would, from your description of it. But I'm not going to! If you people think that what you're doing is funny, go to it—and have a good time. But I don't see why you should want to make a monkey out of *me*!'

'Now—see here,' pleaded Fred. 'Be a sport.'

'Well,' agreed Jack, reluctantly, overruled by the persuasive voice of the experienced businessman from California who, according to his competitors, had been known to sell a man a dead mouse to wear on his watch-chain.

‘Well—I’ll do it, then; but, I say, Mr. Clayton, I’m not expected to be a boob all the time she’s here, am I?’

‘Far from it, me lad!’ boomed Fred, patting him on the shoulder. ‘Just until she gets the idea that this isn’t a house party at the Van Upsofars on the Hudson. Thanks! Very, very much! I’ll help you dress when you come for the sled.’

Returning to the table, Fred found his brother and sisters trying to recall the Christmas gifts of their childhood. Jim had once won a pair of skates as a premium for getting one new subscription to ‘The Youth’s Companion.’ Finding them too small, he had given them to his little brother a month later as a Christmas present.

‘The fact that Freddie had seen the skates and tried them on at the time I received them didn’t seem to depreciate the gift,’ recalled Jim.

‘They were too big for me,’ muttered Fred. ‘Everything I had was too big for me. When Father bought pants for me he always saw to it that there would be plenty of room to grow. They never began to fit until they were worn out. Then I’d start in on another new pair that was intended for the fellow I was going to be by next fall if I kept my health. My shoes were too big. My hat was too big. Everything hung loose on me.’

‘Well,’ drawled Claire, ‘at least you don’t have that to worry about any more.’

‘One time Trudie sent ten cents to a novelty company in Connecticut,’ said Nan, ‘and received a parcel of miscellaneous trinkets which saw her through the Christmas season. There was a trick toy, a coral ring, a sheet of scrap-pictures, and a dozen calling cards——’

‘And one “hidden name” card,’ added Gertrude. ‘I gave Fred the trick, Claire the ring, Nan the pictures, and Jim the cards. I signed his name to the order, so it would be printed on the cards, and then intercepted the mail when it arrived addressed to him. Rather crafty, I thought, for a woman of twelve.’

‘We could always count on knitted scarfs from Mother,’ said Jim.

‘“Mufflers,” you mean,’ amended Gertrude. ‘And Father came through with a bright new silver dollar for each of us.’

‘That wasn’t Christmas,’ corrected Claire. ‘It was on New Year’s morning that we got the dollar. Father gave us oranges for Christmas. Remember the time Fred walked all the way to Wimple to buy a pocketbook

so he'd have some place to carry his New Year's gift—and paid a dollar for it?’

‘The fellow always was a wastrel,’ muttered Jim. ‘Great trader. One day he started out to see what he could get in exchange for a new pair of boots that hurt his heels. He kept swapping all day and when he got home at night the result of his day's trading was an old jackknife. Thrifty chap, our Fred.’

‘But there was something pathetic about the little fellow,’ reflected Claire, almost as if they were assembled to bury him. ‘One time I could have cried for him. Some boy had caught a baby rabbit in the woods and Fred bought it for a quarter. He walked five miles to get the rabbit, worked a whole Saturday making a pen for it, and it got away while he was transferring it from the little box.’

Fred did not join in the general smile. ‘Yes,’ he sighed, ‘things always slipped through my fingers.’

‘All but that time you planted twenty acres of orange trees and they all grew up to be oil derricks,’ consoled Jim. ‘Seems to me you've done fairly well.’

‘No—everything I really wanted got away,’ persisted Fred, doggedly.

‘Perhaps,’ ventured Nan, slyly, ‘you've been too easily discouraged. Who knows but that rabbit is still waiting to be trapped and petted . . . And that reminds me—one of you boys must take that sausage-grinder back to the Hunters. They might be needing it.’

‘I'll do it,’ volunteered Jim. ‘Fred borrowed it. No more than fair that I should carry it home.’

‘Nonsense!’ declared Fred, magnanimously. ‘That's my job. I'll see it through.’

‘First time in my recollection,’ said Gertrude, ‘that Fred ever offered to go on an errand.’ All eyes drifted in the direction of the plump Californian who rewarded their inquiry with an acid grin.

‘If I may modestly make an exception of myself,’ said Fred, carefully extinguishing his cigarette in an abandoned pool of maple syrup on his plate, ‘we are perhaps the most clever and cunning family that ever mobilized in celebration of the Yuletide.’ He paused reflectively while they all encouraged him with bright eyes and expectant smiles.

‘Proceed, please,’ approved Nan. ‘This is wonderful!’

‘In order to save you the mental fatigue,’ continued Fred, ‘of thinking up any more mysterious wisecracks, I’ll tell you that I have had two pleasant little visits with Jean and am just now leaving here for another. And she is coming over here, tomorrow night, to attend Nan’s silly entertainment. But I warn you that if you girls are planning to do any teasing while Jeannie is here, there’s going to be a few ears boxed and some handfuls of hair pulled! I like a joke as well as anybody, but I’m not going to have Jeannie persecuted. You’ll see!’

‘Jim,’ said Gertrude, tenderly, ‘I wouldn’t have believed it possible that we could recover, at our age, so much of the simple affection of our childhood.’

‘It certainly sounds like old times, Trudie,’ agreed Jim. ‘I say, Fritz,’ he added, ‘while you’re over there, ask Granmaw Hunter how you make souse.’

‘I don’t make souse,’ growled Fred.

SIXTH CHAPTER

CHAPTER SIX

IT was with some misgivings that Jack Bailey had permitted the festive Claytons to array him outlandishly for his masquerade. He had thought it prudent not to mention, at home, the nature of his excursion to Wimple. No doubt his mother would have understood the joke, though it was unlikely that she would have thought it a very funny one.

His father, he knew, wouldn't have liked the idea at all. Samuel Bailey had always been sensitive to jests and jokes that ridiculed country people. It made him pretty sore, at the movies, when the farmer shambled into the scene, drawling bad grammar and chewing a straw and grinning like a half-wit.

Quietly proud as he was to see Jack taking advantage of the refinements offered by city life, it sometimes distressed him a little to observe the increasing difference between their speech, habits, and clothes.

Jack had experienced twinges of conscience when his father had helped him harness the roan three-year-old 'Sprite' to the trim cutter. And when, as he waved a hand, his father had shouted, 'Have a good time, young feller!' he decided that he would tell the Claytons he had changed his mind about posing as a bumpkin for the entertainment of their girl.

However, upon arrival at the Claytons', he found them all so expectant and enthusiastic that it was difficult to go back on his promise. He tried to say he wouldn't do it. He considered telling them how his father might feel, but was checked by the thought that they might form the wrong impression of the grandest man in the world. His father was not a grouch or a kill-joy, and the Claytons must not be led to think so.

While he debated what to say, they clustered about him with the fantastic articles of his costume. Through the window he saw the shaggy old horses, attached to the big bobsled, their drowsy heads drooping. Timmie was leading the restive 'Sprite' to the stable. The whole affair had gone much too far for a dignified retreat. In a half-hour they had rigged him for the adventure and he was on his way.

As he neared the station it suddenly occurred to Jack that it would now be up to him to play the part of the traditional yokel convincingly, or the girl

would immediately become suspicious, and the joke would be on himself. It wasn't quite enough to be dressed in the old felt boots, the mangy overcoat, the moth-eaten bearskin cap and barnyard mittens. He must make his talk and manners fit his clothes.

The white-jacketed porter carried out her bags and put them down on the snowy platform. And there she was, one of the most lovely creatures imaginable, beautifully dressed for a drive through the park in a heated limousine. There was a gardenia on the lapel of her fur coat. Brown curls fringed the rakish little hat. Brown eyes glanced about inquiringly as the train, after its momentary halt, resumed its journey.

Knowing that a diffident country boy would not come forward very promptly, Jack had decided to be tardy about making himself known. This part, he found, was not hard to play. It required the utmost resolution to approach and address this super-girl in his humiliating garb. Beneath old Timmie's cast-off overcoat, Jack's heart speeded.

Grinning shyly, he ambled toward her, picked up her baggage, and drawled, 'I guess yer Mis' Eldridge's girl, aint yuh?' Miriam surveyed his six feet of sturdiness from the old boots to the frowsy cap, and nodded. Her wide eyes were perplexed.

Leaving her to toddle after him on high heels, Jack led the way, with long strides, boots clumping, to the huge bobsled.

'Yer maw 'lowed yuh might git cold feet.' He handed her a disreputable pair of Ellen Ruggles's goloshes. 'Think they'll be big enough fer yuh?' He guffawed unpleasantly, taking pains to avoid her eyes for he doubted if he could face their incredulity without giving himself away.

Miriam surveyed the dreadful goloshes with distaste. 'I don't think I shall need them,' she said, politely. 'Thanks—just as much. Now—how does one get into this thing?'



GRINNING SHYLY, HE AMBLED TOWARD HER, PICKED UP HER BAGGAGE AND DRAWLED, 'I GUESS YER MIS' ELDRIDGE'S GIRL, AIN'T YUH?'

'Yuh have to be lifted in,' explained Jack, pleased with his own impudence. He suddenly rejoiced that they had cast him for this character part. Gathering her up into his rangy arms, he made a leisurely task of lifting her over the side of the sled, gently depositing her in the straw.

'Thank you,' said Miriam, with dignity, as Jack released her. 'You are very kind. Did you meet my mother in this funny thing?'

He nodded, and tucked the robes about her.

'And you lifted her in—and Aunt Claire?' she asked, guilelessly.

'Naw,' replied Jack. 'They clumb in by theirsels. They's just country folks—same as me. You set here fer a minute, and I'll git yer trunk.'

Miriam studied him from beneath long lashes. 'Are you meaning to leave me here—with the horses untied?'

'They aint never run away yit,' declared Jack. 'They's got lots o' faults, but that aint one of 'em.'

Returning presently with her steamer trunk on a shoulder that had done a great deal of damage at left tackle, Jack dumped it into the sled, hooked a long leg over the side of the ungainly box, and chirruped to Timmie's steaming plugs. Aware that they were headed toward home, the horses trotted stiff-leggedly past the little clump of stores where loungers regarded the old bobsled and its occupants with candid interest. Jack made a point of not turning his head in their direction.

On the crosswalk in front of the post office a well-dressed man of forty-plus halted to let them pass. The horses slowed to a plod, in spite of their driver's efforts to urge them on.

'Hello, Jack!' hailed the pedestrian. 'Merry Christmas!'

Timmie's team halted in their tracks, pleased over the prospect of a neighborly visit.

'Happy to see you, Doctor Collins,' lied Jack, amiably. 'And a Merry Christmas to you, sir!'

'When did you get home? I see they've put you to work.' Doctor Collins chuckled. 'Last time I met you—at the fraternity convention—you didn't look like that, my boy. It's your last year at Cornell, isn't it?'

Jack nodded; then, turning to Miriam, he tugged off Timmie's old cap.

'Miss Eldridge,' he said, suavely, 'may I present Professor Collins?' Miriam bowed, displaying pretty teeth and a pair of deep dimples. 'Miss Eldridge,' explained Jack, 'is here to visit the Claytons. Her mother, Mrs. Jason Eldridge of New York, was Gertrude Clayton. Doubtless you remember her. I hope we will see you again, sir, before the holidays are over.' He slapped Timmie's horses vigorously with the lines, shouted back something about having to push along, so Miss Eldridge wouldn't get cold; and when the bells were jingling again he turned to gaze upon his mystified passenger.

'That was old man Collins,' he called, resuming his twang. 'He's come home fer to see his folks. He teaches law er sumpin, down t' Ann Arbor. . . . Git along, there; darn ye! I never seen sich good-fer-nothin' animals.'

Miriam disentangled herself from the blankets and made her way to the forward end of the bobsled. Gazing up into his impassive face, she asked, soberly, 'What is this game called, little one? Perhaps it's something I might learn to play. I'm fairly good—if I know the rules.' She gave him a smile that speeded his pulse.

'Sorry,' muttered Jack. 'It wasn't my doing. You may be sure of that. Your own family schemed it. I'll tell you how it happened. . . . Look out! You'd better hold on to something, if you're going to stand up.' Timmie's nags had remembered it was nearly time to eat.

Miriam tucked a hand under the old ragged sleeve and clung tightly as the old sled careened and bounced over the frozen snow. Not averse to a rough voyage, under these pleasant circumstances, Jack gave the homing

horses their heads, and continued his explanation of the comedy he had been urged to play.

‘Listen!’ Miriam tightened her fingers on his arm. ‘Wouldn’t it be fun if I had some perfectly awful clothes, like yours, to arrive in?’

Jack shook his head.

‘I don’t mean old rags and tatters,’ amended Miriam. ‘Our people are pretending they are youngsters again. I think it would be wonderful if I could go into the house wearing the sort of things people dressed in when my mother was my age. I don’t suppose any of the neighbors could help me to some old-fashioned clothes; could they? Would they?’ Her face was beaming with inquiry.

‘I expect my mother could find a lot of old things in our attic,’ said Jack. Then, quickly repentant, he added, ‘But I doubt whether she would want to. You see——’ He broke off, unable to explain his objection.

‘Why not?’ coaxed Miriam. ‘Your mother would think it a real lark.’

After all, reflected Jack, why not? His mother would understand. His father wouldn’t be there, for he was driving over beyond Lester to look at a Jersey; wouldn’t be back until after dark.

‘Well,’ he consented, doubtfully, ‘we’ll ask her. I’d hate to see you dressed in a lot of old rubbish.’ He paused. ‘And yet—it would be interesting to see how much of it you could pile on, and still be lovely.’ To cover his retreat from this audacity, Jack yelled at the team, and grumbled, ‘These are the slowest horses in all this part of the country.’

‘I suppose they would seem so,’ replied Miriam, dryly, ‘to anyone who works as fast as you do.’ She teased him with a reproving smile which he met with sober eyes.

‘I meant that,’ he muttered.

‘Thank you,’ said Miriam.

They were turning into the driveway now. The snow had drifted across the path to the house.

‘You mustn’t try to walk in those thin shoes,’ said Jack, extending his arms.

‘I should have known better,’ said Miriam, a bit flustered as he lifted her out. Her brown curls brushed his cheek.

‘I’ll forgive you,’ he replied, warmly. ‘I don’t mind carrying you.’
Miriam felt that this was the truth.

SEVENTH CHAPTER

CHAPTER SEVEN

‘YOU’LL find my mother is just a bit shy,’ Jack had warned as he lowered Miriam to her feet on the verandah, to which she had replied, ‘Oh?—so that’s where you get it.’

It was a fact. Mrs. Bailey was not accustomed to having modish strangers drop in with the request that they be shown to the attic for a glimpse of her obsolete finery.

‘I’m afraid your mother wouldn’t like to see you dressed that way,’ she objected quietly. ‘You have such pretty clothes. And I haven’t seen your mother for many years. It isn’t as if we were well acquainted—any more. Perhaps you’d better go just as you are, and if they want to make you look like a ragamuffin——’

Miriam’s face expressed so much disappointment that Mrs. Bailey paused.

‘She really wants to, Mother,’ wheedled Jack.

‘It would have been great fun,’ murmured Miriam.

‘Very well, then,’ sighed Mrs. Bailey. ‘But I hope you will explain to your people that it wasn’t my idea.’

Once she had reluctantly yielded to their whim, Ruth Bailey began to see the amusing possibilities of this occasion. Leading the way to the rambling garret, she inspected a row of old-fashioned coats and opened an antique trunk filled with all manner of discarded dresses, scarfs, hoods, shawls. Miriam bent over the trunk beside her, so closely their shoulders touched. It was with smiling interest that Jack watched them, so near together.

‘Look at the funny silk gloves,’ cried Miriam, ‘without any fingers.’

‘Mitts,’ said Mrs. Bailey, smiling. ‘Didn’t you ever see any mitts before? We’ll catch our death up here in the cold. Bring along an armful—you two—and we’ll go down to my room.’

Descending to the comparative warmth of Mrs. Bailey’s bed-room, they spread out their discoveries, Jack excusing himself presently and leaving them alone together. A pair of remarkable women, he reflected. His father,

muffled to his ears in a huge bearskin coat, was coming into the living-room from the kitchen.



LEADING THE WAY TO THE RAMBLING GARRET, SHE INSPECTED A ROW OF OLD-FASHIONED COATS AND OPENED AN ANTIQUE TRUNK.

‘Hello!’ shouted Mr. Bailey, tugging his cap off a great shock of tousled gray hair. ‘Whose rag-bag have you been into? I thought you were meetin’ some o’ the Clayton’s tony kin. And what’s Tim Ruggles’s old pair o’ crow-bait doin’ out here sound asleep in the lane?’

‘They wanted me to, Dad. You see—they’re all trying to act the way they did when they were kids. And when Mrs. Eldridge heard that her daughter was coming, they thought she’d understand the party better if——’

‘——If they made you up to look like a boob!’ growled Samuel, suddenly angry. ‘Thought they’d turn you into a hick—to entertain their stylish girl—did they? Well—I don’t like it.’

‘Steady, Dad. Let’s keep the good old shirt on.’ Jack grinned, and held out his hand for the big coat. ‘The girl’s up stairs with Mother. She’s putting on some old-fashioned clothes. She’s a good sport. Let’s don’t get mad, Sam.’

Once in a blue moon, when the two of them were enjoying the luxury of some man-to-man confidences, Jack said ‘Sam.’ It invariably fetched a slow smile that tipped up a little on one end as if it knew it really shouldn’t be there.

‘Well—I hope she isn’t makin’ fun o’ your mother’s old fixin’s,’ rumbled Sam, less savage but still disgruntled.

‘You ought to see ’em,’ said Jack, reassuringly. ‘Ruth hasn’t had so much fun in a dog’s age.’

Sam Bailey rubbed his jaw in an effort to erase a grin.

‘Say, young feller!’ he growled. ‘Are you in the habit of calling your mother by her first name?’

‘Sometimes,’ admitted Jack, in a tone that was barely audible, ‘sometimes—when she’s unusually pretty—and girlish.’

‘Well,’ snorted Sam, ‘I don’t think that’s very respectful. If you want to call me Sam—when there’s nobody else around—I don’t give a darn. But Ruth’s your mother, and I think you’d do well to stick to that. It sounds better.’

Jack laughed.

‘I don’t see what kick you’ve got coming,’ he teased. ‘She’s not *your* mother, but that’s what you generally call her—a lot oftener than I call her Ruth. I’ll make a bargain with you——’

‘Go on with you! If I’d a-known college was goin’ to make a young smart-aleck out o’ you——’ The rest of it trailed off into a chuckle. There was a sound of footsteps on the stairs. Sam stared at the girl who was being piloted toward him. His face broadened into a reminiscent smile. His memory-reel spun back a full quarter-century.

‘This is Gertrude Clayton’s daughter,’ said Ruth. ‘Miss Eldridge.’

‘How do you do, Miss Eldridge?’ Samuel extended a large hand.

‘My name is Miriam, Mr. Bailey.’ She picked up the flowing ends of the knitted hood-like white scarf that hadn’t quite concealed her curls. ‘Know what this is?’ she asked, coyly.

‘It’s a fascinator,’ replied Jack’s father, stroking the soft wool with something like a caress, ‘and I still think it’s prettier than a hat.’

‘Not bad.’ Miriam turned her head to inspect herself in the mirror over the mantel. ‘How do you like my big sleeves?’

‘The one on my side used to get smashed pretty flat,’ said Samuel, daringly, with an elaborate wink in his wife’s direction.

‘Now, Sam,’ reproved Mrs. Bailey.

‘We must be going, Miriam,’ said Jack, possessively. ‘They will be wondering what has become of us. It will soon be dark.’

‘There will be a moon,’ promised his father.

‘I hope to see you again,’ said Miriam. ‘You have been very kind, Mrs. Bailey. Good-by, Mr. Bailey.’

‘We’ll be over tomorrow evening,’ said Samuel, heartily. ‘There’s to be an entertainment.’

Jack’s eyes brightened. His father hadn’t wanted to go. There had been quite a debate about it. He glanced at his mother and was delighted over the light in her eyes.

When the door had closed behind them, Miriam said, ‘I think your father and mother are wonderful! . . . No—I can walk now. I have on these high shoes. . . . Please. I’d like to try them.’

‘You can’t climb into the sled, Miriam—all bundled up like that.’

‘Very well, then. Here we go. Do I really look funny?’

‘Lovely!’

The moonlight had turned the whole world to silver.

‘Jack! We’ve left all my things at your house!’

‘I’ll bring you back for them in the morning.’

‘Do you think my mother will be surprised?’

‘Your mother,’ said Jack, dreamily, ‘will have a fit.’

‘Let’s have a little fun with them,’ suggested Miriam. ‘We’ll pretend it’s twenty years ago.’

‘What do we know about twenty years ago?’ asked Jack, doubtfully. ‘Think we can get away with it?’

‘Well—you’re pretty good, if I do have to say it myself, and I’ll try to do my part.’ Miriam gave him a companionable smile, and briefly sketched a little skit for them to play. They were nearing their destination now and Jack slowed the horses to a walk while they rehearsed their charade.

At the Clayton homestead, anxiety had been mounting. The afternoon train, said Nan, was almost never late. Claire hoped there hadn’t been a wreck. Gertrude wondered whether the horses had bolted. Fred tried to reassure her on that point. Whatever accounted for their tardiness, it wasn’t a runaway: he would bet his last dollar on that.

For the past two hours they had been trimming the tree. Claire had brought down the old boxes from the attic, in which their mother had stored the baubles and trinkets accumulated through the years. Some of them were badly tarnished.

‘I remember,’ murmured Gertrude, inspecting the remains of a candy horse, ‘—I remember when little Freddie licked off the saddle and bridle. They were red.’ And nobody laughed, though each of them knew it was funny.

‘These things,’ remembered Nan, ‘haven’t been opened since—let me see—the last time we had a Christmas tree was when I came home in my Sophomore year. Claire, Fred, and I were here.’

‘Let me see that bear,’ said Jim. ‘That’s the one I remember—first of all—and best of all. Would you all care very much if I took it along with me, when we go home?’

They had been sitting cross-legged on the floor in front of the big fireplace. Suddenly, Nan stilled them with an upraised hand. She had heard the old sleigh bells.

Scrambling to their feet, the family clustered about the window. Presently the big bobsled skidded into the drive and stopped. Nobody spoke for a long moment. Then Gertrude broke the silence. ‘That,’ she muttered, thickly, ‘can’t possibly be my child.’

‘Of course it is,’ chuckled Fred, deep in his throat, ‘and she looks exactly the way you did when you were her age.’

Jack Bailey had swung a long leg over the side of the bobsled. His companion remained standing where she was, gazing with wide eyes toward the lighted window. She looked ethereal in the moonlight.

‘It’s a fact, Trudie,’ said Jim, soberly. ‘The likeness is positively uncanny! I didn’t think such a thing was possible.’

Jack clumped up the steps and halted at the door, which Fred had thrown open to receive them.

‘Come on! Come on!’ shouted Fred. ‘Come on in! Bring her in!’ And then, suddenly quieted by the unfocused eyes of the young fellow, he stood, waiting, while the family gathered about him, tense, bewildered.

‘Pardon me, sir,’ said Jack, as remotely as a chance visitor from Arcturus, ‘we were bidden to a party—a Christmas party—given by the Clayton children. . . . Are you the Clayton children?’

James stepped into the tableau, faced Jack in the doorway.

‘We are the Clayton children,’ he said, with dignity, ‘and we have been expecting you. Please bring your sweet companion, and come in.’

Fred showed signs of breaking forth into genial mirth and a gay shout, ‘Pretty good! Pretty nice! That’s enough! Cut it out! Fetch her in!’ But Claire dug her fingers into his arm and muttered, ‘Wait a minute! This is going to be good! Give her a chance!’

Jack had gone back to the bobsled and Miriam had yielded herself into his arms as he lifted her over the side. Regaining her feet, she drew up her voluminous skirts and mounted the steps. At the open doorway, she paused, wide-eyed, a bit baffled, and, turning to Jack, said, ‘Are you sure this is the right place? How oddly they’re dressed!’

Then they ganged her. Old James gathered her into his arms. Claire tore her away from him and whispered, ‘Splendid!’ Fred patted her on the head and said he’d be damned. And Gertrude, when her turn came, said nothing at all; just wrapped her arms about her girl and whimpered like a little child.

‘Don’t, darling,’ pleaded Miriam, into her mother’s ear. ‘We’re just playing.’

EIGHTH CHAPTER

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE old Clayton house, which for many years had drowsed lonesomely through the holiday season, with no more evidence of life than a path to the barn and one dim light in the kitchen window, was crowded to capacity on Christmas night.

Neighbors and former schoolmates began coming quite early, for Nan's invitation had said the program would open at eight sharp, adding that Miss Packer would preside, whose beliefs about punctuality were memorable.

Welcomed by rows of red candles that gleamed from every window, the arriving guests—with noisy greetings and mighty stomping of snowy feet on the broad verandah—poured through the doorway and into the aromatic warmth of the spacious living-room.

The women of each party came in first, rather shyly, for very few of them had more than glimpsed their prosperous and polished hosts since school-days. The story of the Clayton family's progress from the simplicity of rural life to affluence had become a community legend. It would be interesting to observe what effects had been wrought upon the characters of these fortunate people. With this query in mind, the women arrived stiffly on guard against any hint of condescension, and were much relieved when it appeared that the Clayton sisters had no top-lofty ideas about themselves.

And then came the men, who had been jockeying their sleighs and sleds and cars into the congested parking-space afforded by the barnyard. They mounted the front steps with heavy tread, as if to build up confidence against the moment of meeting their childhood friends who had quite outdone them in the game of acquisition. They hitched at their belts, squared their toil-rounded shoulders, and made much ado over cleaning their boots.

Earliest of the men to enter the house were two brothers, John and Will Dutton, whose wives had preceded them. The plumpest Clayton met them at the door.

'How do you do, Mr. Clayton,' said the taller Dutton, in a tone of severe dignity.

'Hello, Bill!' shouted Fred. 'Don't you try to "Mister" me, you old rascal! You'll get your block knocked off!'

‘Hi, Fred,’ saluted John, knowing now what was expected of him. ‘Har yuh, Jim! By golly, it’s good to see you again. I thought mebby you’d forgot about us. It’s been a long time.’

‘I was just reminding Fred,’ drawled Jim, ‘of the story my father used to laugh over. Do you remember, Bill, that Halloween when you and Sam Bailey and I spent several hours going about through the neighborhood upsetting various small structures——’

‘Yep—I recollect, all right,’ chuckled Bill, ‘and your dad and mine found out who did it and made us put ’em all back again next day. I was a long time forgivin’ my old man for that.’

‘But we got out of going to school, that day,’ reflected Jim.

‘You must have been quite a bright boy,’ observed Fred, ‘if going to school was less pleasant than this work of putting the community to rights on November first.’

‘I don’t think any of us ever learnt very much,’ said Bill, ‘except maybe how to dodge a lickin’. Old Packy sure swung a mean gad.’

‘Psst!’ warned Fred. ‘She’s standing right behind you.’

Sam Bailey, looking twice his actual size in his big bearskin coat, shouldered through the door to be pounced upon by the Duttons and Claytons before he had a chance to speak. Jim whispered something into his ear. Sam’s face, quite serious on arrival, broke into a grin and then an open laugh.

‘Well, I guess it’s the same old gang,’ drawled Sam. ‘You boys haven’t changed much—’cept Fritz is a little chubbier.’ He tapped Fred on his equator. ‘I suppose you got that a-eatin’ oranges out in California.’ This being the best joke so far, they all pounded Fred on the back and laughed uproariously. Sam peeled off his impressive coat with an air of assurance, and by the time he had reached the ladies—segregated on the other side of the big fireplace—he had developed enough courage to call Gertrude ‘Trudie,’ glowing with satisfaction when she promptly remembered him as ‘Sam.’

After that, it was easy. Arriving guests, noting the geniality of the house, dropped their diffidence along with their goloshes. Claire said to Nan in an undertone, as they collided in the kitchen doorway, ‘You’ve put it over, Sis. I hadn’t supposed it could be done.’

Between the fragrant tree and the asthmatic little melodeon, a space had been kept clear for the performers. To augment the seating facilities Timmie had been sent to the Edwards Furniture and Undertaking establishment in Lester for two dozen collapsible chairs. One of them did collapse with Fred near the close of an extended prayer by the Reverend Silas Swann.

Miss Packer, standing prim and magisterial beside the old melodeon, had called for order, announcing that Brother Swann would lead us in prayer. Brother Swann was the least well-remembered of the entire company. Jim vaguely recalled that Silas, several years his senior, was about through with country school when he himself came into it.

The prayer covered a broad field. Before venturing upon a leisurely survey of various unrelated matters which, in the opinion of Brother Swann, should be brought to the Divine attention, due credit was extended to the Claytons for an abundant hospitality proffered to this goodly company. The petitioner was grateful that prosperity had not turned the heads of these fortunate brothers and sisters and implied that Deity too was without doubt favorably impressed by this unusual phenomenon.

Then, recalling that James was always something of a free lance in his thinking, to the very point of having early earned a reputation for taking an interest in agnosticism—evidenced by his familiarity with the works of Bob Ingersoll—the good old parson proceeded with an evangelistic appeal so candidly addressed to the head of the Clayton clan that Fred, sitting immediately to the rear of his brother, leaned forward and breathed into his ear, ‘That’s for you, you doggoned old atheist!’

This sacrilege was promptly avenged. There was a splintering of fragile pine, and the girthy bachelor from San Diego sank into the ruins, where he remained with reverentially bowed head until Brother Swann had concluded his errand at the Throne of Grace. Jean Hunter Winslow, sitting beside him, imprudently bestowed upon his slumped figure a gentle smile of sympathy which suddenly went pipping off to a shrill giggle, quite to her dismay. At this moment, the prayer arrived at an impressive end, and kind hands assisted Fred to his feet while another chair was found for him and installed on the site of the disaster. When order had been restored, Fred, leaning forward, again sought private audience with his brother.

‘Sorry,’ he whispered, ‘to have made so much racket while your case was being heard,’ to which James replied, with dignity, ‘Served you right. It’s a pity you didn’t break your neck.’

Miriam and Jack sat far back in a corner of the cushioned window-seat, feeling that they were there by sheer sufferance and should remain unobtrusive.

‘Isn’t my Aunt Claire funny?’ whispered Miriam, nodding toward the serious face at the old melodeon. ‘She isn’t hearing a word of Miss Packer’s address.’

‘I think she is a darling,’ replied Jack. ‘Everybody in the family,’ he ventured, bravely, ‘is a darling.’

‘They really are,’ she admitted.

‘“They?” You’re a part of the family; aren’t you?’

‘Not tonight, Jack. I don’t belong to any of this.’

‘Nor I,’ he said, gently. ‘So we’ll have to stick close together.’ He shifted his position slightly to exemplify this pleasant resolution and was shushed, for Miss Packer—having finished her words of welcome—was announcing that Ruth Bailey would now speak a piece entitled, ‘Hang Up the Baby’s Stocking.’

‘Isn’t it odd?’ whispered Miriam. ‘Your mother learned that little piece in school, long before you were ever thought of.’ Jack nodded, with brooding eyes. ‘She thinks you’re wonderful,’ he said when his mother returned to her seat amid generous applause. ‘She always wanted a daughter, you know,’ he explained, to which Miriam replied, as from a considerable distance, ‘No—I didn’t know.’

‘Hasn’t your mother ever wished she had a son?’ he persisted.

Miriam regarded him with a slow smile and said she had never heard her mother complain about it.

‘Oh, well,’ sighed Jack, maturely, ‘I suppose everybody ought to accept things just as they are.’

Good old Packy was almost too serious in her supervision of the program, exhibiting no little annoyance when some grizzled farmer, forgetting the lines of his childish doggerel, stirred an outburst of laughter. It was to be hoped, admonished Packy, after Professor Collins had made a mess of ‘Willie’s Letter to Santa’—during which misadventure he had been freely prompted by all manner of spurious aids from the audience—that we might avoid any more unseemly levity which might prove embarrassing to the performers. ‘Any one of us,’ she added, maternally, ‘is likely to make mistakes.’ This comment sent them all off into whoops of glee which Packy

dourly endeavored to account for by scratching deep into her obsolete top-knot with a competent lead-pencil.



GOOD OLD PACKY WAS ALMOST TOO SERIOUS IN HER SUPERVISION OF THE PROGRAM

From somewhere in her archives, the dear old lady had recovered a Christmas exercise which had been performed in the Wimple school. Fourteen persons were required. Each carried a large letter made of cardboard and tin-foil. When assembled, the letters spelled 'Merry Christmas.'

'We will now try to repeat this exercise,' announced Packy. 'Of course,' she continued, 'it would be too much to expect that all fourteen of these children would be present tonight. Such a coincidence is hardly possible. We will ask all those pupils who do happen to be here, and participated in this exercise when they were in school, to come forward.'

Gertrude, Nan, Jean, Ruth, Tom Munger, Doctor Collins and Fred responded to this call, holding up their letters and reading their babyish verses. Whenever there was a missing performer, Packy held up the letter, read the lines of the absent one, and offered a brief explanation. Jim said afterwards that Packy's utter lack of any emotion, when accounting for the missing schoolmates, furnished the occasion with a dramatic flavor worthy of grand opera.

Nan, first in line, had held up her letter *M*, and recited the simple quatrain assigned to her; Gertrude had reported for *E*, and Ruth for the first *R*. Then Packy broke in to say, 'This second *R* in the word "Merry" was carried by little Bobby Zimmerman. I will read it—in his absence:

“Rejoice with us for peace is come
To all this weary world,
No more is heard the battle-drum,
The flags of war are furled.”’

Packy read the verse with about as much feeling as she might have put into a paragraph of real estate transfers; then remarked, briskly, ‘I presume you all know that Captain Robert Zimmerman fell in the Argonne. We should be proud of him. . . Next, please.’

Another trenchant moment arrived when the *T* was missing in the word ‘Christmas.’

Packy held aloft the letter and with the book at arm’s length she read, primly:

‘Thanks be to Him who, meek and mild,
And in a manger born,
Finds heart-room for each little child,
This blessed Christmas morn.’

Closing the book with an index finger inserted, she said, after a discreet hesitation, ‘Most of you will remember what a pretty and sweet-tempered little girl Goldie Whaley was. We were all grieved over her tragedy. It is for none of us to say how much right anyone has to dispose of his own life. ‘To err is human; to forgive, divine.’ . . . Now—the next, please.’

NINTH CHAPTER

CHAPTER NINE

THE CHRISTMAS entertainment was drawing to a close. Miss Packer said they would finish it, presently, by singing ‘Joy to the World.’

But, before this concluding hymn, she felt that they would all be glad to hear from one of their number who had become more widely known than any of his former schoolmates.

‘I have not consulted him about this, but I feel sure that James Clayton will be willing to speak briefly to us at this time,’ continued Packy, ‘and I suggest that he give us a little talk on “What Christmas Means to Me.”’

‘I don’t think that’s quite fair,’ whispered Jean.

‘She’s certainly got the old boy on the spot,’ muttered Fred, anxiously.

There was a long pause before James rose and walked slowly to the front. Claire reflected the expression of most of their faces as she turned to look at her brother with sympathy in her eyes.

‘Miss Packer,’ began Jim, ‘—and neighbors—’ The room was hushed to a dead silence. Everybody felt sorry. Good old Jim had been taken at a serious disadvantage. It was a situation that couldn’t possibly be turned into a joke. He cleared his throat and went on.

‘As the senior member of this Clayton clan, I venture to remind you that this house, in the time of our father and mother, was a sanctuary where belief in the traditions of religion was preserved in sincerity and simplicity. Your homes too, as I remember them, were similarly blest by the uninquiring confidence of parents to whom faith was the substance of their dearest hopes and sufficient evidence of things unseen.

‘On behalf of those worthy people, most of whom have entered into the eternal rest, I commend to you their splendid wish that peace and good-will may eventually rule this troubled world.

‘It is quite possible that the Christmas legend may be variously interpreted by us who are gathered here to renew endearing memories. Some of us may find it difficult to believe that a choir of angels once came to earth to sing an inspiring song. But I suppose that if all the great musical composers were met in conclave to decide which of all the immortal songs

had stirred mankind to its best endeavors, they would unanimously vote for the anthem of peace chanted one night above the Plains of Bethlehem, even though no one of them might give credence to the event as a historical fact.

‘We have heard tonight many tender little verses about an uncharted star that lighted the path of the Wise Men to the birthplace of the Prince of Peace. Astronomy knows nothing about that star. But if all the astronomers of the world were convened, and the question were raised: Which of all the blazing planets that light the sky has furnished men and women with the most luminous ideals and the most radiant aspirations?—I believe they would unite in honoring this enchanted star.

‘All paths that lead toward brighter light are good paths; good for wise men, good for shepherds. And every festival that unites us more closely in affection is a hallowed event, worthy of our best celebration. Whatever may be the differences in our opinions of this ancient minstrelsy, it is—and must unquestionably remain—the most important story ever told.’

There was no applause but a long intake of breath as Jim returned to his seat. Miss Packer, grimly efficient, brought them all up with her emaciated old arms to sing the closing song. As they rose, Fred put an arm about his brother’s shoulders and muttered into his ear, ‘It was a grand speech, Jim. I couldn’t have done better myself.’

Then, the hymn having ended, Miss Packer piously said that Brother Swann would pronounce the benediction, which he did, after having unctuously given thanks that Brother Clayton’s soul, at long last, had been redeemed. This observation brought on a coughing spell, led by Samuel Bailey and shared by his male contemporaries. Subconsciously aware that any further comments on Jim Clayton’s spiritual condition, albeit addressed to Deity, would meet a dull market locally, Brother Swann eased into the traditional formula of benediction, and the assembly began breaking up into little groups of intimates.

‘May I see you home?’ asked Fred, exactly as he had said it at seventeen.

Jean smiled shyly and nodded.

‘Seems as if it was only yesterday,’ he said, gently. ‘I was terribly fond of you, Jean. Do you remember?’

She stood for a moment with averted eyes, making pretense of searching her memory; then replied, unsteadily, ‘Were you—really?’

TENTH CHAPTER

CHAPTER TEN

THEY were all gone now but Jean and the Baileys. The latter were at the door saying their good-bys to the family.

‘Tomorrow morning, then,’ said Jack in an undertone. ‘About nine-thirty.’

Miriam nodded and they exchanged a smile that had the potentiality of an embrace. ‘Good night, Jack,’ she said, trying to make it sound casual. ‘Good night, Mr. Bailey. Good night, Mrs. Bailey.’

Samuel gave her a comradely grin and seemed on the point of adding some comment to his ‘Good night’; but, apparently deciding not to do it, made way for his wife who looked tenderly into the girl’s brown eyes and said, ‘Good night, dear.’ Then the door closed on the three Baileys.

The Claytons and Jean lingered for a few minutes beside the tree, appreciatively discussing the success of Nan’s party. Presently Fred drifted out of the circle and went to the kitchen where Nan found him lighting an old kerosene lantern.

‘I’m afraid you’ll not be able to see very far ahead of you with that thing,’ she exclaimed. ‘You would have done better to let the Baileys take Jean home. They wanted to. She’ll have to wade snow to her knees.’

‘Well—it won’t be the first time,’ drawled Fred. ‘It will be fun, I think.’

‘You’re happy; aren’t you, boy?’ challenged Nan, knowingly. ‘I’m awfully glad.’

‘Thanks, Nannie.’ Fred was making a big job of closing the rusty old lantern. ‘But don’t you get off any wisecracks to Jean. I haven’t said anything—that is, not anything much—to her yet. You’re always so darned beforehand with your remarks. My uncle!—but this lantern smells bad! I’d forgotten that reek. Takes me back a thousand years!’

Jim, lingering beside the fireplace, was saying good night to Jean, muffled for her journey through the snow. ‘The girls tell me you’re starting back to Memphis tomorrow,’ he was saying.

‘I had planned to,’ replied Jean, uncertainly. ‘Mother has been asking me to stay a few days longer. Perhaps I may decide to do so.’

Claire, who had been in the dining-room helping Susan, joined them. 'I suppose this will be good-by for awhile, Jean,' she said, 'if you're leaving in the morning.'

'She has changed her mind,' explained Jim. 'We'll be seeing her again.'

Claire's lips puckered into a discreet grin. Jean's nose wrinkled into a brief but unmistakable 'snoot.' But there was a smile in her eyes. 'Thanks for the party,' she said. 'It was grand to see your tribe all together again. I loved every minute of it.'

'You'd *better* like us,' warned Claire.

Nan and Fred came in from the kitchen.

'Well,' said Fred, 'if you're ready, Jean, we'll go.'

'See you tomorrow, Jean,' said Nan, quite obviously impatient for them to be off. She was fairly bubbling with news. When the door closed, Claire said, 'Out with it, Nannie, before you burst.'

'Our little brother,' reported Nan, slipping an arm through Claire's, 'is going back to San Diego by way of Memphis.'

ELEVENTH CHAPTER

CHAPTER ELEVEN

MIRIAM had gone upstairs where Gertrude was brushing her hair before the cloudy old mirror. She laid both warm palms against her mother's cheeks.

'What's on your mind, baby?' asked Gertrude gently.

'I love you, Trudie,' murmured Miriam.

'Are you going to call me Trudie when we get home?'

'Not if you wouldn't like it, but it's a sweet name. It makes me all warm when they say it, just as if we were two girls together. We're awfully alike, you know. Everyone speaks of it.'

'Does that please you, dear?' asked Gertrude, almost shyly.

'Of course! Why not? Funny, isn't it, our having to come away out here to—to get acquainted?'

She continued to stand very close. Gertrude searched her child's dreamy eyes in the mirror.

'And what else is on your mind, baby?' she inquired softly.

'Trudie, darling,' murmured Miriam, 'I'm awfully happy. I'd like to tell you—just as one girl to another. You couldn't guess.'

'Couldn't I?' Gertrude reached up, took her daughter's hand and kissed it.

Unaware that they were in a private conference, Nan pushed open the door. Regarding the pair with a tender smile, she was about to beat a retreat.

'Come here, Aunt Nannie,' said Miriam. 'I'll tell you, too.'

'Pish!' said Nan, slipping her arm around the girl's waist. 'As if I didn't know!'

Transcriber Note: Note: There were Twenty Six illustrations in original book, however as they are still in copyright they have been omitted from this eBook. Captions have been left in, where they occur.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

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[The end of *Home for Christmas* by Lloyd C. Douglas]