

# The Spirit Of Christmas Present

By Norman MacDonald, Kensington, P. E. I.

The first class coach of the Evening Express that ran from Forresterburg to Lighthouse Point took on a different atmosphere as soon as Johnnie saw her. The train had stopped at a little town called Dalebar, and the newly arrived passengers were trooping down the aisle, burdened with parcels, for it was Christmas Eve. SHE was one of them.

The train had traversed only forty odd of the one hundred and sixty-seven miles to Gowdy, Johnnie Williams' destination, but Johnnie had been nevertheless thoroughly tired of the trip. He had finished reading the Forresterburg Daily News, and had spent the rest of the time looking out at the monotonous winter landscape. He had been looking forward to the four hours he would still have to pass on the train with anything but pleasure, and was mentally kidding himself for not having brought a book along.

Then in the flash of an eye everything was changed. And the eye that flashed belonged to this slender girl who was making her way down the aisle with the other Dalebar shoppers.

Johnnie, who wasn't particularly impetuous, decided instantly that she hadn't seen so pretty a girl in a long time. And it wasn't that she was just pretty. There was something else. Something about her that Johnnie could appreciate but couldn't explain. She had a gleam in her eye, a poise to her head, that was one with the stuff which he used as building material for his favorite air castles.

### Fortune Favors Johnnie

Johnnie hoped she would occupy a seat alone, so that under some pretext he might be able to change his seat and sit with her. Would Dame Fortune do that little thing for him, he wondered. Dame Fortune did even more than that. When the girl arrived where he was seated, she wheeled around and sat in the vacant seat beside him. Johnnie helped her arrange her parcels.

"I see you've been acting Santa Claus," he said with his friendly smile.

The girl smiled in return. "I'm not acting," she said, in the low, sweet voice Johnnie knew she would hear. "I am the old gentleman's person."

"I mean," she added in explanation, "there's a couple of kiddies whom Santa Claus wouldn't visit tonight if anything happened to me."

Johnnie's newly constructed air-castle started to tumble. Could it be that she was a married woman with two children?

"I envy you your thrilling evening," he said with conviction. "I'd give a good deal to be going to a home where there were children who believed in Santa Claus."

"It does add something to Christmas, doesn't it?" she agreed. "My little brothers are seven and eight. I feel that this may be their last year, so I want to make it an extra happy one."

Her two little brothers! The air-castle was back on its airy foundations.

"I'm spending Christmas with a bachelor uncle," Johnnie informed her. "He's all alone in a big, gloomy house, and he doesn't believe in Christmas festivities. I've spent the last three Christmases there, and believe me, they haven't been exactly merry ones."

"Why spend them there at all?" the girl asked, then quickly added: "But I suppose it's for the old gentleman's sake. He's probably happy to have you."

There was doubt in Johnnie's gray eyes as he answered.

"Maybe," he said, "but he's an awful old grinch just the same. Doesn't believe in telling children about Santa. Says it's deceitful and foolish."

"Well, I certainly don't envy you your holidays," the girl returned producing a compact, and adding a few dabs of powder to her exquisitely powdered nose. She spent the next few minutes looking over Johnnie's newspaper. Johnnie went back to gazing out of the window.

He was thinking of the real reason on he was sending his way to Uncle Henry's to spend the Christmas holidays; the reason he had

spent the last three Christmases there. Uncle Henry was rich. Being a bachelor, he had no direct heir, but a fairly large group of expectant nephews and nieces. Johnnie had been Uncle Henry's favorite as a boy, and so Johnnie's mother had insisted that he spend his holidays at his uncle's, in the hope that he might be given preference over all the other nephews and nieces in Uncle Henry's will.

It was a sordid, money-grubbing scheme, and Johnnie did not like it. Not that he was averse to falling heir to a fortune. But he disliked the hypocrisy of pretending an attachment for Uncle Henry that had no foundation in fact. Mrs. Williams, however, was of a different stamp. And Johnnie didn't want to hurt his mother's feelings by going against her wishes.

"Hazy sun had dipped below the horizon, and shadows were gathering fast on the snow-clad hills and valleys. Lights were beginning to twinkle in the windows of the farmhouses along the way. Johnnie tried to picture what was happening in each:

"Small kiddies in sleepers, taking last looks at gayly decorated trees, and scampering off to bed, to lie wide-eyed with excitement through interminable minutes, until Sleep finally came along and rescued them."

"I've never got over the thrilling mystery of Christmas Eve," he said turning to the girl. "Whenever night starts closing in, I get a touch of the old feeling."

"Isn't that funny?" she exclaimed, giving Johnnie a smile that he found even more thrilling than the glowing in of the Yule-tide. "I feel that way too. But perhaps everyone is like that."

"Almost everyone, maybe," Johnnie amended, "but we'll certainly have to except Uncle Henry."

The girl laughed. They were fast becoming good friends.

In the course of the next few hours Johnnie learned that the girl's name was Elsie Farnham; that her father was dead, and that she was working in a dentist's office in Dalebar. Her home was at Birch Hill, eighteen miles farther along the railroad than Gowdy, and only three miles from Lighthouse Point, the end of the line. Elsie learned that Johnnie was a single man in Forresterburg, that his mother and father, seven miles out of the city, and that his Uncle Henry, his mother's brother, was a resident of Maple Lake, three miles north of Gowdy.

Johnnie bought out of wood and gave them to Elsie to take home to her brothers, and Elsie addressed a Christmas card to Uncle Henry. They got a lot of fun out of that.

But Gowdy, the station which seemed to Johnnie, a little while ago, a wretchedly long distance away, was now drawing near with a deplorable celerity.

"The next station is Gowdy," he announced dolefully, "and the hour has arrived to exchange your society for Uncle Henry's."

"I've enjoyed talking to you very much," Elsie volunteered, flashing her devastating smile.

"Don't smile like that," Johnnie remonstrated. "Frown. And see what you can do about a little growling, so as to make the change as gradual as possible."

She laughed unsteadily at this. Before the sounds of her merriment had died away, the trainman had entered the car, and was calling out the station.

"Gowdy, next station stop!" he chanted, then, to everyone's surprise, added: "This train stops at Gowdy on the track about two hundred yards ahead of us."

This announcement dropped like a bombshell among the few remaining passengers; but when the trainman assured them that accommodation had been provided for them in Gowdy, they appeared reconciled.

All except Elsie Farnham. From light-hearted laughter her mood had changed indignantly to dismay. She looked despairingly at the parcels in the rack above. Johnnie knew what she was thinking of.

"Any way of your getting to

Birch Hill tonight?" he asked. "Yes," she declared courageously. "I'll walk."

"Eighteen miles!" he exclaimed. "And over a heavy road! You'd never make it."

"The kiddies are waiting, and Santa Claus never stops for heavy roads," she answered with a resolute smile.

Johnnie started to take down her parcels.

"We'll talk it over in the station," he said.

The little waiting room was crowded with people, all trying to get near the stove, which was red half-way up the pole. A grizzled little man was reciting the story of the wreck to a group of listeners.

"Hey falls," he piped. "Should a' been picked. Two box-cars went off the track, and one o' them dangled near went over the bank."

Johnnie conducted his travelling companion to a seat in the corner nearest the stove. "The sack in a minute," he announced shortly, and left her.

He made inquiries as to the chances of getting anyone to drive to Birch Hill that evening, but met with no success. The wind had shifted to the north-east, and there were unmistakable signs of an approaching storm. No one seemed willing to risk an eighteen-mile drive.

Johnnie found Uncle Henry in the sleigh on the road behind the station. Sitting up as straight as a ram-rod with his old fur cap over his ears. Always Johnnie found him thus. He was never on the station platform to shake hands with a fellow and welcome him to Maple Lake. Not a word except a curt "Get in quick. The mare's getting a chill," or "What in tarnation kept the train so long?"

Johnnie stood looking at him for a moment from the corner of the station platform. Then, squaring his shoulders, and clamping his jaws, he made his way to the sleigh.

"Where in tarnation have you been?" the old gentleman barked irritably. "I've a notion to start off home without you."

Johnnie took the plunge.

"There's a young girl that lives in Birch Hill who simply must get home tonight," he announced quietly. "I thought, perhaps, we would drive her old man snapped. 'I'd drive a woman way out to Birch Hill tonight? Why should I do such a dad-blamed fool trick as that? Is it a matter of life and death?'"

"No," Johnnie admitted. "Not exactly. But if this girl doesn't get home tonight, her kid brothers won't find anything in their stockings tomorrow morning."

It was like touching a match to a keg of gunpowder. Fortunately Uncle Henry couldn't answer coherently for a full half-minute. He started off with an angry that was a masterpiece of concentrated scorn and contempt. Then he began to sputter and fume, and finally blurted out:

"Who in tarnation do you think you're talkin' to?" Uncle Henry, Johnnie declared, "and you can consider me the Ghost of Christmas Present."

With a bound he was in the sleigh and had snatched the reins out of Uncle Henry's mittened hands. Turning the horse around, he drove in close to the station platform, and hailed a boy who was helping the village postman haul his mail-bag laden sleigh.

"I'll give you ten cents if you tell the young lady in the station that I'm waiting for her," he told the boy.

"What young lady?" the boy asked.

"The pretty one with all the parcels. Then to Uncle Henry: 'Are you coming along, or will you stay in Gowdy till I get back? You can swap yarns with Josh Bigelow. He'll be open till nearly twelve to-night.'

"I'll stick with the mare, and see she don't get froze to death, y' dad-blamed highwayman!" Uncle Henry grated.

Presently Elsie appeared with her parcels.

"It's very kind of your uncle, I'm sure, but it's altogether too much to ask," she protested, on being informed of Johnnie's intentions.

"Humph," was Uncle Henry's only audible reaction.

"Uncle Henry and I both insist on driving you home," Johnnie asserted, with visions of his mother's consternation when she found out that her boy had dropped out of the mad race for Uncle Henry's wealth.

"Humph," repeated Uncle Henry, somewhat louder this time.

Elsie put her parcels in the back of the sleigh, and got in.

"Sit on my knees, and drive," Johnnie directed. "You know the road."

They drove out of Gowdy in complete silence. Johnnie wondered how long his uncle would be able to restrain his wrath, and what would happen when it broke loose. Elsie felt that everything was not as it should be, and decided it would be more faithful to let somebody else start the conversation. Uncle Henry had pulled up the fur collar of his driving coat, and appeared to take no further interest in the proceedings.

The air was getting steadily colder, and snow was beginning to fall. Johnnie was the first to break the silence.

"Cold, Elsie?" he asked. He figured it was an opportune time to start calling her by her first name. If she didn't like it, she couldn't stare him out of countenance.

"Not very, Johnnie," she answered, turning round and giving him a smile which wasted much of its sweetness on the darkness of the night.

Without being seen, Johnnie, choking with laughter, slipped back to his room. Crawling into bed, he waited the arrival of his uncle. Ten minutes later, hearing him at the door, he feigned to be asleep. Uncle Henry entered stealthily. The half-shut eyes Johnnie watched him change to his regular clothes, from time to time casting furtive glances in Johnnie's direction. When he had finished and stowed away the Santa outfit in a corner of the closet, Johnnie opened his eyes.

"Well, how is old St. Nicholas this morning?" he asked casually.

Uncle Henry started, then a slow smile overspread his lined features. He went over and sat on the bed.

"It's time you an' me were havin' a talk over things, Johnnie," he said in a quiet voice, "so's y' can understand me better y'do. Alice, your mother, is my youngest sister, an' I know y' won't get mad when I say that she's a schemer, an' always was, from the time she was a little girl. She knew I had kinds took a notion to y', so she contrived to send y' down t' my place every

THE END

from his bed and slipped into his trousers. In his sock feet he left the room and quietly descended the stairs. The sight that met his gaze when he reached the living-room was so improbable that he was almost persuaded that he was dreaming.

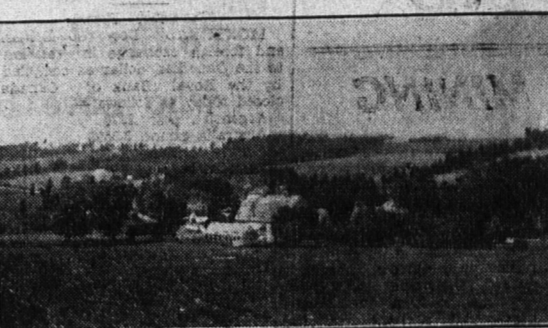
In the middle of the room stood Uncle Henry, dressed in an old faded Santa Claus suit, his thin face decorated with whiskers of white wool. He was going through the most ludicrous antics as he handed gifts from the tree to two greatly excited little boys who sat in the middle of the floor. Elsie and her mother sat on the couch watching the proceedings with happy faces.

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**BEAUTIFUL ISLAND SCENE AT CLINTON**  
While this pretty view does not look much like this picture at the present time, still it reminds us of the time when each place is clothed in verdant verdure, as shown in this picture taken by Mrs. Wilfred Pickering of Margate. The films were mailed to The Reid Studio, Montreal for developing and printing, and this one selected to publish in The Guardian. Mail your winter Kodak pictures to Reid's for developing and printing and ask them to publish your best snaps in this paper.

Uncle Henry made a noise that sounded as if he were strangling.

From then on Elsie and Johnnie chatted intermittently, but Uncle Henry maintained a rigid silence. The wind grew steadily stronger, the snow had begun to drift, and the road kept getting heavier as they advanced.

"There's St. Jessup's light," Elsie announced at last. "His is the first farm in Birch Hill. We're about three-quarters of a mile from our place."

"We're not going to get there any too soon," Johnnie declared. "This is going to be a real nor'easter."

"Looks as if you're going to spend Christmas with the Farnhams," he said.

"It does look like that," Johnnie admitted. "I don't think it would be wise to drive the mare back in a storm like this."

"Mother will be glad to keep you," Elsie assured him.

"When they arrived at the back door," Farnham's modest little farmhouse, Johnnie spoke to his uncle for the first time.

"Go right in and get thawed out," Uncle Henry advised. "I'll put the mare and sleigh away."

Uncle Henry got out of the sleigh without a word and followed Elsie into the house. "I'll get a lantern," the girl called back as she was entering.

Johnnie drove over to the barn and started to unhitch. He wondered how Uncle Henry would behave at Farnham's. He's not a particular early attractive Christmas guest at his best, and he's probably a long way from being at his best now, he thought ruefully.

Elsie came out with a lantern and helped him look after the mare. Between them they managed to get the sleigh on the barn floor.

"Your uncle doesn't seem to be such a stick," she told him as they were approaching the house. "He's in there talking to mother like an old pal."

As Johnnie entered Mrs. Farnham was showing Uncle Henry the Christmas tree in the living room. A Christmas tree of all things to show to Uncle Henry! You might as well show a red flag to an enraged bull. But strangely enough Uncle Henry appeared quite docile. A bachelor, he bowed cheerily to the corner of the room opposite the tree, which was ornamented with the usual Christmas decorations.

"Doesn't it make one feel young again to look at it?" Mrs. Farnham, a plump little woman with soft brown eyes, was saying. "It's a good many years, Mr. Thomas, since we hung up our stockings and scaddled off to bed to wait for Christmas morn."

"Um—yes—I suppose it is—yes," floundered Uncle Henry, looking sheepishly at Johnnie.

"This is Johnnie Williams, mother," Elsie said. "Mr. Thomas's nephew. He came down on the train with me."

Elsie started to prepare supper, leaving Johnnie with her mother and Uncle Henry in the living room. The older people started talking about earlier days, so Johnnie excused himself and joined Elsie in the kitchen.

"I've come to help you," he announced with a grin. "Your mother and my uncle are living their barefoot days over again. It seems they know some of the same old tales. They were so enthusiastic about it, they forgot about me all by my lonesome in the twentieth century."

"Set the table," Elsie directed, "and for goodness sake, don't break any of mother's 'oompany china'."

The dining room is in there to your right.

The evening was a social success. Mrs. Farnham and Uncle Henry found enough reminiscences to keep them talking until after ten o'clock. The younger couple did not discuss the past. Because they were young, they talked of the thrilling present, and the romance-tingled, glorious future. And long before the old clock on the mantle had struck eleven, their eyes were telegraphing, in a code as old as life, the tender words that were in their hearts.

Johnnie and his uncle slept together in the spare room with two hot irons wrapped in flannel at their feet to keep them warm.

"You seem to be enjoying this trip after all, Uncle," Johnnie ventured, as they were undressing for bed.

"Humph," was Uncle Henry's not exactly original comment, but Johnnie noticed that it was a pleasant, friendlier "humph" than the old gentleman was in the habit of emitting.

When Johnnie woke next morning he was alone. His uncle had risen, dressed, and was gone. Johnnie looked at his watch. A quarter after six! What in time had taken Uncle Henry out of bed at that hour? Eight o'clock was his usual hour for rising in winter, Johnnie remembered. Then he heard sounds of merriment from below. The delighted shouting of children. Elsie's Johnnie

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Christmas so as to give y' a sorta head start on the rest o' my kin, in the matter o' my last will an' testament. Now, isn't that so?"

"I reckon maybe it is," Johnnie answered honestly.

"I could read your mother's call-culatin' mind, an' I knew why y' were comin'; not likin' it a whit, but comin' just the same. Mind, I didn't exactly blame it on y'. I figured maybe you were just doin' it to please your mother, but I couldn't be sure even o' that, an' the whole affair was makin' me madder'n madder as time went on. Just three weeks ago I drew up a will leavin' you out o' the scheme altogether. When I saw how y' acted at Gowdy last night, it sorta pleased me some. Maybe I didn't show it very much, but as we were drivin' alone, I kept figurin' y' didn't give a hoot whether I left y' my money or not, an' y' went up a heap in my estimation, for that's the kind of a lad I took y' to be when you were small, an' I didn't want t' be disappointed in y'. I wasn't hankerin' to come on this trip, but I sorta admired your pluck just the same."

Uncle Henry was silent for a brief period, then began again.

"An' now to explain this Christmas business. Thirty years ago I was engaged to a girl named Madeline Lea. She jilted me on a Christmas Eve. I—well—it sorta made me hate the Christmas season. That was foolish, I know, but I can be mighty stubborn an' foolish when the notion takes me. Madeline went to the States after that, I never heard tell of her until last night. Mrs. Farnham knew her in Boston. She told me Madeline never got married. She got into wild company an' took t' drinkin', and now she's a dodderin' wreck in a State Infirmary. That story turned all my bitterness into pity."

"Well, I'm glad you feel different about Christmas, Uncle," Johnnie said after another pause, "and you certainly made a first-rate Santa Claus."

"I could be still better with a little more practice," Uncle Henry declared with a twinkle in his eye. "If you and Elsie Farnham promise t' get married soon, so's I can have some practice later on, I'll write your name in on that will for the lion's share of what I own."

"It's a go, Uncle Henry," Johnnie said, "and there's certainly no fortune hunting about it this trip. I'd marry Elsie Farnham if it took an amount equal to all your money to buy the marriage license."

THE END

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