

Tommy's Santa Claus.

('Home Words.')

Chapter I.

Everything disagreeable that one can think of in connection with winter weather seemed to be concentrated into Christmas tide that year. It was bitterly, piercingly cold; a cold that found its way somehow through the best-fitting doors and windows, and discovered draughts where no one had imagined them before. The sky was one dull, grey sheet—not blanket, nothing half so comfortable was suggested in its look. And it seemed to lean down heavily on the dull landscape below. The north wind had a searching way with it—whistling into odd corners that had been left undisturbed for ages, and driving out before it puffs of stony dust, and bits of straw and stick, and then blowing them into people's eyes and mouths, in the rudest fashion. Everything out of doors had to 'move on.' It was just as if the north wind were determined that the old year should not be allowed to sleep till all odds and ends were cleared out, and the whole world brushed up and put straight and tidy for the new-comer.

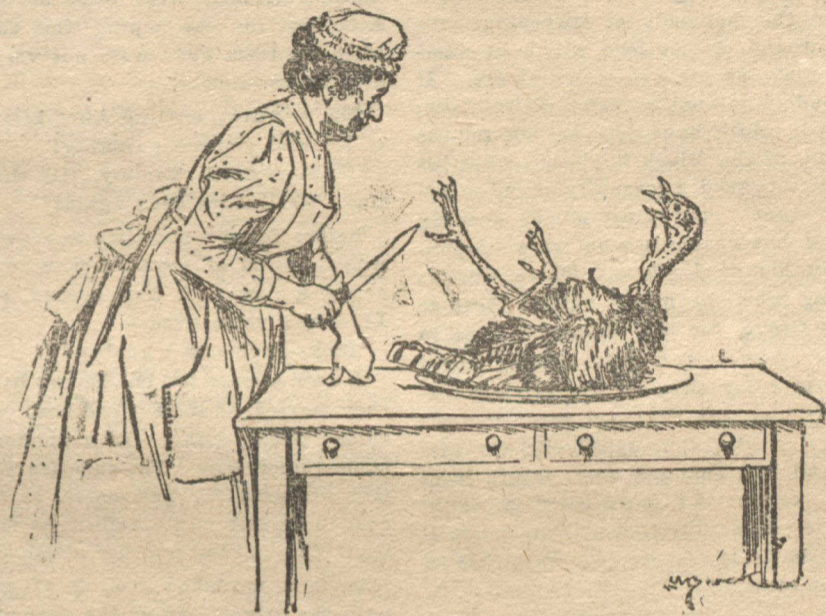
It almost seemed as if he must have had something to do with the misfortunes that came, one after the other, to Myrtle Grove that Christmastime; and Tommy Lindsay, who was flattening his nose against the window-pane that dreary afternoon, in the vain hope of seeing somebody pass, was not the only one in the house who fancied there was a note of triumph in his voice, as he blustered round the grey stone walls. Rightly or wrongly, most people do not expect misfortunes at Christmastime. Even if things have been difficult and disagreeable during the past year, they are expected to become smooth and pleasant, if only for the Christmas holidays.

A month ago all had been bustle and joyful preparation at Myrtle Grove; for Colonel Lindsay, Tommy's father, might be expected to arrive from India any day. The house had been cleaned from top to bottom; the maids had got new caps and aprons; everything was ready and waiting—days before the very earliest date at which the Colonel could possibly arrive, although nurse had assured them all many times over that they 'would have nothing ready for him.' Even Tommy's delicate mother, who spent most of her day on the sofa, as a rule, did wonders in the way of arranging and re-arranging the furniture in all the rooms. And Tommy himself helped everybody, and strange to say, seemed to be in nobody's way.

There had come a day—a day beginning in much the same way as those others that had been so full of happy bustle—when it had all come to an end. There was a loud ring—and knock—at the front door-bell; a few seconds of wild heart-beating and then a rush on the part of Mrs. Lindsay to the door. With trembling fingers, that could hardly grasp the handle, she opened it—on a telegraph boy.

'One shilling for portage, miss.'

He had to peal the bell loudly, more than once this time, before he got it; and Mrs. Lindsay had to read his message over and over again—though no tears fell on the pink slip of paper to ease the grip at her heart—before she took in what it meant.



THE CHRISTMAS TURKEY.

'It is really most unhandsome,' I once heard a turkey say,
'That I'm killed just to be eaten, and that on Christmas day;
So prithee, cook, do spare my life, for really I'm not able
To join in all the mirth when lying on the table.'
But cook refused, and sharpened her knife, and loudly did declare,

'There'd be no Christmas fun at all if the turkey were not there.'
The turkey gobbled down a sob, his breast swelled with a sigh,
'Then put me down, and roast me brown, a martyr I must die.'
So when you dine at Christmas time, and slice of turkey take,
Remember that he willing went to death 'for duty's sake.'

—J. E. WHITE.

'Can't come: important business detains.' He was not coming, then after all! After all those weeks of anticipation, that had gone with such 'lazy, leaden-stepping hours'; after the long, long two years' separation. Nurse got her upstairs, somehow, and put her to bed.

That was the first, and the biggest misfortune that came to Myrtle Grove; and it was not to be wondered at if those that followed seemed to come in the natural order of things.

There were alleviations in her disappointment, many of her friends thought. There were not wanting those even who found entire consolation for Mrs. Lindsay in the fact of her husband's being 'a rising man,' and necessary in high places. Outsiders occasionally see comforts in one's lot, which one has overlooked—perhaps, because, after all, they see most of the game. But, when one has been in the sunshine, it takes some little time before the eye has grown sufficiently accustomed to a dark room, to distinguish objects in it.

No one tried harder to comfort her than Tommy—poor noisy, fidgety Tommy; and perhaps no one tried her poor shaken nerves more! Do what he would, try as hard as he could, he found it impossible to sit still for many minutes in his mother's room, where nurse, with the kindest intentions, and for the wisest reasons of her own, kept the blinds down. Everything that went on out-of-doors sounded so much louder and stranger behind his mother's darkened windows; and he was constantly jumping up just to peep out and ascertain what it could be.

Misfortune number two came in this manner.

When Mrs. Lindsay's mother heard of her daughter's disappointment, she had settled to come and spend Christmas at

least with her, rightly judging that at that time of all others—which was to have been kept in such different fashion—her daughter would feel the disappointment keenly. Her other child, Tommy's 'pretty Aunt Ella,' was to spend it with a neighboring family to one of whose sons she had just become engaged to be married. It had all fitted in so nicely: but alas, alas, for 'the best-laid schemes of men and mice!' On the very day that Mrs. Graham was to have started for Otterbrook, she received the news of the sudden and dangerous illness of a sister, with an entreaty that she would come to the rescue at once.

It was 'just like people,' nurse said, when the second telegram bringing disappointment reached Myrtle Grove that cold, dreary morning. 'If you didn't want 'em, nothing would keep 'em away; and if, by any chance you did want 'em, why, they wouldn't come. If Miss Ella could have come now—but there, no one ever thought of anything but their own pleasure.' Which was hardly fair to Mrs. Graham, nor to Ella, as will be seen.

The third misfortune which came to Myrtle Grove was really the last straw on poor nurse's broad back. Just as she was most anxious to keep the house quiet—and Tommy out of mischief in his nursery—the chimney took to smoking! It was not an ordinary smoking either, such as a dexterous management of window or door ajar might have remedied.

The wind had changed, and the zeal of the new-comer, the meddling north wind, had discovered amongst other disagreeable things, that the nursery chimney wanted sweeping, and had emphasized its discovery by clouds of blacks, and angry flames. It could not have happened at a worse time. Not only did it mean Tommy's being anywhere in the house but where he should have been, but it necessitated