

Sarah Mary's Christmas Tree.

By Frank H. Sweet.

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"It ain't any use for you to say you think it's goin' to stop snowin', grandfather, for it ain't. It's set in for a big storm." There was a slight quiver about little Sarah Mary's lips as she said this, but she pressed them firmly together, and, brushing the flakes of snow from her plaid shawl, she swung it up on a nail behind the kitchen door and set about getting the breakfast.

"You've been out in the road to get a good look at the sky, I reckon, Sarah Mary," said Grandfather Nichols genially.

Sarah Mary nodded. A queer little sound came from her throat, but she did not speak.

"Well, I declare, it does appear to be a kind of a stump, Sarah Mary—a kind of a stump," said the old man slowly



"CAN'T YOU AND I HAVE A PRETEND CHRISTMAS HERE?"

as he carried in some kindlings for the stove in the living room and stooped down to open the stove door and start the fire.

"Here she was lottin' on that Sunday school Christmas tree for weeks and weeks stiddy," said Grandfather Nichols, apparently addressing the flickering blaze that seemed loath to start up briskly, "and then 'twas put off to New Year's on account of the minister bein' sick, and now, after all the waitin', she's got to lose it. Never been to a Christmas tree in her life, Sarah Mary ain't, and thinks I haven't nuther."

"I was goin' along with her. Full moon due tonight and mild weather for a week back. The first snowstorm of the season, this is, and Sarah Mary ain't fitted out for stormy weather. Them three miles there and back three more was goin' to be about all I could 'a' fetched in good walkin', but I wouldn't 'a' begrudged gettin' master tired, not a mite."

"Breakfast is most ready," said Sarah Mary, with a faint smile. Presently it was quite ready, and they sat down at the table. It was a very silent meal, but at last Sarah Mary broke the silence.

"Last year was the first one they ever had, but I didn't mind missin' that, grandfather, because you was sick, but now it just seems as if"—Poor little Sarah Mary could not finish, but rose abruptly and began to clear away the dishes.

"I know, honey," said the old man, patting her head as he, too, rose from the table.

When the door from the kitchen into the shed was closed Sarah Mary sank into the splint bottomed rocking chair and sobbed despairingly. Gradually the sobs ceased. Then she stopped rocking and sat up straight.

"Grandfather," cried the little girl cheerily about half an hour later, "you must have split up more'n enough kindlin's by this time. Come in. I want to talk to you. I've got a reg'lar splendid plan."

The old man came in quickly, rubbing his hands.

"Kind o' cool in the shed this mornin'," he said, looking anxiously at Sarah Mary, whose eyes were red, though she smiled bravely at him.

"Now sit right down here in front of the stove and get warmed up," she said, drawing the old rocking chair forward.

"I've been thinkin'," she went on, speaking quickly as she stood quite close to her grandfather, "that this is the last day of the year, and tonight will be New Year's eve, only we'll be to home 'stead of down to the church." Here her voice trembled a little, but only for a moment.

"And I don't see why you and I, grandfather, can't have a pretend Christmas here that'll be most as good as if we'd gone to the Sunday school one."

"Of course," said the little girl wistfully, "we could do it better if we had ever seen a real Christmas ent'ainment. But I reckon we can make out

grandfather, don't you?"

"I see a Christmas ent'ainment once, tree and all," said the old man. "Twas when your father was a little chaw, and he was visitin' with Brother Henry's folks down in the city."

"Oh, grandfather!" exclaimed the child, drawing a long breath. "Then you must be more disappointed even than I am, because you know what you're missin'. But you can tell me what it was like, so we can pretend just complete."

"Well," began the old man, "there was a tree all covered with sparklin' things and colored ones and candles, and then the folks' presents was hung on the limbs too. The room was all kind of trimmed round with green, and there was words on the walls, 'Peace on Earth, Good Will to Men,' and sev'ral others."

"And there was a Santa Claus, a man all dressed up in furs, with long white whiskers and lookin' as if he'd been out in a snowstorm, and he made some remarks fust and then give out the presents. There was a parcel of candy for each child, I rec'lect. 'Twas a handsome sight."

"We can pretend most of it if you'll help, grandfather," she said.

"I'm ready for anything you suggest, ma'am," said the old man as he rubbed Sarah Mary's hand between his own rough palms.

"Well, then," said the child briskly, "had you just as soon have your dinner at half past 'leven, so I can have the whole afternoon to get ready to pretend in?"

"Have it at ten thutty if you say so," said her grandfather gayly.

"No," returned Sarah Mary, with much gravity; "half past 'leven will be early enough. Now, there's two or three things you can do to help. I don't see 't we can have a real tree, but if we could bring in that tallest apple wood chunk that's out in the shed and cut some notches in it and stick some of the twigs from the brush pile in the notches I think 'twould make a real good pretendin' tree."

"And then, of course," she went on, "you must be Santa Claus, and you'll know just how 's long as you've seen one, and if you could spare me some of your old papers I'd be obliged. And I'll do all the rest."

"Mussy sakes alive!" ejaculated Grandfather Nichols. "What a little planner you be! Well, well, I guess there's quite a little job laid out for me. I'll look over the old papers fust and see what I can spare. I s'pose it's no use askin' you what they're for?"

"Not a mite," replied the child merrily as she took down the broom from its peg on the wall.

"Guess I'll step out if it's house-cleanin' time," said Grandfather Nichols as he beat a retreat, in pretended dismay, to the living room.

"Here's four numbers from the three years' ago file that haven't got anything of no great interest to me in 'em," said the old man, cautiously opening the kitchen door at about 10 o'clock with a little package of old newspapers in his hand. "Will that be enough for your purposes? Seems to be great doin's in here this mornin'. Haven't I smelled molas?"

"Grandfather!" said Sarah Mary in a warning tone, and the old man dropped the papers and retreated.

"Just like her ma, that child is," he said to himself as he put on his coat, preparatory to a trip to the cold garret, where he expected to find some articles suitable for his afternoon's masquerade. "There ain't no stumpin' her, not for long, I can tell ye."

Dinner was what Sarah Mary called "slim" that day and was eaten with all possible expedition. Sarah Mary's thin little cheeks were flushed, and her eyes were unusually bright.

"Do you s'pose—do you reckon it's silly for me to be pretendin'?" she asked. "Had I ought to consider I'm too old for play, grandfather?"

"Let's see—how old be you 'xactly'?" inquired the old man.

"I'm jest about 'leven," responded the child.

"Well, that's gettin' on, o' course; but, seein' you're small for your age, I presume it might be allowed ye to play a little spell longer if you get a good chance like this one."

The child's last doubt vanished with this assurance.

It had been agreed between them that when Grandfather Nichols had placed the chunk, with its twig branches tightly notched in according to Sarah Mary's directions, she was to take possession of the living room and beautify it as she saw fit.

All her grandfather had to do with it was to give her a few more particulars about the decorations he had seen that other Christmas so long ago. He was not to be permitted to see the living room till 6 o'clock.

Precisely at that hour Sarah Mary in the character of guest and Santa Claus in the person of her grandfather were to enter the apartment, one from the kitchen and the other from the entry.

Time hung rather heavily on the old man. At 5 o'clock he muttered to himself, "I wisht I could see how I look," and vainly tried to get a glimpse of his figure in the little cracked looking glass, six inches square, which hung in his room.

"There," exclaimed Sarah Mary, descending from a chair on which she had been standing and looking about the room with pride; "I've done the very best I could, I hope grandfather 'll be pleased it's half past 5 now, and I must hurry and get dressed."

A few minutes before 6 o'clock a little figure stepped softly down the steep back stairs, and at about the same time a large, cumbersome form descended the front stairs laboriously.

As the old clock in the kitchen struck 6 with its sharp, curt strokes these

two figures entered the living room from opposite directions and gazed at each other.

Sarah Mary was bravely attired in a changeable silk waist which had once belonged to her mother and a skirt of some sort, the exact style of which could not be determined, inasmuch as it was completely covered by Sarah Mary's best apron, a very large white one with strings of great length. These strings were crossed diagonally on the child's back and brought over her shoulders to the front, where they terminated in a large bow securely pinned to her dress. Her curly hair had been made to lie as flat as such hair ever would. She stood with her eyes riveted on Santa Claus, on whose face was a broad smile. Truly he was a wonderful Santa Claus! An old buffalo skin, plentifully besprinkled with flour, was gathered about him and tied in place about his neck, arms and legs. It was easy to see that getting downstairs at ever so slow a pace must have been a difficult matter. His hair and beard were well covered with flour, and so was the old fur cap on his head. There was even a dash of flour here and there on the boots he wore.

"Oh! Oh! I'd never know you in the world!" gasped Sarah Mary. Then, recollecting herself, she walked sedately to a chair placed in one corner of the room.

Santa Claus for his part was unable to suppress an admiring "Well, I declare to man!" as he looked about the room. On the wall in several places were strips of brown cambric on which were pasted sentiments appropriate to the season. The letters were of various sizes, cut from the papers.

"Peace on Earth," read Santa Claus, looking at the words over the stove through a tremulous mist that made them waver.

A wreath of autumn leaves was pinned on one window curtain and a bunch of dried "everlastings" on the other. There was a big candle in the center of the wooden mantel and a small one at each end. A lamp burned on the one table, and the smallest candle of all shone from a little tin candlestick placed on the top of the tree.

The inverted washtub was hidden by an old red cloth, and above it the tree rose resplendent, its bare twigs glistening with strips of tin and scraps of colored paper and hung with strings of popcorn. Tied to the two largest branches were two packages wrapped in newspaper.

Sarah Mary's eyes shone with pride as she looked at the tree.

"This is a glorious, blessed time, children," said Santa Claus, advancing slowly to the tree and turning his eyes on his sedate but beaming audience. "We've got a sight of things to be joy-

ous about, and, wishtn' you all a merry Christmas-New Year, I will now procede to distribute the presents."

So saying, Santa Claus put out his hand and cautiously untied one of the newspaper packages.

"For Grandfather Nichols," he read slowly aloud. "I understand he's expected to be with us this evenin' and will probably be along in a few minutes."

He untied the other package and read, "For Sarah Mary Nichols." Will the little gal step foward and get her present?" Sarah Mary received the package and a pat on the head from Santa Claus. She turned away and then stopped.

"Grandfather," she cried, facing about and throwing her little arms as far around the befooled buffalo robe as they would reach, "you've been a splendid Santa Claus, and now will you take your package and be the rest of the children with me? It's only jest molasses candy, but it's real good. I tasted it to see."

"Well, I reckon I will," said Grandfather Nichols heartily as he burst the bonds of his buffalo robe and kicked off the clumsy boots with a right good will.

He and Sarah Mary were sitting together in the big old rocking chair, the candles were burning low and the mo-



"THE SUNDAY SCHOOL TREE IS POSTPONED TILL TOMORROW." Sasses candy was nearly gone when the two Christmas-New Year revelers

heard the sound of sleighbells, followed by a knock at their door.

"I jest stopped on my way home from the Corners," said Nicholas' nearest neighbor when the door opened. "I thought I'd come in and tell you that the Sunday school tree is postponed till tomorrow night on account of the bad travellin', and I can fix it to take Sarah Mary and you, too, along with us to the ent'ainment. Good night."

"Much obliged! Much obliged!" said Grandfather Nichols as he drove away. Sarah Mary, preparing to go to bed, took a peep at the outside world.

"Why, grandfather," she exclaimed joyfully, "it has stopped snowin', and the moon is comin' out! What a beautiful time Christmas and New Year is!"

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—Sketch.

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