

A CHRISTMAS PRESENT

It was Christmas Eve under the stairs. All was quiet, apart from the nibbling of one small hamster in her cage. As she did every night between the hours of ten and twelve, the little hamster hung on to the thin bars with all her might and nibbled and nibbled.

It was lonely, being a very small hamster and it being Christmas Eve, with no one to talk to her. Back at the pet-shop, one of the elder hamsters had told her about Christmas, when boys and girls got presents, and there was laughter and usually good things to eat.

Oh, the boy was very good to her, fed her every day, changed her water, took her out and held her. Even when she bit him a little at first. Just to show him that she was a hamster. And she got to run around most days, exploring cupboards and armchairs. But it was lonely in the evenings and nights, when the house was all dark and quiet.

She knew what was going to happen. The elder hamster in the pet-shop had told her about all this. Christmas Day would come and there would be a lot of presents for the boy and his sister, and there would be a lot of noise, and a granny would turn up and there would be eating and games. And it would only be later in the day when the boy remembered about her, the hamster all alone in her cage under the stairs.

Then for the hamster there might be a few crusts, maybe the leaf of a Brussels Sprout. If she was lucky, on the second day of Christmas, there would be two chocolate drops and a apple-tree twig.

But it wasn't the same, not really, if you didn't get a present yourself. The little hamster stopped nibbling at her bars and sat down in her food bowl. Tiny tears pricked in her eyes. No present for her. She chewed a green thing to stop herself from crying. The elder hamster had said that there was an old man who flew around the skies on a sleigh pulled by reindeer, and that he stopped at every house where children had been good and left

presents for them. The elder hamster said that this man had big claws and that he never left any presents for hamsters, only for children.

It would be nice to get a present, even just a little one, a surprise, like the elder hamster had talked about. It would be nice not to be forgotten in the middle of the dark night, under the stairs where everything was quiet. It would be nice to sit up suddenly, having spotted a piece of food that had not been there before and know that you had not been overlooked.

But the the elder hamster had said that only boys and girls got presents like that. And only good boys and good girls. The little hamster knew she herself had not been good: she had bitten the boy once, when she was very small. She had escaped from her cage one night, when the boy had not put the lid on properly, and they had called her 'a very naughty little hamster' when they finally found her under the book-case. She had once done a pee on the carpet and the children's mother had said she was very bad. No, the little hamster knew she had

not been good. So there would be no present for her this year.

Sadly, the little hamster climbed up to her sleeping quarters and buried her head in the cotton-wool and sobbed herself to sleep.

At about three in the morning she awoke suddenly. It seemed to her that she had heard a noise. Immediately, she recalled what the elder hamster had said – the man with large claws! The tiny hamster kept as still and as quiet as she could. There was not a sound in the house, except for a distant echo of jingling bells. After a few minutes of waiting, the little creature decided that it was safe to poke her nose out of the cotton-wool. Would there be claws out there? No, that was safe. After a few minutes more, she opened her eyes and looked out. That was safe too. After a few minutes more, she cautiously lifted her head from the bedding and looked round. That was safe too.

There was nothing to be seen. But she *had* heard something. Time to be brave, little hamster. She slid out of her bedroom into the main part of her

cage and sniffed around. Her eyesight was not very good. But there was something... There was something new in the cage – it smelled good!

Over beside the exercise-wheel was a package. The small hamster approached cautiously, eyes popping, ears erect listening for any danger, whiskers twitching.

It was a large nut, wrapped up in some tasty newspaper, tied with a green paper ribbon. “*From Santa*” it said on the label. Bliss!

Well, that elder hamster didn't know anything, did she then?