

# **A Christmas Present for a Lady**

Myra Kelly



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It was the week before Christmas, and the First Reader Class, in a lower East Side school, had, almost to a man, decided on the gifts to be lavished on "Teacher." She was quite unprepared for any such observance on the part of her small adherents, for her first study of the roll book had shown her that its numerous Jacobs, Isidores, and Rachels belonged to a class to which Christmas Day was much as other days. And so she went serenely on her way, all unconscious of the swift and strict relation between her manner and her chances. She was, for instance, the only person in the room who did not know that her criticism of Isidore Belchatosky's hands and face cost her a tall "three for ten cents" candlestick and a plump box of candy.

But Morris Mogilewsky, whose love for Teacher was far greater than the combined loves of all the other children, had as yet no present to bestow. That his "kind feeling" should be without proof when the lesser loves of Isidore Wishnewsky, Sadie Gonorowsky, and Bertha Binderwitz were taking the tangible but surprising forms which were daily exhibited to his confidential gaze was more than he could bear. The knowledge saddened all his hours, and was the more maddening because it could in no wise be shared by Teacher, who noticed his altered bearing and tried with all sorts of artful beguilements to make him happy and at ease. But her efforts served only to increase his unhappiness and his love. And he loved her! Oh, how he loved her! Since first his dreading eyes had clung for a breath's space to her "like man's shoes" and had then crept timidly upward past a black skirt, a "from silk" apron, a red "jumper," and "from gold" chain to her "light face," she had been mistress of his heart of hearts. That was more than three months ago. How well he remembered the day!

His mother had washed him horribly; and had taken him into the big red schoolhouse, so familiar from the outside, but so full of unknown terrors within. After his dusty little shoes had stumbled over the threshold he had passed from ordeal to ordeal until, at last he was torn in mute and white-faced despair from his mother's skirts.

He was then dragged through long halls and up tall stairs by a large boy, who spoke to him disdainfully as "greenie," and cautioned him as to the laying down softly and taking up gently of those poor, dusty shoes, so that his spirit was quite broken and his nerves were all unstrung when he was pushed into a room full of bright sunshine and of children who laughed at his frightened little face. The sunshine smote his timid eyes, the laughter smote his timid heart, and he turned to flee. But the door was shut, the large boy gone, and despair took him for its own.

Down upon the floor he dropped, and wailed, and wept, and kicked. It was then that he heard, for the first time, the voice which now he loved. A hand was forced between his aching body and the floor, and the voice said: "Why, my dear little chap, you mustn't cry like that. What's the matter?"

The hand was gentle and the question kind, and these, combined with a faint perfume suggestive of drug stores and barber shops— but nicer than either— made him uncover his hot little face. Kneeling beside him was a lady, and he forced his eyes to that perilous ascent; from shoes to skirt, from skirt to jumper, from jumper to face, they trailed in dread uncertainty, but at the face they stopped— they had found rest.

Morris allowed himself to be gathered into the lady's arms and held upon her knee, and when his sobs no longer rent the very foundations of his pink and wide-spread tie, he answered her question in a voice as soft as his eyes, and as gently sad.

"I ain't so big, and I don't know where is my mama."

So, having cast his troubles on the shoulders of the lady, he had added his throbbing head to the burden, and from that safe retreat had enjoyed his first day at school immensely.

Thereafter he had been the first to arrive every morning, and the last to leave every afternoon; and under the care of Teacher, his liege lady, he had grown in wisdom and love and happiness, but the greatest of these was

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love. And now, when the other boys and girls were planning surprises and gifts of price for Teacher, his hands were as empty as his heart was full. Appeal to his mother met with denial prompt and energetic.

"For what you go and make, over Christmas, presents? You ain't no Krisht; you should better have no kind feelings over Krishts, neither; your papa could to have a mad."

"Teacher ain't no Krisht," said Morris stoutly; "all the other fellows buys her presents, und I'm loving mit her; it's polite I gives her presents the while I'm got such a kind feeling over her."

"Well, we ain't got no money for buy nothing," said Mrs. Mogilewsky sadly. "No money, und your papa, he has all times a scare he shouldn't to get no more, the while the boss"— and here followed incomprehensible, but depressing, financial details, until the end of the interview found Morris and his mother sobbing and rocking in one another's arms. So Morris was helpless, his mother poor, and Teacher all unknowing.

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And now the great day, the Friday before Christmas, has come, and the school is, for the first half hour, quite mad. Doors open suddenly and softly to admit small persons, clad in wondrous ways and bearing wondrous parcels. Room 18, generally so placid and so peaceful, is a howling wilderness full of brightly colored, quickly changing groups of children, all whispering, all gurgling, and all hiding queer bundles. A new-comer invariably causes a diversion; the assembled multitude, athirst for novelty, falls upon him and clamors for a glimpse of his bundle and a statement of its price.

Teacher watches in dumb amaze. What can be the matter with the children? They can't have guessed that the shrouded something in the corner is a Christmas tree? What makes them behave so queerly, and why do they look so strange? They seem to have grown stout in a single night, and Teacher, as she notes this, marvels greatly. The explanation is simple, though it comes in alarming form. The sounds of revelry are pierced by a long, shrill yell, and a pair of agitated legs spring suddenly into view between two desks. Teacher, rushing to the rescue, notes that the legs form the unsteady stem of an upturned mushroom of brown flannel and green braid, which she recognizes as the outward seeming of her cherished Bertha Binderwitz; and yet, when the desks are forced to disgorge their prey, the legs restored to their normal position are found to support a fat child— and Bertha was best described as "skinny"— in a dress of the Stuart tartan tastefully trimmed with purple. Investigation proves that Bertha's accumulative taste in dress is an established custom. In nearly all cases the glory of holiday attire is hung upon the solid foundation of every-day clothes as bunting is hung upon a building. The habit is economical of time, and produces a charming embonpoint.

Teacher, too, is more beautiful than ever. Her dress is blue, and "very long down, like a lady," with bands of silk and scraps of lace distributed with the eye of art. In her hair she wears a bow of what Sadie Gonorowsky, whose father "works by fancy goods," describes as "black from plush ribbon— costs ten cents."

Isidore Belchatosky, relenting, is the first to lay tribute before Teacher. He comes forward with a sweet smile and a tall candlestick— the candy has gone to its long home— and Teacher for a moment can not be made to understand that all that length of bluish-white china is really hers "for keeps."

"It's to-morrow holiday," Isidore assures her; "and we gives you presents, the while we have a kind feeling. Candlesticks could to cost twenty-five cents."

"It's a lie. Three for ten," says a voice in the background, but Teacher hastens to respond to Isidore's test of her credulity:

"Indeed, they could. This candlestick could have cost fifty cents, and it's just what I want. It is very good of you to bring me a present."

"You're welcome," says Isidore, retiring; and then, the ice being broken, the First Reader Class in a body rises to cast its gifts on Teacher's desk, and its arms round Teacher's neck.

Nathan Horowitz presents a small cup and saucer; Isidore Applebaum bestows a large calendar for the year before last; Sadie Gonorowsky brings a basket containing a bottle of perfume, a thimble, and a bright silk handkerchief; Sarah Schodsky offers a penwiper and a yellow celluloid collar-button, and Eva Kidansky gives an elaborate nasal douche, under the pleasing delusion that it is an atomizer.

Once more sounds of grief reach Teacher's ears. Rushing again to the rescue, she throws open the door and comes upon woe personified. Eva Gonorowsky, her hair in wildest disarray, her stocking fouled, un-gartered, and

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down—gyved to her ankle, appears before her teacher. She bears all the marks of Hamlet's excitement, and many more, including a tear-stained little face and a gilt saucer clasped to a panting breast.

"Eva, my dearest Eva, what's happened to you *now*?" asks Teacher, for the list of ill chances which have befallen this one of her charges is very long. And Eva wails forth that a boy, a very big boy, had stolen her golden cup "what I had for you by present," and has left her only the saucer and her undying love to bestow.

Before Eva's sobs have quite yielded to Teacher's arts, Jacob Spitsky presses forward with a tortoise-shell comb of terrifying aspect and hungry teeth, and an air showing forth a determination to adjust it in its destined place. Teacher meekly bows her head; Jacob forces his offering into her long suffering hair, and then retires with the information, "Costs fifteen cents, Teacher," and the courteous phrase—by etiquette prescribed "Wish you health to wear it." He is plainly a hero, and is heard remarking to less favored admirers that "Teacher's hair is awful softy and smells off of perfumery."

Here a big boy, a very big boy, enters hastily. He does not belong to Room 18, but he has long known Teacher. He has brought her a present; he wishes her a merry Christmas. The present, when produced, proves to be a pretty gold cup, and Eva Gonorowsky, with renewed emotion, recognizes the boy as her assailant and the cup as her property. Teacher is dreadfully embarrassed; the boy not at all so. His policy is simple and entire denial, and in this he perseveres, even after Eva's saucer has unmistakably proclaimed its relationship to the cup.

Meanwhile the rush of presentation goes steadily on. Other cups and saucers come in wild profusion. The desk is covered with them, and their wrappings of purple tissue paper require a monitor's whole attention. The soap, too, becomes urgently perceptible. It is of all sizes, shapes, and colors, but of uniform and dreadful power of perfume. Teacher's eyes fill with tears of gratitude as each new piece, or box, is pressed against her nose, and Teacher's mind is full of wonder as to what she can ever do with all of it. Bottles of perfume vie with one another and with the all-pervading soap until the air is heavy and breathing grows laborious, while pride swells the hearts of the assembled multitude. No other teacher has so many helps to the toilet. None other is so beloved.

Teacher's aspect is quite changed, and the "blue long down like a lady dress" is almost hidden by the offerings she has received. Jacob's comb has two massive and bejeweled rivals in the "softy hair." The front of the dress, where aching or despondent heads are wont to rest, is glittering with campaign buttons of American celebrities, beginning with James G. Blaine and extending into modern history as far as Patrick Divver, Admiral Dewey, and Captain Dreyfus. Outside the blue belt is a white one, nearly clean; and bearing in "sure 'nough golden words" the curt, but stirring, invitation, "Remember the Maine." Around the neck are three chaplets of beads, wrought by chubby fingers and embodying much love, while the waist-line is further adorned by tiny and beribboned aprons. Truly, it is a day of triumph.

When the waste-paper basket has been twice filled with wrappings and twice emptied; when order is emerging out of chaos; when the Christmas tree has been disclosed and its treasures distributed, a timid hand is laid on Teacher's knee and a plaintive voice whispers, "Say, Teacher, I got something for you"; and Teacher turns quickly to see Morris, her dearest boy charge, with his poor little body showing quite plainly between his shirtwaist buttons and through the gashes he calls pockets. This is his ordinary costume, and the funds of the house of Mogilewsky are evidently unequal to an outer layer of finery.

"Now, Morris, dear," says Teacher, "you shouldn't have troubled to get me a present; you know you and I are such good friends that—"

"Teacher, yis, ma'am," Morris interrupts, in a bewitching rising inflection of his soft and plaintive voice; "I know you got a kind feeling by me, and I couldn't to tell even how I'm got a kind feeling by you. Only it's about that kind feeling I should give you a present. I didn't"—with a glance at the crowded desk "I didn't to have no soap nor no perfumery, and my mama; she couldn't to buy none by the store; but, Teacher, I'm got something awful nice for you by present."

"And what is it, deary?" asks the already rich and gifted young person. "What is my new present?"

"Teacher, it's like this: I don't know; I ain't so big; like I could to know"—and, truly, God pity him! he is passing small—"It ain't for boys—it's for ladies. Over yesterday on the night comes my papa on my house, and he gives my mama the present. Sooner she looks on it, sooner she has a awful glad; in her eye stands tears, und she says, like that—out of Jewish—`Thanks,' un' she kisses my papa. a kiss. Und my papa, *how* he is polite! he says—out of Jewish, too—`You're welcome, all right,' un' he kisses my mama a kiss. So my mama, she sets and looks on the present, und all the time she looks she has a glad over it. Und I didn't to have no soap, so you could

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to have the present."

"But did your mother say I might?"

"Teacher, no ma'am; she didn't say like that un' she didn't to say *not* like that: She didn't to know. But it's for ladies, un' I didn't to have no soap. You could to look on it. It ain't for boys."

And here Morris opens a hot little hand and discloses a tightly-folded pinkish paper. As Teacher reads it he watches her with eager, furtive eyes, dry and bright, until hers grow suddenly moist, when his promptly follow suit. As she looks down at him, he makes his moan once more:

"It's for ladies, und I didn't to have no soap."

"But, Morris, dear," cries Teacher unsteadily, laughing a little, and yet not far from tears, "this is ever so much nicer than soap— a thousand times better than perfume; and you're quite right, it is for ladies, and I never had one in all my life before. I am so very thankful."

"You're welcome, all right. That's how my papa says; it's polite," says Morris proudly. And proudly he takes his place among the very little boys, and loudly he joins in the ensuing song. For the rest of that exciting day he is a shining point of virtue in a slightly confused class. And at three o'clock he is at Teacher's desk again, carrying on the conversation as if there had been no interruption.

"Und my mama," he says insinuatingly— "she kisses my papa a kiss."

"Well?" says Teacher.

"Well," says Morris, "you ain't never kissed me a kiss, und I seen how you kissed Eva Gonorowsky. I'm loving mit you too. Why don't you never kiss me a kiss?"

"Perhaps," suggests Teacher mischievously, "perhaps it ain't for boys."

But a glance at her "light face," with its crown of surprising combs, reassures him.

"Teacher, yis, ma'am; it's for boys," he cries as he feels her arms about him, and sees that in her eyes, too, "stands tears."

"It's polite you kisses me a kiss over that for ladies' present."

Late that night Teacher sat in her pretty room— for she was, unofficially, a great pampered young person— and reviewed her treasures. She saw that they were very numerous, very touching, very whimsical, and very precious. But above all the rest she cherished a frayed pinkish paper, rather crumpled and a little soiled. For it held the love of a man and woman and a little child, and the magic of a home, for Morris Mogilewsky's Christmas present for ladies was the receipt for a month's rent for a room on the top floor of a Monroe Street tenement.

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