

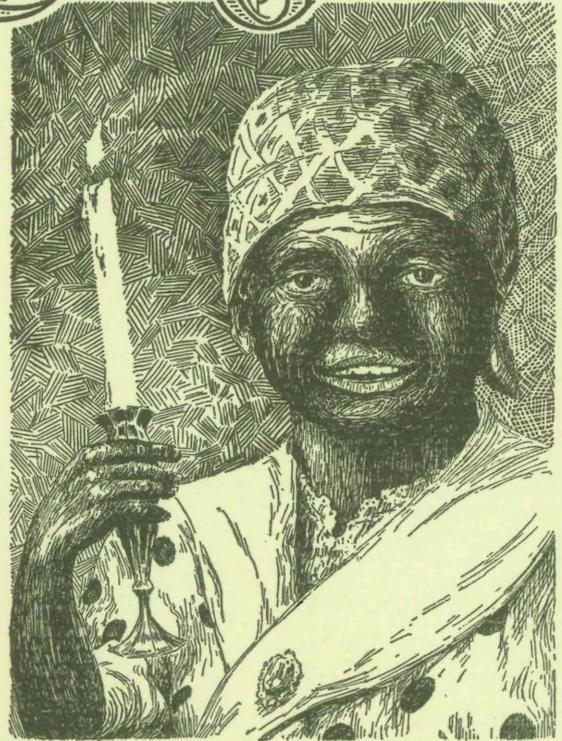
“Crismus Gif”

**A Christmas Story
from Dixie**

By

Wm. B. Hogg

„Weihnachts
Gift“



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William B. Hogg

DEDICATION



*Tenderly dedicated to the colored
friends of my boyhood, the memory
of whose laughter has been a tonic
in dreary days, and whose genuine
love for Christ left a halo
over my youth.*



“Crismus Gif”



MY HEART and I had a great argument over the spelling of this title. A furtive fear played “hide and seek” with me as I prepared to write this monograph—a devout concern that reverent souls would condemn the title for its apparent sacrilege. Be assured that there is nothing akin to irreverence in my mind as I walk Memory’s shady lanes back to the carefree land of Long Ago.

The phrase “Crismus Gif” is a colloquialism warm from the heart of the Old South. It truly was a wizard’s wand when I was a boy. When two persons met on Christmas day, the one who cried “Crismus Gif” first put the other under the obligation of a present. It was a great game. All through a Christmas morning one would catch fleeting glimpses of children stealthily stalking an intended victim to catch his Christmas Gift. The colored folk were past masters in this holiday hunt. What if they garbled the sacred words as their reverent lips articulated them in the accent of the Southern Negro? After all, where is the real value, in the cultured exactness of speech or in the sublimity of the thought that lies in the mind? To express an idea with clarity and precision is a very rare accomplishment, while a beneficent Creator has given with unmeasured

bounty to every rational being the capacity to revel in exalted thought independent of the power of expression. When some Turner can transfer to canvas all the color he sees in a sunset; when some Phidias can portray in cold and tongueless marble the beauty of the concept locked in his heart; when some Beethoven can cause the strings of an instrument to reproduce all the music in his soul—then we may begin the quest for a tongue or pen that can translate into words all the sublimity and grandeur that gathers in the sunrise of a single noble thought.

Often in school days I drowsily gazed at a bottle of ink and wondered at the excellent compositions that nestled snugly and hopelessly within that tiny glass receptacle! How to get the ink out of the bottle and on the pages of my notebook in ordered lines of thought—that was my Waterloo! It is the age old problem, this getting the content of the mind out of its prison and delivering it to the world. If you can do that, you are a genius, and the people on this little sphere will so acclaim you. Have you not often remarked, at least to yourself, upon hearing a great orator, "Why, I know that. He hasn't told me anything new. He simply expressed my thoughts." The same is true of a great book, a beautiful painting or an entrancing oratorio.

As a small artesian stream of water indicates the

presence beneath of a great subterranean ocean, so the words "Crismus Gif" on the lips of Aunt Ca'line bespoke a depth of feeling that the unschooled speech of a colored "black mammy" could never declare.

The "crooners" and black-faced comedians have left their audiences in woeful ignorance of the real meaning of "black mammy" down in Dixie. Their unfaithfulness to so great a trust has often gotten me into trouble with radio audiences. When I was broadcasting in Chicago with a broad Southern accent and frequently using negro dialect, many of my radio audience thought I was a negro because I spoke of my "black mammy." One distant listener wrote to our office that he was asking all his friends to listen to the broadcast of the negro preacher on the Courier program! While it is true, I make no boast that my skin is white. In the providence of God I was born of white parents. It is a great comfort to my soul that Jesus is color blind. Real human value lies deeper than the pigment of the skin that so thinly covers the man. The real church, that of the born again believers, was placed by Jesus on the high level of regeneration, and it will be composed of God's children who will one day sing a "new song." Fortunately the Bible has given us the words of that blessed hymn of praise:

*"And they sung a new song saying:
Thou art worthy to take the book,
And to open the seals thereof:
For thou wast slain,
And hast redeemed us to God by thy blood
Out of every kindred, and tongue, and people
and nation;
And hast made us unto our God kings and priests:
And we shall reign on the earth."*

—REVELATION 5:9, 10.

A "black mammy" down South was a colored nurse, but far more than a mere hireling to attend to a child. She was a teacher as well! Then, what meant much more, she was somewhat of a spiritual guide to her precious charge. In short, she was foster mother to her "white chile." As teacher she felt a tremendous responsibility. To her, it was a God-given duty to impress upon the plastic mind of her "chillun" the negro folk lore that had been handed down from the dim and all but forgotten yesterdays. Were not all grave-yards peopled with ghosts of the departed? To the old "black mammy" they were "hants." How she feared that the child committed to her care would transgress some of the laws that govern "hants," thereby bringing the violator under the relentless scourging of the invisible but fearful hosts of "sperits."

That the white children of the South were often filled with all such fears by the negroes may cause many of

my readers to cry out in horror. But your fears are groundless, dear reader! Life has had many sunny lanes for me, and quiet nooks of happiness, but no moments more fraught with pure bliss than those spent on a sheep-skin rug in front of the fire in the cabin of Mrs. Caroline Rhodes, beloved by our family who knew her as "Aunt Ca'line." The fire place in her little cabin was large, and always filled with a roaring fire or glowing embers. A large soot-covered tea kettle hung over the fire and sang a merry accompaniment to the stories so marvelously told by my dear old "black mammy." Often sweet potatoes lay roasting in the ashes with the dripping "candy" telling of the sweets within. And the "cracklin'" bread! Ah, me! What would I give now for one pone of that delicious product of Aunt Ca'line's culinary skill and the accommodating fire place! It was made of luscious, creamy corn meal, ground at the water mill, and all through the nutritious cakes were crisp bits of meat skins. There was a full meal in one "co'n pone." Dietitians would do well to bring back this delicious and economical food during these days of bread-lines.

Uncle Dan, much the worse of body for the rigors of slavery, would sit by the fire and smoke a clay pipe that was fastened on a foot-long stem, and dream of the days that were gone forever. The colored folk had scattered to the four winds. Many of his friends of the

corn rows and cotton fields had crossed the Silent Sea, leaving him and Aunt Ca'line stranded on the shores of a strange world. No longer the "darkies" gathered in the negro quarter to listen in the moonlight to the inimitable strumming of banjos, or sing the spiritual songs the negroes love so well. Those nightly gatherings gave rest to the tired bodies and wing to the burdened souls of slaves. Now only memory and prayer could lift the lonely old negroes to the heights above. Aunt Ca'line would sit before the fire and knit as she told me stories. Uncle Dan smoked his pipe and wandered over the fields of Long Ago.

The story of "Raw Head and Bloody Bones" was the most blood curdling, and therefore my choice as a boy of nine years. Let us sit awhile with Aunt Ca'line and Uncle Dan.

"Dan, you gwine ter pizen dis pore chile wid dat nasty ole pipe. Thow it out! Why don't you put some wood on dat fyer? You was borned lazy and gits more wusser evy day you live." Smiling at me, she continued: "Yes, honey, I is gwine ter tell you a story. But dis trifin' nigger husband o' mine shore pesterates me er settin' dere wid his eyes shot, and smokin' bof of us out wid dat pipe. Ef he don't wake up fum dere and fix de fyer, I low to bust his head wid one of dem sticks o' wood."

But Uncle Dan was too engrossed in reverie to catch the full meaning of her tirade. He slowly arose and put on another back log, muttering about his rheumatism:

"Ca'line, is you got any of dat hoss medicine fer rumatiz? I 'clare to goodness dis misery's gwine ter run into piralisis if I don't do somin' fer it." Then Uncle Dan poked the fire and said to me, "Boy, effen you had a nickle fer ev'y one o' dem sparks, you'd be jist half as rich as yore pappy was fore dey sot us niggers free."

Aunt Ca'line gave no answer to his inquiry, but shot a look of contempt at the wizened old negro. The aged negro had forgotten his pain himself for he stretched out in his old hickory chair with its cowhide seat, and closed his eyes to listen again to voices from across the years.

"Black mammy" went on:

"You see, dere was a whole passle of pore white trash boys dat cussed. Dey mammy tole 'em not to cuss, and ef dey kep on at it dat ole Raw Head wus er gwine ter git 'em. But dey wus hard-headed—you couldn't tell 'em nuthin'. So dey would slip off down to dat ole hanted house, and smoke terbaccer, and dat want all, dey would chaw it! Away down in de hanted house whar dey pappies and dey mammies couldn't see 'em. Well, dey kep on, until one day a Christi'n man, he

seed 'em. An' he 'lowed, 'You boys better quit dat meanness, specially 'round dat hanted house, case dere is lots of hants in dere. An' dey don't like boys what smokes and cusses.'

"It wa'nt no use. Dey got mo' wusser. So one day a little ole cotton headed white trash put his mouf rite at the fyer-place and cussed as loud as he could wid his mouf full of terbaccer.

"You know whut happened? Only one of dem pore little boys ever 'scaped outen dat hanted house! He tole his ma what de boy had said up the chimbley. Den here come all de white folks seekin' dem five boys dat never 'scaped out de house. What you reckon dey found?"

Here Uncle Dan got restless and poked the fire. Knocking out the ashes in his pipe, he said:

"I 'clare to goodness, Ca'line, why in de world don't you shet you mouf? I been hearin' 'bout dat Ole Raw Head all my life, an' I don't like it yit. Den dere is dat pore lil' white chile, er settin dere wid his eyes poppin' out. Look at de po' lil' boy! You ought ter be 'shamed o you-sef!"

The old man limped over to the door and fastened it. As he hobbled back to his chair he lowered his voice almost to a whisper, and said, "You gwine keep on wid dat big talk ontill some o' dese times a hant gwine snatch all dat kinky hair o' yourn right offen you head.

You heerd me! Jest keep on wid dat big mouf o' yourn."

The old colored woman snapped, "I'se a Christi'n in my heart. Ain't no hant gwine ter mess wid me. Den dat ain't all. I carries a sack er salt wid me at night. Thow salt on a hant, 'n he jist nacherlly can't hurt you. He vanishes away right now!"

Uncle Dan countered with, "I know dey can't hurt me, but dey would run me lost. 'N I'se too ole an' feeble to have hants running me all over dis place."

"Go on, Aunt Ca'line!" I impatiently cried. "What did they find?"

"Honey, de reason I'se telling you dis, is to put de fear of wrongdoin' in yore precious young heart. Well, dey never found nothin' but de raw bones of dem cussin', terbaccer chawing chillun! Ole Raw Head and Bloody Bones had done et all de meat offen dey bones, 'n stacked de bones in de corner lak cord wood."

Over the years, I can hear Mother calling from the big house:

"Oh, Willie, it's bed time! Come on in!"

"Dere now," Uncle Dan grunted, "de po' chile's got to go out in dat dark yard all by his sef."

Standing in the door but dimly lighted by the dying embers, I could see "Raw Head and Bloody Bones" hiding behind every bush and tree. But both Aunt Ca'line and Uncle Dan were as afraid of the night as

I was. So Mother would have to be my body-guard across that dreadful No Man's Land between Aunt Ca'line's cabin and our house—fully two hundred feet!

The funny thing about it is that through the half a hundred years I have lived, the fear of profanity and a tender conscience about the filthy weed have never left me!

Had the stories of "hants" been all that my "black mammy" told me, her influence might have been called pernicious. But the superstition is only a trifle when it is thrown in the balances with all the blessed influence of her life on mine.

Aunt Ca'line ascended to a regal throne when Christmas turned the bend of the calendar road. For weeks she was busily engaged in baking pies and cakes, and in making general preparations for the holiday season. "Hog killing time" usually fell on the week before Christmas. This kept Uncle Dan busy the whole week butchering the fat porkers, making the toothsome country sausage, and putting up the hams and sides for the winter. All this added to the duties of Aunt Ca'line. She made the "hog-head cheese" and rendered up the lard, taking time to prepare an ample store of "cracklin'" bread for the festive season. Chickens and turkeys had to be "finished off" for "Crismus," and who but

Aunt Ca'line knew the art of adding, by special feeding, the delicious flavor to the Christmas fowls?

It makes my heart ache to see the preparations for Christmas now! A pie, and a chalky cake from the baker's; then a turkey from cold storage! All the fancy icing put on mechanically with artistic beauty can never make the cakes of this high-speed age taste like the real Christmas cakes of our childhood. Oh, those fruit cakes! I wonder what Aunt Ca'line put in them to make them taste to a boy like the fabled ambrosia of the gods.

For weeks before Christmas I was always concerned about presents for Aunt Ca'line and Uncle Dan. Nickels were scarce then, and yet we were rich! Rich in all that makes life livable and worth while. We did not need much money. Yet we could not use our glowing health and youthful buoyancy for buying presents. The merchants were too utilitarian to exchange their wares for the wealth that was mine. Poor world of business and finance! They do not know what wealth is! I warrant you that if any of those country merchants have lived along with me to this distant day, they would gladly exchange the contents of any store for the joy that was mine in those Christmases of my boyhood.

Then I had to buy a false-face or two! One bought them then at the drug store for a nickel; they cost five

dollars now at the beauty parlors. There is a difference in the price, but they look now about like they did then! We had another advantage, too: we could throw them away the day after Christmas; you have to keep yours now! But the beauty parlors are not the only places where folks get false faces. They cultivate them in society to hide the real feelings of the heart. Then poor driven humanity, in these trying days, have their faces cruelly scarred by the flying debris in a world that is being blown to pieces. So few have the faith to rest in God, and be themselves!

How I frightened poor old Aunt Ca'line as she was busy with her kitchen duties. I jumped out from behind the kitchen door wearing an Indian false-face, paralyzing the poor old colored woman with a war whoop. What a culprit I was! But that was allowable at Christmas time. I knew I could do it without a tearful trip with my father to the woodshed. How the false-faces frighten people today! The painted faces make many wonder if any reality remains! The strained eyes and wrinkled brows of broken humanity raise questions in the souls of many as to whether any real peace of heart is left in the world.

No words can describe the thrilling excitement that made my heart all but quit my breast as Christmas Eve fell on Dixie. My presents for the faithful servants were tucked away under my pillow. Mother and father

talked in whispers at a distance, and were suspiciously silent when sister and I came near. We had an idea that it was in some way associated with the approaching visit of Santa Claus. But our letters to that beneficent and rotund patron of good children had informed him days before of our wishes. So sister and I reluctantly yielded to slumber at last to dream through the wonderful night of another happy Christmas.

The soft fingers of the first light of day gently opened our eyes. Sister and I felt that we must not get up until Aunt Ca'line came. Soon we heard the crunching of snow as she came early to sit in queenly glory for a day. The unlocked kitchen door enabled her to slip in to catch the "Crismus Gif" of the household. Why should we lock our doors? We had nothing that anyone wanted! In fact everybody had all the joy and happiness that their hearts could hold!

"CRISMUS GIF!" shouted Aunt Ca'line. "I done cotched de Crismus gif of all you all." Then with merry peals of laughter such as only a happy southern negro can utter, she marched in triumph from room to room to gather her spoils.

"Lawse me, Mrs. Hoggs, how'd you know I needed dese here purty new shoes? Is dey big enuf? You knows I wears 'lebens. Thank you, Miss Mamie! Ain't dat the purtiest shawl you ever seed? Honey, whar did you git it? You must a paid a lot fer it. What's dis

here boy got fer my Crismus gif? Why, Mister Willie! Ef you ain't done got your black mammy a calico dress! You shorely is de finest boy in all dis land. Thank you all so much—Oh, I thanks evy one for dese be-utiful Crismus Gifs. De Lawd will shorely bless you. Now lemme see what old Santa Claws don brung you chillun. He better had done lef a lot of purty things for de best white chillun dere is."

The best white children! How different when Christmas came! At other times Aunt Ca'line voiced her fears that I would close my earthly career in the penitentiary. But Christmas had cast its magic spell of goodness over everybody, even as the immaculate blanket of snow had mercifully covered all the landscape, hiding every ugly thing.

Much of Christmas day was spent by sister and me with Aunt Ca'line in the kitchen. A double motive kept us there, one was the wealth of delicious food in abundance; the other was to hear Aunt Ca'line sing and talk of Christmas. To the colored people, Christmas was the gift of freedom from all the drudgery of human existence. So freshly come from the fearful evils of slavery, the negroes of the South felt that this sacred day was a type of eternal emancipation. Finer intellects and minds far richer in wisdom have never given a more beautiful interpretation of the Lord's birthday.

"Little chillun," Aunt Ca'line said, half in soliloquy,

"Crismus ain't no ordinary day. Sunday is de Lawd's day, but Crismus is all de bes' of all de Sundays biled down inter one sweet day dat belongs ter Jesus. Ev'ybody ought ter love ev'ybody all de time lak dey does at Crismus time. We all ought ter be allers on de givin' han' like we is now. Seems like all de doors an' winders of people's hearts is open now. Dere ain't nobody stingy an' mean at Crismus. It's de Lawd, little chillun, it's de Lawd. He takes one day outen all de res' to make people fergit deyseves and think 'bout other people. Dat's jest de way us oughter live always."

The joy and peace that filled the dear old ex-slave's heart could no longer be kept in her bosom, so she burst into the rhythmic melody of her race, singing in a high treble:

*"Yes, ev'y day is er gwine ter be Crismus
By and by;
Nobody gwine ter be moanin' and sighin'
Er weepin' and er wailin', groanin' ner cryin'
Fer ev'y day's gwine ter be Crismus
After I die.
Come on, little chillun, come on;
Come on, bruther'n sister, come on;
Jine de band, de blessed gospel band,
Marchin' thu trubble to de Promis' Land:
Fer ev'y day's gwine ter be Crismus,
By and by."*

Again she fell into musing as she washed the dishes

while sister and I played with the pretty things that we had found in our Christmas stockings.

"Don't you chillun do like lots er people does when dey grows up. Dey gits cold and hard-hearted and loses de way to de Happy Land of Crismus. Always 'member, chillun, dat de pore world didn't have no Crismus 'fore Jesus come dat nite in Bethluhem. You see, dey had been hanging up dey stockings ever since Marsar Adam an' Missus Eve thought dey knowed more 'n de Lawd his sef, an' listened to de Ole Debil. He got 'em all messed up and ruint wid sin an' put offen de Paradice Plantation. All de people in de ole times, dey hung up dey stockings. Dere was Nora on de Ark; he hung up his stocking fer him an' his little chillun. Some wild bird built her nes' in it. He never got nuthin'. Den Aberham, he hung his'n up, 'n all he got was er disapintment. So wid little David, 'n all de heroes away back yander. But one night dis sinful wurd hung up its stocking, and God put de little baby Jesus in it. Chillun, dat's how come Crismus started. God caught de whole world's Crismus Gif. While dey wus asleep, He sont a passle of angels er serenading, and whilst de people was waking up and listening to de purty music, He cotched dey Crismus Gif, den He give 'em Jesus. When anybody catches yo' Crismus Gif, you has to giv' 'em somethin'. So you little chillun oughter give Him your hearts—dat's de present He

wants. Den some of dese days, He'll take Ole Aunt Ca'line, 'n your pore ole Uncle Dan—bof of us is mighty nigh wore out now. Den He'll take your mammy and pappy. But don't cry like dat, little chillun. Case He'll take you too. I shore would love to cook fer you all in de Land whar it's Crismus all de time."

That night, sister knelt by her little bed longer than usual. When I asked the reason, she said through her tears,

"I was just asking Jesus not to leave any of us behind so that all the family and Aunt Ca'line and Uncle Dan—all of us can be together where it's Christmas all the time."

Soon she was asleep with her pretty new dolly by her side and I dropped off into pleasant dreams with one wart-covered hand on my new wagon.

Uncle Dan went first; then Aunt Ca'line. Father followed next. Then sister fell asleep after having lost her two beautiful boys. Mother slipped away next, singing feebly as she left us, "O come, Angel Band." I do not know what ever became of sister's pretty dolls, but I know where the bodies of her little boys rest, waiting for the resurrection morning. Only two of the once large and happy family are left on this earth where we have only one Christmas day annually. But all the home folks left a testimony that they were going to the Land of Eternal Christmas.

When Christmas comes this time, I think I shall build a big fire on the hearth, and sit up much of the night, listening to the songs of other days. Surely Memory will tune me in on the kitchen of my boyhood, and let me hear Aunt Ca'line sing again:

*"Come on, little chillun, come on;
Come on, bruther 'n sister, come on;
Jine de band, de blessed gospel band,
Marchin' thu trubble to de Promis' Land:
Fer ev'y day's gwine ter be Crismus,
By and by."*



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