A Christmas Accident and Other Stories

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Annie Eliot Trumbull

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A CHRISTMAS ACCIDENT

A Christmas Accident

STORIES BY
ANNIE ELIOT TRUMBULL

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"A Masque
of Culture," etc.



A Christmas Accident



AT first the two yards were as much alike as the two houses, each house being the exact copy of the other. They were just two of those little red brick dwellings that one is always seeing side by side in the outskirts of a city, and looking as if the occupants must be alike too. But these two families were quite different. Mr. Gilton, who lived in one, was a pretty cross sort of man, and was quite well-to-do, as cross people sometimes are. He and his wife lived alone, and they did not have much going out and coming in, either. Mrs. Gilton would have liked more of it, but she had given up thinking about it, for her husband had said so many times that it was women's tomfoolery to want to have people, whom you weren't anything to and who weren't anything to you, ringing your doorbell all the time and bothering around in your dining-room,—which of course it was; and she would have believed it if a woman ever did believe anything a man says a great many times.

In the other house there were five children, and, as Mr. Gilton said, they made too large a family, and they ought to have gone somewhere else. Possibly they would have gone had it not been for the fence; but

when Mr. Gilton put it up and Mr. Bilton told him it was three inches too far on his land, and Mr. Gilton said he could go to law about it, expressing the idea forcibly, Mr. Bilton was foolish enough to take his advice. The decision went against him, and a good deal of his money went with it, for it was a long, teasing lawsuit, and instead of being three inches of made ground it might have been three degrees of the Arctic Circle for the trouble there was in getting at it. So Mr. Bilton had to stay where he was.

It was then that the yards began to take on those little differences that soon grew to be very marked. Neither family would plant any vines because they would have been certain to heedlessly beautify the other side, and consequently the fence, in all its primitive boldness, stood out uncompromisingly, and the one or two little bits of trees grew carefully on the farther side of the enclosure so as not to be mixed up in the trouble at all. But Mr. Gilton's grass was cut smoothly by the man who made the fires, while Mr. Bilton only found a chance to cut his himself once in two weeks. Then, by and by, Mr. Gilton bought a red garden bench and put it under the tree that was nearest to the fence. No one ever went out and sat on it, to be sure, but to the Bilton children it represented the visible flush of prosperity. Particularly was Cora Cordelia wont to peer through the fence and gaze upon that red bench, thinking it a charming place in which to play house, ignorant of the fact that much of the red paint would have come off on her back. Cora Cordelia was the youngest of the five. All the rest had very simple names,—John, Walter, Fanny, and

Susan,—but when it came to Cora Cordelia, luxuries were beginning to get very scarce in the Bilton family, and Mrs. Bilton felt that she must make up for it by being lavish, in one direction or another. She had wished to name Fanny, Cora, and Susan, Cordelia, but she had yielded to her husband, and called one after his mother and one after herself, and then gave both her favorite names to the youngest of all. Cora Cordelia was a pretty little girl, prettier even than both her names put together.

After the red bench came a quicksilver ball, that was put in the middle of the yard and reflected all the glory of its owner, albeit in a somewhat distorted form. This effort of human ingenuity filled the Bilton children with admiration bordering on awe; Cora Cordelia spent hours gazing at it, until called in and reproved by her mother for admiring so much things she could not afford to have. After this, she only admired it covertly.

Small distinctions like these barbed the arrows of contrast and comparison and kept the disadvantages of neighborhood ever present.

Then, it was a constant annoyance to have their surnames so much alike. Matters were made more unpleasant by mistakes of the butcher, the grocer, and so on,—Gilton, 79 Holmes Avenue, was so much like Bilton, 77 Holmes Avenue. Gilton changed his butcher every time he sent his dinner to Bilton; and though the mistakes were generally rectified, neither of the two families ever forgot the time the Biltons ate, positively ate, the Gilton dinner, under a misapprehension. Mrs.

Bilton apologized, and Mrs. Gilton boldly told her husband that she was glad they'd had it, and she hoped they'd enjoyed it, which only made matters worse; and altogether it was a dark day, the only joy of it being that fearful one snatched by John, Walter, Susan, Fanny, and Cora Cordelia from the undoubted excellence of the roast.

Of course there was an assortment of minor difficulties. The smoke from the Biltons' kitchen blew in through the windows of the Giltons' sitting-room when the wind was in one direction, and, when it was in the other, many of the clothes from the Giltons' clothesline were blown into the Biltons' yard, and Fanny, Susan, or Cora Cordelia had to be sent out to pick them up and drop them over the fence again, which Mrs. Bilton said was very wearing, as of course it must have been. Things like this were always happening, but matters reached a climax when it came to the dog. It wasn't a large dog, but it was a tiresome one. It got up early in the morning and barked. Now we all know that early rising is a good thing and honorable among all men, but it is something that ought to be done quietly, out of regard to the weaker vessels; and a dog that barks between five and seven in the morning, continuously, certainly ought to be suppressed, even if it be necessary to use force. Everybody agreed with the Biltons about that,—everybody except the Giltons themselves, who, by some one of nature's freaks, didn't mind it. Mrs. Bilton often said she wished Mrs. Gilton could be a light sleeper for a week and see what it was like. So, too, everybody thought that Mr. Bilton had right on his

side when he complained that this same dog came into his yard, being apparently indifferent to any coolness between the estate owners, and ran over a bed of geraniums and one thing and another, that was the small Bilton offset to the Gilton bench and ball. But when one morning, for the first time, that dog remained quiet and restful, and was found cold and poisoned, and Mr. Gilton was loud in his accusations of the Bilton boys and their father, public opinion wavered for a moment. After that accident, no member of either family spoke to any member of the other. That was the way matters stood the day before Christmas.

* * *

It was snowing hard, and the afternoon grew dark rapidly, and the whirling flakes pursued a blinding career. In spite of that, everybody was out doing the last thing. Mrs. Gilton was not, to be sure. Of course they would have a big dinner, but even that was all arranged for, although the turkey hadn't come and her husband was going to stop and see about it on his way home. She shuddered as the possibility of its having gone to the Biltons occurred to her. But she didn't believe it had,—they hadn't the same butcher any longer. Meanwhile there was so little to do. It was too dark to read or sew, and she sat idly at the window looking out at the passers and the driving snow. Everybody else was in a hurry. She wished she, too, had occasion to hasten down for a last purchase, or to light the lamp in order to finish a last bit of dainty sewing, as she used to do when she was a girl.

She seemed to have so few friends now with whom she exchanged Christmas greetings. Was it then only for children and youth, this Christmas cheer? And must she necessarily have left it behind her with her girlhood? No, she knew better than that. She felt that there was a deeper significance in the Christmas-tide than can come home to the hearts of children and unthoughtfulness, and yet it had grown to be so painfully like other days,—an occasion for a little bigger dinner, that was about all. With an unconscious sigh she looked across to the Bilton house. Plenty of people over there to make merry. Five stockings to hang up. She wished she might have sent something in. To be sure, there was the dog, but that was some time ago. Very likely the dog would have been dead now, anyhow. She felt, herself, that this logic was not irrefutable, but she wished she could have sent some paper parcels just the same. So strong had this impulse been that she had said to her husband somewhat timidly that morning,—

"There are a good many of those Bilton children to get presents for."

"More fools they that get 'em presents, then," he had pleasantly replied.

"I don't suppose he has much to buy them with," she continued.

"He had enough to buy poison for my dog," exclaimed her husband, giving his newspaper an angry shake.

"I'd almost like to send them in some cheap little toys."

"Well, as long as you don't quite like to, it won't do any harm," he said with some violence, laying down his newspaper, and looking at her in a manner not to be misunderstood. "But you see that the liking doesn't get any farther."

"It's Christmas, you know," said his plucky wife.

"Oh, no, I don't know it!" he replied gruffly. "I haven't fallen over forty children a minute in the street with their ridiculous parcels, and I haven't had women drop brown-paper bundles that come undone all over me when they crowd into the horse car, and I haven't found it impossible to get to the shirt-collar counter on account of Christmas novelties! Oh, no, I didn't know it was Christmas!"

After that there was really not much to be said, for we all know Christmas is dreadfully annoying, and the last thing a man in this sort of temper wants to hear about is peace and good will.

Notwithstanding the fact that Mrs. Gilton looked over to her neighbors' with an envious feeling this dark afternoon, their Christmas cheer was not so abounding as it had been in more prosperous times. There was not very much money to be spent this year, and they were obliged to give up something. Mr. and Mrs. Bilton had decided that it should be the Christmas dinner; they would have a simple luncheon, and let all the money that could be spared go for the stockings. Each child had its own sum to invest for others, and there was still a small amount for the older members of the family. That it was a small amount Mrs. Bilton felt strongly, as she went from

shop to shop. But when she reached home again she was somewhat encouraged; there was such an air of joyous expectation in the house, and her purchases looked larger now that they were away from the glittering counters. Then each of the five children came to her separately and confided to her the nothing less than wonderful results of judicious bargaining which had enabled them to buy useful and beautiful presents for each of the others out of the sums intrusted to their care, ranging in amount from the two dollars of John to the fifty cents of Cora Cordelia. She felt sure that there were further secrets yet; secrets attended by brown paper and string, which she had taken the greatest care for the last two weeks not heedlessly to expose,—riddles of which the solution lay perilously near her eyes, which would be revealed to her astonished gaze the next morning.

She had reason to believe that even Cora Cordelia was making something for her, and though it was difficult for her to ignore the fact that it was a knit washcloth, she had hitherto avoided absolute certainty on the subject. So that altogether it was a pretty cheerful afternoon at the Biltons'.

Meanwhile, down in the main street of the city it was a confusing scene. It was darker there than where the streets were more open; and although there were several daring spirits of that adventurous turn of mind which leads people into byways of discovery, who asserted that the street lamps were lighted, it was not generally believed. The snow was blowing down and up and across, and getting more and more unmanageable under the feet of foot passengers every

moment. It was cold and windy and blinding and crowded, and a good many other disconcerting things, all of which Mr. Gilton felt the full force of as he stood on the corner where he had just bought his turkey. It was a fine turkey, and had been a good bargain, and though he had to carry it home himself, there was nothing derogatory in that. If it had been anybody else he would have been thrilled with a glow of satisfaction, but Mr. Gilton was long past glows of satisfaction—it was years since he had permitted himself to have such things.

"Jour—our—nal! fi-i-i-ve cents!" screamed an intermittent newsboy in his ear.

"Get out!" replied Mr. Gilton, the uncompromising nature of his language being intensified by the fact that he jumped nearly two feet from the suddenness of the newsboy's attack. Even the newsboy, inured to the short words of an unfriendly world, and usually quite indifferent thereto, was impressed by the asperity of the suggestion and moved somewhat hastily on. Possibly his cold, wet little existence had been rendered morbidly susceptible by the general good feeling of the hour, one lady having even spontaneously given him five cents.

After this exchange of amenities Mr. Gilton stepped into his horse car. It was crowded, of course, as horse cars that are small and run once in half an hour are apt to be, and he had to stand up, and the turkey legs stuck out of the brown paper in a very conspicuous way. If Mr. Gilton had been anybody else he would have been chaffed about his turkey, because to make

up for the conveniences that the horse car line did not furnish the public, the large-hearted public furnished the horse car line with an unusual amount of friendliness. There was almost always something going on in these horse cars. Their social privileges were quite a feature. To-night they were in unusual force on account of the season. But nobody said anything to Mr. Gilton. Only when he jerked the bell and stepped off, one stout man with his overcoat collar turned up to his ears said, without turning his head:—

"I supposed of course he was going to give the turkey to the conductor."

Everybody laughed in that end of the car except one small old lady in the corner, who was a stranger and visiting, and who was left with the impression that the gentleman who got off must be a very kind man. It was darker and blowier and snowier than when he had left the corner, and Mr. Gilton floundered through the unbroken drifts up the little path to the door with increasing grudges in his heart against the difficulties of Christmas. The lock was off, and he went in slamming the door after him. There was no light in the hall, and he murmured loudly against the inconvenience.

"Confound it!" he said, "why didn't they light the gas? I'm not one of those confounded Biltons; I can afford to pay for what I don't get;" and, without pausing to take off his hat and coat, he strode to the sitting-room door and flung it open. That was an awful moment. The sudden change from the cold and