

God's Christmas Gift

With steady perseverance the tramp forced his way through the huge drifts of snow that separated him from his home. It was late at night. The snow that had been falling all the day had ceased, and the air was biting cold. How tired he was, and how the cold pierced his body. At last he reached his destination, almost exhausted, for he had covered many miles that day in one of the worst blizzards that had ever swept over the country.

He crossed to the opposite side of the street and paused before the house of William Bohling, one of the leading citizens of the village. For a while he stood there in the cold before this house, *his* house, *his* home, which he had left in sorrow and in disgrace ten years before. As he stood there in the glow of the light within, he silently meditated on his past.

Arthur Bohling, M. D., the rising young doctor of the village ten years before, had been tried and found guilty of a murder which he had not committed. He had been taken to the State Penitentiary, where he began to work out a life sentence. After the passing of five years, the real murderer confessed to his crime, when on his death-bed. Arthur Bohling became a free man once more. But five years of Penitentiary life, with all its hardships, did not help Bohling to retain those true characteristics of uprightness which he had possessed before he had been wrongly accused, nor did it help him to live up to his religious duties. A great change came over him. His nature, once strong, became through the loss of his faith, weak and unstable. By degrees, Bohling lost all traces of his former self, and sank lower and lower until he had finally become an outcast and a weakling. Now, on Christmas Eve, he

was returning to his home, wretched, and forlorn, uncertain of his reception, and hardly daring to hope that it would be a welcoming one. For many minutes he stood there in the cold, hesitating. Finally, he summoned up courage enough to knock timidly upon the door of the house that led to a peace and a happiness which he had not known for years.

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Inside the house, William Bohling and his wife, a bit tired from the preparations which they had been making for the morrow, sat in silence together before the open fireplace in the library. Now, as always, they thought of but one thing, their son Arthur, sadly asking themselves again and again when he would return. They were happy in each other, and in their second child, a girl who had come ten Christmases ago, to take the place of the boy whom they had just lost; but their happiness was far from being complete, nor should it ever be complete, until their son returned.

Mary was a wonderful child, and they both loved her ardently. She was always happy, always playing about the house. To-night, it seemed, she had been happier than ever, rejoicing in the happiness that the next day was to bring. Yes, she was a wonderful child, but she could never take the place of that other child, the boy whom they had lost, perhaps forever.

Thus they sat there, thinking silently upon the past. Suddenly a low moan coming from the bed-chamber above the library reached their ears. With a start, Bohling jumped from the easy chair in which he had been sitting.

"What was that?" he exclaimed.

"It sounds as though it came from Mary's room," his wife replied.

"She can't be sick," said Bohling, "she was all right

when she went to bed."

They hurried upstairs, and entered Mary's room. Switching on the lights, they beheld their little daughter writhing in pain. Her father took her in his arms, and asked her what was the matter. Several times she tried to answer, but she could not speak. While they were still seeking from her the cause of her pain, she fainted.

"You must go for the doctor, William!" said his wife, frantically. "I am afraid that she may die!"

"No, no, it can't be! She can't die now."

"Quick, William, hurry, I am afraid!"

William Bohling was like a man gone mad. He ran blindly down the stairs, snatched his heavy top-coat and hat from the rack in the hall, and started for the door.

As he reached it, he heard a knock from without. In some doubt as to who this caller might be, Bohling opened the door. He beheld a tramp, shivering from the cold, rubbing his hands together.

"What's the matter? What can I do for you?" Bohling asked.

"I'd like something to eat, and some shelter for the night, sir, if you'd be so kind as to give it to me," the tramp answered.

"Come inside and I'll see what I can do for you," said Bohling.

"But you were getting ready to go out," said the tramp.

"Yes, I am on my way to the doctor's. My little girl is very sick. Are the roads very bad? I won't be gone long though, and if you feel like waiting, my wife can get something ready for you."

"No," said the tramp. "Don't you go. I'll go. It's no trouble for me."

"You must hurry," said Bohling. "My child is dying. For God's sake, go quickly!"

The tramp hesitated. "Could I see the child, sir?" he

asked. "Perhaps I may be able to do something for her. It will take the doctor a long while to get here, through this snow."

"Why," asked Bohling, in astonishment, "Who are you?"

"My name—well, sir, I needn't mention that, but I was once a surgeon, sir, and I'm pretty sure that I haven't forgotten all that I learned. It's your only chance, sir, and I can do it!"

Bohling was undecided. At that moment his wife entered. She had heard the pleadings of the tramp, and she now added her entreaties to his.

"Oh, William, let him see Mary, for I am sure that he can help her. God has sent him to us in our trouble, William!"

Bohling no longer doubted. He accepted the tramp's offer. "Follow me," he directed, "I'll show you the girl."

They entered the little girl's room. The tramp glanced at the still form on the bed. He realized at once that only an operation could save the child's life. Turning to the father, he said:

"An operation is necessary to save her life. Have you any instruments that I can use in performing the operation?"

Bohling did not doubt the truth of the tramp's declaration, but he stood there dazed for a moment by its suddenness.

"Quick, time is precious," the tramp pleaded, "we haven't a minute to lose!"

Bohling came to himself.

"Yes" he said. "I have. My son was a surgeon. You can use his instruments. They are all right, I guess, they haven't been touched for a long time."

"All right," the tramp agreed, and Bohling left the room to fetch the instruments.

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The operation was over. The tramp called the parents back into the room and said to them :

"The child will live. You have every reason to be thankful to God. Another few minutes and it would have been impossible to save her life."

As the father reached out to grasp the hand of the tramp, the latter, worn out by hunger and by the awful strain through which he had just passed, fell unconscious to the floor. Bohling picked him up gently and carried him to his own bedroom, where for the first time he recognized him as his own son whom he had given up all hope of ever seeing. He called to his wife, who had followed him into the room unnoticed.

"My dear," he said, "it's our boy, Arthur."

"Thank God," his wife murmured.

Crying softly, she crossed over to the bed on which her son was lying. Lifting his head in her arms, she gently kissed him.

"Arthur dear, do you know me?" she asked.

At that moment he regained consciousness. The first words that he spoke were :

"Father! Mother!"

They gave him a hot drink and told him to lie still until he felt strong enough to talk.

After a few minutes of thought he began his story.

"Arriving at the State Penitentiary, after my arrest, I was listed on the books for a life sentence with hard labor. The days I spent there were like a hell on earth to me. My hands were torn and bleeding, my back was nearly broken and Oh! how my body ached. I can never forget it. For five long years, day in and day out, it was the same. In

that time I lost my faith, I swore vengeance and I blasphemed God. At last my release came and I was free once more, but the one on whom I swore vengeance had been taken away. I could not bear to come home then, for the disgrace in which I had left home did not promise me a welcome among my friends here.

I obtained a position as bar-tender in a cheap saloon in Chicago and from there drifted to other towns and cities where I took up other occupations which led me into a life of dissipation. Time and time again I was arrested for vagrancy and spent numberless nights in jail without food or drink. At last I decided to come back to you. It has taken a whole year to get here, but I thought that you at least, would be glad to have me, and after all, that's the only thing that counts."

The story finished, the young man wept bitterly, while his mother and father, in their joy at having him with them again, could not restrain the tears of gladness which came to them.

It was a few minutes before he spoke again.

"How is little sister," he asked, "I know she will soon be well again."

"Yes, Arthur, she's sleeping soundly now," replied his mother. "Thank God you arrived in time."

They were silent for a few minutes.

"What's that?" he asked her.

"The chimes of St. Rose's. They're ringing for midnight mass."

"They're wonderful, mother!" Arthur said.

They listened silently for a while, then, kneeling beside their son's bed, the mother and father joined with him in a fervent prayer of Thanksgiving to God.

H. J. Osborne, '25