

**HEPHZIBAH, A
CHRISTMAS STORY
FOR CHILDREN**

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Hephzibah, a Christmas story for children by Lucy Field

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LUCY FIELD

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FOR CHILDREN**



"She uttered a cry of joy."—Page 46.

HEPHZIBAH:

A CHRISTMAS STORY FOR CHILDREN.

“WHAT a mite of a child to be sure!” said old Dolly to herself, as she tethered her goat under her mossy apple tree, and then stood looking across the common. It was a large, bare common, with nothing living in sight, except the “mite of a child,” and the people she followed. These people, a man and a woman, were approaching that way, and they were black and ragged and stern-looking enough; and stern and savage were the words and blows they bestowed on their starved-looking donkey, staggering along the white track of a road before them, and bearing across his back a bundle, of colour and size much like some dirty old sack. The child who had caused old Dolly’s remark, resembled the donkey in her half fed appearance. Her soiled and blood-

stained little feet twinkled wearily over the gravel in her effort to keep up with her companions, who took no notice whatever of her, nor of old Dolly who watched them from her cottage door; but divided their attention between the donkey on whom their blows were bestowed, and the huge crust of bread and slice of bacon each of them devoured as they went.

Moved by the sight of the thin little labouring figure behind them, old Dolly ran as fast as she could to her cupboard and returned with a morsel of bread, which she flung to the poor little wayfarer. Alas! The child struggled on, afraid of being left behind, and conscious neither of the friendly face of old Dolly, nor of the effort she made to feed her. The bread lay untouched, till old Dolly, after seeing the group grow smaller and smaller, and finally disappear in the distance, went and picked it up, with a sigh, and returned in-doors to prepare her own humble meal.

The night was coming on wild and stormy, and very soon old Dolly fastened up her creaky door, to keep out the wind which rattled and whined for an entrance. It grew darker and darker, and the storm raged fiercer and fiercer, so that old Dolly was glad to creep to her poor little bed; and drawing the patchwork counterpane and thin old blankets closer

round her, she shut her eyes and tried to go to sleep.

Old Dolly had lived all her life in this poor little hut, where her father and mother lived before her. She had played there as long ago as she could remember anything; and she never thought of being afraid of being all alone there, young or old, though any rough, strong man could have easily knocked down her cottage, walls and roof and all, and have buried her in its ruins. "No, no, it is not worth their while to take so much trouble for nothing," she would say to herself, with a smile, if any such notion ever did cross her brain. The wind and the rain, too, sounded often so strong and so fierce that one might easily have fancied they would soon put an end to the cottage and Dolly and all, when raging as they were doing on the night in our story. But Dolly said softly to herself, when the storm was loudest: "They are but God's servants; He has the wind and the rain in the hollow of his hand, and they wo'nt be sent to hurt a poor old body like me."

It will be seen by this that Dolly was not a wicked old woman, though she was very poor, and very ignorant too. Then, as she could not go to sleep, and as the window and door rattled, and the rain splashed down the chimney, she thought how her father and mother had died and been carried

away from that same very bed to be buried. Her father was a hard sort of man, and Dolly's thoughts did not rest long on him, but turned to her mother, a gentle, patient soul, who never said a cross word to any one in all her life. Thinking of her mother, somehow Dolly grew wider and wider awake; and lay staring at the dim, grey square of the little window, where a grey curtain hung, to keep out the sun when he came to shine on the world. The grey curtain waved in the draught, and as Dolly's eyes rested on it, she fancied she saw something moving outside.

This made her sit up in her bed, and stare at the window harder still than before. But her eyes were old and dim, and they grew so tired with trying to see, that presently she lay down with a weary sigh, and very nearly fell off to sleep,—thinking again of her mother; dead so long ago. Either sleeping or waking, she then fancied she heard a faint little voice crying, "Let me in;" and wider awake than before, she trembled a little, and asked herself: "Is mother come back?" But the grey square of the window now showed plainly even to her old and dim eyes, that a small figure was perched outside, whether the figure of her goat slipped from his tether, or of some other stray creature frightened by the storm, she was at a loss

to guess, till again a plaintive cry of "I want to come in," uttered in a thin, childish voice, settled the question. "Oh, gracious! it must be a child," old Dolly exclaimed, bestirring herself hurriedly to rise and open the little casement. In rushed the wind and the rain pell-mell, and the old woman shivered, as she strained her eyes to discern the owner of the voice.

A dark little heap lay, just slipped down, under the window,—and as neither sound nor motion replied to her question of "Who are you?" she stretched out her hands, and, grasping the wet bundle which lay there so still, with some difficulty succeeded in dragging it in over the low window sill. A child it was, sure enough, and a faint groan, as Dolly deposited it on the old hearth-rug, proved life to be still beating in that poor, shrunken, pale little starveling, though the eyes were closed, and the thin blue lips also, and the two wasted hands were rigid and stiff in their grasp of the tattered rags which scarcely deserved the name of clothes.

Here was a serious business for old Dolly. Few and scanty were the provisions at hand for fire, or food, or clothes. But the white little face did not fail to move her heart; and the fire was presently crackling on the hearth, the lost child, divested of its rags and of some of its dirt, sat there on the floor,

close before the kindling warmth, wrapped in the blanket from the old woman's bed, and propped up against the one chair which Dolly possessed. The closed eyes had opened for one wandering, puzzled look round the place; and then were again shut wearily, as fixed and still as before. But Dolly persevered without losing heart or hope; and at length, having made some tea from her own little precious store, she succeeded in inducing the parched lips to open for a draught; and she watched with immense delight the successful efforts to swallow, which ensued. The languid, drooping head was soon after raised, and the eyes fixed dreamily on the withered old kindly face which was stooping over her own.

The poor little soul was an eight or ten year old girl, and she had soft grey eyes, and a quantity of light, silky hair, now all dirty and draggled with rain, hanging in masses over her shoulders and neck. Dolly took the child from the ground, and seated her upon her own knees, as she gave her the rest of the hot, sugary tea she held in her hand. Scarcely was the last drop swallowed than the little one, who sat so contentedly to be fed, sank quietly back in the old woman's arms in a deep, refreshing sleep. Dolly laid her gently in the bed by her side, not shrinking, as a delicate lady