



Christmas



[Copyright, 1901, by Rosa C. Eichorn.]

"Life grows darker every day here on the creek."
 "To you, Mrs. Aldine, but not to all the settlers, poor as we are. Maybe your luck will change."
 "Preachers always talk that way. It's in your training, Mr. Goodnow. Besides, you get about to see every new face."
 "And old timers too. If they do not join in our church doings, I try to take a little of the gospel to them."
 "Well, I for one, am ashamed to go to meeting in the old clothes that I've got. I can't do it, Mr. Goodnow. But it's not the meetings and the crowds that I miss. The trouble's right here at home. This is Christmas eve, but, alas, where is the Christmas cheer?" She shook her head wearily. Her eyes wandered to the lone house they had just left. Mr. Goodnow took advantage of her absent gaze and turned to his horse. Relieved by that moment or two of retrospection, the widowed ranchwoman turned to him again.
 "Ah, if I had half a dozen boys and girls to marry and bring home mates, it would be lively here, for all he is gone!"
 Some troubles are beyond the consolation derived from words. The preacher of Led Horse meeting house was too wise to plead that Providence ordained Mrs. Aldine's early widowhood or the ambition which had taken Alice Aldine away to college, where she and a slip of a brother, more child than man, were the mother's sole support. Poor little Bert Aldine had grown up moody and dwarfish in the taint of universal loneliness. Solitude and a book, with Gyp, the great St. Bernard pet, eying him lazily from the blinking windows of his canine soul, made a heaven for the young emigrant, half orphaned just when he was beginning to long for a fling at life beyond the limits of home.
 Preacher Goodnow's gaze wandered about the little hillside farm in search of some more congenial topic for conversation. It lighted on the St. Bernard trotting lazily around the curve above the ridge where the ranch trail hung like a shelf set on brackets.
 "Now, at my cabin," said he, "your Gyp would be the most welcome Christmas company that I could bring home."
 "Gyp is everything except just your own kind. He feels our loss too. He loved father, but he just clung to Allie. He was her keeper in childhood and her romping playmate always."
 "Come, come; cheer up, Mrs. Aldine. This can't last forever. Bert will set the ranch booming, and your daughter'll come back. With her return all the likely fellows in the Creek will come pouring in over that trail yonder. You'll be holding pink teas. You'll look back on these days as the only days of peace. I tell you, Mrs. Aldine, when Allie comes back there won't be room in your cabin to turn around in. Put a likely girl on a ranch, and you'll have all the men company you want, and more too."
 Mrs. Aldine smiled at his friendly attempt to brighten her thoughts. He continued:
 "All evils end like the drought, the 'fresh' and the locusts. Yours will too. Cheer up, Mrs. Aldine. Your day is not far off."
 "Bert knows nothing of ranch work. His father died too soon to teach him how to till the land. The boy's all for education, yet he has no books, and now that he's grown larger no clothes for his age—nothing but made over things from father's stock. Those, too, will soon be all gone."
 "Allie's hard sense will make him all right, Mrs. Aldine. Girls are quick to fall into new ways. Your daughter may turn out a first class ranchwoman."
 "I'm afraid not. Every one of her letters contains something about a young man she has met around college. Every day I expect to hear that there's a match on between them. Young folks off alone so don't have proper advice about choosing company."
 "But your Allie is a girl of brains. She'll look out for 'number one,' which includes mother, brother and Gyp."
 "The Lord grant that you're right. I have enough religion to pray that much. If Allie comes back, there will be joy on this ranch."
 "Don't you worry; she'll come, Sister Aldine," urged the preacher, gathering up the reins. "I say again, you're welcome to the few books I have. But you know a poor emigrant dominie can't blizzard?" asked the lad eagerly.
 "Have you any that tell about blizzards?" asked the lad eagerly.
 "Something like that among our young folks, and you shall have it too."
 "I've read about a book on blizzards, and I want to see one. May I go along now and fetch it for Christmas?"
 "Why, Bert," said his mother, "it's most night and coming on chilly."
 Mr. Goodnow glanced skyward, shook his head dubiously, then cautioned Bert to wait a day or so. Said he: "The wind is freshening, and it comes from the

ocean too. That means a storm. Who knows, we may have a real blizzard for Christmas."
 "It's about getting lost in a blizzard that I want to read. That must be fun to get snowed under. I wouldn't care, with Gyp along."
 "That's well put in, 'with Gyp along.' Gyp's an Alpine life saver. Guess I'd better be traveling along. Looks as though it were coming soon." He clucked to his pony, and as he turned to the friends he was leaving he called out gayly, "A merry Christmas, and many of them!"
 The varying scene along the creek made fruitful study for the artist-minister as his sturdy mountain pony clattered over the sandy trail. The dog Gyp almost fell over himself as he sniffed the air at all points of the compass, lingering longest at the northwest, with his sensitive nose toward the peaks of the Rockies. If he read the weather signal, he made no further sign, but, doglike, accepted Bert's challenge to a race as the boy darted down the house trail shouting: "Hooray for the blizzard! I ain't afraid!"
 The widow likewise gave no sign of having read the portents of that flurry of clouds rising back of the mountains. Those snowy peaks were still bathed in sunlight. The scene held her eyes with a strange fascination. The little clouds increased and rolled up like a black wall, hiding the hills and casting shadows across the low country at their base. Suddenly the intervening miles of sunlight were blotted out, and the storm burst over the plains.
 Mrs. Aldine walked heavily after the racing boy and dog. In her mind hung an older picture than that which filled the eye. The visitor had stirred deep memories, and she swiftly lived over the drama of years. First, the shock to John Aldine's health, the sacrifice of business and home, emigration to the plains and death within a short year. The scanty fortune had been sunk in a quarter section, with a cluster of modest ranch buildings. Then an eastern relative offered Alice a scholarship, with the chances of earning her expenses for the whole college course. Bert was then a lad of nine whose sole idea of the country was a place to romp and have fun with the layseeds. Out of this sad retrospect the ranchwoman was shaken by the noise of the gathering storm. The cold became intense. Snow as fine as salt sifted down before the wind, stinging the bare face and hands like needles. With Bert's erratic help, the live stock of the ranch was turned in for shelter just as darkness came down.
 As the boy and woman rushed with lowered heads from the stable to the nearest door of their cabin Gyp bounded alongside in high spirits, his nose often to the keenest blast.
 Indoors, the dog took his station at the window, with paws on the sill. Frequently he turned his pleading eyes on the others, watching their every movement with curious gaze. At length he set up a low whine to call their attention to the storm.
 "Gyp wants to tackle it, ma," said Bert. "Tomorrow him and me'll have a Christmas trip up the creek. It'll be fine fun!"
 "He sniffs trouble, and so do I. The last two days I've seen scraps floating in the creek. That means tenderfoot camp up above. Bits of straw, broken buckets, scraps of newspaper, horse combings and the like don't come down the creek from nowhere."
 "Somebody's coming for Christmas, ma?" asked the boy, with widening eyes.
 "Travelers, most likely, who can't make port ahead of this storm. Only for the dark, I'd take Gyp and guide them in."
 "Let me go, ma—Gyp and me."
 "Tomorrow we'll all go."
 The ranchwoman slept little that night. Bert dozed by the fire alone, for he couldn't coax the dog from his vigil. Next morning Gyp's emotion was beyond his control. When let loose, he ran from place to place, constantly sniffing the northwest air from up the creek trail. At chortime he disappeared. Bert shouted lustily for him, but got no answer.
 "He's off in the blizzard, ma, to hunt the snowed unders, and I'm going too."
 "In an hour we'll start together." Mrs. Aldine prepared some brandy left from John's supply, also strips of blankets and mufflers. She drew on trousers and boots and John's greatcoat. It was a man's task to wade that deeply drifted snow. Carrying the bundles between, they bravely faced the storm.
 The wind cut across their faces and drove the freezing snow into their blinded eyes. Bert soon lost his vim. Mrs. Aldine realized the perils of the trip, and they both turned back. After thawing himself out Bert said, "Hereafter when folks say it's colder than Christmas I'll know they never struck a Christmas blizzard on the Led Horse."
 Toward midday, with the sun shining brightly on high, it looked warm from the windows of the ranch. "I can go on now, ma," said Bert. "Gyp's stuck it out, and so will I."
 "Gyp's a blizzard dog; you're only a house boy; quite a difference on a day like this."

"Well, I won't be 'only a house boy.' I'm going after Gyp and the snowed unders, if there are any."
 "Gyp ought to be back by this time," said Mrs. Aldine. Meanwhile she had quietly made ready for another trial. She added to her stock extra mittens for herself and Bert and a tin bucket filled with dry kindlings for making hot tea in the open. Bert carried the blankets strapped to his back.
 They had proceeded but a short distance through the deep snow when Bert began to tire.
 "Gyp ought to be here to carry this pack and make a trail, shouldn't he, ma?"
 "He may be doing better work where he is." Bert faced it more bravely than before and began to see things more clearly. His mother was snow white, and he knew that he, too, must be covered with the powdered frost.
 "All you lack is a beard, ma, to be a big Santa Claus. I'm just a dwarf, and your reindeer has run on ahead."
 "Yes, and his tracks lead up the hill along yonder ridge. The wind has swept the snow away there, and we can trail him easy. He's found something, or he'd been back long ago."
 Gyp's tracks gradually became fainter, but the ridge itself was a guide. The dog would take the shortest route, and Mrs. Aldine believed that travelers caught in the storm would make for the shelter of an oak clump a few miles up the creek.
 Now and then she shaded her eyes and searched the line of the creek far ahead. The wagon trail ran along the valley, but that was drifted even with snow. At last they sighted the oaks, and there the keen eyes of the ranchwoman could outline a peculiar snowdrift, with patches of color flung over it. Was it a low cabin or a log pile snowed under? Gyp's tracks led to the strange drift. Its shape was irregular, and something besides driven snow held up the even crest.
 "There's a stage or a wagon," said Mrs. Aldine. "What next?"
 "I don't see," said Bert, shading his straining eyes.
 "You will in a minute. Gyp's there too."
 Speechless and eagerly they made that last spurt. Arched over with snow, they saw some spokes of wheels and above them the profile of an emigrant wagon thickly covered with icy snow. Beyond, partly hidden by winglike drifts branching right and left and half buried in snow, were the figures of four horses, the wheelers of the team almost upright in the heavy bank, and the leader in the act of rearing to mount the crest of a monster drift. In frantic struggle they had perished from exhaustion and cold.
 Gyp's tracks led around over the horses' bodies and the driver's seat. Bert was instantly changed from boy to man. The storm had promised him a Christmas picnic. Here was tragedy. Death might lie beneath that mysterious mound. Leaping ahead, he dashed to the torn end of the canvas cover, looked in and withdrew his head long enough to shout, "Ma, it's Allie!" then plunged through the hole made by the frantic Gyp.
 "God grant we're not too late!" cried the mother, the full burden of her resentment surging heavily upon her heart.
 Between barricades of boxes were two figures buried in robes and blankets. One was Alice, and close to her waxen face lay Gyp's. His eyes were rather human than canine and seemed to say, "I have done the correct thing and saved her." He had burrowed under the robes to give the freezing girl the warmth of his own thick coat and the heat from still warmer bodies.
 "I wrote you of my marriage," murmured the girl faintly after the victims had been thawed back to life. Mrs. Aldine almost dropped the cup of hot broth she was giving the loyal driver, Yankton Bill, whose white and blistered hands were useless stumps.
 "Then that letter was lost on the way," said she, and for the first smiled on the robust tenderfoot whom Gyp had also kept from perishing as he sauntered beside his freezing mistress.
 "Yes, I wrote that, but I didn't tell you that we should cross the plains for our honeymoon. I wanted to surprise you Christmas day."
 Bert and Gyp put in a lively holiday week bringing to the ranch the contents of the boxes stored in the blockaded wagon. They were filled with clothing, books and blankets, a timely donation to the Led Horse meeting house folks from the King's Daughters of the Ohio town where Alice had so effectually looked out for number one.
 On the last trip to the drift the tenderfoot and Yankton Bill helped haul the sled home, for it was weighted down by a large trunk bearing the legend, "R. R., Grandville, Minn." When opened, the trunk disgorged a motley pile of stout working clothes very unlike a college boy's wardrobe. Mrs. Aldine turned to her daughter with questioning eyes.
 "Oh, it's nothing, mother," said Alice, "excepting that my Christmas present is a born and bred farmer to run the land. We're here to remain, if you'll have us, Ralph Ralston and Alice, his wife."
 ROSA C. EICHORN.

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