



The Christmas of 1776

*from the book
"A Last Century Maid"
by Anne Hollingsworth Wharton*

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Homeway Press
PO Box 187
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mail@chirotoons.com

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Christmas in Seventeen-Seventy-Six (1776)

by Anne Hollingworth Wharton

*"On Christmas day in Seventy-six,
Our gallant troops with bayonets fixed,
To Trenton marched away."*

Children, have any of you ever thought of what little people like you were doing in this country more than a hundred years ago, when the cruel tide of war swept over its bosom? From many homes the fathers were absent, fighting bravely for the liberty which we now enjoy, while the mothers no less valiantly struggled against hardships and discomforts in order to keep a home for their children, whom you only know as your great-grandfathers and great-grandmothers, dignified gentlemen and beautiful ladies, whose painted portraits hang upon the walls in some of your homes. Merry, romping children they were in those far-off times, yet their bright faces must have looked grave sometimes, when they heard the grown people talk of the great things that were happening around them. Some of these little people never forgot the wonderful events of which they heard, and afterward related them to their children and grandchildren, which accounts for some of the interesting stories which you may still hear, if you are good children.

The Christmas story that I have to tell you is about a boy and girl who lived in Bordentown, New Jersey. The father of these children was a soldier in General Washington's army, which was encamped a few miles north of Trenton, on the Pennsylvania side of the Delaware River. Bordentown, as you can see by looking on your map, if you have not hidden them all away for the holidays, is about seven miles south of Trenton, where fifteen hundred Hessians and a troop of British light horse were holding the town. Thus you see that the British, in force, were between Washington's army and Bordentown, besides which there were some British and Hessian troops in the very town. All this seriously interfered with Captain Tracy's going home to eat his Christmas dinner with his wife and children. Kitty and Harry Tracy, who had not lived long enough to see many wars, could not imagine such a thing as Christmas without their father, and had busied themselves for weeks in making everything ready to have a merry time with him. Kitty,

who loved to play quite as much as any frolicsome Kitty of to-day, had spent all her spare time in knitting a pair of thick woollen stockings, which seems a wonderful feat for a little girl only eight years old to perform! Can you not see her sitting by the great chimney-place, filled with its roaring, crackling logs, in her quaint, short-waisted dress, knitting away steadily, and puckering up her rosy, dimpled face over the strange twists and turns of that old stocking? I can see her, and I can also hear her sweet voice as she chatters away to her mother about "how 'sprised papa will be to find that his little girl can knit like a grown-up woman," while Harry spreads out on the hearth a goodly store of shellbarks that he has gathered and is keeping for his share of the 'sprise.

"What if he shouldn't come?" asks Harry, suddenly.

"Oh, he'll come! Papa never stays away on Christmas," says Kitty, looking up into her mother's face for an echo to her words. Instead she sees something very like tears in her mother's eyes.

"Oh, mamma, don't you think he'll come?"

"He will come if he possibly can," says Mrs. Tracy; "and if he cannot, we will keep Christmas whenever dear papa does come home."

"It won't be half so nice," said Kitty, "nothing's so nice as REALLY Christmas, and how's Kriss Kringle going to know about it if we change the day?"

"We'll let him come just the same, and if he brings anything for papa we can put it away for him."

This plan, still, seemed a poor one to Miss Kitty, who went to her bed in a sober mood that night, and was heard telling her dear dollie, Martha Washington, that "wars were mis'able, and that when she married she should have a man who kept a candy-shop for a husband, and not a soldier--no, Martha, not even if he's as nice as papa!" As Martha made no objection to this little arrangement, being an obedient child, they were both soon fast asleep. The days of that cold winter of 1776 wore on; so cold it was that the sufferings of the soldiers were great, their bleeding feet often leaving marks on the pure white snow over which they marched. As Christmas drew near there was a feeling among the patriots that some blow was about to be

struck; but what it was, and from whence they knew not; and, better than all, the British had no idea that any strong blow could come from Washington's army, weak and out of heart, as they thought, after being chased through Jersey by Cornwallis.

Mrs. Tracy looked anxiously each day for news of the husband and father only a few miles away, yet so separated by the river and the enemy's troops that they seemed like a hundred. Christmas Eve came, but brought with it few rejoicings. The hearts of the people were too sad to be taken up with merrymaking, although the Hessian soldiers in the town, good-natured Germans, who only fought the Americans because they were paid for it, gave themselves up to the feasting and revelry.

"Shall we hang up our stockings?" asked Kitty, in rather a doleful voice.

"Yes," said her mother, "Santa Claus won't forget you, I am sure, although he has been kept pretty busy looking after the soldiers this winter."

"Which side is he on?" asked Harry.

"The right side, of course," said Mrs. Tracy, which was the most sensible answer she could possibly have given. So:

"The stockings were hung by the chimney with care, In hopes that St. Nicholas soon would be there."

Two little rosy faces lay fast asleep upon the pillow when the good old soul came dashing over the roof about one o'clock, and after filling each stocking with red apples, and leaving a cornucopia of sugar-plums for each child, he turned for a moment to look at the sleeping faces, for St. Nicholas has a tender spot in his great big heart for a soldier's children. Then, remembering many other small folks waiting for him all over the land, he sprang up the chimney and was away in a trice.

Santa Claus, in the form of Mrs. Tracy's farmer brother, brought her a splendid turkey; but because the Hessians were uncommonly fond of turkey, it came hidden under a load of wood. Harry was very fond of turkey, too, as well as of all other good things; but when his mother said, "It's such a fine bird, it seems too bad to eat it without father," Harry cried out, "Yes, keep it for papa!" and Kitty, joining in the chorus, the vote was unanimous, and the

turkey was hung away to await the return of the good soldier, although it seemed strange, as Kitty told Martha Washington, "to have no papa and no turkey on Christmas Day."

The day passed and night came, cold with a steady fall of rain and sleet. Kitty prayed that her "dear papa might not be out in the storm, and that he might come home and wear his beautiful blue stockings"; "And eat his turkey," said Harry's sleepy voice; after which they were soon in the land of dreams. Toward morning the good people in Bordentown were suddenly aroused by firing in the distance, which became more and more distinct as the day wore on. There was great excitement in the town; men and women gathered together in little groups in the streets to wonder what it was all about, and neighbours came dropping into Mrs. Tracy's parlour, all day long, one after the other, to say what they thought of the firing. In the evening there came a body of Hessians flying into the town, to say that General Washington had surprised the British at Trenton, early that morning, and completely routed them, which so frightened the Hessians in Bordentown that they left without the slightest ceremony.

It was a joyful hour to the good town people when the red-jackets turned their backs on them, thinking every moment that the patriot army would be after them. Indeed, it seemed as if wonders would never cease that day, for while rejoicings were still loud, over the departure of the enemy, there came a knock at Mrs. Tracy's door, and while she was wondering whether she dared open it, it was pushed ajar, and a tall soldier entered. What a scream of delight greeted that soldier, and how Kitty and Harry danced about him and clung to his knees, while Mrs. Tracy drew him toward the warm blaze, and helped him off with his damp cloak!

Cold and tired Captain Tracy was, after a night's march in the streets and a day's fighting; but he was not too weary to smile at the dear faces around him, or to pat Kitty's head when she brought his warm stockings and would put them on the tired feet, herself.

Suddenly there was a sharp, quick bark outside the door. "What's that?" cried Harry

"Oh, I forgot. Open the door. Here, Fido, Fido!"

Into the room there sprang a beautiful little King Charles spaniel, white,

with tan spots, and ears of the longest, softest, and silkiest.

"What a little dear!" exclaimed Kitty; "where did it come from?"

"From the battle of Trenton," said her father. "His poor master was shot. After the red-coats had turned their backs, and I was hurrying along one of the streets where the fight had been the fiercest, I heard a low groan, and, turning, saw a British officer lying among a number of slain. I raised his head; he begged for some water, which I brought him, and bending down my ear I heard him whisper, 'Dying--last battle--say a prayer.' He tried to follow me in the words of a prayer, and then, taking my hand, laid it on something soft and warm, nestling close up to his breast--it was this little dog. The gentleman--for he was a real gentleman--gasped out, 'Take care of my poor Fido; good-night,' and was gone. It was as much as I could do to get the little creature away from his dead master; he clung to him as if he loved him better than life. You'll take care of him, won't you, children? I brought him home to you, for a Christmas present."

"Pretty little Fido," said Kitty, taking the soft, curly creature in her arms; "I think it's the best present in the world, and to-morrow is to be real Christmas, because you are home, papa."

"And we'll eat the turkey," said Harry, "and shellbarks, lots of them, that I saved for you. What a good time we'll have! And oh, papa, don't go to war any more, but stay at home, with mother and Kitty and Fido and me."

"What would become of our country if we should all do that, my little man? It was a good day's work that we did this Christmas, getting the army all across the river so quickly and quietly that we surprised the enemy, and gained a victory, with the loss of few men."

Thus it was that some of the good people of 1776 spent their Christmas, that their children and grandchildren might spend many of them as citizens of a free nation.