

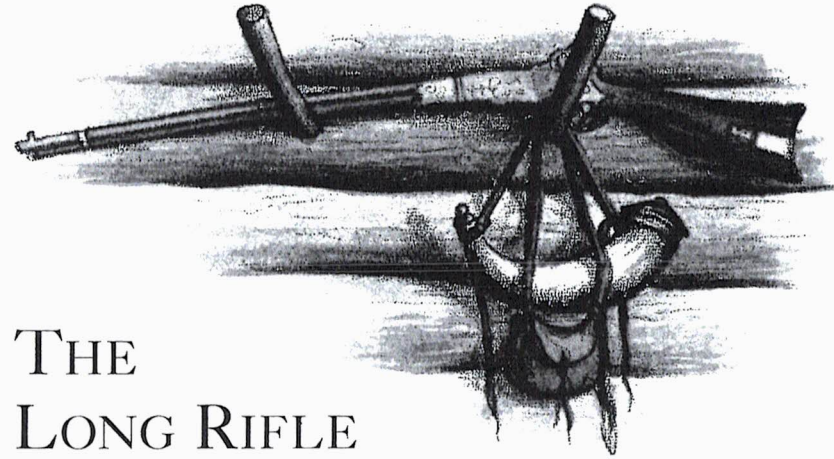
back with its claws. But Grandpa grabbed his gun from the wall and got to the window, just in time to shoot the panther dead.

“Grandpa said he would never again go into the Big Woods without his gun.”

When Pa told this story, Laura and Mary shivered and snuggled closer to him. They were safe and snug on his knees, with his strong arms around them.

They liked to be there, before the warm fire, with Black Susan purring on the hearth and good dog Jack stretched out beside her. When they heard a wolf howl, Jack’s head lifted and the hairs rose stiff along his back. But Laura and Mary listened to that lonely sound in the dark and the cold of the Big Woods, and they were not afraid.

They were cosy and comfortable in their little house made of logs, with the snow drifted around it and the wind crying because it could not get in by the fire.



THE LONG RIFLE

Every evening before he began to tell stories, Pa made the bullets for his next day’s hunting.

Laura and Mary helped him. They brought the big, long-handled spoon, and the box full of bits of lead, and the bullet-mold. Then while he squatted on the hearth and made the bullets, they sat one on each side of him, and watched.

First he melted the bits of lead in the big

spoon held in the coals. When the lead was melted, he poured it carefully from the spoon into the little hole in the bullet-mold. He waited a minute, then he opened the mold, and out dropped a bright new bullet onto the hearth.

The bullet was too hot to touch, but it shone so temptingly that sometimes Laura or Mary could not help touching it. Then they burned their fingers. But they did not say anything, because Pa had told them never to touch a new bullet. If they burned their fingers, that was their own fault; they should have minded him. So they put their fingers in their mouths to cool them, and watched Pa make more bullets.

There would be a shining pile of them on the hearth before Pa stopped. He let them cool, then with his jack-knife he trimmed off the little lumps left by the hole in the mold. He gathered up the tiny shavings of lead and saved them carefully, to melt again the next

time he made bullets.

The finished bullets he put into his bullet pouch. This was a little bag which Ma had made beautifully of buckskin, from a buck Pa had shot.

After the bullets were made, Pa would take his gun down from the wall and clean it. Out in the snowy woods all day, it might have gathered a little dampness, and the inside of the barrel was sure to be dirty from powder smoke.

So Pa would take the ramrod from its place under the gun barrel, and fasten a piece of clean cloth on its end. He stood the butt of the gun in a pan on the hearth and poured boiling water from the tea kettle into the gun barrel. Then quickly he dropped the ramrod in and rubbed it up and down, up and down, while the hot water blackened with powder smoke spurted out through the little hole on which the cap was placed when the gun was loaded.

Pa kept pouring in more water and washing

the gun barrel with the cloth on the ramrod until the water ran out clear. Then the gun was clean. The water must always be boiling, so that the heated steel would dry instantly.

Then Pa put a clean, greased rag on the ramrod, and while the gun barrel was still hot he greased it well on the inside. With another clean, greased cloth he rubbed it all over, outside, until every bit of it was oiled and sleek. After that he rubbed and polished the gunstock until the wood of it was bright and shining, too.

Now he was ready to load the gun again, and Laura and Mary must help him. Standing straight and tall, holding the long gun upright on its butt, while Laura and Mary stood on either side of him, Pa said:

“You watch me, now, and tell me if I make a mistake.”

So they watched very carefully, but he never made a mistake.

Laura handed him the smooth, polished

cowhorn full of gunpowder. The top of the horn was a little metal cap. Pa filled this cap full of the gunpowder and poured the powder down the barrel of the gun. Then he shook



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the gun a little, and tapped the barrel, to be sure that all the powder was together in the bottom.

"Where's my patch box?" he asked then, and Mary gave him the little tin box full of little pieces of greased cloth. Pa laid one of these bits of greasy cloth over the muzzle of the gun, put one of the shiny new bullets on it, and with the ramrod he pushed the bullet and the cloth down the gun barrel.

Then he pounded them tightly against the



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powder. When he hit them with the ramrod, the ramrod bounced up in the gun barrel, and Pa caught it and thrust it down again. He did this for a long time.

Next he put the ramrod back in its place against the gun barrel. Then taking a box of caps from his pocket, he raised the hammer of the gun and slipped one of the little bright caps over the hollow pin that was under the hammer.

He let the hammer down, slowly and carefully. If it came down quickly—bang!—the gun would go off.

Now the gun was loaded, and Pa laid it on its hooks over the door.

When Pa was at home the gun always lay across those two wooden hooks above the door. Pa had whittled the hooks out of a green stick with his knife, and had driven their straight ends deep into holes in the log. The hooked ends curved upward and held the gun securely.

The gun was always loaded, and always

above the door so that Pa could get it quickly and easily, any time he needed a gun.

When Pa went into the Big Woods, he always made sure that the bullet pouch was full of bullets, and that the tin patch box and the box of caps were with it in his pockets. The powder horn and a small sharp hatchet hung at his belt and he carried the gun ready loaded on his shoulder.

He always reloaded the gun as soon as he had fired it, for, he said, he did not want to meet trouble with an empty gun.

Whenever he shot at a wild animal, he had to stop and load the gun—measure the powder, put it in and shake it down, put in the patch and the bullet and pound them down, and then put a fresh cap under the hammer—before he could shoot again. When he shot at a bear or a panther, he must kill it with the first shot. A wounded bear or panther could kill a man before he had time to load his gun again.

But Laura and Mary were never afraid when Pa went alone into the Big Woods. They

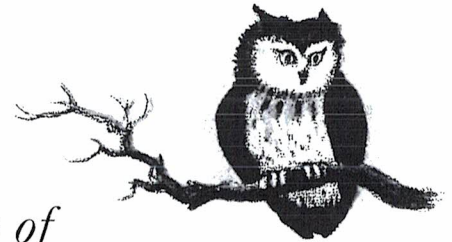
knew he could always kill bears and panthers with the first shot.

After the bullets were made and the gun was loaded, came story-telling time.

“Tell us about the Voice in the Woods,” Laura would beg him.

Pa crinkled up his eyes at her. “Oh, no!” he said. “You don’t want to hear about the time I was a naughty little boy.”

“Oh, yes, we do! We do!” Laura and Mary said. So Pa began.



The Story of Pa and the Voice in the Woods

“When I was a little boy, not much bigger than Mary, I had to go every afternoon to find the cows in the woods and drive them home. My father told me never to play by the way, but to hurry and bring the cows home before

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dark, because there were bears and wolves and panthers in the woods.

"One day I started earlier than usual, so I thought I did not need to hurry. There were so many things to see in the woods that I forgot that dark was coming. There were red squirrels in the trees, chipmunks scurrying through the leaves, and little rabbits playing games together in the open places. Little rabbits, you know, always have games together before they go to bed.

"I began to play I was a mighty hunter, stalking the wild animals and the Indians. I played I was fighting the Indians, until the woods seemed full of wild men, and then all at once I heard the birds twittering 'good night.' It was dusky in the path, and dark in the woods.

"I knew that I must get the cows home quickly, or it would be black night before they were safe in the barn. And I couldn't find the cows!

"I listened, but I could not hear their bells.

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I called, but the cows didn't come.

"I was afraid of the dark and the wild beasts, but I dared not go home to my father without the cows. So I ran through the woods, hunting and calling. All the time the shadows were getting thicker and darker, and the woods seemed larger, and the trees and the bushes looked strange.

"I could not find the cows anywhere. I climbed up hills, looking for them and calling, and I went down into dark ravines, calling and looking. I stopped and listened for the cow-bells and there was not a sound but the rustling of leaves.

"Then I heard loud breathing and thought a panther was there, in the dark behind me. But it was only my own breathing.

"My bare legs were scratched by the briars, and when I ran through the bushes their branches struck me. But I kept on, looking and calling, 'Sukey! Sukey!'

"'Sukey! Sukey!' I shouted with all my might. 'Sukey!'



“Right over my head something asked, ‘Who?’

“My hair stood straight on end.

“‘Who? Who?’ the Voice said again. And then *how* I did run!

“I forgot all about the cows. All I wanted was to get out of the dark woods, to get home.

“That thing in the dark came after me and called again, ‘Who-oo?’

“I ran with all my might. I ran till I couldn’t breathe and still I kept on running. Something grabbed my foot, and down I went. Up I jumped, and then I *ran*. Not even a wolf could have caught me.

“At last I came out of the dark woods, by the barn. There stood all the cows, waiting to be let through the bars. I let them in, and then ran to the house.

“My father looked up and said, ‘Young man, what makes you so late? Been playing by the way?’

“I looked down at my feet, and then I saw that one big-toe nail had been torn clean off. I



had been so scared that I had not felt it hurt until that minute.”

Pa always stopped telling the story here, and waited until Laura said:

“Go on, Pa! Please go on.”

“Well,” Pa said, “then your Grandpa went out into the yard and cut a stout switch. And he came back into the house and gave me a good thrashing, so that I would remember to mind him after that.

“‘A big boy nine years old is old enough to remember to mind,’ he said. ‘There’s a good reason for what I tell you to do,’ he said, ‘and if you’ll do as you’re told, no harm will come to you.’”

“Yes, yes, Pa!” Laura would say, bouncing up and down on Pa’s knee. “And then what did he say?”

“He said, ‘If you’d obeyed me, as you should, you wouldn’t have been out in the Big Woods after dark, and you wouldn’t have been scared by a screech-owl.’”



CHRISTMAS

Christmas was coming.

The little log house was almost buried in snow. Great drifts were banked against the walls and windows, and in the morning when Pa opened the door, there was a wall of snow as high as Laura’s head. Pa took the shovel and shoveled it away, and then he shoveled a path to the barn, where the horses and the cows were snug and warm in their stalls.

The days were clear and bright. Laura and Mary stood on chairs by the window and looked out across the glittering snow at the glittering trees. Snow was piled all along their bare, dark branches, and it sparkled in the sunshine. Icicles hung from the eaves of the house to the snowbanks, great icicles as large at the top as Laura's arm. They were like glass and full of sharp lights.

Pa's breath hung in the air like smoke, when he came along the path from the barn. He breathed it out in clouds and it froze in white frost on his mustache and beard.

When he came in, stamping the snow from his boots, and caught Laura up in a bear's hug against his cold, big coat, his mustache was beaded with little drops of melting frost.

Every night he was busy, working on a large piece of board and two small pieces. He whittled them with his knife, he rubbed them with sandpaper and with the palm of his hand, until when Laura touched them they felt soft

and smooth as silk.

Then with his sharp jack-knife he worked at them, cutting the edges of the large one into little peaks and towers, with a large star carved on the very tallest point. He cut little holes through the wood. He cut the holes in shapes of windows, and little stars, and crescent moons, and circles. All around them he carved tiny leaves, and flowers, and birds.

One of the little boards he shaped in a lovely curve, and around its edges he carved leaves and flowers and stars, and through it he cut crescent moons and curlicues.

Around the edges of the smallest board he carved a tiny flowering vine.

He made the tiniest shavings, cutting very slowly and carefully, making whatever he thought would be pretty.

At last he had the pieces finished and one night he fitted them together. When this was done, the large piece was a beautifully carved back for a smooth little shelf across its middle.

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The large star was at the very top of it. The curved piece supported the shelf underneath, and it was carved beautifully, too. And the little vine ran around the edge of the shelf.

Pa had made this bracket for a Christmas present for Ma. He hung it carefully against the log wall between the windows, and Ma stood her little china woman on the shelf.

The little china woman had a china bonnet on her head, and china curls hung against her china neck. Her china dress was laced across in front, and she wore a pale pink china apron and little gilt china shoes. She was beautiful, standing on the shelf with flowers and leaves and birds and moons carved all around her, and the large star at the very top.

Ma was busy all day long, cooking good things for Christmas. She baked salt-rising bread and rye'n'Injun bread, and Swedish crackers, and a huge pan of baked beans, with salt pork and molasses. She baked vinegar pies and dried-apple pies, and filled a big jar

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with cookies, and she let Laura and Mary lick the cake spoon.

One morning she boiled molasses and sugar together until they made a thick syrup, and Pa brought in two pans of clean, white snow from outdoors. Laura and Mary each had a pan, and Pa and Ma showed them how to pour the dark syrup in little streams onto the snow.

They made circles, and curlicues, and squiggledy things, and these hardened at once

and were candy. Laura and Mary might eat one piece each, but the rest was saved for Christmas Day.

All this was done because Aunt Eliza and Uncle Peter and the cousins, Peter and Alice and Ella, were coming to spend Christmas.

The day before Christmas they came. Laura and Mary heard the gay ringing of sleigh bells, growing louder every moment, and then the big bobsled came out of the woods and drove up to the gate. Aunt Eliza and Uncle Peter and the cousins were in it, all covered up, under blankets and robes and buffalo skins.

They were wrapped up in so many coats and mufflers and veils and shawls that they looked like big, shapeless bundles.

When they all came in, the little house was full and running over. Black Susan ran out and hid in the barn, but Jack leaped in circles through the snow, barking as though he would never stop. Now there were cousins to play with!

As soon as Aunt Eliza had unwrapped them, Peter and Alice and Ella and Laura and Mary began to run and shout. At last Aunt Eliza told them to be quiet. Then Alice said:

“I’ll tell you what let’s do. Let’s make pictures.”

Alice said they must go outdoors to do it, and Ma thought it was too cold for Laura to play outdoors. But when she saw how disappointed Laura was, she said she might go, after all, for a little while. She put on Laura’s coat and mittens and the warm cape with the hood, and wrapped a muffler around her neck, and let her go.

Laura had never had so much fun. All morning she played outdoors in the snow with Alice and Ella and Peter and Mary, making pictures. The way they did it was this:

Each one by herself climbed up on a stump, and then all at once, holding their arms out wide, they fell off the stumps into the soft, deep snow. They fell flat on their faces. Then they tried to get up without spoiling the

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marks they made when they fell. If they did it well, there in the snow were five holes, shaped almost exactly like four little girls and a boy, arms and legs and all. They called these their pictures.



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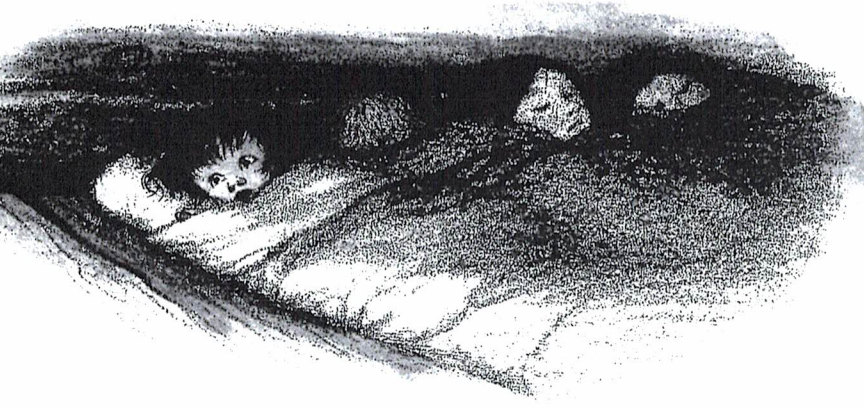
They played so hard all day that when night came they were too excited to sleep. But they must sleep, or Santa Claus would not come. So they hung their stockings by the fireplace, and said their prayers, and went to bed—Alice and Ella and Mary and Laura all in one big bed on the floor.

Peter had the trundle bed. Aunt Eliza and Uncle Peter were going to sleep in the big bed, and another bed was made on the attic floor for Pa and Ma. The buffalo robes and all the blankets had been brought in from Uncle Peter's sled, so there were enough covers for everybody.

Pa and Ma and Aunt Eliza and Uncle Peter sat by the fire, talking. And just as Laura was drifting off to sleep, she heard Uncle Peter say:

"Eliza had a narrow squeak the other day, when I was away at Lake City. You know Prince, that big dog of mine?"

Laura was wide awake at once. She always



liked to hear about dogs. She lay still as a mouse, and looked at the fire-light flickering on the log walls, and listened to Uncle Peter.

"Well," Uncle Peter said, "early in the morning Eliza started to the spring to get a pail of water, and Prince was following her. She got to the edge of the ravine, where the path goes down to the spring, and all of a sudden Prince set his teeth in the back of her skirt and pulled.

"You know what a big dog he is. Eliza scolded him, but he wouldn't let go, and he's so big and strong she couldn't get away from him. He kept backing and pulling, till he tore

a piece out of her skirt."

"It was my blue print," Aunt Eliza said to Ma.

"Dear me!" Ma said.

"He tore a big piece right out of the back of it," Aunt Eliza said. "I was so mad I could have whipped him for it. But he growled at me."

"Prince growled at you?" Pa said.

"Yes," said Aunt Eliza.

"So then she started on again toward the spring," Uncle Peter went on. "But Prince jumped into the path ahead of her and snarled at her. He paid no attention to her talking and scolding. He just kept on showing his teeth and snarling, and when she tried to get past him he kept in front of her and snapped at her. That scared her."

"I should think it would!" Ma said.

"He was so savage, I thought he was going to bite me," said Aunt Eliza. "I believe he would have."

"I never heard of such a thing!" said Ma. "What on earth did you do?"

"I turned right around and ran into the house where the children were, and slammed the door," Aunt Eliza answered.

"Of course Prince was savage with strangers," said Uncle Peter. "But he was always so kind to Eliza and the children I felt perfectly safe to leave them with him. Eliza couldn't understand it at all.

"After she got into the house he kept pacing around it and growling. Every time she started to open the door he jumped at her and snarled."

"Had he gone mad?" said Ma.

"That's what I thought," Aunt Eliza said. "I didn't know what to do. There I was, shut up in the house with the children, and not daring to go out. And we didn't have any water. I couldn't even get any snow to melt. Every time I opened the door so much as a crack, Prince acted like he would tear me to pieces."

"How long did this go on?" Pa asked.

"All day, till late in the afternoon," Aunt Eliza said. "Peter had taken the gun, or I would have shot him."

"Along late in the afternoon," Uncle Peter said, "he got quiet, and lay down in front of the door. Eliza thought he was asleep, and she made up her mind to try to slip past him and get to the spring for some water.

"So she opened the door very quietly, but of course he woke up right away. When he saw she had the water pail in her hand, he got up and walked ahead of her to the spring, just the same as usual. And there, all around the spring in the snow, were the fresh tracks of a panther."

"The tracks were as big as my hand," said Aunt Eliza.

"Yes," Uncle Peter said, "he was a big fellow. His tracks were the biggest I ever saw. He would have got Eliza sure, if Prince had let her go to the spring in the morning. I saw the

tracks. He had been lying up in that big oak over the spring, waiting for some animal to come there for water. Undoubtedly he would have dropped down on her.

"Night was coming on, when she saw the tracks, and she didn't waste any time getting back to the house with her pail of water. Prince followed close behind her, looking back into the ravine now and then."

"I took him into the house with me," Aunt Eliza said, "and we all stayed inside, till Peter came home."

"Did you get him?" Pa asked Uncle Peter.

"No," Uncle Peter said. "I took my gun and hunted all round the place, but I couldn't find him. I saw some more of his tracks. He'd gone on north, farther into the Big Woods."

Alice and Ella and Mary were all wide awake now, and Laura put her head under the covers and whispered to Alice, "My! weren't you scared?"

Alice whispered back that she was scared,

but Ella was scareder. And Ella whispered that she wasn't, either, any such thing.

"Well, anyway, you made more fuss about being thirsty," Alice whispered.

They lay there whispering about it till Ma said: "Charles, those children never will get to sleep unless you play for them." So Pa got his fiddle.

The room was still and warm and full of fire-light. Ma's shadow, and Aunt Eliza's and Uncle Peter's were big and quivering on the walls in the flickering fire-light, and Pa's fiddle sang merrily to itself.

It sang "Money Musk," and "The Red Heifer," "The Devil's Dream," and "Arkansas Traveler." And Laura went to sleep while Pa and the fiddle were both softly singing:

"My darling Nelly Gray, they have taken
you away,
And I'll never see my darling any more. . . ."

In the morning they all woke up almost at

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the same moment. They looked at their stockings, and something was in them. Santa Claus had been there. Alice and Ella and Laura in their red flannel nightgowns, and Peter in his red flannel nightshirt, all ran shouting to see what he had brought.

In each stocking there was a pair of bright red mittens, and there was a long, flat stick of red-and-white-striped peppermint candy, all beautifully notched along each side.

They were all so happy they could hardly speak at first. They just looked with shining eyes at those lovely Christmas presents. But Laura was happiest of all. Laura had a rag doll.

She was a beautiful doll. She had a face of white cloth with black



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button eyes. A black pencil had made her eyebrows, and her cheeks and her mouth were red



with the ink made from pokeberries. Her hair was black yarn that had been knit and raveled, so that it was curly.

She had little red flannel stockings and little black cloth gaiters for shoes, and her dress was pretty pink and blue calico.

She was so beautiful that Laura could not say a word. She just held her tight and forgot everything else. She did not know that everyone was looking at her, till Aunt Eliza said:

“Did you ever see such big eyes!”

The other girls were not jealous because Laura had mittens, and candy, *and* a doll, because Laura was the littlest girl, except Baby Carrie and Aunt Eliza’s little baby, Dolly Varden. The babies were too small for dolls. They were so small they did not even know about Santa Claus. They just put their fingers in their mouths and wriggled because of all the excitement.

Laura sat down on the edge of the bed and held her doll. She loved her red mittens and

she loved the candy, but she loved her doll best of all. She named her Charlotte.

Then they all looked at each other’s mittens, and tried on their own, and Peter bit a large piece out of his stick of candy, but Alice and Ella and Mary and Laura licked theirs, to make it last longer.

“Well, well!” Uncle Peter said. “Isn’t there even one stocking with nothing but a switch in it? My, my, have you all been such good children?”

But they didn’t believe that Santa Claus could, really, have given any of them nothing but a switch. That happened to some children, but it couldn’t happen to them. It was so hard to be good all the time, every day, for a whole year.

“You mustn’t tease the children, Peter,” Aunt Eliza said.

Ma said, “Laura, aren’t you going to let the other girls hold your doll?” She meant, “Little girls must not be so selfish.”

So Laura let Mary take the beautiful doll, and then Alice held her a minute, and then Ella. They smoothed the pretty dress and admired the red flannel stockings and the gaiters, and the curly woolen hair. But Laura was glad when at last Charlotte was safe in her arms again.

Pa and Uncle Peter had each a pair of new, warm mittens, knit in little squares of red and white. Ma and Aunt Eliza had made them.

Aunt Eliza had brought Ma a large red apple stuck full of cloves. How good it smelled! And it would not spoil, for so many cloves would keep it sound and sweet.

Ma gave Aunt Eliza a little needle-book she had made, with bits of silk for covers and soft white flannel leaves into which to stick the needles. The flannel would keep the needles from rusting.

They all admired Ma's beautiful bracket, and Aunt Eliza said that Uncle Peter had made one for her—of course, with different carving.

Santa Claus had not given them anything at all. Santa Claus did not give grown people presents, but that was not because they had not been good. Pa and Ma were good. It was because they were grown up, and grown people must give each other presents.

Then all the presents must be laid away for a little while. Peter went out with Pa and Uncle Peter to do the chores, and Alice and Ella helped Aunt Eliza make the beds, and Laura and Mary set the table, while Ma got breakfast.

For breakfast there were pancakes, and Ma made a pancake man for each one of the children. Ma called each one in turn to bring her plate, and each could stand by the stove and watch, while with the spoonful of batter Ma put on the arms and the legs and the head. It was exciting to watch her turn the whole little man over, quickly and carefully, on a hot griddle. When it was done, she put it smoking hot on the plate.

Peter ate the head off his man, right away.

But Alice and Ella and Mary and Laura ate theirs slowly in little bits, first the arms and legs and then the middle, saving the head for the last.

Today the weather was so cold that they could not play outdoors, but there were the new mittens to admire, and the candy to lick. And they all sat on the floor together and looked at the pictures in the Bible, and the pictures of all kinds of animals and birds in Pa's big green book. Laura kept Charlotte in her arms the whole time.

Then there was the Christmas dinner. Alice and Ella and Peter and Mary and Laura did not say a word at table, for they knew that children should be seen and not heard. But they did not need to ask for second helpings. Ma and Aunt Eliza kept their plates full and let them eat all the good things they could hold.

"Christmas comes but once a year," said Aunt Eliza.

Dinner was early, because Aunt Eliza,



Uncle Peter and the cousins had such a long way to go.

"Best the horses can do," Uncle Peter said, "we'll hardly make it home before dark."

So as soon as they had eaten dinner, Uncle Peter and Pa went to put the horses to the sled, while Ma and Aunt Eliza wrapped up the cousins.

They pulled heavy woolen stockings over the woolen stockings and the shoes they were already wearing. They put on mittens and coats and warm hoods and shawls, and wrapped mufflers around their necks and thick woolen veils over their faces. Ma slipped piping hot baked potatoes into their pockets to keep their fingers warm, and Aunt Eliza's flatirons were hot on the stove, ready to put at their feet in the sled. The blankets and the quilts and the buffalo robes were warmed, too.

So they all got into the big bobsled, cosy and warm, and Pa tucked the last robe well in around them.

"Good-by! Good-by!" they called, and off they went, the horses trotting gaily and the sleigh bells ringing.

In just a little while the merry sound of the bells was gone, and Christmas was over. But what a happy Christmas it had been!



SUNDAYS

Now the winter seemed long. Laura and Mary began to be tired of staying always in the house. Especially on Sundays, the time went so slowly.

Every Sunday Mary and Laura were dressed from the skin out in their best clothes, with fresh ribbons in their hair. They were very clean, because they had their baths on Saturday night.

In the summer they were bathed in water