

# Heartfelt Words, Good Will & Wishes True (1913)

*John Q. Barrett\**

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In Fall 1909, Robert H. Jackson, age 17, became a commuter on the Warren & Jamestown Street Rail Road. He took a morning trolley northward each day from Frewsburg, New York, his hometown, to attend



Jamestown High School as a post-graduate student.

At Jamestown, Jackson took subjects that had not been offered at Frewsburg High School. He also came under the influence of special teachers who shaped him and the rest of his life. Perhaps most significant was Mary Rosina Willard, an English teacher. Jackson took two of her courses, English and English History.

On one occasion that fall, Miss Willard asked the class a question that had not been addressed in the assigned reading. Only Jackson could answer. Miss Willard laid her book down and asked, "Why, Bob Jackson,

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where did you learn that?" He named a book that he had read on his own. At the end of the class, she stopped him as he was leaving the room and they continued to discuss the subject.



Soon Miss Willard, then age 52, was much more than Jackson's classroom teacher. She became an adviser as he prepared for interscholastic debate competitions. He also began a habit, which lasted many years, of having dinner regularly with Mary Willard and her sister Miss Vesta Willard, also a Jamestown teacher, at their home. After dinner, they would listen to the Victrola playing music from their record collection, including the best operas. They also would read to each other. Decades later, Jackson recalled Mary Willard's efforts to acquaint him with "the best in literature," including Shakespeare, Thomas De Quincey and George Bernard Shaw.

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In late 1913, Robert Jackson, age 21, was a new lawyer. He was beginning to practice law and litigate cases in Jamestown and throughout Chautauqua County, New York. His closest friends included, still, the Willard sisters. He also was writing regular letters to his girlfriend Irene Gerhardt, whom he had met a year earlier when he was a law student in Albany. Jackson hoped to establish himself and then to propose marriage.

As Christmas approached that year, Mary Willard searched the day's leading catalogues for something suitable to buy Jackson as a gift. But when she consulted him about the possibilities, he was uncooperative. In the end, she wrote and gave him this Christmas poem:

*To choose a gift for little Bob  
I did my very best, I vow; –  
In vain I searched the catalogues  
of Peter Paul and Daniel Low.<sup>[1]</sup>*

*He either didn't "need the things,"  
Or contrariwise, he "had 'em all," –  
He had no use (the little cuss!)  
For Daniel Low or Peter Paul.*

*So since 'tis plain the catalogue's  
Alluring hints won't "fill the bill,"  
There's nought remains but Marywog's  
Sincere intention and good will,  
And loving thoughts and wishes true,  
Ever and always, Bob, for you.<sup>2</sup>*

In time, the Willards became intimate friends of Irene Gerhardt, who in 1916 married Robert Jackson in Albany and then moved to Jamestown. When the Jacksons had a daughter in 1921, they named her for Mary Willard and two other Marys who were Jackson ancestors. For much of her girlhood, Mary Jackson had a grandmother in Chautauqua County, another in Albany and, *de facto*, two more: Mary and Vesta Willard.

And Robert Jackson saved Mary Willard's 1913 Christmas poem for the rest of his life.

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Paul operated a book publishing company and stationery store in Buffalo, New York, for many years. Daniel Low & Company operated a Salem, Massachusetts, store and sold goods by mail order catalogue.

<sup>2</sup> This handwritten poem by Mary Willard and the envelope in which she gave it to Robert Jackson at Christmastime 1913 are in the Robert H. Jackson Papers, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Washington, D.C., Box 21, Folder 11. Images of the envelope and the poem are at the end of this file.





R.H.J.  
Christmas, 1913



- Christmas, 1913. -

To choose a gift for little Bob  
I did my very best, I vow; -  
In vain I searched the Catalogues  
Of Peter Paul and Daniel Lorr.

He either didn't "need the things,"  
Or contrariwise, he "had 'em all," -  
He had no use (the little cuss!)  
For Daniel Lorr or Peter Paul.

So since 'tis plain the Catalogue's  
Alluring hints won't fill the bill,  
There's nought remains but Marywag's  
Sincere intention and good will,  
And loving thoughts and wishes true,  
Ever and always, Bob, for you.