



12. The Norway Spruce

The Three Happy Children were looking at the calendar. It was a large one which had been given to Father by Silas Drown who kept the Hardware Store. On it was a picture of a meadow, with a green brook running through it; and people were haying in the meadow. It was undoubtedly a beautiful picture, but the children weren't interested in it at all. They were gazing at the numbers underneath.

Now one would suppose that nothing could be quite so dull as figures, or so uninteresting. But these told a very fascinating story. There were thirty-one of them, all in little black squares like those that make up a checkerboard. Thirty of the numbers were black like the squares, but one was red, bright red. And there lies the story. You see, there was a good reason for that one being red, oh, a very good reason!

Jehosophat took out a pencil and climbed on a chair, while Marmaduke and Hepzebiah looked on in wonder. The pencil made a mark at 23.

"Only two more days," said the older boy.

"Hooray!" exclaimed his brother.

"Hooway!" echoed their little sister.

Then they all sighed—three long-drawn out sighs—it was so hard to wait. And when they were through sighing, they all stood and stared at all those numbers, and particularly that bright 25, their eyes growing rounder each minute.

There was something in the air, most decidedly, something that the children couldn't exactly feel or touch or handle. It was as though the sky, and air, and the trees, and the house itself, were carrying a secret, a happy secret, and one almost too big to be kept.

They could get hints of that secret everywhere. Sometimes they caught Mother and Father whispering about things—very mysterious things. Mother, too, was working late these nights. What she was making they could never find out, though they looked and guessed and wondered.

The Toyman wouldn't let them in his shop. And Father, when he went to town, for once refused to let the children go with him and old Methusaleh.

But the closets were the most mysterious of all. Some of them were actually locked, and, though Marmaduke tried to peek through the keyholes, all he could see was darkness—like midnight.

Once Mother saw him peeking.

She went over to the door and unlocked it. But she didn't open it.

"I thought I would keep it locked, children," she said, "but after all I've decided I won't. Trust is stronger than any key. And I think I can trust you, can't I?"

"Y-y-yes," said Jehosophat.

"Y-y-yes," said Marmaduke.

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“Y-y-yeth,” lisped Hepzebiah.

“Thank you, my dears,” she said, then went away, leaving the door unlocked.

For two whole weeks they hadn’t peeked. They had hung around that closet and stared and sighed, but never once did they even try the door. And I think they were rather brave, when they knew there were packages inside, all wrapped in red paper and tied with green ribbon, and they could almost hear the paper rustle. Oh, well they knew those packages were there, for hadn’t they caught Mother inside with her apron over packages and things, the bits of red and green showing through the folds of the apron. Besides that, they had seen Father go to the largest closet of all with parcels covered by a blanket. And it is very hard to know that there are things, wonderfully beautiful things like treasures, hidden in dark closets, and not to be able to investigate and find out about them. But then, of course, there was the fun of guessing. And they guessed everything under the sun, enough toys and articles to fill the biggest store in the world, or the whole of Santa Claus’ workshop, which stands under the North Star where the polar bears live and the Aurora weaves pretty scarves in the sky.

Well, that day passed, and in the morning Jehosophat climbed on a chair again and put a little mark through the next number—24.

“Tomorrow!” he said in a solemn whisper. And the whispers of the other two children, echoing him, were quite as full of wonder and awe.

Then they went to the window. Snow was on the ground.

“It’s as white as the feathers of the Foolish White Geese,” Jehosophat happened to remark.

“No, it’s prettier than that,” Marmaduke corrected him. “It’s like the coats of the Hip-pity-Hop Bunnies. And the sky is just as gray as the Quaker ladies over in the meeting-house on Wally’s creek,” he added.

That afternoon they heard sleigh-bells, clear, tinkling, but never jangling, on the still air.

“Whoa!” yelled the Toyman.

The big sleigh stopped by the side porch. Hal the Red Roan and Teddy the Buckskin Horse tossed their heads merrily, and the sleigh-bells jingled even after the team had come to a halt.

“All aboard!” shouted the Toyman, as he stamped the snow from his boots and entered the kitchen. “We’re going to find the biggest, finest tree in the whole woods! Who wants to go?”

Who wouldn’t want to go! There was a scurrying for boots and coats, mufflers and mittens. Then they tumbled in, the sleigh bells jingled, and off they flew through the deep, powdery, sparkling snow.

The river was not in motion; it was not flowing at all this day, but lay like a long lead pipe, twisting between the white snow banks. Sometimes, when the sun came out and shone upon it, the lead was changed to pearl.

They drove away from it now, up by Jake Miller’s place, and past the Fizzletrees’ and the

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Van Nostrands', then up the hill to the woods.

The trees stood still like a great congregation, Marmaduke thought. There were giant oaks, their heavy branches all gnarled and twisted; tall chestnuts with rough gray trunks; shaggy hickories with bark always ready to peel off like "proud flesh"; little ironwood trees whose wood was so tough that the axe must be sharp to cut them at all; and silver birches, gracefully swaying in the wind, and white against the snow. Most of them were naked and bare, but on the oaks and birches rustled a few little left-over leaves, brown and dried-up, and crackling and cackling like little old people. Ah, but everywhere, in, and around, and between, the naked trees, and on higher up the hill, were others still clothed in green,—trees that never cast off their cloaks, even when winter came,—spruces, cedars, firs, and hemlocks and pines. They were decorated, too, for on their green branches hung tufts of snow like the pieces of fur on the carriage robe of the neighbor's baby.

The Toyman tied the horses to the fence-rail and they all jumped out of the sleigh. He lifted little Hepzebiah, then started to help Marmaduke.

"No, thank you," said that little boy, "I don't need any help," and, all alone, he climbed over the fence after his big brother.

Then on they tramped, through the snow, and under the branches and around the bushes, looking for that great tree which soon was to have the place of honor in their house.

"There's one," said Marmaduke.

"No," replied the Toyman, "that won't do. See—it has clumps of needles like a porcupine's quills. It looks beautiful in the woods, but it wouldn't look so pretty in the parlor. And that cedar yonder is too thick to hang the presents and the ornaments on.—Yes, that hemlock is pretty, and that fir—but I guess we'll stick to the spruce. Let's find one that's shapely and just the right height."

So they hunted around until he said:

"Now there's a likely young spruce."

It was covered with little needles that ran evenly all along the twigs, leaving plenty of room on the branches for all they were going to put on them. And it looked very soft and feathery and green against the snow.

The Toyman looked up at the topmost twig, carefully measuring it with his eye.

"It will just about reach the parlor ceiling," he declared, and the boys guessed so, too.

Then he took the axe from his shoulder.

"Stand back, fellows," he shouted, "and watch the chips fly!"

Crack! went the sharp axe blade. A little cut appeared in the tree, about fifteen inches above the ground. Crack! again, and a little cut appeared in the trunk, about four inches under the other mark. Crack! again, and a piece of wood flew out of the spruce.

"A little farther back, youngsters!" called the Toyman, and the children sought the shelter of the big oak nearby.

Fast flew the axe, still faster the white chips. My! how strong the Toyman was! Now a big hole yawned in the trunk of the spruce, like the jaws of the alligator when he basks in the sun. It grew wider and wider. The Toyman looked around to make sure that the children

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were well out of harm's way, then he swung once more, one great hefty stroke, and with a great crash the spruce fell and measured its length in the snow. And the Toyman put the axe and the tree too, over his shoulder—he certainly was strong, that Toyman—and through the woods they tramped back again, and loaded the tree on the sleigh.

Then he paused for a moment.

“Think a little jag of green would go nice on the windows,” he remarked, “and a touch of red to brighten things up a bit.”

So they looked and found plenty of green for wreaths, and some bayberries like coral, and some holly, besides, by the ruins of the deserted house that had burned down years before they were born.

It had been a long hunt and, though the sky had cleared, it was growing pretty dark when they climbed in the sleigh. As the Toyman clambered upon the seat and took the reins, he turned around and looked up the hill.

“The stars are beginning to twinkle,” he said, “and look, youngsters, there is a whole army of Christmas trees for you.”

They turned around and gazed in the direction in which his finger pointed, and there, sure enough, the evergreens,—the spruces, pines, and hemlocks, the firs, and the cedars, too, were standing so still, and the stars were peeping out between their twigs and branches all over the hill, twinkling like little candles. There were hundreds and hundreds of Christmas trees, standing up straight on that hill, with millions and millions of candles on them.

“My, but that's pretty!” the Toyman exclaimed.

As for the children, they said, “Oh,” and “Ah,” all in one breath. It was so wonderful to see all those live Christmas trees growing and shining in the forest.

“You see,” the Toyman went on to explain, “that's how they first got the notion of a Christmas tree, seein' the little stars shine through the forest.—A good notion, too, I should say.”

A good one? Why, the best in the world! So the Three Happy Children thought as they drove down the hill and back by the river.

And when they turned in the drive and Teddy and Hal walked off to the barn, the sleigh bells jingling like Christmas chimes in the air, they shouted “hooray” again, one and all.

Then Jehosopha said as they reached the door,—

“And now for tomorrow!”——