

The Christmas season begins at sundown on 24th December and lasts through sundown on 5th January. For that reason, this season is also known as the Twelve Days of Christmas.

The Magic Conclusion

At eight o'clock the whole company was ordered to move into the warehouse, for the grand feature of the evening. Jem was to work the lantern, and Joe was to keep order, and all were pledged to be as good as gold during Uncle Bob's talk. But to speak the simple truth, I do not think that there was one boy-no, not the least boy there, who ever thought of any mischief, or of taking any advantage of the darkness. Lizzie was first carried in by Joe and Tom; and last of all Uncle Bob took his place before the sheet. Two oil lamps flickered their light "upon the rafters above and on the boys below, and the fire glowed a steady red at the back part of the place. Thus there was the mingled brightness and blackness which Rembrandt loved to paint, and which lent mysteriousness and a kind of awe to the scene. However, these lights had to be obscured for the sake of the lantern, and as the room grew dark and only the sheet was bright a hush fell on all, and when Uncle Bob, in rather a deep tone, said, 'My lads,' his audience felt almost startled.

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'My lads,' he began, 'in trying to make you happy this Christmas night, I want to take you back to the very first Christmas night of all, that you may see what Christmas really means. So, by j em's help, with the lantern I am going to show it you! '

Uncle Bob's voice was one of those which are full and clear and pleasant to listen to, and, indeed, he had a little of the natural gift of oratory which arrests and holds attention.

'See, here is Bethlehem running up this hillside, and looking over this plain to mountains far away. But what

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have we here? A beautiful young woman on a mule, and an elderly man leading it, and they are going to this place, which is an inn, to ask for lodgings. Alas! When they get to the door they find a crowd of people inside the yard, and the landlord tells them he is quite full. "There isn't a single room to be had for love or money."

"Oh, but," cries the elderly man, "my wife is ill. You must take her in." If I could tell you all, lads, you would see a great wonder in this. Jesus Christ was going to be born that night. Ages before it had been foretold he must be born there, in that place, and now his mother has come, and yet they couldn't take her in. How little men know of what is really going on, and what God is doing! If that landlord had known, he would have gone to the man who had taken the best chamber, and he would have said, "Do give it up to this lady." But, no; all he said was, "Well, there is only the cave in the hillside, which we use as a stable sometimes. I will send a mattress, and here's a curtain you can hang up. This is all I can do for you."

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So to that stable they went, and there Jesus Christ the Son of God was born into this world. Remember always that He was born poor, to be one with all us poor folk, and every Christmas it seems all to happen over again, and He comes again to each one of us and says, "I was born in Bethlehem; now I want to be born in your heart. Don't turn me away. Let Me come in and be your own Savior."

He paused for a moment, to let the appeal have time with them, and then he tinkled the bell, and there appeared the scene of the angels and the shepherds. 'These beautiful creatures which you now see, you know, are angels, and this Christmas night they made themselves visible to the shepherds. They came from heaven on purpose to tell about the Babe in the stable. God sent them. Poor as He was born, Jesus was the Lord of these shining ones, and they felt it an honor to be His messengers. Thus they bear witness to the wonder of His lowly birth.

They were so dazzlingly bright in the dark of the night they frightened the shepherds. We should have been frightened too; and yet that is surely a strange thing. Why should beautiful angels, why should God, be so fearful to us? It is a deep question. Perhaps if our hearts were all pure, and we saw an angel, he would seem a sweet friend, and we should be glad, and not afraid. Wouldn't it be splendid to feel at home with good angels? Just you try to be friends with God all your life, and keep pure in heart, and then when angels come for you in death you won't be frightened. You will see them smile, and they will take you to heaven.

This angel who spoke smiled on these shepherds, and said "Fear not!" and then he told them about the birth of Jesus, the long-expected Messiah. "He lies in a manger," he said. They expected a great king, but they hadn't time to be surprised, what happened next was so wonderful. No sooner had the one angel spoken than a whole host of angels came into sight, and sang such music as the world never heard before nor since; and they sang and sang all the way as they went back to heaven, and at last their song died out amongst the stars.

'There is a heaven, you see, and those angels went back there, to God who had sent them; but what I want you to understand is the glory of which these angels sang. "Glory to God in the highest!" ...was their song. That glory was not their music, or their blaze of light. No, it was Jesus in the manger, and they who know that and believe it are the most blessed of all people. Jesus is God's richest gift-the very glory of his love.

Now I want to ask you a question. The angels being gone, what do you think the shepherds had best do? Stop where they were?'

'Go look at the baby,' answered one of the boys.

'But,' said Uncle Bob, 'what about the sheep? Should they be left?'

That puzzled them. It did seem as if the sheep needed the shepherds.

'Well, I will ask two more questions, which may let in a little light. First, did the angel tell them to go and see the baby?'

Yes; the angel said, "Ye shall find the Babe," and so they had to go and seek,' answered one sharp fellow.

Good! Good!' Exclaimed Uncle Bob, 'the very truth. Yes, there was a command to go. Now for the second question, and please think of it seriously: Were the sheep frightened at the angels?'

No? That is my opinion too, and so I don't believe the sheep would have objected to being left. If they could have spoken, my opinion is, they would have said, "You go as the angel told you: we shall be safe. No wild beasts will come our way to-night. That bright light will have scared them all away, and the God of the angels will take care of us."

One more question before Jem shows us the shepherds in the stable: How would they know how to go to the inn as the right place? The angels had not mentioned the special place. What do you say?'

It was little Lizzie who timidly asked if it was the manger which made them think of the inn.

'So it was, little one,' said Uncle Bob; 'for a manger is in a stable, and a stable is in an inn, and in a small place like Bethlehem there would be but one inn, and that is how they would work it out. Don't you think so, boys? '

It was a sort of speculation they seemed to like, if one might judge from the buzz of assent which arose.

But,' Uncle Bob went on, 'the great thing after all is that they went there and looked on the Babe. It is not enough to get a message, even from angels, about Jesus; we need to see Him each one for ourselves. Take that in as you look on this wonderful scene; and as you see these poor shepherds favored above all others, above even kings and priests, remember to believe always that Jesus is a Savior for the poor. Sometimes poor people think that He is only for the rich, because of fine churches and chapels; but no! Here is the truth. I know one poor lad who would have been miserable indeed if Jesus hadn't been His Friend and Helper. He is speaking to you now. What could I have done if it hadn't been for the comfort of believing that, though I am all crooked and helpless almost, yet the Good Father has given His dear Son to be my Friend and Savior, to stand by me always? It makes me quite certain that He can bless and use even me.

'There is one thing more which strikes me about these shepherds. All the rest of their lives, however long they lived, they would never forget the angels and the Babe. I can't help thinking that to their dying day they would from time to time seek each other out to talk over this grand event of the past, and wonder what had become of the Babe, and what He was going to do when He became a man and spoke to the people as "Christ the Lord."

But there is another lesson I think we ought to learn from these shepherds. Suppose they had not gone to see the Baby. Wouldn't you say in that case that they would have been people who were not worthy of such a message? Yes, and you would be right; but then, what of us? Haven't we seen and heard the same, and must we not do something? Yes, indeed. What can you do? I'll tell you what you should do. You should just try to be like Jesus in that manger. Don't swear, don't cheat, don't be impure, and don't be selfish. He gave up all for our sakes, and do you be kind to others; yes, even to your donkeys and dogs and cats, let alone your little brothers and sisters. You like to be happy-go then and try to make others happy. That was His way, and oh! What a grand man He grew!

'Let me show you something,'-and here Uncle Bob's voice grew broken and husky with emotion, and quite a hush in consequence fell on his audience. 'I will show you His face,' he cried, 'as He suffered for us. I didn't mean to show it just now; but put it in, Jem,-the "Ecce Homo"-when they see it they cannot help loving Him. There! There! Behold the man! Behold the Babe of the manger grown into the Man of Calvary' He was poor in the manger, He suffered on the cross, and never, never in any heart beat such deep pure love as His even for those who scorned Him. A mother's love is wonderful. I know a little of it, and so does Joe there. And Mrs. Rogers there, she knows about it, for she has it, and her heart has been glad to-night because Tom has come home as it hasn't been glad since he went away.'

Those who were near Mrs. Rogers could dimly see that she was wiping her eyes; and they heard her say, 'Bless 'im! E'es a hangel'; and I don't think she meant Tom either; though just then, to her great joy, the sheepish fellow, taking advantage of the darkness, put his hand into hers and squeezed it.

'Yes, a mother's love is wonderful; but it does not come near the love of Christ. Look at that face; what is this? It is a crown of thorns-and see how the blood flows! It was put on Him in cruel mockery; but He was a King, you know-the King of angels, and now a King of sorrow. Did you ever see such eyes, so pure, so forgiving? They seem to say, "I was the Babe of the manger; I came to save you. I was the Babe over whom the angels sang, and this is what I came for-to die for love of you. There is no

room for me yet in the world, but there will be one day. I wait for that. I shall be known then as Savior."

'But see, here is another scene. We have gone back to the Babe; and now who are these? The wise men from a far country? Yes; and what is this star? It is the light which has led them to Jesus, and in its light they kneel and worship. They feel He is a wonderful Child, that He is indeed some great King, to whom glory belongs.

'Well, I have shown you His grand face of suffering-now I will show you His face of glory.'

Tinkling the bell, there was thrown on the sheet a picture of the Ascension, with the disciples kneeling in a circle and gazing up to Jesus with looks of loving reverence as He ascends.

It is the Babe of the star grown into the Man of glory. No crown of thorns now; there is one of light, you see, and a smile of triumphant love. He is going back to heaven, risen from the dead, alive for evermore. And the angels who sang at Bethlehem are here again to welcome His return as soon as He has finished saying "Farewell" to these people. Do you know what He is saying? "Go, tell everyone on earth about Me, and let them know that I the Son of God have died to save them all, and want all to love me."

'So He went to heaven, and has shown us the way to get there too. There He waits to share His glory with all who love Him. And what do you think will happen when we see Him? We shall grow like Him. We shall be as beautiful as those angels, and we shall sing like them. No more crooked legs and broken backs then; no more sorrow and sin; no more unkindness; no more heart-break; no more drunkenness and dark homes. No; all is light there, and Jesus will walk with us and talk with us, and we shall be good.

'Oh, my lads,' he wound up, and there was an appeal in his voice which held them spellbound, 'don't miss it all j don't miss it. Take Jesus from to-night as Savior and Master; walk with Him here, and then you shall walk with Him there. Don't be ashamed of Him, but tell everybody about Him. There's Tom, who will be going to sea again soon. It will be a grand thing, Tom, to sail with Jesus as Captain, with His star of love overhead, guiding into port. Your mother would be easy at night. She would say, " It's all right with my T am. He is trusting Jesus, and Jesus is with him."

, And so with you all, whatever you have to face and go through,-and you will have a good deal,-yet it will be all right, lads; nothing can harm you if you have Jesus with you, and His angels ministering help to you. After earth comes heaven.

*'He is gone-but we once more
Shall behold Him as before;
In the heaven of heavens the same,
As on earth He went and came.
In the many mansions there
Place for us He will prepare,
In that world unseen, unknown,
He and we may yet be one.'*

This was the finish, and there was quite a stillness for a moment, as of deep feeling.

Then the scene changed back from the warehouse to the house, and the end soon came. The great secret—the Christmas tree—was unveiled, and its fruit was distributed to each boy by little Lizzie. How her face flushed with joy as the lads came up to receive their gifts! And after all these had been duly handed to them there still remained the oranges and the rest of the buns and cake and cheese, which Uncle Bob told them to take to any little brothers or sisters at their homes. 'For,' said he, 'we must think of others, as Jesus did.'

Never was such a Christmas! How their faces, one and all, shone with happiness, and not the least happy were little Lizzie and Uncle Bob. I think there were angels hovering round, who would have liked to show themselves, had it been wise to do so.

But now an unexpected thing happened. Jem actually stepped out to make a speech.

'Gentlemen,' he began, 'I shouldn't like to go without thanking Uncle Bob, and I think you would like to thank him too; and so for us all, not presuming, but only feeling, I say, Thank you for the fine grand treat we have had; not forgetting your Christmas tree, miss, nor Mrs. Rogers' coffee-pot, nor all the good talk we've had. We all liked it, and we'll never forget it. To think the likes o' us should have such a night as this—so happy from fust to last! It's been real good o' Uncle Bob to think of us so kindly, lads, and we mun do as he has told us. An' seein' as I'm not used to public speakin', I just finish off, saying we all believe you're a real good friend, and we all wish you long life and happiness.'

You should have seen one sweet child's face as these words were being spoken. Instinctively a little hand went seeking the hand of Uncle Bob, which quietly clasped it in answering pressure, and all the while, so to speak, shadows of changeful feeling went and came upon the face. It smiled and flushed with pleasure, and then went nearly pale with excess of loving pride. To little Lizzie it was as good as if the universe were finding out the real worth of Uncle Bob and paying him true honor. And so her face was good to see: it spoke volumes.

All were ready to cheer, but before even a murmur of assent could be made, to the surprise of everyone, Mrs. Rogers, who afterwards explained that 'she had been that full o' feeling as Jem was talking that she must either speak or burst,' jumped up from the hearth, and instinctively seizing the coffee-pot, which stood conveniently at hand, she proceeded to flourish it aloft with a majestic expression on her face, whilst she cried out, "Ear! Ear! I second that. Bless 'im! Ee's a hangel!"

It was enough—a splendid climax. Such a cheer went up in that house from twenty strong pairs of lungs as was good to hear. The cheer got out into the yard before it could be stopped, and rushed all down the dark entry into the street, and made two policemen passing by wonder what was going on, and brought them to listen at the door, and to look in at the window, and then go away wondering still more at all the happy faces of which they caught a glimpse.

And here we will end our story, and let Mrs. Rogers, as her faithful devotion deserves, have the last word. Her opinion shall stand for what it is worth. It is the opinion of a humble and very ignorant poor woman whose life had many hardships; but it was her own opinion. She knew what she knew, and she would not have said it unless she had had some ground for saying it, nor would the boys have cheered as they did if they hadn't fully agreed with her.

And, believe me, it is something even here, and may mean a very great deal hereafter, when all lives are reckoned up, not in earthly, but in heavenly values, that one poor neighbor and twenty neighbors' children in a poor court and street should have come to feel as these felt about a poor crippled man. Was it the triumph of mind over matter? Nay, it was the triumph of Jesus the Redeemer, who filled the soul of this strange hero with His own noble, true, redeeming love, and glorified weakness.

Let none think they are useless, let none despair. It is possible, even though life be obscure, the back crooked, the legs crippled, to be loving and good, to do good and to win love, to be full of noble desire and noble deeds, and to be akin in faith and spirit to Jesus the Son of God and the Lord of angels.