

## CLASSIC CHRISTMAS SHORT STORIES



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## Foreword

I bring you this collection of classic Christmas short stories that I have enjoyed through the years in the hope that it will touch your heart as much as it did mine.

*Martyn Demas*



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# FROM A FAR COUNTRY BY CYRUS TOWNSEND BRADY

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*Being a New Variation of an Ancient Theme A STORY FOR GROWNUPS*

## I

"*A certain man had two sons*"--so begins the best and most famous story in the world's literature. Use of the absolute superlative is always dangerous, but none will gainsay that statement, I am sure. This story, which follows that familiar tale afar off, indeed, begins in the same way. And the parallelism between the two is exact up to a certain point. What difference a little point doth make; like the little fire, behold, how great a matter it kindleth! Indeed, lacking that one detail the older story would have had no value; it would not have been told; without its addition this would have been a repetition of the other.

When the modern young prodigal came to himself, when he found himself no longer able to endure the husks of the swine like his ancient exemplar, when he rose and returned to his father because of that distaste, he found no father watching and waiting for him at the end of the road! Upon that change the action of this story hangs. It was a pity, too, because the elder brother was there and in a mood not unlike that of his famous prototype.

Indeed, there was added to that elder brother's natural resentment at the younger's course the blinding power of a great sorrow, for the father of the two sons was dead. He had died of a broken heart. Possessed of no omniscience of mind or vision, he had been unable to foresee the long

delayed turning point in the career of his younger son and death came too swiftly to enable them to meet again. So long as he had strength, that father had stood, as it were, at the top of the hill looking down the road watching and hoping.

And but the day before the tardy prodigal's return he had been laid away with his own fathers in the God's acre around the village church in the Pennsylvania hills. Therefore there was no fatted calf ready for the disillusioned youth whose waywardness had killed his father. It will be remembered that the original elder brother objected seriously to fatted calves on such occasions. Indeed, the funeral baked meats would coldly furnish forth a welcoming meal if any such were called for.

For all his waywardness, for all his self-will, the younger son had loved his father well, and it was a terrible shock to him (having come to his senses) to find that he had returned too late. And for all his hardness and narrowness the eldest son also had loved his father well--strong tribute to the quality of the dead parent--and when he found himself bereft he naturally visited wrath upon the head of him who he believed rightly was the cause of the untimely death of the old man.

As he sat in the study, if such it might be called, of the departed, before the old-fashioned desk with its household and farm and business accounts, which in their order and method and long use were eloquent of his provident and farseeing father, his heart was hot within his breast. Grief and resentment alike gnawed at his vitals. They had received vivid reports, even in the little town in which they dwelt, of the wild doings of the wanderer, but they had enjoyed no direct communication with him. After a while even rumor ceased to busy itself with the doings of the youth. He had dropped out of their lives utterly after he passed over the hills and far away.

The father had failed slowly for a time, only to break suddenly and swiftly in the end. And the hurried frantic search for the missing had brought no results. Ironically the god of chance had led the young man's repentant footsteps to the door too late.

"Where's father?" cried John Carstairs to the startled woman who stared at him as if she had seen a ghost as, at his knock, she opened the door which he had found locked, not against him, but the hour was late and it was the usual nightly precaution:

"Your brother is in your father's study, sir," faltered the servant at last.

"Umph! Will," said the man, his face changing. "I'd rather see father first."

"I think you had better see Mr. William, sir."

"What's the matter, Janet?" asked young Carstairs anxiously. "Is father ill?"

"Yes, sir! Indeed I think you had better see Mr. William at once, Mr. John."

Strangely moved by the obvious agitation of the ancient servitor of the house who had known him from childhood, John Carstairs hurried down the long hall to the door of his father's study. Always a scapegrace, generally in difficulties, full of mischief, he had approached that door many times in fear of well merited punishment which was sure to be meted out to him. And he came to it with the old familiar apprehension that night, if from a different cause. He never dreamed that his father was anything but ill. He must see his brother. He stood in no little awe of that brother, who was his exact antithesis in almost everything. They had not got along particularly well. If his father had been inside the door he would have hesitated with his hand on the knob. If his father had not been ill he would not have attempted to face his brother. But his anxiety, which was increased by a sudden foreboding, for Janet, the maid, had looked at him so strangely, moved him to quick action. He threw the door open instantly. What he saw did not reassure him. William was clad in funeral black. He wore a long frock coat instead of the usual knock-about suit he affected on the farm. His face was white and haggard. There was an instant interchange of names.

"John!"

"William!"

And then--

"Is father ill?" burst out the younger.

"Janet said--"

"Dead!" interposed William harshly, all his indignation flaming into speech and action as he confronted the cause of the disaster.

"Dead! Good God!"

"God had nothing to do with it."

"You mean?"

"You did it."

"I?"

"Yes. Your drunken revelry, your reckless extravagance, your dissipation with women, your unfeeling silence, your--"

"Stop!" cried the younger. "I have come to my senses, I can't bear it."

"I'll say it if it kills you. You did it, I repeat. He longed and prayed and waited and you didn't come. You didn't write. We could hear nothing. The best father on earth."

The younger man sank down in a chair and covered his face with his hands.

"When?" he gasped out finally.

"Three days ago."

"And have you--"

"He is buried beside mother in the churchyard yonder. Now that you are here I thank God that he didn't live to see what you have become."

The respectable elder brother's glance took in the disreputable younger, his once handsome face marred--one doesn't foregather with swine in the sty without acquiring marks of the association--his clothing in rags. Thus errant youth, that was youth no longer, came back from that far country. Under such circumstances one generally has to walk most of the way. He had often heard the chimes at midnight, sleeping coldly in the straw stack of the fields, and the dust of the road clung to his person. Through his broken shoes his bare feet showed, and he trembled visibly as the other confronted him, partly from hunger and weakness and shattered nerves, and partly from shame and horror and for what reason God only knew.

The tall, handsome man in the long black coat, who towered over him so grimly stern, was two years older than he, yet to the casual observer the balance of time was against the prodigal by at least a dozen years. However, he was but faintly conscious of his older brother. One word and one sentence rang in his ear. Indeed, they beat upon his consciousness until he blanched and quivered beneath their onslaught.

"Dead--you did it!"

Yes, it was just. No mercy seasoned that justice in the heart of either man. The weaker, self-accusing, sat silent with bowed head, his conscience seconding the words of the stronger. The voice of the elder ran on with growing, terrifying intensity.

"Please stop," interposed the younger. He rose to his feet. "You are right, Will. You were always right and I was always wrong. I did kill him. But you need not have told me with such bitterness. I realized it the minute you said he was dead. It's true. And yet I was honestly sorry. I came back to tell him so, to ask his forgiveness."

"When your money was gone."

"You can say that, too," answered the other, wincing under the savage thrust. "It's as true as the rest probably, but sometimes a man has to get down very low before he looks up. It was that way with me. Well, I've had my share and I've had my fling. I've no business here. Good-bye." He turned abruptly away.

"Don't add more folly to what you have already done," returned William Carstairs, and with the beginnings of a belated pity, he added, "stay here with me, there will be enough for us both and--"

"I can't."

"Well, then," he drew out of his pocket a roll of bills, "take these and when you want more--"

"Damn your money," burst out John Carstairs, passionately. He struck the other's outstretched hand, and in his surprise, William Carstairs let the bills scatter upon the floor. "I don't want it--blood money. Father is dead. I've had mine. I'll trouble you no more."

He turned and staggered out of the room. Now William Carstairs was a proud man and John Carstairs had offended him deeply. He believed all that he had said to his brother, yet there had been developing a feeling of pity for him in his heart, and in his cold way he had sought to express it. His magnanimity had been rejected with scorn. He looked down at the scattered bills on the floor. Characteristically--for he inherited his father's business ability without his heart--he stooped over and picked them slowly up, thinking hard the while. He finally decided that he would give his brother yet another chance for his father's sake. After all, they were brethren. But the decision came too late. John Carstairs had stood not on the order of his going, but had gone at once, none staying him.

William Carstairs stood in the outer door, the light from the hall behind him streaming out into the night. He could see nothing. He called aloud, but there was no answer. He had no idea where his younger brother had gone. If he had been a man of finer feeling or quicker perception, perhaps if the positions of the two had been reversed and he had been his younger brother, he might have guessed that John might have been found beside the newest mound in the churchyard, had one sought him there. But that idea did not come to William, and after staring into the blackness for a long time, he reluctantly closed the door. Perhaps the vagrant could be found in the morning.

No, there had been no father waiting for the prodigal at the end of the road, and what a difference it had made to that wanderer and vagabond!

## II

We leave a blank line on the page and denote thereby that ten years have passed. It was Christmas Eve, that is, it had been Christmas Eve when the little children had gone to bed. Now midnight had passed and it was already Christmas morning. In one of the greatest and most splendid houses on the avenue two little children were nestled all snug in their beds in a nursery. In an adjoining room sound sleep had quieted the nerves of the usually vigilant and watchful nurse. But the little children were wakeful. As always, visions of Santa Claus danced in their heads.

They were fearless children by nature and had been trained without the use of bugaboos to keep them in the paths wherein they should go. On this night of nights they had left the doors of their nursery open. The older, a little girl of six, was startled, but not alarmed, as she lay watchfully waiting, by a creaking sound as of an opened door in the library below. She listened with a beating heart under the coverlet; cause of agitation not fear, but hope. It might be, it must be Santa Claus, she decided. Brother, aged four, was close at hand in his own small crib. She got out of her bed softly so as not to disturb Santa Claus, or--more important at the time--the nurse. She had an idea that Saint Nicholas might not welcome a nurse, but she had no fear at all that he would not be glad to see her.

Need for a decision confronted her. Should she reserve the pleasure she expected to derive from the interview for herself or should she share it with little brother? There was a certain risk in arousing brother. He was apt to awaken clamant, vociferous. Still, she resolved to try it. For one thing, it seemed so selfish to see Santa Claus alone, and for another the adventure would be a little less timorous taken together.

Slipping her feet into her bedroom slippers and covering her nightgown with a little blanket wrap, she tip-toed over to brother's bed. Fortunately, he too was sleeping lightly, and for a like reason. For a wonder she succeeded in arousing him without any outcry on his part. He was instantly keenly, if quietly, alive to the situation and its fascinating possibilities.

"You must be very quiet, John," she whispered. "But I think Santa Claus is down in the library. We'll go down and catch him."

Brother, as became the hardier male, disdained further protection of his small but valiant person. Clad only in his pajamas and his slippers, he followed sister out the door and down the stair. They went hand in hand, greatly excited by the desperate adventure.

What proportion of the millions who dwelt in the great city were children of tender years only statisticians can say, but doubtless there were thousands of little hearts beating with anticipation as the hearts of those children beat, and perhaps there may have been others who were softly creeping downstairs to catch Santa Claus unawares at that very moment.

One man at least was keenly conscious of one little soul who, with absolutely nothing to warrant the expectation, nothing reasonable on which to base joyous anticipation, had gone to bed thinking of Santa Claus and hoping that, amidst equally deserving hundreds of thousands of obscure children, this little mite in her cold, cheerless garret might not be overlooked by the generous dispenser of joy. With the sublime trust of

childhood she had insisted upon hanging up her ragged stocking. Santa Claus would have to be very careful indeed lest things should drop through and clatter upon the floor. Her heart had beaten, too, although she descended no stair in the great house. She, too, lay wakeful, uneasy, watching, sleeping, drowsing, hoping. We may have some doubts about the eternal springing of hope in the human breast save in the case of childhood--thank God it is always verdant there!

### III

Now few people get so low that they do not love somebody, and I dare say that no people get so low that somebody does not love them.

"Crackerjack," so called because of his super-excellence in his chosen profession, was, or had been, a burglar and thief; a very ancient and highly placed calling indeed. You doubtless remember that two thieves comprised the sole companions and attendants of the Greatest King upon the most famous throne in history. His sole court at the culmination of His career. "Crackerjack" was no exception to the general rule about loving and being beloved set forth above.

He loved the little lady whose tattered stocking swung in the breeze from the cracked window. Also he loved the wretched woman who with himself shared the honors of parentage to the poor but hopeful mite who was also dreaming of Christmas and the morning. And his love inspired him to action. Singular into what devious courses, utterly unjustifiable, even so exalted and holy an emotion may lead fallible man. Love--burglary! They do not belong naturally in association, yet slip cold, need, and hunger in between and we may have explanation even if there be no justification. Oh, Love, how many crimes are committed in thy name!

"Crackerjack" would hardly have chosen Christmas Eve for a thieving expedition if there had been any other recourse. Unfortunately there was none. The burglar's profession, so far as he had practiced it, was undergoing a timely eclipse. Time was when it had been lucrative, its rewards great. Then the law, which is no respecter of professions of that kind, had got him. "Crackerjack" had but recently returned from a protracted sojourn at an institution arranged by the State in its paternalism for the reception and harboring of such as he. The pitiful dole with which the discharged prisoner had been unloaded upon a world which had no welcome for him had been soon spent; even the hideous prison-made clothes had been pawned, and some rags, which were yet the rags of a free man, which had been preserved through the long period of separation by his wife, gave him a poor shelter from the winter's cold.

That wife had been faithful to him. She had done the best she could for herself and baby during the five years of the absence of the bread winner, or in his case the bread taker would be the better phrase. She had eagerly awaited the hour of his release; her joy had been soon turned to bitterness. The fact that he had been in prison had shut every door against him and even closed the few that had been open to her. The three pieces of human flotsam had been driven by the wind of adversity and tossed. They knew not where to turn when jettisoned by society.

Came Christmas Eve. They had no money and no food and no fire. Stop! The fire of love burned in the woman's heart, the fire of hate in the man's. Prison life usually completes the education in shame of the unfortunate men who are thrust there. This was before the days in which humane men interested themselves in prisons and prisoners and strove to awaken the world to its responsibilities to, as well as the possibilities of, the convict.

But "Crackerjack" was a man of unusual character. Poverty, remorse, drink, all the things that go to wreck men by forcing them into evil courses had laid him low, and because he was a man originally of education and ability, he had shone as a criminal. The same force of character which made him super-burglar could change him from criminal to man if by chance they could be enlisted in the Endeavour.

He had involved the wife he had married in his misfortunes. She had been a good woman, weaker than he, yet she stuck to him. God chose the weak thing to rejuvenate the strong. In the prison he had enjoyed abundant leisure for reflection. After he learned of the birth of his daughter he determined to do differently when he was freed. Many men determine, especially in the case of an ex-convict, but society usually determines better--no, not better, but more strongly. Society had different ideas. It was Brahministic in its religion. Caste? Yes, once a criminal always a criminal.

"Old girl," said the broken man, "it's no use. I've tried to be decent for your sake and the kid's, but it can't be done. I can't get honest work. They've put the mark of Cain on me. They can take the consequences. The kid's got to have some Christmas; you've got to have food and drink and clothes and fire. God, how cold it is! I'll go out and get some."

"Isn't there something else we can pawn?"

"Nothing."

"Isn't there any work?"

"Work?" laughed the man bitterly. "I've tramped the city over seeking it, and you, too. Now, I'm going to get money--elsewhere."

"Where?"

"Where it's to be had."

"Oh, Jack, think."

"If I thought, I'd kill you and the kid and myself."

"Perhaps that would be better," said the woman simply. "There doesn't seem to be any place left for us."

"We haven't come to that yet," said the man. "Society owes me a living and, by God, it's got to pay it to me."

It was an oft-repeated, widely held assertion, whether fallacious or not each may determine for himself.

"I'm afraid," said the woman.

"You needn't be; nothing can be worse than this hell."

He kissed her fiercely. Albeit she was thin and haggard she was beautiful to him. Then he bent over his little girl. He had not yet had sufficient time since his release to get very well acquainted with her. She had been born while he was in prison, but it had not taken any time at all for him to learn to love her. He stared at her a moment. He bent to kiss her and then stopped. He might awaken her. It is always best for the children of the very poor to sleep. He who sleeps dines, runs the Spanish proverb. He turned and kissed the little ragged stockings instead, and then he went out. He was going to play--was it Santa Claus, indeed?

#### IV

The strange, illogical, ironical god of chance, or was it Providence acting through some careless maid, had left an area window unlocked in the biggest and newest house on the avenue. Any house would have been easy for "Crackerjack" if he had possessed the open sesame of his kit of burglar's tools, but he had not had a jimmy in his hand since he was caught with one and sent to Sing Sing. He had examined house after house, trusting to luck as he wandered on, and, lo! Fortune favored him.

The clock in a nearby church struck the hour of two. The areaway was dark. No one was abroad. He plunged down the steps, opened the window and disappeared. No man could move more noiselessly than he. In the still night he knew how the slightest sounds are magnified. He had made none as he groped his way through the back of the house, arriving at last in a room which he judged to be the library. Then, after listening and hearing nothing, he ventured to turn the button of a side light in a far corner of the room.

He was in a large apartment, beautifully furnished. Books and pictures abounded, but these did not interest him, although if he had made further examination he might have found things worthy of his attention even there. It so happened that the light bracket to which he had blundered, or had been led, was immediately over a large wall safe. Evidently

it had been placed there for the purpose of illuminating the safe door. His eyes told him that instantly. This was greater fortune than he expected. A wall safe in a house like that must contain things of value.

Marking the position of the combination knob, he turned out the light and waited again. The quiet of the night continued unbroken. A swift inspection convinced him that the lock was only an ordinary combination. With proper--or improper--tools he could have opened it easily. Even without tools, such were his delicately trained ear and his wonderfully trained fingers that he thought he could feel and hear the combination. He knelt down by the knob and began to turn it slowly, listening and feeling for the fall of the tumblers. Several times he almost got it, only to fail at the end, but by repeated trials and unexampled patience, his heart beating like a trip-hammer the while, he finally mastered the combination and opened the safe door.

In his excitement when he felt the door move he swung it outward sharply. It had not been used for some time evidently and the hinges creaked. He checked the door and listened again. Was he to be balked after so much success? He was greatly relieved at the absence of sound. It was quite dark in the room. He could see nothing but the safe. He reached his hand in and discovered it was filled with bulky articles covered with some kind of cloth, silver evidently.

He decided that he must have a look and again he switched on the light. Yes, his surmise had been correct. The safe was filled with silver. There was a small steel drawer in the middle of it. He had a broad bladed jack-knife in his pocket and at the risk of snapping the blade he forced the lock and drew out the drawer. It was filled with papers. He lifted the first one and stood staring at it in astonishment, for it was an envelope which bore his name, written by a hand which had long since moldered away in the dust of a grave.

## V

Before he could open the envelope, there broke on his ear a still small voice, not that of conscience, not that of God; the voice of a child--but does not God speak perhaps as often through the lips of childhood as in any other way--and conscience, too?

"Are you Santa Claus?" the voice whispered in his ear.

"Crackerjack" dropped the paper and turned like a flash, knife upraised in his clenched hand, to confront a very little girl and a still smaller boy staring at him in open-eyed astonishment, an astonishment which was without any vestige of alarm. He looked down at the two and they looked up at him, equal bewilderment on both sides.

"I sought dat Santy Claus tamed down de chimney," said the younger of the twain, whose pajamas bespoke the nascent man.

"In all the books he has a long white beard. Where's yours?" asked the coming woman.

This innocent question no less than the unaffected simplicity and sincerity of the questioner overpowered "Crackerjack." He sank back into a convenient chair and stared at the imperturbable pair. There was a strange and wonderful likeness in the sweet-faced golden-haired little girl before him to the worn, haggard, and ill-clad little girl who lay shivering in the mean bed in the upper room where God was not--or so he fancied.

"You're a little girl, aren't you?" he whispered.

No voice had been or was raised above a whisper. It was a witching hour and its spell was upon them all.

"Yes."

"What is your name?"

"Helen."

Now Helen had been "Crackerjack's" mother's name and it was the name of his own little girl, and although everybody else called her Nell, to him she was always Helen.

"And my name's John," volunteered the other child.

"John!" That was extraordinary!

"What's your other name?"

"John William."

The man stared again. Could this be coincidence merely? John was his own name and William that of his brother.

"I mean what is your last name?"

"Carstairs," answered the little girl. "Now you tell us who you are. You aren't Santa Claus, are you? I don't hear any reindeers outside, or bells, and you haven't any pack, and you're not by the fireplace where our stockings are."

"No," said the man, "I'm not exactly Santa Claus, I'm his friend--I--"

What should he say to these children? In his bewilderment for the moment he actually forgot the letter which he still held tightly in his hand.

"Dat's muvver's safe," continued the little boy. "She keeps lots o' things in it. It's all hers but dat drawer. Dat's papa's and--"

"I think I hear someone on the stairs," broke in the little girl suddenly in great excitement. "Maybe that's Santa Claus."

"Perhaps it is," said the man, who had also heard. "You wait and watch for him. I'll go outside and attend to his reindeer."

He made a movement to withdraw, but the girl caught him tightly by the hand.