

# Chimneyside

## *The Fireplace Talks*

'Twas the week before Christmas  
And all through my mind  
Not an idea was stirring  
Not a thought could I find—

It was December and I'd lingered late by the old fireplace at Knoxdale. By this time I was writing a regular feature column for a local newspaper and I had to find inspiration tonight, but not a thought could I find. Everybody else had gone to bed except me, and the coal-oil lamp, and my pecky old typewriter, and the fireplace. I was sleepy. The lamp, I could tell by its weakened light, was tired; the typewriter was patiently waiting with me for an idea; but the fireplace was softly humming and whispering to itself.

As I searched my mind for Christmas ideas and stories, I thought to myself: "If I could browse round a busy shopping district, I could find something to write about. If I could have a hand at a great library, I would perhaps find an idea in some musty old volume. If I even had one person to talk with, an

idea might come,” but nobody at my house wanted to talk that night, unless perhaps it was the fireplace.

As I thought of old and well-loved stories, the legend of “The Other Wise Man” came into my mind. Could I find an idea in that? I did not.

Then the story of “Acres of Diamonds” popped into my head, and kept popping. You remember that old legend, I am sure. It tells how a man searched the whole wide world for diamonds and failed to find them; but when he came back home, worn and tired, he learned that right on his own farm, the place he had deserted, there were acres and acres of diamonds.

Then the idea came. It struck me like a flash. My fireplace—the only thing that wanted to talk that night—was my “acres of diamonds.” That would be my library, my source of a story. Why the humble, smoke-blackened, warm-hearted fireplace had seen generations of happy children take down Christmas stockings and explore the depths of heel and toe for surprise packages. Why not, I thought, turn the lamp low, draw my chair and typewriter a little nearer, and catch the stories that the fireplace was whispering of a hundred Christmas eves.

“You won’t care for what I could tell you about Christmas,” mumbled the fireplace. “In these days of steam-heated Yuletides and jazz bands, radiators and radios get all the attention; my nose is broken, as they say. The simple, homely stories I could tell would be far too tame for the lively, thrill-seeking crowds of today.”

“Oh, come on, Fireplace, do your stuff, I must have a story, and you are my only hope.”

ALFRED

“Well, did you ever hear about little Alfred’s red-topped, brass-toed boots?” asked the fireplace. “He was happier over that little pair of boots and his little homemade chair than modern children ever seem over expensive toys that wind-up and perform. On Christmas morning he put them on and admired his feet all day. He even wanted to sleep in his boots that night, but parental authority persuaded him differently. But next morning. Oh, Tragedy! Just as he might have expected, somebody had stepped on a beautiful brass toe and mashed it flat. Alfred was enraged. Summoning all the temper that he had inherited from the “other side of the house,” he shouted.

“Who doned my boot ’is way? Whoever doned it had better doned it back again, I can tell you.” So angry was Alfred on that occasion that only a threatened dose of “peach tree tea” would quiet his temper.”

STELLA

“Speaking of boots,” said the fireplace, “reminds me, too, of Stella. Boots and shoes meant a great deal to children in her time. Each child got a new pair for Christmas, and if that pair did not last until the next Christmas, somebody’s toes got frosted.”

“One Christmas—times had been rather hard, but Stella was expecting a big time just the same—her father awakened her saying, ‘Get up, Daughter, come quickly, and see what Santa Claus has brought you.’ Stella climbed sleepily out of the old trundle bed and followed him to where her mother lay. ‘See,’ he said as he drew back the covers, ‘it’s a baby sister.’

“Stella gave one look, turned quickly, and came and dropped to her little stool beside me,” continued the fireplace. “Then with her face in her hands she burst into tears. ‘To think,’ she sobbed, ‘that old Santa Claus would bring another squalling baby here, as bad as I wanted new shoes.’

“But Fireplace,” I asked, “didn’t children get anything else except shoes in those days? Weren’t there toys, and nuts, and candies, and things like that? Didn’t the little girls get dolls and didn’t the boys get wagons and guns?”

“Oh, surely,” chuckled the fireplace in throaty tones which I could hardly understand. “There was striped stick candy sometimes, but molasses candy more often. There were dolls, not the kind that children have nowadays, but they brought happiness to their little mothers despite the fact that they were made of rags, shucks, cobs, wax or china, and sawdust.

#### MARY JANE AND NORA

“I can hardly remember seeing a happier face than that of Mary Jane, when she clasped to her small bosom a smiling rag dolly wrapped in a scrap of turkey-red calico, which Mary Jane could sew into dresses for her cotton-stuffed darling.

“Little Nora was so happy over her first waxen-headed baby and the little red rocking chair, which Santa Claus brought her one Christmas, that she would not even go to the breakfast table on Christmas morning; instead she drew the little chair up near the hearth, and taking her baby in her arms, sat rocking and singing, ecstatically happy.

“Then came,” said the fireplace, “an occurrence of which I shall always be ashamed and regretful. I scarcely know whose fault it was, perhaps father had laid on too much wood, perhaps Mary Jane was sitting too close to me, anyway, the doll’s beautiful waxen curls and complexion were so disfigured by the heat that ever thereafter she looked as though she had had smallpox on one side of her face. But Mary Jane forgave all, and loved her baby more for its affliction.”

#### MATTIE

“Little girls in those days were as eager to give their dollies the best of everything as mothers are today or have always been, for that matter,” the fireplace went on. “Take little Mattie, for example. Her father was a Baptist preacher, and many times she had seen him take people to the creek for the baptismal ceremony. Mattie took her first China doll to the creek likewise and plunged it beneath the waters just as she had seen her father do his people. But alas, however much religion that poor, poor dolly got from the experience, she surely ‘lost her head,’ for when the waters of the old creek came up about her neck, the glue was softened and off went her head.

“And wagons. Of course, the boys had wagons. What would Christmas be without wagons for boys? They were crude perhaps and homemade sometimes, but they had wheels that would roll and tongues that would pull. But even the wagons were not quite so important in some cases as the red-topped, brass-toed boots.”

FAYETTE

“At least that was the opinion of little black Fayette. In addition to the ‘Christmas gif’s from the big house,’ one Christmas there was a little red store-bought wagon and a pair of red-topped boots. Mammy had made him a white suit out of brown-domestic, too, that Christmas, and he was so happy in that new suit and his shiny new shoes, as he pulled the red wagon down the road to show it off, that he really forgot the color of his skin.

“But clouds must pass into every life, as I’ve heard them say,” whispered the fireplace, “and this is the way I heard the results of that walk as it was told around me and the hearth that night. Fayette was happily sauntering down the road, stepping high in his new boots, and drawing his little wagon, when two boys from a family of ‘po’ whites’ who got no boots, no suit, and no wagon that Christmas, came out into the road to see the resplendent ‘nigger.’ Fayette marched merrily along until the boys began to spit on his new boots, then he grabbed up handfuls of dust—the nearest weapons at hand—and threw them on the white boys.

Whether it was a ‘race war’ or an ‘interracial war,’ it was a dirty affair, as the ‘white brown-domestic suit’ showed very plainly when Fayette came in to face his indignant Mammy while she was baking salt-risin’ bread for dinner in the old oven before my face,” and the fireplace chuckled at the memory of the scene.

“I could tell you many tales,” he continued, “of hidden gifts and family secrets. I could tell tales that would break hearts that are happy and others that would mend hearts that are broken, but those secrets are sacred to me. I’ll just keep them up my chimney, I guess. But I will say that there would be more good than bad in the stories I could tell if I would.

“How happy I used to be when the children would sit around and write letters for me to take up the chimney to Santa Claus. How I did my part in popping boxes of popcorn to be left on the hearth for Santa. How I used to laugh with the children over the socks full of ashes and switches that father always got, and one Christmas morning there was a rolling pin for mother.

“It always amused me that on Christmas morning the first things the little girls would do was to dress and undress the new doll, set the tiny table with tiny dishes, and enjoy a quiet little tea party with the dolls on the rug near the hearth.

“But the boys, now they were different. No quiet for them. They wanted to make a lot of noise. Before the time of fire crackers, they were always glad if hog-killing time came before Christmas, then there would be hog-bladder ‘pop guns,’ blown up tight and dried, to burst with a big noise on Christmas morning.”

PARTIES & DINNERS

“But I must tell you about the parties, too, and the dances—not the kind of dances that have come into modern times with those disgusting, spitting, rumbling steam radiators, but clean, wholesome, graceful, beautiful square dances, games, jigs, and reels. Now those were the days,” said the fireplace. “Or perhaps I should say the nights. Dances then didn’t begin at 11 and last until 2, they began at dusk and lasted ’til dawn, and the whole family went, not in a limousine but in a wagon.

“And I can never, forget the dinners, they were given every day ‘during Christmas,’ at first one neighbor’s and then another’s, and everybody went and everybody had a good time.

“When my family all went off I had a rather lonely time, I’ll confess, but the cat and dog stayed with me and they were rather poor company; but on the day that all the kin and neighbors gathered around my hearth, well, now that was some time. They told stories, and laughed and joked, and discussed important questions of the day. Any fireplace that kept its eyes and ears open in those times could know something about everything that was going on.

“In my lifetime,” he went on, “I have seen Christmases that were merry, hilarious, and rollicksome; and those that were cheery, happy, and joyful. But there have also been Christmases that would almost break the heart of me; there have been empty stockings many times, but there have also been empty chairs,

and once an empty cradle—sometimes hearts that were empty. I have seen many sides of life and of people.

“I am glad that Christmas comes in midwinter, for then the folks come nearer me with their happiness and with their sorrow. And I can give them warmth of my sympathy, my pleasure or displeasure, as no modern radiator can do. People are beginning to realize that, too. They are coming back to me—but that is enough story for one night. You should have been asleep long before now, Story-loving Lady, and so should I.

“If you will just take a few shovelfuls of ashes and throw over my embers, I think I can quiet down now, and wish a good and happy Christmas to you, and to faithful old Pecky Typewriter and all.”



### *Around the Fire*

Winter evenings around that old fireplace. How we had enjoyed them. Our fireplace was not one of those white-throated beauties of the modern, newly built house. It was more practical than fancy, wide and high, if not handsome. The smoke of a hundred winters had blackened its throat—but that black background only made the flames look brighter. We loved it; we were always thrilled by the beauty of the flames, even though we knew that there would be ashes to take out in the morning.

We had a definite line-up for our family circle as we gathered around the old fireplace when the evenings began to get cold. Close up, in the chimney corner on the right hand side, sat Uncle Fayette. His business was to smoke his “home-made” in an old corncob pipe—that was our incense. Next to Uncle Fayette, and as close to him as he could get, was Jack on a little stool. He lighted the old man’s pipe and shelled the popcorn for Uncle Fayette to pop. The swish of the shaking popper and the odor of popping corn was an integral part of the fireside’s atmosphere.

Jack, we knew, should be studying, but he never could bear to have lessons clutter up his mind when Uncle Fayette was available for company: Uncle Fayette and the mail order catalogue! Boy and man took turns holding the big book on their knees, turning pages, and discussing guns, traps, fish-hooks, and baseballs in undertones. There were sixty-odd years of difference in their ages, but they had many tastes in common.

In the center of the fireside semi-circle was a little table holding the coal-oil lamp. Dad sat on the right of the table, reading aloud. Margaret and I sat on the left, I patching or sewing, Margaret studying. The remarkable thing about her was that she could listen, talk, and study all at the same time. She could sit there absorbed in lessons and never miss any conversation or a word of the story being read.

## POPCORN AND PEANUTS

As each fresh batch of corn was popped, it was passed around, and then we passed the pan of peanuts that had been parched in the oven while supper baked. There were usually cookies, and sometimes fruit. If, as often happened on winter afternoons, we had dinner in the early afternoon, we would have supper cooked slowly on the fireplace: potatoes roasted in the ashes or a pot of oatmeal cooked over the fire. A skillet full of corn-pone baked in Dutch-oven fashion, and perhaps ham or bacon broiled over the coals. When all was ready we'd bring out a cake of hard, country butter to serve with the potatoes or corn-pone; home grown cream for the oatmeal; and sweet milk with apple pie to finish off the meal. We did not like winter, but we did love the winter evenings around the fire.

There was humor, too, of a homemade type. Old Uncle Fayette was full of wit. We all had our wisecracks. It was when fun came unexpectedly that we appreciated it more. Here's an example:

Margaret (studying English): "In this sentence, 'The horned toad resembles a lizard.' Is that a direct object or a subjective complement?"

Jack (looking up from the toy department of his catalog: "I don't think it's much of a compliment."

Such guests we had at our fireside those winter evenings. We'd bring them in by armfuls, all we could buy, beg, or borrow—old and new books, magazines, and papers. With our

feet on our own hearthstone, and with Uncle Fayette popping and passing the popcorn and the odors of home-grown tobacco and roasting peanuts and sweet potatoes between courses of snow cream and apple pie, we accompanied the Swiss Family Robinson throughout their adventuring; we walked the streets of Philadelphia with Benjamin Franklin in his autobiography. We wept and quaked over *Kidnapped*, laughed at “Miss Minerva and William Green Hill,” admired Pollyanna and sympathized deeply with *Little Women*.

We flew the Atlantic with Lindbergh; shivered in Antarctica with Commander Byrd. We traveled the royal road to romance with Richard Halliburton and shuddered at the ghost of Hamlet’s father; chanted at the dance of the witches in *Macbeth*.

Lonesome in the country? Not us! Wanting much? Well, certainly not very much. Jack might possibly have liked a few items of the newer types of fishing paraphernalia shown in the catalogue. Margaret’s chief want might have been an “A” on tomorrow’s lesson. Uncle Fayette seemed completely at peace with himself and the world.

Alex and I could have wished for no more than merely a stay of time. We’d have liked (or we felt then that we would have liked) to spend the rest of the ages just one long winter’s evening by that quiet, comfortable, pleasant fireplace. But as time moved on, we would not roll it back, not even for one more winter’s evening to enjoy life’s comforts by the fire.



OUT DRIVING WITH THE SAME YOUNG MAN

