

# The Soft Spot in B606

By Grace Kaufman of Beetown Wisconsin – 1904

*This story was found in the school book of Grace Kaufman. It was probably written when she was in grade school. We present it as a 100 year old story of Christmas and the salutary effects of that event for mankind.*

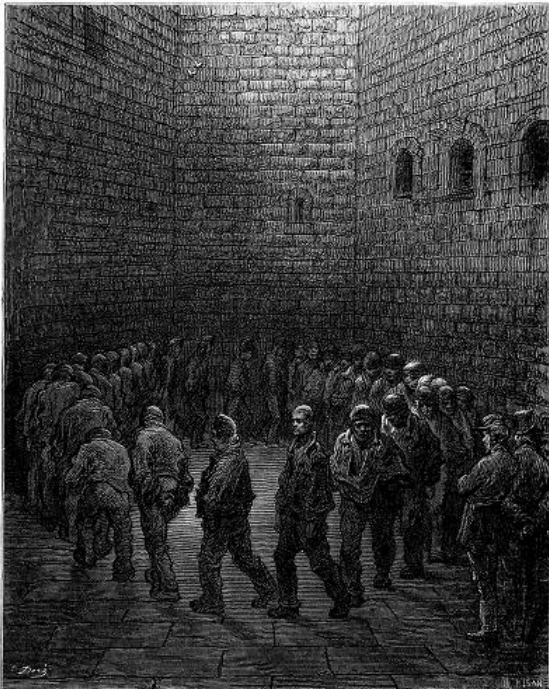
## I

Bells were pealing faintly somewhere in the distance when B606 was released from the punishment cells. Somewhere there was merriment and chiming of bells – but not in the great grim walls of the English prison; not in the grim hardened heart of convict B606.

B606, for the six days just past, had been on bread and water in one of the punishment cells. He had been violent and abusive to one of the warders. B606 was a “tough un.” In Portland prison no one was more closely watched in all the sullen, gray coat ranks.

## II

“Merry Christmas!” someone chanted in his ears as he shuffled into line with his mates on the parade ground. A loud laugh followed, as if it were a good joke to be Merry Christmas in Portland prison. But the man – he was still a man – with the round badge marked with “B606” on his gray jacket, started discernibly at the sound of the two words in his ear.



### III

“Front rank, two paces to left-march!” The governor of the prison strode about giving low – voiced orders to the guards. His keen, shaven face was softened a little by the Christmas “peace, good will” that had crept into it. He laughed out cheerily, now and then, and spoke a kind word to some numbered convict in the lines. At sight of B606 the stern lines tightened about his lips again. The Christmas look vanished.

“Keep a lookout, Charley”, he muttered to the nearest warder. “He’s a slippery one – there’s blood in his eye today. No knowing how he’ll celebrate Christmas!”

“He’s a Looney”, growled the warder surly.

“Twon’t no ways disconvenience me when he slings his hook. They ain’t no soft spot in im.”

“We’ll keep on the lookout a while longer, Charley. Watch out sharp. He’ll be out in a matter of six months now.”

### IV

What’s six months time to nine years and a half? But B606 felt no exultation. He had long since ceased to tell off the months on his fingers. It did not matter one way or another that he was almost “out.” The old despair and numbness in his heart had deadened hope long since.

The day lagged on inside the walls of Portland prison. Outside it was Merry Christmas, and people made merry among their own. In the afternoon the chief warder approached the convict in the blue cap with the number B606 on his jacket, with a message from the governor. He was wanted at the receiving office.

B606 strode along beside the warder indifferently. It did not occur to him to wonder at the unusual summons. It could not only mean some fresh punishment. It didn’t matter, but they had arrived at the receiving office. A little child was standing there beside a calm faced sister of charity. The convict stared at them both in dull wonder. But at the sound of the child’s voice he started violently.

### V

“Merry Christmas daddy!” it said shyly in his ear. The slender little figure crossed to him and slipped a small brown hand into his hand. “Won’t you say Merry Christmas back daddy? It was such a piece of work to get here. I guess you’d never think how hard it was to get an order to come! It was the sister who did it. You see, she promised mother to bring me. Mother is dead.”

For a moment it was silent in the room. The governor turned away to gaze out of the window, and the warder's rough face softened. Then the childish voice began again:

“She tried to wait daddy – guess you'd never think how hard she tried! But when she knew she couldn't she got everything ready for you, and told me to wait instead. I'm waiting now daddy – its lonesome – you'd never think how lonesome it is! But I keep counting the days off. Every night I cross one out. Daddy, s'pose you know there's only a hundred an' eighty-seven left. There won't be but a hundred and eighty-six tonight, after I've crossed out. Mother always kept count – my, there used to be thousands of days once! You can begin to expect when there's only a hundred an' eighty-six. When its only one day left, my think of that daddy! Mother used to.

“An' I know just what I'm going to do then – just exactly! Mother an' I used to practice together; I guess you'd never guess how many times. She told me just how I was to tidy up the kitchen an' put the kettle all ready to boil, an' be sure to remember the chair you always liked to sit in – an' the geranium daddy. Mother an' I used to hope so it would be in bloom that day! An' the supper – mother showed me how to make muffins. You know, an' boil the steak an' set the cups an' plates on tidy. There wasn't anything mother didn't show me about, when she found she couldn't wait. She said for me to put on her white apron and stretch up tall, an' smile. I guess you'd never think how much we practiced!



“The last time mother cried a little, but that was because she was so tired. I cried too. It was that night mother died. I – its very lonesome now, daddy, but I'm waiting. You'll come right away won't you daddy? That was why she wanted the

sister to bring me – to make sure.....”

The great hard fingers had closed around the small brown ones... The tears were trailing over the rough cheeks of B606. The sister’s calm face was broken into lines of weeping.

“I’m most twelve now daddy. You mustn’t mind how little I am – I can stretch up tall! An’ you’ll laugh to see how I can keep house for you. There’s a woman on the third floor helps me when I forget how mother said to do. I’ve got a hundred an’ eighty-six more to practice in daddy. Daddy, won’t you say Merry Christmas?”

If he said it no one heard, but the child. He caught her to him and buried his face in her soft hair. The sound of his sobbing seemed to fill the room.

## VI

The New Year came and grew on familiar terms with the world. Spring crept into the lanes and turned them green and even the gray - coated files of convicts at their quarrying drew in the warm sweet breaths and, in their way, rejoiced. The heart of one of them lightened within him as day followed day. In the walls of his cell he crossed off each one as it passed, and counted eagerly those that were left. They grew very few. He “practiced” the home-going over and over, alone in his cell. It kept him happy and softened the fierce, angry look in his eyes. He grew peaceable and quiet among his mates. The warders talked of it in amazement.

One summer day B606 “went out.” Across the strip of sea a child was waiting for him. The room was tidied and the kettle on to boil, and in the sunny window the geranium was all in bloom.

A new life had begun, and the prison shackles fell away from him. He was no longer B606. He was a man among men, and a child’s faith and love strengthened him.