

The Very Special Christmas Star

1. Once upon a time, almost a hundred years ago, there lived a little boy called Edmund. Now this story has a sad beginning, because Edmund had no mother or father. His father had died when he was a baby, and his mother had died when he was eight years old. Edmund had gone to live with his only other relation, who was his great uncle Jeremy. Uncle Jeremy was a rich, old man, who lived in a grand old house. He had never been married and didn't have a family of his own, and he had quite liked living by himself. He wrote books about history, and spent all his time working in his study. When Edmund came to live with him, he didn't really know how to look after a small boy. He cared for the boy, and made sure he was well fed and smartly dressed, but he never spent any time with him, and he never noticed that it takes more than food and clothes to make a young boy happy.

2. Edmund was very unhappy. He was so lonely, spending all his time alone in the big house. He had a few small toys that he had brought with him from his old home, but Uncle Jeremy never bought him anymore. He had no friends, and never went out except into the large garden. He spent hours each day walking round and round, but it was a very neat and tidy garden, and he had been told not to disturb the flowers or climb the trees, so even that wasn't much fun. But it was better than staying inside the house all by himself, and so even when winter came, he wrapped up warm and stayed outside most of the day.

3. Soon it was Christmas, but it was not a happy time for Edmund. That was when he missed his mother the most. And to make things worse, Uncle Jeremy was not a man who liked Christmas. He paid no attention to all the celebrations going on around him, and to him, Christmas Day was just like any other day. There were no Christmas trees or decorations in the house, there was no nice food, and no fun and games. Uncle Jeremy had got a gift for Edmund, because he knew that such things were expected. What he thought was a fine book for the boy, all about history with lots of words. But that was all he planned for Christmas day, and he thought it would be enough. He just didn't know how much Edmund missed having a proper Christmas.

4. Christmas Eve came, and Edmund stood at the window of his room, watching carol singers singing in the street. He knew they wouldn't come to his uncle's house, because everyone knew how much he hated carols. Edmund loved carols, and he listened for as long as he could, until the group of happy singers went to another street and he couldn't hear them anymore. Then he was so sad that he couldn't stand to stay inside the gloomy house any longer, so even though it was very cold, he took himself off into the garden.

5. Outside, he wandered around, wondering if it was going to snow. Then at least he would be able to make a snowman. But suddenly he saw an unexpected thing; something was curled up under a bush, watching him. He crept a little closer, and saw that it was a little puppy. He was very surprised, and looked all around to see if there was anyone else around who might own the puppy, or a mummy dog that had lost its baby. But the garden gates were always kept locked and Edmund and puppy were completely alone.

6. Very carefully, Edmund bent down and gave the puppy a stroke. The puppy gave a happy yap and jumped up to give Edmund a lick. It made Edmund giggle, and he hugged the puppy. Soon they were playing together in the garden. Edmund hadn't had so much fun for a long time. But before too long, it started to get dark and very cold, and Edmund knew he would have to go in for dinner. Uncle Jeremy didn't like him being late. Edmund took the puppy in his arms and gave him a big cuddle.

7. "What am I going to do with you?" he said to the puppy. "You can't stay out here, it's too cold." He stroked the puppy's golden fur, and fondled his floppy ears. "I wish you could stay with me." Edmund was pretty sure that Uncle Jeremy wouldn't let him keep the dog in the house, but he decided that he had to ask. After all, it was Christmas, and even Uncle Jeremy couldn't leave a dog outside to die of cold in the night. So he took the dog into the house and went to find his uncle.

8. Uncle Jeremy wasn't pleased to see Edmund coming in late, and still in coat and boots. But he was even less pleased to see him bringing a dog into his house. "Take it back outside where you found it," he said crossly. "Whoever owns it must come and take it away."
"But it was in your garden," said Edmund. "It must be lost, and no-one will come and look for it there." He was trying hard not to cry, because he knew it would make his uncle even more cross. "Please, Uncle, it's so cold out there, and he's so small. Don't make him go outside. Not on Christmas Eve."
"Well, I don't know how it came to be in the garden," said Uncle Jeremy. "I suppose it's too late to take it to the police station. It can stay in the kitchen tonight, and tomorrow it must go to the police."
"But tomorrow is Christmas Day," said Edmund.
"Never mind that," said Uncle Jeremy. "Now take that dog out of my sight and go and get yourself ready for dinner."
And Edmund knew he mustn't argue with his uncle anymore.

9. Christmas Eve evening wasn't a very cheery night for Edmund. There was no Christmas tree to put presents under, and Edmund didn't have a stocking to hang up. He certainly wasn't allowed to leave out a mince pie for Father Christmas. But before he went to bed, he snuck down to the kitchen to see the puppy. The cook had made a cosy bed for it in an old basket wrapped up snugly with a woolly blanket. The puppy yapped happily to see him. Now that it was warm and well fed, it was sleepy, but it still cuddled up to Edmund. "Goodnight, puppy," Edmund whispered. "And merry Christmas. I'm sorry I haven't got you a present, but maybe there'll be time to play a bit more in the morning." And he kissed the puppy goodnight, and crept off to bed.

10. In his study, Uncle Jeremy worked as usual, writing his latest book. He didn't like being interrupted, and he found Christmas such a disruption. He couldn't understand why everyone had to make such a fuss. And he would have the inconvenience of taking that stray dog to the police station. The sergeants at the station probably wouldn't be happy to have that to deal with, but that was not his problem. The sooner the dog was gone, the better. Sitting at his desk, he heard the church clock strike midnight. He wasn't feeling tired yet, but he did feel a bit hungry. So he decided to go down to the kitchen and find himself something to eat.

11. The kitchen was dark and warm, and Uncle Jeremy lit a candle to help him see. He was just making his way to the pantry when he heard a sharp bark. It made him jump, until he remembered that the dog was sleeping here. He turned to the basket and saw the dog was watching him. "Shush," he hissed at it, "don't go disturbing the whole house." The dog put its head to one side and yapped again. "Be quiet," snapped Uncle Jeremy, "or I'll put you back out in the garden."
"Would you be so cruel?" said a voice.
Uncle Jeremy stared. He could have sworn that the puppy spoke. And as he stared, the puppy sat up, and began to talk again. "Don't you know it's Christmas night?"

12. "I must be dreaming," said Uncle Jeremy, rubbing his eyes. "Dogs can't talk to men."
"But tonight is Christmas night," said the puppy. "There's a very special kind of magic in the air on this night that lets animals talk to humans, when there is an important message to be told."
"An important message?" said Uncle Jeremy. "Do you have a message for me?"
"Yes," said the puppy. "I am here to tell you about Christmas."
"Christmas!" snapped Uncle Jeremy. "Bah, what rubbish. I should throw you out in the garden after all."

13. The puppy looked sad on hearing this. "Don't you know how sad this would make Edmund?" it said. "Imagine his disappointment to come down in the morning and find me gone, and to know that his uncle was so cruel."
"He's just a boy," said Uncle Jeremy. "He won't care about it so much."
"Oh yes he will," said the puppy. "He'd be even more miserable than ever."
"Miserable?" said Uncle Jeremy. "What does he have to be miserable about? He has a good home, and more than enough food and clothes. He is lucky."
"He knows that, but he is still sad," said the puppy. "He misses his mother, and he misses having someone to love him."

14. "It's not my fault," said Uncle Jeremy. "I don't know how to look after young boys. I was never prepared to have children living here. I could have said no, and sent the boy to the orphanage. I did a good thing letting him come here. And I do my best for him."

"And he is so grateful to you," said the puppy. "He would do anything to please you, and make you pleased with him. But you never give him the chance."

"I suppose he is a good boy," said Uncle Jeremy. "He never causes any trouble, and he isn't greedy, asking for things all the time."

"That's because he doesn't want a lot," said the puppy. "But the things he does want, he wants desperately. But he's too afraid to ask for them."

15. "What does he want?" asked Uncle Jeremy. "Toys and sweets, I suppose. That's what all children want, isn't it. And then they get spoiled, and become rotten. That's why I don't let him have such things. It's for his own good."

"You're right, some children do become spoiled if they have too many toys or sweets," said the puppy.

"But that only happens if those things come without love. Children need to know they are loved. Toys and sweets on their own do not replace a loving family."

"But what about Edmund?" asked Uncle Jeremy.

"Alas, poor Edmund has no toys and sweets, nor a loving family," said the puppy. "He is very lonely, and very unhappy."

16. "I didn't know that," said Uncle Jeremy. "I suppose he would never dare to tell me himself. And I didn't pay much attention to him. I never wanted him to be unhappy. Is it all my fault?"

"Edmund doesn't blame you," said the puppy. "But you are the only one who can put things right."

"Then tell me, what must I do?" asked Uncle Jeremy.

"Well, tomorrow is Christmas," said the puppy.

"Bah, Christmas," said Uncle Jeremy. "Why is that so important?"

"Because it is a time of love," said the puppy. "It is the time when we remember how much God loved his people, and that he sent his only son to be with them. And the best way to do that is by sharing the love."

17. "But what has that got to do with all the fuss of Christmas?" said Uncle Jeremy. "Why do we need trees, and decorations, and music, and why do we need all that extra food, and presents? What has that got to do with love?"

"Because it makes people happy," said the puppy. "Don't you remember Christmas when you were a child? Don't you remember being happy?"

Uncle Jeremy closed his eyes. "It was such a long time ago," he said. "But I still remember. Christmas was different then. There wasn't so much fuss. People had to work hard, and couldn't stop just for a celebration. But it was special."

18. "Tell me what made it special," said the puppy.

The old man smiled. "My father would go out into the fields and collect holly and ivy, and mistletoe, and then the whole house was decorated with it. I remember the smell, it was so fresh. And my mother made the nicest mince-pies. I remember my sisters and I waiting for them to cool before we could eat them, it felt like such a long wait. And I remember being so excited on Christmas morning, to see if there would be a present for me. Sometimes my father didn't have much money, but there was always a present. The best present ever was a set of tin soldiers, so beautifully painted. They looked so smart and proud, that I felt smart and proud to play with them."

"You were not spoiled," said the puppy, "but you were happy."

19. "You are right, dog," said Uncle Jeremy. "Tell me, how does a small dog know such things?"

"It is the magic of Christmas," said the puppy. "But there is more magic that needs to be done, and it is you that must do it."

"But it is too late," said Uncle Jeremy. "It is Christmas Day already, and what can be done in the middle of night?"

The puppy yapped. "I'm afraid I cannot help you anymore," it said. "I'm so tired, I must sleep, and when I wake up, I won't be able to talk anymore. But I think I've said enough. You will know what to do." And it gave a large yawn and lay down and closed its eyes.

Uncle Jeremy stroked its ears. "You get some sleep," he said softly. "You are right. It is down to me now. And I must get on with things. I have a lot to do."

20. Uncle Jeremy set about his work. Firstly, he went out into the garden. It was very cold, but he was too busy to notice. Then he came in, and creeping quietly so as not to wake anyone he moved from room to room, not stopping until his work was done. In the kitchen, he wrote a long list of instructions to the cook and the maids and left it for them to find when they got up. The last thing he did was creep up into the attic of the old house. There was something there that he just had to find, and he wouldn't give up until he had.

21. When Edmund woke on Christmas morning he lay in his bed listening to the church bells ringing. He didn't feel like getting up, but he knew his uncle would be angry if he was late for breakfast. But when he got out of bed, he found something very surprising waiting for him. There was parcel on the end of his bed, wrapped in plain brown wrapping, but decorated with a sprig of holly. The card said "Dear Edmund, Merry Christmas. Put these on and come downstairs as quick as you can." Edmund ripped open the parcel, and found a pair of slippers, old fashioned and a little too big, but warm and snug when he put them on his feet. In surprise and excitement, he rushed out of his room.

22. Downstairs, the most amazing sight was waiting for him. Holly, ivy and pine branches decorated every surface. Amongst the greenery were candles, flickering prettily. But the most amazing sight of all was his uncle, sitting at the piano, playing Christmas carols. When Uncle Jeremy saw Edmund, he jumped up and cried, "Good morning, Edmund, and Merry Christmas to you."

"And Merry Christmas to you Sir," said Edmund. He was so surprised, that he didn't know what else to say.

"Come sit down," said Uncle Edmund. "Cook is fixing us a special breakfast, I hope you will enjoy it. And at lunch time, we will have a Christmas Dinner. I'm afraid there was no turkey, but Cook has promised to prepare the most delicious meal she can. And she has also promised me there will be mince pies, and cake. Does that sound good?"

"Yes Sir," said Edmund, as he took his seat beside his uncle at the table. "And thank you for the slippers. They were from you, weren't they Uncle?"

23. "Yes, I found them in the attic," said Uncle Jeremy. "I know they are old, but they are still good. But they weren't what I was really looking for in the attic. I went up there to find this." And he gave Edmund another present. It was a big red box, with a velvet ribbon tied round the middle. Edmund pulled off the ribbon and opened the box, to see a fine collection of tin soldiers, all nestled neatly in dark blue velvet.

"Oh Uncle, how lovely," he cried. "But are they really for me?"

"Yes," said Uncle Jeremy. "They were mine when I was a child, and as you see, I looked after them well. I hope you will do the same?"

"I will, I will," said Edmund. "Thank you so much." And then he did something he had never done before. He jumped up and kissed his uncle. And Uncle Jeremy was so pleased, that he did something he had never done before – he gave the boy a big hug.

24. When Cook brought in the breakfast, it was the nicest breakfast Edmund had ever seen. There was bacon and eggs, and thick creamy porridge, and toast with fruity jam. But even better than all the food was the sight of the little puppy, who trotted into the dining room behind the cook. He had a red ribbon tied round his neck, and he hopped up onto Edmund's lap and licked him. Edmund cuddled him and kissed him.

"Oh Uncle," he said, "must we really send him away today? Couldn't he stay just a little longer?"

"He can stay forever," said Uncle Jeremy. He stroked the puppy's ears, and the puppy yapped happily.

"Something very mysterious happened to me last night, something that I will never be able to explain, but I owe a lot to this little dog. So I think we should give him a good home here with us. What do you say? Can you think of a good name for him?"

"I think I shall call him Star, because he came at Christmas," said Edmund. "Thank you Uncle. I will look after him and he won't be any trouble, I promise."

"Star is a good name for him," said Uncle Jeremy, "and he did bring an important message. Now eat up your breakfast, and then we can take Star for a walk. We have a busy day ahead of us."

And so they did, a busy day having the best Christmas ever.

MERRY CHRISTMAS!!

