

An Old-Fashioned Christmas

“Helen! Helen!”

That’s me—my name is Helen—and that would be my mother calling. I jumped out of bed when I heard her voice, for that meant that I had overslept. Some of the chores, like milking the cows and feeding the hens, weren’t things you could do only when you had a mind to.

I shook my head and looked doubtfully at the sun that had snuck up on me so suddenly, and while I scrubbed my face, my mind was a-whirring and a-clicking like an adding machine, trying to see if I could fit in all the chores before the rest of my siblings awoke.

Well, I managed. Mother always said I had a way of managing—I was proud of that.

When I heard Mother call, “Come and get it!” I was getting up off the milking stool and rubbing the kinks out of my fingers. I stowed the stool where it belonged, and carrying the pail of milk, I left the stable.

Our house was built on a five-acre stretch of land within sight of the Roanoke

River, and on clear days I could see all the way to the Blue Ridge Mountains. I loved the smell of pines and the smell of the grass in the summer. I took a deep breath, savoring the morning air as I walked toward our sturdily built home. At the moment breakfast was uppermost on my mind.

At the breakfast table, Father wished me a “happy birthday,” which was followed by wishes of the same from the entire family. The meal was filling and everyone had enough to eat. Father said that Mother daily performed the miracle of the “loaves and fishes,” because he didn’t know how else she could make so little food stretch so far and taste so good.

My hand darted to the side and caught tiny, grasping fingers making a beeline for my plate. My little brother, Troy, looked mighty guilty at being caught, but there was a sparkle of something else in his eyes, and when the rest of the children burst into giggles, I just knew that Hector had swiped something off my plate while I was attending to Troy.

“All right now,” Father said, and all seven of us quieted down. Hector returned my slice of bread with a wink.



“Happy birthday, Helen,” Mother said in a voice that sounded strained.

Even though it was my birthday, I wasn’t expecting presents or anything special.

I hugged her tight and said, “You don’t have to worry about not getting me anything—presents are just for children.” And I smiled as wide as I could at her. I wasn’t telling a lie—I had almost convinced myself that there really was no need for presents once a girl turned twelve, especially since we were so poor.

“Your jaw has nearly gone square,” my mother said with a twinkle in her eye. It was a joke we had about how the shape of my face would change when I settled my mind on something.

I ran an errand to town that day. I think Mother asked me to go because she knew I liked town, and it would be a change

in routine from the other chores that needed to be done at the house.

I did a bit of thinking on the three-mile trip to town.

A family that works as hard as we do, I thought, shouldn't be so poor. How can that possibly be fair? There must be something I can do so that by the time Hector turns twelve, he at least can have some sort of present. ... There must be a way ...

I thought of our worn clothing with numerous patches, our roof that needed repairs, Troy and Hector's shoes with worn soles, and there were some books of poetry that I would dearly like to have for my very own.

I reached town and made the purchases that Mother needed, and then I set to wandering a bit to pick up on some local news. Today, pausing by Kearney's smithy, I heard of the folks who had moved into town from England and had set up in the mansion that had been completed last week. It's amazing what you can learn by standing still and being quiet.

"Seems that Mrs. Whitfield's a widow and brought a brother along with her too," Mr. Kearney said.

I had not seen this mansion, and I had some time before Mother needed me to help with supper, so I decided to go and see this new, fine house.

I stood gaping at it for at least five minutes. The place was more than fine! It was grand! White marble columns graced either side of the front door, and rose bushes that must have been brought in from England lined the fence that surrounded the house. The windows on the first and second stories were high arched and wide, and the walls were built of a warm-colored red brick.

I didn't realize that I was inching closer and closer to the gate until a carriage pulled up next to me. I jumped back in surprise as I took in the fine carriage and the frail woman, dressed in black, who had alighted.

She noticed me and her forehead wrinkled a little, as if she had never seen a child up close before.

"My dear," she said, "is there something I can do for you?"

She might have been in her fifties, and she had sad, brown eyes. She spoke in a soft voice with a distinct British accent. I looked at her, her carriage, and her house, and before I could lose

my nerve, I blurted, "Ma'am, I was just looking at your house. ... Seems to me that such a large house will need some help to keep it looking spotless—and I can clean anything. I can help cook and I can run errands. I can even garden a little. I know how to take care of poultry ... if you keep chickens and such. I could be such a help to you, ma'am."



I took a deep breath then, for I had not paused to breathe during my speech, scared of not being able to finish.

She studied me from top to toe and pressed her lips together. She didn't look angry; more like she was thinking hard on something.

"What is your name, child?"

"Helen Southey, ma'am."

"Come by tomorrow at two o'clock," she said. "We can talk about this then."

She nodded to me and disappeared inside the house.

Helen, I told myself, I think you surprised that lady almost as much as you surprised yourself.

I turned and found that with my hopes and fears all mixed up together, I had as much on my mind going home as I'd had coming to town.

That is why I didn't notice Terrance until he was sliding down my back. Terrance is good-natured, quiet, and unassuming ... but he was also a frog, and I don't think he liked being inside my dress any more than I wanted him there. I clutched desperately at my back until my brother,

Aggie, who had slipped behind and put Terrance there to begin with, helped fish him out.

Aggie's eyes went round and innocent as a spring lamb. I was too outraged to speak at first, but the words were piling up inside and soon boiled over.

"That's no way for an older brother to act!"

"Says who?"

I was stumped.

"Why, why..."

He pulled out a piece of taffy and gave it to me to prolong my silence.

"This doesn't mean I've stopped being mad at you," I said, taking the taffy with one hand and shaking my other in his face.

"It doesn't?" he asked, looking so crestfallen that we both started laughing and didn't stop until we got home.

Coming home brought back what the Terrance incident had driven clean out of my mind. I made straight for Mother and told her all about my appointment for two o'clock the next day.

"Well, for goodness' sakes!" Mother said in astonishment. "I must say, you have no little bit of nerve to do something like that!" Mother was surprised, but I could tell she was a little bit proud of me as well.

Even Aggie looked at me like he had never seen me before.

After supper Mother and Father talked about my working at the big house, and



to my delight it was decided that I would at least go and see if Mrs. Whitfield could use me. Aggie was told to accompany me, at which he looked as pleased and as devious as a fox in a henhouse. Even being told by Father to put Terrance back by the river didn't appear to dampen his apparent goodwill.



I was so jumpy the next day that I was almost sorry I had ever thought of talking to Mrs. Whitfield. Bless Aggie, he stayed by my side and joshed with me until I forgot all about my nerves. He played the clown all the way up the carriageway to the gate of the house, and before I could remember that I was scared as a wild bird, the door opened and a butler showed us in to a sitting room.

When Mrs. Whitfield entered the room she was smiling slightly and looked less stern than she had the day before. She sat and we drank tea.

“Do you have a big family?”

“Yes, ma'am. There are nine of us, including my mother and father.”

“My word!” she exclaimed. After a while she asked, “What is your father's occupation?”

“He works in the sawmill, and we have a farm, ma'am.”

“Are you the eldest of your siblings?”

“Aggie is the oldest. He's fifteen years old.” I turned to look at Aggie and realized that whatever fright was riding me had switched horses and was now riding him. His back was as straight as a poker, and he looked like he had no joints at all.

“I'm the next,” I continued. “Then there is Troy and Hector, and the twins, Penelope and Hera, and Ulysses is the youngest.”

Her face transformed itself into the first real smile I had seen yet from her. It made her look like the perfect grandmother.

“I see your father must be a reader of Homer.”

I didn't understand what she meant.

She smiled again. “I have given your offer some thought, and the truth is my housekeeper does need help with cleaning, cooking, and the running of sundry errands. If you are available from ten o'clock in the morning till five o'clock in the afternoon, Mondays

through Thursdays, I will pay you a salary of—” and she named a price. It was very generous considering I was only twelve years old.

“It's a deal, ma'am!” I exclaimed and held out my hand.

Mrs. Whitfield did not appear to be used to shaking hands, but after a moment's hesitation, she displayed another of her perfect grandmother smiles and gave my hand a firm shake.

She turned to Aggie, who, although it hadn't seemed possible, became even stiffer than before.

“I need help in the stable for the next few months until my groom in England will arrive. What do you think of the job?”

“Oh ... I-I mean, yes!” Aggie blurted out.

After talking a little more, she shook our hands again and we went home. I was floating on air and Aggie was walking like a tin soldier for the first half hour.



We began work the next Monday. Mrs. Whitfield turned me over to her housekeeper, Miss Adel, who had been

with her for twenty-some years already in England and had liked Mrs. Whitfield enough to cross the ocean and be her housekeeper in her new house.

Miss Adel was tall and stout and had very pale hair that was piled on the top of her head with one large pin sticking through it. She looked me up and down as if I were a bug on a board, taking in my neat, patched clothing. I was glad that I had washed my face and had taken extra care to clean my nails. I was sure she was looking at them and also had some way of knowing that I had washed behind my ears.

“Here,” she said. “When you come to work, you must wear this apron and cap. Please do not track mud in the house. Do not put finger marks on the windows and mirrors. Do not let animals inside the house. And do not touch the draperies with dirty hands.”

I felt my temper rising, but it came to me that this housekeeper had no way of knowing that I wouldn't do all these things and more. It was actually a little funny.

“Oh, no, ma'am. I wouldn't do any of those things,” I said, and I tried to look as serious as possible.

It took one week before Miss Adel decided that I could be trusted not to do any of the horrible things she had listed at the beginning of my work at the Big House. Until then, she had a harried look about her and was always hovering over my shoulder. The jobs I had that first week were very simple: washing dishes, sweeping out the fireplaces, bringing in wood, and weeding. I didn't see much of Mrs. Whitfield, but when I did, she smiled and asked me how I was doing.

During the second week, a miracle took place. I had finished weeding in the garden and was going into the house when I spied Miss Adel galloping toward me, and I knew she was going to tell me to not track mud in the house. As calm as you please, I scraped the undersides of my shoes with a wooden scraper left there for that purpose and held my breath. Miss Adel halted, and the corners of her mouth quirked up in what must have been meant for a smile. She turned and walked back around the corner of the house. She never hovered over my shoulder after that.

Although she didn't spell it out, I knew she trusted me by the way she reacted.

By that time, I had gotten acquainted with all the other hired help. There was a Mr. Jennings, the butler, and

Rose, the cook, and there were two or three men who worked here and there whom Mrs. Whitfield called “footmen.” I don't know why they were called that as they seemed to be what we call the jack-of-all-trades kind of folk. “Footmen” does sound grand, though, doesn't it?

It was during the second week, too, that I met Mrs. Whitfield's brother. I was walking between a tall row of tomatoes and an even taller row of corn when I nearly stumbled over the figure of a man lying flat on his stomach. I stifled a scream.

When I got my breath back I squeaked out, “Mister? Sir? Are you all right?”

The man turned to me and propped himself on his elbows, “What? Right? Yes, perfectly splendid, thank you very much.” And he got slowly to his feet. He looked just like Mrs. Whitfield. His eyes, however, held a playful twinkle.

“I've seen you around the house, but we have never been properly introduced,” the man said. “My name is Harris Featherington. Dreadful, isn't it?”

“It is quite a mouthful,” I admitted.

“And what is your name, my dear?”

“Helen Southey, sir.”

“What a sensible, yet pretty name. I have a request, my dear,” he said. “I can’t abide being called Featherington by anyone. Could you call me ‘Mr. Harris,’ or even ‘Uncle Harry’ instead?”

“Yes, Mr. Harris, of course.”

“Wonderful! Splendid!” he exclaimed, and he nodded to me in a most friendly fashion and strode back into the house.

As I continued to weed, I couldn’t understand why Mr. Harris was lying on the ground. When I returned to the house, I told Miss Adel what I had seen and asked her what he could possibly be doing.

“Lying on the ground, you say?” she clicked her tongue. “He’ll ruin his clothes, and I’ll have quite a time trying to get the stains out.”

“But what was he doing?” I persisted.

“I asked him that once,” she said, “but I didn’t understand a word of his answer. Ask him next time you catch him in the garden or at the back of the house, lying on the ground. You can also tell him, for me, that his clothes all have holes and stains in them.”

The housekeeper sniffed and continued her work.

The next month was very busy, as some of Mrs. Whitfield’s friends—who also had moved from England—stopped by for a visit. This meant more cooking, dishwashing, laundry, and a little less dusting.



Miss Adel and I became friends during this time. There was so much to do that she and Mrs. Whitfield began to give me a wider range of jobs: buying items at the general store, polishing silver, and cleaning the upstairs bedrooms. The housekeeper soon began to call me “Helen” instead of “Miss Southey,” and requested that I simply call her “Miss Adel.”

It was the beginning of September when I next caught Mr. Harris on the ground in the garden, this time near the strawberry patch.

“Excuse me, Mr. Harris, but what are you doing?”

“Oh, good day, Miss Southey. I am indulging in the fascinating profession of myrmecology.”

The housekeeper was right; I didn’t understand at all what he’d just said.

“What’s myr-myrm...? Well, what is it, sir?”

“I was hoping you’d ask. Myrmecology is the study of ants, my dear. A person who studies them is called a myrmecologist.”



"I see," I said cautiously. Mr. Harris bent back down and adjusted a magnifying glass over a small mound of earth. He continued to speak as he gazed intently through the glass. "You see, I am trying to ascertain if this is an entirely new colony of ants, or if this hole is just the back door of the other hole between the corn and the tomatoes. For this purpose, I need a sample. Miss Southey!"

"Yes, sir?" I responded.

"Would you be so kind as to hold this glass just so? There! Excellent."

He made a quick swipe with a glass tube and captured a small black ant. He put in a cork stopper and turned to me. "Thank you very much for your assistance, Miss Southey." He took out a handkerchief and wiped his brow.

In the next couple of months, I helped Mr. Harris with many such experiments, and by mid-November we knew all about the busy colony of ants that lived under the garden patch. I learned that King Solomon of Bible days had studied ants too, and had written some of his observations in the Proverbs. I could pronounce "myrmecology" without stumbling, and had actually explained the mysteries of ant life to Adel's satisfaction.

I was very busy with my other duties as well, for we had another group of visitors from England who were planning to stay until New Year's.

Although my work at the Big House was going well, things at home remained difficult. There wasn't much work to be done at the sawmill, so Father did not have regular work. There was also an early frost which ruined a large portion of our late autumn produce. Although Aggie and I both had work, we were not paid as much as grown-ups, and as the year drew to a close, it seemed that we would just scrape by. But I didn't want to "just scrape by." I was feeling pretty down. It seemed too bad that when Aggie and I had found work, Father's work decreased. I was hoping for a real fancy Christmas celebration with all the trimmings: presents for everyone and maybe even a little spending money. I swallowed a sigh and went about my work.



Our house was filled with spicy, good smells when I walked out our door on the last day of work before Christmas. Mother had gotten Troy and Hector to help with slicing apples for some of the baking. Last year they had tried to taste everything they put into the cookie batter and found that baking powder and

flour don't taste good until mixed with everything else. The smaller children were playing outside in the snow.

"See you tonight, Ma," I said as Aggie and I headed out. Mother smiled and waved a floury hand at us. "She looks so tired," I said to Aggie as we tramped through the snow. Aggie nodded soberly; he had noticed too.



That day at the mansion, I cleaned the upstairs' bedrooms and sitting rooms. It was the last bit of cleaning before I took a week's vacation. Mrs. Whitfield had insisted that I have a "paid vacation" like all the other staff, for which I was very thankful.

There was one corner of Mrs. Whitfield's sitting room that hadn't been cleaned for a while. It had a small writing table and a miniature shelf with three or four pocket-sized books on it. I carefully dusted all around, and wiped the surfaces when I noticed that there was something between two of the books. The covers didn't quite meet like they should. I took the books out and five old ten-dollar bills fluttered to the floor. It was fifty dollars!

I certainly don't lay any claims to sainthood, and I'm not ashamed to say that that money looked mighty tempting. The first thing that came to my mind was, *That money would help us through the winter.* I figured if it had been there for months and nobody'd noticed it—nobody'd notice if I took it.

Oh, I knew it wasn't right to take things that belonged to someone else, but I felt a great deal of resentment right then toward all the rich folks who didn't have to skimp and scrape just to have enough

money to buy a present for Christmas. I could tell Mother that Mrs. Whitfield had given me a Christmas bonus, and she would never suspect that I wasn't telling the truth.

In a wave of shame I realized that Mother trusted me, and that is why she wouldn't suspect anything. Mrs. Whitfield, Mr. Harris, and Adel trusted me too. I would be smashing all that trust into the dirt if I took that money, even if no one ever found out. I crushed the money in my hands and raced downstairs to where Mrs. Whitfield was planning her own Christmas celebration.

"Mrs. Whitfield, I found this between some books upstairs," I said, the words rushing out as I pushed the money into her hand in a hurry. Then I mumbled something about dusting the furniture, and darted off before she'd have a chance to thank me—I didn't want to be thanked.

I had come within a hairsbreadth of being a thief.

That afternoon, Aggie and I went to get our month's pay from Mrs. Whitfield. Mr. Harris was there too.

"Thank you both so much for all your help," Mrs. Whitfield said as she handed

us our pay envelopes, each with our name written on it.

"We also have Christmas presents for you," she said. She was smiling beautifully.

Mr. Harris stepped forward and gave me a delicate silver chain, a clear, brown stone dangling from it. "It's called amber, fossilized tree sap. If you look, there's an ant inside."

"Oh, thank you!" I cried. "It's the most beautiful thing in the world!"

Mr. Harris then gave Aggie something in a paper bag. "Open it outside," he said with a wink and a boyish smile that reminded me of my little brother Hector.

Walking back home I realized I was really very glad that I hadn't taken that money. If I had, I probably would have broken down in hysterics when they gave Aggie and me Christmas gifts, knowing I had stolen from them. But that didn't change the fact that we didn't have enough money left over to buy presents for the younger children. That thought still made me sad.

A loud yelp of surprise broke through my thoughts, and I turned to see that Aggie had dropped his present on the

ground. The bag was open and from it had flown two—guess what? Two rubber toads! They were so large and lifelike it made the skin on my back crawl in remembrance. We both stared for a moment, then roared with laughter. We sat right down in the snow and laughed till tears were streaming down our faces. Aggie picked up the two toads and said in a quivering but solemn voice, “I’ll name this one Terrance the Second, and this one Featherington the Second.” We agreed that these were excellent names. We put Terrance and Featherington back in their bag. We spoke of what he could do with two rubber toads until we reached home.

The glow of the fire and the smell of food and the squeals of laughter coming from the loft where Troy and Hector slept at night warmed me up inside. I gave Mother and Father a big hug and said, “Oh, it’s good to be home! It’s the best home in the world!”

Mother smiled, and Aggie and I handed her our month’s wages.

We were leaning as close to the fire as possible, toasting the tips of our noses and the palms of our hands when I heard Mother gasp as if someone had knocked all the wind out of her.

We turned and she was staring dumbfounded at my envelope with the five old ten-dollar bills in addition to my agreed-upon wages.

“What on earth is this?” Mother asked.

I could hardly believe it myself. There was a note pinned to the money in Mrs. Whitfield’s neat script.



Mrs. Southey,

It has been an honor for me to employ your children at my house for the past six months. They are both diligent and hard working. I have had the opportunity to come to know Miss Helen well, and have found her to be entirely trustworthy.

My brother, Harris, also says that he has never met a more avid myrmecologist and expresses his thanks for her assistance in his research. I am enclosing a holiday bonus in this envelope and wish you a Merry Christmas.

*Sincerely,
Mrs. Whitfield*

“I must say, this is the most astounding Christmas gift ever!” Mother said when she had got her breath back. Aggie’s eyes twinkled, “Just wait until I show you what Mr. Harris gave me for Christmas!”

The End