

THE CHRISTMAS ELF

By Elizabeth Yates

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JENNIE and her mother were making the Christmas cake. They stirred in flour and milk and butter, raisins and currants and spices. The more they put in the harder they had to stir. Soon everything was in but the three wishes. Jennie carried the bowl into Daddy's room. He took the wooden spoon in his hand and gave the batter a big stir all around the bowl.

"I've put my wish in," he said.

Jennie carried the bowl back to her mother in the kitchen.

Mother closed her eyes tight and smiled as she moved the spoon right around the bowl. "Now my wish is in," she said.

Jennie didn't know what to wish for. She took the spoon in her hand and thought that she wanted some new clothes for her doll Pauline almost as much as she wanted a baby brother; and then she knew that what she wanted most of all was for Daddy to be well again. She put her other hand on the spoon too and stirred with all her might, wishing as hard as she could.

"I've got my wish in, too," she said.

Mother made a deep hole in the batter. She picked up the silver money piece that had been washed and polished until it shone like a little chip off a star and dropped it into the batter.

Then they left the kitchen, for this was the time when the Elf took over. Giving the mixture a final stir, he would send the money to a special place in the cake; after it was baked, whoever found the money piece would be the luckiest person in the house with a wish that was bound to come true. Jennie often wondered if other families had an Elf. Of course, he wasn't really real. No one ever saw him. Mother used to say he was the spirit of Christmas in their hearts and all

through the house; and Daddy said if they loved the Elf enough, he would stay with them all through the year.

A few minutes later, when they came back to the kitchen, Jennie looked into the bowl.

"It's gone," she said, for no flash of silver could she see, only dark raisins and thick rich batter. "The Elf's been here and stirred."

Quickly Mother poured the batter into a cake tin and put it into the oven to bake—its wishes and its wealth safe inside it.

The Elf did a great many things about the Saunders' home and this Christmas he was busier than ever, for Mother had said it was going to be a very different Christmas than any they had ever had before. Daddy had been ill for so long that they couldn't give each other presents that cost money. They would have to make their presents and trust to the Elf. But he was a very special kind of Elf. If he did something nice for Jennie, Jennie would return it, not by doing anything for him, but by doing something nice for someone else. That was the Elf's rule, and it had to be kept to keep in his favor.

"You're a big girl now, Jennie," Mother said to her; "you can make your presents. The Elf will help you, I'm sure."

Jennie nodded, because at seven it was nice to be told you were a big girl and because she knew way down inside herself that because Christmas was Christmas something wonderful was bound to happen.

Jennie's mother went out to work every day and when Jennie got home from school she would go to her father's room and sit on the end of his bed. Together they were making a present for Mother—a pair of warm felt slippers. Of course, Jennie's father did most of the work on the slippers, but Jennie was stitching a design across the toes in bright colored wools.

"But how do you know she needs slippers more than anything else?" Jennie asked her father.

"The Elf told me," he answered her. That was what was so nice about the Elf—he told other people things they wanted to know but he never, never gave any secrets away.

“Do you know where Pauline has gone?” Jennie asked. She had missed her doll for some days now.

“I expect the Elf has her,” Daddy said.

“Oh,” Jennie smiled, “do you think he knows that she needs a new dress?”

“He knows almost everything.”

Jennie leaned nearer to her father. “Do you think he knows that she needs a little pair of pants, too?”

Daddy smiled. “Perhaps Pauline will tell him.”

Jennie had to think about that for a minute and then she smiled a great big smile, for Pauline and the Elf must surely speak the same language. She wondered why she had not thought of that before.

After supper, in the little time left before she went to bed, Jennie sat with her mother in the kitchen making a present for her father. She had learned to knit and she was busy knitting a long red scarf. It did not grow at all quickly for her but sometimes when she got home from school and picked it up, it looked at least an inch longer.

“The Elf has been helping me again,” Jennie said, but she knew better than to ask any questions. Instead, she helped her mother set the table for supper.

Mother said to Jennie one evening, “You know, darling, it's going to be a very long time before Daddy can go outdoors. It may not even be winter then. Don't you think you should make something he could use now—like a washcloth?”

Jennie shook her head, thinking of the wish she had stirred into the Christmas cake. “No, the Elf told me that Daddy would like a long red scarf to wrap around his neck when he goes out.”

Mrs. Saunders just looked at Jennie and nodded. That was another thing about the Elf: if you mentioned his name no one ever disputed you. It was always final.

So, no matter what anyone said about Christmas · this year, Jennie knew it would be the same wonderful day that it always was. There would be presents for everyone; everyone, it seemed, except MacTavish.

“He'll feel so left out if he doesn't have anything,” Jennie said.

"Oh, no, he won't, darling. We'll ask them at the meat market to let us have a bone for him and we'll tie a red ribbon around it."

"But he has a bone every Sunday. He'll think it's Sunday and not Christmas."

"Well," Mother said, "I'm afraid MacTavish can't possibly have a present this year."

"The Elf told me that MacTavish wanted a ball to play with—a shining red rubber ball."

Mother didn't say anything, for no one ever questioned the Elf.

Jennie walked down with MacTavish to the Corner Store and looked in the window at the ball they had both seen there. MacTavish stood on his hind legs with his front paws and his nose against the window. Jennie thought of the games they could play together with that ball and MacTavish wagged his tail almost as if the ball were his.

Christmas Eve came and the presents were all done up, not to be opened until the morning—a flat one for Daddy, a narrow longish one for Mother, and a box for Jennie that was big enough to hold the missing Pauline, but there was nothing for MacTavish. That night, at supper, they cut the first slices in the Christmas cake. It was a big cake and would last them for a long time, but Mother always liked to begin it on Christmas Eve. They were having supper in Daddy's room on a little table beside his bed.

"The first piece will be for Jennie," Mother said as she let the big sharp knife cut down through the rich dark cake. She cut a piece for Daddy and then one for herself.

Jennie drew up her chair to the table. All of a sudden, she could do nothing but smile, for there in the piece of cake that was hers, shining like a star among all the dark raisins and currents, was the money piece.

"Look!" Jennie said, showing the plate to her mother and father. "It's come to me! The Elf has given it to me!"

"Sure enough," Mother said, looking almost as pleased as Jennie.

Jennie was glad now that she had wished for Daddy to be well again. Jumping up from her chair she threw her arms around him, hugging him tight.

"My wish is coming true," she said; "the wish I stirred into the cake!"

Daddy smiled. "What are you going to do with the money piece, Jennie?"

Jennie picked up the silver coin and rubbed off the cake that had stuck to it. "I know what I'm going to do with this," she nodded secretly, for though it was exciting to have the coin, it was not nearly so exciting as to know her wish was coming true.

After they had finished their supper she said to her mother, "Please, may I go to the corner store, for just a minute?"

"Yes, if you really will be just a minute," Mother replied.

"I'll run both ways," Jennie promised.

She put on her rubbers, her coat and her hood, and went to the door. MacTavish ran after her.

"No, MacTavish, not tonight," she said as she went out and shut the door on a puzzled black dog.

It took her a very little time to get to the store where she saw, to her great joy, that the red ball was still in the window.

"Please, Mr. Higgins, I'd like to buy your red ball," she said. "Have I got enough money?"

He looked at the shiny piece in her fingers and wagged his head. "Ten cents. That's exactly right. To the penny." He took the ball out of the window and did it up in white paper with lots of red ribbon.

Jennie took the ball under her arm and ran home with it. She let herself in the door very quietly. She would have to hide the package with the other presents so MacTavish would not find it until morning. She could hear her mother and father talking in the next room and another voice that must have been the doctor's.

"You're much better, Mr. Saunders," the doctor was saying. "Indeed, it won't be long now before you'll be able to be up and about."

Jennie wanted to shout for joy, but she clapped her hand over her mouth and stood very still for a moment in the hallway.

"Thank you, Elf," she said in a voice not much louder than a whisper but loud enough for an Elf to hear.

