



MARGERY AND THE TWINS AT THE CHRISTMAS INN.

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Long ago, in one of England's old shires there was a famous hostelry known as the 'Saracen's Head,' and on the creaking sign-board was painted a fearful paynim with gleaming white teeth and frowning eyebrows. But one day it became the 'Christmas Inn,' with the genial device of a sprig of holly, promising good cheer and a jolly welcome. To tell the reason of the inn's change of name will be to give a page out of the obscure chronicles of the common lives of men, women, and children more than three centuries ago. But the quaint, sweet incident is well worth calling to mind at the blessed Christmas season.

It is found briefly set down between items of household expenses, and statements of journeys to London and back, and records of deaths in battle, and costs of trials for treason, in the household books of the worshipful families of the Hightowers and the Barnstaples in the years from 1461 to 1483. It comes like a little flute's silvery tone, between the blare of trumpets and the clash and clang of swords in those rough days, and is so briefly told that I shall have to piece it out for you in my own way.

It was Christmas Eve in 1465, and snow had fallen thick and fast, covering from sight the charred and blackened gable-ends of many a ruined or desolate house. There had been hard fighting in old England, 'Merry' no longer when class fought against class, section against section, people against nobles, east against west, and when friend and kinsman were at deadly feud; when the white rose of York and the red rose of Lancaster were in conflict for the English throne. But, for the sacred Christmas season, a truce had been agreed upon, and

for thirty days there would be no blow struck.

The Saracen's Head looked fierce and grim in the wild wind and drifting snow; but mine host of the inn, Thomas Curdy, came to the door and gazed up and down the highroad with a broad, red, jolly face of hospitality and welcome. It was so wild a storm that he was about to shut and bar the great door earlier than was usual; but he would fain catch some sign of approaching travellers, man and beast, before doing so.

'No traveller abroad to-night!' quoth he with a sigh of regret, as he went back within the red glowing circle of warmth thrown out by the huge Yule-logs of the blazing fire, and rubbed his stout hands before its leaping flames.

'Marry, then this blessed eve there will be no drinking nor bawling here, nor quarrelling in men's cups till they come to blows, truce or no truce!' answered Dame Curdy, contentedly, her rosy, motherly face and fat figure seeming to shed in its way as much comfort around her as did the fire.

A jolly pair they were, and to see how the flames made them ruddier and jollier and cheerier every moment, was a sight for Christmas eve. The Hightowers and Barnstaples chronicles have little to say of this honest pair, but nevertheless they are quite as worthy our attention as any Lancastrian Hightowers or Yorkist Barnstaples of them all.

'Travel, good dame, travel up and down the highroad brings good luck to the Saracen's Head, and it's a bad night that stops it!'

'Ay, I wot—travel in peace. But no bands of fighting-men, to give the honest house a hard name,—and no reckonings paid either. But in this storm, I warrant none will stir abroad that can bide at home

—not even your thirsty cronies from the village, Hobbs and Giles.'

'An' if a storm stops them,—but here a loud, shrill blast from a trumpet sounded keen and clear across the wild wind.

Mine host started up, alert and ready, and Dame Curdy wrung her hands in dismay.

'More fighting-men, alack! I hear the ringing of their armor now as they ride through the gate. May the saints keep watch and ward over us poor sinners, for that is none other than Sir John Keightley's call! They are all the Earl's men.'

The good landlady loved peace, and hated war, and her kindly heart dreaded the turbulent scenes that old kitchen had often witnessed; but her lamentations were to no purpose, as she well knew. Of all people they dared not offend the redoubtable Earl of Hightowers, or any of his stout men-at-arms.

In a few seconds, the inn was full of bustle and confusion. Hostlers ran, maids hurried here and there; and, while the dame gave shrill orders in the kitchen, Thomas Curdy shouted a welcome through the fierce blasts of wind that drove the whirling snow through the wide-open doors.

Across the threshold—with wind and snow-flakes—entered the late comers; Sir John Keightley, a weather-beaten, rugged, and scarred old veteran of many a hard-fought fight, and at least nine or ten stout men with him, roughly dressed, and armed with the long-bow, as were most of the common soldiers at that

time. But as they came out of the night and the storm into the circle of light around the great hearth, Thomas Curdy saw that this was no ordinary band of fighting-men. There were women—three of them, and one who carried herself so haughtily that mine host, who was used to the ways of great people, shrewdly suspected that she was no more than some great lady's attendant; for he had always noticed that the great lady herself was likely to be more simple and quiet in her ways than the maid.

And Sir John Keightley carried in his arms a bundle which he would let no one touch, but strode ahead in front of the great fire, and kneeling down, began tenderly to unfasten wrap after wrap. What a hush of amazement at first, and then what exclamations of wonder and delight from Dame Curdy and her women when the last wrapping was thrown off, and out stepped the daintiest little girl ever seen! She was but two years and six months old; and she laughed out merrily like the ripple of water, or the singing of the early winds in spring through the young leaves. And looking up at the big knight, with tiny hands she began to brush the snow-flakes from the grizzled hair and beard of the old soldier.

'Who is this dear heart?' cried Dame Curdy; and a clear little flute-like voice answered in the softest of tones:

'I'm Lady Margery' (or 'Margy,' as she pronounced it)—'Rosamond Vere.'

Her hair was of reddish gold of the finest silken texture. It was cut square across her brow in front, and hung over her lace frill behind. Her eyes were of a velvety black-blue color, and had a look of wistful tenderness that was contradicted by the laughing, mischievous mouth and the dimples that lurked in cheek and chin.

That look must have come from the young mother who died not long after the husband, only son of the Earl of Hightowers, was cut down in a skirmish with the Yorkists at Stapleton-on-the-moor. The baby girl had her mother's eyes and her father's chin, but the likeness that delighted the portly landlady and made her smile cheerily, and rub her fat hands, was to little Margery's stately old grandmother, the countess, with her tall head-dress. For just at that time the fashionable gentlemen wore puffed and slashed doublets, and shoes ridiculously broad like hoofs; and fashionable ladies, like the countess, were adorned with headdresses ornamented by projecting horns, and looked very grand, no doubt.

'Pretty lamb, how she favors the Countess herself with that proud turn of her sweet head!'

Dame Curdy was right. This baby in her little rose-colored canlet gown, with the gold of her precious head for a crown, ordered her retainers about—Sir John most of all—more royally than the Earl dared to do. But it was, after all, a right heavenly rule of love, albeit a wilful one.

She would have none of her nurse when, after a dainty grace, she had eaten her supper of cream and fine white wheat bread; but she ran away, laughing so that she tripped and almost fell, past the men-at-arms to stout old Sir John Keightley, and climbed on his knee in triumph—for she was sure of having her own way there.

Sir John had been sent by the Earl to bring home his little granddaughter, too young to grieve over her double loss, and had fallen in love with the little maid from the first sound of her childish voice.

She prattled away merrily now, her silvery, piping tones sounding curiously sweet among the gruff voices of the rough soldiers. The men were watching with keen appetites the stirring of the savory dishes, as the landlady hung over the fire, every now and then glancing at the pretty child on the knight's knee.

'Hark! hark!' cried Margery, suddenly, making with her baby finger an imperative gesture for silence. 'Margy' hears the big horn coming! and laughing out with delight, she doubled up her rosy fists and began to blow in pretty mimicry, her eyes shining like stars in her excitement. Then quickly changing, she clapped her tiny palms together, crying, 'Kling-klang, kling-klang!'

They all heard now what the finer ear of the child had sooner detected—the trumpet-call coming nearer and nearer, and the clang of arms.

'Who think you that these may be, land-lord?' asked Sir John, anxiously glancing at the golden head against his breast.

'I fear it is Sir Joseph Barnstaple's men,' answered mine host deprecatingly, for the Barnstaples were Yorkists, and long at enmity with the Hightowers faction; and again the good dame sighed and wrung her hands in dismay.

Fearing some possible attack, in spite of the solemn proclamation of the truce, Sir John made his men resume their weapons while the big door was being unbarred.

Then what a sight! No such wonderful night had the old Saracen's Head ever known before. Here, again, with the soldiers were nurses—two nurses in russet kersey gowns, carrying each a small bundle; and out of these bundles, when unwrapped, appeared two babies, twin girls of eighteen months old! Sir Joseph Barnstaple's second son had married in one of the southern shires a rich heiress, who had died of a fever, and now, the granddame being dead also, the father was sending them, like the wee lady with Sir John, under military convoy back to his old home at Barnstaples Manor.

The women clapped their hands, and laughed with 'Ohs!' and 'Ahs!' and 'Dear hearts!'—even the soldiers laughed—but nobody was so pleased as the little 'Lady Margy,' as she gazed, with wide-open eyes and crimson lips just parted by a smile and showing a few white pearls of teeth, at the demure twin babies.

Barbara and Janet Barnstaples, as the firelight danced over their little, smooth, round heads, darker than Margery's, could not be coaxed into a smile. Their four dark grave eyes wondered solemnly at all the noise and all the strange faces, and the two little mouths were drawn up for a cry, when all at once they caught sight of Margery, bending forward, and two faint