

UNDER THE EVENING LAMP

MERRY XMAS!

Written for the Review

Merry Xmas! hear the greeting
Ringing out on every hand;
Merry Xmas! shout the greeting,
Christian men, on every land!

"Merry Xmas" to the stranger,
Who is far from home and kin;
Merry Xmas to the fallen,
Who are sinking low in sin!

Merry Xmas to the wealthy!
Merry Xmas to the poor!
Merry Xmas to the beggar
Who comes knocking at your door!

Merry Xmas to the weary!
Merry Xmas to the sad!
Merry Xmas to the homeless
Who have naught to make them glad!

Merry Xmas to all nations,
Ring the greeting out again;
Merry Xmas to all people,
"Peace on earth, good will to men!"

F. BRUCE CAREY, TORONTO.

FRANCES DONOVAN'S CHRISTMAS VIGIL.

Outside the rain was falling steadily, with no breath of wind. The shadows of evening were gathering over the sodden fields, and curiously mingling with the gray mist that was rising from the river, seemed to blot out all form and substance of material things.

Within the little weather-beaten house Frances Donovan was sitting alone. She had lighted no lamp, and the fire had burned down to a mass of coals. She sat upright, her head leaning against the back of the old-fashioned rocking chair, her hands firmly clasped in her lap, listening to the monotonous dripping of the rain and seeing the pictures that naturally rise before the eyes of a woman who sits alone on Christmas eve.

She saw herself as a merry, laughing school girl, gathering buttercups and daisies in the fields that stretched back of the old gray stone house that was her home. A few years and she was a blushing maiden listening to the tender words of a tall, Saxon-faced lover. Then came her marriage night, and she remembered the thrill of rapture with which she had lifted her eyes to that same face and promised, before God's altar, to be Mark Donovan's true wife. Again the scene changed, and she held in her arms her first-born, her only child, little Harold. How reverently she had knelt by his cradle and given him into God's keeping! Ah, those happy, happy days! The next picture was not so bright. It was leaving the old home for the far West. She had opposed it, but Mark's enthusiasm had carried all before it.

Ten years ago they had come here. She had been unhappy, and blaming Mark for all the privations she must endure, coldness had sprung up between them. Five years passed. Then came that awful night when Harold had breathed his life away. She had stood above her dead boy and accused his father of murdering him. "Had he been where a good doctor could have reached him he might have been saved." At those words the youth had died out of Mark's face, and it had never come again.

The years since were so dark, so empty, containing only the little grave upon which the rain was dripping. And Mark's pain, the pain that began to try to drown itself in strong drink, had been as naught to her.

This morning he had told her that he had done the thing they used to build so many hopes on, viz., sold one-half the huge farm to a wealthy Eastern speculator for five thousand dollars.

"You can have a new house, Frances, you can go East, or do anything you like," he said, with something like a smile in the blue eyes from which disappointment and sorrow had long ago blotted out the sunshine.

And she had never looked up from the bread she was mixing. "I don't want anything," that was all she had said.

He had turned, gone to the barn, saddled his horse, and rode away to the town six miles distant.

Suddenly she sprang to her feet, lighted a kerosene lamp, replenished the dying fire, and stood looking irresolutely around her. The sitting room, kitchen and bed-room that constituted the entire house save the loft were comfortable and clean. But there were no attempts at ornamentation, no effort to make the little house a home Christmas eve. It was not to the joyous Christ-

mas eve of her girlhood that her mind turned, but to the natal night of Christ when "a multitude of the heavenly host" had announced his birth. Did it mean aught to her, that coming of the Prince of Peace? Since earliest childhood she had professed allegiance to Him. And did she not look forward longingly to the time when, saved by the blood of Christ, she should enter into the fair beyond and once more clasp her child to her breast? Yes, but now, what did it mean? Was He, the Saviour of men, her daily companion, was her life blessed by His presence, and did she, because of His presence, bring happiness to all about her? A moan broke from her lips. She crossed to the little sleeping room, and holding the lamp close to the mirror, looked long and intently at the reflection of her own face. She noted the line crossing the low brow, the dark eyes in whose depths burned a fire of unrest, the hard lines about the lips, the haggard, worn expression; then she turned away, sick at heart.

"I look like a happy woman!" she cried. "God pity me." and at the words, the barriers of coldness gave way. She fell upon her knees, and a torrent of sobs shook her slender form.

Two hours had gone by when Frances Donovan rose. These hours when we come face to face with self and view our inner hearts by the revelation of God's spirit are epochs in our lives. Mrs. Donovan mechanically replenished the fire and glanced at the clock.

"Half-past ten," she exclaimed in a tone of genuine alarm. "Why has Mark not come? Something must have happened."

It seemed as if an icy hand was laid upon her heart. If something had happened, if her husband came to her with unsteady step and clouded vision, would she be guiltless? Again the memory of the past swept over her, and Frances Donovan saw that the love of long ago was not dead, that it was real love and therefore eternal.

"I love Mark, and I will save him," she thought. "Dear Father, help thy child to atone for the past."

She glanced again around the dreary room. Then she said to herself:

"When Mark comes, no matter how he comes, he shall find Christmas cheer waiting him."

A fire was soon burning in the kitchen stove. She remembered that Mark had killed a couple of fat chickens for to-morrow's dinner, and she prepared them for cooking. She made mince pies and doughnuts, she swept and dusted the little rooms, bringing forth a few bits of cherished china and some photographs to give the place a festive air. As she worked, she thought of many things. Thought how in the past she had done nothing for the Master or the needy ones about her. A half-mile away was the home of the Widow Salls and her little ones.

"To-morrow shall see a big basket of food carried to her," she thought. Then she sighed. How many morrows had come and gone without her once thinking of the neighbor who was one of those, "whom ye have always with you." Then there was the little church a few miles away. For months she had not crossed its threshold. A few months before a boy had been in Mark's employ, a bright lad who was fast learning to walk in the downward way. Her hand had never been raised to stay his going. How much she might have done to help the poor Swedish women around her. Many of them were ignorant of life in the West, but she had been indifferent to their wants.

"God forgive me," she cried, her lips white with pain. All night she worked and planned with feverish haste. Mark did not come. As the hours wore away, a terrible fear came to her. Had she awakened too late? When all was done, she sat down for a moment waiting for the dawn. Sleep overpowered her, and she was only aroused by the opening of the outer door. She sprang up. The gray light of the glad Christmas morning was peering in at the windows. Alas in the east a faint glow of rosy light told that the storm had passed with the darkness. At her side stood her husband, carefully holding in his arms something wrapped in a blanket.

"It was too bad to leave you all night Frances," he said gravely. "But I was called in to Jim Lane's on the way home. He died an hour ago. There were only men there, and I brought little Willie home with me, just to stay until some arrangements can be made to send him to the poor-house."

She did not notice the apologetical tone in his voice, but threw back the covering from the sleeping child. He was a beautiful boy, notwithstanding the dirt and rags. His dimpled face was flushed with the glow of perfect health, he had close-curling dark hair, and a lovely scarlet mouth.

"Let me take him."

Without a word, Mark Donovan laid Willie in her extended arms. She stooped and pressed her lips to the clustering curls.

"My Christmas gift," she whispered. "sent me by God as a token of His love and forgiveness. Mark, husband, will you forgive