

The Bishop's Kitten

A Christmas Story

By FRANK H. SWEET.

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It was Christmas eve. The secretary had paper and pencil ready and a typewriter beside him. The bishop of Winchester sat in the window in a straight backed chair, for it appeared that he could not even allow himself the luxury of resting when he might have rested.

"A note of thanks from the president of the board of managers of the Home for the Homeless," said the secretary, opening another letter, with a little sigh of relief, for he was near the end of the pile. "He says that your magnificent contribution has saved the home from serious difficulties and that this will enable them to go through the winter comfortably."

"No answer needed," said the bishop briefly.

"A letter from Mr. Hanlon for help for a poor family. He says he has found a family in great distress, and he looks to you for advice and assistance."

"He doesn't need advice. He needs assistance. Tell him to draw on me and do what he thinks necessary."

"A letter from Mr. Quintard in reference to young Cooper, the theological student. He has married and so has forfeited his right to continue his course and enter upon his career unless you are willing to make an exception in his case."

The bishop's face flushed and his lips set in a line like iron.

"Write Mr. Quintard," he said in icy tones, "that he will please convey to the young man my compliments and tell him that since he has put his nose to the grindstone he may keep it there. He is to tell him from me that he can seek out some humble employment for himself."

"Are you going out, sir?" asked the secretary as the bishop put on his overcoat.

"Yes," replied the great man simply. "I promised to give a talk to the workmen tonight at the Dayton mission."

There was a world of personal history in the simple answer. It was a cold and dismal night, and the fire was burning cheerily in the grate, yet this man, who might have taken his ease, was going to the farthest extremity of the city to talk to grimy workmen. The secretary watched him with wonder and curiosity in his face. The hard, stern, unbending man, the self-sacrificing sympathizer with the poor—what contradictions were in this man's nature!

The mission stood in the midst of a thickly settled district populated chiefly by the workmen from the foundries and mills that abounded there. The mission house was small and plain and not too comfortable, as the bishop knew, for he had spoken there before. To his surprise, the doors were closed and the place was dark.

"Strange," he said to himself. "I did not think I was too early."

Nothing stirred about the house except a little furry kitten which sat on the steps and rent the air with agonized howls.

"Mercy, what a voice!" exclaimed the bishop uneasily. "Are you cold, poor little kitty?"

Looking up and down the street to see that no one was coming, he took the tiny kitten up and stroked its head. It opened its mouth wide and could not explain. It surely must be almost frozen. No one was coming yet. The bishop unbent his overcoat at the top and thrust the kitten in.

"If I see any one coming I can take it out," he thought. "Perhaps one of the workmen will take it home to the children."

Lulled by the warmth, the kitten was quiet for a moment, but all at once it realized that there was something else needed. It crawled up, put out its head and howled louder than ever.

"Mercy on us!" exclaimed the bishop. "It must be hungry. If the men would only come!"

Sure enough, there was some one walking up the street with a rapid swing. But he was about to pass when the bishop stopped him.

"Pardon me, my friend," he said, "but I expected there would be service in this house tonight. Can you tell me?"

"No; it's Christmas night," said the man, hurrying on.

He had mistaken the night, and all this long journey! "Too bad, kitty," he said to the head which was just beneath his chin and which was giving utterance to the wildest and most hopeless howls. "As I have nothing else to do, though, perhaps I might find a place where they would give you a little milk and maybe adopt you."

A little distance farther on there was a house where there was a fire in the front room, and he could hear a man's voice within. Ah, here was the place! A man would understand the situation.

A ring at the bell and the door was swung open and a man stood on the threshold. "That you, Fred?" he asked, peering into the darkness.

"No, it is not Fred," replied the bishop mildly, and then he repeated his formula.

"See here, my man," said the person

in the doorway, "I don't know whether you're crazy or on a jag, but you'd better hurry on, for it is mighty near time for the copper on this beat to git around."

The bishop drew his splendid figure erect and walked on. "All men are becoming pessimists," he said to himself and the kitten.

Perhaps it was this gloomy thought that made the kitten open its mouth and surpass all its previous efforts in the way of soul stirring wails. The bishop set his lips in a hard line.

"I'm going to find something for this kitten to eat," he said, half aloud, and when the bishop said things in that way it was as well for circumstances to yield.

A tiny cottage stood at a street corner—such a tiny cottage that it seemed to have been crowded into the corner as an afterthought when the place was already full. There was a light in the front room, and as the bishop had grown desperate he walked up the small stoop and rang the bell.

A young man opened the door. There was an electric light a few feet away, and the bishop saw by it that the young man had a pale face and that his hair was tumbled as though by restless fingers. While he was noting these things he was telling about the kitten.

"I have applied to several people," he added, "but they seem to look upon me as a dangerous and suspicious character. I hope you will be more generous in your judgment."

The young man had started at the sound of his voice, but he opened the door wider.

"Come in," he said. "I think we will be able to find the kitten something to eat."

A slender slip of a girl arose from her seat near the fire and went into the other room. She came back presently with a saucer of milk and set it and the kitten down on a rug, and then the bishop sat down, too, at their invitation, and they laughed with one accord at the enthusiastic manner in which the kitten crawled bodily into that saucer of milk and lapped and choiced and lapped and strangled again as though it would never have enough.

"The poor little thing was hungry, very hungry," said its benefactor pityingly.

While the kitten drank the bishop was looking around the poor, neat little room, with its bare floor shining white and its pitiful little adornments. And from the room his eyes wandered to the girl, who was down on her knees by the fire wiping the milk from the kitten's paws and making it fit for decent society. She was a lovely girl, with large, tender brown eyes, and her hair was filled with gold in the firelight, and there was a dimple in the midst of the bloom on her left cheek.

When had the bishop of Winchester ever noticed the bloom on a woman's cheek before or the dimple in the midst of it?

"Really, this is very pleasant," he said, warming under the genial influence of the neat little room and the lovely girl and the fine young man with the intellectual face. "I am glad that I found the kitten, for it has been the cause of my making some pleasant friends. You must give me your name, for I have no disposition to lose friends so pleasantly found."

Something had been weighing on the mind of the young man ever since his guest had come into the room. Now he arose and stood before the bishop, his eyes kindling.

"My name is Cooper," he said, with an intrepidity which the bishop could not but recognize even in the midst of his amazement. "I am a student of theology. I lack a year of finishing my course. A month ago I married, and today you sent me word that since I had put my nose to the grindstone I could keep it there."

There was silence in the room for some moments. Then the bishop arose and began to button his overcoat.

"I am glad I came in," he said gently, looking at the young man. "And so you have been married a month? Have courage, my boy. We all have our grindsomes, and our noses are kept pretty constantly at them in the course of the years, but no matter so they don't grind away any of our hearts. And this is the little wife who was more and better than a career? Well, perhaps she is. She reminds me of a girl I knew long ago. You won't mind my taking the little kitten home with me, will you?"

And the two young people stood amazed while he put the kitten inside his overcoat and then shook hands with them warmly before he departed.

The next morning when the secretary entered the study he paused and leaned against the door a moment and passed his hands across his eyes. Could that be the bishop of Winchester sitting in his accustomed place, with a white kitten climbing over him and biting his ears and bumping its head against his chin?

"Oh, you're here, Daniel!" said the bishop, catching sight of him. "Sit down there for a moment and take this for Mr. Quintard."

And the secretary staid his reeling faculties while the bishop dictated:

Dear Quintard—I have reconsidered my decision in regard to young Cooper. I have some evidence that goes to show that he will make a useful man, and you may assure him from me that he will be allowed to continue his course; also please ascertain if he is at all cramped in his circumstances, and if so consider me your banker and help him as he needs it without letting him know to whom he is indebted. You can manage this, I know.

"I must be dreaming," said the secretary to himself, but as he looked again to convince himself there was the bishop of Winchester smiling at the kitten, which was clawing at the leaves of one of the abstract books on the table and turning somersaults down the open pages.

CALISTA'S CHRISTMAS

How a Girl Was Changed From Selfishness to Charity.

By CLARISSA MACKIE. (Copyright, 1909, by American Press Association.)

For twelve long years Calista Thorp had fought against that grim fate which had removed her loved ones within the space of a short twelve-month and left her hopeless and dry eyed in the midst of an empty house, even now echoing with happy voices stilled forever.

She was a frail little woman, with a bruised heart which she hid behind a cold exterior, defiant blue eyes and a bitter tongue. All the softness of her youth had congealed. She was estranged from happiness.

Twelve times since that awful year had Calista hung the stockings before the fireplace in the sitting room—mother's warm woolen hose, father's large sock, Bobby's two stockings (gaping expectantly), little Ann's white ones and, last of all, her own limp black one.

And twelve times had Calista filled them with shining eyes and swelling heart. Then when Christmas morning dawned and she awoke to the bitterness that awaited her in the silent house and in the sight of the row of bulging stockings hanging before the smoldering fire she would fly down to the sitting room and tear them from the shelf and empty each one of its burden.

The bureau drawers in the slant roofed bedrooms were filled with the little treasures Calista had bought for her loved ones.

Again it was Christmas eve, and Calista had come home from shopping. Her arms were full of parcels, and the snowflakes powdered the dark hair that framed her small pale face—paler than usual, for the young minister had met her at the corner and walked home with her.

At the gate he had timidly relieved himself of a burden that troubled him. He had remonstrated with Calista Thorp because of her selfishness.

Her cheeks burned as she remembered how his spectacles had reflected



"MERRY CHRISTMAS, MISS CALISTA!" the moonlight until they seemed like luminous supernatural eyes reading her soul.

He had ventured only a few words, and his concluding sentence still rang in her ears:

"Surely there is room in your heart for others outside your loved ones who have gone! God grant you a happy Christmas, Miss Calista!"

He was very young and very poor and very much in earnest, and he had a young wife and family at home awaiting him, yet he had found time to concern himself over Calista Thorp, the most skeptical member of his flock.

For the first time a light broke in on Calista's brain. For the first time she saw herself in her true character. She saw that in giving herself up to those who were gone she was hiding her talent in a napkin.

It was not those loved ones she was benefiting; it was the living she was denying. What right had she to keep all for the dead, who could use nothing she would give them?

Was she not in giving it to them hoarding it for herself? All of a sudden a realization of her true position rushed upon her with resistless force.

And how long had she shut herself in this world of her own selfish making? Twelve years.

A shame came in her heart that she had all this while taken no interest in a single living being at Christmas time.

There were the children among her relatives, the children of her friends, but, above all, the children of the poor. When she thought of the many little ones whom even a penny toy would delight she was seized with a desire on this Christmas to wipe out the stain.

The parcels rattled to the floor—the pipe which her father would never smoke, the soft wools which her mother's fingers would never knit, the toys with which Bobby might not play, the wax doll which could not afford little Ann any delight!

The next morning, when Christmas broke over the world, Calista Thorp

was stirring around her house. Two great baskets were filled with gifts from the overflowing drawers in the closed chambers, and Calista's best cloak and hat lay on the sofa.

The poorhouse was three miles away on the highroad, and a snowplow had leveled a broad track to the very door. So Calista, clad in her best, put on her overshoes and started forth, a basket in either hand.

She was quite pale and tired when she turned into the high white gate and advanced up the path, bordered on either side with gloomy cedar trees.

Dr. Keyes was the overseer of the Cloverdale poorhouse, and it was considered the best managed institution of its kind in the state.

Breakfast was being served in the long dining hall when Calista rang the bell, and when the door opened the bluff, brown eyed doctor himself stood before her.

"Merry Christmas, Miss Calista! So you are playing Santa Claus this morning! I am glad of that, because some of my old people are feeling very blue today."

He relieved her of the baskets and led the way into the cheery warmth of his comfortable office, where Calista sat down before the glowing stove and thawed out her frosty fingers. When she spoke her eyes were fastened on the red coals, and the words came bestatingly.

"I've kept Christmas alone—for twelve years. Somehow I didn't care about seeing anybody. I just wanted to try to bring back things as they used to be—before—"

Dr. Keyes wiped his glasses and replaced them on his fine nose. Had he not stood side by side with little Calista Thorp and fought hopelessly the battle of life and death—and lost? And had not Calista turned on him like a little wild animal and condemned him because he had failed?

She had avoided speaking to him afterward, and this was the first time he had met, and she was talking to him now as if she had forgotten that he had lost the grim battle for her loved ones.

"—before my folks died," went on Calista steadily. "But it can't be done! The minister talked to me about it, and I got to thinking last night maybe the best way to live over happy times is to give them to somebody else that never had any, so I've brought all the presents I've given mother and father and the children ever since—then—and I want the folks here to have them."

Two tears rolled down her cheeks from Calista's overcharged heart, and others followed and fell into the glass of grape juice which Dr. Keyes held at her lips, and perhaps it was that or the large warm hand which rested on her shoulder that revived the little woman to renewed strength.

"You need never be without a family, Miss Calista," said the doctor at last in a husky voice. "I have a family here—forty people—old and young, and little children. They need help and encouragement and comfort. Some may have another chance in the world if they receive a word of womanly sympathy in season. Will you be my right hand here?"

"I'd like to," sobbed Calista thankfully.

Together they distributed the contents of the two baskets, and Calista found her tongue saying soft pleasantries and her cold face responding warmly to grateful smiles.

She saw her mother's kindly look and her father's approving nod in the faces of many of these indigent old people, and the delight of Bobby and little Ann were repeated tenfold by the orphaned poor children of the doctor's household.

"You have been an angel in disguise to them this Christmas day," said the doctor as he carried Calista home in his sleigh that evening, for Calista had stayed to the dinner of pork tenderloin and apple sauce, with vegetables and many dainties contributed by the good overseer from his own scanty pocket.

Calista Thorp's house was empty no longer. There was always room for some broken soul from the poorhouse—some one who drooped in the atmosphere which could never be inseparable from the institution and who needed comfort and encouragement before taking up the burden of life and attaining independence in the end.

The following Christmas Calista was welcomed as an old friend by the inmates of the poorhouse.

At her bidding each one had hung his or her stocking on a line stretched before the dormitory doors, and that evening Calista and Dr. Keyes had filled them all.

Calista's blue eyes were shining with happiness as the doctor drove her home under the Christmas stars.

"We remembered every one," she said contentedly, leaning back among the soft robes.

"Every one?" he repeated doubtfully.

"Why, who have we forgotten?"

"Me," he said gravely.

Calista's heart thumped painfully at the new note in his deep voice.

"You have forgotten me, Calista. I have given you my heart. That is my gift. You have God's gift, too, the love of my poor people and his love in your heart. I, too, want a gift."

There was a hushed silence then until Calista found courage to ask shyly, "What shall I give to you—my best friend?"

"Give me a place in your heart, Calista. I must be there also. We will work together. Surely you have room in your heart for me, too?"

He leaped over and looked in her eyes, where joy shone serene.

She gave her hand into his with simple faith.

"There is room in my heart for you, Henry—room for the memory of my dear ones, room for the whole world."

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