

Susy's Christmas
Written by Lavinia Goodell
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"Aunt Kate, tell me a story—*please* do!" "O, yes, auntie! A story!" And Willie and Carrie Hudson, forgetting the newly acquired treasures with which the floor was strewn, clung to aunt Katie's skirts, while bright, expectant eyes, and noisy tongues clamored for the "story."

A story on Christmas day? Who ever heard of such a thing? Why, Carrie, you haven't got tired of Miss Genevieve, yet, have you? And Willie —"

"But, auntie, you know we've eat up all our candy, and I can't try my new skates to-day, because it rains, and —"

"And Genevieve is taking a nap. She got so tired, last night, going all around with Santa Claus, that I've put her to bed," insisted little Carrie.

"And you're sure she won't wake up, till I finish my story?"

"Yes, sure."

"Well, then — now what kind of a story do you want?"

"O, a Christmas story, aunt Kate!" chimed in Willie, who had drawn up a chair, and seated himself as closely to his auntie, as the immutable laws of the material universe would allow. "A Christmas story," Carrie thereupon proceeded to climb into Katie's lap, and gaze, with earnest expectancy, into her face.

"Shall I tell you a story about Susy Lester's Christmas, and what she found in her stocking?"

"O, yes! What did she find?" exclaimed Carrie, impatiently.

"What do you guess?"

"A wax doll?"

Aunt Kate laughed, and shook her head.

"Perhaps she got a little china tea-set?" Carrie ventured again.

"Not right yet, Carrie."

"Skates! Skates!" shouted Willie, very confidently.

"No, indeed, Mr. Willie! Try again."

"But why not skates? Girls *do* skate, you know. I wish Carrie was big enough to skate with me!"

“She got a paper of candies, anyhow, didn’t she?” suggested Carrie, doubtfully.

“And didn’t her uncle John send her a picture book, all about elephants, and camels, and lions, like mine?” added Willie.

“I’ll tell you presently, but I must begin at the right end, if I am going to tell you a story. So be very patient, and I will tell you all about Susy Lester’s Christmas. Susy Lester was about eight years old, at the time of our story.”

“Just as big as me!” exclaimed Carrie earnestly.

“No, Carrie. She was your age, but she was a wee bit of a thing, with a pale face, and deep. Blue, earnest eyes, that didn’t laugh, as yours do, and brown hair, combed back and braided behind her ears. Susy could laugh and play right merrily, sometimes, with other little girls, and then, when the game was all over, the old grave look would come back, and she would wander off, quietly, by herself. Susy did not live in a great, handsome house, like this, with parlors, and basements, and playroom and library, and she didn’t have uncles and aunts and cousins, to come and see her, and make her Christmas presents.”

“Didn’t she have anybody?”

“No one in the wide world, but her father and mother. If she had any relations they never came to see her, and she never heard anything about them. She had no brothers and sisters, and her father – Did you ever see a *drunkard*, Willie?”

“Yes, I have! There’s old Wilkes, goes staggering and swearing along – *he’s* a drunkard. The boys all throw stones at him.”

“Wouldn’t it be dreadful to have such a man for a father?”

“O, aunt Katie! There don’t any little girls’ fathers be drunkards, do they?” asked Carrie, anxiously.

“Yes, Carrie; old Wilkes has got five children – one a little baby. A great many little girls have just such fathers. Little Susy’s father was a drunkard. He spent all the money he could get, to buy rum; and that kept them so very poor that they had to live in one little, dark, lonesome room, way up over so many stairs, in a tenement house. Susy’s father used to go away, and be gone a long time, but Susy was never glad when he came back, for he did not take her on his knee, and tell her stories, nor bring her picture books, nor call her his dear little daughter, and say he was glad to see her. Susy’s mother had to work hard, sewing, sewing, day after day, and sometimes late at night, to earn food and clothes for them both.”

“What did Susy have to play with?”

“Sometimes she went to the Public school, and then she could play with the children, at recess; but sometimes in cold weather her mother could not afford to get her nice dresses to wear, and then she had to stay at home, and her mother would talk to her, and tell her stories. Sometimes she would try to help her mother; but she was too little to do much. Well, this winter, when it came towards Christmas time, and the toy and confectionary windows began to glisten with all sorts of pretty things,

Susy loved to walk along slowly, and look in and admire them. There were a great many pleasant store windows, on the way from her home to the place where her mother had to go for work. Susy knew the streets very well, and so, when she was tired of staying in the house, and her mother could not think of any more stories, she would let Susy take a little walk.

It was the day before Christmas, and a bright, sunny day it was, too. The shop windows were in the height of their glory. Mamma, papas, aunties, uncles, and cousins, were all out shopping, and children clustered about the windows in crowds. Poor, quiet, little Suzy wandered on alone from window to window, perfectly delighted with the glittering array. There were dolls – great ones – as big as real babies – and O, *so* beautiful! And there were little toy chairs, and sofas, and tea-sets, and all sorts of things! And O, *such* candies! How bright and beautiful everything looked! What might Christmas be, that it brought such a train of pleasant things with it? But when Suzy heard the rosy, laughing boys and girls wondering if papa would get them this, and uncle Charles that or mamma something else, then she remembered that she had no kind father or uncle to buy her Christmas presents, and that she had no warm, bright, happy home like theirs.

“Mamma, who is Santa Claus?” she asked, as she sat thoughtfully watching her mother sew, that evening.

“Her mother smiled, a very sober, sad smile, as she said – ‘Why, Susy, why do you ask that question?’

“Because I heard some children talking to-day about Christmas presents, and wondering what they should get, and one little girl said she wished Santa Claus would get her a new crying-baby, with a cradle. She was such a pretty little girl, mamma, with such red cheeks and black eyes! So I asked her who Santa Claus was, and she laughed, and asked me if I didn’t know, and said he was a little old man, that filled the stockings of all good children with Christmas presents. I wonder why he never brings *me* things! Ain’t I a good girl, mamma? I *try* to be.’

“Susy’s mother smiled, and sighed too, but she laid down her work and kissed her little girl, and told her that she had been very good and Susy saw her wipe away tears, and wondered why her mother should cry, when she hadn’t been naughty, and what she could have said to grieve her. Mrs. Lester told Susy she might hang up her stocking before she went to bed; so, with a beating heart, she fastened it to a nail, near the stove, and wondered what strange happiness might be in store for her. When Susy had repeated her usual prayer that night she added – “O, God, please tell Santa Claus to come here to-night!”

“Susy slept soundly. When she awoke, it was just beginning to be light. She could faintly discern the outlines of the table and chairs. Then she thought of her stocking, and wondered if it held anything for her. Her mother was sleeping quietly by her side, so she crept softly out of bed, and stole to the nail. There hung the stocking, and – yes! – something in it. What could it be? She felt something like arms and a head. She started. It couldn’t be the little old man, himself? The little girl told her he was very small. He couldn’t have got into her stocking? But, after all she was afraid, so she retreated, tremblingly, to bed and covered herself all up in the clothes. When it had grown lighter she became more venturesome, and again proceeded to investigate the contents of her stocking. And now what do you think she found? A real rag-baby, with arms and legs, and head, and with a calico dress on! There was something else, too; she drew it out – a whole stick of candy!”

“Was that all?” exclaimed Carrie, drawing a long breath.

“All? You wouldn’t have thought anything else was needed to make Susy happy, if you had seen her that day. I don’t believe any of the little girls that got wax dolls or crying-babies, and pounds of mixed candies, spent a merrier Christmas! She was very eager to know all about the ‘little old man,’ so Mrs. Lester took her in her lap, and told her how the story of Santa Claus was all made up for fun, and that little girls’ mammas got their presents, and how she was poor and couldn’t afford to buy any of those beautiful things in the windows, but she had tried to do the best she could, for her little girl. Susy didn’t care, though, for the shop windows, nor anything else. She had a dollie, and she named it ‘Mary,’ and she rocked it, and sang to it, and talked to it, and dressed and undressed it, and even tried to make it share her candy. She didn’t ask her mother for a story *that* day. And so passed merry Christmas with Susy Lester.”

Willie drew a long breath and whistled, and then went to try on his new skates, for the twentieth time; while Carrie proceeded to arouse the dark-eyed waxen Genevieve, and relate to her the story of Susy’s Christmas.

L.G.