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THREE BIRTHDAYS.

A CHRISTMAS CAROL.

BY ELEANOR C. DONNELLY.

(From the Philadelphia Catholic Standard.)

PART SECOND.

III.—(CONTINUED.)

To which she made answer gently that it would be no use—but she thanked him all the same. And he looked at her again, as he had looked the day before, with his melancholy eyes full of wistful yearning, and almost woman's tenderness in his smile.

It had been in Pet's mind to say a few words of parting to him when he went away—not knowing, poor child, what the morrow might bring forth; but she held her peace and waited. It was only when Angelique brought into her dressing-room that evening a lovely little bunch of hearts-ease and forget-me-nots, with "Monsieur Albe's card," that Pet fully realized the young minister's delicate sympathy and consideration. In such strong contrast, moreover, to Cyril's brusque neglect—that something very like rain, dropped from the gray eyes upon the fragrant flowers.

"Mam'selle will wear her pearl silk with the lace over-dress?" said Angelique, seeing how abstractedly her young mistress stood at her toilette.

"No, no, my good girl," and Pet raised herself with an effort: "let it be white. White is for the bride: and you know, Angelique, how pure, how beautiful was the Divine Spouse who came to me this morning!"

Pet lowered her voice to a whisper: and bowed her head reverentially as she spoke.

"Ah! she is an angel!" muttered the French girl, with tears in her eyes; and sighing as she drew the silk bodice together and found it so loose.

"I am thinner," said Pet, with a smile; "but courage, Angelique. See how plump I will grow when you and I go wandering together over the earth like a pair of pilgrims—Shall we go to Rome or the Holy Land? Or shall it be our own old sunny home among the vineyards—la belle France?"

"They will not send you away, the sunbeam of the house?" protested the maid vehemently, though her face had brightened at the mention of her native land.

"God's will be done!" said her young mistress gently as she turned from the mirror in her virgin robes, Mr. Albe's flowers in her hand, and Barbara's gift sparkling like stars on her throat and bosom.

Who was happier than Pet that happy evening? Who was blither or sunnier as carriage after carriage rolled to the doors of the Terrace and the drawing-rooms grew brilliant with flowers and laces? While

—bright
The lamps shone o'er fair women and brave men;
And all went merry as a marriage bell."

Knowing the secret which she carried in her heart which, at all risks, must be told to Barbara before the night was over, even Pet, herself, marvelled at her own exceeding gaiety.

"What have you been doing to yourself, little one?" said the old doctor, detaining her as she floated past him in white robes. "You are as pale as a lily and fragile as an Urdino."

"Why, doctor," laughed Pet, looking up at him through her long lashes, "who would suspect you of getting off such fine speeches?"

"But you are like a spirit," persisted the old gentleman, eyeing the sweet thin face through his glasses, a little anxiously. "Upon my honor, if we don't look to you sharply, you will be getting your wings soon, and flying away from us altogether."

Pet nodded confidentially: "My dear old friend, I said this morning if any one would make me a birth-day gift of a pair of wings, I would soon find use for them." Then throwing back her curls with one of her wonderful smiles, she hummed softly:

"Ah! had I the wings of a dove I would fly
Away from this world of care!"

"That reminds me, my dear child, of a request I would make. Will you sing me one of your sweet songs before the evening is over?"

"After supper, with pleasure," smiled Pet; and Barbara came up to say:

"Have you seen Cyril, my darling?"

added the old gentleman, with a moaning twinkle at Pet, "he hopes to imitate that same despairing lover, and (after taking his little holiday) be brought back triumphantly at last."

Pet's small hand was laid on Barbara's arm; and she drew her gently away.

"I have much to tell you," she said in a grave, tender fashion.

"About Cyril's departure, love?"

"Yes; and something else of even greater importance."

"Well, well," returned Barbara soothingly, without the least suspicion of the truth; "come to my room, tonight, dear, before you go to bed; and we'll talk it over. I shall wait you."

And some one came to claim Pet's hand; and the quadrille went on; and the dancers little guessed the cruel pain, gnawing under the flowers on her brow. But,

"The deepest ice that ever froze
Can only o'er the surface close;
The living stream lies quick below
And flows, and cannot cease to flow."

And after seating herself at the grand piano in the alcove, Pet touched the keys and sang her song—"Then you'll remember me."

Thinking of the sunny past whose gates were closing upon her; thinking of the dark unknown future whose portals were opening before her, she looked on the dear once grouped around her chair, and sent forth in that songful burst the supplication of her soul.

Many a day in the clouded months to come, did Barbara and Miriam recall those pleading words; and picture to themselves the sweet spirituelle face, the drooping figure in its white robes—and the rich voice surging forth in a tide of touching melody. O hearts so fond—how could you be so blind?

It was past midnight when Pet came out of Barbara's room and entered her own. The night-lamp burned low, and the maid was dozing in front of the fire.

"O Angelique!" cried Pet flinging herself on the girl's broad chest and sobbing there like a child. "It has been a terrible interview.—The worst has come to pass—and Barbara has sent me away from the Terrace—forever!"

PART THIRD.

I.

"GLORIA IN EXCELSIS DEO!" the angels were singing in heaven. "GLORIA IN EXCELSIS DEO!" the Catholic choirs were singing on earth; and the church-bells were ringing far and near, and the sun shone brightly and the Christmas skies were as blue as the skies of June. It had snowed hard all Christmas-eve, and everything was hooded and muffled with nature's purest ermine. White roads—white fences—white roofs; and every tree for miles around Trenton Terrace was so coated and crusted with sparkling snow, that a poet might have dreamed of some vast sea sinking into snow—and leaving the coral trees bare to the morning sun.

There was no one to look out from the windows of the Terrace (save from the servant's wing), and view the fairy-like landscape, left and right. It was the hour for service in Mr. Albe's church; and Barbara and Miriam wore both in the family pew. Barbara, looking ten years older and sterner—Miriam, a little thinner, but all the lovelier for her pensive mouth and thoughtful eyes.

It was full time for Mr. Albe to appear; but the congregation (it had grown larger in the past few years), gathered promptly in the pretty little church; the scarlet berries of the holly glowed upon the frescoed walls; the school children came in demurely with folded hands and took their seats in the choir—but still no minister.

A boy in a white surplice came out according to custom and lighted the candles in the chancel: the sexton came up the aisle and adjusted the service of solid silver on the communion-table, and brushed off a few rose-leaves which had fallen there; while the beadle opened the last pew, and subsided into his accustomed place—and still no minister.

In the dead silence, the school-children began timidly to sing:

"With hearts truly grateful, come, all ye faithful,
To Jesus, to Jesus in Bethlehem—"

and while something in the old tender tune touched her heart, Barbara Trenton lifted a book from the bench beside her and turned the leaves. It was Pet's old Prayer-book: the same Barbara had given her the first Christmas after she came from school; and in between the leaves were bits of paper with Pet's handwriting on them. Little French prayers which she had copied out in her days of struggle.—Prayers for light—for a pure and humble heart—for grace to see and strength to do God's holy hidden will. Barbara was strangely moved. She had never opened that book before since Pet went away. She had sat there in her pew week after week, Sunday after Sunday, feeling such hard bitter resentment in her breast, such sore vexation at the failure of all her cherished hopes and plans—that she had not dared to touch it. And now, like invisible

characters brought out by the breath of fire—came this sudden revelation of this true, innocent, fervent heart she had crushed and cast from her, like a broken lily. The reserved and decorous lady did what she had not done for years. She began to cry. And while her tears dropped softly under cover of her hand, Miriam had bowed her head upon the pew and was listening to the children's voices, and wondering what could keep Mr. Albe so long.

Something in the sweet old hymn had set her thinking, too, of Pet. The Terrace was lonely without her. Even this bright-cushioned, richly-carpeted pew looked bare and empty without the sweet, earnest face and the slender girlish figure which once nestled in its corner. Had Barbara done right or wrong to cast her off because she had turned Catholic and refused to marry Cyril Murdoch? Was it a Christian or a kindly act to subject her (like a refractory child in a reformatory), to the chilling influences of that rigid Presbyterian aunt, hundreds of miles away? Dear gentle, charming Pet! they did not think she would have held out in her rebellion so long. They did not think she would have thrown off at last the yoke of bitter dependence and gone to teaching music in some distant convent-school; instead of coming home, charmingly repentant, to revoke all her Popish errors, and be once more the sunbeam and the darling of the house.

"A grave mistake all through," muttered Miriam, with moist eyes. "The next thing that unaccountable girl will do, will be to turn nun herself; and then we shall be justly punished for our sins by never seeing her again."

A subdued hum all over the crowded church aroused her: and she looked up to see Mr. Albe entering the chancel. Marvel of marvels! could it be Mr. Albe? How oddly he looked! Right and left, wondering eyes were fixed upon him, growing wider and rounder with amazement as, instead of kneeling to begin the accustomed prayers, he motioned the troop of acolytes to their seats, and came and stood at the chancel-rail.

His dress, usually so neat, was strangely disordered; his hair thrown back carelessly from his brow, and all the little details of Anglican decorum, for once, neglected—but the old dependent stoop was gone, and he held himself firmly erect, and looked out at his people with a resolute energy in his white face. For the first time since he came among them, he looked them in the face (God bless him!) with bright fearless eyes, like an honest man. And after that one long breathless pause—he spoke:

"My brethren, when you hear the hard words which I have to say, you may think me cruel to have spoken them on this merry Christmas morning. But the God of truth is a jealous God and breaks no cowardly delays: I am going to leave you forever."

With a wave of his lifted hand he calmed the tumult which was breaking forth and went on:

"It is useless to tell you how long I have struggled against the powerful inspirations of the Holy Ghost, the proofs of the Scripture, and the evidence of my own calm reason. How long I have prayed with a strong cry and tears that this bitter chalice of separation from all I loved"—(and his eye rested a moment on the Trenton pew)—"might be averted. But what can a man give in exchange for his soul? or what doth it profit a man to gain the whole world if he lose his own soul? I can deceive myself—I can deceive you, my people, no longer. The doctrines which I have taught you, the practices which I have introduced among you are not the doctrines or the practices of the Anglican Church. They are mere fragments of a vast Whole—broken splinters from the great mirror Truth which can only be found in its perfect unity—in its untarnished splendor, in the bosom of the HOLY ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH. Thither I go—crying with the penitent Augustine, 'Too late have I known Thee, O Beauty, ever Ancient and ever New!' O Souls!" he cried, stretching forth his arms to the people with a gesture of ineffable yearning—"souls for which I have prayed and labored. Souls, redeemed by the precious Blood of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, and for which He was born this day in the stable at Bethlehem—would that I could gather you all into my arms and take you with me safely into the shelter of the One True God!"

He broke down, deeply moved—took off his surplice and threw it upon the floor, and hastily quitted the chancel.

The congregation rose on *masse* crying and sobbing—for he was tenderly beloved. Some followed him into the vestry, telling him (as Father Faber's people did on a similar occasion), that he might preach what he pleased if he would only stay with them and help them to save their souls; the rest standing in groups in and around the church talking over the remarkable event in mingled grief and excitement. While a few (principally young girls and elderly spinsters) were weeping wildly in the back-pews, and going into hysterics under the very nose of the beadle.

It was some time before Barbara and Miriam could make their way through the crowd and get round to the little parsonage. As they

went, Miriam was pale as a ghost, and Barbara had not a word to say. A year ago, nay, six months ago, the latter would have got into her new carriage after such a scene, and gone home in lofty indignation; now, she felt staggered, dizzy, but with a strange sympathy for the young minister in her softened heart.

They expected to find him in a crowd, excited or at least depressed. But he was neither. He was alone in his pretty little parlor: and his manner had all the buoyancy of a child's. He shook their hands warmly, retaining Miriam's the longest.

"I have read of men coming out of wild, trackless deserts," he said, "into sunny oases where everything was green, and the birds sang in the palm-trees, and ripe dates dropped beside the well of water. To-day I realize their sensations."

"You are at rest?" said Barbara, looking as if she was not.

"Yes, thank God! I am surprised at myself. Our dear Lord seems to be consoling me with sweetenings as nurses do a child which has had a hard blow. Just now as I quitted the chancel I felt as if I should swoon—and now all my burden is gone and I am as light-hearted as a boy. You remember, dear Miriam,

"In the calm stillness of regeneration
Cometh a joy they never knew of old."

Miriam was standing by the table, mute and colorless, looking down at an open book. One passage on its pages was strongly pencil-marked and she read it silently with sharpened perceptions: "*Comfort and harmony—home and ease are not meant for those who wish to follow Christ. God's Will be done, whatever that gracious Will may be!*"

"My dear, how you tremble!" cried Barbara; "and your hands are as cold as marble. Mr. Albe, will you please ring for some wine? The child is surely ill."

"I don't want any wine," said Miriam, resolutely. "I am well enough. I am going home," and she walked to the door.

"But the sleigh is not here, urged Barbara; "it was all over so soon at the church, the coachman will not be here this half-hour."

"I can walk," said Miriam, wilfully, with a red spot burning in either cheek—"it is a lovely day, and the road is a good one."

"Mr. Albe, please reason with her," and Barbara looked anxiously at Mr. Albe, whose eyes were on Miriam's downcast face. "It is preposterous to think of her walking."

"Not any more preposterous than to think of staying here after what has happened this morning," said Miriam, in an unnatural voice.

"I declare I am harassed to death," cried poor Barbara, with a little sob. "Everything and everybody seems to conspire against me. There is Pet hundreds of miles away, working like a slave in some horrid convent; while I get a letter (last week) from Cyril Murdoch telling me with the greatest assurance that he was happily married a month ago to a lovely girl of his own creed; and is going to bring his unknown bride to spend the Christmas with us. And, as if that were not aggravation enough, here is Mr. Albe turning Romanist, all of a sudden, and throwing up his living—while Miriam—"

here the poor little lady gave way incontinently, and sank into a chair near the fire with her handkerchief to her eyes.

"Dear friend," said the young man, gently, "if Miriam wants to go, and would rather walk than ride—do not let it distress you.—Stay you here and rest till the sleigh comes round; and with your permission, I will accompany your sister home."

"As you please," (came from behind the cambric handkerchief.) "It does not matter much. My feelings or objections are of very little account to anybody. The end of the world is surely coming."

Miriam would have protested, but she dare not trust herself to speak; and Mr. Albe drew her gently from the room, leaving Barbara nursing her grief in front of the fire, and plaintively repeating again and again that everything and everybody conspired against her, and that the end of the world was surely at hand.

II.

An hour later, with a merry jingle, the family sleigh swept up the drive to Trenton Terrace, and the footman sprang to help Miss Barbara out.

"Has Miss Miriam returned yet?" she asked, impatiently.

"No, Miss, but—" and the man was about to explain further—when his mistress, without giving him the opportunity, turned away abruptly and sailed up the steps. Truly, the events of the morning had strangely soured the little lady's usually sweet temper.

"Well, Danvers, what is it?"

"Please, Miss Barbara, there is a mistake somewhere. One of the maids says she was told to take down the crimson curtains in Miss Pet's room. Did you give the order?"

"By no means," returned her mistress, decidedly. The first one who alters a single appointment in Miss Patronilla's room quits my service on the instant. A pretty piece of as-

urance! What can the girl want with the curtains, anyway?"

"She said they were needed for the stage in the west drawing-room."

"What stage?"

The housekeeper looked surprised.

"The one you told the men to put up for the tableaux this evening, Miss."

In the great excitement of the morning, Barbara had forgotten this arrangement of her own. There had been guests invited for that evening: and a set of tableaux projected to supply for the old-time ball, customary at the Terrace on Christmas nights ever since Pet was born. To the merriment and hilarity of a ball on the birthday of her exiled darling, Barbara did not feel equal this year; but a Christmas entertainment she was bound to have. First, that the neighboring gentry might see with what gay heroism she could immolate her affections on the altar of duty; and second, to show the recreant Cyril and his bride, how supremely indifferent Trenton Terrace could be to his fickle forgetfulness of Pet.

"Will you walk over to the drawing-room, Miss," suggested the housekeeper, "and see what can be done about the curtains?"

"Yes; send these up to my room with one of the maids," and Barbara left her hat and cloak in the old lady's hands; and crossed the hall with more energy than she had shown for hours.

There was the sound of a hammer to be heard outside the west drawing-room, and other sounds of men talking and laughing; and just as Barbara opened the door a familiar voice was saying:

"A little more this way, Michael. Draw the curtain a trifle to the left; and drive a nail through it—so!" And there was a tall, broad-shouldered gentleman with bright eyes and a brown curly beard, mounted on a ladder and directing the workmen in the drapery of an impromptu stage.

"Cyril!" cried Barbara in astonishment; and down he came with one leap, like an expert gymnast, and caught her little hand in his two strong ones and shook it again and again, crying cheerily:

"A merry Christmas, Miss Barbara, and a happy New Year! Upon my honor, I am happy to see you. And how are you? And how have you been? And I only wish you were half as well or half as happy as I am this day!"

Barbara made appropriate replies to all this in a mildly injured way; feeling very much abused at Cyril's graceful buoyancy, notwithstanding her intention of showing him how indifferent she could be.

"Where is Mrs. Cyril?" she asked a little dryly.

"In her room," returned Cyril gaily, "with a troublesome headache. You see we missed a connection coming on last evening: and made a close shave of not getting here for Christmas after all: which would have been simply unbearable. So, between waiting hours at the station, and then travelling all night, my wife" (how proudly he lingered over the words!) "was terribly fatigued when we got here, an hour ago, and went to bed right off. She sent her regrets, however."

"Perhaps I had better go up to her room and see if she wants anything," said Barbara, making an heroic effort at hospitality.

"Not the least reason in the world," returned the bridegroom; "her maid is with her: and I dare say she is sound asleep by this time. How do you like my taste?" and he pointed to the stage.

The servants had finished it while they talked, and were now clearing away the litter, preparatory to leaving the room.

"You would not believe,"—lowering his voice—"what a botch they were making of it when I came in. Michael had the footlights wrong side out, and Richard was running up an ugly black curtain which looked like a pirate's flag. *Mais nous avons change tout cela.* I made them bring down the hangings from my old smoking-room; and you see the effect. Upon my word," with his head critically on one side, "I think that crimson drapery is very artistic."

"Very pretty, indeed," murmured Barbara wearily, sinking into a chair.

"You are not well," said Cyril, as the door closed on the workmen and they were left alone. "Indeed, my dear friend, you look quite pale and fagged."

"I am as well as I ever was in my life," returned his companion a little curtly, but I am out of sorts. There was a terrible emetate at the church this morning. Mr. Albe has turned Papist."

"Preposterous!" cried Cyril, incredulously.

"The honest fact. Gone over to the enemy, heart and soul,—and resigned his living this morning in the grandest sermon I ever heard him make. Eloquent—pathetic—to be candid!"—(for Barbara found a queer relief in opening her mind even to him)—"it has shaken me so much that I don't think it's worth while trying to save one's soul the old fashion; I think I'll give up going to church altogether."

"Humph!" said Cyril musingly, "this business will spoil another marriage in the