

Christmas Day

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North American

Intermediate
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“Boys,” said Mrs. Howard one morning, looking up from a letter she was reading, “I have had a letter from your grandmamma. She writes that she is returning to England shortly.”

The boys went on with their breakfast without showing any great amount of interest in this piece of news, for they had never seen their grandmother, and therefore could not very well be expected to show any affection for her.

Now Mrs. Howard, the mother of two of the boys and aunt to the third little fellow, was a widow and very poor, and often found it a hard task to provide for her “three boys,” as she called them, for, having adopted her little orphan nephew, she always treated him as her own son. She had sometimes thought it strange that old Mrs. Howard should not have offered to provide for Leslie herself but she had never done so, and at last Mrs. Howard had ceased to expect it. But now, right at the end of her letter, Grandmamma Howard wrote:—

“I have been thinking that perhaps it would come a little hard on you to support not only your own two boys, but poor Alice’s son, and so, on my return to England, I propose, if you are willing, to adopt one of them, for I am a lonely old woman and shall be glad of a young face about me again.”

After thinking the matter over, Mrs. Howard decided she would say nothing about their grandmother’s intention to the boys, as she thought that it was just possible she might change her mind again.

Time passed on, and winter set in, and full of the delights of skating, the boys forgot all about the expected arrival of their grandmother.

During the Christmas holidays the boys one morning started off to Broome Meadow for a good day's skating on the pond there. They carried their dinner with them, and were told to be sure and be home before dark.

As they ran along the frosty road they came suddenly upon a poor old woman, so suddenly that Leslie ran right up against her before he could stop himself. The old woman grumbled about "lazy, selfish boys, only thinking of their own pleasure, and not caring what happened to a poor old woman!"

But Leslie stopped at once and apologized, in his polite little way, for his carelessness.

"I *am* sorry," he said. "I hope I did not hurt you; and you have such heavy parcels to carry too. Won't you let me help you?"

"Oh! come on, Leslie," said his cousins; "we shall never get to the pond at this rate!"

"Yes, go on," said the old woman sharply; "your skating is of a great deal more importance than an old woman, eh?"

But Leslie's only answer was to take the parcels and trudge merrily along beside his companion.

On the way to her cottage the old woman asked him all sorts of questions about himself and his cousins, and then, having reached her cottage, dismissed him with scarcely a "thank you" for the trouble he had taken. But Leslie did not take it much to heart.

He raced along, trying his hardest to overtake his cousins before they reached the pond, and was soon skimming about with the rest of them.

Squire Leaholme, in whose grounds the boys were skating, afterwards came down to the pond to watch the fun, and, being a kind-hearted old gentleman, offered to give a prize of a new pair of skates to the boy who should win the greatest number of races.

As it was getting late, it was arranged that the racing should come off on the following day, and the Squire invited all the boys who took part in it, to come up to his house to a substantial tea, after the fun was over.

How delighted Leslie was, for he was a first-rate skater, and he *did* so want a new pair of skates!

But the Squire's skates were not to be won by him, for on the following day as he and his cousins were on their way to the pond, they came across the queer old woman whom they had met on the previous day.

She was sitting on the ground, and seemed to be in great pain. The boys stopped to ask what ailed her, and she told them that she had slipped and twisted her foot, and was afraid that her ankle was sprained, for she could not bear to put it to the ground.

"You musn't sit here in the cold," said Leslie; "come, try and get up, and I will help you home."

"Oh! Leslie," cried both his cousins, "don't go. You will be late for the races, and lose your chance of the prize."

Poor Leslie! He turned first red, then white, and then said, in a husky tone of voice—

"Never mind—you go on without me."

"You're a good laddie," said the old woman. "Will you be *very* sorry to miss the fun?"

Leslie muttered something about not minding *much*, and then the brave little fellow set himself to help the poor old woman home, as gently and tenderly as he could.

She would not let him come in with her, but told him to run off as quickly as he could, and perhaps after all, he would not be too late for the skating. But Leslie could not bear to leave her alone and in pain, so he decided to run home and fetch his Aunt.

When Mrs. Howard arrived at the cottage, you can think how surprised she was to find that Leslie's "poor old woman" was none other than Grandmamma Howard herself, who wishing to find out the real characters of her grandsons, had chosen to come in this disguise to the little village where they lived.

You will easily guess which of the three boys Grandmamma chose to be her little companion. And oh! what a lovely Grandmamma she was, as not only Leslie, but his cousins too, found out. She always seemed to know exactly what a boy wanted, and still better, to give it to him.

Walter and Stanley often felt terribly ashamed of the selfish manner in which they had behaved, and wished they were more like Leslie.

But Grandmamma told them that it was “never too late to mend,” and they took her advice, and I am quite sure that at the present moment if they were to meet a poor old woman in distress by the roadside, they would not pass her by, as they once did Grandmamma Howard.

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