

THE BIRD'S CHRISTMAS CAROL

By

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Chapter 5: Some Other Birds Are Taught to
Fly



Before the earliest Ruggles could wake and toot his five-cent tin horn, Mrs. Ruggles was up and stirring about the house, for it was a gala day in the family. Gala day! I should think so! Were not her nine "children" invited to a dinner-party at the great house, and weren't they going to sit down free and equal with the mightiest in the land? She had been preparing for this grand occasion ever since the receipt of the invitation, which, by the way, had been speedily enshrined in an old photograph frame and hung under the looking-glass in the most prominent place in the kitchen, where it stared the occasional visitor directly in the eye, and made him pale with envy:

"BIRDS' NEST, Dec. 17th, 188-.

DEAR MRS. RUGGLES,—

I am going to have a dinner-party on Christmas day, and would like to have all your children come. I want them every one, please, from Sarah Maud to Baby Larry. Mama says dinner will be at half-past five, and the Christmas tree at seven; so you may expect them home at nine o'clock. Wishing you a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year, I am, yours truly,

CAROL BIRD."

Breakfast was on the table promptly at seven o'clock, and there was very little of it, too; for it was an excellent day for short rations, though Mrs. Ruggles heaved a sigh as she reflected that even the boys, with their India-rubber stomachs, would be just as hungry the day after the dinner-party as if they had never had any at all.

As soon as the scanty meal was over, she announced the plan of the campaign: "Now Susan, you an' Kitty wash up the dishes; an' Peter, can't you spread up the beds, so't I can git ter cuttin' out Larry's new suit? I

ain't satisfied with his close, an' I thought in the night of a way to make him a dress out of my old plaid shawl—kind o' Scotch style, yer know. You other boys clear out from under foot! Clem, you and Con hop into bed with Larry while I wash yer underflannins; 'twont take long to dry 'em. Sarah Maud, I think 'twould be perfeckly han'som if you ripped them brass buttons off yer uncle's policeman's coat an' sewed 'em in a row up the front o' yer green skirt. Susan, you must iron out yours an' Kitty's apurns; an' there, I came mighty near forgettin' Peory's stockin's! I counted the whole lot last night when I was washin' of 'em, an' there ain't but nineteen anyhow yer fix 'em, an' no nine pairs mates nohow; an' I ain't goin' ter have my childern wear odd stockin's to a dinner-comp'ny, brought up as I was! Eily, can't you run out and ask Mis' Cullen ter lend me a pair o' stockin's for Peory, an' tell her if she will, Peory'll give Jim half her candy when she gets home. Won't yer, Peory?"

Peoria was young and greedy, and thought the remedy so much worse than the disease that she set up a deafening howl at the projected bargain—a howl so rebellious and so out of all season that her mother started in her direction with flashing eye and uplifted hand; but she let it fall suddenly, saying, "No, I won't lick ye Christmas day, if yer drive me crazy; but speak up smart, now, 'n say whether yer'd ruther give Tim Cullen half yer candy or go bare-legged ter the party?" The matter being put so plainly, Peoria collected her faculties, dried her tears and chose the lesser evil, Clem having hastened the decision by an affectionate wink, that meant he'd go halves with her on his candy.

"That's a lady;" cried her mother. "Now, you young ones that ain't doin' nothin', play all yer want ter before noontime, for after ye git through eatin' at twelve o'clock me 'n Sarah Maud's goin' ter give yer such a washin' an' combin' an' dressin' as yer never had before an' never will agin, an' then I'm goin' to set yer down an' give yer two solid hours trainin' in manners; an' 'twon't be no foolin' neither."

"All we've got ter do 's go eat!" grumbled Peter.

"Well, that's enough," responded his mother; "there's more 'n one way of eatin', let me tell yer, an' you've got a heap ter learn about it, Peter Ruggles. Lord sakes, I wish you childern could see the way I was fetched up to eat—never took a meal o' vittles in the kitchen before I married Ruggles; but yer can't keep up that style with nine young ones 'n yer Pa always off ter sea."

The big Ruggleses worked so well, and the little Ruggleses kept from "under foot" so successfully, that by one o'clock nine complete toilets were laid out in solemn grandeur on the beds. I say, "complete;" but I do not know whether they would be called so in the best society. The law of compensation had been well applied; he that had necktie had no cuffs; she that had sash had no handkerchief, and vice versa; but they all had boots and a certain amount of clothing, such as it was, the outside layer being in every case quite above criticism.

"Now, Sarah Maud," said Mrs. Ruggles, her face shining with excitement, "everything is red up an' we can begin. I've got a boiler 'n a kettle 'n a pot o' hot water. Peter, you go into the back bedroom, an' I'll take Susan, Kitty, Peory an' Cornelius; an' Sarah Maud, you take Clem, 'n Eily, 'n Larry, one to a time, an' git as fur as you can with 'em, an' then I'll finish 'em off while you do yerself."

Sarah Maud couldn't have scrubbed with any more decision and force if she had been doing floors, and the little Ruggleses bore it bravely, not from natural heroism, but for the joy that was set before them. Not being satisfied, however, with the "tone" of their complexions, she wound up operations by applying a little Bristol brick from the knife-board, which served as the proverbial "last straw," from under which the little Ruggleses issued rather red and raw and out of temper. When the clock struck three they were all clothed, and most of them in their right minds, ready for those last touches that always take the most time. Kitty's red hair was curled in thirty-four ringlets, Sarah Maud's was braided in one pig-tail, and Susan's and Eily's in two braids apiece, while Peoria's

resisted all advances in the shape of hair oils and stuck out straight on all sides, like that of the Circassian girl of the circus—so Clem said; and he was sent into the bed-room for it too, from whence he was dragged out forgivingly by Peoria herself, five minutes later. Then—exciting moment—came linen collars for some and neckties and bows for others, and Eureka! the Ruggleses were dressed, and Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these! A row of seats was formed directly through the middle of the kitchen. There were not quite chairs enough for ten, since the family had rarely all wanted to sit down at once, somebody always being out, or in bed, but the wood box and the coal-hod finished out the line nicely. The children took their places according to age, Sarah Maud at the head and Larry on the coal-hod, and Mrs. Ruggles seated herself in front, surveying them proudly as she wiped the sweat of honest toil from her brow.

"Well," she exclaimed, "if I do say so as shouldn't, I never see a cleaner, more stylish mess o' childern in my life! I do wish Ruggles could look at ye for a minute! Now, I've of 'en told ye what kind of a family the McGrills was. I've got some reason to be proud; your uncle is on the police force o' New York city; you can take up the newspaper most any day an' see his name printed right out—James McGrill, and I can't have my childern fetched up common, like some folks. When they go out they've got to have close, and learn ter act decent! Now, I want ter see how yer goin' to behave when yer git there to-night. Let's start in at the beginnin' 'n act out the whole business. Pile into the bed-room, there, every last one of ye, an' show me how yer goin' ter go in't the parlor. This'll be the parlor 'n I'll be Mis' Bird." The youngsters hustled into the next room in high glee, and Mrs. Ruggles drew herself up in her chair with an infinitely haughty and purse-proud expression that much better suited a descendant of the McGrills than modest Mrs. Bird. The bed-room was small, and there presently ensued such a clatter that you would have thought a herd of wild cattle had broken loose; the door opened, and they straggled in, all the little ones giggling, with Sarah Maud at the head, looking as if she had been caught in the act of stealing sheep;

while Larry, being last in line, seemed to think the door a sort of gate of heaven which would be shut in his face if he didn't get there in time; accordingly he struggled ahead of his elders and disgraced himself by tumbling in head foremost.

Mrs. Ruggles looked severe. "There, I knew yer'd do it in some sech fool-way,—try it agin 'n if Larry can't come in on two legs he can stay ter home!"

The matter began to assume a graver aspect; the little Ruggleses stopped giggling and backed into the bed-room, issuing presently with lock step, Indian file, a scared and hunted expression in every countenance.

"No, no, no!" cried Mrs. Ruggles, in despair; "Yer look for all the world like a gang o' pris'ners; there ain't no style ter that; spread out more, can't yer, an' act kind o' careless like—nobody's goin' ter kill ye!" The third time brought deserved success, and the pupils took their seats in the row. "Now, yer know," said Mrs. Ruggles, "there ain't enough decent hats to go round, an' if there was I don' know 's I'd let yer wear 'em, for the boys would never think to take 'em off when they got inside—but, anyhow, there ain't enough good ones. Now, look me in the eye. You needn't wear no hats, none of yer, en' when yer get int' the parlor 'n they ask yer ter lay off yer hats, Sarah Maud must speak up an' say it was sech a pleasant evenin' an' sech a short walk that you left yer hats to home to save trouble. Now, can you remember?"

All the little Ruggleses shouted, "Yes, marm," in chorus.

"What have you got ter do with it," demanded their mother; "did I tell YOU to say it! Wasn't I talkin' ter Sarah Maud?" The little Ruggleses hung their diminished heads. "Yes, marm," they piped, more feebly. "Now git up, all of ye, an' try it. Speak up, Sarah Maud."

Sarah Maud's tongue clove to the roof of her mouth.

"Quick!"

"Ma thought—it was—sech a pleasant hat that we'd—we'd better leave our short walk to home," recited Sarah Maud, in an agony of mental effort.

This was too much for the boys.

"Oh, whatever shall I do with ye?" moaned the unhappy mother; "I suppose I've got to learn it to yer!" which she did, word for word, until Sarah Maud thought she could stand on her head and say it backwards.

"Now, Cornelius, what are YOU goin' ter say ter make yerself good comp'ny?"

"Dunno!" said Cornelius, turning pale.

"Well, ye ain't goin' to set there like a bump on a log 'thout sayin' a word ter pay for yer vittles, air ye? Ask Mis' Bird how she's feelin' this evenin', or if Mr. Bird's havin' a busy season, or somethin' like that. Now we'll make b'lieve we've got ter the dinner—that won't be so hard, 'cause yer'll have somethin' to do—it's awful bothersome ter stan' round an' act stylish. If they have napkins, Sarah Maud down to Peory may put 'em in their laps 'n the rest of ye can tuck 'em in yer necks. Don't eat with yer fingers—don't grab no vittles off one 'nother's plates; don't reach out for nothin', but wait till yer asked, 'n if yer never GIT asked don't git up and grab it—don't spill nothin' on the table cloth, or like's not Mis' Bird 'll send yer away from the table. Now we'll try a few things ter see how they'll go! Mr. Clement, do you eat cramb'ry sarse?"

"Bet yer life!" cried Clem, who, not having taken in the idea exactly, had mistaken this for an ordinary family question.

"Clement Ruggles, do you mean to tell me that you'd say that to a dinner party? I'll give ye one more chance. Mr. Clement, will you take some of the cramb'ry?"

"Yes marm, thank ye kindly, if you happen ter have any handy."

"Very good, indeed! Mr. Peter, do you speak for white or dark meat?"

"I ain't particler as ter color—anything that nobody else wants will suit me," answered Peter with his best air.

"First rate! nobody could speak more genteel than that. Miss Kitty, will you have hard or soft sarse with your pudden?"

"A little of both if you please, an' I'm much obliged," said Kitty with decided ease and grace, at which all the other Ruggleses pointed the finger of shame at her and Peter GRUNTED expressively, that their meaning might not be mistaken.

"You just stop your gruntin', Peter Ruggles; that was all right. I wish I could git it inter your heads that it ain't so much what yer say, as the way yer say it. Eily, you an' Larry's too little to train, so you just look at the rest, an' do 's they do, an' the Lord have mercy on ye an' help ye to act decent! Now, is there anything more ye'd like to practice?"

"If yer tell me one more thing I can't set up an' eat," said Peter, gloomily; "I'm so cram full o' manners now I'm ready ter bust 'thout no dinner at all."

"Me too," chimed in Cornelius.

"Well, I'm sorry for yer both," rejoined Mrs. Ruggles, sarcastically; "if the 'mount o' manners yer've got on hand now, troubles ye, you're dreadful easy hurt! Now, Sarah Maud, after dinner, about once in so often, you must say, 'I guess we'd better be goin';' an' if they say, 'Oh, no,

set a while longer,' yer can stay; but if they don't say nothin' you've got ter get up an' go. Can you remember?"

"ABOUT ONCE IN SO OFTEN!" Could any words in the language be fraught with more terrible and wearing uncertainty?

"Well," answered Sarah Maud, mournfully, "seems as if this whole dinner party set right square on top o' me! Maybe I could manage my own manners, but ter manage nine mannerses is worse 'n staying to home!"

"Oh, don't fret," said her mother, good naturedly, "I guess you'll git along. I wouldn't mind if folks would only say, 'Oh, childern will be childern;' but they won't. They'll say, 'Land o' Goodness, who fetched them childern up?' Now it's quarter past five; you can go, an' whatever yer do, don't forget your mother was a McGrill!"