THIS WAY TO CHRISTMAS

A DOZEN YARDS FROM THE TRAPPER'S HUT THEY PLANTED ONE POST.

THIS WAY TO CHRISTMAS

BY

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TO
DAVID

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

The author wishes to acknowledge the courtesy of Mrs. William Sharpe, who has so kindly given her permission for the adaptation of parts of Fiona Macleod's "Muime Chroisd" for the legend of St. Bridget, told here by Johanna. The author found many fragments of the legend in the north of Ireland; but nowhere was it complete as recorded by Fiona Macleod from the Island of Iona.

CHAPTER I

THE CHAPTER BEFORE THE BEGINNING

I WONDER if you know that stories have a way of beginning themselves? Sometimes they even do more than this. They tell themselves—beginning and ending just where they please—with no consideration at all for the author or the reader.

Perhaps you have discovered this for yourself; you may have in mind this minute some of the stories that you wished had begun long before they did—and others that ended before you thought they had any business doing so. These have a very unpleasant way of leaving your expectations and your interest all agog; and I have not a doubt that you have always blamed the author. This is not fair. In a matter of this kind an author is just as helpless as a reader, and there is no use in trying to coax or scold a story into telling itself her way. As sure as she tries the story gets sulky or hurt, picks up its beginning and ending, and trails away, never to come back; and that story is lost for all time. You may try it yourself if you do not believe me.

Now, if I could have had my way, I should have begun with David in the window nook at dusk-hour, looking out on the Hill Country all white with the gathering snow; and I should have said:

"It was the year after last—and the year before next—and just seven days before Christmas—"

I have begun this way a hundred times, and every time the same thing happens. The story behaves disgracefully. It will have none of my way. I have actually heard it screaming: "No! I won't begin there! I won't—I won't—I won't!" After which it always runs for the door. As a result I have become completely cowed and I have given in. I am making believe now (and so must you, for it never does to let a story get in a bad humor) that after all this is the best beginning.

It was late fall when David's world dropped away from him; at least to David that is what seemed to happen. When one loses the very things one always expects to have—big things like mother and father, home and the boys on the block—why, there is not so very much of the world left. To David, speeding toward the Hill Country on the big express with Johanna, it seemed as if there was not enough left to fill even one of the many empty days that lay before him.

It had all come about because of father being a scientist. Just what a scientist was David had never felt quite sure, but he knew it meant having a great deal of knowledge and very little time—time for boys. It also meant forgetting things that even David was supposed

to remember; things like going to bed, and coming home at dinner-time, and putting on a coat when it was cold, and rubbers when it rained. Mother always laughed at these and said that father was more trouble to look after than David; and she wondered what she would do if the time ever came when she would have to decide between the two of them, and which needed her most.

And then, without any warning, that time had come. Very suddenly father came home one night and announced that there was a fresh development of an almost unknown bacillus among the soldiers in the Eastern war zone; it was the chance of a lifetime for a scientist, and he would go as soon as he could pack and make necessary arrangements. The next moment he had plunged into his pocket for his note-book, and only David had seen how white and still mother had grown. When she spoke at last there was a funny little catch in her voice that sounded as if it had tried to be a laugh, but somehow could not manage it.

"I hoped and prayed that this wouldn't happen quite so soon—this having to decide between my big boy and my little boy."

Father had laughed outright. "Nonsense, there is nothing to decide. Of course you stay with David. The war country is no place for either of you, and I shall manage perfectly by myself."

"The war country is no place for David; but there are plenty of women over there working side by side with their husbands. Oh, my dear, my dear!"

Mother's arms had gathered them both in and mother was holding them close. It was to father, however, that she was speaking. "I believe you are my little boy, after all. Manage! Over there! When you can't take care of yourself in your own civilized country! No, my dear, you need a mother more than David does. Besides, there's Johanna; we'll send for her. She will look after David almost as well as I can; but what would she do with you!" This time the laugh had right of way and rippled all over mother's face.

Father had stopped making notes and was looking at them both with that funny wrinkly smile about his mouth that David loved to see.

"Well, sir, what do you think about it?" he said, looking straight at David.

David had squared his shoulders and straightened his chin; but it took two hard swallows before he could answer. "I think, sir, that mother is right. You see I'm eight, going on nine; and when, a—man's that old he ought to be able to look after himself for a while. Don't you think so?"

"He certainly ought to; but it seems that there are some who never are quite able." And father's hand had suddenly reached up to mother's, which was about his shoulder.

That is all there had been to it. The next day Johanna had come—good, Irish Johanna, who had taken care of him as a baby and had stayed until he had outgrown his need of her and she had married Barney. The day after, he had said good-by to the boys on the block; and he had said it as one about to depart upon a

rare adventure, taking his leave of less fortunate comrades. He did not intend that they should discover how much of his world had dropped away from him, or how he envied them the continued possession of theirs. Moreover, it increased his courage threefold to make believe that what had happened was not so bad, after all. In this manner he was able to assume an added stature, one fitting his newly acquired manhood, when the time came to swing the door of his home tight shut; and he was able to say a brave good-by to father and mother.

Now it was all over. He and Johanna were speeding toward the Hill Country, and he was glad, very glad, to be a little boy again and snuggle into the hollow of Johanna's arm as he had been used to doing in the old nursery days. After all, eight-going-on-nine is not so very old.

David wasted no time. Out of the scraps that were left him he tried at once to build up a new world. He looked out of the car window at the fields and houses flying past, and he thought of all the pleasant things Johanna had promised him. Johanna and Barney were the caretakers of a big summer hotel in the mountains. The summer season was over, the hotel closed, and he was going to live with Johanna and Barney in the lodge and have a whole mountain-top to play on. He was going to help Barney cut down next year's fire-wood and drive the sledge for him over the lumber roads. He was going to make a toboggan-slide down the cleared side of the mountain; he was going to skate on the pond above the beaver dam, and learn to skee, and a crowd of other jolly things. And in the

spring there were to be the maple-trees to tap. Only, in the mean time, there were father and mother traveling farther and farther away; and there was Christmas coming nearer and nearer. And how could he ever stand one without the others?

He turned away from the car window and looked at Johanna; and then out popped the most surprising question from her.

"Hark, laddy! Have ye forgotten all about the fairies and the stories Johanna used to tell?"

David smiled without knowing it.

"Why, no. No, I haven't. A person never entirely forgets about fairies, even if he does grow up—does he? I guess I haven't been thinking about them lately, that's all."

"Sure, and ye haven't!" Johanna's voice had the same folksy ring to it that it had in the nursery days. "Faith, 'tis hard keeping them lively when ye are living in the city. Wasn't I almost giving over believing in them myself, after living there a few years? It wasn't till I moved to the hilltops and the green country that I got them back again."

"Have you seen any up there?"

David asked it as one might inquire about the personal habits of Santa Claus or the chances of finding the crock of gold at the rainbow's end, experiences one has never had oneself, but which one is perfectly willing to credit to another upon receipt of satisfactory evidence. Moreover, fairies were undeniably comfortable to think about just now. And what is more, when-

ever things happen that seem unreal and that make you feel strange and unreal yourself, that is the very time that fairies become the most real and easy to believe in. David discovered this now, and it made him snuggle closer to Johanna and repeat his question:

"Have you really seen any up there?" Johanna puckered her forehead and considered for a moment.

" 'Tis this way, laddy. I can't be saying honestly that I have laid my two eyes on one for certain; and then again I can't say honestly that I haven't. Many's the time in the woods or thereabouts that I've had the feeling I've just stumbled on one, just missed him by a wink, or beaten him there by a second. The moss by the brookside would have a trodden-down look and the bracken would be swaying with no help o' the wind—for all the world as if a wee man had just been brushing his way through."

"It might have been a squirrel," suggested David, the dust of the city still clouding his mind.

"Aye, but I'm thinking it wasn't. And if there's a fairy up yonder in the Hill Country I'm thinking ye'll find him. 'Twill give ye one thing more to do, eh, laddy?" Johanna tightened the arm about him and laughed softly.

"But how would fairies get over here? I shouldn't think they would ever want to leave Ireland; and I thought they never came out in winter."

"They might come because they had been locked out." Johanna's eyes suddenly began to dance mysteriously, and she put her lips close to David's ear

that the noise and jar of the train might not drown one word of what she was going to say:

"Whist, laddy! Do ye mind what day it is? 'Tis the very last day of the fairy summer, the last day when they'll be making the rings and dancing the reels over in Ireland."

"Why, it's Hallowe'en," remembered David.

"Aye, that's what! And after this night the fairies bolt the doors of their raths fast with magic and never come out again till May Eve, barring once in a white winter or so when they come out on Christmas Eve. But it happens every so often that a fairy gets locked out on this night. He stays dancing too long, or playing too many tricks, and when he gets back to the rath 'tis past cock-crow and the door is barred against him. Then there's naught for him to do but to bide how and where he can till opening time comes on May Eve."

"And if—and if—"

"Sure, if one should get locked out this night, what's to prevent his coming over? What's more likely than that he'd be saying to himself, 'Faith, Ireland 'll be a mortal lonely place with the rest o' the lads gone. I'll try my luck in another country.' And with that he follows the rest of the Irish and emigrates over here. And if he ever lands, ye mark my word, laddy, he'll make straight for the Hill Country! That is, if he's not there already ahead of himself."

Johanna laughed and David laughed with her.

"Sure, there's a heap o' sense in some nonsense, mind that! And never be so foolish, just because ye

grow up and get a little book knowledge, as to turn up your nose and mock at the things ye loved and believed in when ye were a little lad. Them that do, lose one of the biggest cures for heartache there is in the world, mind that!"

David turned back to the window. Already, beyond the foreground of passing woods and meadows, he could catch glimpses of the Hill Country, hazy and purple, lying afar off. Johanna was right. It was better to think of the locked-out fairy than of himself. He found himself wondering if fairies grew lonesome as humans did, and if it was as hard to be locked out of a rath as a home. He wondered if all the fairies were grown up or if there were boy and girl fairies, and father and mother fairies. He would ask Johanna some time, when he was sure he could ask it with a perfectly steady voice. But most of all, he wondered about opening time; and he wished with all his heart that he knew just when opening time would come for him. Until then, he must keep very busy with the fire-wood and the sled and the toboggan-slide and the skating and skeeing and Christmas.

What kind of a Christmas was it going to be?

The train climbed half-way to the top of the highest hill and there it left David and Johanna. Barney was waiting for them with the horses and the big wagon to carry them up the rest of the way; and to David it seemed a very lonesome way. The stars were out before they reached the lodge, but even in the starlight he could see that they were alone on the hilltop

except for the great, shadowy, closed hotel and the encompassing fir-trees.

"Ye'll not be troubled with noise, and ye'll not be pestered with neighbors," laughed Barney, as he helped David to clamber down from the wagon. "Johanna says that in the winter there is nobody alive in these parts but the creatures and the 'heathens' and ourselves."

CHAPTER II

THE LOCKED-OUT FAIRY

TWO months had passed since David had come to the Hill Country—two months in which he had thrown himself with all the stoutness of heart he could muster into the new life and the things Johanna had promised. He had spent long, crisp November days with Barney in the woods, watching him fell the trees marked for fire-wood and learning to use his end of a cross-cut saw. When the snow came and the lumber roads were packed hard for sledding he had shared in the driving of the team and the piling of the logs. He had learned to skee and to snow-shoe; already he had dulled his skates on the pond above the beaver dam. Yet in spite of all these things, in spite of Barney's good-natured comradeship and Johanna's faithful care and love, the ache in his heart had grown deeper until his loneliness seemed to shut him in like the snow-capped hills about him. And now it was seven days before Christmas—and not a word had been said concerning it.

David had begun to wonder if in all that country of bare hilltops and empty valleys, of snow and fir-tree and wild creature, there was anything out of which one

could possibly make a Christmas. And slowly the conviction had been borne in upon him that there was not. The very thought of the toy-stores in the city, of the windows with their displays of Christmas knick-knacks, of the street booths covered with greens, of what the boys on the block were doing and talking about, of the memories of all the other Christmases that had been, brought unspeakable pangs to his soul. He wondered how he was ever going to stand it—this Christmas that was no Christmas.

And this is how it happened that at dusk-hour, seven days before Christmas, a very low-spirited boy of eight—going-on-nine—sat curled up on the window-seat of the lodge, looking out through the diamond panes and wishing with all his heart that he was somebody else in some other place and that it was some other time of the year.

Barney was always bedding down the horses at this time and Johanna was getting supper; and as there was never anything in particular for David to do it had become a custom with him to watch for the lighting of the lamps in the cabins of the "heathen." There were four cabins—only one was a cottage; and he could see them all from the lodge by a mere change of position or window. Somehow he liked them, or thought he should like them if he knew them, in spite of all the unalluring things Johanna had said about them. According to her the families who lived in them were outcasts, speaking strange tongues and worshiping strange gods, and quite unfit to cross the door-steps of honest Christian folk. David hardly knew whether Barney shared this opinion or not. Barney teased

Johanna a good deal and laughed at her remarks every time she aired her grievance: that there should be no decent neighbors like themselves on all that barren hilltop. In his own heart David clung persistently to the feeling that he should like them all if he ever got near enough to make their acquaintance.

It was always the "lunger's" lamp that shone out first in the dusk. David could usually tell to the minute when it would be lighted by watching the shadow on the foot-hill. Johanna was uncertain from what country these neighbors had come, but she thought it was Portugal. And Portuguese! Words always failed her when she tried to convey to David the exact place that Portuguese held among the heathen; but he was under the impression that it must be very near the top. One of these neighbors was sick with bad lungs, so his family had come to try the open-air cure of the hills; and they had been here since early spring. David never saw their tiny spark of a light spring out against the dark of the gathering gloom that he did not make a wish that the "lunger" might be a good deal better the next day.

Across the ridge from the foot-hill lay the lumber-camp, and here David always looked for the second light. The camp was temporarily deserted, the company having decided to wait a year or two before cutting down any more timber, and the loggers had been sent to another camp farther north. Only the cook, an old negro, had remained behind to guard the property from fire and poachers, and he it was that lighted in his shack the solitary lamp that sent its twinkling greeting up to David every night.

Straight down the hill shone the third light from the trapper's cabin, and it was always close to dark before that was lighted. What the trapper's nationality was Johanna had never happened to specify; but she had often declared that he was one of those bad-looking dark men from the East—Asia, perhaps; and she had not a doubt that he had come to the woods to escape the law. David's mental picture of him was something quite dreadful; and yet when his light sprang out of the dark and twinkled at him up the white slope he always found himself desperately sorry for the trapper, alone by himself with the creatures he had trapped or shot—and his thoughts.

The fourth light came through another window, shining up from the opposite slope of the hill—the slope that led toward the station and the village beyond. This was the flagman's light and it hung in the little hut by the junction where the main railroad crossed the circuit line. It was always lighted when David looked for it, and he always sat watching until he should see the colored signal-lights swing out on the track beyond, for then he knew the flagman's work was over for the day—that is, if all was well on the road. It happened sometimes, however, that there was a snow-slide down the ravine above the crossing, or sometimes a storm uprooted a tree and hurled it across the track, and then the flagman was on guard all night. Now, the flagman was German; and Johanna's voice always took on a particularly forbidding and contemptuous tone whenever she spoke of him. David had often marveled at this, for in the city his father had

friends who were German and they were very good friends. Once David had spoken his mind:

"I don't see why you call him a heathen, Johanna, just because he was born in the country that's making the war. It wasn't his fault—and I don't see why that's any reason for treating him as if he had made the trouble himself."

"Well, how do ye think we'd be treated if we were over there now in that heathen's country? Sure, ye wouldn't find them loving us any to speak of." Johanna's lips had curled scornfully. "Ye can take my word for it, laddy, if we were there the same as he's here we would be counting ourselves lucky to be alive at all, and not expecting to be asked in for any tea-drinking parties."

It troubled David, none the less, this strange unfriendliness of Johanna's; and this night the weight of it hung particularly heavy upon him. He turned back to his window-nook with a heart made heavier by this condition of alienage. No family, no neighbors, no Christmas—it was a dreary outlook; and he could not picture a single face or a single hearthside behind those four lights that blinked at him in such a friendly fashion.

He realized suddenly that he was very tired. Half the day he had spent clearing a space on the beaver pond big enough for skating; and clearing off a day's fall of snow with a shovel and a broom is hard work. He leaned against the window niche and pillowed his head on his arm. He guessed he would go to bed right after supper. Wouldn't it be fun now, if he could wish

himself into one of those cabins, whichever one he chose, and see what was happening there this minute? If he had found the locked-out fairy Johanna had talked so much about he might have learned wishing magic from him. What had happened to the fairy, anyway? Of course it was half a tale and half a joke; nevertheless the locked-out fairy had continued to seem very real to him through these two months of isolation, and wherever he had gone his eye had been always alert for some sign of him. Unbelievable, as it may seem, the failure to find him had brought keen disappointment. David had speculated many times as to where he might be living, where he would find his food, how he would keep himself warm. A fairy's clothes were very light, according to Johanna. Undoubtedly he had come over in just his green jerkin and knee-breeches, with stockings and slippers to match; and these were not fit covering for winter weather like this.

David smiled through half-shut eyes. The fairy might steal a pelt from the trapper's supply; that would certainly keep him warm; and if he were anything of a tailor he could make himself a cap and a coat in no time. Or, better yet, he might pick out one that just fitted him and creep into it without having to make it over; a mink's skin would be about the right size, or a squirrel's. His smile deepened at his own conceit. Then something in the dusk outside caught his eye. Some small creature was hopping across the snow toward the lodge.

David flattened his nose to the window to see better, and made out very distinctly the pointed ears,

curved back, and long, bushy tail of a squirrel—a gray squirrel. At once he thought of some nuts in his jacket pocket, nuts left over from an after-dinner cracking. He dug for them successfully, and opening the window a little he dropped them out. Nearer came the squirrel, fearlessly eager, oblivious of the eyes that were watching him with growing interest. He reached the nuts and was nosing them about for the most appetizing when he sat up suddenly on his hind legs, clutching the nut of his choice between his forepaws, and cocking his head as he did so toward the window.

The effect on David was magical. He gave his eyes one insistent rub and then he opened the window wider.

"Come in," he called, softly. "Please do come in!"

For he had seen under the alert little ears something quite different from the sharp nose and whiskers of the every-day squirrel. There were a pair of blue eyes that winked outrageously at him, while a round, smooth face wrinkled into smiles and a mouth knowingly grinned at him. It was the locked-out fairy at last!

He bobbed his head at David's invitation, fastened his little white teeth firmly in the nut, and scrambled up the bush that grew just outside. A minute more and he was through the window and down beside David on the seat.

"Ah—ee, laddy, where have your eyes been this fortnight?" he asked. "I've whisked about ye and chattered down at ye from half a score o' pine-trees—and ye never saw me!"

David colored shamefully.

"Never mind. 'Tis a compliment ye've been paying to my art," and the fairy cocked his head and whisked his tail and hopped about in the most convincing fashion.

David held his sides and rocked back and forth with merriment. "It's perfect," he laughed; "simply perfect!"

"Aye, 'tis fair; but I've not mastered the knack o' the tail yet. I can swing it grand, but I can't curl it up stylish. I can fool the mortals easy enough, but ye should see the looks the squirrels give me sometimes when I'm after trying to show off before them."

There was nothing but admiration in David's look of response. "The coat fits you splendidly," he said.

"Sure—'tis as snug as if it grew on me. But I miss my pockets, and I'm not liking the color as well as if it were green."

David laughed again. "Why, I believe you are as Irish as Johanna."

And why shouldn't I be? Faith, there are worse faults, I'm thinking. Now tell me, laddy, what's ailing ye? Ye've been more than uncommon downhearted lately."

"How did you know?"

"Could a wee fairy man be watching ye for a fortnight, coming and going, and not know?"

"Well, it's lonesomeness; lonesomeness and Christmas." David owned up to it bravely.

" 'Tis easy guessing ye're lonesome—that's an ailment that's growing chronic on this hillside. But what's the matter with Christmas?"

"There isn't any. There isn't going to be any Christmas!" And having at last given utterance to his state of mind, David finished with a sorrowful wail.

"And why isn't there, then? Tell me that."

"You can't make Christmas out of miles of snow and acres of fir-trees. What's a boy going to do when there aren't any stores or things to buy, or Christmas fixings, or people, and nobody goes about with secrets or surprises?"

The fairy pushed back the top of his head and the gray ears fell off like a fur hood, showing the fairy's own tow head beneath. He reached for his thinking-lock and pulled it vigorously.

"I should say," he said at last, "that a boy could do comfortably without them. Sure, weren't there Christmases long before there were toy-shops? No, no, laddy. Christmas lies in the hearts and memories of good folk, and ye'll find it wherever ye can find them!"

David shook his head doubtfully.

"I don't see how that can be, but even suppose it's true, there aren't even good folk here."

The fairy grinned derisively and wagged his furry paw in the direction of the lights shining on the hillside:

"What's the meaning of that, and that, and that? Now I should be calling them good folk, the same as ye here."

"Hush!" David looked furtively toward the door that led into the kitchen. "It wouldn't do to let Johanna hear you. Why, she thinks—"

The fairy raised a silencing paw to his lips.

"Whist, there, laddy! If ye are after wanting to find Christmas ye'd best begin by passing on naught but kind sayings. Maybe ye are not knowing it, but they are the very cairn that mark the way to Christmas. Now I'll drive a bargain with ye. If ye'll start out and look for Christmas I'll agree to help ye find the road to it."

"Yes," agreed David, eagerly.

"But there's one thing ye must promise me. To put out of your mind for all time these notions that ye are bound to find Christmas hanging with the tinsel balls to the Christmas tree or tied to the end of a stocking. Ye must make up your mind to find it with your heart and not with your fingers and your eyes."

"But," objected David, "how can you have Christmas without Christmas things?"

"Ye can't. But ye've got the wrong idea entirely about the things. Ye say now that it's turkey and plum-cake and the presents ye give and the presents ye get; and I say 'tis thinkings and feelings and sayings and rememberings. I'm not meaning, mind ye, that there is anything the matter with the first lot, and there's many a fine Christmas that has them in, but they'll never

make a Christmas of themselves, not in a thousand years. And what's more, ye can do grand without them."

David rubbed his forehead in abject bewilderment. It was all very hard to understand; and as far as he could see the fairy was pointing out a day that sounded like any ordinary day of the year and not at all like Christmas. But, thanks to Johanna, David had an absolute faith in the infallibility of fairies. If he said so it must be true; at least it was worth trying. So he held out his hand and the fairy laid a furry paw over the ball of his forefinger in solemn compact.

"It's a bargain," David said.

"It is that," agreed the fairy. "And there's nothing now to hinder my going."

He pulled the gray ears over his tow head again until there was only a small part of fairy left.

"Don't ye be forgetting," he reminded David as he slipped through the window. "I'll be on the watch out for ye the morrow."

David watched him scramble down the bush, stopping a moment at the bottom to gather up the remainder of the nuts, which he stuffed away miraculously somewhere between his cheek and the fur. Then he raised a furry paw to his ear in a silent salute.

"Good-by," said David, softly, "good-by. I'm so glad you came."

And it seemed to him that he heard from over the snow the fairy's good-by in Gaelic, just as Barney or Johanna might have said it: *"Beanacht leat!"*