The Breaking of the Frost Spell

Prize Christmas Story

By Alta Rawlins

"RICHMAN, Poorman, Beggarman—Thief. Nana, it's not a bit of use," cried Tad in despair, wrinkling up her forehead. "It's always Beggarman."

"Try the other, then," Nana submissively put out her other foot and went on with her mending.

"No," repeated the child gloomily, pushing herself back on the floor and clasping her knee in her hands. "It's not a bit of use. It won't even be a Beggarman or a Thief. I don't believe, Nana," she ventured uncertain with an upward glance at the young woman, "that it'll ever be anyone?"

She left a loophole for hope by putting it into the form of a question. But even that was no use. Nana only bit off her thread and said quietly, "No, dear," as if Tad's destiny were not at stake in the hesitating question. "I don't think it will, unless it is a Beggarman."

Tad knew why Nana smiled. It was because she thought her joking. But Tad was not joking. It was no joke to have counted buttons three times over wherever there were buttons to count.

"I mean," repeated Tad, in a voice which could not be mistaken for "fun" in its despondency, "that you'll never get married, Nana." This time she left no loophole; it was not only the conclusion from button counting—for, of course, it couldn't be a real Beggarman or Thief!—but from years of patient waiting and observation. Tad would not have cared if it had not meant Christmas, too, for as far as she could discover the two were in some mysterious way wrapt up with one another. And Christmas was not far off. She broke the silence to ask wistfully, timidly: "Won't there be a Christmas this year, either?"

The young woman glanced up. Her eyes took in the limp dejection of the little form on the floor. With a quick movement she reached down and gathered Tad in her arms, pressing her face close against her shoulder. "Poor Taddie, not this year, either."

"And never?" came a muffled voice.

The arms held closer but the lips were sadly positive that answered. "I'm afraid never—the kind you'd want."

The rumpled brown head came to view again with a little effort. "Then will you tell me about the Christmas?" There was a dignified resignation in the tone.

Nana's lips pressed close together for a minute. Then she began. "It was 10 years ago, Tad, before you were born. Oh, yes," she broke off with a half sigh. "I don't wonder that you want to hear of that Christmas so often, it was a very happy one for your father." Nana played with the soft brown hair affectionately, with musing eyes. "I've never seen Jack so radiant as he was that Christmas morning—for you know, Tad," she explained, "he came to tell me he and Grace, my old schoolmate in Boston, were going to be married. He'd got the letter that morning. Why, he acted like a boy about it—danced me off to the next room from Granda to tell me, though if ever you have anything to tell, girlie, I hope you won't take as long about it as Cousin Jack did, that day!" Nana shook a playful finger at her. "He teased me and joked and would make me guess—"

"And did you guess?" cried Tad eagerly.

"How could I, when he'd never given me an inkling he cared for anyone! No, I guessed down to Granda, and then had to give up. But when I did tell me—and that it was Grace, I was so glad I could have kissed the dear fellow. The fact is, I believe I did. I was so pleased. And that's how Jack became your father and Grace your mother, and I was bridesmaid. Don't you wish you could have been there, Tadpole?" Nana laughingly pinched her cheek.

"Well, I do think it's pretty horrid we've never had a Christmas I could see," Tad frankly pouted, now that she and Nana were on more confidential terms. "If they hadn't died, maybe—"

"Don't, Tad," Nana chided gently with a hurt look in her eyes. "For if I couldn't have had you all these years, whatever would I have done?" The hand that toyed with Tad's trembled. "And if it weren't that it would be such a farce, we'd have a Christmas for you. But what would be the use? There's Granda, she couldn't exactly hop round a Christmas tree, could she?" Nana's smile was a misty one.

Tad laughed. "Oh, that would be funny!"

"And there's only you left. And one couldn't have any kind of a Christmas by oneself, now could one?"

"No—" The truth is, Tad had already tried it too many times and found it a failure. It was just like having a dinner party alone. One got tired of doing all the tea-drinking and talking. No, it was a real Christmas Tad wanted, where mysterious things happened as they had at that long ago Christmas she heard about; somebody to get married, like her father—Tad felt sure if Nana would only get married there would be a Christmas.

"Why, there's you, Nana!" cried Tad, brightening. "You've forgot yourself!"

"Me? No, no, Tad, I couldn't," Nana shuddered.

"But why? Don't you like Christmases?"

"Once. Once I thought Christmas would be the happiest day of my life and found it the most wretched. I believed in someone and found him to be—not what I thought. No, Tad," she hurried on, "I'm like Granda. I couldn't sing Merry, Merry Christmas bells either. My voice would crack. I'm getting so old!"

"But you could hang up your stocking all right."

"And who—who would be Santa Claus?" Once begun, Nana went on bravely.

"Why, there's only one, of course, the same one who put a cap in Granda's stocking at the Christmas, and a ring—a real ring, you know, in yours—"

Nana stiffened. She put the child down and took up her sewing. "There, run along, Tad, you know it all anyway." The lines in her face hardened.

The sparkle died out of Tad's eyes. She stood still for a minute and then walked quietly away, with her lips, too, catching some of the hardness. It was always that way; Nana always spoiled the story and sent her off when it became most interesting. But then, Nana did not tell it right when she did start—not as she herself knew it. It was Granda she should have gone to. It was Granda who told of the Christmas in a way to make one's breath come fast and one's eyes pop out. It was Granda she went to now, as she climbed the steep, winding stairs. She stumbled at the top. Tad always called it the "stumbly" step.

"Hey? Who has broken their neck? It's a pity a woman can't see a body even breaking of their neck under her own nose," wailed a querulous voice from the next room.

"It's just me, Granda—Tad."

"Hey? So you have broken your neck! I knew it; I knew a neck 'ud be broken there some day. It's been kept that way a purpose so I'd break my neck if ever I went down, and be laid in my grave."

"T'aint my neck, ma'am; it's my leg," said Tad, rubbing the member as she entered the room.

"Eh? Worse still. If it ha' been Nan I'd say she'd broke it a purpose not to wait on me. What have you broken it for?"

The little woman peered in Tad's direction from the depths of her chair with sightless blue eyes. It was because Granda was so odd with the nervous shake of her head and those bright beady eyes, and sharp, dried-up features, and said just such queer things as these that Tad liked to come to her room—which was as odd as Granda herself, with its old black rafter and funny little stove that she poked herself, and the big green-cushioned chair that half swallowed its occupant up, and the queer old fashioned hair wreathes and wax flowers that she couldn't see, hung on the wall—nor even the bright rays of the sun, that came through the high window though they shone straight in her face.

"Hey?" Granda reached out with her cane for Tad.

Tad started and recollected. "T'aint broken, ma'am."

"Of course, I might ha' known it. You wouldn't break your leg for nobody, eh?"

Tad stared at her. "No'm, I don't think so."

The little old woman laughed shrilly, triumphantly. "Ha, ha! And you wouldn't break your neck now, would you—or die?"

"What for?"

"Eh? For anybody, say me, or Nan?"

Tad traced the bend of her shoe while she pondered. "No."

"Not even—not even, say, for Nan to get married?"

Tad pricked up her ears. "Could Nan get married?" She pushed her stool closer to the old lady's chair and looked eagerly into her face.

"Maybe she could ha'. But Nan didn't," she added quickly with a chuckle.

"Why not?"

Granda's eyes glittered sidewise at Tad till they made her uneasy. "Hey? Because the man wouldn't die for her either. I told Nan he wouldn't. And she didn't believe me, Nan didn't. But he wouldn't none the less." She nodded her head a great many times.

"Did he have to die?"

"Eh? Somebody always has to die."

"But do you really believe it?"

"Believe it!" Granda snorted, sitting forward. "Don't I know it! Everybody's always believed it in the family. It's a tradition, child. Haven't I told you of Aunt Libby and Great Uncle Hyslop, and —"

"Oh, yes, and I'd rather hear about the Christmas now, please," hinted Tad hastily.

"Ain't it in that very story? Believe it!" she repeated. And then subsiding somewhat from her seat, "Eh child? Where shall I begin?"

"At the very beginning—with Santa and Jack Frost. Was Jack Frost my father?"

"Jack? Maybe yes, maybe no, I'll warrant Charles would ha' said so," Granda chuckled.

"Who is Charles?"

"That's another name for Santa Claus. He put the ring in Nan's stocking, you know."

"And then—"

"And then after Santa ha' gone, here come Jack Frost."

"And Santa and Jack Frost hated each other—"

Granda nodded. "I'll warrant they did. Each was jealous of t'other. Santa, he come round in his sleigh with bells ringing, on Christmas eve, and climbed down the chimney to put his presents in the stockings; and Jack Frost, all he could do ever was fly along with the wind and paint his presents on the window panes at night. Now because Santa's presents were real everybody ha' liked his presents the best, and didn't much notice the drawings on the window, which likely made Jack Frost pretty mad." Granda stopped for breath.

"And—"

"So when Santa had up and gone Christmas eve, here along came Jack, who knew in a minute Santa ha' been there, for he'd pushed the snow down from the roof when he'd walked over it, and it ha' fallen on the window, daubing it so it weren't no good for a picture. Jack Frost he looked at it a minute hiding inside with anger, and then swore as he'd get even with Santa for this. This was a little too much to stand. So he drew a picture anyway and when he'd done, away he blew snapping of his fingers at Santa and howling as he'd got the best of him."

Once more Granda stopped and Tad said, "Oh!" with solemn eyes.

"Eh?—And next morning up got Nan—"

"It WAS Nan really, wasn't it?"

"Well, her name was Nan. And up she got the next morning and found the ring in her stocking."

"Did she like it?"

"And didn't she! Who wouldn't ha' liked to find a ring in a stocking Christmas! But all at once she looked and there on the window saw Jack Frost's present. What do you think it was, eh?" Granda leaned forward mysteriously, with one finger raised.

"What?" breathlessly answered Tad—just as if she did not know every point in the story that had come and was to come—had not heard it twenty times.

"Ah!" Granda lowered her voice to a small whisper. "A skull! A skull itself, as sure as I'm born, made out o' the snow Santa ha' let fall, only it was Jack Frost ha' made it into a skull!"

"And what then?"

"What then! Nan when she see that she could a died, for from the minute she laid eyes on the skull, the ring it weren't any good, but turned to lead. It was a spell, child, which made it no good and never could be. And Santa knew he was beaten and never came no more." The old woman went on in an impressive sing song: "Child, when you see a skull on the window, rub it out quick! Say—'Not me! not me! not me!' three times and rub it out quick!"

"Did Nana rub it out?"

"Not Nan; it was me as rubbed it out for Nan," she chuckled. "Nan 'ud ha' let it stay—"

"Granda—"

Both started. It was Nan herself. "Granda, you mustn't tell Tad such stories."

"But it's such a fine story, Nana," cried Tad pleadingly.

"No, Granda mind—not again!" And turning—"It's a very foolish story, child."

* * *

Tad watched the holiday time approach desolately. She did not need to count the days off on her fingers as a way of telling the nearer Christmas came. Each day, that something unusual in the air grew more pronounced; people had a merrier smile of greeting for each other as they passed in the streets; store windows put forth more tempting arrays of toys—were more brilliantly lighted and earlier as the dusk came on—were open later. And bye and bye there began to appear cotton snow storms in the windows over cotton houses; mantels with red fires that never burned out, from which hung advertised stockings "On sale for the holidays!" Christmas trees decked with bobbing colored balls and gold silver strands. Tad did not miss a step in the march of Christmas, for she found excuses of errands to bring her often to the busy part of town, and when there lingered much longer than the purchase of a spool of thread or ribbon warranted.

But it was the day when she found the Christmas trees decking the curbing in front of the grocery stores, and the strands of holly and mistletoe set at the bank corners, that she felt the first keen pang of Christmas time. For that was the day the Santa Claus with his white hair and beard and red cloak first paraded amidst a score of admiring children at his heels, up and down before the candy store. Even then hope was furthest from her mind, till of a sudden he stopped in front of her and held out his box.

"Have you told Santa what you want for Christmas?"

Tad eyed him solemnly. "No; can I?"

He laughed. "Of course. That's what they all do. Here—" he pulled a writing pad from his pocket. "You tell me and I'll write it down for you."

Tad thought a moment. Then she repeated slowly for him to write: "I want a Christmas."

"Christmas what?" He stopped, looking down at her.

"That's all—just a Christmas," she answered gravely.

"Are you sure? not a doll or dishes?" he still hesitated.

Tad was quite sure. So he wrote it down, answered her question by, Oh, yes, she would be certain to have it! and turned away.

After that Tad was his faithful follower, though no more than with her eyes, the few remaining days, sometimes as she passed with Nana, sometimes lingering by herself near the candy store, but never among the other children. The fact is, though interested, Tad was dubious. At home there had been no difference since, from before the writing of the note. Dreary lessons went on in the forenoon at Nana's knee, as if there were no such approaching thing as Christmas. Nana plainly did not have time to talk of it, for whenever Tad could lead her into the subject, there would come Granda's rap from above and Nana, though always patient, would be kept busy with her needs. Besides, Nan never had very much to say about Christmas; and even Granda, herself, began to grow morose and uninteresting. And now, too, since Nana had forbidden Granda's stories there was no incentive for Tad's climbing to her little upstairs room. Altogether, home was a dreary, hopeless place compared to the interest and bustle of town. And the day before Christmas was worst of all.

It was in the afternoon of that day, that Tad found herself again apart from the little crowd elbowing and shouting around the Santa Claus. There were other watchers, too—grown-up people—for this day there seemed nothing for them to do except stop to chat with one another on the street, and exchange greetings or smile at unknown people of pleasant faces. But Tad, her eyes wide open, was not aware of the man with very tanned face watching her amusedly, until at length he stepped to her side and touched her arm. "Why aren't you among them?" he asked smiling down at her, and pointing toward the little crowd at which she stood upon the outskirts.

Tad looked up—it seemed very far, though he was bending down over a great length of brown overcoat, till she came to his face, with the merry, kind eyes, and the hair slightly touched with grey showing beneath his hat. Despite the evident amusement, Tad's confidence was won immediately.

"Don't you believe in your ruddy friend?" he asked.

"Santa? No, I don't," Tad replied flatly. "Only I hope he didn't hear. But I really don't see how he could give me a whole Christmas, do you?"

"Well," her companion hemmed. "It wouldn't exactly go into a stocking, that's true. You might try a gunny sack."

Tad gave him a look of reproof. "Now you're joking. But you wouldn't joke if you'd never had a Christmas." There was a tear that would glide into her eyes though she did her best to blink it back.

"Never had one!" A crowd of people pushed them on, and for a moment he and Tad were separated. When they met again, he put himself so as to shield her. "Do you know," he said, "I think I should like to be friends with you. Do you mind?" Very gravely he took off his hat. "Allow me to introduce myself—Castell, late of the C— M— African company, and formerly engineer of no particular importance in this self same town. I can't claim to being anything remarkable but at least I'm no highway robber. That is," he smiled, "you're not to think I'm trying to kidnap you when I suggest our taking a walk." Someone jostled them again. "You see, people don't seem to think it quite polite of us to have a tete-a-tete in the middle of Main street. But, were you going anywhere?"

"Oh, no, there's nowhere to go," Tad answered.

"Good! My exact predicament too," he cried in gay surprise. And so she put her arm through his and they joined the throng that swept down one side of the walk. Tad, though outwardly sober, had a delightful feeling of importance within her, although a child usually does not make much of the extraordinary, taking everything more or less as a matter of course. But to be introduced just as if one were a "grown-up" and be asked to take a walk with a real man who seemed to understand one, and didn't laugh at everything one said, this was more than unusual for Tad, whose acquaintance had been limited to Granda and Nana and some few neighboring playmates, though Tad was older than most children of her age, and hence found them not always satisfactory.

"The fact is," said Castell, when they had safely piloted through the worst of the jostling, and there was more ease in walking and talking and enjoy the crisp, dry wintry air. "For the one whole day since I've been here I haven't had a soul to talk to—everybody is so confoundedly busy and happy over Christmas—And, oh, yes, I was to hear how it happens you've never had a Christmas," he ended sympathetically.

"Oh," Tad's disappointment returned again. "It's just that there's nobody to have one with."

"Well, if that's all, how will I do?"

"You?"

"Why not"

"But you don't mean it." Tad eyed him dubiously.

"Don't I? Haven't I been looking for that very thing—someone to have a Christmas with! It's pretty tough to be away ten years and then come home to have to spend Christmas alone. I'll tell you what, if Christmas isn't jolly, it's a—well, it's a mighty tough day, that's all I've got to say, little girl." His voice was a bit husky at the close.

"Don't they have Christmases away, just the same?"

"In Africa?" He laughed. "Perhaps they do, but if so they never told me about it. One day was the same to me year in and year out, except that one day it was the birds for company, and the next, a crocodile, and the next, an elephant, and sometimes a crowd of dirty natives. I think if it was ever Christmas it was when the commissioners wrote me I was to come home. Do you know what I did?"

"No. What?" eagerly.

"Threw up my hat and sang Hail Columbia at the top of my unmelodious lungs."

Tad showed it unsatisfactory.

"What would you!" he laughed. "Down there you can't exactly paint the towns red, in the first place because they don't have paint, and in the second, you have a hard enough time looking after your head as it is, without purposely going crazy. No, all I wanted to do was make straight for the point of the 'liner,' and do my celebrating at this end, for ten years! But I didn't calculate on not finding a soul I ever knew." He made a wry face. "And Christmas of all times! As if it wouldn't be bad enough without that!"

"Where are the people you used to know?"

"—Lost, strayed or stolen, but not where I left them."

"Why did you leave them?"

"Why?" His eyes narrowed and looked far off. Instinctively their pace had become slower as they passed at random into the residence streets. "But it's a story, little girl, that you wouldn't understand if I told."

"Oh," cried Tad, drawing herself up. "I could, I know. I've heard lots of stories that are hard and know all about them. That's the kind granda tells—only sometimes I don't know quite all she says," she admitted. "She says such funny things sometimes. I wish you could hear her. Do you know any Christmas stories?"

"Why, to be sure. That was a Christmas story—why I left."

"Oh, do tell me," cried Tad, clasping her hands. "I love stories—"

"It's not a pretty story," he commented.

"I don't care. Neither is granda's."

"Well, it's only that once upon a time there was a Santa Claus who thought to have a very merry Christmas himself, after he'd given them to so many people; and he thought it would be asking too much for one—just one—present. So he hung up his stocking, put the present he had chosen for himself in it and went to sleep, dreaming all sorts of pleasant happy dreams. But when he woke—the present wasn't there! Somebody else had come in the night and said, Here, this is mine; I asked for it!—and took it right from under Santa's nose. When he found it gone, and his stocking empty, he felt so bad that he vowed he wouldn't be Santa Claus another second. And that very day he sold his outfit of white hair, reindeer and sleigh to the first person who came along, packed up his own things and left. From that day to this he's never been heard of since."

"What did become of him—truly?"

"Truly, after giving up his job he became a very ordinary man who served under a commission in Africa, with grey hair, and a face as brown as—as mine!" he ended triumphantly.

"Well," sighed Tad. "Is that all."

"All!" he echoed.

"Yes, for it's just like the stories Nana tells—"

"Nana, who is Nana?"

"Just Nana. I don't know how it got to be Nana," Tad puzzled. "Anyhow she'll never tell the way granda does, all about what everybody says and does and thinks. I wish you could hear granda. Yours is pretty good if you told it her way."

"Well, you prompt, and I'll see if I can do better again. Now remember! —After Santa had put his present in his stocking—"

"What was the present?"

He started. "Must I tell that?"

Tad nodded.

"Then, someone he loved, very much, little girl," he replied huskily in spite of himself, "and wanted for his own very much."

"Then he couldn't put her in his stocking."

"Well no—The fact is, it was her stocking which was hung up and he put his heart in it—No, to be sure, it couldn't be a heart. It was a ring—"

"Ring? Why, that's just like granda's story—"

"But this is a true story. He put the ring in Christmas eve, and never slept a wink all night for happiness. And the next morning he went to ask for his present, and was told that someone else was to have it. But he didn't believe it, not till he saw with his own eyes, and then he had to."

"What did he see?"

"What a persistent little miss you are! He saw the girl he loved and the other man, through the doorway—with both her hands in his."

"Didn't they say or do anything?"

He flinched. "Must I tell that too? Suppose I've forgotten?"

"Then make it up."

"Oh—that was it, it began with 'Oh, Jack,' was what she said, 'I cannot believe it.' And he said: 'Does it make you happy then, Nan?' And for answer she kissed him. That's all. Does it suit your ladyship? For the fact is this man didn't care to listen for any more, but said goodbye as quick as he could, and went away as soon as he could, and as far as he could."

"Isn't it funny—"

"Oh, you think so? Perhaps it is now, but it wasn't then—for the man."

"No, I mean isn't it funny how it's so much like Granda's story. Do you know, I think you must have read it in a book, only you don't tell it right. Jack's my father, and Nan, that's just like Nana, and the ring—"

"Wait—" He checked her with a motion of his hand. He stopped himself, there, facing her on the corner while of a sudden suspicions, conjectures jumped to his brain and ran riot. Jack—Nan—"What is your name?"

Tad laughed. "Why, we've forgot to introduce me, haven't we? I'm Tad."

"But the other name?" he demanded feverishly.

"I forgot. I'd ought to have said: Miss Matilda Rebecca Laughlin." She drew herself up with dignity.

"Oh!" The blood rushed from the veins into his head and for a moment he stood weakly staring at Tad. He stared for a long time, it seemed to her, before he went on to say slowly: "So this is Tad! I might have known it. You look very much like your father—not Nan."

"Did you know them?" Tad cried, her face lighting up. "Then you can come to hear Granda's story!"

Granda, too, he thought. How stupid for him not to have guessed.

"—And we can have a Christmas," went on Tad, jubilant. "I know we can, for it was only because there wasn't anybody to be Santa Claus before that we couldn't have one. And you can be Santa Claus. Nana can hang up her stocking just like she did before, and Granda is to have a new footstool. And you can ask for any present you want to—"

Castell awoke from his reverie to a sudden appreciation of her words. "No, No!" he cried, stepping back almost in horror.

"But you said you wanted to have a Christmas," declared Tad, crestfallen.

"Not that!" was all he said again.

"What could we do?" And then as he did not answer, but kept gazing over her head with that peculiar look in his eyes, she ventured to return to the subject by asking, "Why not?"

"Why—" he hesitated. "A thousand reasons why not, little girl," he said at length. "What would they think?"

"Who?"

"Granda—and Nana—and Ja—your father."

"But I haven't any," she cried in astonishment. "He was dead, long, long ago. Didn't you know?"

One by one surprises smote thick and fast upon Castell's whirling brain. "No, I didn't know. I haven't know anything for 10 years. But I never would have dreamed that Jack— Tell me of Nan," he broke off.

"There's nothing to tell, I don't think. But Granda's blind— There," she cried with a sudden thought, "if you won't have a Christmas you can come and hear Granda's story! Oh, please do say you will?" She caught his hands imploringly. "You don't know what fine stories Granda tells."

But he shook his head again, though it might be he was a trifle less vehement in his denial than before.

"Is it because you don't want anybody to see you?" puzzled Tad.

"That's it, exactly," he sighed with relief.

She gave a little laugh of triumph. "Oh, if that's all, nobody will. Nana's gone for Granda's stool, and Granda will never know, because we can tiptoe upstairs and keep as still as a mouse, and she can't see. Why, it'll be nearly as much fun as the Christmas."

The child's eager upturned face and pleading brown eyes were hard to resist. With his mind in a hazy chaos—where sometimes it was dread, and sometimes pain, and occasionally desire uppermost, Tad led him unconscious, a few uncertain steps down the cross street while he wavered. Then, "I know you'd come," she said softly, smiling up at him.

"But I shouldn't—" He stopped short. "Yet— You are sure I won't see anybody? Nan?" There was something pulling him toward the old familiar place now, as strong as that repelling him at the first thought, though he fought it back inwardly, as Tad fought for his every step forward. But there was Tad, pleading. When he did give in, he believed it to be for her wish—not his own.

Tad put her finger to her lips. Castell followed obediently on tiptoe, and both held their breaths whenever a board in the stairs creaked.

"Look out for the stumbly step!" warned Tad, and then out of pure enjoyment of the stealth, she laughed softly at him. Castell smiled back at her, though tumultuous thoughts, memories filled his mind and made him oblivious to the fact that he smiled, indeed, to all his movements except as in the consciousness which came from them, he felt like a thief at night entering a forbidden realm. At the top he shrank back. "Oh Tad," he whispered. "I shouldn't. Suppose she hears me—"

A voice startled them. "Eh, Tad?"

"Yes, Granda?"

Castell did not dare move. He listened for what she would say next, and while he listened the sound of the shrill voice sent a wave of the pain it had caused him when he last heard it, through him again.

"Law, how you startled me, child!" It didn't sound like your step."

Castell cast an anxious glance at Tad, and one of retreat toward the stairs. Tad frowned and shook her head. Then she laughed once more, softly for the old lady's benefit, as she stood in the door. "Why, I did it on purpose, Granda. I wanted to see if you would be scared!"

"Eh, you did—wanted to scare me!" she wailed shrilly. "As if it ain't enough a body sits all the day hearing strange noises—steps and voices and words as had ought to be in their grave. Do you want to know whose step I thought it—Laws, child, h'aint you coming in? Come, here." She tapped her cane on the floor at her side. "Here."

Tad beckoned to Castell. Fearfully he followed, disguising his faint footfalls in the purposely heavy ones of Tad. He entered the door. For a second his heart failed him as he saw the old woman, her gaze straight upon him. It seemed as if those glinting sightless blue eyes read his guilt through and through. He felt as if he must explain himself, excuse himself. He wondered why he had not asked Tad if Granda could not see a little bit, only a shadow of him, perhaps. But, no; Granda dropped her eyes at last and gave no start. His heart beat regularly again. Then a sort of pity possessed him for the little old woman. In 10 years how she had aged! Now she was like a brown autumn leaf when it was dried and curled at the edges, and threatens to crack with a touch. Ten years, though, had not changed her manner, nor her tone, with its sharpness of a needle point. Yet as if in contradiction of the impression, her next words had a strange touch of pathos in them.

"Here child—so I can touch you. I'm glad you're come. I've been wishing somebody'd come. Not Nan, though," she added hurriedly. "I wouldn't ha' wanted it to be Nan, not today!" A half shudder went through her thin frame. "Eh, what day is today, Tad?"

"It's Christmas eve day, Granda," answered Tad, placing herself obediently on the floor at the side of the big chair, while Castell stealthily seated himself on the stool, facing Granda and with his back to the door.

"Hey? So I might ha' known it from the things I've been thinking. It's queer I'd forget, I'm forgetting fast, Tad; that's because I'm so old. How old do you think I am, eh?" She whispered the answer quick, so that she should not say it. "Eighty-eight. I ha'nt forgot that," she smiled grimly. "Not many bodies live till they're that old, eh, Tad?" she said with a sort of pride, and then interrupted herself. "But many a body lives till they're ninety-five, or a hundred. Why shouldn't they? A hundred's not many, and it's awful to die." She shuddered. "How old are you, child?"

"Nine, next month, Granda."

"Then it's just 10 years come today."

"What is?"

"The Christmas."

Tad cast a joyous glance at her silent companion. He gave a start, too, and some of the color ebbed from his face.

"Oh, Granda, that's just what I was going to ask you—to tell us about the Christmas!"

"Us? Who is there?" cried Granda, sitting up.

Castell held his breath.

Tad gave an anxious little laugh. "Why, you and me, Granda, of course. For you like to hear about it, too, don't you?" she explained.

Castell relaxed with a smile at the child, as the old woman settled back in her chair, mumbling, "Not today! Not today!"

"Oh, but Granda," pleaded Tad, "it's Christmas eve today, and it won't be again for a year."

"Eh? But why shouldn't I live till another year?" Granda demanded fiercely of Tad.

Tad was a trifle nonplussed for a moment. "Yes'm, Only it's this year, right now, I want to hear it. You haven't told it for a long time, Granda."

"Eh? But Nan said—"

"But I won't tell Nana," she broke in eagerly. "Nana won't ever know," and nodded at Castell.

"What?" Granda looked peculiarly straight in front of her, unknowingly at Castell, and then gave a queer triumphant laugh. "Nan. Nan never did know, nor Charles, either!"

Castell drew in his breath. Suddenly came to him intuitively a new interest in the scene. Granda—how strange she acted. Was this the change of 10 years?

In the next moment the triumph was gone and fear took its place. "God," she whispered, "if Nan should know!"

"But I won't tell," insisted Tad rising in her eagerness to her knees.

"Eh?" The change back to her usual cunning was swift again. "To be sure you won't. You don't know. Nobody does."

"Oh, yes, Granda, I do. I could tell it myself, only not so good. It begins like this," she turned and faced Castell. "Once upon a time there was a Jack Frost, whose name for short was Jack, and a Santa Claus—what was his other name, now, Granda?"

"Saint Nick."

"No, no, it isn't," protested Tad. "You said it a minute ago."

Castell breathed a word upon his lips.

"Yes, that's it—Charles," she said delighted. "Well, and Santa, he came down the chimney—"

"Eh? Through the front door, child, where he'd gone out—he'd been after the Christmas tree party."

"Oh no," interrupted Tad. "Down the —"

"Eh? Didn't I stop for seeing the front door open, as we'd thought was latched, and see him come back, when all was abed but me, and me most gone upstairs except for the candle blowing out, and stopping to light it?"

Castell moved slightly.

"That was it—a push, so scarce you could hear it, and a click, and then tiptoed over to the stocking—"

"—Hung on the mantel," put in Tad.

"—Nan's, and put the ring in it—"

Tad gave a glance at Castell. "Then Granda?" she asked as her artifice to emphasize it.

"—And note—"

"Oh, you never told about a note before."

"Eh?" the old woman so suddenly that it startled the two listeners. "Why shouldn't I ha' read it and not tell? Wasn't I all the mother Nan had? 'Can you take it, Nan,' says it, 'and no more; an' I'll come for my answer tomorrow, Santa.'—Couldn't I ha' dropped to read it? I'd never would I ha' dreamed of his coming there so [illegible] like Cousin Jack and a sight more [illegible] her lover, him teasing of her and calling her Nancy dear, and so [illegible] feelinate like. Jack was a case he was!" Granda half smiled reminiscently, shaking her head.

Till now Tad had sat rather bewildered. Now she brightened up. "There, Jack—he was really my father," she explained to Castell. "—What—If of course in the story he's— What? Oh yes, I'll tell her to go on—" she caught herself and bit her lip. But Granda had not noticed. Granda was still nodding her head and mumbling to herself.

"Then," said Tad aloud, to draw her attention, "when Santa had gone—"

"Eh?" Granda started alert once more. "Didn't I lay awake that night when he'd gone and I was abed thinking over Great Uncle Hyslop and Great Aunt Hickly, and Cousin Jeffries and Nan's mother—scarce a body in the family who hadn't died when there was a wedding come no more an' ten months! And then thinks I—Nan to be married! And back again of Hyslop and Jeffries, and then of Nan and after Father, back and forward all night, till I fell asleep. And then I tossed and moaned the while—" she moved now uneasily in her chair, as if in memory. "—Moaned and tossed and dreamed—Eh? Is that Nan? I thought I heard a noise."

Castell glanced hurriedly at the door.

"Oh no," said Tad reassuringly

Photo by Harry Shipler

JACK FROST AT LIBERTY PARK.