A CHRISTMAS STORY.

"Inever heard of a woman's bein' saxton. "I dun'no' what difference that makes; I don't see why they shouldn't have women saxtons as well as men saxtons, for my part, nor nobody else neither. They'd keep dusted'nough sight cleaner. I've seen the dust layin' on my pew thick enough to write my name in a good many times, an' 'aint said nothin' about it. An' I ain't goin' to say nothin' now again Joe Sowen, now he's dead an' gone. He did jest as well as most men do. Men git in a good many places where they don't belong, an where they set as awkward as a cow on a hen-roost, jest because they push in ahead of women. I ain't blamin' 'em ; I s'pose if I could push in I should jest the same way. But there ain't no reason that I can see, nor nobody else neither, why a woman shouldn't be saxton."

Hetty Fifield stood in the rowen hay-field before Caleb Gale. He was a deacon, the chairman of the selectmen, and the rich and influential man of the village. One looking at him would not have guessed it. There was nothing imposing about his lumbering figure in his calico shirt and baggy trousers. However, his large face, red and moist with perspiration, scanned the distant horizon with a stiff and reserved air; he did not look at Hetty.

"How'd you go to work to ring the bell?" said he. "It would have to be tolled, too, if anybody died."

I'd jest as lief ring that little meetin'-house bell as to stan' out here and jingle a cowbell," said Hetty, " an' as for tollin', I jest as soon toll the bell for Methusaleh, if he was livin' here! I'd laugh if I ain't got strength 'nough for that."

"It takes a kind of a knack." "If I 'ain't got as much knack as old Joe Sowen ever had, I'll give up the ship.'

"You couldn't tend the fires." "Couldn't tend the fires-when I've cut an' carried in all the wood 1've burned for forty year ! Couldn't keep the fires agoin' in them two little wood stoves !"

"It's consider'ble work to sweep the meetin'-house." "I guess I've done 'bout as much work as

to sweep that little meetin'-house, I ruther guess I have."

"There's one thing you 'ain't thought of." "What's that?"

"Where'd you live?" All old Sowen got for bein' saxton was twenty dollar a year, an' we couldn't pay a woman so much as that. You wouldn't have enough to pay for your livin' anywheres."

"Where am I goin' to live whether I'm saxton or not?"

Caleb Gale was silent. There was a wind blowing, the rowen hay drifted round Hetty like a browngreen sea touched with ripples of blue and gold by the asters and golden-rod. She stood in the midst of it like a May weed that had gathered a slender toughness through the long summer; her brown cotton gown clung about her like a wilting leaf, outlining her harsh little form. She was as sallow as a squaw, and she had pretty black eyes; they were bright although she was old. She kept them fixed upon Caleb. Suddenly she raised herself upon her toes; the wind caught her

ressand made it blow out; her eyes flashed. "I'll tell you where I'm goin' to live," said she. "Im goin' to live in the meetin'-house." Caleb looked at her. "Goin' to live in the meetin' house !"

"I'd like to know why not." "Why-you couldn't-live in the meetin'-

" Live in the meetin'-house?"

"Yes, I be."

house. You're crazy." Caleb flung out the rake which he was holding, and drew it in full of rowen. Hetty moved around in front of him, he raked imperturbably, she moved again right in the

path of the rake, then he stopped. "There ain't no sense in such talk.' "All I want is jest the east corner of the back gall'ry, where the chimbly goes up. I'll set up my cookin' stove there, an' my bed, and I'll curtain it off with my sunflower

quilt, to keep off the wind. "A cookin' stove an' a bed in the meetin'. house?"

"Mis' Grout she give me that cookin' stove, an' that bed I've allers slept on, before she died. She gave 'em to me before Mary Anne Thomas, an' I moved 'em out. They air settin' out in the yard now, an' if it rains that stove an' that bed will be spoilt. It looks some like rain now. I guess you'd better give me the meetin'-house key right

"You don't think you can move that cookin' stove an' that bed into the meetin'house-I ain't goin' to stop to hear such

talk. "My worsted-work, all my mottees I've done, an' my wool flowers, air out there in

the yard.' Caleb raked. Hetty kept standing herself about until he was forced to stop or gather her in with the rowen hay. He looked straight at her, and scowled; the perspiration trickled down his cheeks. "If I go up to the house can Mis' Gale get me the

"No, she can't." " Be you goin' up before long?" "No, I ain't. Suddenly Caleb's voice changed; it had been full of stubborn vex-

key to the meetin'-house?" said Hetty.

ation, now it was blandly argumentative. "Don't you see it ain't no use talkin' such nonsense, Hetty? You'd better go right along, and make up your mind it ain't to be thought of."

"Where be I goin' to-night, then?"

"To-night ?" "Yes; where be I a-goin'?"

"'Ain't you got any place to go to ?" "Where do you s'pose I've got any place? Them folks air movin' into Miss Grout's house, an' they as good as told me to clear out. I 'ain't got no folks to take me in. dun'no' where I'm goin'; mebbe I can go to our house?"

Caleb gave a start. "We've got company to home," said he, hastily. "I'm 'fraid Mis Gale wouldn't think it was convenient." Hetty laughed. "Most everybody in

te town has got company," said she. Caleb dug his rake into the ground as if vere a hoe, then he leaned on it and d at the horizon. There was a fringe of y birches on the edge of the hay-field ; bey i them was a low range of misty blue You 'ain't got no place to go to, then ?"

house n'no of any. There 'ain't no poor-Calele, an' I 'ain't got no folks." flew canood like a statue. Some crows "I s'pose over the field. Hetty waited. find it?" se key is where Mis' Gale can

Caleb tusaid, finally.

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d and threw out s rake with

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see what can be done."

Hetty scuttled off across the field. " You in' house," Caleb called after her, "we can't her down the path. have that nobow."

Hetty went on as if she did not hear. prime, blue and white ones; here and there she had entered upon a life which endured were afraid to take her into their families; wax cross on the pulpit glistened in a sundust was thick; Hetty when she emerged a starm brewel; then it broke; and Hetty own way, and never heeding the voice of sitting in the gallery, thought innocently of it. She did not look to the right or left, months. she kept her small, eager face fixed straight It was on a Saturday that she took up her ly farmer's wife; "but, near's I can find out, ahead, and moved forward like some little habitation in the meeting-house. The next I couldn't never be sure that I'd get molasanimal with the purpose to which it was morning, when the boy who had been sup- ses in the beans, nor saleratus in my sourborn strong within it.

house on the right of the road; there she other side. "Deacon Gale said for you to ture, tables and chairs standing among the boy. dahlias and clumps of marigolds. Hetty leaned over the fence at one corner of the to ring the bell; I'm saxton. yard, and inspected a little knot of housewas a small cooking stove, a hair trunk, a yellow bedstead stacked up against the fence, to each other that a new hand was ringing. and a pile of bedding. Some children in the Only a few knew that Hetty was in the posed to all their ideas of church decorum had to speak. "I'm 'fraid you find it yard stood in a group, and eyed Hetty. A meeting house. When the congregation had and propriety in general; her pitching her pretty cold here, don't you, Hetty?" said he. woman appeared in the door-she was small, assembled, and saw that gaudy tent pitched tent in the Lord's house was almost sacrithere was a black smutch on her face, which in the house of the Lord, and the resolute lege, but what could they do? Hetty jangled in the sun as she looked over at Hetty. "Well, got a place to stay in?" said she, in in an unexpectedly deep voice.

"Yes, I guess so," replied Hetty. you. All the beds will be full-I expect his ground of her quilt, saw the people below | she garnished the walls with her treasures mother home to night, an' I'm dreadful gathering in group, whispering, and look- of worsted-work. The neatness of the garstirred up anyhow."

"Everybody's havin' company; I never see anything like it " Hetty's voice was inscrutable. The other woman looked sharply at her.

a jerk. "She knows where 'tis; its hangin' youth moved a little way after her, as if in. Hetty was strong and capable; al. of poor apples and stale bread and pie, payup behind the settin'-room door. I s'pose perforce. Then he stopped and cast an ap though she was old, she could have paid for ing for it inteaching her art of worsted-work you can stay there to night, as long as you pealing glance back at his mother. Her face her food and shelter by her labor; but this to the daughters. Her Saturday's dinner ain't got no other place. We shall have to was distressed. "Oh, Sa amy, I'm afraid could not secure her an entrance even among had been a banquet to her; she had actualyou'll git sick." said she.

"No, he ain't goin'to get sick," said Hetty. would ordinarily grasp quickly enough at vegetables; somebody had given her a nice mustn't take no stove nor bed into the meet- "Come, Sammy!" And Sammy wllowed service without wage in dollars and cents. little cabbage and some turnips, without a

The golden-rod at the sides of the road the chimuey-corner of the church gallery; among the bean-poles, or a fierce little ani- ing; the meeting-house was very clean; was turning brown; the asters were in their her stove and little bedstead were set up and mal with claws and teeth bared. People there was not a speck of dust anywhere, the were rows of thistles with white tops. The successfully for six months. All that time she had the reputation of always taking her beam slanting through the house. Hetty, from Caleb's house, trotted along in a cloud sailed in her own course for the three authority. "I'd take her in an' have her how nice it looked.

plying the dead sexton's place came and milk cakes, if she took a notion to put it in. Presently she came to a large cottage shook the door, Hetty was prompt on the I don't dare to risk it."

last it was better. The village people said that in their homes. was haggard with fatigue, and she scowled little pilgrim at the door of it, there was a the Sabbath bells for the three months; once "I dun'no' how in the world I can have dark and watchful against the flaming back- and dusted the little meeting-house, and ing at her.

> the other deacon came up the gallery stairs. | Hetty's skill in fancy-work was quite cele-Hetty sat stiffly erect. Caleb Gale went up brated. Her wool flowers were much talked fitter, mebbe you do." to the sunflower quilt, slipped it aside, and

this hard-working and thrifty people, who ly bought a piece of pork to boil with the Hetty had somehow gotten for herself an | thought of the limitations of her house-keep-It was four o'clock then. At dusk Hetty unfortunate name in the village. She was ing Hetty herself had not a thought. She had her gay sunflower quilt curtaining off held in the light of a long-thorned brier made the fires as usual that Sunday morngive me a lift with the work," said one sick-

Stories were about concerning Hetty's austopped. The front yard was full of furni- let me in so I could ring the bell," called the thority over the old woman with whom she Caleb and the other two selectmen waited on had lived. "Old Mis' Grout never dared to | Hetty in her tabernacle. They stumped "Go away," responded Hetty, "I'm goin' say her soul was her own," people said. up the gallery stairs, and Hetty emerged Then Hetty's sharp, sarcastic sayings were from behind the quilt, and stood looking at Hetty rang the bell with vigor, but she repeated; the justice of them made them them scared and defiant. The three men hold goods set aside from the others. Here made a wild irregular jangle at first; at the sting. People did not want a tongue like nodded stiffly; there was a pause; Caleb

> Hetty as a church sexton was directly opcommotion. The farmers and their wives she tolled the bell for an old man, and it were stirred out of their Sabbath decorum. seemed by the sound of the bell as if his After the service was over, Hetty, sitting in | long, tired years had swung by in a weak | find no fault." a pew corner of the gallery, her little face delirium; but people bore it. She swept niture went far to quiet the dissatisfaction Presently the minister, Caleb Gale, and of the people. They had a crude taste. be livin' alone here this way. and young girls tried to copy then. So

After the meeting, Caleb Gale approached the other deacon. "Somethin's got to be done," said he. And the other deacon nodded. He had not smelled the cabbage until his wife nudged him and mentioned it; neither had Caleb Gale.

In the afternoon of the next Thursday, Gale motioned meaningly to one of the others, who shook his head; finally he himself "No, thank ye, it's very comfortable,"

said Hetty, polite and wary. "It ain't very convenient for you to do your cookin' here, I guess." "It's jest as convenient as I want. I don't

"I guess its rayther lonesome here nights,

"I'd 'nough sight ruther be alone than have comp'ny, any day."

"It ain't fit for an old woman like you to "Well, I dun'no' of anything that's any

Caleb looked appealingly at his compan-



"You've got a place, 'ain't you?" she asked, doubtfully,

"Yes, I have. At the left of this house, quite back from the road, was a little unpainted cottage, hardly more than a hut. There was smoke coming out of the chimney, and a tall youth lounged in the door. Hetty, with the women and children staring after her, struck out across the field in the little foot-path towards the cottage. "I wonder if she's goin' to stay there?" the woman muttered, meditating.

The youth did not see Hetty until she was quite near him, and then he aroused suddenly as if from sleep, and tried to slink off around the cottage. But Hetty was after him. "Sammy," she called, "Sammy, come back here, I want you."

"What d've want?"

"Come back here!" The youth lounged back sulkily, and a tall

it anxiously to hear Hetty. "'I want you to come an' help me move my stove an' things," said Hetty. "Where to?"

"Into the meetin'-house." "The meetin'-house?"

"Yes, the meetin'-house."

The woman in the door had sodden hands; behind her arose the steam of a wash-tub. She and the youth stared at Hetty, but sur-

grasp firmly. help me," said Hetty. "He ain't strong enough to move a stove,

said the woman. "Ain't strong enough!" "He's apt to git lame."

Come right along, Sammy !" "He ain't able to lift much." "I s'pose he's able to be lifted, ain't he?" "I dun'no' what you mean."

git hold of it. Come, Sammy !" Hetty turned down the path, and the no private family was willing to take her forage in the neighbors' cellars and kitchens.

an' bedstead here?" Hetty nodded.

"What made you do such a thing?" How's a woman as old as me goin' to sleep | ing over it, all covered with silver frost | back a little closer to the other men. Hetty, in a pew, an' go without a cup of tea?"

conferred in low tones; then they went own work. comprehended hers perfectly. She was the they won't say no more," she said. propounder of a problem; as long as it was But the people, although they shared unguessed she was sure of her foothold as Hetty's admiration for the cross, were propounder. This little village in which doubtful. They, looking at it, had a double she had lived all her life had removed the vision of a little wax Virgin upon an altar. shelter from her head; she was penniless, it They wondered if it savored of popery. But woman came to the door. She bent out of was beholden to provide her another; she the cross remained, and the minister was man's?" asked it what. When the old woman with mindful not to jostle it in his gestures. whom she had lived died, the town prompt- It was three months from the time Hetty ly seized the estate for taxes-none had been took up her abode in the church, and a week paid for years. Hetty had not laid up a before Christmas, when the problem was cent; indeed for the most of the time she solved. Hetty herself precipitated the soluhad received no wages. There had been no tion. She prepared a boiled dish in the her labor for a sickly, impecunious, old next day the odors of turnip and cabbage her. woman was a frugal board. When the old were strong in the senses of the worshipers. woman died, Hetty gathered in the few They sniffed and looked at one another. lated, and made no complaint. She walked sanctuary, the fragrance of peppermint loz- make up your mind to it." "I went Sammy to come right over and out of the house when the new tenants came enges and wintergreen, the breath of Suncould not turn an old woman out into the fore her sunflower hanging, comfortable for "Most folks are. Guess I've got lame. fields and highways to seek for food as they her good dinner of the day before, radiant would a Jersey cow. They had their Puri- with the consciousness of a great plateful of would sound louder in their ears than the dinner.

ant witnesses. "Did you bring that stove ceptably between the meeting-house win- all. dows as pictures of saints in a cathedral.

pit; on it she set her chiefest treasure of | you'd better pack up your things, an' I'll "What was I goin' to do if I didn't? art, a white wax cross with an ivy vine trail- carry you right over there." Caleb stepped work. Hetty always surveyed this cross small and trembling and helpless before The men looked at each other. They with - with a species of awe, she felt the irrespon- them, looked vicious. She was like a little drew to another corner of the gallery and sibility and amazement of a genius at his animal driven from its cover, for whom there

downstairs and out of the church. Hetty | When she set it on the pulpit, no queen | death. smiled when she heard the door shut. When casting her rich robes and her jewels upon a one is hard pressed, one, however simple, shrine could have surpassed her in generous gets wisdom as to vantage-points. Hetty enthusiasm. "I guess when they see that

Jersey's bell echoing down the valley in the Poor Hetty had not many comfortable "The stove don't weigh nothin'," said stillest night. But the question as to Hetty dinners. The selectmen doled out a small a nice ride." Hetty. "I could carry it myself if I could | Fifield's disposal was a hard one to answer. | weekly sum to her, which she took with dig-There was no almshouse in the village, and nity as being her hire; then she had a mild

the of the average medel mostly the case much glass grant in the appear to

looked in. Heturned to Hetty with a frown. these wreaths and clusters of red and blue | ions ; they stood stiff and irresponsive. Het-To-day his dignity was supported by import- and yellow wool roses and lillies hung as ac- ty's eyes were sharp and watchful upon them

"Well, Hetty," said Caleb, "we've found Hetty hung a worsted motto over the pul- a nice comfortable place for you, an' I guess is nothing left but desperate warfare and "Where to?" asked Hetty. Her voice

shrilled up into a squeak.

Caleb hesitated. He looked again at the other selectmen. There was a solemn, faraway expression upon their faces. "Well," said he, "Mis' Radway wants to get some-

"You ain't goin' to take me to that wo-

"You'd be real comfortable-" "I ain't goin'."

"Now, why not, I'd like to know?"

"I don't like Susan Radway, hain't never iked her, an' I ain't goin' to live with her." "Mis' Radway's a good Christian woman. money in the house, all she had gotten for meeting-house, upon a Saturday, and the You hadn't ought to speak that way about

"You know what Susan Radway is, jest as well as I do; an' everybody else does too. prise was too strong an emotion for them to household articles for which she had stipu- This superseding the legitimate savor of the I ain't goin'a step, an' you might jest as well

Then Hetty seated herself in the corner of in; all she asked was, "Whatare you going day clothes, by the homely, week-day odors the pew nearest her tent, and folded her to do with me?" This little settlement of of kitchen vegetables, was too much for the hands in her lap. She looked over at the narrow-minded, prosperous farmers, how- sensibilities of the people. They looked in- pulpit as if she were listening to preaching. ever hard a task charity might be to them, dignantly around at Hetty, sitting there be- She panted, and her eyes glittered, but she had an immovable air.

"Now, Hetty, you've got sense enough to tan consciences, and her note of distress cold vegetables in her tent for her Sabbath "You'd better put on your bonnet, an" know you can't stay here," said Caleb. come right along before dark. You'll have

Hetty made no response. The three men stood looking at her. 'Come, Hetty," said Caleb, for and