

"The Christmas Bells,"

Once more across the leafless land
We hear the clush of Christmas chimes;
The young and old stand hand in hand,
And dream the past in present times.
There is a story in the bells
That comes in whispers through the air:
Of love to sound their music tells,
They sigh to others of despair!

Last year we sung the window wide;
'Twas such a Christmas Eve as this;
We bade the bells to greet the bride
And consecrate the bridegroom's kiss.
A little year! too brief, alas!
To save the ship or sail the wave;
To-morrow morning we shall pass
The flowers on her husband's grave!

A year ago! you can't forget
The darkness of last Christmas night,
A little robin cold and wet
Flew dazed and hungry to the light.
Our holly wreaths unwithered still,
The glad new year had scarcely come.
We heard a shout across the hill,
Our long-lost brother had come home!

"Good Will and Peace" in leafy scroll,
We saw above the chancel dim;
We heard the mighty organ roll
Its music for the Christmas hymn.
The sermon was of love, and all
Uprised, just best—a Christian fold;
Still father's kisses never fall
On mother's forehead as of old!

Ring on, ye Christmas bells, of peace;
Ring on of love that never dies;
The love that lasts though life must cease,
The life of deathless sympathies;
Ring out the only true belief
Across the meadows and the plain,
The woods once more will smile in leaf;
The summer flowers come again.

This is the music of the chimes
That crushes hate and kills despair;
The gospel of the good old times
Filling with love the very air;
Though hopes lie buried, it will rise,
Though sorrow triumphs, 'twill depart;
Love will re-light grief-wasted eyes,
And fill with joy the empty heart.

COUSIN JOHN.

THE STORY OF A CHRISTMAS DAY.

"Are we near Marston Station now?" I asked timidly of my opposite companion, with whom a few civilities had been exchanged during a somewhat long railway journey performed in a second-class carriage.

"We shall be there almost directly," she answered briskly. "You are glad, I dare say; for it has been a tiring day for you."

"Yes," I replied doubtfully, feeling inwardly a sensation little akin to gladness; for, though I was going home in one sense of the word, having no other place to call by that name, I had never been to Marston before. I was going as a stranger to accept a shelter from relatives I had never seen—going with dread and uncertainty too; for though my aunt Vereker's letter had contained the promise of a welcome, how could I be sure she really meant it? How could I divine whether my cousins would not regard me in the light of an intruder and interloper as well? But I had had no choice in the matter. All had been hurriedly settled and arranged, almost before I had realised that I was to leave my old home and go out amongst new friends and strange faces.

I knew that the Verekers were rich—at least, rich in comparison with what we had ever been; and, as my means were in future to be of the most modest description, I had travelled in a way would probably shock them if they chanced to see me alight. But that could not be helped. I knew I was right. Very likely none of them would be at the station; at all events, there was not much time for deliberation; even then the train was slackening its speed. I was gathering up my few belongings and preparing very tremblingly for the ordeal.

I had jumped out very quickly, not pausing to glance either to the right or to the left, when suddenly a voice behind me said something which in my nervousness I could not quite catch; but, looking up, I found myself facing a gentleman who, concluding who I was, introduced himself as my cousin John Vereker. He was dressed in a rough gray shooting-suit, with a wide-awake hat, which he raised slightly when he first addressed me.

"Lina is here too," he said. "We drove over together; and the cart has been sent for your boxes."

"Thank you," I answered; "but I have only one small box and what you see."

"All right," said my cousin John, though how he came to be my cousin was a mystery which was still to be explained; for I had

never heard that aunt Vereker had a son. I had always imagined that her family consisted of daughters only.

He possessed himself quietly of my small property, and, leading the way, conducted me through the little gateway to the pony-carriage wherein Lina sat, gazing towards us with evident curiosity as we approached. She welcomed me kindly, and then proceeded to ask if I would mind sitting behind in the seat usually occupied by the groom, as she wished to drive home.

"And John won't let me," she said, with a pretty plaintive gesture, "unless he sits beside me. He is such a tiresome old plague; aren't you, John?"

"Nonsense, Lina!" replied John. "I mean to sit here"—pointing to the back seat—"I can guide the reins just as well if you get frightened."

So I got in obediently and seated myself by Lina's side. She kept up a running fire of small-talk all the way home, varied only by one or two nervous exclamations when the ponies seemed disposed to get beyond her control. When had I started? Was I very tired? Didn't I think the heat terrific? And wasn't I afraid to take such a long journey alone?

"Oh, John"—suddenly stopping her conversation with me, during which my replica had been of the least consequence to her—"here's Mr. Haughton coming! Hadn't we better speak to him? He is sure to have made a call on us, and he will have been so dreadfully disappointed. Do stop, John!"

Walking very leisurely up the road, accompanied by several dogs, was a gentleman who I of course concluded was Mr. Haughton; he was tall and very fair, with an almost moustache and extremely handsome sunburnt face. The features were faultless, excepting only the chin, which, sloping inwards, gave a look of indecision and weakness, which in my opinion detracted not a little from his good looks. However, he was very gentleman-like, and greeted Lina most cordially, as well as my cousin John.

Neither of them thought of introducing me; so I sat quietly by, half amused, half amazed at Lina's incessant chattering, and her evident desire to impress Mr. Haughton favorably. It struck me however that the latter appeared hardly grateful enough to her. His manner was a mixture of indifference and politeness; and, after the first few sentences had been spoken, he made a decided movement to depart, which Lina apparently did not notice. She rattled on most vigorously, until reminded by her brother that we ought to hasten homewards on my account; so, with a few last words, which were rather lengthy ones, we started off once more on through a most picturesque little village, then down a broad road bordered on either side by magnificent elm-trees, until we came to an iron gateway with a cosy lodge one mass of blooming jasmine, roses, and honeysuckle, with bright lattice-paned windows and brilliant flower-beds facing them.

"How pretty!" burst from my lips. "How lovely! Oh, it is like a picture!" I exclaimed involuntarily as we drove up the short approach and came within view of the house.

In another few seconds we drew up before the doorway. The reins were thrown by Lina to a groom, who promptly appeared; Cousin John helped me to get out; and, under his escort, I was presently ushered into aunt Vereker's presence.

I had expected to see some one very cold and formal—I had fancied she was so from her letters—but, instead, I found a youthful-looking person, dressed in most elaborate black—it could scarcely be called mourning—with a tiny little tulle tulle perched most coquettishly on the side of her head, which thick plaits of chestnut hair also adorned. Far from being cold and formal, she was cordial and kindly to a degree; she repeated all Lina's enquiries, and was equally accommodating to my answers. But, although outwardly there was nothing left for me to desire, so far as words went, something—I could not explain what—chilled me towards aunt Vereker.

Aunt Vereker had been a widow for about five years, and since then had lived at the Grange, which belonged to Mr. John Vereker, who was only her step-son, having been a well-grown boy of fifteen when his father fell in love with and married her. Perhaps it was out of love for her, perhaps it was from some innate conviction of her incapability and shallowness, perhaps from his entire confidence in his—no one knew—but the late Mr. Vereker had left his widow to the care of his son, and trusted to him to

supplement, as far as he considered needful, a very moderate settlement, which was all he had made upon his wife.

John Vereker was a rich man, and, what was still more to the point in my aunt's opinion, a very generous one. She considered she had been very badly treated by her husband, and there were times when she rather murmured because her step-son did not secure to her the allowance he gave. However, those sentiments were never uttered in his presence. It was only behind his back that John Vereker was at times accused of being "mean," "stingy," and "miserly." The girls were each to have three thousand pounds—"a beggarly pittance," aunt Vereker said; but, if John did his duty, they would have a great deal more.

Lina was her favorite; and Lina's prospects of a matrimonial settlement were just then beginning to occupy her mind. Mr. Haughton was the individual upon whom their hopes were resting; and, as I came to know my aunt better, I trusted most sincerely, for the sake of general peace, that he might not disappoint them.

He was a frequent visitor at the Grange—in fact, hardly a day passed without our seeing something of him; but, as his place was within an easy distance, and he had nothing at home to enliven him, I sometimes wondered whether it was for his own or Lina's sake that we were so often favored with his company. I had been at the Grange a little over a month, and had become day by day more convinced of one thing—namely, that neither aunt Vereker nor Lina regarded me with friendly eyes. Perhaps I was too near Lina's own age—I was nineteen; perhaps they felt I was a restraint and burden. I could not tell what it was. Of Mr. John Vereker I saw very little; and my three younger cousins, being still in the schoolroom, were seldom available as companions; so I found myself solitary in the midst of them all, an intruder and an interloper—just what I had feared when I was hurrying towards Marston on the first day of my arrival.

I had one pleasure however which none of them grudged me, and of which I could avail myself as often as I desired. Soon after I came to Marston the organist of the village chapel was suddenly taken ill; no one was able or willing to undertake the duties he could not for a time perform, and for the first Sunday the service was conducted without music of any kind.

"Aunt Vereker," I said that same evening, "do you think Mr. Harleigh would let me play for him?"

"You!" repeated aunt Vereker. "Play in church! Oh, no; it would never do!"

"I used to do so at home sometimes," I answered, "when I didn't sing in the choir."

"I don't like the idea of your performing here in public," replied aunt Vereker severely. "I should never dream of allowing Lina to do such a thing."

"But Lina couldn't," put in Beatrice, with naive sincerity.

"Couldn't she?" laughed Lina, who at that moment appeared, with Mr. Haughton behind her, at the drawing-room window. "Pray what can I not do?"

"Play the organ in church. Blanche has been asking mamma if she may."

"Are you musical, Miss Beresford?" asked Mr. Haughton, addressing me.

"I am very fond of music if that means being musical," I answered, with a guilty consciousness that aunt Vereker was eyeing me severely.

"Will you play something now?" continued Mr. Haughton. "Do ask your cousin"—appealing to Lina, who seconded his request so warmly that I was obliged to accede.

Hardly had I played a few chords when aunt Vereker, interrupting me, begged that we would all recollect what day it was—Sunday—and, if I must play, she must beg me to play only chants. However, Lina and Mr. Haughton drew near the piano, at which I seated myself; and soon a chorus of voices—shrillest amongst them aunt Vereker's own—sounded through the pretty dining room.

But music at the Grange was not like the music I revelled in when, armed with aunt Vereker's rather unwillingly accorded consent, I undertook the organist's post and practised for it in the long summer afternoons. It was a lovely little chapel, built partly by uncle Vereker, and fully finished at Mr. John Vereker's expense. Many an hour I spent in it, many a sad thought and fancy I embodied in the grand tones which rolled forth under my fingers. When I was

saddest, when things felt strangest and most desolate, I used to take the key of the chapel, and, tying on my hat, run down the shrubby walk, and, crossing the broad elm-bordered road, enter the still little edifice, and in the pleasures of harmony forget as far as I could the realities of life.

One rather drizzling day I had set forth to have some practice, and had just reached the gateway leading to the chapel, when I saw Mr. Haughton coming towards me. It was impossible to pretend that I had not observed him; I must make some civil remark; so I waited quietly until he came up, fancying that he would go on to the Grange where I knew he was already expected.

As yet he had not done his duty regarding Lina; she was still hoping daily for a declaration, the very tardiness of which might have sufficed to convince her that it would never come. I pitied Lina from my heart. What could be more wearing or more degrading than a perpetual effort to bring an unwilling suitor to the point, or more distracting than aunt Vereker's transparent little schemes to throw them together and to give him every possible facility for asking the question that was to make poor Lina happy?

"Did he say nothing to-day, Lina," aunt Vereker would—"nothing tangible?"

"No, nothing. What do you mean?" Lina would answer, angry, indignant, and disappointed.

Mr. Haughton's silence, though very exasperating, did not suffice to damp my aunt's welcome to him. He was at liberty to come to the Grange at all times, and, when there, was treated with all the honor due to a future most unexceptionable son-in-law. I have described him as a handsome man. In features he certainly was, and his general appearance was gentleman-like; but, when he stood side by side with my cousin John Vereker, the contrast between the two ought, I thought, to have been sufficient to cure Lina of her preference. For there was nothing manly about Eustace Haughton, no intellect in the pale blue eyes, no strength in the narrow white hands, with their long nerveless-looking fingers; whilst Mr. Vereker, with his almost plain face, gray-streaked hair, and shabby shooting-coat, had an air of quiet decision, an indescribable something which at once proclaimed him to be, what I felt from the first he was, a brave, honest, honorable English gentleman. I could have fancied it possible to face any great danger quietly with John Vereker by my side.

Before I had been long at the Grange, I knew that I had seen the one person in the world with whom life for me would be almost cloudless; but what folly it was to think of such a thing! How I tried to reason myself out of it one moment; the next, how closely I clasped the sweet secret—the secret that would be buried with me! For I loved John Vereker—I, Blanche Beresford, aged nineteen, possessed of the magnificent fortune of about fifty pounds a year, with nothing to recommend me except perhaps my voice. And I could sing; even aunt Vereker said one night that she could not listen quite unmoved when Blanche sang, for she had tears in her voice.

I wondered what he thought. But he seldom spoke to me. Sometimes, when he seemed inclined to do so, I grew so nervous that my answers simply repelled him. I knew it, and writhed to think how utterly foolish and unnatural I must appear. I had the presumption to love him. Well, no one knew it, and time might cure me perhaps. Besides, I should not long remain at the Grange; aunt Vereker did not wish it. I could perceive that more from her manner than from anything she ever said; instinctively I was aware that the welcome of which I had been doubtful from the first had ceased to exist, and that toleration only was accorded to me by my cousins as well as herself. No suspicion of what had caused the growing coolness had ever flashed across me, never distantly did I dream of the possibility of having interfered with Lina's prospects, until this drizzling afternoon, when, hurrying to the chapel, I chanced to encounter Mr. Haughton.

"Miss Beresford," he said, when the first greetings had been exchanged, "won't you give me a great pleasure? Won't you let me hear you sing something? I know that you are going to practice. Won't you let me listen?"

"If you like," I answered, without hesitation. "Old Tuffton comes to blow the organ for me; so I must go to his cottage first."

"Couldn't I do instead?" asked Mr.