

*The Message of the Bells.*

## A CHRISTMAS TALE.

"WHAT am I to do, Mis' Jones," shrieked a shrill child's voice, "if Mary Ann ain't at home?"

The speaker was a little dark-eyed girl, who might have been pretty had her face been less wan and pinched, and she was standing, basket in hand, at the foot of a narrow staircase in a poor and dingy London home.

"Bless the child! Mary Ann 'll be there sure enough. Now, you be off, an' I mind you that you don't forget them collars." This injunction was sufficient, and in another moment the child had darted down the street.

Jenny Green was the duly recognized carrier and messenger for all the inmates of Alma Grove. If her earnings were not large, they were at least enough to aid in keeping the dreaded wolf from the door of her home. And this evening, could you have looked straight into Jenny's heart, you would have seen that she was overflowing with delight at some prospect that lay before her. Mrs. Jones was always a generous patron, but this evening she had surpassed herself in liberality of promise.

"A whole sixpence!" Jenny was muttering to herself. "Whatever 'll Jack say to that?" And the smile that brightened her face was like a gleam of sunshine; but presently it died away, for Jenny was a woman of business, and as she plodded through the mire on that dull and foggy evening she slowly revolved in her mind various and important calculations. "How much sugar candy and how many brandy-balls might be purchased for sixpence?"

Oh, dear, no! Jenny was only nine years old, it is true, but circumstances had turned her into a little old woman before her time. Two years before her mother had died, a gently loving woman, who had faded slowly away, worn out by ill-usage and scanty fare, and since then Jenny had been to all intents and purposes the head of the household. Her father was her heaviest burden, a low, drinking, dissolute man, who was "off on the spree" four days out of the seven. Only two of his children now survived, and of these Jack, the youngest, was a cripple.

"Two pen'orth o' coals, ha'porth tea, ha'porth sticks, ha'porth sugar, tuppenny loaf—no, penny loaf, then we might have a treat—a herring mebbe—or would Jack like a roll and a ha'porth o' milk?" All the time she was steadily wending her way re-tion of Camden Town. A

sharp turn to the left, away from the light and glare, down a court a trifle more shabby than that from which she had started, and now the end of her journey was reached.

"Please, Mis' Jones, 7 Alma Grove, sent me for the clean clothes, 'tickerly the collars."

The old woman whom she had addressed turned round and called out the requirement to some one within the house.

"Tell her they ain't done. She must call again in twenty minutes," was the loud response; and with that slam went the door.

Jack would have to wait for his supper, Jenny reflected sadly. But father was gone off, that was a comfort, and there was certainly no likelihood of his reappearing until after Boxing Day. Jenny loitered slowly down the street, and then her eye was caught by the bright light streaming from a small iron mission-room at the farther end of the court, and crossing the road she crept softly into the tiny lobby. There was apparently some kind of service going on within; a man with a loud voice was speaking in a very earnest and simple manner. Jenny was not critical of his uneducated mode of speech, for she was at once attracted by what he had to say. He was telling the little congregation of the time when, as a boy, he had lived in a country home many miles away, where the one glory of the village was that their church bells could play three distinct hymn tunes. One of these went to the well-known words: "Hark, the herald angels sing," and every Christmas Day at six o'clock in the morning the bells would strike up the melody, and continue ringing for an hour or more.

"We did not live in the village; 'twas quite a mile away, up a steepish bit of hill, and we could hear them bells beautiful if the wind was right, and just faintly when it was contrary. My mother was a good woman, if ever there was one, and from a little chap I mind her allays dressing all in the dark on Christmas morning, and moving about so quietly 'cos she shouldn't wake up no little 'uns, and then she 'ud light the fire, and sit there hearkening till our old clock struck six. And with that she catches up her shawl and goes and opens the door, and we children, all warm tucked up in bed, would hear the bells strike up, and mother's voice singing the hymn all through.

"Mother, what for do you open the door?" I mind askin' her one day.

"Jim," says she, 'I want the Lord Jesus to come into my home, and that is to

show He is welcome here.' And that very morning she taught us all to say after her—

"Come, Desire of Nations, come,  
Fix in us Thy humble home;  
Rise the woman's conquering seed,  
Bruise in us the serpent's head."

"Ah," she said, 'children, ours is but a poor place to ask the Lord Jesus to; but there! if He didn't mind coming to a stable and a manger, He won't scorn to come to us, if so He knows we are wishful for Him.'

"Mother's been dead this twenty year and more; but I think I can see her now on that Christmas Day, gatherin' us all round her, and biddin' us always to 'make room for Jesus.'"

What more the good man may have said, Jenny, indeed, did not know, for a new and delightful idea had struck upon her mind. "Why, the Lord Jesus is coming to-morrow!" Jenny did not know much about Him, it was true, but of this she was certain, for she had been told so at the Ragged School, and there, moreover, she had heard that He loved all children—the poor and the ragged just as much as the rich and respectable. So now, if she and Jack opened their door on Christmas morning, the Lord Jesus would come in even to their poor home, "and p'raps He 'ud make Jack straight!" But with that vision there came a sudden sob, for the thought touched a chord that lay deep in Jenny's heart.

There was a sudden burst of singing from within the little mission-room.

"Make room for Jesus—room, sad heart,  
Beguiled and sick of sin;  
Bid every alien guest depart,  
Arise, and let Him in."

"Make room, sad heart, make room, make room!  
Bid alien guests depart;  
Oh, let the Master in, sad heart!  
Arise, and let Him in."

Jenny lingered until the very end, and then she darted off just as the door was opening.

Presently, the bundle of clean clothes tucked securely under her arm, she was trudging along the street towards home. Her heart was full of thoughts too great for words: it seemed to her only a moment before she again stood in Mrs. Jones' dark passage, and received the reward for her journey. Mr. Jones was seated at the table eating his supper, and whilst his wife was rummaging in her pocket for the promised sixpence he cut off a good slice of a solid cake-pudding that stood before him.

"Hi! little 'un," he said good-naturedly, as Jenny was turning away, "here's a Christmas-box for you!" And so it came