

SUSAN COOLIDGE, VARIOUS

**WHO ATE THE
PINK
SWEETMEAT?**

Susan Coolidge

Who ate the pink sweetmeat?

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Susan Coolidge

Who ate the pink sweetmeat? / And Other Christmas Stories

WHO ATE THE PINK SWEETMEAT?

Only three pairs of stockings were left in the shop. It was a very little shop indeed, scarcely larger than a stall. Job Tuke, to whom it belonged, was not rich enough to indulge in the buying of any superfluous wares. Every spring he laid in a dozen dozen of thin stockings, a bale of cheap handkerchiefs, a gross of black buttons, a gross of white, a little stationery, and a few other small commodities. In the autumn he added a dozen dozen of thick stockings, and a box full of mittens and knitted comforters. Beside these he sold penny papers, and home-made yeast made by Mrs. Tuke. If the stock of wearables grew scant toward midwinter, Job rejoiced in his heart, but by no means made haste to replenish it. He just laid aside the money needed for the spring outfit, and lived on what remained. Thus it went year after year. Trade was sometimes a little better, sometimes a little worse, but whichever way it was, Job grew no richer. He and his old wife lived along somehow without coming on the parish for support, and with this very moderate amount of prosperity they were content.

This year of which I write, the supply of winter stockings had given out earlier than usual. The weather had been uncommonly cold since October, which may have been the reason. Certain it is, that here at Michaelmas, with December not yet come in, only three pairs of stockings were left in the little shop. Job Tuke had told his wife only the week before that he almost thought he should be forced to lay in a few dozen more, folks seemed so eager to get 'em. But since he said that, no one had asked for stockings, as it happened, and Job thinking that trade was, after all, pretty well over for the season, had given up the idea of replenishing his stock.

One of the three pairs of stockings was a big pair of dark mixed gray. One pair, a little smaller, was white, and the third, smaller still and dark blue in color, was about the size for a child of seven or eight years old.

Job Tuke had put up the shutters for the night and had gone to bed. The stockings were talking together in the quiet darkness, as stockings will when left alone. One pair had been hung in the window.

It had got down from its nail, and was now straddling carelessly with one leg on either side of the edge of the box in which the others lay, as a boy might on the top of a stile. This was the big gray pair.

“Our chances seem to be getting slim,” he said gloomily.

“That is more than you seem,” replied the White Stockings, in a tart voice. “Your ankles are as thick as ever, and your mesh looks to me coarser than usual to-night.”

“There are worse things in the world than thickness,” retorted the Gray Stockings angrily. “I’m useful, at any rate, I am, while you have no wear in you. I should say that you would come to darning about the second wash, if not sooner.”

“Is that my fault?” said the White Pair, beginning to cry.

“No; it’s your misfortune. But people as unfortunate as you are should mind their P’s and Q’s, and not say disagreeable things to those who are better off.”

“Pray don’t quarrel,” put in the Little Blues, who were always peacemakers. “Think of our situation, the last survivors of twelve dozen! we ought to be friends. But, as you say, matters *are* getting serious with us. Of course we are all thinking about the same thing.”

“Yes; about the Christmas, and the chimney corner,” sighed the White Pair. “What a dreadful thing it would be if we went to the rag-bag never having held a Christmas gift. I could not get over such a disgrace. My father, my grandfather – all my relations had their chance – some of them were even hung a second time!”

“Yes; Christmas is woven into our very substance,” said the Gray Stockings. “The old skeins and the ravellings tell the story to the new wool, the story of the Christmas time. The very sheep in the fields know it. For my part,” he added proudly, “I should blush to lie in the same ash-heap even with an odd stocking who had died under the disgrace of never being hung up for Christmas, and I will never believe that my lifelong dream is to be disappointed!”

“Why will you use such inflated language?” snapped the White Pair. “You were only woven last July. As late as May you were running round the meadow on a sheep’s back.”

“Very well; I don’t dispute it. I may not be as old as Methuselah, but long or short, my life is my life, and my dream is my dream, and you have no call to criticize my expressions, Miss!” thunders the Big Pair.

“There you are again,” said the Little Blues. “I *do* wish you wouldn’t dispute. Now let us talk about our chances. What day of the month is it?”

“The twenty-seventh of November,” said the Gray Stockings, who, because they hung over the penny papers in the window, always knew the exact date.

“Little more than four weeks to the holidays,” said the White Pair dolorously. “How I wish some one would come along and put us out of suspense.”

“Being bought mightn’t do that,” suggested the Little Blues. “You might be taken by a person who had two pairs of stockings, and the others might be chosen to be hung up. Such things do happen.”

“Oh, they wouldn’t happen to me, I think,” said the White Pair vain-gloriously.

As it happened, the three pairs of stockings were all sold the very day after this conversation, and all to one and the same person. This was Mrs. Wendte, an Englishwoman married to a Dutch shipwright. She had lived in Holland for some years after her marriage, but now she and her husband lived in London. They had three children.

The stockings were very much pleased to be bought. When Job Tuke rolled them up in paper and tied a stout packthread round them, they nestled close, and squeezed each other with satisfaction. Besides the joy of being sold, was the joy of keeping together and knowing about each other’s adventures.

The first of these adventures was not very exciting. It consisted in being laid away in the back part of a bureau drawer, and carefully locked in.

“Now what is this for?” questioned the White Stockings. “Are we to stay here always?”

“Yes; that is just what I should like to know,” grumbled the Big Gray ones.

“Why, of course not! Who ever heard of stockings being put away for always?” said the very wise Little Blues. “Wait patiently and we shall see. I think it is some sort of a surprise.”

But day after day passed and nothing happened, surprising or otherwise, till even the philosophical Little Blue Stockings began to lose heart and hope. At last, one evening they heard the key click in the lock of the drawer, a stream of light flashed into their darkness, and they were seized and drawn forth.

“Well, mother, let us see thy purchase. Truly fine hosen they are,” said Jacob Wendte, whose English was rather foreign.

“Yes,” replied his wife. “Good, handsome stockings they are, and the children will be glad, for their old ones are about worn out. The big pair is for Wilhelm, as thou knowest. Those must hang to the right of the stove.”

The Big Gray Pair cast a triumphant glance at his companions as he found himself suspended on a stout nail. This *was* something like life!

“The white are for Greta, and these small ones for little Jan. Ah, they are nice gifts indeed!” said Mrs. Wendte, rubbing her hands. “A fine Christmas they will be for the children.”

The stockings glowed with pleasure. Not only were they hung up to contain presents, but they themselves were Christmas gifts! This was promotion indeed.

“Hast thou naught else?” demanded Jacob Wendte of his wife.

“No great things; a kerchief for Greta, this comforter for Wilhelm, for the little one, mittens. That is all.”

But it was not quite all, for after her husband had gone to bed, Mrs. Wendte, a tender look on her motherly face, sought out a small, screwed-up paper, and with the air of one who is a little ashamed of what she is doing, dropped into each stocking a something made of sugar. They were not sugar almonds, they were not Salem Giblaltars – which delightful confections are unfamiliar to London shops – but irregular lumps of a nondescript character, which were crumbly and sweet, and would be sure to please those who did not often get a taste of candy. It was of little Jan that his mother had thought when she bought the sweetmeats, and for his sake she had yielded to the temptation, though she looked upon it as an extravagance. There were three of the sweetmeats – two white, one pink – and the pink one went into Jan’s stockings. Mrs. Wendte had not said anything about them to her husband.

“Well, this is satisfactory,” said the Gray Pair, when Mrs. Wendte had left the room, and he was sure of not being overheard. “Here we are all hanging together on Christmas Eve. My dream is accomplished.”

“Mine isn’t,” said the White Pair plaintively. “I always hoped that I should hold something valuable, like a watch, or a pair of earrings. It is rather a come-down to have nothing but a bit of candy inside, and a pocket handkerchief pinned to my leg. I don’t half like it. It gives me an uncomfortable pricking sensation, like a stitch in the side.”

“It’s just as well for you to get used to it,” put in the Gray. “It doesn’t prick as much as a darning needle, I fancy, and you’ll have to get accustomed to that before long, as I’ve remarked before.”

“I’m the only one who has a pink sweetmeat,” said the Little Blues, who couldn’t help being pleased. “And I’m for a real child. Wilhelm and Greta are more than half grown up.”

“Real children are very hard on their stockings, I’ve always heard,” retorted the White Pair, who never could resist the temptation to say a disagreeable thing.

“That may be, but it is all in the future. This one night is my own, and I mean to enjoy it,” replied the contented Little Blue.

So the night went, and now it was the dawn of Christmas. With the first light the door opened softly and a little boy crept into the room. This was Jan. When he saw the three pairs of stockings hanging by the stove, he clapped his hands together, but softly, lest the noise should wake the others. Then he crossed the room on tiptoe and looked hard at the stockings. He soon made sure which pair was for himself, but he did not take them down immediately; only stood with his hands behind his back and gazed at them with two large, pleased eyes.

At last he put his hand up and gently touched the three, felt the little blue pair, gave it a pat, and finally unhooked it from its nail. Then he sat down on the floor, and began to put them on. His toe encountering an obstacle, he pulled the stocking off again, put his hand in, and extracted the pink sweetmeat, with which he was so pleased that he laughed aloud. That woke up the others, who presently came in.

“Ah, little rogue that thou art! Always the first to waken,” said his mother, pleased at his pleasure.

“See, mother! see what I found!” he cried. “It is good – sweet! I have tasted a crumb already. Take some of it, mother.”

But Mrs. Wendte shook her head.

“No,” she said. “I do not care for sugar. That is for little folks like thee. Eat it thyself, Jan.”

It was her saying this, perhaps, which prevented Wilhelm and Greta from making the same offer – at least, I hope so. Certain it is that neither of them made it. Greta ate hers up on the spot, with the frank greediness of a girl of twelve who does not often get candy. Wilhelm buttoned his up in his trousers pocket. All three made haste to put on the new stockings. The three pairs had only time to hastily whisper as they were separated:

“To-night perhaps we may meet again.”

The pink sweetmeat went into the pocket of Jan’s jacket, and he carried it about with him all the morning. He did not eat it, because once eaten it would be gone, and it was a greater pleasure to have it to look forward to, than to enjoy it at the moment. Jan was a thrifty little boy, as you perceive.

Being Christmas, it was of course an idle day. Jacob Wendte never knew what to do with such. There was his pipe, and there was beer to be had, so in default of other occupation, he amused himself with these. Mrs. Wendte had her hands full with the dinner, and was frying sausages and mixing Yorkshire pudding all the morning. Only Greta went to church. She belonged to a parish-school where they gave Christmas prizes, and by no means intended to lose her chance; but, apart from that, she really loved church-going, for she spoke English and understood it better than either of the other children. Wilhelm went off on errands of his own.

Little Jan spent the morning in admiring his stockings, and in wrapping and unwrapping his precious sweetmeat, and taking it out of his pocket and putting it in again.

“Why dost thou not eat it, dear?” asked his mother, as she lifted the frying-pan from the stove.

But he answered: “Oh! not yet. When once it is eaten, it is over. I will wait.”

“How long wilt thou wait?” she asked.

Jan said bashfully: “I don’t know.”

In truth, he had not made up his mind about the sweetmeat, only he felt instinctively that he did not want to hurry and shorten his pleasure.

Dinner over, he went out for a walk. Every now and then, as he marched along, his hand would steal into his pocket to finger his precious candy and make sure that it was safe.

It was a gray afternoon, but not snowing or raining. Hyde Park was not too far away for a walk, and Jan went there. The Serpentine was skimmed over with ice just strong enough to bear boys, and quite a little crowd was sliding or skating upon it. Jan could skate very well. He had learned in Holland, but he made no attempt to join the crowd. He was rather shy of English boys, for they sometimes laughed at his Hollander clothes or his Dutch accent, and he did not like to be laughed at.

So he strolled away, past the Serpentine and the skaters, and watched the riders in the Row for awhile. There were not a great many, for people who ride are apt to be out of London at the Christmas time; but there were some pretty horses, and one fair little girl on a pony who took Jan’s fancy very much. He stood for a long time watching her trot up and down, and the idea occurred to him that he would like to give her his sweetmeat. He even put his hand into his pocket and half pulled it out, but the little girl did not look his way, and presently her father, with whom she was riding, spoke to her, and she turned her horse’s head and trotted off through the marble arch. Jan dropped the sugar-plum again into his pocket, and felt as if his sudden fancy had been absurd; and indeed I think the little girl would have been surprised and puzzled what to do had he carried out the intention.

After the pony and his little mistress had departed, Jan lost his interest in the riders, and walked away across the park. Once he stopped to look at a dear little dog with a blue collar, who seemed to have lost his master, for he was wandering about by himself, and smelling everybody and everything he met, as if to recover a lost trail. Jan called him. He came up in a very friendly way and allowed himself to be patted, and once more the sweetmeat was in danger, for Jan had taken it out with the intention of dividing it with this new friend, when a whistle was heard which

the little dog evidently recognized, and he darted off at once to join his master. So again the pink sweetmeat was put back into Jan's pocket, and he walked on.

He had gone quite a distance when he saw a number of people collected round the foot of a tree. A ladder was set against one of the lower branches, and a man had climbed up nearly to the top of the tree. Jan, like a true boy, lost no time in joining the crowd, but at first he could not make out what was going on. The boughs were thick. All that he could see was the man's back high up overhead, and what he was doing he could not guess.

A benevolent-looking old gentleman stood near and Jan heard him exclaim with great excitement:

"There, he's got him! No, he's not; but it was a close shave!"

"Got what, sir?" he ventured to ask.

"Why, the rook, to be sure."

Then, seeing that Jan still looked puzzled, he took the trouble to explain.

"You see that rook up there, my lad, don't you?" Jan had not seen any rook at all! "Well, it is caught in some way, how, I can't tell you, but it can't get away from the tree. It has been there three days, they say, and all that time the other rooks have brought food to it, and kept it from starving. Now some one has gone up to see what is the difficulty, and, if possible, to set the poor thing free."

"Thank you, sir," said Jan.

And the old gentleman looked at him kindly, and said to himself:

"A very civil, tidy little lad! I like his face."

Jan had now become deeply interested in what was going on. He stood on tiptoe, and stretched his neck; but all he could see was the man's back and one of his feet, and now and then the movement of a stick with which the man seemed to be trying to hit something. At last there was a great plunge and a rustling of branches, and people began to hurrah. Jan hurrahed too, though he still saw nothing very clearly; but it is easier to shout when other boys shout, if you happen to be a boy, than it is to keep still.

Slowly the man in the tree began to come down. He had only one hand to help himself with now, for the other held the heavy rook. We in America do not know what rooks are like, but in England they are common enough. They are large black birds, something like our crows, but they look wiser, and are a good deal bigger.

As the man neared the ground every one in the crowd could see what had been the matter with the rook. A kite-string caught among the tree branches, had tangled his legs and held him fast. He had pulled so hard in his efforts to escape that the string had cut into one of his legs and half broken it. It was stiff and bleeding, and the rook could neither fly nor hop. People searched in their pockets, and one little girl, who had a half biscuit, fed the rook, who, for all the kindly efforts of his friends, seemed to be half-famished. The poor thing was too weak to struggle or be frightened, and took the crumbs eagerly from the girl's hand.

Jan thought of his sweetmeat, and took it out for the third time. Everybody was crowding round the man who held the rook, and he could not get near. A tall policeman stood in front of him. Jan pulled his arm, and when he turned, handed him the sweetmeat, and said in his soft, foreign English:

"For the bird, sir."

"Thank you my dear," said the policeman.

He had not understood what Jan said, and in an abstracted way, with his eyes still fixed on the rook, he bit the pink sweetmeat in two, and swallowed half of it at a mouthful. Fortunately Jan did not see this, for the policeman's back was turned to him; but observing that the man made no attempt to go forward, he pulled his sleeve for the second time, and again said:

"For the bird, I said, sir."

This time the policeman heard, and taking one step forward, he held the remaining half of the sweetmeat out to the rook, who, having by this time grown used to being fed, took the offered dainty greedily. Jan saw the last pink crumb vanish into the long beak, but he felt no regret. His heart had been touched by the suffering of the poor bird, and he was glad to give what he could to make it forget those painful days in the tree.

So that was the end of the pink sweetmeat, or not quite the end. The kind old gentleman to whom Jan had spoken, had noticed the little transaction with the policeman. He was shrewd as well as kind.

He guessed by Jan's clothes that he was a working-man's son, to whom sweets were not an everyday affair, and the generous act pleased him. So he put his hand into *his* pocket, pulled out a half-crown, and watching his opportunity, dropped it into Jan's pocket, quite empty now that the sweetmeat was gone. Then, with a little chuckle, he walked away, and Jan had no suspicion of what had been done to him.

Gradually the crowd dispersed, Jan among the rest walking briskly, for he wanted to get home and tell his mother the story. It was not till after supper that he discovered the half-crown, and then it seemed to him like a sort of dream, as if fairies had been at work, and turned the pink sweetmeat into a bit of silver.

That night the three pairs of stockings had another chance for conversation. The blue ones and the green ones lay close together on the floor of the room where Jan slept with his brother, and the white ones which Greta had carelessly dropped as she jumped into bed, were near enough the half-opened door to talk across the sill.

"It has been an exciting day," said the White Pair. "My girl got a Keble's *Christian Year* at her school. It was the second-best prize. It is a good thing to belong to respectable people who take prizes. Only one thing was painful to me, she wriggled her toes so with pleasure that I feel as if I were coming to an end in one of my points."

"You probably are," remarked the Big Gray. "Yes, now that I examine, I can see the place. One stitch has parted already, and there is quite a thin spot. You know I always predicted that you would be in the rag-bag before you knew it."

"Oh, don't say such dreadful things," pleaded the Little Blues. "Mrs. Wendte will mend her, I am sure, and make her last. What did your girl do with her sweetmeat?"

"Ate it up directly, of course. What else should one do with a sweetmeat?" snapped the White Pair crossly. "Oh, dear! my toe feels dreadfully ever since you said that; quite neuralgic!"

"My boy was not so foolish as to eat his sweetmeat," said the Big Gray stockings. "Only girls act in that way, without regard to anything but their greedy appetites. He traded his with another boy, and he got a pocket-knife for it, three screws, and a harmonica. There!"

"Was the knife new?" asked the Blue.

"Could the harmonica play any music?" demanded the White.

"No; the harmonica is out of order inside somehow, but perhaps my boy can mend it. And the knife isn't new – quite old, in fact – and its blade is broken at the end; still it's a knife, and Wilhelm thinks he can trade it off for something else. And now for your adventures. What did *your* boy do with his sweetmeat, Little Blues? Did he eat it, or trade it?"

"It is eaten," replied the Blue Stockings cautiously.

"Eaten! Then of course he ate it. Why don't you speak out? If he ate it, say so. If he didn't, who did?"

"Well, nobody ate the whole of it, and my boy didn't eat any. It was divided between two persons – or rather, between one person and – and – a thing that is not a person."

"Bless me! What are you talking about? I never heard anything so absurd in my life. Persons, and things that are not persons," said the White Pair, "what do you mean?"

“Yes; what *do* you mean? What is the use of beating about the bush in this way?” remonstrated the Big Gray Pair. “Who did eat the sweetmeat? Say plainly.”

“Half of it was eaten by a policeman, and the other half by a rook,” replied the Little Blues, in a meek voice.

“Ho, ho!” roared the Gray Stockings, while the White Pair joined in with a shrill giggle. “That beats all! Half by a policeman, and half by a rook! A fine way to dispose of a Christmas sweetmeat! Your boy must be a fool, Little Blues.”

“Not a fool at all,” said the Blue Pair indignantly. “Now just listen to me. Your girl ate hers up at once, and forgot it. Your boy traded his away; and what has he got? A broken knife, and a harmonica that can’t play music. I don’t call those worth having. My boy enjoyed his sweetmeat all day. He had more pleasure in giving it away than if he had eaten it ten times over! Beside he got half a crown for it. An old gentleman slipped it into his pocket because he was pleased with his kind heart. I saw him do it.”

“Half a crown!” ejaculated the White Pair, with amazement.

“That *is* something like,” admitted the Big Gray Stockings. “Your boy did the best of the three, I admit.”

The Little Blues said no more.

Presently the others fell asleep, but she lay and watched Jan as he rested peacefully beside his brother, with his wonderful treasure – the silver coin – clasped tight in his hand. He smiled in his sleep as though his dreams were pleasant.

“Even if he had no half-crown, still he would have done the best,” she whispered to herself at last.

Then the clock struck twelve, and the day after Christmas was begun.

THE WHIZZER

That was a cold evening. The snow was just as dry as flour, and had been beat down till the road looked slick as a ribbon far up and far down, and squeaked every step. I pulled Mrar on our sled. All the boys went home by the crick to skate, but I was 'fraid Mrar would get cold, she's such a little thing. I like to play with the girls if the boys do laugh, for some of the big ones might push Mrar down and hurt her. She misses her mother so I babies her more than I used to.

We's almost out of sight of the schoolhouse, and just where the road elbows by the Widow Briggs's place, when something passed us like whiz! I'd been pulling along with the sled rope over my arm, and my hands in my pockets, and didn't hear a team or anything, but it made me shy off the side of the road, and pretty near upset Mrar. School lets out at four o'clock, and dusk comes soon after that, but it was woolly gray yet, so you could see plain except in the fence corners, and the thing that passed us was a man riding on nothing but one big wheel.

"O, see there!" says Mrar, scared as could be. I felt glad on her account we's close to Widow Briggs's place. It would be easy to hustle her over Briggs's fence; but the thing run so still and fast it might take fences as well as a straight road.

The man turned round after he passed us, and came rearing back, away up on that wheel, and I stood as close before the sled as I could. He sat high up in the air, and wiggled his feet on each side of the wheel, and I never saw a camel or elephant, or any kind of wild thing at a show that made me feel so funny. But just when I thought he's going to cut through us, he turned short, and stopped. He had on an overcoat to his ears, and a fur cap down to his nose, and hairy gloves on, and a little satchel strapped over his shoulder, and I saw there was a real small wheel behind the big one that balanced him up. He wasn't sitting on the tire neither, but on a saddle place, and the big wheel had lots of silver spokes crossing back and forward.

"Whose children are you?" says the man.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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