

hour ago they led her fainting to the room, and having placed her on her bed as she closed her eyes wearily, they left her to repose; but sleep came not, and once again she sought the room in which the remains of all she loved were laid.

"Uncle, uncle! will you never speak to me again," she moans piteously. "Just one word—call me your Stella once more."

But the ears that never before had been deaf to her slightest wish heard her not.

At last the pent up fountains of her heart were let loose, tears flowed from her eyes, and her frame quivered with sobs. An hour passed before she again raised her head, but she was calm then, the wild wordless sorrow had exhausted itself.

She stood gazing at the dear dead face, and murmured: "He gave me a packet addressed to myself yesterday; he said I was to read it when he was no more. I will read it now. No doubt it contains some advice, some words of consolation perhaps for his poor Stella."

With silent footsteps she sought her own room, took a large sealed envelope from her writing desk and returned to the chamber of death.

"I will read it here beside him; it will seem as if I heard him speak," and she broke the seal.

"My dearest child: Before you commence to peruse these pages stop for a moment and remember the assurance you gave me last Christmas Eve, viz: That you had never in your life missed a mother's care; remember the paternal affection I have lavished upon you, remember that my every wish has been for your happiness, and then try to forgive me if I have done wrong. I will not weary you with an account of my own life; suffice it to say that while yet young I met with a serious disappointment which threatened to darken the remainder of my days, and for many years I lived alone an unhappy, bitter man. I was rich, I had position, but my heart was without affection. So time went on until one Christmas Eve just eighteen years ago. I was leaving my house in the afternoon to go to town upon some business, when I was met on the doorstep by a poor woman, who asked me for charity. She carried an infant in her arms and led a little girl of about three years old by the hand. The sight was pitiable, so I rang the bell and bade one of my servants attend to her. It was late in the evening when I returned, and as I passed through the streets the glad faces I met and the happy voices I heard jarred on me terribly, for of all days of the year Christmas was the loneliest to me. I hurried home, but just as I was lifting the latch, the light ringing laugh of a child greeted my ears. I opened the door, and still the laugh rung out. I enquired of my housekeeper, and she informed me that she had kept the poor woman I had sent in, and that it was the little girl who was laughing down stairs with the servants.

"She is a little beauty, sir," she said: "might I bring her up and let you see her?"

"Do so," I replied, and in a few moments she returned, leading the little thing by the hand. I had always loved children, and this was certainly no ordinary child; she was a beauty indeed; she came straight to me without any signs of timidity and stood looking up into my face. She was so sweet, so innocent, that I caught her in my arms and placed her on my knees. She gazed at me earnestly for a moment, then hiding her face in my breast, said in pretty baby accents:

"Oo is good; I love oo."

"Already a natural coquette," I smiled to myself.

"What is your name?" I asked her.

"Minnie," was the answer.

"That name is not pretty enough for you; you should have a name as bright and pretty as yourself; Stella, for instance," I said.

"She looked at me in surprise; she evidently did not understand me.

"Shall I call you little Stella?" I asked.

"She repeated the name over two or three times, as if she liked the sound, then turned to me and asked—

"What is oo name?"

"Call me old Uncle John," I answered.

"She laughed and was satisfied. That night I recalled to my mind all the fairy tales I had ever heard to amuse her, and for the first time in many years I spent a pleasant Christmas Eve. The next day the child never left me for a moment. The following morning she was still at my side, prattling away in her baby language, when a servant came in and said: "The poor woman is going away, and wants her little girl."

"I thought for a moment. I was growing to love the child, she interested and amused me, my resolution was formed, and I sent for the mother. I found the latter to be a gentle, refined creature, who, though a widow now and miserably poor, had seen better days. I had a long talk with her, then she left, bringing only her infant away. Little Minnie or Stella, as I ever after called her, remained with me. I promised to bring the child up as my own, on condition that the mother would never claim or make herself known to it. A short time before my only brother had died in India, followed in a few weeks' interval by his wife. They left no children, but to those who inquired I said that little Stella was their child and my niece, and this was generally believed. Of the woman I heard no more until a little over a year ago. One day she came to my office and made herself known to me. Her other child, also a girl who had grown up to be her support, had just died, and she was wild with grief. She begged of me to let her see you. For your happiness and my own I refused. I gave her money and, after much persuasion, she promised never to return again. But you remember the scene of your ball last Christmas Eve. God forgive me! I told you—I told all assembled—that the woman who claimed you as her child was mad. But, beloved Stella, her words were only too true; child of my heart, forgive me—she was really your mother. When I followed her from the room that night she told me that she had been very ill, that she believed she would soon leave this world for ever, she asked me again to let you speak to her only for a moment—she wanted you to call her 'mother' once, then she would go away content. But I would not; I could not allow this. I explained to her how happy you were, how rich, how beloved; I promised to provide for her as long as she lived if she would only leave us, and never trouble you. She refused, then I threatened if she disclosed your parentage to you to cast you both from me; and I told her that as you loved me as dearly as if I were your father, this would break your heart. She was silent at last and went away. I settled a sum of money sufficient to support her respectably at my bankers to be drawn monthly, and I never saw her again. For four months only she drew the money, then I made every inquiry concerning her, but to no avail, so I came to the con-

clusion that she was dead. Now, my dearest Stella, you know all. Once more forgive me if I did wrong. Once more remember how much I have loved you, remember that although Norman is my relative, I leave you my sole heiress. Thank God I am not wronging him, since you are to be his wife.

"JOHN MUNRO."

As Stella finished reading, the paper fell from her hands, and she sat down as if in a dream.

"Oh heavens!" she exclaimed, "why did I not know this sooner, or why did I ever know it at all?"

The tears streamed from her eyes, and her voice quivered as she said,

"My poor mother, how you must have suffered, and your wish was only that I should call you once by your name! Mother, mother, mother!" she repeated, dwelling on the word with a longing tenderness as if she would thereby satisfy the desire of the unknown lost one. Then she was lost in reverie, the expression of her face changed. A dread had come over her.

"In a few hours," she said, "Norman Handell will be here. He arrived in New York two days ago, on his way to spend Christmas with us. The sad news of my uncle's death met him there, and he telegraphed that he was coming with all speed. How can I meet him? How can I tell him this? What shall he say when he hears that his affianced wife—the proud Stella Munro—is in reality only the daughter of a beggar. If his pride revolts against this fact he will be poor, while the fortune which should have been his is mine. No, no," she cried, "this will never do." She dashed the tears away which were glistening on her lashes, and her grand-grey eyes shone with heroic resolution.

"I have no right to this money, no right to my name, no right to his love, and Minnie, the beggar's child, is too proud to throw herself on the pity of a noble heart."

She hurriedly wrote a few lines, which she enclosed in her uncle's letter. They read as follows:

"You will see by this letter who I am. I was ignorant of these facts until a few minutes ago. I release you from your engagement. I am going away to find my own poor mother, if she is alive. Do not seek for me; rather try to forget her who once was

STELLA MUNRO."

She addressed the sealed envelope to Norman Handell, placed it where it might be immediately seen, and her face was strangely pale as she bent over the form of her uncle, taking a last adieu. She kissed his hands nervously and hurriedly as if she feared that hesitation might make her waver. She flew next to her own room, gathered a few jewels—her uncle's gifts—together, put on her cloak, and went down stairs, and having glanced cautiously around to see that she was unperceived, she noiselessly opened the great hall door. The cold wind caused her to draw back for an instant, the next she had stepped out beyond its threshold and it closed behind her.

Out she went alone on that frosty December night. The moon shone coldly upon her, and the wintry winds moaned with a despairing loneliness through the mountain pines. Poor Stella, this is a sad Christmas Eve for you. To-night you have met with your first real sorrow.

### III.

Another year passes away. The scene is now in an humble room in a remote part of the city, the floor is uncarpeted, the furniture is poor and shabby; but notwithstanding this, there is an air of unmistakable refinement about the place. It lies in the exquisite taste with which the few dried flowers are grouped together on the wooden mantle, in the graceful draping of the coarse white muslin curtains which adorn the one small window; but above all it centers in a slight girlish form seated on a low stool plying her needle with silent industry. She is very pale, she has grown thin, but who can mistake the glorious eyes which turn around with inexpressible kindness to the elderly woman, evidently an invalid, who occupies the only comfortable chair in the room. Listen to her low voice, you will soon know her.

"Are you cold, mother dear?"

The woman's smile is full of love as she answers,

"No."

Again the needle is plied in silence for several minutes, then a sigh of relief is heard as the last stitch is finished, and with justifiable pride she holds up the work which her fair fingers have wrought. It is a smoking cap embroidered in gold on crimson velvet.

"Is it not pretty, mother," she says.

"Beautiful, indeed; but you are very tired, my child."

"Oh no," answers the young girl, "not when I think that I will soon be paid for it. We will have quite a grand Christmas dinner to-morrow, you and I together, mother, with the money I will receive for this. Won't that be nice?"

She stoops to kiss the thin careworn face of the woman who throws her arms round her and holds her close to her bosom, while the tears chase each other down her cheeks.

"Mother, Mother! What is the matter? Are you not glad to have me with you?"

"Oh! I never expected such joy on earth," the woman answers. "Yet I would give it all up to see you rich and happy as you once were."

"Rich! mother! I do not want riches; and can I be otherwise than happy when near you? You are all I have in this great busy world. If you only knew how I used to long for a mother when I was rich. I cannot be otherwise than happy now, having found such a good, sweet gentle one."

Stella Munro—for we will still call her by that name, though now she is only known by her mother's—having settled the latter comfortably and bade her not be uneasy during her absence, put on her hat and cloak; she then took from a drawer a small gold locket, opened it and looked with yearning eyes at the faces therein. One, old and kind, was that of her adopted uncle; the other, young and handsome, and her eyes dwelt longer and more sadly upon it, was the face of her lost lover, Norman Handell. With a half-stifled sigh she hung the trinket upon her neck, took up her piece of work and went out.

It was about eight o'clock and the streets were very busy. She might have been sad if she had had time to think; but too much responsibility weighed upon her, for she was the only support of her invalid mother. No one but herself and God knew what sacrifices she was obliged to make in order to give some comfort to that new-found parent. All the jewels which she took with her the night she left her uncle's home, she had been obliged to sell one by one; but she was young and her heart was brave, so as she went along the cold bracing air brought

roses to her cheeks and much of the old ravishing beauty might be discerned about her. Having at last reached her destination, a handsome residence similar to that in which she herself once lived, she rung the bell and disappeared in the doorway. Half an hour elapsed ere she again came out, but that half-hour had wrought a dreadful change upon her. Her face was marble white and her lips quivered. "Well," she said to herself, "since she refuses to pay me to-night the last trinket I have, my locket, must go. I had hoped to be able to keep that always, but for my mother's sake I shall part with it."

The lady whom she had just left had brought her the work three days before, which we saw her completing, and had urged her to do it for Christmas it being meant for a present, and since that time night and day she had been employed upon it scarcely stopping to sleep or eat. Then when she brought it home she had been told to call next week for her money. She had scarcely a dollar left to buy bread with till then, so she summoned courage to beg the lady to pay her immediately; the latter, a coarse selfish woman who surrounded by luxury herself had no feeling for the wants of others, answered in cold sarcastic tones: "Are you afraid that you will not get your money? Come after to-morrow you will be paid, not till then."

With a bursting heart Stella retraced her homeward path, murmuring the words we have above cited. She did not slacken her pace till she had reached an unpretentious jeweller's shop where she had often before found sale for her jewels. Here she stopped in the window's light to take one more look at her last treasure. She put her hand to her neck, she did not feel the tiny chain which held it, she opened her cloak, she shook her dress, it was not there. With heartrending though stifled cry, she exclaimed:

"My God! Is it possible. I have lost it."

Then a mist seemed to cover her eyes, the lights became indistinct around her, the noises in the streets grew more and more distant. Her limbs lost their power and she sank down on the icy pavement. A man who saw her falling stooped to help her, two or three gathered around him. "A woman has fainted," said they one to another, but the crowd rushed by indifferent. Who cared for the poor girl in that great crowded city?

A young gentleman strolling leisurely along stopped through mere idle curiosity to see what was the matter. "A woman has fainted," some one said to him, and he was about to continue his way when he caught a glimpse of the pale young face. He started, approached her, his heart beat wildly, while he exclaimed half aloud:

"I have found you at last, my Stella, after a whole year's dreary search."

He helped to raise her and bore her carefully and tenderly into the jeweller's store. The latter advanced, recognized immediately the young girl whose jewels he had bought, received her kindly and gave her into the charge of his wife.

Then the gentleman asked the jeweller for the lady's address, informed him that he was an old friend of hers, though he had not seen her for a long time, bade him have her conveyed to her home as soon as possible, and having made him promise to say nothing about him until he should make his appearance on the morrow, he departed.

When Stella recovered from her faint she fell into a heavy slumber from which she did not awake until late on the following morning. When she did open her eyes she found herself in her own poor little room, and at first she could not remember the events of the preceding night. One by one at last they presented themselves to her mind till her heart grew heavy again. She remained quiet for a long time, she felt as if life were so dreary that she wished she would never more really awaken to it, and then she began to wonder where her mother was, when the latter entered the room.

In seeing her Stella no longer could restrain the tears which welled to her eyes.

"Mother, Mother!" she said, "we have nothing left us; what shall we do?"

Had she looked into her mother's face she would have perceived a joyous light beaming there which she had never seen before. The latter, however, only replied:

"Come, my dear girl, there must be no tears on Christmas day. Get up and dress quickly, it is nearly time for our dinner."

Stella obeyed mechanically, she felt too weak to do otherwise. And when she had completed her simple toilet it seemed as if she and her mother had changed places, for she leant on the latter's arm as they entered the only other room they had and which served as dining and sitting room to them. When Stella raised her eyes she drew back in amazement, for before her there was a table with a snowy cover and shining with silver and crystal, while in the centre arose a beautiful obergene laden with fruit and flowers.

She rubbed her eyes, she believed it was a dream and trembling she caught her mother's arm.

"What does it mean, mother! Am I dreaming?" She came nearer to the table, she thought the plate before her was familiar. She looked closely. Yes there was her adopted uncle's crest upon it.

"Oh! what does it mean?" she said again; "What is the matter with me? Am I awake?"

At that moment the door opened and Norman Handell stood before her, but the surprise was too great, the shock too sudden and he reached her side just in time to catch her in his arms or she would have fallen.

He put a glass of water to her lips and as the colour returned to them she murmured a third time:

"What does it all mean?"

"What does it mean, my Stella," he replied. "It means that after searching day and night for you during a whole year I have found you at last. I have now come to have my Christmas dinner with you."

He then related the events of the preceding night to her and as he finished he said:

"I need not ask you what were your motives in breaking our engagement and hiding yourself away from me, for, noble girl, I understand them; but now that I have found you I think I read in your eyes that the old love is not all forgotten. Tell me, dearest Stella, that we will never be parted again."

Sweetly, seriously, she echoed his words: "Never again."

All sorrows were buried forever in the past when these three sat down to the delightful meal which Norman Handell had provided for them. Happy, happy was the mother in seeing her child restored to her former position, happy was the lover in having found his beloved one again, and happy was Stella, though often in future years would her mind wander back to those three Christmas Eves of her girlhood, so strange, so sad and ending in such joy.