

THE BIRD'S CHRISTMAS CAROL

By

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Chapter 6: When the Pie Was Opened, The
Birds Began to Sing



The children went out the back door quietly, and were presently lost to sight, Sarah Maud slipping and stumbling along absent-mindedly as she recited, under her breath, "It— was — such — a — pleasant — evenin' — an — sech — a — short — walk — we — thought — we'd — leave — our — hats — to — home."

Peter rang the door bell, and presently a servant admitted them, and, whispering something in Sarah's ear, drew her downstairs into the kitchen. The other Ruggleses stood in horror-stricken groups as the door closed behind their commanding officer; but there was no time for reflection, for a voice from above was heard, saying, "Come right up stairs, please!"

"Theirs not to make reply,
Theirs not to reason why,
Theirs but to do or die."

Accordingly, they walked upstairs, and Elfrida, the nurse, ushered them into a room more splendid than anything they had ever seen. But, oh woe! where was Sarah Maud! and was it Fate that Mrs. Bird should say, at once, "Did you lay your hats in the hall?" Peter felt himself elected by circumstance the head of the family, and, casting one imploring look at tongue-tied Susan, standing next him, said huskily, "It was so very pleasant — that — that" "That we hadn't good hats enough to go round," put in little Susan, bravely, to help him out, and then froze with horror that the ill-fated words had slipped off her tongue.

However, Mrs. Bird said, pleasantly, "Of course you wouldn't wear hats such a short distance—I forgot when I asked. Now, will you come right in to Miss Carol's room, she is so anxious to see you?"

Just then Sarah Maud came up the back-stairs, so radiant with joy from her secret interview with the cook, that Peter could have pinched her with a clear conscience, and Carol gave them a joyful welcome. "But

where is Baby Larry?" she cried, looking over the group with searching eye. "Didn't he come?"

"Larry! Larry!" Good Gracious, where was Larry? They were all sure that he had come in with them, for Susan remembered scolding him for tripping over the door-mat. Uncle Jack went into convulsions of laughter. "Are you sure there were nine of you?" he asked, merrily.

"I think so, sir," said Peoria, timidly; "but, anyhow, there was Larry;" and she showed signs of weeping.

"Oh, well, cheer up!" cried Uncle Jack. "I guess he's not lost—only mislaid. I'll go and find him before you can say Jack Robinson!"

"I'll go, too, if you please, sir," said Sarah Maud, "for it was my place to mind him, an' if he's lost I can't relish my vittles!"

The other Ruggleses stood rooted to the floor. Was this a dinner party, forsooth; and, if so, why were such things ever spoken of as festive occasions?

Sarah Maud went out through the hall, calling, "Larry! Larry!" and without any interval of suspense a thin voice piped up from below, "Here I be!" The truth was that Larry, being deserted by his natural guardian, dropped behind the rest, and wriggled into the hat-tree to wait for her, having no notion of walking unprotected into the jaws of a dinner-party. Finding that she did not come, he tried to crawl from his refuge and call somebody, when—dark and dreadful ending to a tragic day—he found that he was too much intertwined with umbrellas and canes to move a single step. He was afraid to yell! When I have said this of Larry Ruggles I have pictured a state of helpless terror that ought to wring tears from every eye; and the sound of Sarah Maud's beloved voice, some seconds later, was like a strain of angel music in his ears. Uncle Jack dried his tears, carried him upstairs, and soon had him in breathless fits of laughter, while Carol so made the other Ruggleses

forget themselves that they were soon talking like accomplished diners-out.

Carol's bed had been moved into the farthest corner of the room, and she was lying on the outside, dressed in a wonderful soft white wrapper. Her golden hair fell in soft fluffy curls over her white forehead and neck, her cheeks flushed delicately, her eyes beamed with joy, and the children told their mother, afterwards, that she looked as beautiful as the pictures of the Blessed Virgin. There was great bustle behind a huge screen in another part of the room, and at half-past five this was taken away, and the Christmas dinner-table stood revealed. What a wonderful sight it was to the poor little Ruggles children, who ate their sometimes scanty meals on the kitchen table! It blazed with tall colored candles, it gleamed with glass and silver, it blushed with flowers, it groaned with good things to eat; so it was not strange that the Ruggleses, forgetting that their mother was a McGrill, shrieked in admiration of the fairy spectacle. But Larry's behavior was the most disgraceful, for he stood not upon the order of his going, but went at once for a high chair that pointed unmistakably to him, climbed up like a squirrel, gave a comprehensive look at the turkey, clapped his hands in ecstasy, rested his fat arms on the table, and cried, with joy, "I beat the hull lot o' yer!" Carol laughed until she cried, giving orders, meanwhile, "Uncle Jack, please sit at the head, Sarah Maud at the foot, and that will leave four on each side; Mama is going to help Elfrida, so that the children need not look after each other, but just have a good time."

A sprig of holly lay by each plate, and nothing would do but each little Ruggles must leave his seat and have it pinned on by Carol, and as each course was served one of them pleaded to take something to her. There was hurrying to and fro, I can assure you, for it is quite a difficult matter to serve a Christmas dinner on the third floor of a great city house; but if every dish had had to be carried up a rope ladder the servants would gladly have done so. There was turkey and chicken, with delicious gravy and stuffing, and there were half-a-dozen vegetables, with cranberry

jelly, and celery, and pickles; and as for the way these delicacies were served, the Ruggleses never forgot it as long as they lived.

Peter nudged Kitty, who sat next him, and said, "Look, will yer, ev'ry feller's got his own partic'lar butter; I suppose that's to show yer can eat that much 'n no more. No, it ain't neither, for that pig of a Peory's just gittin' another helpin'!" "Yes," whispered Kitty, "an' the napkins is marked with big red letters. I wonder if that's so nobody 'll nip 'em; an' oh, Peter, look at the pictures painted right on ter the dishes. Did yer ever!"

"The plums is all took out o' my cramb'ry sarse, an' it's friz to a stiff jell!" shouted Peoria, in wild excitement.

"Hi—yah! I got a wish-bone!" sung Larry, regardless of Sarah Maud's frown; after which she asked to have his seat changed, giving as excuse that he gen'ally set beside her, an' would "feel strange;" the true reason being that she desired to kick him gently, under the table, whenever he passed what might be termed "the McGrill line."

"I declare to goodness," murmured Susan, on the other side, "there's so much to look at I can't scarcely eat nothin'!"

"Bet yer life I can!" said Peter, who had kept one servant busily employed ever since he sat down; for, luckily, no one was asked by Uncle Jack whether he would have a second helping, but the dishes were quietly passed under their noses, and not a single Ruggles refused anything that was offered him, even unto the seventh time. Then, when Carol and Uncle Jack perceived that more turkey was a physical impossibility, the meats were taken off and the dessert was brought in—a dessert that would have frightened a strong man after such a dinner as had preceded it. Not so the Ruggleses—for a strong man is nothing to a small boy—and they kindled to the dessert as if the turkey had been a dream and the six vegetables an optical delusion. There was plum-

pudding, mince-pie, and ice-cream, and there were nuts, and raisins, and oranges. Kitty chose ice-cream, explaining that she knew it "by sight," but hadn't never tasted none; but all the rest took the entire variety, without any regard to consequences.

"My dear child," whispered Uncle Jack, as he took Carol an orange, "there is no doubt about the necessity of this feast, but I do advise you after this to have them twice a year, or quarterly, perhaps, for the way they eat is positively dangerous; I assure you I tremble for that terrible Peoria. I'm going to run races with her after dinner."

"Never mind," laughed Carol, "let them eat for once; it does my heart good to see them, and they shall come oftener next year."

The feast being over, the Ruggleses lay back in their chairs languidly, and the table was cleared in a trice; then a door was opened into the next room, and there, in a corner facing Carol's bed, which had been wheeled as close as possible, stood the brilliantly lighted Christmas-tree, glittering with gilded walnuts and tiny silver balloons, and wreathed with snowy chains of pop-corn. The presents had been bought mostly with Carol's story money, and were selected after long consultations with Mrs. Bird. Each girl had a blue knitted hood, and each boy a red crocheted comforter, all made by Mama, Carol and Elfrida ("because if you buy everything, it doesn't show so much love," said Carol). Then every girl had a pretty plaid dress of a different color, and every boy a warm coat of the right size. Here the useful presents stopped, and they were quite enough; but Carol had pleaded to give them something "for fun." "I know they need the clothes," she had said, when they were talking over the matter just after Thanksgiving, "but they don't care much for them, after all. Now, Papa, won't you PLEASE let me go without part of my presents this year, and give me the money they would cost, to buy something to amuse them?"

"You can have both," said Mr. Bird, promptly; "is there any need of my little girl's going without her Christmas, I should like to know? Spend all the money you like."

"But that isn't the thing," objected Carol, nestling close to her father; "it wouldn't be mine. What is the use? Haven't I almost everything already, and am I not the happiest girl in the world this year, with Uncle Jack and Donald at home? Now, Papa, you know very well it is more blessed to give than to receive; then why won't you let me do it? You never look half as happy when you are getting your presents as when you are giving us ours. Now, Papa, submit, or I shall have to be very firm and disagreeable with you!"

"Very well, your Highness, I surrender."

"That's a dear Papa! Now, what were you going to give me? Confess!"

"A bronze figure of Santa Claus; and in the little round belly, that shakes, when he laughs, like a bowl full of jelly, is a wonderful clock. Oh, you would never give it up if you could see it."

"Nonsense," laughed Carol; "as I never have to get up to breakfast, nor go to bed, nor catch trains, I think my old clock will do very well! Now, Mama, what were you going to give me?"

"Oh, I hadn't decided. A few more books, and a gold thimble, and a smelling-bottle, and a music-box."

"Poor Carol," laughed the child, merrily, "she can afford to give up these lovely things, for there will still be left Uncle Jack, and Donald, and Paul, and Hugh, and Uncle Rob, and Aunt Elsie, and a dozen other people."

So Carol had her way, as she generally did, but it was usually a good way, which was fortunate, under the circumstances; and Sarah Maud had

a set of Miss Alcott's books, and Peter a modest silver watch, Cornelius a tool-chest, Clement a dog-house for his "lame puppy," Larry a magnificent Noah's ark, and each of the little girls a beautiful doll. You can well believe that everybody was very merry and very thankful. All the family, from Mr. Bird down to the cook, said they had never seen so much happiness in the space of three hours; but it had to end, as all things do. The candles flickered and went out, the tree was left alone with its gilded ornaments, and Mrs. Bird sent the children down stairs at half-past eight, thinking that Carol looked tired.

"Now, my darling, you have done quite enough for one day," said Mrs. Bird, getting Carol into her little night-dress; "I am afraid you will feel worse to-morrow, and that would be a sad ending to such a good time."

"Oh, wasn't it a lovely, lovely time," sighed Carol. "From first to last, everything was just right. I shall never forget Larry's face when he looked at the turkey; nor Peter's, when he saw his watch; nor that sweet, sweet Kitty's smile when she kissed her dolly; nor the tears in poor, dull Sarah Maud's eyes when she thanked me for her books; nor—"

"But we mustn't talk any longer about it to-night," said Mrs. Bird, anxiously; "you are too tired, dear."

"I am not so very tired, Mama. I have felt well all day; not a bit of pain anywhere. Perhaps this has done me good."

"Perhaps; I hope so. There was no noise or confusion; it was just a merry time. Now, may I close the door and leave you alone? I will steal in softly the first thing in the morning, and see if you are all right; but I think you need to be quiet."

"Oh, I'm willing to stay alone; but I am not sleepy yet, and I am going to hear the music by and by, you know."

"Yes, I have opened the window a little, and put the screen in front of it, so that you will not feel the air."

"Can I have the shutters open; and won't you turn my bed a little, please? This morning I woke ever so early, and one bright beautiful star shone in that eastern window. I never saw it before, and I thought of the Star in the East, that guided the wise men to the place where Jesus was. Good night, Mama. Such a happy, happy day!"

"Good night, my precious little Christmas Carol—mother's blessed Christmas child."

"Bend your head a minute, mother dear," whispered Carol, calling her mother back. "Mama, dear, I do think that we have kept Christ's birthday this time just as He would like it. Don't you?"

"I am sure of it," said Mrs. Bird, softly.