

LITERATURE, &c.

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THE DOCTOR'S TWO CHRISTMASSES.

A NEW YEAR'S TALE FOR THE CHILDREN.

By G. Moir Bussey.

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[Concluded.]

The poor French orphan, of whom Harry Harcourt had taken charge so romantically on the Christmas day of 1847, received the most unwearied attention, and kindest sympathy, from the entire family of her benefactor. Its members, one and all, vied with each other to anticipate all her wants and wishes; though, indeed, affliction had smitten her mind so sorely that she was able to form but few wishes of any kind; and she would have had as few wants, had they not been forced upon her by her generous friends, anxious to restore her as early as possible to health and happiness. Mrs Harcourt, although she could not speak French, nor understand it when spoken by others, and consequently experienced some difficulty in communicating with her youthful guest, had nevertheless such gentleness of manners, was so truly good humoured and good natured, and pressed the hands of Margaret within her own so tenderly, that the latter was not slow to perceive that she had not been abandoned by heaven, but that, in losing the first, she had found a second mother. In Lucy and Mary Harcourt she felt that she had sisters; and in Harry, if not a brother, yet at least something more than a brother.

The funeral of the poor exile having been performed under the direction and at the charge of the doctor, and Margaret having recovered from the indisposition into which excessive grief had thrown her, inquiries were instituted into the history of the mother and daughter to ascertain whether they had any relatives or friends in London, and to devise what would be the best course to take for the future. The story of Margaret was simple, and cannot be told better than it was related by herself to Harry Harcourt:

"My father," said she, "was an Englishman, and he had a brother who is now resident in London. That brother is a wealthy East India merchant—a director of the East India Company; but to my mother and I he has been cruel, pitiless and unjust. It was to recover from him a legal debt that we came to this country. I need not tell you how he left us here, among strangers, to exist or perish as we could. You saw our miserable abode; and the consummation of his neglect and injustice."

"My mother, in early womanhood, married Edward Clifford, who had lived for some time in Paris and was engaged in commerce. I was their only child, and we were all devoted to and happy in each other. After a few years, however, my father was seized with a fatal sickness. Feeling a presentiment that he was about to be snatched away from us, and wishing to assure our future welfare, he wrote to his brother, Sir Robert Clifford, desiring to see him before he died. Sir Robert obeyed the call immediately.

"To him my father commended the care and fortunes of those who were in a few days to become a widow and orphan. My uncle pledged himself, in the name of heaven and of his honor, to treat and provide for both as though we had been his own. His brother then charged him to dispose of his property, both in France and in England, and to invest the proceeds in the best manner he could for our benefit, so that we might have ample means of evading the cold looks and colder estrangements of such as withdraw their smiles from acquaintances whose resources have been diminished. Sir Robert Clifford solemnly promised to perform all that was required of him; he would be a brother to my poor mother, to me a tender parent.

"The East India Director waited in Paris only till he had rendered the last duties to his brother. On taking leave of my mother and me he reiterated the assurance that he would punctually perform the last injunctions of my dying father, and that we should speedily have a good account of what he had done for our advantage.

"Many weeks passed without a letter reaching us, but the mind of my mother was too strongly absorbed by the affliction of her recent bereavement to take much notice of that ominous silence. At length, however, we began to find our affairs embarrassed, for want of remittances. My mother wrote to Sir Robert Clifford, pressing him for money, and explaining the nature of our unpleasant position. There was no reply. We were sorely harassed by the importunities of those who had given us credit. Another and more urgent letter was forwarded to London; but still the same tantalizing kind of silence was maintained by the man who had engaged himself, before his Maker, to protect and aid us.

"After another brief interval, we were compelled to quit our early and once happy home, from inability to pay the rent. Our furniture and plate were subsequently seized and sold; and, at last, bowed down by sorrow and poverty, misery and shame, my mother parted with the few jewels which alone remained to her of all our former wealth, and resolved to come over to England, to demand in person, from Sir Robert Clifford, the fortune of the widow and orphan of his brother.

On reaching London, we immediately presented ourselves at the mansion of the wealthy and titled merchant. He had just married the daughter of an Irish Peer—a 'Lady,' and his excess of pride seemed to have deprived him of all recollection of former days, and past engagements. He received us in a stately parlour, with freezing hauteur; scarcely deigned to recognise us as relatives; and after an interview of about five minutes' duration, referred my mother, for information regarding all business transactions, to his principal clerk. He then hurried out of the room, placing in my hand, as he passed, a ten pound note. I could have screamed with anguish, as I touched the paltry 'paper promise to pay,' and should have cast it after him, but for the interposition of the timely reflection that it was not a dote of charity, but payment of part of a much larger debt which was due to us, and that, trifling as the amount was, it would at least afford some relief to my mother in the midst of her destitution.

"With Sir Robert's Clerk we fared little better than with the Knight himself. He was a mere man of accounts and of routine; and seemed to have been less than half informed as to the circumstances of the case which was left in his hands for settlement. He wanted to see my father's will, and on hearing that he had made none, questioned us about Doctor's Commons and letters of administration. He talked much about the laws of France and England, and dwelt with pedantic minuteness and satisfaction on the salutary provisions of the Alien Act; suggesting a thousand difficulties which we had never contemplated or dreamed of as incident to so clear a matter of right and justice; and finally ended by telling us that we must apply to some solicitor, in order to bring certain questions, upon which Sir Robert and he were in doubt, before the court of chancery.

"My poor mother's heart sank within her. She was far from her own land, in the midst of strangers, without a friend to whom she could apply for aid or counsel, and was now penniless.

"We made a new appeal to the stony-hearted Sir Robert Clifford, but in vain. He confided solely in the discretion of his clerk; and repulsed all ideas of rendering us temporary assistance. We then applied to a lawyer, but he also conjured up a crowd of doubts and obstacles; and refused to undertake our cause unless we could deposit in his hands a large sum of money to cover the costs.

"Mental and physical distress had completely prostrated my poor mother's soul. She became restless and fevered, and in a few days' time was dangerously ill. Bit by bit I sold for her support all that remained to us; our shawls, some lace we had preserved, our veils, every article of our clothing that could be dispensed with. I took the miserable garret in which you found us, because it could be hired for a few weekly pence; caused my mother to be conveyed thither; applied for needle-work, in order that I might sustain her languishing life; and again sought the residence of my father's brother, in the foolish hope that his heart would relent at the tale of wretchedness I had to tell to him. He refused to see me; and all my other toils and cares were useless. My mother sunk under her sufferings, cheered, however, in her dying moments by the knowledge that goodness and virtue had not become quite extinct in the world."

Harry Harcourt communicated to his mother all that Margaret had related to him, and upon a consultation between them it was decided that, until the young orphan should find a more favorable opportunity and better prospects of returning to France, and till some more satisfactory intelligence concerning the conduct and intentions of Sir Robert Clifford had been obtained, she should remain in London, under the maternal guardianship of Mrs Harcourt. Margaret consented willingly to the arrangement, and testified deep gratitude to her new found friends. As she felt reluctant, however, to be a burden to her benefactors, she proposed that a situation should be sought for her, as governess or teacher in a school, to give lessons in the French language, in music and drawing. The doctor promised to make inquiries as she desired, on the simple condition that, in the meanwhile, she should remain where she was.

Perhaps Harry never intended to fulfil this promise, but made it in the spirit in which promises are sometimes made to wilful children, merely to pacify present demands and avoid more urgent importunities. Certain it is, that no eligible situation ever offered for Margaret, and that, whenever she made an inquiry on the subject, she was met with all sorts of evasions. The young physician, it may be, thought that, before setting out in the world to teach French, it would be as well for his fair protegee to learn English; and we only do him justice in saying, that he was personally at great pains, and spent much time in her society, in order to teach her.

Thus days, and weeks, and months rolled on, and Margaret, in the midst of friends who had come to regard her as a member of their family, forgot her griefs, and had her regrets softened and soothed. Kind, amiable, affectionate, active and intelligent, she had soon won the love of all around her. She seemed to Mrs Harcourt like another daughter, and to all the young folks an additional sister and a valued instructress. Under her tuition, Mary and Lucy, and even the younger misses, were soon competent to hold little dialogues in French; and Margaret herself, in turn, was not long ere she could converse intelligibly in English.

Harry Harcourt, though silent on the subject before the young lady, had not failed to interest himself warmly in her behalf, for the purpose of obtaining a settlement of the business relating to her father's property, with Sir Robert Clifford. He called on that 'great man,' and was somewhat rudely desired to 'attend to the ailment of his patients.' Not repulsed with this, it was insinuated in his ear that the two Frenchwomen were mere adventurers; and that Edward Clifford was still little better than a boy, had been inveigled by the artful foreigner who had 'outlived him, in a messalliance.' Harry was patient and prudent and took the precaution to obtain unquestionable proofs from Paris of the utter falsehood of these calumnies. It was then broadly asserted that the effects and property of Margaret's father realised barely sufficient to satisfy the claims of his creditors; and when a statement of accounts were demanded, in order to test the accuracy of that asseveration, the knight coolly handed to the doctor the name and address of his legal adviser.

Harcourt was more nettled and indignant at this shuffling treatment on the part of a wealthy and titled man, one of the 'merchant princes' a wielder of empire over the teeming east, than he had ever before been; under any circumstances of provocation; and for the first time in his life he did apply for counsel to an attorney. He found, however, that the case as it stood, was really a difficult one to deal with. The facts might be precisely as they had been represented; but where was the proof? There was not a document in the hands of Margaret that would have sufficed to convince a court that she had a legal claim on her uncle for a shilling. A detailed statement of the whole matter was submitted to an eminent barrister who gave a brief, but conscientious opinion thereupon—that it would be useless to enter upon any legal process in the case, as the issue must be worse than uncertain. Thus the affair seemed to have closed hopelessly.

The doctor had scarcely recovered from the chagrin and disappointment he had sustained, in his efforts to serve the good and handsome Margaret Clifford, when Christmas again came round—the Christmas day of 1848. The residence of the Harcourts was again filled with the family circle, some attached friends as guests. Mrs Maxwell smiled with her wonted good humor, and carrying an air of heart-ease that gladdened all who looked upon her, was again seated in the drawing room, rallying all around her upon all that she knew of their adventures during the past year. Mrs Harcourt seemed to have grown happier as age crept upon her. Mary and Lucy were beaming with loveliness and delight, anticipating the pleasures of the evening; and Harry Harcourt was disengaged, and promised to be more punctual that day in taking his seat at the head of the table than he had been the year before.

The placid face of Margaret alone wore an expression of melancholy. She could not exclude the recollection that it was the anniversary of the death of her poor mother; and that, although she had at the same time acquired the friendship of the Harcourts, she was still in the position of a dependant upon their bounty. Every one strove to banish these sad reminiscences, and especially Mrs Maxwell, who had become strongly attached to the young Frenchwoman. She rallied the doctor upon his last year's cold repast and philosophical reflections; and gently roused the curiosity of the children concerning her offering to the Christmas tree. Margaret listened and smiled; and her heart could not be diverted at any time from the garret she had occupied with her mother, in the neighborhood of St. Martin's Lane; her ear refused to be filled with other sounds than the dim and far off echoes of a dying parent's affection.

It was then duly announced that dinner was served, and the party had just taken their seats at table, when a violent knocking at the street door resounded through the house; and immediately afterwards the servant delivered a note to the doctor. Scarcely had Harry cast his eyes upon the contents of the billet ere he uttered an expression of strong surprise and interest, and rising instantly from the table, he exclaimed, 'Quick, quick, Betsey! My coat and hat; there is not a moment to lose!'

"What, another Christmas adventure," exclaimed Mrs Maxwell. But without waiting to reply or afford any explanation respecting this sudden call from the midst of his friends, Harry hastened out of the room, and the door closed behind him.

"Heaven help these doctors," resumed Mrs Maxwell. "The woman who ventures to marry one of them must have the courage of a Highlander of the old 'Black Watch.' Why one cannot eat a meal in peace with any of the profession."

"Some unhappy patient requires his services," interposed Mrs Harcourt; "but it will be useless to await his return. We will proceed this time to take our Christmas dinner in his absence."

"He will assuredly bring back with him," returned Mrs Maxwell, laughing, "a new and agreeable surprise. This is my prophetic day. If I had remained till now in Scotland, I should have been reputed for an annual gift of second sight at this season."

The good smiled at the good old lady's pleasantry, and the repast commenced, and was prolonged somewhat inordinarily, in the hope that Harry would return to partake it. The delay, however, was in vain. Several wistful hours passed, during which his coming was anxiously watched and listened for. Even gay and social Mrs Maxwell went frequently to the window to look up and down the street,

and to criticise the dress and appearance of the few pedestrians who were astir from home on that raw, cold, misty afternoon. Nay, she discovered more than once that her ears must be beginning to beguile her; and she occasionally hurried to the top of the staircase, to ascertain whether she had not heard a knock at the front door.

The party, nevertheless, was not a dull nor a joyless one. The children were as full of glee and ecstasy as ever at the exhibition of their Christmas tree; which, however, retained all its honors undespoiled, on this occasion, as it had not yet been seen and admired by 'brother Harry,' and Margaret Clifford, whose melancholy seemed to have given place to a more intense feeling, strove to conceal a rising agitation in her heart, which, notwithstanding all her efforts, was perfectly perceptible to the acute eyes of Mrs Maxwell, by singing some of her prettiest and most characteristic French songs.

As frequently occurs in active life, though very seldom in novels and romance, the vigilance which had been used to welcome the return of the doctor proved to have been all wasted. Shortly before ten o'clock he entered the drawing room unperceived, while Mary and Lucy, and their younger sisters were in the midst of a little masquerade performance—a sort of domestic pantomime, pre-arranged among themselves, and full of harmless merriment and fun. He was soon hailed, however, with cheerful greetings from all present. He looked graver than usual and his mind seemed to be pre-occupied; but, in his eyes, and in the play of his lips, it might be read by an observer that a feeling of profound satisfaction predominated over every other feeling.

His sisters now hastened to show him their Christmas tree, and to thank him for the fine presents with which he had enriched it; and, as Margaret had not been forgotten in the distribution of favors, she also in her turn tendered her hand in acknowledgment of his bounty.

"I have in reserve for you," replied Harry, as he pressed kindly the hand extended to him, "a more precious offering;" and he drew from his pocket a small bundle of papers, which he placed before the lovely young Frenchwoman.

"What is it? what is it?" arose from the children, whose curiosity was instantly on tip-toe.

Margaret smiling, opened the packet. "It is a will," she cried, trembling and turning ashy pale. The will of Sir Robert Clifford! Is not this a dream, Harry? Explain it, You would not be cruel enough to mock me with such a delusion merely as a Christmas pleasantry?"

"My dear Margaret," replied the doctor earnestly, "it is no pleasantry. I have never practised jests calculated to give pain to any one; and least of all should I do so to you. It is really the last will and testament of Sir Robert Clifford. He died this evening. When I was called away so suddenly from dinner, it was to wait on him in the dangerous crisis of a sickness which he himself felt to be mortal. I hastened to his house and found that he had been stricken with apoplexy, the result of a series of matrimonial broils. The lady who had ceded her hand to his wealth, despised him for his arrogance and meanness; and he had already begun to hate her for reckless extravagance and the contumacy which she was constantly throwing upon him. He had recovered perfect consciousness when I was introduced to his bedside, and, feeling that his end was approaching, remorse had seized his mind for the cruelty he had exercised towards you and your mother.

"Heaven is just, doctor, he murmured, 'I have offended, and am punished; but while I have yet power to do so I would make reparation for the wrongs I have inflicted. The lawyer is in the next room preparing for me a new will. My niece will be the heiress of all I possess, except the dowry settled at the time of my unhappy marriage, upon lady Heather Clifford. I sent for you, that you might be gratified with the knowledge of this solemn act of justice, because I know that you have been the guardian of her whom I had sworn to protect and succour and then abandoned.'

"I endeavoured to soothe and console the wretched man, but in vain. I could not hold out a hope to him, nor did he seem to desire that I should. He had done with the world—its hollow pageantries and worthless baubles; and seemed to be weary of the burden of riches and obsequious flattery which he had borne. Having signed the will, which I have now bro't to you, and handed to me in the presence of his attorney, and of some other confidential persons who were called in to witness the act, he sought for a brief interval of repose; but, suddenly a second fit convulsed his frame, and, notwithstanding the most active and instant aid, he expired in the midst of the paroxysm.

"My prediction is verified," cried Mrs Maxwell, with animation. "I told you that Harry was but gone to fetch us another agreeable surprise."

"And now," said Mary Harcourt, with a feeling of pleasure, modified slightly by a kind of vague apprehension, "you, Margaret will be a rich lady; and we, your poor friends—shall we be forgotten?"

Margaret remained standing before the thoughtful doctor, speechless and motionless. The extraordinary events of the last few hours seemed to have reduced her to the unconsciousness of a statue.

"Sir Robert Clifford," resumed Mrs Maxwell, "was held on 'Change to be a millionaire,