

AN EMPTY PURSE

By Sara Orne Jewett

In the Public Domain

Little Miss Debby Gaines was counting the days to Christmas; there were only three, and the weather was bright and warm for the time of year. "I've got to step fast to carry out all my plans," she said to herself. "It seems to me as if it were going to be a beautiful Christmas; it won't be like any I've spent lately, either. I shouldn't wonder if it turned out for the best, my losing that money I always call my Christmas money; anyway I'll do the best I can to make up for it."

Miss Debby was sitting by the window sewing as fast as she could, for the light of the short winter day was going, mending a warm old petticoat and humming a psalm-tune. Suddenly she heard a knock at the door; she lived in two upstairs rooms, and could not see the street.

"Come in!" she said cheerfully, and dropped her lapful of work.

"Why, if it isn't Mrs. Rivers!" she exclaimed with much pleasure.

The guest was a large woman, fashionably dressed. You would have thought that a very elegant blue-jay had come to make a late afternoon call upon such a brown chippy-sparrow as Miss Debby Gaines. Miss Debby felt much honored, and brought forward her best rocking-chair; and Mrs. Rivers seated herself and began to rock. Her stiff silk gown creaked as if she were a ship at sea.

"What are you doing—something pretty for Christmas?" she asked.

"It may be for Christmas, but it isn't very pretty," answered Miss Debby with a little laugh and shake of the head. "Tell you the truth, I was mending up a nice warm petticoat that I don't have much use for; I thought I'd give it to old Mrs. Bean, at the poorhouse. She's a complaining, cold old creatur', an' she's got poor eyesight and can't sew, and I thought this would make her real comfortable. It's rather more heavy than I need to wear."

"I've been down town all the afternoon, and it's so tiresome trying to get anything in the stores," complained Mrs. Rivers. "They push you right away from what you want time to look over. I like to consider what I buy. It's a great burden to me trying to get ready for Christmas, and I thought I shouldn't do anything this year on account of my health. I've had large expenses this autumn. I had to buy new carpets and a new outside garment. I do like to see the pretty things in the stores, but they were so full of people and so hot and disagreeable this afternoon."

Miss Debby had picked up her petticoat and was holding it close to the window while she sewed on the button with firm linen stitches.

“I haven’t been down the street for two or three days,” she said. “You’ll excuse me for gain’ on with my work; it’s most dark, and I’ll be done in a moment; then we can sit an’ talk.”

“It does me good to come and see you once in a while,” said Mrs. Rivers plaintively. “I thought I’d stop on my way home. Last year you had so many pretty little things that you’d been making.”

“There aren’t any at all this year,” answered Miss Debby bravely. “It wasn’t convenient, so I thought I’d just try having another kind of a merry Christmas.”

“Sometimes I wish I had no more responsibilities than you have. My large house is such a care. Mr. Rivers is very particular about everything, and so am I.” She gave a great sigh, and creaked louder than before, but Miss Debby did not find the right sort of consolation to offer, and kept silence. “You enjoy having your pretty house,” she ventured to say after a few moments; “you wouldn’t like to do with as little as some,” —and Mrs. Rivers shook her head in the dusk, and went on rocking.

“Presents aren’t nothing unless the heart goes with them,” said Miss Debby boldly at last, “and I think we can show good feelin’ in other ways than by bestowing little pin-cushions. Anyway, I’ve got to find those ways for me this year. ‘Tis a day when we New England folks can speak right out to each other, and that does us some good. Somethin’ gets in the air. I expect now to enjoy this Christmas myself, though I felt dreadful bad last week, sayin’ to myself ’twas the first time I couldn’t buy Christmas presents. I didn’t know how interested I was goin’ to get; you see I’ve made my little plans.”

Then they talked about other things, and Mrs. Rivers grew more cheerful and at last went away. She always found Christmas a melancholy season. She did not like the trouble of giving presents then, or at any other time; but she had her good points, as Miss Debby Gaines always bravely insisted.

II

Early on Christmas morning Miss Debby waked up with a feeling of happy expectation, and could hardly wait to make her cup of tea and eat her little breakfast on the corner of the table before she got out her best bonnet and Sunday cloak to begin her Christmas errands. It was cloudy and dark, but the sunlight came at last, pale and radiant, into the little brown room; and Miss Debby’s face matched it with a quiet smile and happy look of eagerness.

“Take neither purse nor scrip,” she said to herself as she went downstairs into the street. There was nobody else stirring in the house, but she knew that the poorhouse would be open and its early breakfast past by the time she could get there. It was a mile or so out of town. She hugged a large package under her

shawl, and shivered a little at the beginning of her walk. There was no snow, but the heavy hoar-frost glistened on the sidewalks, and the air was sharp.

Old Mrs. Bean was coming out of the great kitchen, and when her friend wished her a merry Christmas she shook her head.

“There ain’t anybody to make it merry for me,” she said.

“I wish you a happy Christmas!” said Miss Debby again; “I’ve come on purpose to be your first caller, an’ I’m going to make you the only present I shall give this year. ‘Tis somethin’ useful, Mis’ Bean; a warm petticoat I’ve fixed up nice, so’s you can put it right on and feel the comfort of it.”

The old woman’s face brightened. “Why, you are real kind,” she said eagerly. “It is the one thing I’ve been wantin’. Oh yes, *dear sakes!* ain’t it a beautiful warm one—one o’ the real old-fashioned quilted kind. I always used to have ‘em when I was better off. Well, that is a present!”

“Now I’m goin’, because I can come an’ set an’ talk with you any day, and today I’ve got Christmas work,” and off Miss Debby went to the heart of the town again.

Christmas was on Tuesday that year, and she opened the door of a little house where a tired-looking young woman stood by an ironing-table and looked at her with surprise. “Why, Miss Gaines!” she exclaimed; “where are you going so early?”

“I wish you a happy Christmas!” said Miss Debby. “I’ve come to spend the mornin’ with you. Just through breakfast? No; the little girls are eatin’ away yet. Why, you’re late!”

“I didn’t mean to be,” said the young mother; “but I felt so tired this morning, and pretty sad, too, thinking of last year an’ all. So I just let the children sleep. Nelly’s got cold and was coughing most all night, and I couldn’t bear to get up and begin the day. Mother sent for me to come over to spend Christmas, but I couldn’t get the courage to start. She said she’d have some little presents ready for the little girls, and now I’m most sorry I disappointed her.”

“That’s just why I’m here,” said Miss Debby gayly, and with double her usual decision. “No, Nelly’s not fit to go out, I can see; and you leave her here with me, an’ you just get ready and take Susy and go. Your mother’ll think everything of it, and I’ll see to things here. Ironin’? Why, ’twill do me good. I feel a little chilly, and Nelly and I can have a grand time. Now you go right off an’ get ready, and catch the quarter-to-nine train. I won’t hear no words about it.”

So presently the pale, hard-worked young mother put on her widow’s bonnet and started off down the street, leading bright-faced little Susy by the hand; and Miss Debby and her favorite, Nelly, watched them go, from the window. The breakfast dishes were washed and put away in such fashion that

Nelly thought it quite as good as doll's housekeeping; and then, while Miss Debby ironed, she sat in a warm corner by the stove and listened to stories and to Miss Debby's old-fashioned ballads, which, though sung in a slightly cracked voice, were most delightful to childish ears. What a Christmas morning it was! And after the small ironing was done, what pleasant things there seemed to be to do! Miss Debby rummaged until she found some little aprons cut for the children; and first she basted one for Nelly to sew, and then she took the other herself, and they sat down together and sewed until dinnertime. The aprons were pink and added to the gayety of the Occasion; and they were ready at last to surprise Nelly's mother by being put back in their place in the same roll—all done even to the buttons and buttonholes, for Miss Debby found time to finish Nelly's as well as her own. And they had bread and milk for dinner, and Miss Debby told stories of when she was a little girl. Altogether there never was a happier Christmas Day, and the spirit of Christmas, of peace and good-will, shone brightly in Miss Debby's face. Her quick eyes saw many chances to lend a helping hand to the poor defenceless household. When Nelly's mother came home at night, heartened and cheered by her visit, she found the ironing and mending done; and a day or two later the pink aprons turned up all ready to be put on. And Nelly's tiresome cough, which sounded like the whooping-cough, was quite stilled by some good old-fashioned dose which Miss Debby mixed agreeably with molasses and put to simmer on the stove. There seemed to be no end to the kind and thoughtful things Miss Debby did that day in a neighbor's house.

She had started for home at dusk, just before it was time for young Mrs. Prender to get back, and was walking along the street, a little tired, but very happy.

"Why, it's only half past four o'clock now!" she exclaimed, as she passed the watchmaker's window. "I mean to go and see Mrs. Wallis a little while," and she quickened her steps.

Presently Miss Debby Gaines came to a fine large house, very different from the one she had just left, and took pains to straighten her little black bonnet as she went up the long flight of handsome stone steps. An elderly man-servant opened the door.

"I wish you a happy Christmas!" said Miss Debby. "Can I see Mrs. Wallis, do you suppose, Mr. Johnson?"

"Oh, yes'm," said Johnson with feeling. "I was wishing somebody'd come in, Miss Gaines, now it's beginning to get dark. The young ladies was here this morning, and brought their presents, but they'd made a promise to go out into the country with some young friends, so they aren't coming to dinner, and Mrs. Wallis has been alone all day. She was pleased to have 'em go, though."

By this time Miss Debby had crossed the wide hall to the library, where the kind mistress of the house was sitting alone. She hesitated a moment before she could speak.

“I wish you a happy Christmas!” she said. “It’s only me, Mrs. Wallis—Debby Gaines.”

“Why, Miss Debby!” and there was something in the tone of this hostess which told at once that she was glad to see a friend. “Why, dear Miss Debby! Come and sit down in this chair by me! I don’t doubt you have been trotting about all day,” and Mrs. Wallis held out a warm, affectionate hand.

“No, I’ve been keepin’ house for Mis’ Prender, so she could go and see her mother,” explained Miss Debby quite simply. “I had a nice time with her little girl that’s just getting over a cold and couldn’t go with the others. I was just on my way home. I thought I’d stop and see if there was anything I could do for you.”

“Nothing except to stay a little while and keep me company,” said Mrs. Wallis. “My granddaughters are usually here, but they had a very pleasant plan made for them, and I was very glad to have them go. A skating party and a dinner at the Ashtons’ country house, and a dance.”

“Young folks will be young folks,” said Miss Debby. “I should like to hear all about it when they come and tell. Everybody seemed to be goin’ somewhere today; ’twas the nice clear weather.”

“There are all my pretty presents on the table,” said Mrs. Wallis. “Somehow they haven’t been very good company; this is the first Christmas in all my life that I have happened to spend quite alone.”

Miss Debby might not have done so much without thinking, by daylight, but she drew a little nearer and took hold of Mrs. Wallis’s hand.

“You must have had a great many lovely things to remember,” she said softly. “But anybody can’t help feeling lonesome; I know how ’tis. Everybody misses somebody the world over. There was all of us together once at home, and now I’m a kind of sparrow on the housetops. But I’ve had a beautiful day so far. I own I was afraid you’d have a sight of company an’ I should have to miss askin’ to see you.”

“I’m glad somebody wanted to see me,” said Mrs. Wallis more cheerfully, “and one of the friends I’ve known longest”; then they went on with much pleasant talk of the old days, and Mrs. Wallis gave Miss Debby an excellent cup of tea, and they had a happy little feast together there in the library before the humble, loving-hearted guest went away, leaving peace and good-will once more in a lonely and troubled heart.

She stopped here and there at the houses of other friends, forgetting in her happiness that she was empty-handed on Christmas Day, and everywhere she left a new feeling of friendliness and pleasant kindness. At one house she

comforted a crying child by mending his broken top, and at another she knew just how to help a pretty girl to get ready for her Christmas party, and sat down and took off her big woollen gloves to alter the refractory dress, which had seemed impossible to be worn. She was like a good angel as she sat there, sewing and smiling and putting everybody's mind at ease.

It was late in the evening when this was finished, and she had had a long day; but she stopped, with great bravery, and asked to see the minister, just to tell him how thankful she was for his sermon on Sunday and wish him a happy Christmas. The minister had been a little discouraged for some reason, as ministers often are, and even Christmas kindnesses in the shape of welcome presents from his friends did not cheer him half so much as the sincerity and affection of Miss Debby's visit. He watched the little figure go down the steps with tears in his eyes. So few persons could forget themselves to remember others as this dear parishioner could: it was worth living for, if one could sometimes help and refresh those who are the true helpers; and he went back to his work in the study feeling like a better and busier man than when he had left it.

So Miss Debby came back to her little home again. The fire was out and it was all dark, but she went straight to her small rocking-chair by the window and sat down to rest, and to thank the Lord for such a happy day. Though her purse was empty her heart was full, and she had left pleasure and comfort behind her all along the way.

Presently she lighted her lamp, and then she saw on the table a great package with a note beside it; the note was from Mrs. Rivers.

"Something you said the other day," Miss Debby read, "made me feel differently about Christmas from the way I have before, and I am going right to work to try to make as many people happy as I can. And you must feel that my heart goes with these presents that I send you first. They are some of my own things that I liked, and I send them with love."

Miss Debby's face shone with joy. She had always liked Mrs. Rivers, but she had often pitied her a little; and now the note made her feel as if she had found a new friend in an old one. This was the way that Miss Debby's Christmas came to its happy end.