

## LITERATURE, &amp;c.

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THE DOCTOR'S TWO CHRISTMASSES.  
A NEW YEAR'S TALE FOR THE CHILDREN.

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## I. CHRISTMAS 1847.

THE interval between Christmas and Twelfth day is a sort of annual sabbath, bearing about the same proportion to a whole life, as Sunday does to the whole year. This season always brings with it thoughts and feelings of kindness towards all mankind. We yearn then, to gather our friends around us; to collect beside our hearts all whom we love; to exchange little thoughtfully selected presents, and courtesies, and tokens of genial remembrance; to relax from our every-day astuteness and austerities, into expressions of hearty good-will to one another; and to exercise the social charities as far as our means will allow. It is peculiarly an open-hearted, generous time, as it ought to be; for it was the period chosen by the Deity himself to proclaim universal peace and fraternity, and everlasting love and redemption to mankind.

Our ancient amenities and likings return to us at this season, stripped of all recollection of the intermediate asperities and waspish stings, which the selfish jostlings and bickerings incident to extended intercourse with the world have engendered; and we feel refreshed and invigorated by the restoration of the good old feelings and hospitalities of our younger and pleasanter days. Our jealousies, rivalries, and animosities, if not wholly forgotten, at least become softened, and are laid aside for awhile; and we feel so well satisfied with ourselves and others, that we should be loth to turn from the door a declared enemy, if we conceived him to be in distress; but we should forgive in him all that pertained to past feuds, for pity's sake; and be irresistibly urged to extend to him again the hand of former amity, out of pure regard for the old familiar face.

This, then, is the best possible epoch for bestowing a benevolent thought upon the poor; upon the hard struggles, the patient endurance, the helpless indigence, and bitter privations of those who, without improvidence of their own, or wilful fault on the part of others, are able to share but too few of the enjoyments which the world offers to the favorites of fortune. The humble denizens of the earth would be all the better for it, if they had more seasons of rejoicing. The more contented they could be rendered with what, at best, is a hard lot, the more peaceful, orderly, moral, and even religious would they become. There is no demoralizer so active and powerful as extreme poverty; no teacher of infidelity so dangerous as hunger, destitution, and the absence of friends and sympathy.

But we did not intend to write a homily concerning the cordialities of Christmas tide. We have something better for our readers:—a Romance of the season, a narrative of facts, which must serve to show that all the best and purest feelings of our nature are as active now as ever; as hale and hearty, and as redolent of love and practical philanthropy as at any period of those far-off times of antiquity, which dreamers and postasters have called the golden days of merrie England?

Our story opens with the twenty-fifth of December, 1847. The snow and sleet were falling rapidly over London, interrupted only, at intervals, by heavy gusts of wind. The shops were closed, the streets deserted, silent and melancholy; and a stray passenger, in taking his course through the usually busy thoroughfares of the mighty metropolis, would have little suspected that every house he saw, from the splendid mansion of the wealthy millionaire to the humble abode of the modest tradesman or poor artizan, was that day filled with joy and gaiety; that all hearts were intent on celebrating with becoming delight the greatest, as well as most solemn of our national festivals.

In one of the streets which run out of the Strand, in a good, though by no means first-rate residence, the customary preparations had been made for a handsome Christmas-dinner. Mrs Harcourt, her daughters, and a few of the intimate friends and relatives of the family, were seated around a bright blazing fire, crowned with the 'yule log' in pleasant converse about old social times which had glided into the past, and companions who were no longer nigh to grace the happy circle. As successive minutes, however, sped into oblivion, the conversation slackened, and a visible fidgettiness arose to mark the movements of Mrs Harcourt; for the hour fixed for punctually serving dinner had been exceeded, and her son, a handsome young man of about six and twenty, and a rapidly rising physician, had not returned from a visit to which he had been called, and which had not been expected to detain him more than half the time that he had been absent. She felt reluctant to sit down to table without seeing him at its head; and yet she knew not how, otherwise, to divert from her guests the impatience which was beginning to take possession of her own mind.

'Well, cousin,' at length exclaimed Mrs Maxwell, one of the guests, addressing herself to the benevolent hostess, with a slight Scottish accent, 'I suppose that we are waiting for Harry. Wherefore has he ventured out on such a day, and in such a storm as this?'

'He has been called out professionally,' re-

plied the mother. 'He, you know, is the sole support of his family; and neither festivals nor pleasures of any kind would have power to hinder him from rendering what he believes to be his duties to the sick. For the last three hours he has been away on a visit to Sir Charles Dornton, one of his patients.'

'But he has been gone longer than usual; longer than he intended to stay,' interrupted a beautiful fair-haired girl, one of Harry Harcourt's sisters. 'My brother cannot have remained all this time with the baronet. Some accident must have befallen him.'

Mrs Harcourt trembled with apprehension. The words of her daughter had evidently strengthened a train of fears and anxieties which she had been endeavoring to suppress.

Mrs Maxwell perceived the painful impression which prolonged suspense was causing to every member of that tenderly attached and united family; and, with the ready-witted good feeling which seems to belong to the natives of Scotland, she at once made an effort to turn the current of their thoughts. Taking the hand of the eldest Miss Harcourt she said: 'You, Mary, must now show me your Christmas-tree, as a little bird has whispered to me that you have one. I am desirous of making a contribution to its store of fruit.'

Mary, smiling, led her cousin into an adjoining room, in which the tree had been prepared. This Christmas-tree, which has been familiar to the Germans for ages, is a new importation into England. It consisted of a young pine, planted in a large antique vase, bedecked with gilding and other finery. The branches of the shrub, rising in the form of a pyramid over each other, had each received a name, and were appropriated severally to the various members of the family; that bearing the designation of the head of the house being the largest, and the rest being applied according to age. In the midst of each bough, among the dark foliage, were placed sundry lighted wax-tapers, in various colored glass stands, corresponding in number to the age of the parties whom the boughs represented; and around the main stem were entwined garlands of winter flowers and evergreens, whence peeped out joyously the bright red-berries of the holly, and the smile-awakening blush provoking, pure white seeds, and delicate leaflets of the old Druidic mistletoe. The beauty and value of these trees are of course greatly enhanced by the substantial compliments of the season, which are contributed by parents and friends, and with which the boughs are usually laden. In wealthy and well-to-do families, the branches are commonly found bending beneath a weight of grateful presents—exotic fruits and flowers, picture books of all shapes and sizes, sweetmeats, trinkets, toys, and friendly devices, grave or humorous, according to the impulse of the donor—all conferring upon the little bower an aspect of enchantment; glittering, as it does, with new and beautiful cakes, never before seen or heard of; and with such jewels and golden stores, as it would seem next to impossible to have obtained otherwise than by wresting them from the palace of the geniù of Eastern mines.

It is not customary to exhibit these trees till after dinner, when all the company who are present are invited to inspect the mystical scene; and then begins the revelry and the raptures of the young folks, who are permitted to search the gay foliage for the gifts brought for their behoof by the fairies. The most precious favors are always the most carefully hidden from the first glance of the inquiring eye, in the green intricacies of the miniature bower; and bursts of intense glee and merriment accompany the discovery of each new and more surprising dispensation of juvenile wealth. A Christmas carol is subsequently sung round the denuded plant; and an hilarious dance, or other festive entertainments, close the night's enjoyment; the prur, the more homely, and the happier for being partaken together by age and youth, without formal restraint on the one hand, or troublesome boisterousness on the other.

When Mary and Mrs Maxwell entered the room in which the tree had been planted, they found there the younger children of Mrs Harcourt, who were putting the finishing graces to their work.

'So, Lucy,' cried Mrs Maxwell, addressing a charming girl of some twelve years old, 'you do not desire to add my present to your store, or you would have run to welcome me?'

'Nay, cousin,' replied the little maiden with animation, reddening at the same at the recollection of her remissness; 'but I stayed to add some ornaments to the bough designed for my dear brother Harry.'

'Complete your work, then,' said the elder lady, 'while I conceal my offering in the foliage.'

So saying, Mrs Maxwell drew from her reticule, and hastened to hide among the boughs, divers small packets which she had brought with her for the purpose of distributing among her young relatives.

The children, one and all, followed the motions of the benevolent matron with eyes sparkling with delight and curiosity; for they well knew both her excellent taste and liberality, and they felt, consequently, assured beforehand that they should be charmed with her presents whatever they might be.

Mrs Harcourt shortly afterwards entered the apartment, ushering in her other visitors, whose ennuï at the delay which had occurred in her arrangements she was desirous of diverting. Every one complimented the happy children on the beauty which the tree presented; and each pretending to search for secret nooks in the bendings of its branches, added something to the pretty burdens which it bore! what, remained to be discovered at the proper time.

The anxiety of Mrs Harcourt could not, however, be longer restrained, and she exclaimed suddenly and earnestly, 'As Harry seems to have forgotten us, in thus absenting himself unreasonably, we will wait for him no longer, but will proceed at once to dinner.' The tone assumed in uttering this was one of offended authority; but she could not stifle the maternal sigh which arose with it, and forced it, perhaps, into expression. She had scarcely completed the sentence when a violent knock was heard at the street door, so loud and hasty as to create some alarm among all who were in the house.

'Gracious Heaven,' cried the mother in anguish, 'some misfortune has surely befallen my son.'

She was rushing into the entrance hall to ascertain the truth, when she recoiled with a feeling of dismay and affright at seeing her beloved Harry, pale, and staggering, drenched with rain and snow, and spattered with mud, enter the passage, bearing in his arms a young woman who appeared to have fainted.

'Give me your assistance, mother; help me, my friends,' he ejaculated, as soon as he could recover breath. 'This young lady must be bestowed in a place of comfort and safety.'

He carried his fair burden into the parlour, and deposited her on a sofa near the fire. A mortal paleness overspread her countenance. Her long black hair had broken its graceful bonds, and fallen in disorder about her face and neck, which it concealed as with a mourning veil, and rendered still more striking the marble whiteness of the portions which were still left visible. On turning back those dishevelled locks, it was seen that the features of the unhappy female were cast in a mould of surpassing beauty, and that her entire form and figure would not have been an unworthy model for the chisel of Phydias himself. Every person present immediately hastened to the assistance of the stranger, and Harry Harcourt, profiting by the benevolent assiduity displayed, withdrew to his dressing room, in order that he might make such hurried preparations as were absolutely necessary to enable him to render becomingly the honour of his house's hospitality to the friends who had been kept waiting so long in suspense and uncomfortable agitation.

After a few minutes, the young person who had been so strangely introduced to the Christmas party, re-awakened to consciousness, when looking around her with mingled terror and surprise, she exclaimed, 'My mother! my poor mother!' Then covering her face with her hands she burst into tears, which seemed to have been forced from her by despair. Her grief elicited the kindest expressions of sympathy and benevolence from all who stood watchful and attentive around, but none of them knew the meaning of the words she uttered, for she spoke in French, which was unintelligible to the entire party assembled, with the exception of the young physician himself.

Fortunately Mr Harcourt soon returned, when, on drawing near to the patient, the latter raised her eyes to him, and said freely but eagerly, 'Monsieur—' but we may as well translate her request into English—'Sir, I pray you to conduct me to my mother. She is ill; she awaits me, she needs, she calls me!'

The mind of the poor girl was obviously still wandering. Memory seemed, however, to return to her at that instant, for, uttering a piercing cry, which was rather an involuntary ebullition of sudden agony than a scream, she threw herself on her knees beside the sofa, and sighed forth, 'My God! my God! Have pity on me! and ere the sound of her voice had ceased she again fainted.

'The Doctor,' as Harry Harcourt was familiarly called by his friends, scratched his head for a second with disquietude, but on feeling the pulse of the stranger he was speedily reassured. 'The crisis,' he said 'will be a favorable one. Remove the poor girl to a chamber where she may obtain some gentle and refreshing sleep. Then leaving some one to watch her tenderly, return all of you to the best enjoyment we may find of our Christmas dinner.'

'Not, however,' said Mrs Maxwell, whose curiosity just then happened to be stronger than her appetite, 'until you have given us some clue to the solution of this riddle.'

'You will listen to my story best,' replied Harry, smiling, 'when we have warmed our sympathies by discussing part of the good cheer which is now cooling.' At the same time he took upon himself almost the whole labor in what he called assisting his sisters to bear his patient to a bed chamber.

The family group were, within a few moments, seated round Mrs Harcourt's well-planned board.

'Now Harry,' said the good humoured and persevering Mrs Maxwell, 'we must have the history of your new acquaintance. Is there any secret in it that you look so melancholy when the subject is mentioned?'

'None whatever,' returned the doctor, 'but I fear that the narrative will be too sad a one for a Christmas story.'

This served only to increase the longings of the social party to penetrate to the heart of the mystery. 'We must have the tale,' cried Mrs Maxwell, and the peremptory claim was echoed by all as a chorus.

'You are aware then,' said Harry, beginning his relation with somewhat more than wonted seriousness of look and tone, 'that I was sent for this morning to visit Sir Charles Dornton, a wealthy baronet who has ruined his health by reckless debaucheries. He has been a patient of mine only for a few weeks, but I had already seen enough to convince me that his constitution is destroyed, and

that my services, and all the aid that could be called to him, would be useless in restoring his health, or prolonging his life beyond a very limited term. These thoughts struck forcibly on my mind as I hastened back from Belgrave square; and it saddened and humiliated me to reflect that the riches which we covet so eagerly, and for which we sacrifice so much quiet happiness daily,—that the rank and honors which excite such malice and envy, are but the mere toys and trinkets of a day, to be at sunset abandoned for ever, in order that we may render a rigid account to God for our actions, and for the use or abuse of the opportunities which he has afforded us of doing good in our generation. I recalled the life which Sir Charles Dornton had led, in what is called the 'fashionable world;' and I could not refrain from recollecting the texts of Scripture which teach us, that in proportion to the gifts we have received, we shall be compelled to reckon the worth of the blessings conferred by us, from our abundance, upon our neighbors; and that, as these tell for or against us in judgment, we shall be acquitted as worthy stewards or condemned as unjust.

The wealth and title of my patient, instead of preserving him from sin, sickness, suffering and death, has been the main cause of his damaged character and broken health, and in all probability has conducted him earlier to the grave than, under other circumstances, nature would have decreed.

Whether all these sombre meditations had birth in any special mood for philosophizing in which I may have waked this morning, or whether they were occasioned by the dense fog which hung over the city from end to end, and filling the mouth, ears and eyes of wayfarers, imparted the most uncomfortable sensations to the whole frame; I cannot say; but after wandering on in a reverie for some distance, I perceived all at once that I had lost my way.

It had begun to snow, and to drizzle in my face a reek of smoky rain, and the cold was intense. I mended my pace therefore and took the nearest road I could find towards home, when, passing through the labyrinth of narrow streets and alleys on the skirts of St Martin's Lane, I was suddenly arrested by a female voice, soft but loud, issuing from a miserable nest of tenements near me, and plaintively begging of some person to run instantly for a doctor.

I must tell you that, although several wretched looking women and children were on the spot, and seemed ready to render any service in their power, none of them was moved by the stranger's appeal to do what was required, for they did not understand her, as she was addressing them in French. 'I am a doctor,' said I, speaking also in French, as a young woman appeared at the door, hurriedly throwing a shawl over her head to go herself in search of aid. 'Who requires assistance? Lead me to the spot where help can avail.'

'You will have heaven's blessing, sir,' cried the half-distracted female, seizing me eagerly by the arm. 'But come, follow me; my mother is sick—is dying!'

I accompanied her unhesitatingly. We passed through a squalid dirty passage, up a dark, worn and broken staircase, into a dismal garret, the door of which stood ajar. The scene was one of utter wretchedness and destitution, and struck an icy chill to my heart. It seemed as though this day was to present to me nothing but sights of misery and affliction. In that scowling attic, as in the luxuriant chamber of the baronet whom I had recently quitted, Death had struck a victim; but it was one who could have little to sigh for of the pompe and vanities about to be relinquished. On a low, rickety bed stuck, thinly covered with mattress and counterpane, lay an elderly woman, evidently in her last agony. She was worn down to almost transparent thinness, and her face and forehead were deadly pale; but still, in the form and set of her features, in her dark eyes, and the arch of her lips, the remains of beauty were perceptible; and her whole countenance betokened pious resignation, and reliance on the inscrutable will of the supreme.

'My mother,—my dear mother!' cried my conductress as we entered, 'I have brought you a doctor. Tell him the nature of your sickness. He will cure you, I feel certain.'

'My poor Margaret,' murmured the dying woman, turning on me at the same moment a look which convinced me that she was not herself deceived as to the state in which I found her.

I sat down on the bedside and took the hand of the sick person in mine. She seemed to understand that I deeply sympathized with her; and perhaps her soul, then about to detach itself from earth, was able to penetrate my heart, and to read my very thoughts; for she said, solemnly:—'God himself has sent you hither to be the savior of the poor orp whom I am about to abandon. Procure for her, I conjure you, the means of returning to France; and though neither she nor I may be able to recompense your kindness, heaven itself will reward you.'

Margaret, overwhelmed with grief and pale as the snow that was beating against the casement, stood near us, as in a listening attitude; but she heard nothing and saw nothing. Her last hope had been wrecked and the blow seemed to have stricken despair into her soul. Until then she had indulged the fond belief that her mother might revive—that the illness which had confined her to her bed was but the effect of mental anxiety and disappointment; but now she saw that every illusion had only mocked her. I cast my eyes upon the