

THE HIDDEN GIFT

BY WALTER E BUTTS, JR.

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STORY

It is a very much depressed Wallis family on Christmas eve that meets to discuss their problems. They hardly have enough money for wood for the fire, EMMA may lose her job, Carol's boyfriend is hurt and may die, and brother Joe is in prison. They are all waiting for Judge Davis to bring over a tin box their grandfather left them which, according to his will, can not be opened until tonight. They hope it is filled with money. As they wait, a stranger enters seeking warmth and they receive him as a friend. When the box is opened and found empty, they discover that happiness is not dependent on money, but comes from within.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

BRUCE WALLIS: The older brother.

EMMA WALLIS: A school teacher.

ANN WALLIS: The youngest child.

CAROL WALLIS: Between Bruce and Emma.

LUCY WALLIS: The mother.

JOE WALLIS: Another brother.

THE STRANGER: Who opened the gift.

MESSENGER BOY: Small part.

CAROL SINGERS: Any number.

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SYNOPSIS

TIME: Christmas Eve.

PLACE: The Wallis home.

PLAYING TIME: About 1 hour.

SCENE DESIGN

The living-room of the Wallis home. It is modestly furnished and gives an atmosphere of frugal scrimping in the lives of those who occupy it daily.

To the left of fireplace is a small stand with a telephone upon it. At left front is a large sofa. At right of fireplace is a chair. Near it is a small table with lamp upon it and a rocking chair beside it. A floor lamp stands behind sofa. It is Christmas Eve, but there is little in the room that reveals the Christmas spirit. Even the fire in the fireplace has been allowed to almost to die out.

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SCENE 1

(AT RISE: There is an air of nervous and anxious waiting hovering over the room. ANN WALLIS, a child of eight, is on her hands and knees in front of fireplace, blowing on the embers. BRUCE WALLIS, her brother, about twenty-four, is pacing nervously up and down, going to window at right of fireplace frequently, to glance out.)

ANN: *(Glancing around toward HER brother.)* Bruce, the fire is going out.

BRUCE: *(Unheeding, going to window and looking out.)* It's got to be that! It can't be anything else but that!

ANN: *(Plaintively.)* Bruce, it's getting cold -

BRUCE: *(Turning upon HER, impatiently.)* For Pete's sake, Ann, can't you be still five minutes!

ANN: *(Near tears.)* But I'm cold, Bruce. Can't you put on another log?

(EMMA WALLIS enters SR. She is the oldest of the Wallis sisters. A girl who has known want and frustration all her life. Now a school teacher, with the fear of losing her job, due to the curtailing and consolidation of the city schools.)

EMMA: *(Speaking sharply to ANN.)* Ann, you're old enough not to whine. It's not cold here. The fireplace is just for show, anyway, and with wood five dollars a cord, we can't afford to burn any more than we have to.

ANN: But just a little fire to make the red bricks glow.

(EMMA does not answer, as she sinks wearily upon divan. BRUCE goes over to her.)

BRUCE: *(Eagerly.)* EMMA, what do you think it will be?

EMMA: Your guess is as good as mine, Bruce. Your Grandfather Stephen was a very peculiar man.

BRUCE: You're telling me. But he was a rich man, too, wasn't he?

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EMMA: Reputedly so. But no one has ever seen concrete evidence of the fact.

BRUCE: *(Excitedly.)* I tell you, it can't be anything else but money. He made us wait five years!

EMMA: *(With a tinge of bitterness.)* Five years! Yes. Five years, and each one shrinking and growing leaner. Five years gone and, no matter what he's left us, it won't bring them back. Once I had dreams, plans - *(EMMA stops speaking abruptly.)*

BRUCE: Cheerful, as usual, tonight, aren't you, Emma. What's the matter? Did you get your notice?

EMMA: *(Looking frightened.)* Not me. But Alice Grant in Second B did. On the day before Christmas. She tried to be brave and laugh it off. But she couldn't, anymore than I will be able to when my turn comes.

BRUCE: I don't know why you won't be able to laugh it off after twelve o'clock tonight. You don't want to be a school teacher all your life. It's only five hours to midnight. *(BRUCE goes to window and looks out.)* He ought to be coming any moment now.

ANN: *(Speaking up, eagerly.)* Who ought to be coming?

BRUCE: For Pete's sake, Ann -

ANN: *(HER indignation rising.)* Bruce Wallis, you're a mean, disagreeable brother! All you can talk about is that old tin box Grandfather Stephen left. All anyone thinks about in this house is that old tin box! Except Carol, I mean.

EMMA: Listen to the child, lecturing us!

ANN: Well, it's true. All I've heard Bruce say all year is: "Wait till Christmas, 20__, and we'll be in clover." Except Carol -

(CAROL WALLIS enters SL. She is the sister between BRUCE and EMMA. She is a cheerful girl. Her arms are filled with packages.)

CAROL: *(Cheerily.)* What's this about, Ann?

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ANN: *(Rising from in front of fireplace and running to CAROL.)* Oh, Carol, I'm so glad you've come! I was just saying that all I've heard Bruce say all year is: "Wait till Christmas, 20___, and we'll be in clover." But I remember you said once: "I'm not so sure that the clover will be any sweeter."

CAROL: *(With a laugh.)* Did I say that, Sis?

(CAROL lays packages on table, and, with ANN clinging to her arm, walks over to divan where EMMA is seated. She sits down beside her. Ann stands wistfully in front of her.)

CAROL: Come, Sis, you sit, too. *(ANN happily squeezes down beside HER.)* We're going to have a white Christmas, after all, folks. It's beginning to snow - great, soft, feathery flakes.

EMMA: With the streets a glare of ice, that will make for more accidents.

CAROL: *(Shuddering.)* Accidents on Christmas Eve. Oh, Emma, I don't like to think of it.

EMMA: There are lots of things I'd like to close my mind to.

CAROL: *(Impulsively laying a hand on her SISTER'S arm.)* Emma, you're tired. You've had a hard day.

EMMA: *(Wearily.)* The day before Christmas is always a hard one at school. So many things go wrong.

CAROL: *(Anxiously.)* Emma, you didn't get your notice?

EMMA: *(In flat voice.)* Not yet.

BRUCE *(Coming over and sitting on edge of divan.)* You aren't your usual cheerful little self tonight, either, Carol. If the truth were known, I'll bet you've had the hardest day of all.

CAROL: *(Smiling at HER BROTHER.)* I am rather tired, Bruce. But it's been great fun, just the same. Somehow, I've loved it this Christmas time, being in the toy department and seeing the bright, wondering faces of the children.

(CAROL'S words seem forced to BRUCE, who is watching his sister keenly.)

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