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**FOR THE YOUNG FOLKS**

**A Christmas Story Concerning the Bravery of Little Mercy**

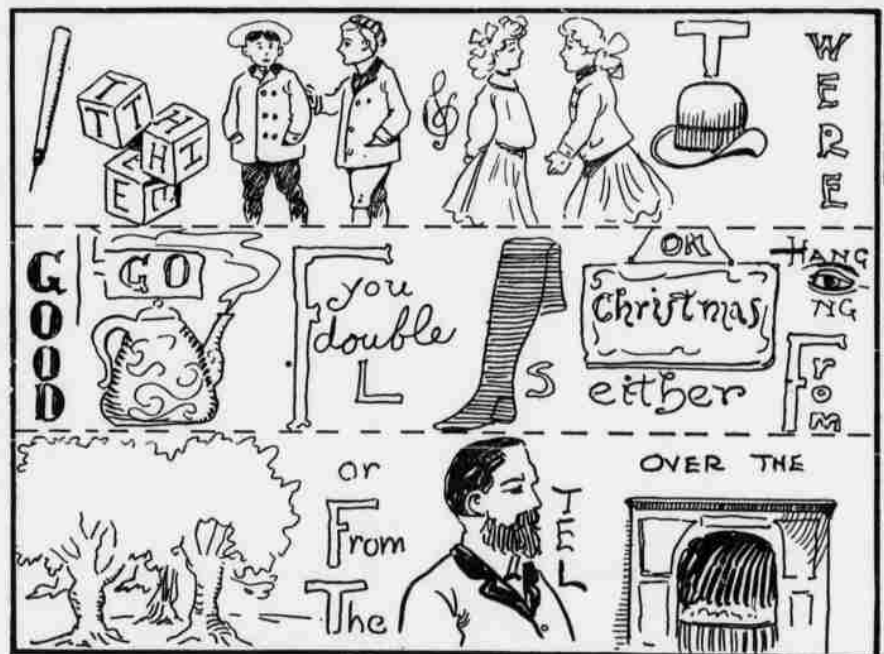


MERCY was the little 10-year old niece of Hilda, the nursemaid who cared for the Holmes children. With her invalid mother, who was a widow, she lived in a tumble-down house that stood in an isolated corner of the Holmes estate, not far from the great Holmes mansion on the hillside. Here the three—Hilda, Mercy and Mercy's mother—were obliged to live on Hilda's scant earnings. Thus it had been that on Christmas morning Mercy awoke, to find her poor stocking almost as empty as when she had hung it beside the chimney, the night before.

One morning, just as Mercy and her mother were eating their simple breakfast, Hilda ran in on her way to town,

At last the night fell, to Mercy's delight, and the hands of the little wooden clock made their slow round to the figure 9. Then Mercy's mamma wrapped her little girl in her own big cloak, kissed her and let her start towards the big house on the hill, for it was a walk of about thirty minutes. The night was dark, the clouds were gathering over the sky, and Mercy's path lay through the park, whose tall and abundant trees shut out any light that might come from the moon and stars. But, unafraid, Mercy trudged on her way, stopping at a little ravine to catch her breath before climbing the steep hill at whose summit stood the great mansion whose windows sent out so many brilliant lights.

During this brief pause Mercy heard low, muffled voices from behind her, and something told her there was cause for fear. Quickly she stepped from the path and knelt behind a thick clump of lilac bushes. She had scarcely hidden in the



WHAT CHRISTMAS STORY DOES THIS TELL?

whither she was bound on an errand for her mistress. "Oh, my!" she exclaimed, "there are great doings to be held at the mansion tonight. And, dearie"—turning to Mercy—"if you want to get a peep into the big place, just you come slipping up by the back path at half past nine, and I'll be on the back porch to meet you and take you where you can look into the ballroom. They are giving a fancy-dress ball, and the costumes are to be wonderful—real kings and queens and fairies, you know. And after you've seen into the ball-room I'll take you up the back stairs and give you a sight of the children's Christmas tree that still stands in the big nursery—all full of its pretties and goodies."

To Mercy the day dragged very slowly, "And I'll see the beautiful Christmas tree, too," she confided to her rag dolly. "And I'll see the lovely rooms, the grand ladies and gentlemen and the pretty Holmes children, who Aunt Hilda says are so good and sweet—although they be very rich. Then, best of all, I'll get to hear the music played by the orchestra that Aunt Hilda says is coming from the city. Oh, it will be so, so nice!"

black shadow when three men came creeping down the path she had just left and paused in the spot where she had stopped. Being only a few feet away from them, she could overhear distinctly every word they said.

"Now, pals, you stop here an' wait till I go up to the house and reconnoiter," spoke one of the men in a voice that caused Mercy to tremble—it was such a wicked voice. "I'll be back in a jiffy. You keep a keen lookout hereabouts, too."

"Sure, sure," answered the other two; then as the first speaker started up the hill they sat down on a flat rock near the footpath and began conversation. "Say," said one, "did you or Shorty plan this?"

"The glory is all mine," answered the other man. "I heard about a big party that's to be given up there tonight, and I knowed there would be a lot of money and valuables in the rooms. While the dance is in full swing downstairs we'll just lift a back winder that opens off a porch at the back—a top porch I mean—and go in undisturbed and gather up the souvenirs. Oh, it'll be as easy as pie."

"But the pesky servants—won't they be on the wing?" asked the first man.