

KITTY.

The Story of a Christmas Eve and After.

"Oh, mother, it is snowing fast still, there is nothing to look at but snow!" grumbled Kitty O'Hara.

"And what else should you look at at Christmas-time? For my part, I like to welcome the true old-fashioned weather."

"But it's rather dreary to be buried for weeks behind those big hills. Don't you wish we were near the town, mother?"

"No I don't, and you ought to be ashamed to stand there and chatter so foolishly, Kitty. Come and prepare your father's tea."

Before Kitty had finished buttering the last thick round of toast, a muffled noise of wheels echoed through the still air, succeeded by a loud shrill whistle at the front gate. Down fell the toast and knife on top of it.

"Mother, mother, here's father!" shouted Kitty.

Without a second's delay, Mrs. O'Hara strode from the dairy and hastened to unbolt the door; and Tilly, the hard-worked maid-of-all-work, suddenly ceased her violent clattering of cans and followed in the rear.

"What a beautiful winter night like the good old-fashioned times when we used to sit on grandfather's knee and listen to his ghost-stories!" thought Mrs. O'Hara, as she glanced at the white hills and dazzling valleys.

An extra-merry cosy meal was the jolly substantial tea in the farm kitchen. O'Hara sat in his wide arm-chair in the chimney-corner, and with immense relish sipped his cocoa and ate his big slices of home-cured beef and pickled tongue; and Kitty made no pretense of appreciation as she munched the crisp buttered toast, and brown ginger-cakes her mother made so well. How full of fun and bustle was the remainder of that happy evening! There were the lofty hall, best parlor, and kitchen to finish with final sprays here and there of holly and mistle-toe; there were the numerous varied presents to be given to the hired hands on the morrow waiting to be arranged in order to-night. Everything, before they laid their heads on their pillows, must be done "decently and in order," said farmer O'Hara.

Steadily the hours sped on, and soon the large round moon broke through the rolling clouds and looked down quietly upon the sleeping world. It was a glorious night, an exquisite scene, viewed from the sweet shelter of home—a picture to admire, gazed at by those standing in warm well-lit rooms, "Jack Frost" at a respectable distance on the other side of the window—but, alas, there was very little beauty in it to the half-frozen traveller, the hungry, the footsore, the stranger who had lost his way?

"What's that! Hark! Surely I heard something! What can it be?"

Kitty O'Hara started from sleep, and sat up in bed, listening. Again came that strange murmuring sound in the dead of night—half cry, half call. An awful silence ensued; then something was thrown at the window. Kitty's heart went pit-a-pat so violently that it seemed as if it must stop beating. She did not believe in hobgoblins or ghosts; she was neither superstitious nor timid; yet, when a second pebble struck the glass pane and rolled down upon the sill, she felt terribly alarmed, yet could not have explained why.

"I'll smother myself under the clothes!" moaned bewildered Kitty.

Before she could get to her father or mother, she must cross a horrible dark passage; before she could get to Tilly, she must mount winding creaking stairs. For one minute she lay very still, thinking. At last an idea struck her. Perhaps some one had lost their way. She would open the window and shout.

Kitty's little spirit lamp was burning brightly on the toilet table; perhaps the glimmer of the light had attracted some one outside. Yet who would come on Christmas Eve to such a lonely little farm behind the hills?

Kitty threw a shawl over her head, braced herself up not to be afraid, pulled back the curtain, opened the window, and then shouted in a voice of assumed sternness.

"Any one here?"

The words sounded harsh and unnatural, and echo answered them far away.

"Shelter this bitter night, if only in a barn, I pray you!"

"Who are you?"

"A traveller who has lost his way."

"How am I to know you are speaking the truth?"

"Have pity on me! I am almost dead!"

"You must wait a bit longer. I will call my father."

Kitty's loving heart ached as she listened to the stranger's voice, so weak from exposure and pain. She hastened with fearless steps and knocked at her mother's door, never doubting for one moment that they would let the poor creature in.

Kitty had no easy task to rouse her father; he had had a long day in the market, and was snoring now as loudly as—yes, Kitty could not help saying it—as the old sow in the yard. He could not be brought to his senses or induced to believe that there was really a miserable being outside pleading for shelter for admittance even into the barn. Oh, no! He knew all about it; he knew—he was not such a fool—what the rogue wanted. He had heard of such capers before—he was not born yesterday. If he were to give ear to the mad fancies of mankind, they would be murdered in their beds and the whole place ransacked before dawn that was all. Kitty had better go back to her bed and dream.

But Kitty stood quite still, making no attempt to move. And such a queer object she looked—her quilted petticoat trailing on the floor, a coarse gray shawl thrown anyhow about her shoulders and head, the little spirit-lamp flickering and glimmering in her hand.

"Oh, father and mother, I didn't think you were so cruel and hard-hearted!" she said passionately and indignantly. "And it's actually Christmas Eve!"

The farmer was suddenly attacked with a violent fit of coughing. When it ceased, he ordered Kitty to leave the room; and the instant she disappeared he hastened out of bed, thrust his feet into his monster slippers, wound round his body a blanket huge enough to cover a modern Goliath, told Mrs. O'Hara to mind her own business when she inquired what he intended to do, put on his spectacles carefully, armed himself with a thick stick and a clumsy lantern, and stalked downstairs, sending such a ghost-like creaking sound through the silent house that honest Tilly, sleeping the deep hard sleep of a faithful servant, turned on her side and uttered a feeble scream.

The lantern held by O'Hara shone full on the stranger's face for a long half-minute.

"Humph, humph," muttered the farmer, "ye look mighty wretched, be ye a friend or foe! Why can't ye walk in, when ye see me standing a martyr to the east wind, and just out of my warm bed too? Ain't ye got any legs?"

The pale-faced traveller mumbled something, which O'Hara seemed not to hear, about kindness and gratitude—all the sound he could force between his poor chattering teeth—as the heavy door swung back shutting out the keen cold air.

"Mother, Kitty, you're wanted? Be quiet, sir, can't you? Be quiet! If you are contemplating cutting our throats by and by, perhaps you'll be good enough to spare my daughter Kitty. If it hadn't been for her soft heart, you might have been out there, although although it's Christmas Eve, and it would sort of grieve me to see you stiff and stark and cold

on my door-stone. I'm dashed if I should eat any Christmas dinner!"

"We will not waken him yet; he must be very tired, poor fellow!" said Mrs. O'Hara, bustling about and directing Tilly what to arrange on the breakfast-board.

"Not tired, ma'am, in the least, though my eyes have not closed for twenty-four hours, but so stiff and aching—so woefully stiff! I thought I'd never manage to crawl down-stairs!"

Mrs. O'Hara turned round sharply, and saw standing close by her elbow, a tall, rather slender, pale-faced gentleman, neither particularly handsome nor particularly plain, but a human being of quite an ordinary type of the same stamp as one passes in a crowded city scores of times each day. Yet Kitty, at that moment crossing the hall from the little parlor, almost smothered with holly and overgreens, thought him in her own mind "perfectly splendid." Poor Kitty had seen so few people, had led such a secluded life in that out-of-the-way little farm enlivened now and then only by a flying visit from some vulgar freckled cousin, whose sighs were loud and long because he had failed to turn her small brain. It was no wonder that she considered this stranger "beautiful," and declared later on that his smooth white hands were simply "magnificent." And then Kitty glanced despairingly at her own plump brown ones, her mother's long bony fingers, Tilly's crimson wrists—with a cut here and there by way of ornament and her father's "hard huge palms. How strange that she had never thought of noticing these things before! It was odd—very.

"And but for you a corpse might be lying yonder!" The strange gentleman looked at Kitty very earnestly with his fine dark eyes, and pointed with his finger towards the garden.

Kitty's lips moved. She was about to attempt some sort of reply, when O'Hara called out in his gruff honest voice:—

"To be sure, to be sure, your life's due to my Kitty; and—and I must say I had my fears as to whether we'd all be together to welcome the Christmas morn! Humph, humph!"

"You suspected me?"

"Well, you see, sir, we're but lonely mortals who bide in these dull parts; and 'tis extremely unusual for a person to ask admittance in the dead of night. But there—there, sir! Here's my hand. Accept the hospitality of a poor hard-working man and welcome!"

"Your good-natured offer I accept with much thankfulness. I feel too weak and footsore to turn out this morning and continue my journey, and shall be only too glad if you will spare me a slice of your Christmas beef and taste of plum-pudding."

"That we will do right heartily," put in Mrs. O'Hara.

"There is gold in my valise—more than I shall need for my wanderings. I will repay you."

"Sir," said O'Hara indignantly, "though we live behind the mountains, we are not behind the people in the town in deeds of mercy."

So the stranger took his seat amongst them, and made himself as affable and merry as he could in the circumstances—his poor limbs were so painful—and the simple farm-folk knew not that they were entertaining rich Squire Dylton of Dylton Hall.

"If that poor wretch isn't laid on his bed to-morrow with rheumatic fever, my name isn't Jemima O'Hara!"

"I must confess he looks queer," returned her husband.

"And there'll be a handful of work for some one. I'm sure I'm not equal to trotting fifty times a day up them stairs, with everything to be carried up and down; and he, being a gent, 'll expect such a load o' attention. Oh, dear, oh, dear, to think that he should come to our house on purpose to be ill!"

"I don't suppose he can help it, mother. I dare say he'd be glad to be well, if he could," said Kitty quietly.

"I don't suppose you know anything about it, child!" answered Mrs. O'Hara sharply.

The farmer's wife's predictions proved too true. Reginald Dylton was unable the next morning, and many mornings following, to rise from his bed, or even to move a limb. The short, fussy little middle-aged doctor from Snaresleigh had to pay a visit to O'Hara's farm every day; and once, when his light blue eyes were very watery and the tip of his nose of a reddish purple tinge—occasioned of course by such frequent exposure to the weather—he had rubbed his hands a peculiar habit of his when it was his misfortune to have to say something unpleasant—and announced that the gentleman was "very bad indeed."

The poor fellow's mind seemed gone entirely. He had no knowledge of where he was or who were tending him; he would talk to his favorite horses and dogs, rush miles across the country on his mare Saxon, with Tiger and Tip tearing at his heels, and call loudly and repeatedly for some one named "Maude," who Kitty thought must be his sister.

"I'll be with you soon, darling very soon," he said one afternoon, staring intently at the ceiling. "I rolled down a steep mountain, and it was nearly over with me. My limbs ache a bit. I'm better—I'm almost well. I'll be with you soon, dearest. Oh, my love, what would you have done if I had died?"

As the sufferer uttered this last sentence he smoothed Kitty's hand and gazed anxiously into her face. There was no recognition in that stare, only a look of extreme bewilderment.

"Answer me, Maude, this instant! You're glad to see me?"

Kitty, feeling very nervous, and scarcely conscious of what she was saying, answered—

"Yes, very."

"How fond and foolish! That's my own Maude; and I was doubting and I was doubting—I think I'll sleep a bit now, dear, if you don't mind. You'll let me hold your hand so? 'Tis such a tiny hand—so soft, so—"

He fell asleep, and Kitty stirred not, was almost afraid to breathe even. He had not rested for several nights, and Mrs. O'Hara was getting wan and haggard with watching him. An undisturbed good sleep might prove a turning-point for the better. Oh, how fervently Kitty hoped and prayed it might be so!

Tilly crept cautiously on tip-toe into the room, brought Kitty a steaming cup of tea, put a little more fuel softly upon the fire, and then glided out to her work again.

A whole hour fled by, and still Kitty sat patiently in the same position, afraid to disengage her hand lest she might awaken the peaceful sleeper to his sad wanderings and pain. But about a quarter of an hour later he moaned slightly, stirred, sighed, and then opened his eyes—how gravely they looked at Kitty! How they roamed round and round the room!

"Where am I?"

"With friends," Kitty answered softly. "What is your name, child?"—"Katharine O'Hara."

"O'Hara, O'Hara! I have heard that name somewhere before. What is the day of the month?"

"It is the 31st of December—New Year's Eve."

"Ah, yes, I remember! It isn't a dream at all. You are the farmer's daughter Kitty."

The simple little name fell from his lips so easily, so naturally; he never once thought of calling her Katharine.

"I'll just pour out the medicine mother said you were to take when you awoke."

"I'm a great plague to you all," the patient murmured in a weary tone.

"It has been an anxious week for everybody, but you're mending now, and I'm sure mother'll never remember the trouble