



HORATIO ALGER

**BERTHA'S
CHRISTMAS
VISION**

20 HOLIDAY STORIES

Horatio Alger

Bertha's Christmas Vision: 20 Holiday Stories

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LITTLE FLOY; OR, HOW A MISER WAS RECLAIMED.

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Of all the houses which Martin Kendrick owned, he used the oldest and meanest for his own habitation. It was an old tumble-down building, on a narrow street, which had already lived out more than its appointed term of service, and was no longer fit to “cumber the ground.” But the owner still clung to it, the more, perhaps, because, as it stood there in its desolation, unsightly and weather-beaten, it was no unfit emblem of himself.

Martin the miser! Years of voluntary privation, such as in most cases follow only in the train of the extremest penury, had given him a claim to the appellation. It might be somewhat inconsistent with his natural character, that, with the exception of the one room which he occupied, the remainder of the large house was left tenantless. After all, it was not so difficult to account for. He could not bear the idea of having immediate neighbors. Who knows but they might seize the opportunity afforded by his absence, and rob him of the gains of many years, which, distrusting banks and other places of deposit, he kept in a strong box under his own immediate charge?

Martin had not always been a miser. No one ever becomes so at once; though doubtless the propensity to it is stronger in some than in others. Years ago—so many that at this time the recollection only came to him dimly, like the

faint sound of an almost-forgotten tune—years ago, when the blood of youth poured its impetuous current through his veins, he married a fair girl, whose life he had shortened by his dissipated habits; and the indifference, and even cruelty, to which they led.

The day of his wife's death, the last remnant of the property which he inherited from his father escaped from his grasp. These two events, either of which brought its own sorrow, completely sobered him. The abject condition to which he had reduced himself was brought vividly to his mind; and he formed a sudden resolution—rushing, as will sometimes happen, from one extreme to the other—that, as prodigal as his past life had been, that which succeeded should be sparing and penurious in the same degree; until, at least, he had recovered his losses, and, so far as fortune went, was restored to the same position which he had occupied at the commencement of his career.

But it is not for man to say, "Thus far shalt thou go, and no farther,"—to give himself up, body and soul, to one engrossing pursuit, and, at the end of a limited time, wean himself from it.

Habit grows by what it feeds on. It was not long before the passion of acquisition acquired a controlling influence over the mind of Martin Kendrick. He reached the point which he had prescribed for himself; but it stayed him not. Every day his privations, self-imposed though they were, became more pinching, his craving for gold more insatiable. Long ago, he had cut himself off from all friendship—all the pleasures and amenities of social intercourse. He made no visits, save to his tenants, and those only on quarter-day.

Nor were these of an agreeable character to those favored with them; for Martin was not a merciful landlord. He invariably demanded the uttermost farthing that was due; and neither sickness nor lack of employment had the power for a moment to soften his heart, or delay the execution of his purpose. His mind was drawn into itself, and, like an uncultivated field, was left to all the barrenness of desolation. Such is always the case, when a man, by his own act, shuts himself out from his kind, foregoes their sympathy and kind offices, and virtually says, "I am sufficient unto myself."

Martin had one child, a girl, named Florence. At the time of the death of her mother, she was but six years old. He had loved her, perhaps, as much as it was in his power to love any one; and, as long as she remained with him, he did not withdraw himself so entirely from human companionship. But, at the age of seventeen years, she became acquainted with a young man, a mechanic, in whose favor her affections were enlisted. He proposed for her hand; but her father, in whom love of gold was strong, on account of his poverty drove him, with scorn, from his door.

The young man was not to be baffled thus. He contrived to meet Florence secretly, and, after a while, persuaded her to forsake her home, and unite her fortunes with his—with the less difficulty, since that home offered but few attractions to one of her age. Her father's indignation was extreme. All advances towards reconciliation, on the part of the newly-wedded pair, were received with a bitterness of scorn, which effectually prevented their repetition. From

that time, Martin Kendrick settled down into the cold, apathetic, and solitary existence which has been described above. Gradually the love of gain blotted out from his memory the remembrance of his children, whom he never met. They had removed from the city, though he knew it not; and the total amount of interest displayed respecting them discouraged any idea they might have entertained of informing him.

* * * * *

“It’s a cold night,” quoth Martin to himself, as he sat before the least glimmering which could decently be called a fire in the apartment which he occupied. He cast a wistful glance towards a pile of wood which lay beside the grate. He lifted one, and poised it for a moment, glancing meanwhile at the fire, as if he was debating in his mind whether he had best place it on. He shook his head, however, as if it were too great a piece of extravagance to be thought of, and softly laid it back. He then moved his chair nearer to the fire as if satisfied that this would produce the additional warmth without the drawback of expense.

It was, indeed, a cold night. The chill blasts swept with relentless rigor through the streets, sending travellers home with quickened pace, and causing the guardians of the public peace, as they stood at their appointed stations, to wrap their overcoats more closely about them. On many a hearth the fire blazed brightly, in composed defiance of the insidious visitor who shuns the abodes of opulence, but forces his unwelcome entry into the habitations of the poor.

A child, thinly clad, was roaming through the streets. Every gust, as it swept along, chilled her through and through; and at length, unable to go farther, she sank down at the portal of Martin Kendrick's dwelling. Extreme cold gave her courage; and, with trembling hand, she lifted the huge knocker. It fell from her nerveless grasp, and the unwonted sound penetrated into the room where Martin sat cowering over his feeble fire. He was startled, terrified even, as that sound came to his ears, echoing through the empty rooms in the old house.

"Who can it be?—robbers?" thought he, as he walked to the door. "I will wait and see if it be repeated."

It was repeated.

"Who's there?" he exclaimed, in a somewhat tremulous voice, as he stood with his hand upon the latch.

"It's me," said a low, shivering voice from without.

"And who's 'me'?"

"Floy—little Floy," was the answer.

"And what do you want here at this time of night?"

"I am freezing. Let me come in and sit by the fire, if only for a moment. I shall die upon your steps."

The old man deliberated.

"You're sure you're not trying to get in after my money, what little I have? There isn't any one with you, is there?"

"No one. There is only me. Oh, sir, do let me in! I am so cold!"

The bolt was cautiously withdrawn; and Martin, opening a crack, peered forth suspiciously. But the only object that met his gaze was a little girl, of ten years of age, crouching

on the steps in a way to avail herself of all the natural warmth she had.

“Will you let me come in?” said she, imploringly.

“You had better go somewhere else. I haven’t much of a fire. I don’t keep much, it burns out fuel so fast. You had better go where they keep better fires.”

“Oh, sir, the least fire will relieve me so much! and I haven’t strength to go any farther.”

“Well, you may come in, if you’re sure you haven’t come to steal any thing.”

“I never steal: it’s wicked.”

“Umph! Well, I hope you’ll remember it. This is the way.”

He led her into a little room which he occupied. She sprang to the fire, little inviting as it was, and eagerly spread out both hands before it. She seemed actually to drink in the heat, scanty as it was, so welcome did it prove to her chilled and benumbed limbs.

A touch of humanity came to the miser, or perhaps his own experience of the cold stimulated him to the act; for, after a few minutes’ deliberation, he took two sticks from the pile of fuel, and threw them upon the fire. They crackled and burnt; diffusing, for a time, a cheerful warmth about the apartment. The little girl looked up gratefully, and thanked him for what she regarded as an act of kindness to herself.

“Fuel’s high, very high; and it takes a fearful quantity to keep the fire agoing.”

“But what a pleasant fire it makes!” said the little girl, as she looked at the flames curling aloft.

“Why, yes,” said Martin, in a soliloquising tone, “it is comfortable; but it would not do to have it burn so bright. It

would ruin me completely.”

“Then you are poor?” said the little girl, looking about the room. The furniture was scanty; consisting only of the most indispensable articles, and those of the cheapest kind. They had all been picked up, at second-hand stores, for little or nothing.

It was no wonder that little Floy asked the question. Nevertheless, the miser looked suspiciously at her, as if there was some covert meaning in her words. But she looked so openly and frankly at him as quite to disarm any suspicions he might entertain.

“Poor?” he at length answered. “Yes, I am; or should be, if I plunged into extravagant living and expenses of every kind.” And he looked half regretfully at the sticks which had burned out, and were now smouldering in the grate.

“Well,” said Floy, “I am poor too, and so were father and mother. But I think I am poorer than you; for I have no home at all, no house to live in, and no fire to keep me warm.”

“Then where do you live?” asked the miser.

“I don’t live anywhere,” said the child, simply.

“But where do you stay?”

“Where I can. I generally walk about the streets in the daytime; and, when I feel cold, I go into some store to warm myself. They don’t always let me stay long. They call me ragged, and a beggar. I suppose,” she continued, casting a glance at her thin dress, which in some places was torn and dirty from long wearing—“I suppose it’s all true; but I can’t help it.”

“Where do you think of going to-night?” asked Martin, abruptly.

"I don't know. I haven't any place to go to; and it's very cold. Won't you let me stay here?" asked the child, imploringly.

The miser started.

"How can you stay here? Here is only one room, and this I occupy."

"Let me lie down on the floor, anywhere. It will be better than to go out into the cold streets."

The miser paused. Even he, callous as his heart had become, would not willingly thrust out a young girl into the street, where in all probability, unless succor came, she would perish from the severity of the weather.

After a little consideration, he took the fragment of a candle which was burning on the table, and, bidding Floy follow him, led the way into a room near by, which was quite destitute of furniture, save a small cot-bed in the corner. It had been left there when Martin Kendrick first took possession of the house, and had remained undisturbed ever since. A quilt, which, though tattered, was still thick and warm, was spread over it.

"There," said Martin, pointing it out to Floy, who followed him closely—"there is a bed. It hasn't been slept on for a great many years; but I suppose it will do as well as any other. You can sleep there, if you want to."

"Then I shall have a bed to sleep in!" said Floy, joyfully. "It is some time since I slept on any thing softer than a board, or perhaps a rug."

Martin was about to leave her alone, when he chanced to think the room would be dark.

“You can undress in the dark, can’t you?” he inquired. “I haven’t got but one light. I can’t afford to keep more.”

“Oh! I sha’n’t take off my clothes at all,” said the young girl. “I never do.”

She got into bed, spread the quilt over her, and was asleep in less than five minutes.

Martin Kendrick went back to his room. He did not immediately retire to bed, but sat for a few minutes, pondering on the extraordinary chance—for in his case it was certainly extraordinary—which had thrown a young girl, as it were, under his protection, though but for a limited time. He was somewhat bewildered, so unexpectedly had the event happened, and could scarcely, even now, realize that it was so.

But the warning sound of a neighboring church-clock, as it proclaimed midnight, interrupted the train of his reflections, and he prepared for bed; not neglecting, so strongly was the feeling of suspicion implanted in him, to secure the door by means of a bolt. When he awoke, the sun was shining through the window of his room. He had hardly dressed himself, when a faint knock was heard at the door of his room. Opening it a little ways, he saw Floy standing before him.

“What! you here now?” he inquired.

“Yes. Where should I go? Besides, I did not want to unlock the front door without your permission.”

“That is quite right,” said Martin. “Some one, who was ill-disposed, might have entered and stolen—that is, if he could have found any thing worth taking.”

“And now, sir, if you please, I’ll make your bed,” said the child, entering the room. “I’ve made the one I slept in.”

Martin looked on without a word; while Floy, taking his silence for assent, proceeded to roll back the clothes, shake the bed vigorously, and then spread them over again. Espying a broom at one corner of the room, she took it, and swept up the hearth neatly. She then glanced towards the miser, who had been watching her motions, as if to ascertain whether they met with his approval.

“So you can work?” said he, after a pause.

“Oh, yes! mother used to teach me. I wish,” said she, after a while, brightening up, as if struck with a new idea—“I wish you would let me stay here: I would make your bed, take care of your room, and keep every thing nice. Besides, I could get your dinners.”

“Stay with me! Impossible. I don’t have much to do: besides, I couldn’t afford it.”

“It won’t cost you any thing,” said Floy, earnestly. “I know how to sew; and, when I am not doing something for you, I can sew for money, and give it to you.”

This idea seemed to produce some impression upon the old miser’s mind.

“But how do I know,” said he, a portion of his old suspicions returning—“how do I know but you will steal off some day, and carry something with you?”

“I never steal,” said Floy, half indignantly. “Besides, I have no place to go to, if I should leave here.”

This was true; and Martin, considering that it would be against her interest to injure him in any such way—an

argument which weighed more heavily than any protestations on her part would have done—at length said—

“Well, you may stay—at least, a while. I suppose you are hungry. There’s a loaf of bread in the closet. You may eat some of it; but don’t eat too much. It’s—it’s hurtful to the health to eat too much.”

“When will you be home to get some dinner?” asked the child.

“About noon. Perhaps I will bring some sewing for you to do.”

“Oh, I hope you will! It will seem so nice not to be obliged to be walking about the streets, but to be seated in a pleasant room, sewing!”

When Martin came home at noon, instead of finding the room cheerless and cold, as had been his wont, the fire was burning brightly, diffusing a pleasant warmth about the apartment. Floy had set the table in the centre of the room—with some difficulty it must be confessed; for it was rickety, and would not stand even, owing to one of the legs being shorter than the rest. This, however, she had remedied by placing a chip under the deficient member. There was no cloth on; for this was an article which Martin did not number among his possessions. Floy had substituted two towels, which, united, covered perhaps half the table.

A portion of the loaf—for there was but one—she had toasted by the fire, and this had been placed on a separate plate from the other. On the whole, therefore, though it was far from being a sumptuous repast, every thing looked clean and neat; and this alone adds increased zest to the appetite. At least, Martin felt more of an appetite than