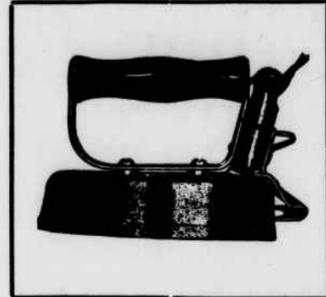


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ROBIN'S CHRISTMAS GIFT

By CLARISSA MACKIE

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"Two days to Christmas, eh, Robin?" quavered old Aunt Hetty as she peered at the farmer's almanac in her lap.

"Yes, Aunt Hetty," replied Robin, stirring the orange peel into the mince-meat with vigorous strokes of her strong young arms.

"When is the Sunday school tree?" "Tomorrow night. I wish you felt like going, Aunt Hetty. You would enjoy the singing and the lights and seeing the people."

"Maybe so, dear. I'll see how I feel. Just give me my knitting, dearie. I must finish the parson's muffler."

Robin brought the knitting basket overflowing with bright colored silks and the half completed muffler for the young clergyman. Her blue eyes were very bright.

Two years ago—it had been Christmas eve—the parson, young Anthony Drake, had whispered to Robin that there was a gift for her on the tree, and something in his look and the tone of his voice led Robin to believe that in the shyly proffered gift lay the expression of his love for her.

But the evening had passed uneventfully. The presents had all been distributed from the tree, and, though Robin's name had been called a number of times and she had gone up to receive sundry mysteriously tied packages, not one appeared to be from the young minister. Robin was deeply offended. She could scarcely believe that Anthony would stoop to jest with her upon such a tender subject as their newly awakened love for each other, but when she found that he avoided her and that his manner grew cold and distant Robin shrugged her pretty shoulders and began a violent flirtation with Ed Willis, the schoolteacher.

"I haven't been to a Sunday school Christmas tree for two years," murmured Aunt Hetty, knitting vigorously. "I remember," said Robin quietly. "You slipped down on the ice and sprained your ankle that night."

"And a slight of trouble it made me," sighed Aunt Hetty. "I remember I just dumped all the things I got of the tree into my worktable drawer, and there they are now—the popcorn ball, as hard as a rock, and the orange, shrunk to almost nothing, and a mess of little presents I never looked at, I was so upset."

"I'll take better care of you this time," promised Robin.

You won't want to be bothered with an old woman, dear."

"Why not?" laughed Robin cheerily. Aunt Hetty flashed her a queer glance. "I thought perhaps you were going with Ed Willis."

Robin flushed warmly. "I'm going with you or not at all," she said firmly. Aunt Hetty was silent for a long while, then she asked: "You are going to help Mr. Drake trim the tree tomorrow afternoon? Most of the other girls are going."

"Perhaps so. There will be so many they won't miss me," said Robin, and Aunt Hetty was quick to note the tinge of bitterness in her tone.

"Mr. Drake always said you was his star helper," said the old woman quietly. "You got your pie crust made?"

"Yes, indeed, auntie. I'm going to fill my pies now. Just taste this mince-meat and tell me if it isn't almost as good as you can make."

Aunt Hetty took the spoon and tasted its contents, nodding her head approvingly. "It's perfect, Robin. You've done credit to my teaching. I believe your poor ma would say so if she was alive. Don't forget to save your prettiest pie for the parson."

"Very well," said Robin patiently, although her heart rebelled.

The Sunday school room was ablaze with lights and a glitter with reflections from the tinsel decorated Christmas tree that stood on the platform. Every seat in the room was filled when Aunt Hetty Treat limped up the aisle leaning on Robin's strong young arm.

Somewhere gave up places in the front row of chairs so that the late comers "Sing!" while everybody stood up and sang lustily.

Robin looked up from her book once and noticed that Aunt Hetty was whispering to Anthony Drake as she slipped a package into his hand. Her brief glance at his face surprised a look of mingled astonishment and disbelief as he went back to his place on the platform.

There were a prayer and more Christmas carols, and then Parson Drake came forward and announced that the distribution of gifts would take place.

"I would like to add"—he hesitated, his eyes fixed on the clock in the rear of the room—"that there will be one gift on the tree tonight which has been delayed two years in reaching its proper recipient. It was given by mistake to another person, who never looked at it until today. I think the—the recipient will understand."

With a very red face Parson Drake whipped out a pocketknife and detached a package from the tree.

"Willie Brown!" he called. And Willie went forth to receive a book and a bag of candy.

After that names followed thick and fast, and boys and girls and grown-ups went to the platform with empty

hands and came back laden with packages, oranges and bags of candy, and presently the whole room was a pleasant buzz of talk and laughter.

As for Robin Treat, she sat there like a beautiful statue of snow ever since the parson had made his announcement concerning the delayed present. She wondered if it was for her. It could not be that Aunt Hetty had received it, although the old lady had given the minister a package. But that package would contain the knitted silk muffler for Mr. Drake. Robin shrugged her shoulders impatiently. Of course the delayed gift was a book for one of the children. She turned to smile down at Aunt Hetty, who was taking childlike pleasure in a lapful of gifts from the tree.

"Miss Robin Treat," read Parson Drake, and Robin's face grew paler as she went up the aisle. No one noticed her going save Aunt Hetty, who looked anxiously at Robin as she came back with a large box of books and two pink tulle bags of candy.

Other names followed, and a greater confusion of sound seemed to shut Aunt Hetty and her niece from the crowd.

"You got two bags, Robin. Let me see what you've got," whispered Aunt Hetty.

Robin looked down in her lap. Sure enough, there were two pink tulle

bags—one she had made that very day and the other, in the shape of a stocking, she recognized as the candy bags used two years ago.

Her hands fell to sudden trembling. Was it possible that this was the delayed present—the one she should have received two years ago? If so, then she had received Aunt Hetty's stocking that year and Aunt Hetty had received the precious one, and in the pain of her sprained ankle had tucked it away and forgotten it until that very day.

She lifted her eyes and met the burning glance of Anthony Drake—he was watching her. He had been waiting two years for his answer. Her fingers pulled out the drawing that fastened the top of the stocking, and she saw a handful of withered popcorn and stale candles.

There was something else—a small Christmas looking envelope with a red seal and her name in a handwriting that brought hot blushes to her cheeks.

Once more she glanced up shyly and met Anthony's questioning eyes. Her swiftly lowered head may have betrayed her secret, for he turned away with a glad smile.

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