

THE BIRD'S CHRISTMAS CAROL

By

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Chapter 4: The Birds of a Feather Flock
Together



Uncle Jack did really come on the twentieth. He was not detained by business, nor did he get left behind nor snowed up, as frequently happens in stories, and in real life too, I am afraid. The snow-storm came also; and the turkey nearly died a natural and premature death from over-eating. Donald came, too; Donald, with a line of down upon his upper lip, and Greek and Latin on his tongue, and stores of knowledge in his handsome head, and stories—bless me, you couldn't turn over a chip without reminding Donald of something that happened "at College."

One or the other was always at Carol's bedside, for they fancied her paler than she used to be, and they could not bear her out of sight. It was Uncle Jack, though, who sat beside her in the winter twilights. The room was quiet, and almost dark, save for the snow-light outside, and the flickering flame of the fire, that danced over the "Sleeping Beauty's" face, and touched the Fair One's golden locks with ruddier glory. Carol's hand (all too thin and white these latter days) lay close clasped in Uncle Jack's, and they talked together quietly of many, many things. "I want to tell you all about my plans for Christmas this year, Uncle Jack," said Carol, on the first evening of his visit, "because it will be the loveliest one I ever had. The boys laugh at me for caring so much about it; but it isn't altogether because it is Christmas nor because it is my birthday; but long, long ago, when I first began to be ill, I used to think, the first thing when I waked on Christmas morning, 'To-day is Christ's birthday—AND MINE!' I did not put the words close together, because that made it seem too bold but I first thought, 'Christ's birthday,' and then, in a minute, softly to myself—AND MINE!' 'Christ's birthday—AND MINE!' And so I do not quite feel about Christmas as other girls do. Mama says she supposes that ever so many other children have been born on that day. I often wonder where they are, Uncle Jack, and whether it is a dear thought to them, too, or whether I am so much in bed, and so often alone, that it means more to me. Oh, I do hope that none of them are poor, or cold, or hungry; and I wish, I wish they were all as happy as I, because they are my little brothers and sisters. Now, Uncle Jack, dear, I

am going to try and make somebody happy every single Christmas that I live, and this year it is to be the 'Ruggleses in the rear.'"

"That large and interesting brood of children in the little house at the end of the back garden?"

"Yes; isn't it nice to see so many together? We ought to call them the Ruggles children, of course; but Donald began talking of them as the 'Ruggleses in the rear,' and Papa and Mama took it up, and now we cannot seem to help it. The house was built for Mr. Carter's coachman, but Mr. Carter lives in Europe, and the gentleman who rents his place doesn't care what happens to it, and so this poor Irish family came to live there. When they first moved in, I used to sit in my window and watch them play in their backyard; they are so strong, and jolly, and good-natured; and then, one day, I had a terrible headache, and Donald asked them if they would please not scream quite so loud, and they explained that they were having a game of circus, but that they would change and play 'Deaf and Dumb School' all the afternoon."

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Uncle Jack, "what an obliging family, to be sure."

"Yes, we all thought it very funny, and I smiled at them from the window when I was well enough to be up again. Now, Sarah Maud comes to her door when the children come home from school, and if Mama nods her head, 'Yes,' that means 'Carol is very well,' and then you ought to hear the little Ruggleses yell—I believe they try to see how much noise they can make; but if Mama shakes her head, 'No,' they always play at quiet games. Then, one day, 'Cary,' my pet canary, flew out of her cage, and Peter Ruggles caught her and brought her back, and I had him up here in my room to thank him."

"Is Peter the oldest?"

"No; Sarah Maud is the oldest—she helps do the washing; and Peter is the next. He is a dressmaker's boy."

"And which is the pretty little red-haired girl?"

"That's Kitty."

"And the fat youngster?"

"Baby Larry."

"And that freckled one?"

"Now, don't laugh—that's Peoria!"

"Carol, you are joking."

"No, really, Uncle dear. She was born in Peoria; that's all."

"And is the next boy Oshkosh?"

"No," laughed Carol, "the others are Susan, and Clement, and Eily, and Cornelius."

"How did you ever learn all their names?"

"Well, I have what I call a 'window-school.' It is too cold now; but in warm weather I am wheeled out on my little balcony, and the Ruggleses climb up and walk along our garden fence, and sit down on the roof of our carriage-house. That brings them quite near, and I read to them and tell them stories; On Thanksgiving Day they came up for a few minutes, it was quite warm at eleven o'clock, and we told each other what we had to be thankful for; but they gave such queer answers that Papa had to run away for fear of laughing; and I couldn't understand them very well. Susan was thankful for 'TRUNKS,' of all things in the world; Cornelius, for 'horse cars;' Kitty, for 'pork steak;' while Clem, who is very quiet, brightened up when I came to him, and said he was thankful for 'HIS LAME PUPPY.' Wasn't that pretty?"

"It might teach some of us a lesson, mightn't it, little girl?"

"That's what Mama said. Now I'm going to give this whole Christmas to the Ruggleses; and, Uncle Jack, I earned part of the money myself."

"You, my bird; how?"

"Well, you see, it could not be my own, own Christmas if Papa gave me all the money, and I thought to really keep Christ's birthday I ought to do something of my very own; and so I talked with Mama. Of course she thought of something lovely; she always does; Mama's head is just brimming over with lovely thoughts, and all I have to do is ask, and out pops the very one I want. This thought was, to let her write down, just as I told her, a description of how a little girl lived in her own room three years, and what she did to amuse herself; and we sent it to a magazine and got twenty-five dollars for it. Just think!"

"Well, well," cried Uncle Jack, "my little girl a real author! And what are you going to do with this wonderful 'own' money of yours?"

"I shall give the nine Ruggleses a grand Christmas dinner here in this very room—that will be Papa's contribution, and afterwards a beautiful Christmas tree, fairly blooming with presents—that will be my part; for I have another way of adding to my twenty-five dollars, so that I can buy everything I like. I should like it very much if you would sit at the head of the table, Uncle Jack, for nobody could ever be frightened of you, you dearest, dearest, dearest thing that ever was! Mama is going to help us, but Papa and the boys are going to eat together down stairs for fear of making the little Ruggleses shy; and after we've had a merry time with the tree we can open my window and all listen together to the music at the evening church-service, if it comes before the children go. I have written a letter to the organist, and asked him if I might have the two songs I like best. Will you see if it is all right?"

"BIRDS NEST, Dec. 21st, 188-.

DEAR MR. WILKIE,—

I am the little sick girl who lives next door to the church, and, as I seldom go out, the music on practice days and Sundays is one of my greatest pleasures.

I want to know if you can let the boys sing 'Carol, brothers, carol,' on Christmas night, and if the one who sings 'My ain countree' so beautifully may please sing that too. I think it is the loveliest song in the world, but it always makes me cry; doesn't it you?

If it isn't too much trouble, I hope they can sing them both quite early, as after ten o'clock I may be asleep.

—Yours respectfully,
CAROL BIRD.

P.S.—The reason I like 'Carol, brothers, carol,' is because the choir-boys sang it eleven years ago, the morning I was born, and put it into Mama's head to call me Carol. She didn't remember then that my other name would be Bird, because she was half asleep, and couldn't think of but one thing at a time. Donald says if I had been born on the Fourth of July they would have named me 'Independence,' or if on the twenty-second of February, 'Georgina,' or even 'Cherry,' like Cherry in Martin Chuzzlewit; but I like my own name and birthday best.

—Yours truly,
CAROL BIRD."

Uncle Jack thought the letter quite right, and did not even smile at her telling the organist so many family items. The days flew by, as they always fly in holiday time, and it was Christmas eve before anybody knew it. The family festival was quiet and very pleasant, but quite swallowed up in the grander preparations for next day. Carol and Elfrida,

her pretty German nurse, had ransacked books, and introduced so many plans, and plays, and customs and merry-makings from Germany, and Holland, and England and a dozen other places, that you would scarcely have known how or where you were keeping Christmas. The dog and the cat had enjoyed their celebration under Carol's direction. Each had a tiny table with a lighted candle in the center, and a bit of Bologna sausage placed very near it, and everybody laughed till the tears stood in their eyes to see Villikins and Dinah struggle to nibble the sausages, and at the same time evade the candle flame. Villikins barked, and sniffed, and howled in impatience, and after many vain attempts succeeded in dragging off the prize, though he singed his nose in doing it. Dinah, meanwhile, watched him placidly, her delicate nostrils quivering with expectation, and, after all excitement had subsided, walked with dignity to the table, her beautiful gray satin tail sweeping behind her, and, calmly putting up one velvet paw, drew the sausage gently down, and walked out of the room without "turning a hair," so to speak. Elfrida had scattered handfuls of seeds over the snow in the garden, that the wild birds might have a comfortable breakfast next morning, and had stuffed bundles of dried grasses in the fireplaces, so that the reindeer of Santa Claus could refresh themselves after their long gallops across country. This was really only done for fun, but it pleased Carol.

And when, after dinner, the whole family had gone to church to see the Christmas decorations, Carol limped wearily out on her little crutches, and, with Elfrida's help, placed all the family boots in a row in the upper hall. That was to keep the dear ones from quarreling all through the year. There were Papa's stout top boots; Mama's pretty buttoned shoes next; then Uncle Jack's, Donald's, Paul's and Hugh's; and at the end of the line her own little white worsted slippers. Last, and sweetest of all, like the little children in Austria, she put a lighted candle in her window to guide the dear Christ-child, lest he should stumble in the dark night as he passed up the deserted street. This done, she dropped into bed, a rather tired, but very happy Christmas fairy.