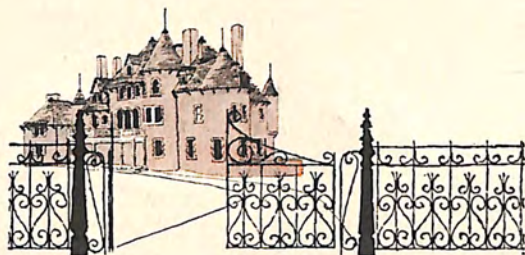


MARY HALBERT'S TWENTY-THIRD CHILD



THE Willard Home for Dependent Children was a venerable brick building which five decades of sunshine had turned to a rose-brown softness. It stood with gabled dignity among the same gnarled pecan trees which old K. T. Willard had budded himself more than half a century before.

In the evening, behind its filigree wrought-iron fence, the Willard Home grew massive in the shadows. Its shingled turrets, elaborately niched and corniced, jugged among the treetops, and in the gloom they resembled the towers and battlements of a giant's castle.

By ten o'clock the only square of light on the whole spectral façade was from the small window in Miss Halbert's room, on the northeast corner of the second floor. At ten-fifteen every night, right on the dot, it

blinked out. Punctuality and efficiency, the home's directors agreed, were two of Miss Halbert's most gratifying qualities.

By appointing her matron eighteen months before, the directors had averted a serious schism in West Grove's social set. Several local candidates for the post had been put forward by groups of determined clubwomen. Had any of them been appointed, swirls of jealousies and lingering antagonisms would have eddied through the town for years; so the board solved the problem by reaching to a smaller community, in another part of the state, for Miss Halbert's services.

As for Miss Halbert, it was not salary which induced her to accept the post—the difference amounted to less than ten dollars a week. And it was certainly not a hunger for prestige, for the matron of the home had only the most modest social standing. What led Mary Halbert to assume the burden of caring for twenty-three children rather than eleven was simply her sense of duty. Duty, she believed, was the most important principle of life, and service its most natural expression.

Perhaps this was because Mary Halbert had truly been [Continued on page 98]

Angelo was no angel—
but in his own small way
he was a messenger of God

A story by CHARLES CARVER



*"I wanted to leave this
under the tree," he said
in a frightened whisper*



Mary Halbert's Twenty-third Child

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duty's bondswoman every second of her thirty-eight years on earth. Orphaned at the age of five, she had spent her childhood nursing a tyrannical, shrewish, bedridden aunt, who had died with a final whimper of self-pity when Mary was eleven. The widowed uncle remarried with indecent haste, and the girl served her new aunt, a laconic, healthy woman, with the same silent obedience she had shown the other.

FROM her Bible she learned patience and forbearance. From her lonely childhood she learned self-reliance. As for the other emotions—well, she was a little suspicious of them and frightened.

Matters of emotion embarrassed Miss Halbert somewhat, and she managed the home very successfully on a completely impersonal basis. Nor was she of an especially motherlike appearance. She had a thin body and a habitual expression of worry on her thin face.

In the sentimental sense, there was little gentleness about Miss Halbert. She had received so little affection during her own childhood that she had become a stranger to the small kindnesses of the heart. Without being unduly brusque with them, she felt that the children would develop self-reliance more rapidly if they were protected from the softer emotions. Accordingly, she was strict without being arbitrary, and absolutely impartial in punishment and reward.

The children thrived—with one exception. And exceptions, to Miss Halbert, were very disconcerting.

The cause of this uneasiness was a six-year-old, melancholy youngster who had been admitted to the home three months before. Prosaically enough, he had been found asleep on a corner bench of the bus station. In one small, dirty hand he held a quarter, and in the pocket of his trousers they had found a penciled note: "This boy is called Angelo. His folks is dead and I can't take care of him no more. He is good boy please." Questioning only elicited that Angelo had been living with "Aunt Mina," and when no trace of her could be found, Angelo became Mary Halbert's twenty-third child.

He spoke rarely. When the others played games, he sat to one side and watched, dark eyes somber, face without expression. He was undernourished when he came, and Miss Halbert privately decided that regular meals would provide the answer. But Angelo gained no weight, and developed little appetite.

Occasionally, as she was reading to the children in the afternoon, she would look up from the book to see his dark eyes fixed upon her. Of course he was lonely and among strangers, but so were they all. She could provide food, shelter,

and clothing, and there were other children to play with. *What more could this child want?* she thought helplessly. Yet, as he looked at her with his wide, inscrutable eyes, she felt strangely inadequate. For the first time, a child was making her feel insufficient, yet her troubled spirit could find no answer.

THERE was perhaps one clue. The first night Angelo had spent at the home, he had done a surprising thing. It was Miss Halbert's custom, when all the children were in bed and just before turning out the lights, to walk through the dormitory rooms and pause at the foot of each bed. Here she would say "Good night" and call the child by name. It was a ritual she never omitted.

To make for Christmas

● **MATERIALS:** Lightweight cowhide, 2¼" x 8¾" and 3¾" x 6¾"; skiving knife; hole punch; household cement; thread; stain; wax.

Center card deck on 8¾" strip and mark folds. Moisten leather, bend, let dry. Bend 6¾" strip over deck and first strip. Skive overlap edges; punch holes for stitching. Cement overlap and cross-stitch. Stain and wax case.

Leather Card Case



When she had come to Angelo's bed that first evening, he had held out his arms to her, as though he expected to be kissed. It was such an impulsive, yet natural gesture that Miss Halbert had been completely nonplused. But remembering her rules, she had merely hesitated a moment, said "Good night, Angelo," and passed on to the next.

Partly to compensate for her sense of failure in bringing Angelo out of himself, Miss Halbert had done everything she could to make this Christmas at the Willard Home memorable. Outside there was no snow on the ground, but almost every window of the mansion boasted a laboriously made wreath, and there were paper angels silhouetted against the lower panes. The large gathering room, which had originally been Mr. Willard's library, was a confusion of large red candles, and festoons of paper chains. A Christmas tree stood at one end of the room. It was here the gifts would be placed.

Since there were no mothers or fathers to complete Christmas at the home, the matter of gifts was handled in a special way. Interested ladies from the town brought presents, selected after consulting with Miss Halbert. The stack of gifts in her bedroom was large this year, for she had campaigned zealously.

Those who had been in the home for any length of time knew that the packages would contain clothes and shoe-polish kits—practical things—but there would also be candy and a toy of some kind. The exciting thing was that whatever they received would be considered their very own to use and to cherish.

Miss Halbert had ruled that the children were not to give each other gifts for Christmas. Experience had taught her that such exchanges only led to unhappiness and jealousies, since some of the children were bound to be slighted.

The only exception to her rule was that a child might give a present to the home itself, something ornamental or useful such as a foot scraper, a birdhouse made in the woodworking shop, a crocheted doily, or a crayon drawing.

This rule led to another upsetting encounter with Angelo. As she had sat in the gathering room after supper, he had approached and stood solemnly, waiting to be recognized.

"Well, Angelo?"

He began to speak, then stopped.

"Come now, Angelo. What is it?"

He blushed. "Miss Halbert, it's about the presents."

"Yes?"

"Can't we give presents to . . . to people?"

She spoke brusquely. "No, Angelo, you can't. It wouldn't be fair. Some little boy or girl might be left out."

His eyes began to moisten, and she added softly, "If you've made something, why not give it to the home so everyone can enjoy it? That's much the nicest idea."

She remembered now that he had been spending a lot of time in the carpentry shop. She patted him on the arm. "Where are Joey and Paul and Lisa? I think I hear them playing in back. Why don't you run along and join them?"

Why was it that when the others had tears in their eyes, she never felt this way? With this boy it seemed to come straight from his small heart. One never knew exactly why he cried.

ON Christmas Eve, after the children's bedtime, Mary Halbert began sorting packages preparatory to taking them down to the tree. The wrappings were bright, and she checked each gift against her list of names. At Angelo's she paused. She knew what the package contained:

a comb, a cheap school kit with three pencils, and a pair of resoled black shoes. Not much to bring a gleam to the sad eyes, she reflected.

Before she fully realized what she was doing, Miss Halbert had unwrapped Angelo's package and slipped into it a small compass she had bought a week before. It was of burnished brass, with a needle of black and silver, and upon the rack Miss Halbert would never have admitted buying it for any particular child.

Angry at herself, hurriedly, Mary Halbert retied the package, filled her arms with the others, and went down the stairs to the shining tree.

At the door, she stopped in amazement. Back to her, small across the room, she saw Angelo's slender pajama-clad figure standing before the tree. In one hand was a crudely wrapped brown-paper parcel, tied with a piece of twine.

"Angelo!" Miss Halbert's frustration and helplessness turned to anger. Here was the one who had made her, for the first time in her life, feel somehow inadequate. Him and his hurt eyes and his chin that trembled like a baby's! What was a woman supposed to do? There were too many of them.

"What are you doing out of bed?" she said sharply.

"I wanted to leave this under the tree," he said in a frightened whisper.

"Is it for the home?" she demanded.

He shook his head. "No, ma'am."

"Well, then!" Miss Halbert jerked the package from his hand. "I'll dispose of this," she said sternly. "I told you once that we do not exchange gifts here. I will not have one little boy breaking the rules, do you hear?" She reached out and grasped his arm. It was pliant in her grip. "Go back to bed now, and no more sneaking about!"

She found herself trembling, less with anger than with an odd feeling of constriction. She stood without moving, looking after him, hearing his slippers pat-pat on the steps as he went back to his cot. The gathering room was empty again.

When she returned to her room for another armload of gifts, Miss Halbert took Angelo's package back with her, but it was not until after the Christmas preparations were completed downstairs that she had time to settle down wearily and to decide what, if anything, to do about his stubbornness.

SHE sat in the wicker rocking chair by the window and let the package fall into her lap. She hadn't been up this late for a long year, and she was tired. Christmas Eve—almost midnight—and as she sat there her mind drifted for a few moments, back along a dreary succession of Christmases spent with strangers.

She rocked and looked woodenly through the brittle lace of branches at the trim lawn, at the ornate fence beyond it. Loneliness stretched below her out there, like a lake of cold black water.

A church bell, pealing for midnight services, jerked Miss Halbert out of her reverie. She shook her head, as though to drive out the drab memories. She forced her mind back to the schedule. What was it she had sat down to do? Oh, yes—to find the reading for the service.

She lifted a Bible to her lap from its place on the table and began to turn the pages. Her eye was caught by a passage, and she began to read:

For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called:

But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty;

And base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen. . .

The words troubled Miss Halbert. Their meaning tantalized her. Restlessly she flipped the pages on toward the story of the first Christmas.

In doing so, she knocked from her lap the package she had confiscated from Angelo. She bent down, picked it up,

and weighed it in her hand a moment. It was very light and apparently made of wood. This bore out her guess that he had made something secretly in the woodworking shop.

She undid the twine and carefully removed the paper. It was just a plain wooden box, crudely nailed together, with a lid that opened on leather hinges.

Turning it over, she saw that he had painted initials on the lid, and added a decoration of flowers on the border.

M.H., she thought idly. *What child was M. H.? Mona—no, she wasn't an H. Michael—no, neither was he. And none of the H's had first names that began with M. Now that's queer*, she thought. Could it be that Angelo had made it for someone not actually in the home? One of the visiting ladies, perhaps?

Twelve o'clock was drawing closer. Another church began chiming the news throughout the town, then a third, and a fourth.

SUDDENLY, as though swept into her astonished mind by the cascade of sound, it came to Miss Halbert that the initials were hers, that the gift from the lonely boy was meant for her! And as she looked at the box held tightly in her hand, her tears made it shimmer like gold.

Through them, with a strangled clarity, she pictured the Aunt Mina Angelo had mentioned when he had first come. Aunt Mina must have given the boy love. She must have cuddled him and kissed him good night. Surely, she had instilled in him habits of affection, such as this Christmas gift, that the boy could not lightly break.

And that was exactly where she herself had failed. In the name of impartiality she had bottled up her love. She had stored it up as though it had to be rationed. She had forgotten the parable of the loaves and the fishes.

NOW Miss Halbert was not a woman to rock and weep for long. After a moment she rose, dried her tears, and walked quietly down to Angelo's cot.

He was fast asleep, curled up knee to chin. But in the half-light she saw tear-stains on his cheek.

A surge of tenderness leaped in her heart, no longer hobbled by theory or fright. It was strong and clear, and Miss Halbert rejoiced. She leaned over Angelo and kissed him, very gently. He stirred, smiled, and fell back into sleep.

Mary Halbert stood looking down at him. It was somehow as though she had never really seen him before. And it was the same at the next cot when she stopped to tuck in a blanket. For suddenly they were orphans no longer. They were her children, each and every one of them. Christmas had found its way into the heart of duty's child at last. THE END

(This story begins on page 28)

To make for Christmas

Chignon Pins

Feather Pins: 2 chopsticks; 2 feather birds; bead wire. Attach bird to stick 2"

from wide end by wrapping with wire. (A dab of cement will prevent it from sliding.)

Flower Pins: 2 chopsticks; several sprays small flowers; 2 long corks; sequin pins; household cement.

With kitchen knife, carve hole in one end of cork. Fill hole with cement, insert wide end of chopstick (chopsticks may be cut down if desired) and allow to dry. Cut flowers from stems and pin individually to cork.

