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TILLY'S CHRISTMAS

LOUISA MAY ALCOTT

“I’m so glad tomorrow is Christmas, because I’m going to have lots of presents.”

“So am I glad, though I don’t expect any presents but a pair of mittens.”

“And so am I; but I shan’t have any presents at all.”

As the three little girls trudged home from school they said these things, and as Tilly spoke, both the others looked at her with pity and some surprise, for she spoke cheerfully, and they wondered how she could be happy when she was so poor she could have no presents on Christmas.

“Don’t you wish you could find a purse full of money right here in the path?” said Kate, the child who was going to have “lots of presents.”

“Oh, don’t I, if I could keep it honestly!” and Tilly’s eyes shone at the very thought.

“What would you buy?” asked Bessy, rubbing her cold hands, and longing for her mittens.

“I’d buy a pair of large, warm blankets, a load of wood, a shawl for mother, and a pair of shoes for me; and if there was enough left, I’d give Bessy a new hat, and then she needn’t wear Ben’s old felt one,” answered Tilly.

The girls laughed at that; but Bessy pulled the funny hat over her ears, and said she was much obliged but she’d rather have candy.

“Let’s look, and maybe we *can* find a purse. People are always going about with money at Christmas time, and someone may lose it here,” said Kate.

So, as they went along the snowy road, they looked about them, half in earnest, half in fun. Suddenly Tilly sprang forward, exclaiming—

“I see it! I’ve found it!”

The others followed, but all stopped disappointed; for it wasn’t a purse, it was only a little bird. It lay upon the snow with its wings spread and feebly fluttering, as if too weak to fly. Its little feet were benumbed with cold; its once bright eyes were dull with pain, and instead of a blithe song, it could only utter a faint chirp, now and then, as if crying for help.

“Nothing but a stupid old robin; how provoking!” cried Kate, sitting down to rest.

“I shan’t touch it. I found one once, and took care of it, and the ungrateful thing flew away the minute it was well,” said Bessy, creeping under Kate’s shawl, and putting her hands under her chin to warm them.

“Poor little birdie! How pitiful he looks, and how glad he must be to see someone coming to help him! I’ll take him up gently, and carry him home to mother. Don’t be frightened, dear, I’m your friend,” and Tilly knelt down in the snow, stretching her hand to the bird, with the tenderest pity in her face.

Kate and Bessy laughed.

“Don’t stop for that thing; it’s getting late and cold: let’s go on and look for the purse,” they said moving away.

“You wouldn’t leave it to die!” cried Tilly. “I’d rather have the bird than the money, so I shan’t look any more. The purse wouldn’t be mine, and I should only be tempted to keep it; but this poor thing will thank and love me, and I’m so glad I came in time.”

Gently lifting the bird, Tilly felt its tiny, cold claws cling to her hand, and saw its dim eyes brighten as it nestled down with a grateful chirp.

“Now I’ve got a Christmas present after all,” she said, smiling, as they walked on. “I always wanted a bird, and this one will be such a pretty pet for me.”

“He’ll fly away the first chance he gets, and die anyhow; so you’d better not waste your time over him,” said Bessy.

“He can’t pay you for taking care of him, and my mother says it isn’t worth while to help folks that can’t help us,” added Kate.

“My mother says, ‘Do as you’d be done by;’ and I’m sure I’d like any one to help me if I was dying of cold and hunger. ‘Love your neighbour as yourself,’ is another of her sayings. This bird is my little neighbour, and I’ll love him and care for him, as I often wish our rich neighbour would love and care for us,” answered Tilly, breathing her warm breath over the benumbed bird, who looked up at her with confiding eyes, quick to feel and know a friend.

“What a funny girl you are,” said Kate; “caring for that silly bird, and talking about loving your neighbour in that sober way. Mr. King don’t care a bit for you, and never will, though he knows how poor you are; so I don’t think your plan amounts to much.”

“I believe it, though; and shall do my part, any way. Good-night. I hope you’ll have a merry Christmas, and lots of pretty things,” answered Tilly, as they parted.

Her eyes were full, and she felt so poor as she went on alone toward the little old house where she lived. It would have been so pleasant to know that she was going to have some of the pretty things all children love to find in their full stockings on Christmas morning. And pleasanter still to have been able to give her mother something nice. So many comforts were needed, and there was no hope of getting them; for they could barely get food and fire.

“Never mind, birdie, we’ll make the best of what we have, and be merry in spite of every thing. *You* shall have a happy Christmas, any way;

and I know God won't forget us if every one else does."

She stopped a minute to wipe her eyes, and lean her cheek against the bird's soft breast, finding great comfort in the little creature, though it could only love her, nothing more.

"See, mother, what a nice present I've found," she cried, going in with a cheery face that was like sunshine in the dark room.

"I'm glad of that, dearie; for I haven't been able to get my little girl anything but a rosy apple. Poor bird! Give it some of your warm bread and milk."

"Why, mother, what a big bowlful! I'm afraid you gave me all the milk," said Tilly, smiling over the nice, steaming supper that stood ready for her.

"I've had plenty, dear. Sit down and dry your wet feet, and put the bird in my basket on this warm flannel."

Tilly peeped into the closet and saw nothing there but dry bread.

"Mother's given me all the milk, and is going without her tea,¹ 'cause she knows I'm hungry. Now I'll surprise her, and she shall have a good supper too. She is going to split wood, and I'll fix it while she's gone."

So Tilly put down the old tea-pot, carefully poured out a part of the milk, and from her pocket produced a great, plummy bun, that one of the school-children had given her, and she had saved for her mother. A slice of the dry bread was nicely toasted, and the bit of butter set by for her put on it. When her mother came in there was the table drawn up in a warm place, a hot cup of tea ready, and Tilly and birdie waiting for her.

Such a poor little supper, and yet such a happy one; for love, charity, and contentment were guests there, and that Christmas eve was a blither² one than that up at the great house, where lights shone, fires blazed, a

1. The "tea" is being used here to mean a meal. While Americans do not speak this way anymore, this usage is still common in Britain.

2. More joyful.

great tree glittered, and music sounded, as the children danced and played.

"We must go to bed early, for we've only wood enough to last over to-morrow. I shall be paid for my work the day after, and then we can get some," said Tilly's mother, as they sat by the fire.

"If my bird was only a fairy bird, and would give us three wishes, how nice it would be! Poor dear, he can't give me any thing; but it's no matter," answered Tilly, looking at the robin, who lay in the basket with his head under his wing, a mere little feathery bunch.

"He can give you one thing, Tilly—the pleasure of doing good. That is one of the sweetest things in life; and the poor can enjoy it as well as the rich."

As her mother spoke, with her tired hand softly stroking her little daughter's hair, Tilly suddenly started and pointed to the window, saying, in a frightened whisper—

"I saw a face—a man's face, looking in! It's gone now; but I truly saw it."

"Some traveller attracted by the light perhaps. I'll go and see." And Tilly's mother went to the door.

No one was there. The wind blew cold, the stars shone, the snow lay white on field and wood, and the Christmas moon was glittering in the sky.

"What sort of a face was it?" asked Tilly's mother, coming back.

"A pleasant sort of face, I think; but I was so startled I don't quite know what it was like. I wish we had a curtain there," said Tilly.

"I like to have our light shine out in the evening, for the road is dark and lonely just here, and the twinkle of our lamp is pleasant to people's eyes as they go by. We can do so little for our neighbours, I am glad to cheer the way for them. Now put these poor old shoes to dry, and go to bed, dearie; I'll come soon."

Tilly went, taking her bird with her to sleep in his basket near by, lest he should be lonely in the night.

Soon the little house was dark and still, and no one saw the Christmas spirits at their work that night.

When Tilly opened the door next morning, she gave a loud cry, clapped her hands, and then stood still; quite speechless with wonder and delight. There, before the door, lay a great pile of wood, all ready to burn, a big bundle and a basket, with a lovely nosegay³ of winter roses, holly, and evergreen tied to the handle.

“Oh, mother! did the fairies do it?” cried Tilly, pale with her happiness, as she seized the basket, while her mother took in the bundle.

“Yes, dear, the best and dearest fairy in the world, called ‘Charity.’ She walks abroad at Christmas time, does beautiful deeds like this, and does not stay to be thanked,” answered her mother with full eyes, as she undid the parcel.

There they were—the warm, thick blankets, the comfortable shawls, the new shoes, and, best of all, a pretty winter hat for Bessy. The basket was full of good things to eat, and on the flowers lay a paper, saying—

“For the little girl who loves her neighbour as herself.”

“Mother, I really think my bird is a fairy bird, and all these splendid things come from him,” said Tilly, laughing and crying with joy.

It really did seem so, for as she spoke, the robin flew to the table, hopped to the nosegay, and perching among the roses, began to chirp with all his little might. The sun streamed in on flowers, bird, and happy child, and no one saw a shadow glide away from the window; no one ever knew that Mr. King had seen and heard the little girls the night before, or dreamed that the rich neighbour had learned a lesson from the poor neighbour.

And Tilly’s bird *was* a fairy bird; for by her love and tenderness to the helpless thing, she brought good gifts to herself, happiness to the unknown giver of them, and a faithful little friend who did not fly away, but stayed with her till the snow was gone, making summer for her in the winter-time.

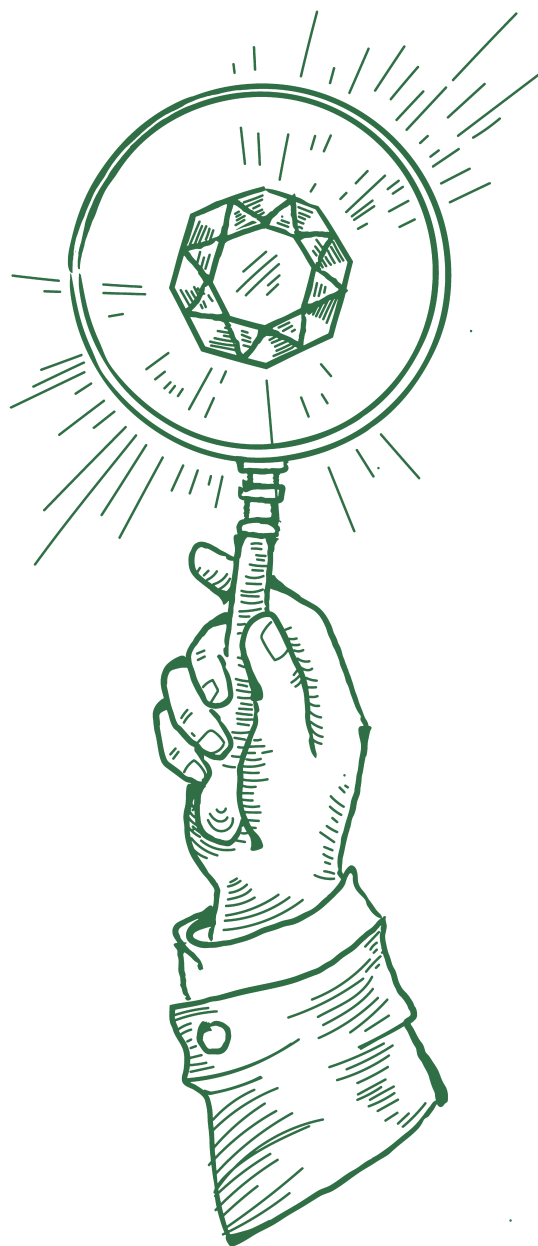
3. A bouquet (an arrangement of a bunch of flowers).

THE ADVENTURE OF THE BLUE CARBUNCLE

SIR ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE

No one ever did more to establish detective stories as a popular genre than Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (1859–1930). His celebrated sleuth, Sherlock Holmes, is one of the most famous and recognizable characters in all of literature. “The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle” (1892) is a Christmas mystery. A “carbuncle” is a gemstone cut in a particular style, and the Countess of Morcar’s dazzling, rare diamond has gone missing. There is mischief afoot, and before it’s all over someone’s goose is going to get cooked. We can count on Holmes to observe what everyone else has failed to see and to grasp what it all must mean. “The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle” was published in the Strand magazine, and then included in the first collection of these short stories, *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (1892). Doyle also wrote four novels featuring Sherlock Holmes and his partner in crime detection, Dr. Watson, the first of which is *A Study in Scarlet* (1887).





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