

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

A Christmas Guest

SARAH ORNE JEWETT

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This 1887 short story by American novelist and writer Sarah Orne Jewett (1849–1909) takes as its subject a common Christmas trope: the stranger in need. A young girl, Rebecca, maintains a lonely Christmas Eve vigil, waiting for her uncle to return with a nurse to care for her ailing grandmother. That night, an unexpected guest arrives, driven to find shelter from an icy winter storm, and Rebecca finds comfort in tending to his needs. The story ends with the disclosure of the mysterious visitor’s identity—thus revealing how Christmas charity can not only benefit the individual, but also aid in the building of local and national community.

Describe Rebecca and her upbringing. How is she regarded by the community? How can she, an orphan who shares in the hard work of her grandmother’s farm, be the “wise[st] and happie[st] child”? How do she and her family typically celebrate Christmas? Who is the Christmas Guest? Why is he traveling on Christmas Eve? What does he come to understand about Rebecca? How is Rebecca rewarded for her act of charity? Why do you think Jewett chose to set this story during Christmas?

This story belongs to a Christmas night a good many years ago, for it happened when Rebecca was a little girl and now she is grown up.

She really was twelve years old, but so very small for her age that most people thought she could be nothing but a child, though I don’t know what her grandmother and her uncle would have done without her, she was so useful in helping with the work, and gave them so much pleasure beside.

These three persons lived on a farm and had found life go very smoothly for some years before—my story begins, indeed, ever since Rebecca’s father and mother had died and she had been brought home to the old house only a few months old, a very cross and crying and dismal little bundle. Mrs. Norris, the grandmother, was a strong and cheerful woman, and while some of the neighbors pitied her for having to bring up an ailing baby at her time of life, she did not pity herself. She was only too glad to have this second Rebecca to love and take care of; and when the little granddaughter proved herself a warm-hearted, thankful, dear child, she thought herself the most fortunate grandmother in

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the world. She only laughed when the baby in a clean frock would creep out over the kitchen doorstep and roll about among the grass and dandelions in the yard and try to fill her lap with handfuls of chips or clover or whatever came first. She did not mind any trouble the child made; she was only too glad to have her in the world, and so Rebecca grew up, slowly enough, as if she meant to be a child as long as she could, and as if she was always remembering that we can be grown up a great while longer than we can be children.

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But though she was short in stature and did not look so old as she really ought, she became, as years went on, a very wise Rebecca. She had a brown face and blue eyes that were quick as a squirrel's. She had a great deal to do every day and soon discovered that this is a busy world though she had been planted in a quiet corner of it. Her uncle Eben was always ready to make her his companion in his out-of-door work; indeed the only trouble in the family came from the differences of opinion between the grandmother and uncle. Old Mrs. Norris would wish sometimes to keep Rebecca in the house, while her son would plead that the child needed the fresh air, and that she never would thrive and grow if she were kept close to the fire. So when he won, and captured Rebecca for the afternoon, or most likely for the whole day, he would wrap her well in buffalo skins and take her to mill and to market or even into the woods chopping; or if it were summer, he was not willing to carry on the farm-work without her, and so Rebecca dropped corn and turned hay and salted the sheep,* and, as her uncle proudly said, from the time she could walk alone was as much help as a man.

In the winter weather, however, she stayed mostly with her grandmother, and as she grew older she learned little by little how to keep house. Without being taught much, only by helping and watching the brisk old lady, and by keeping her eyes and ears open, she found out how a great many things should be done. Her grandmother taught her to read and write, for they lived a good way from the district schoolhouse, and many of the neighbors gossiped about the way Rebecca was being brought up without any mates, and thought no good would come of it because those who had charge of her let her run wild and indulged her so much.

But there was not a wiser or happier child in that town or the next; and so she came to this Christmas Eve when she was twelve years old.

* *Feeding salt to animals*

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For the first time since she could remember, her grandmother was sick. She had waked in the morning very hoarse, and though she undertook the morning work her cheeks soon grew strangely flushed and it hurt her so much to breathe that she had to sit down at last and tell Rebecca that she must get the breakfast alone. Eben Norris and the little girl looked at each other and then at the old lady in wondering dismay.

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“You’ve got a real hoast cold,[†] seems to me,” said Eben anxiously, “but there, don’t give up, mother!” for the poor old lady had dropped into a chair as if she really could not manage to stand up any longer, and two or three great tears chased each other down her cheeks.

“I’m afraid I may be going to have a lung-fever[‡],” she said in a shaking voice. “I don’t know what’s come across me, I feel worse and worse and I don’t know but I’d better get to bed whilst I can.”

Nobody knew what to say; it seemed as if a great danger and sorrow had suddenly fallen on the household. Rebecca helped her grandmother to the bedroom and Eben stood helplessly at the window with his hands in his pockets, and presently went hurrying out of doors to return triumphantly in a few minutes with the news that he had seen the doctor going by to make an early visit, and had called to him to come in. Mrs. Norris gave a little groan and said that she had not called the doctor for thirty years before—to think how well and strong she had been and that she knew what to do for almost any case of sickness, and now she was useless!

The doctor looked somewhat grave, but was comforting nevertheless. He hoped the old lady would not be very sick, but it was impossible to tell, and he told Eben that he had better get somebody to come to stay for a few days; so Mrs. Norris hoarsely suggested her niece, a strong young woman who lived in a village a dozen miles away. Rebecca was shown how to make a rye plaster[§] and told how and when to give the medicines which were left in two cups and a tumbler, and she was then kindly patted on the head and called a good girl and the doctor pulled on his great fur coat again and said good-by promising to come again before night if he possibly could, but it was already beginning to snow and he had some long rides to take before dark. “You had better be off as quick as you can, Eben,” he said, “for I think it looks like a bad storm.”

[†] *A serious cold*

[‡] *Pneumonia*

[§] *A paste applied to the skin to relieve congestion or headache*

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Rebecca and her uncle were very much frightened; they sat down and tried to eat some breakfast but it was a cold and sorrowful little feast, and after a few minutes Eben went out to the barn and harnessed the horse and started out on his long cold ride.

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It had been hardly light when the doctor was seen coming up the road and all the morning the sky was dark and the air grew thicker and thicker with the falling snow. Rebecca stepped softly as she hurried about the kitchen washing the dishes and putting things in order. She cried a little as she gave the cat a saucerful of milk, and the pussy rubbed against her as she stooped down, and looked up into the child's face with a plaintive little mew. There was a good deal of work to be done, and the little girl and her grandmother had planned much more, it being the day before Christmas. Rebecca had stoned a good many raisins the afternoon before and she gave a little sigh as she saw them in a plate on the pantry shelf. From time to time she went into the bedroom, and she thought her grandmother looked very sick—it was so strange and sad that she should be sick at all! Mrs. Norris croaked out some directions once in awhile and told the child not to fret herself, for she should be all right in a day or two; but she grew hoarser and hoarser and more and more drowsy, and soon after noon she fell into a heavy sleep.

Poor little Rebecca began to be very lonely; she sat in the cushioned rocking-chair and tried to read her Sunday-school book, but it seemed very dull, and she kept the cat in her lap and took great comfort in stroking her. There was nothing to do but to keep the fire burning and to watch the snowflakes fall. There was a great deal of snow on the ground already and this storm seemed likely to drift, the wind blew more and more and Rebecca could only see a little way down the road; she never had been so lonely in her life. She thought for almost the first time how nice it would have been to have brothers and sisters, though, to tell the truth, she had always felt much more at home with grown people than with children.

The old clock in the corner of the kitchen went on slowly with its tick-tock, and it seemed to our friend that it had never sounded so loud before and as if everything had stopped but the old timekeeper. She had heard it sound almost as loud once in awhile when she had been left at home alone on Sundays, but there was something strange about it now, and the day dragged slowly away—it seemed as if the hours would never end. Early in the afternoon Rebecca ate a piece of bread and butter and drank some milk. She looked longingly at a piece of pie and was sure that she might eat that also but perhaps it

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would not be exactly right to indulge in any luxuries, and so she pushed the plate away from her, farther back on the pantry shelf.

The nearest barn door was only a little way from the house, and after taking a look at her grandmother she put on her mittens and a big pair of stockings over her boots and her hood and cloak, and made her way through the drifts, which were already quite deep for a person of her height. She knew well enough how to pitch down some hay and how much she ought to give the oxen and the old horse and the two cows; and she stroked all the good creatures kindly. The horse put his nose over Rebecca's shoulder, and seemed glad of companionship and as if he wondered where his mate was gone so long on that stormy day.

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It was almost dark in the barn; the window that was high up over the great doors was thick with cobwebs and the wisps of hay that were caught in them, and through some long cracks the snow was sifting steadily, making little rifts along the haymow that looked like strange white beams of light. The hens were encamped in one corner and gave an anxious cluck now and then as if they were a good deal alarmed at their besieged condition; Rebecca scattered for them a generous measure of corn and then was going back to the house, contented with the certainty that she had made all these creatures comfortable, when she remembered that they must be thirsty—they had had nothing to drink since morning, and after her uncle's cold drive he would not be pleased at having to water the inmates of the barn. Usually they went down into the field a little way and drank from the spring, but in such a storm as this it must be drifted full; there was nothing to be done but to carry pails-full of water from the well to the barn and luckily it was no great distance, though it seemed a good deal of an undertaking and Rebecca was tired at the thought.

She was anxious and worried as she went back to the house where her grandmother still lay sleeping soundly. The old kitchen was already full of shadows—it would be dark early, and the little girl warmed her cold fingers and put more wood in the stove, and then tucked the blankets closer around her grandmother's shoulders, hoping that the old lady would wake up and say that she felt better.

Then she went out again into the storm, while the old clock tick-tocked louder than ever at her as she shut the door. It was cold work drawing the water, and hard work stumbling through the snow with the heavy pail; but the creatures in the barn drank eagerly and Rebecca felt that she should be better friends with them all forever after. One

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cow had to be milked, and by the time this was thought of, it had grown dark enough for the lantern to be brought with the milking pail.

It was not much after half-past four, but it seemed already late in the evening, and when Rebecca came back to the warm kitchen she was so cold and tired that she cried—very softly because her grandmother might hear her and be troubled—but the great tears followed each other faster and faster and spattered the hands she held out to the fire as she crouched beside it. Often and often she had thought it great fun to help her uncle do all this work in bad weather, but she was made sorrowful now by many things.

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It seemed a very sad Christmas Eve; and after Rebecca had brought in some wood from the shed, into which one of the kitchen doors opened, and had laid it down carefully stick by stick, she put a light in the window which could be best seen from the road and the long lane; and the only thought that comforted her was that her uncle would find the barn work done when he came home later in the winter night.

For it never occurred to Rebecca that he might not come at all.

She looked at the two cups and the tumbler with their neglected medicines and wondered if it were because her grandmother was so ill and might be going to die, that she slept so heavily—it could not be possible that a little brownish powder the doctor himself had given her from a teaspoon could have had such a strange effect. The wind that crept in around the window sash made the light flicker and send long rays out into the darkness. The great elm tree creaked, and the wind seemed to rise instead of growing quieter, and it howled in the great kitchen chimney in a way that Rebecca did not like to hear. She thought of her uncle and wondered what had delayed him; if the horse had walked all the way, there was time for him to have returned. Perhaps Susan Johnson had been at her sister's house three miles farther away; perhaps—"I must have some supper for grandmother when she wakes up—she is asleep a—I wish she would wake up"—and Rebecca's head grew so heavy that she rested it on her arms on the kitchen table and went fast asleep herself.

The book she had tried to read lay open before her—it was her grandmother's old red morocco** covered Bible—and was open at the story of the first Christmas Day. The child had read the story of the great star in the east and had thought it must be a pleasant

** Red leather from goat's skin

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country where the shepherds could watch their flocks by night on the hillsides at this time of the year—she had taken care of her flock, she thought with a smile; and after she went to sleep she dreamed about Jerusalem and that she was on her way to Bethlehem with the shepherds to find the little King Christ.

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II

In the midst of this great snowstorm, and against the advice of the hotelkeeper at Southfield, a tall fine-looking man had started to drive to Hartland where Rebecca lived. It was ten miles from one village to the other, but the Norris farm was only seven miles from Southfield.

The stranger had been willing to pay any price for the horse and he seemed impatient of delay. He had come by the stage and he had hastily eaten some dinner, and the faster the snow fell, the more eager he was to be off. The tavern keeper said that he hated to let a horse go out in such a storm, to say nothing of a good customer—they were going to keep Christmas Eve, he and a few of his friends, and they meant to have a good jolly evening; it would be first-rate if the stranger would join them and put off his ride until next day when the storm would be over and the roads well broken.

But the stranger said no, and buttoned his great-coat all fast and close and tucked himself into the old sleigh with some well-worn buffalo skins, and pulled his cap down over his forehead and ears and drove away. The horse was young and strong, and the traveller was soon out of sight of the tavern windows. He had not told his name, but several thought his face a familiar one, and all that afternoon the idle men who clustered about the stove wondered what errand had led him out from that desirable shelter on such a stormy afternoon.

It was already toward four o'clock and a little late for a start. The road to Hartland was an uneven one across the hills, and when the traveller had passed the last houses of the village and was fairly out into the country on the unsheltered highway, he understood better than he had before, the disapproval of the Southfield men. The road for a mile or two was blown bare, but the wind swept it terribly, and farther on the drifts were deep and unbroken. The snow was light and the horse easily breasted it; the driver jumped out of the sleigh now and then, and waded for himself, and felt a great satisfaction, and a sense of companionship with the young creature in harness. "Good fellow!" he said once as he patted him. "I wonder at your patience. Why do you consent to slavery? You could

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break these straps and be free of me in a moment. Why should I be your master! but to-night I promise you a good supper and to-morrow a Christmas holiday.”

The whirling snowflakes were almost blinding, and in the woods the trees thrashed with their branches and dry twigs came down to the ground. The snow that had fallen and the flakes that were new seemed all in the air together. By and by the horse was tired and discouraged and could go ahead but slowly; at last the driver led him by his head, and cheered him with kind words and strokes of his hand.

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It grew dark suddenly and night was almost at hand, it became harder and harder to keep to the road; indeed there was no road to be seen. It was a swampy bit of country and it seemed unsafe to go beyond the fences—it was also certain that they could not be seen much longer; at last the horse stopped before a great mound of snow that was heaped high before him, and shook with cold and fear.

The traveller looked at him and pushed the portmanteau that lay in the bottom of the sleigh, with his foot. He felt a great chill and sense of tiredness creep over him and wondered what he should do. He tried to remember if some houses were not near, for he had once been familiar with the country, but he felt more and more puzzled and bewildered, and called himself hard names for attempting to carry out such a foolish project on such a day as that. The shadows grew thicker and thicker, the poor horse looked round at him wonderingly. They could not freeze there, and once more the man plunged forward into the snow and unbuckled the harness and stamped and pushed his way through the drift while the unfettered horse plucking up the last of his courage floundered after him. Just beyond, the snow was not so deep and they stopped for breath, and after a long blast of wind had blown past them, a light shone out faintly not far away on the hillside beyond. It seemed as if the horse saw it too; for he lifted his head and neighed and pushed on bravely. It was not long before the last of the battle with the weather was fought and won, as they went up the drifted lane that led toward the light from the main road. The horse was familiar with his surroundings and went to a part of the yard that was somewhat sheltered from the wind, while the traveller gave one knock at the door and opened it at once himself for he could not be kept away from the warmth and the light that showed through the farmhouse windows.

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Rebecca did not hear the knock; she was dreaming about her little garden as if it were summer; only a great stalk of London pride^{††} suddenly grew and grew and made itself into a Christmas tree. But she lifted her head and looked around with surprise; she felt stiff and sleepy, and as if she were dreaming still. In those days country people had hardly begun to be afraid of tramps, but still the little girl had heard tales of robbers, and at first she was much frightened at the sight of the tall dark-faced man who had come into the kitchen.

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“Is there anybody here who can look after my horse?” the stranger asked. “We’ve been almost lost in the snow; your lamp in the window was as welcome as a lighthouse to a ship at sea.”

“My uncle is away,” said honest little Rebecca; “he went to Denbigh to get my cousin to come and help take care of my grandmother. She was taken sick this morning. I thought they would be here long ago.” And the sudden fear that they might be still out in the storm made the child feel like crying.

The man held his hands out over the stove, for they looked very cold.

“If he went to Denbigh,” he said pleasantly, as if he wished to comfort Rebecca, “he would have the storm in his face coming home. I don’t believe it would be possible for him to travel against it; he must have got under shelter somewhere as I have, thank Heaven!”

“You can put the horse into the barn,” said Rebecca, feeling more cheerful, and she relit the old lantern and put on her wrappings again to show the way, making no answer to the gentleman’s objections, and they went out together. It only took a few minutes to hang up the frozen harness and put the tired horse into a spare stall with plenty of good oat straw. Rebecca had hastily rubbed off the snow on one side, while the man brushed and dried the other as well as he could, and they found a blanket and strapped it on and the poor creature gave a long sigh of relief. The crib was filled with hay so he could have his supper when he was rested, and they broke the ice in the pail which Rebecca had left half full of water, but the horse would only drink a mouthful or two. The other inmates of the comfortable barn nestled about sleepily, and blinked as the lantern shone in their eyes,

^{††} *A hardy perennial herbaceous plant*

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and one of the old hens gave a squawk as if she thought it were expected of her—which made Rebecca laugh a little though she was so much troubled at heart.

When they went back to the kitchen while the little girl was shaking off the snow, and pulling off her great stockings, the Christmas Guest had thrown his coat and hat upon the woodbox and seated himself close to the fire. He looked about the kitchen for the first time and leaned back in his chair as if he were very tired. He seemed impatient and restless and Rebecca wondered what she ought to do for him since he was so disappointed about reaching his journey's end, but at last she asked him timidly if he would like some supper, after she had brought some plates from the closet, as if it were the proper time instead of two hours later. "I kept thinking my uncle would come home," she said, "so I waited, but it is past seven o'clock."

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"You must be hungry yourself," said the stranger kindly, and looking at her almost curiously, though before this he had hardly noticed her.

The child shook her head sorrowfully and went into the pantry to bring out the piece of mince pie which she would not eat at noon, not to speak of some cold meat and bread and butter which she placed on the table in careful order. To tell the truth, she was glad to have company after her first fright was over; it was much better than keeping her lonely watch in the silent house. There seemed to be no cause for being afraid of this unlucky wayfarer; he was very quiet, but he was very good-natured, and after Rebecca had eaten her little yellow bowlful of bread and milk, and he had hungrily eaten almost everything she had put on the table, he drew closer to the fire again and began to talk to his good little hostess.

She cleared away the plates and looked quite careworn and old for such a small person; she had crossed a little old shawl about herself and tied its ends behind, and one hand held the other in her lap after she had seated herself on the opposite side of the fire to keep her guest company. He was as conscious as the child of the person who lay asleep in the next room; the wind howled louder than ever in the great kitchen chimney, and some branches kept striking the outside of the house angrily as if something were wrong within. The man and the little girl kept watch together, but whether she helped him most to keep the strange vigil or it was he who helped her nobody can tell.

"What are you going to do to-morrow? it will be Christmas day," the Guest said at last, and the very thought of it made Rebecca feel like crying.

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“Nothing,” she said, “because grandmother is so sick. Perhaps I shall have some presents, but I don’t know. Grandma was going to the corners this afternoon if it had been a good day. She wasn’t brought up to keep Christmas, though,” and Rebecca left all the rest unsaid.

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She had amused her uncle and grandmother by making a quantity of little sheaves of oats and rye carefully tied with yarn, and she now pointed to a long row of these which adorned the high kitchen mantel-shelf. “Flocks and flocks of snowbirds come to fly about the house,” she explained, not without confusion, “and sometimes the cedar birds and blue jays. I was going to tie their Christmas dinners to the lilac bushes, and the cherry trees to-night, so they would find them in the morning, but it snows and snows.”

“So you have to take the birds for playmates?” said the Guest; and suddenly Rebecca saw his eyes fill with tears. She wondered whom he could be, and when he reached out his hand to her she hesitated for a minute and then went over and stood close by his chair while he put his arm round her, and held her. Rebecca did not know why she felt so sorry for him; she did not know what to say, so she wisely said nothing and looked down at the floor, or over at the window or anywhere but into his tired face.

“You are a good little girl,” he whispered presently. “I wish I could do something for your grandmother. I am afraid I have only made your hard day a harder one. I am a sorry Christmas Guest. Do you remember something in the Bible about ‘I was a stranger and ye took me in’?” and Rebecca nodded gravely.

“When you read it again—all that verse,” said the stranger, “you must remember this stormy night”; and at this the child felt very solemn indeed, and wondered what he meant, and it seemed more and more as if everything in the world were going wrong, and as if she had grown older and had “seen trouble,” as the neighbors often said of one another.

Rebecca remembered her housekeeping cares again presently, and left the stranger’s side as she suddenly made up her mind what must be done for the night. It was too cold to invite a guest to sleep in the unused best chamber, and neither did she feel certain that her uncle’s winter quarters in the low kitchen chamber overhead would be very comfortable. But her own little bedroom which opened into the kitchen was very snug and warm. She went in to take a look at it; the short little feather bed was fluffing itself

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under the heavy blue counterpane, so that it looked like a most delightful nest. Rebecca would have liked to snuggle down into it herself, but no, she must keep watch, and she gave a tired little sigh, and straightened the pillow and put the flickering candle down upon the small corner table; then she went back to the kitchen and timidly asked the stranger if he would like to go to bed. He hesitated, smiling faintly, for it was still so early, but he noticed the child's white and weary little face, and answered yes, and she held open the narrow door and turned to leave him.

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“If you need me in the night, you must come and speak to me,” he told her gently, “but perhaps you had better not say that I am here, for it may worry your grandmother. I must go away as early as I can in the morning, so you must not be frightened if you hear me stirring.”

They both stood still for a minute listening to the storm and the great elm branches overhead. There was one which struck the house with its lowest twigs every time it swept to and fro, making a dismal sound as if it were the claws of some wild creature which was trying to get in.

“I wish I knew where uncle Eben was,” said Rebecca, almost crying; and the Christmas Guest stooped and kissed her as if he had been her own father, and he looked at her as he kept his hand on her shoulder for a minute, and then whispered, “Good-night, dear child,” and went into the little room and shut the door. As for Rebecca she brought some of the longest candles and lighted one and put it where it would shine out of the window and pulled the curtain back on its rod, and then she crept to the door of her grandmother's room, for she thought that she would lie down on the bed and listen there and keep watch.

But a voice said sleepily, “Becca child, where are you? how long have I been asleep?” and in hurried the little nurse.

“Oh! do you feel better, grandma?” she asked in a breathless whisper, and climbed up on the high bedstead to lay her head upon the old lady's shoulder and be comforted a little.

“Dear me!” said Mrs. Norris, “why, what in the world's the matter, 'Becca? I should like to know how long I've been—eight o'clock?” as the old clock in the kitchen finished striking. “I'm going to be as well as ever I was in my life provided I haven't slept all my strength away. Hasn't Eben got back? I suppose he waited for Susan and the storm kept

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him. I declare, I didn't know but I was going to have a fit o' sickness that morning, but to think I should have slept here going on five or six hours! I never shall doubt Dr. Gerry's judgment again, though I suppose I shall have to be careful for a day or two. I don't see what could have kept Eben so late, but they may be here now before nine o'clock—Susan's always visiting about—'twas all nonsense," repeated Mrs. Norris who still seemed not very wide awake. She was a little deaf—she could not hear the storm; she only asked if it were snowing much, and said something more about the medicine and told Rebecca it was the right-hand cup and that she had better fasten up the doors and come to bed—Eben must be going to stay over at Denbigh all night, it was getting to be late.

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And little Rebecca waited until her grandmother, after much restlessness and tossing about, had fallen asleep again, and then she slid down from the bed and went out to put more wood on the fire. She was tired and frightened; she was more and more sure that her uncle would never have stayed all day at Denbigh and all night. If she had only known where to go to look for him! but the window pane felt icy cold as she pressed her forehead against it, for it was a cold world of storm outside; and she went back to the bedroom full of fear and sorrow, and the cat stirred in the rocking chair and stretched her claws out as Rebecca passed her, and old Mrs. Norris said drowsily, "Go to sleep now, there's a good girl, 'Becca," and the child covered herself a little with the blankets, and opened her eyes wide and told herself it would only take a minute to get the lantern ready and that she would keep watch. And the wind blew until it was out of breath, and the snowflakes fell silently and grew less and less, and at last the night grew still, and the stars came out, and the candle burnt down and down, and shone through the farmhouse window and down the drifted lane as far as it could and gave one great flare and went out, and the branches were still and the fire was out like the candle, and the cat stretched her paws again and cuddled herself in her warm fur, and Mrs. Norris slept on, and tired little Rebecca who had nestled further under the clothes, and who still wore the little brown shawl crossed and tied behind, was asleep too; fast asleep by her grandmother's side.

III

But the Christmas Guest is wide awake; he has grave matters to think of, and he is impatient because his plan for sooner reaching his journey's end has only brought him this delay. He was sure that by making this short cut across the country he could gain several hours; but after all if he had taken the roundabout way by the railroads, he must

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have been stopped somewhere by such a storm as this. He thinks about his errand, and the bad news from Washington, and he hears the voices in the next room—and at last it seems a good while since they ceased—the night seems to him interminably long, and he grows more and more anxious, and then remembers other nights when he has kept watch. He thinks that he will go back to the warm kitchen, for he cannot go to sleep, but he does not wish to frighten the child who has been so kind to him. He sits in the low chair at first, but it is cold by the window; he changes his place and sits on the bed awhile. He is wretchedly tired and he fairly aches with the chill and with the long distance he has hurried in the cold that day. It can do no harm to sleep an hour or two; he will rest a little longer and then go out and try to find his way; he can catch the early train on the railway and he can leave the horse, and push forward afoot, if the roads are too much drifted. The wind seems to be going down, and he remembers that the waning moon will give some light toward morning. He is an old soldier; he remembers many a winter night that he has spent out of doors, but he says to himself that he is an old fellow now, and it is a good thing to be under shelter.

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Rebecca's little bed looks very short for such a tall soldier as himself, and he laughs softly as he looks at it, and then something very much like tears might be seen shining in his eyes as he remembers the dear womanly little girl who has tried so hard to make him comfortable. The children he knows best have a much more gay and careless life—he wonders if they are any happier; but he thinks that some day he must give his little hostess some pleasure or other in return for her hospitality. And in a few minutes after he has blown out the candle he is sound asleep—he has learned to go to sleep quickly and make the most of the time he has for rest. And at last the long Christmas Eve is over and Christmas morning has come, dark and dismal as yet.

After a while the stranger wakes suddenly and hears the old timekeeper in the kitchen strike five o'clock, and he gets up quickly and makes himself ready to go on. He strikes a match and lights the candle again, and he sees the small window glistening with thick frost, and rubs off a bit of it so he can look out at the weather. A low red moon is shining in the east, the wind is still and the stars are shining. He remembers that it is Christmas, and thinks of the little girl and that she is pretty sure to be lonely and sad and disappointed. He wishes that he could know how the poor old grandmother is, and has a sudden fear that the missing uncle may be somewhere covered by a smooth drift of snow, and that Rebecca may wake to know a great sorrow. He thinks of the dear friends with whom he had hoped to spend his holidays and whom he has had to leave hurriedly to go back to his duty. Altogether he is not cheerful, but he is a brave man.

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In a few minutes he has gathered his possessions and has stepped softly to and fro in the kitchen and found his stiff boots and his coat which had been hung by the stove to dry. He has put the light where it will not shine into the bedroom and he tries hard not to wake the sick woman and her little granddaughter. Rebecca's red Bible is still lying on the table, and with a quick smile he takes some money from his pocket and puts it inside the cover—and he writes on the back of his card:

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“For a good little girl, with many thanks from an old soldier.”

He finds that there are some live coals left in the stove and puts some more wood in, and then opens the kitchen door and blows out the light and goes away.

The door shuts with a loud creak and old Mrs. Norris hears it, and says, “Who's that?” but nobody answers, and everything seems quiet; she sees the flickering light from a bit of birch bark in the stove, and thinks it is not late, for the fire is not out, so she goes to sleep again.

The Guest has found his horse, though he has had hard work to get the stable door open, and he puts on the bridle only and slings the strap of his portmanteau over his shoulder, mounts and rides away hoping to catch the half-past six o'clock train which Rebecca had told him of the night before.

IV

Just after daylight the farmers are out with their teams, and presently two sleighs covered with loose snow and drawn by steaming horses who look as if they had had a hard pull of it, meet in the farmhouse yard. Eben Norris is in one, but his arm is bandaged and he looks pale. He says he was thrown out of his sleigh late the afternoon before and had to wait a good while for the doctor, and then they insisted he mustn't think of going home in the storm for he might be laid up all the rest of the winter. He had only put his shoulder out of place—he will be all right in a few days, the doctor says.

But he is frightened to see that Susan Johnson is just making her appearance—he had a long chase after her the day before in the deep snow, for she was not in her own home. His horse was tired, and he had told her to go with a neighbor who was just starting for Hartland, and would reach there much quicker than he could. Then one of the Jarvis boys

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would take her to the farm, and he would let his horse rest and be home an hour or two later. But the storm grew worse and worse, and by the time she reached the village the Jarvis boys would not hear of driving to the farm and everybody said that she must wait until morning. She was chilled already, so there was nothing to do but to yield, but she had hardly slept all night for worrying about her aunt. And if she had not been sure that Eben was at home she believed that she should have gone the rest of the way afoot. And Eben said that the only comfort he had was in thinking she was at home with the folks, or he believed nothing would have prevailed upon him to stay at the doctor's, and they hurried anxiously toward the house.

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Rebecca appears smiling at the smaller barn door; she found it easy to follow the tracks in the snow and she has been wondering about the strange Christmas Guest all the time she threw down some hay from the mow—indeed since she waked up, for she went out to the kitchen to find the good fire, which was a great comfort, and to knock on the door to find her bedroom empty.

She is frightened when she sees that her uncle is hurt, but they all go to the house and there is Mrs. Norris looking not quite so vigorous as usual, but going about the kitchen and frying sausages for breakfast. She is just putting some more into the pan, for she has seen the new comers.

“I declare, I was beginning to be uneasy,” she said. “And here's 'Becca says a strange man slept here last night. Dr. Gerry gave me a sleeping powder, and I never knew a word about it. I feel shaky, but it's broke up my cold. The first think I thought of when 'Becca told me, was the teaspoons and the porringer, and there was my knitted purse on the shelf by the clock. He might have taken anything he'd a mind to, but 'Becca said she knew he wouldn't do us any wrong. 'Twas kind of lonesome for her though; she's been crying good this morning—she said she got so scared about me and Eben too—she was afraid he'd got buried in the snow.”

And just then Eben appeared from the little back entry where 'Becca had been helping him to take off his coat and there was a great excitement when his mother found out about the lame shoulder.

A little later when Susan Johnson had taken the reins of government from both the invalids, 'Becca took up the red Bible to put it away and she happened to see that something lay inside the cover, and with great astonishment she found the money and the

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card. She carried it at once to her uncle who sat by the fire very lame and dismal, now that the excitement of getting home was over with.

“Look here, mother,” he shouted, for the old lady had gone into the bedroom, “who do you suppose ’Becca had for company? ’Twas General—. I should think you’d know him, ’Becca; his picture’s been in all the papers—and he’s left her a present of ten dollars!”

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So ’Becca was the heroine of all that neighborhood, and when people came after the storm to ask for Eben Norris’s damaged shoulder, they were just as anxious to hear the story of the Christmas Guest. And by and by there came a letter from down in Virginia from the General himself—to say that he had thought of his little hostess a great many times, and wished that he could know what sort of a Christmas Day it was at the Farm, and all about her grandmother and her uncle. He hoped that he should see her again some day, and he wished to thank her for her kindness to him. He sent her an illustrated newspaper, beside the letter, with a leaf folded down at the picture of his headquarters; and there were some bright little flowers in the letter which he had picked out-of-doors that day. There were still a good many snowdrifts in Hartland, so Rebecca thought the flowers very wonderful. You may be sure that she was very pleased, and wrote a letter to send back, with great care.

And after the war was over and Rebecca was almost grown up, one day a carriage was driven into the farmhouse yard, and who should the visitors be but the General and his wife and daughter, who had come a good way to see the young girl who was so kind and thoughtful a hostess that stormy night. Rebecca was quite shy at first, but she soon felt at ease again with her friend who seemed to like it very much when old Mrs. Norris said that ’Becca always had tried to find his name in every newspaper she could get.

You may be sure that Rebecca gave her guests the best early supper she knew how to put upon a table, and that everybody laughed when the General insisted upon seeing the little bedroom and the short bed where he had spent the stormy Christmas night, though Rebecca had outgrown her childish quarters long before. They walked about the farm and saw the bees and the garden and the General said that he should like to spend a month in that quiet pleasant country place, and that he should always feel better contented about his young hostess now, because he never before had been able to think of anything but the loneliness and cold weather of her home.

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And the General's daughter, who was a bright, kind girl, a little older than Rebecca, brought a new picture of her father in a pretty frame, which may be seen in the best front room at the farmhouse to this day. The two girls quickly made friends with each other. And so this was another pleasant thing for Rebecca to remember. But indeed she always will be glad that she could give shelter to so kind and so famous a Christmas Guest on the night of the great storm.

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