

the immediate presence of the sweep, and at a time of year when, of all others, it was most difficult to get him. Peter Fisher enjoyed the monopoly of 'sweeping' for miles around, a privilege which he exercised solely at his own convenience. It had made him—not a man of fortune; though it might have done so, but for the existence of the 'Black Boy'—but what his neighbors termed a 'casualty man,' a figure of speech conveying much meaning to those housekeepers who were dependent on his good offices. There was no knowing when he might extend these to Myrtle Grove, for the 'holidays' were in the near future; and Peter Fisher would doubtless enjoy them to the farthest extent. It was this that had made Nurse's message to him almost pathetic in its tone, and had changed what would have been a command into an entreaty. But it was close on Christmas Eve now; it wanted but a few hours, and Peter Fisher had not come.

Perhaps on no one had this last straw fallen more heavily than on Tommy. The dining-room, a small room filled with large furniture, was a poor substitute for his own big, bare nursery, and Jane, the housemaid, would not see the necessity for pulling the books out of the book-case to represent Christmas travellers, and their luggage. It was impossible to make a train of any decent length in such a small room, where the dining-table was in the most inconvenient place for a railway-line and made but a poor tunnel, with its overhanging cloth that would slip off on to the floor. Tommy got very hot and cross as he bumped his head under it, over and over again, and when Jane insisted that everything should be put back into 'its proper place,' he was very near tears.

It was no wonder then, that, as he flattened his nose against the window, Tommy felt dimly that the day and the wind and everyone were grey and cheerless together.

Chapter II.

The church clock had struck three, and then four, in its slow solemn voice, when there came a sound of wheels on the road; and Toby, the mongrel dog belonging to the little house opposite, from whose garden-wall he commanded, as a rule, the approaches to Otterbrook, appeared upon it as if by magic—barking his usual defiance. He had had one or two false alarms already that afternoon; but this was the genuine thing at last. And as the rattle and crash of the wheels over the newly-laid stone became louder, Tommy rubbed the window-pane clear with eager little fingers, that left long smears behind them. It was certainly coming nearer! Yes, there it was at last—a fly, an unmistakable station-fly, with luggage on the top. It was going to stop—it was actually stopping before the door of Myrtle Grove; while the driver, with sundry unnecessary 'wo-backs' to the lean horse, was preparing to descend from the box. There was a noise of mingled bell-ringing and dog-barking; but through it all, something flashed into Tommy's mind, and he was out of the room like the wind.

'Father! Father!' he shouted, as he struggled with the door-handle.

The door opened so suddenly on him, that he almost fell backwards; and a merry voice—not a man's—cried—

'Well, old boy! you didn't expect to see me, did you?'

For a moment Tommy hesitated, and his face clouded—but only for a moment. In another his arms were round her neck, and Ella Graham was hoping that the marks of many tears shed were not very noticeable on her cheeks.

'Oh, you dear, darling Aunt Ella! I never knewed you were coming!'

'No more did I, Tommy, till this morning. Shall I go back again?'

Before Tommy had time to answer, there was a sound of someone moving quickly across a room. A door opened, and Mrs. Lindsay's voice cried—

'Dick—Dick—dear husband!'

A dead silence fell on the two below; and they started, as if they had been caught in some wrong-doing. In a moment it all rushed upon Ella. The surprise which she had prepared for her sister, at so much cost to herself was a failure—a dead failure! She had but another disappointment.

With a wretched feeling of guilt she paid the driver; and as the door of Myrtle Grove closed on him, with a bang that was full of the wind's fury, all the greyness and wretchedness outside seemed to take possession of her heart.

Tommy held fast to her hand, as she turned to walk upstairs, fearful lest—in the general uncertainty of things at that time—she should disappear. And, as she gave his hand a reassuring squeeze, the smile with which she looked down into his happy little face, was a very bright one, though her eyes were full of tears.

At the door of Mrs. Lindsay's room nurse met them.

'Don't go in to her yet, Miss Ella, dear,' she sobbed; 'she'll come round soon, poor dear, if it isn't the death of her this time! She thought you was the Colonel!'

Poor Ella! And this was the end; the good of it all. If it had not been for that close grasp of Tommy's warm little fingers, she must have broken down, there and then.

Mrs. Lindsay did not appear again that day; the shock had been too much for her feeble nerves. But as Tommy sat upon his pretty Aunt Ella's long, comfortable lap that evening, the bitterness of her own disappointment in the failure of that scheme which had cost her so many tears, seemed to melt away in the light of the child's joy and satisfaction. And as time went on, in the fire-light, undisturbed by any suggestion of bed, they made plan after plan for the morrow, each happier than the last. It was a drawback, of course, that they would not be able to do anything in the nursery, in the way of decoration; but Ella would not allow that it was 'a horrid shame' the chimney needed to be swept. She had a good reason for everything. How else, she demanded, could Santa Claus come down it, to bring these good things which, for countless generations, he had brought to the expectant children? This was a new, and wholly delightful way of looking at things, though it involved Ella in embarrassing questions on the subject of Santa Claus himself.

And as she realized, in the light of Tommy's confidence respecting those last dreary weeks at Myrtle Grove what Christmas, that Christmas which was to have been such a bright one to herself!—would have been to the lonely child, a great wave of thankfulness rolled into her heart, and swept away any regrets that were lingering there.

Tommy was not the only one who went to bed happier that night.

'She's just like a bit of Christmas in the house,' said cook, as she stuck some choice bits of holly over her kitchen-mantelpiece. And Jane agreed with her enthusiastically; and put 'two and two together' so well, that she and cook were not very far wrong in the guess they made, as to the trouble in her eyes that afternoon.

As Ella Graham looked out into the darkness that night, her heart was full; but the tears that were in her eyes were not those of disappointment. It had not been easy, that sacrifice of hers; perhaps no genuine sacrifice ever is. And the hardest part of it all was that horrible, haunting sense of failure in its purpose—which some of the martyrs may have known in spite of their hymns of triumph.

'Inasmuch as ye have done unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.' Clear as Christmas 'bells across the snow,' the words came to her; and the hush that had fallen upon the land (for the rude north wind had done his work) filled her heart. And then she felt something soft and cold fall upon her hot cheeks with a quiet persistency, like so many tiny hands pushing her gently back.

A great surprise was being prepared for the morrow, and no one must see it till it was quite ready. Silently, steadily, all the night through it was going on. And in the morning, lo, the old, bare world had become like a little child—white and pure, in a radiant garment of glistening snow.

Chapter III.

It was quite dark the next morning, when Tommy was awakened by the sound of knocking and thumping close at hand. It must be the middle of the night, he thought, for nurse was snoring steadily, and all sorts of possibilities came into his mind. Could it be robbers? or lions? Faster and faster they came, these mysterious sounds. Now they had stopped, and Tommy could distinguish a strange swishing noise. Nurse stirred in her sleep and grunted, and Tommy had just made up his mind to waken her up, when an idea came into his head, which revealed the meaning of it all.

It could be no other than Santa Claus!

It was by the nursery-chimney that he came into houses. Aunt Ella had seemed to say as much, and that strange noise was certainly next door, in the nursery!

Quick as thought, his teeth chattering with mingled fear and excitement, he slipped noiselessly out of bed. Nurse, wearied out by the trouble of the day before, was sleeping heavily, and through the night nursery door creaked as he turned the handle, as gently as he could, she gave no sign of consciousness. He was in the passage now; standing shivering before the day nursery door, whence those strange sounds were coming, louder and faster again. He could hear footsteps distinctly now inside the room, the door of which stood ajar, while a faint light shone out into the darkness of the passage. Though it was to see Santa Claus himself, Tommy had to take his courage in both his small, cold trembling hands—so to speak—before he could push the door open.

Was that Santa Claus?

At no time of life is disillusionment other than a shock. Tommy stood for some moments paralyzed with fear and disap-