

JACOB AUGUST RIIS

NIBSY'S CHRISTMAS

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Nibsy's Christmas

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NIBSY'S CHRISTMAS

It was Christmas-eve over on the East Side. Darkness was closing in on a cold, hard day. The light that struggled through the frozen windows of the delicatessen store, and the saloon on the corner, fell upon men with empty dinner-pails who were hurrying homeward, their coats buttoned tightly, and heads bent against the steady blast from the river, as if they were butting their way down the street.

The wind had forced the door of the saloon ajar, and was whistling through the crack; but in there it seemed to make no one afraid. Between roars of laughter, the clink of glasses and the rattle of dice on the hard-wood counter were heard out in the street. More than one of the passers-by who came within range was taken with an extra shiver in which the vision of wife and little ones waiting at home for his coming was snuffed out, as he dropped in to brace up. The lights were long out when the silent streets re-echoed his unsteady steps toward home, where the Christmas welcome had turned to dread.

But in this twilight hour they burned brightly yet, trying hard to pierce the bitter cold outside with a ray of warmth and cheer. Where the lamps in the delicatessen store made a mottled streak of brightness across the flags, two little boys stood with their noses flattened against the window. Their warm breath made little round holes on the frosty pane, that came and went, affording passing glimpses of the wealth within, of the piles of smoked herring, of golden cheese, of sliced bacon and generous, fat-bellied hams; of the rows of odd-shaped bottles and jars on the shelves that held there was no telling what good things, only it was certain that they must be good from the looks of them.

And the heavenly smell of spices and things that reached the boys through the open door each time the tinkling bell announced the coming or going of a customer! Better than all, back there on the top shelf the stacks of square honey-cakes, with their frosty coats of sugar, tied in bundles with strips of blue paper.

The wind blew straight through the patched and threadbare jackets of the lads as they crept closer to the window, struggling hard with the frost to make their peep-holes bigger, to take in the whole of the big cake with the almonds set in; but they did not heed it.

"Jim!" piped the smaller of the two, after a longer stare than usual; "hey, Jim! them's Sante Clause's. See 'em?"

"Sante Claus!" snorted the other, scornfully, applying his eye to the clear spot on the pane. "There ain't no ole duffer like dat. Them's honey-cakes. Me 'n' Tom had a bite o' one wunst."

"There ain't no Sante Claus?" retorted the smaller shaver, hotly, at his peep-hole. "There is, too. I seen him myself when he cum to our alley last—"

"What's youse kids a-scrappin' fur?" broke in a strange voice.

Another boy, bigger, but dirtier and tougher looking than either of the two, had come up behind them unobserved. He carried an armful of unsold "extras" under one arm. The other was buried to the elbow in the pocket of his ragged trousers.

The "kids" knew him, evidently, and the smallest eagerly accepted him as umpire.

"It's Jim w'at says there ain't no Sante Claus, and I seen him—"

"Jim!" demanded the elder ragamuffin, sternly, looking hard at the culprit; "Jim! y'ere a chump! No Sante Claus? What're ye givin' us? Now, watch me!"

With utter amazement the boys saw him disappear through the door under the tinkling bell into the charmed precincts of smoked herring, jam, and honey-cakes. Petrified at their peep-holes, they watched him, in the veritable presence of Santa Claus himself with the fir-branch, fish out five

battered pennies from the depths of his pocket and pass them over to the woman behind the jars, in exchange for one of the bundles of honey-cakes tied with blue. As if in a dream they saw him issue forth with the coveted prize.

"There, kid!" he said, holding out the two fattest and whitest cakes to Santa Claus's champion; "there's yer Christmas. Run along, now, to yer barracks; and you, Jim, here's one for you, though yer don't deserve it. Mind ye let the kid alone."

"This one'll have to do for me grub, I guess. I ain't sold me 'Newsies,' and the ole man'll kick if I bring 'em home."

And before the shuffling feet of the ragamuffins hurrying homeward had turned the corner, the last mouthful of the newsboy's supper was smothered in a yell of "Extree!" as he shot across the street to intercept a passing stranger.

As the evening wore on it grew rawer and more blustering still. Flakes of dry snow that stayed where they fell, slowly tracing the curb-lines, the shutters, and the doorsteps of the tenements with gathering white, were borne up on the storm from the water. To the right and left stretched endless streets between the towering barracks, as beneath frowning cliffs pierced with a thousand glowing eyes that revealed the watch-fires within—a mighty city of cave-dwellers held in the thralldom of poverty and want.

Outside there was yet hurrying to and fro. Saloon doors were slamming and bare-legged urchins, carrying beer-jugs, hugged the walls close for shelter. From the depths of a blind alley floated out the discordant strains of a vagabond brass band "blowing in" the yule of the poor. Banished by police ordinance from the street, it reaped a scant harvest of pennies for Christmas-cheer from the windows opening on the backyard. Against more than one pane showed the bald outline of a forlorn little Christmas-tree, some stray branch of a hemlock picked up at the grocer's and set in a pail for "the childer" to dance around, a dime's worth of candy and tinsel on the boughs.

From the attic over the way came, in spells between, the gentle tones of a German song about the Christ-child. Christmas in the East-Side tenements begins with the sunset on the "holy eve," except where the name is as a threat or a taunt. In a hundred such homes the whirl of many sewing-machines, worked by the sweater's slaves with weary feet and aching backs, drowned every feeble note of joy that struggled to make itself heard above the noise of the great treadmill.

To these what was Christmas but the name for persecution, for suffering, reminder of lost kindred and liberty, of the slavery of eighteen hundred years, freedom from which was purchased only with gold. Aye, gold! The gold that had power to buy freedom yet, to buy the good will, aye, and the good name, of the oppressor, with his houses and land. At the thought the tired eye glistened, the aching back straightened, and to the weary foot there came new strength to finish the long task while the city slept.

Where a narrow passage-way put in between two big tenements to a ramshackle rear barrack, Nibsy, the newsboy, halted in the shadow of the doorway and stole a long look down the dark alley.

He toyed uncertainly with his still unsold papers—worn dirty and ragged as his clothes by this time—before he ventured in, picking his way between barrels and heaps of garbage; past the Italian cobbler's hovel, where a tallow dip, stuck in a cracked beer-glass, before a cheap print of the "Mother of God," showed that even he knew it was Christmas and liked to show it; past the Sullivan flat, where blows and drunken curses mingled with the shriek of women, as Nibsy had heard many nights before this one.

He shuddered as he felt his way past the door, partly with a premonition of what was in store for himself, if the "old man" was at home, partly with a vague, uncomfortable feeling that somehow Christmas-eve should be different from other nights, even in the alley. Down to its farthest end, to the last rickety flight of steps that led into the filth and darkness of the tenement. Up this he crept, three flights, to a door at which he stopped and listened, hesitating, as he had stopped at the entrance to the alley; then, with a sudden, defiant gesture, he pushed it open and went in.

A bare and cheerless room; a pile of rags for a bed in the corner, another in the dark alcove, miscalled bedroom; under the window a broken cradle and an iron-bound chest, upon which sat a sad-eyed woman with hard lines in her face, peeling potatoes in a pan; in the middle of the room a rusty stove, with a pile of wood, chopped on the floor alongside. A man on his knees in front fanning the fire with an old slouch hat. With each breath of draught he stirred, the crazy old pipe belched forth torrents of smoke at every point. As Nibsy entered, the man desisted from his efforts and sat up glaring at him. A villainous ruffian's face, scowling with anger.

"Late ag'in!" he growled; "an' yer papers not sold. What did I tell yer, brat, if ye dared—"

"Tom! Tom!" broke in the wife, in a desperate attempt to soothe the ruffian's temper.

"The boy can't help it, an' it's Christmas-eve. For the love o'—"

"To thunder with yer rot and with yer brat!" shouted the man, mad with the fury of passion. "Let me at him!" and, reaching over, he seized a heavy knot of wood and flung it at the head of the boy.

Nibsy had remained just inside the door, edging slowly toward his mother, but with a watchful eye on the man at the stove. At the first movement of his hand toward the woodpile he sprang for the stairway with the agility of a cat, and just dodged the missile. It struck the door, as he slammed it behind him, with force enough to smash the panel.

Down the three flights in as many jumps Nibsy went, and through the alley, over barrels and barriers, never stopping once till he reached the street, and curses and shouts were left behind.

In his flight he had lost his unsold papers, and he felt ruefully in his pocket as he went down the street, pulling his rags about him as much from shame as to keep out the cold.

Four pennies were all he had left after his Christmas treat to the two little lads from the barracks; not enough for supper or for a bed; and it was getting colder all the time.

On the sidewalk in front of the notion store a belated Christmas party was in progress. The children from the tenements in the alley and across the way were having a game of blindman's-buff, groping blindly about in the crowd to catch each other. They hailed Nibsy with shouts of laughter, calling to him to join in.

"We're having Christmas!" they yelled.

Nibsy did not hear them. He was thinking, thinking, the while turning over his four pennies at the bottom of his pocket.

Thinking if Christmas was ever to come to him, and the children's Santa Claus to find his alley where the baby slept within reach of her father's cruel hand. As for him, he had never known anything but blows and curses. He could take care of himself. But his mother and the baby—. And then it came to him with shuddering cold that it was getting late, and that he must find a place to sleep.

He weighed in his mind the merits of two or three places where he was in the habit of hiding from the "cops" when the alley got to be too hot for him.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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