

Mrs. Moffat's Christmas Party

By Clarissa Mackie ...

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MRS. DEACON POTTS rapped the teacher's desk smartly with a ruler, and the members who were sitting at the low desks in friendly gossip came to attention rather guiltily. It was a week before Christmas, and the Ladies' Aid society was meeting in the schoolhouse.

"Now that we have settled upon the needy ones who must be helped at Christmas time, it only remains to appoint some one to go around and solicit contributions for the purpose," announced Mrs. Potts.

"Helena Moffat has always done that," suggested Mrs. Pinney.

"Where is the list?" asked Helena bluntly. She was a little blue-eyed, sandy haired woman who lived very modestly on a tiny income left by her dead husband. Helena was always foremost in good works.

Mrs. Potts smiled as she gave the list to Helena.

"If you can get as many contributions as you did last year, Helena, every home in Little River will spend a happy and bountiful Christmas."

"Except some of the givers," whispered Helena.

"Why, what do you mean?" exclaimed Mrs. Potts.

Helena smiled mysteriously and, nodding goodby to the other members, went away from the schoolhouse with her list of names. As she walked along the village street she studied the list.

"Miss Riddell, rolling in money and lonesome as a homesick cat," she commented; "old Mr. Wayne, without chick or child and rattling around that big house like a pea in a barrel; the Widow Merton, still mourning for her husband dead twenty years and crying her heart out every Christmas because all her children are dead and gone; Dr. Langdon, busy as a bee all the year and not a moment to spare except on Christmas day, when he has to stay at home with the housekeeper because his only daughter married a man way out in Honolulu, and Mr. Atkins, trying to keep house all alone since his ma died. I don't believe any town ever had such a lot of lonesome folks in it. Talk about giving to the needy poor! Well, the needy rich ought to be looked after. I wonder who ought to tackle that job!"

Helena turned the thought over and over in her busy mind as she went from house to house soliciting contributions for the Christmas giving of the Ladies' Aid society.

Old Mr. Wayne, not so very old and still hale and handsome, gave a generous check and gave it with a smile.

"I'm going to give a Christmas party. Will you come?" asked Helena recklessly.

"Why—er—thank you, Mrs. Moffat. I shall be delighted!" gasped Mr. Wayne, for he had only a slight acquaintance with the little widow.

"Christmas day at my house in Willow lane I'm going to have a Christmas tree," promised Helena as she went away. "I shall be disappointed if you don't come."

"I'll be there, although I haven't attended a party in years," said Mr. Wayne cordially.

"A Christmas party?" echoed Miss Sarah Riddell after Helena had tucked her check away in her black sateen bag. "I don't know, Helena. I haven't been to a merrymaking in years and—"

"All the more reason why you should come to mine," interrupted Helena stoutly. "Mr. Wayne's coming and lots of others."

"It is delightful of you to ask me," said Miss Riddell smilingly. "I shall look forward to your party, Helena."

After Helena had gone Sarah Riddell went upstairs into her spare bedroom and looked through the wardrobes, where hung almost forgotten gowns that belonged to a gala period of years ago. They smelled of cedar and lavender, but there would be one that must be presentable enough to wear to a Christmas party.



need my party," decided Helena, growing enthusiastic as her list of guests increased. "This is to be a party for lonesome folks, and, judging by the number here in Little River, it ought to be a large gathering, as the city newspapers say when rich folks entertain."

"It's the funniest thing," she soliloquized as she wended her way home when her errands were completed. "I never thought of a party until the words popped right out of my mouth there in Mr. Wayne's house. I can't afford to give 'em much to eat, but they're welcome to what there is, and I can earn some extra money some way or other to make up for what victuals they'll eat. And a Christmas tree—well, I'll get Ham Tennant to chop down that hemlock in the south lot. It can go into the parlor, and I can make some little gifts to go on it and walnut taffy and hickory nuts and popcorn, and I guess my piece bag will turn out silk scraps enough to make pin balls and penwipers for every one. Good land, it is exciting to make a party for poor rich folks!"

When the Ladies' Aid society heard that Helena Moffat was going to give a Christmas party and that few of their members were to be invited a wave of virtuous indignation swept through the ranks.

"Seems to me Helena Moffat's aiming to enter society at one jump, only inviting the rich folks," sneered Mrs. Pinney.

"There's some rich folks she hasn't invited," defended Mrs. Potts. "If you'll stop to think you'll find she's only asked folks who haven't any families to make Christmas for 'em. She's asked those little Seever twins from the town farm. You know they're the only children at the farm, and I expect it is dull for them. Helena's thought all that out."

"I don't suppose she could ask everybody in town," admitted Mrs. Pinney. "Her house is a tiny place, and I wonder if she'd be offended if I had Darius send around a gallon of ice cream for the party?" Mr. Pinney was proprietor of the ice cream parlors in Little River.

"That's a kind thought, Sarah," said Mrs. Potts quickly. "I am going to send Helena a Christmas cake. She's worked like a major over this contribution business. There won't be a hungry mouth in Little River this Christmas."

"Or a hungry heart," added Mrs. Pinney seriously, "after Helena's party."

The days preceding Christmas flew by. For Helena Moffat they were filled with happiness, for every moment was occupied. Her little cottage was cleaned from attic to cellar, although it was usually immaculate. For days spicy odors were wafted through her kitchen windows upon the frosty air. Cakes and pies and cookies were baked; pans of walnut taffy cooled to hardness in the attic windows and were twisted into waxed papers. Stores of hickory nuts and black walnuts were brought forth and the rosiest of apples picked out of the barrels stored in the cellar.

Ham Tennant chopped down the little hemlock in the pasture and set it in a tub in the middle of the parlor. Then he brought great armfuls of trailing ground pine and bitter-sweet and green laurel, and the walls and windows were decked with the cheerful green and the red berries.

"I shall have a party every year," Helena promised herself as she flew from room to room on Christmas eve. "I do hope Mr. Wayne will like his knitted slippers. They say he has the rheumatism badly, and somehow folks don't get such things even if they are rich. It needs a heart to think of comforts like that. I'm so happy. Seems as if my heart could hold the whole world tonight."

She went to the window and looked out at the red reflection of the sunset slanting along the snow. "I'm glad I decided to have a party," she said after all. "It's Christmas day that's the loneliest."

Helena's Christmas tree looked beautiful with its snowy strings of popcorn, its little paper wrapped gifts tied with red ribbons, its mysteriously stuffed stockings for each guest which Helena had made from pink tarlatan found in the attic. The attic gave other things, too—some forgotten toys that would gladden the hearts of the Seever twins and an old book that Dr. Langdon would rejoice over; some foreign stamps that Mr. Atkins might like for his collection.

The Seever twins arrived first. Mr. Smith had brought them over early so that they might enjoy every minute of the day, he explained kindly. They were a rosy, chubby pair, a girl and a boy of five.

Miss Riddell came in her shining carriage, driven by old black Nathan, who was eager to be off to spend the day with his family in the village. Miss Riddell's arms were full of mysterious looking white packages, and Helena found that the lonesome lady had had a lovely time selecting gifts for all of Helena's guests, people she had known all her life, but somehow had never known intimately.

Before 10 o'clock all the other guests had arrived, each one bearing gifts until the little hemlock almost creaked under its burden. Packages were heaped around the base of it, and in some mysterious way oranges suddenly appeared on every branch, and bonbons, and a doll and a book from the city for the twins.

There was much laughter and merriment in the parlor and sitting room, where the guests were gathered. Miss Riddell and the Widow Merton insisted on helping Helena prepare dinner, although Agatha Ames, the little milliner, presented her nervous little hands for the task.

"Run away, do," insisted Miss Riddell kindly. "Go into the parlor and sit down and rest yourself, Agatha, unless you'd rather work. I like to work around the house at Christmas when there's any one to do things for."

"I'd rather rest if you don't mind," said Agatha as she sank into a chair in the corner of the parlor.

Miss Riddell found time now and then to slip into the sitting room and wring a gay tune out of the tinkling old piano, and Mr. Wayne discovered Mr. Moffat's violin in a corner and, having tuned it, played such marvelous music that every one came and listened, spellbound. They all joined in a Christmas carol after that, and then Mr. Wayne insisted on peeling the potatoes just so that he could smell the turkey roasting, and Mr. Atkins cracked nuts, while the doctor went to the cellar for sweet cider.

"Isn't it a happy time!" breathed Helena as she whisked through the sitting room.

The Widow Merton looked up with soft, tender eyes. The Seever twins were sitting in her lap and nestling against her motherly breast.

"Oh, Helena, I shall never forget this day!" she sighed. "I want to adopt these children for my own."

"Why can't you?" returned Helena joyfully. "You couldn't ask for a better Christmas gift, and the twins would be wonderfully blessed."

Dr. Langdon looked at Helena with kindly, quizzical eyes.

"You wonderful woman! Have you had time to think of your own happiness?" he asked.

"This is my happiness!" returned Helena, with a wide gesture that included the house and its occupants.

Mr. Atkins looked up from the stamps he was studying. Dr. Langdon surprised a strange look on his quiet, reserved face, a look that sent the doctor into a brown study.

Dr. Langdon insisted that Mr. Atkins should carve the dinner turkey, and that quiet bachelor grew quite pink in the operation.

Miss Riddell did not seem to miss the attentions of her skilled black servants, and Mr. Wayne grew very jovial and witty and told such funny stories that he kept the table in a gale of laughter. Helena, sitting at the head of the table, looked from one happy face to another and was happy herself.

The Seever twins stuffed themselves outrageously, and Mrs. Merton saw that Mrs. Moffat's plates were heaped. Agatha Ames just ate and smiled and rested.

"I've talked hats for a year," she explained. "Just let me listen to other folks talking. I'm resting today."

So each one found happiness in an individual way. Each one took what he needed of what the day had to give.

After they had all helped to clear the table they went into the parlor where the Christmas tree stood laden with its gifts.

Dr. Langdon became a very jolly Santa Claus and distributed gifts to each one.

"I haven't had a Christmas stocking since I was a lad," remarked Mr. Wayne as he fumbled with the drawing of his tarlatan stocking.

"There's a queer feeling about a Christmas stocking. All those queer little lumps suggest wonderful presents, and one is never disappointed even if the lumps turn out to be quite everyday things."

He smiled in a wonderful way at Helena, and she smiled back again, and Mr. Atkins managed to intercept the smile and take it to himself. Helena felt a strange emotion stirring her heart. What else was this wonderful Christmas offering to her?

When the tree was quite denuded of its glories they played games and told stories and sang songs. Mr. Atkins developed a sweet tenor voice and sang old Scotch songs, while Mr. Wayne accompanied him on the violin.

At last it was time to go home. The happiness the little house sent out into the winter air lightened the town for many a long day. Best of all for Helena, Timothy Atkins had learned what a wonderful woman she was, and before another Christmas came she exchanged the name of Moffat for Atkins.

Dr. Langdon and Agatha found happiness on their way home from Helena's.

When Mrs. Deacon Potts heard about Helena's engagement she threw up her hands in dismay.

"Helena Moffat, do you know what your Christmas party has resulted in?" she asked excitedly.

"Plenty of happiness," smiled Helena.

"Yes. Look at the Seever twins and their new mother, and see Mr. Wayne and Miss Riddell, another marriage, sure as you live! Why, Helena Moffat, there aren't any lonesome folks left in Little River!"

"We will have a Christmas party every year, then," decided Helena.



There was something festive in the very words, "Christmas party."

"It won't be so lonesome," said Miss Riddell wistfully.

Helena Moffat went her way from house to house, adding several checks to those already in her black sateen bag and placing opposite other names on her list promises of potatoes, flour, plum puddings, apples, pies, chickens and other goodies for the Christmas season.

Here and there Helena dropped an invitation to her Christmas party. These invitations were judiciously distributed. She overlooked those who had large families and those who had any families at all to help them make merry.

"They don't



need my party," decided Helena, growing enthusiastic as her list of guests increased. "This is to be a party for lonesome folks, and, judging by the number here in Little River, it ought to be a large gathering, as the city newspapers say when rich folks entertain."

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