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THREE BIRTHDAYS.

A CHRISTMAS CAROL.

BY ELEANOR C. DONNELLY.

(From the Philadelphia Catholic Standard.)

PART FIRST.

IV.—(CONTINUED.)

Cyril laughed.

"Mr. Albey's Catholic Church did not satisfy you?" he suggested with twinkling eyes. "I was famished," said Pet impressively; "hungry and thirsty for something solid and nourishing for my poor soul. So I made a bouquet of flowers and went to the Chapel; and after Benediction—(ah! that ravishing benediction!)—I walked boldly up to Our Lady's Altar and laid my flowers at her feet. Then I came home happy."

Her companion laughed again. "Bless the foolish child! how little it takes to make her happy. After all these sweetenings of flowers and shrines and benedictions and Madonnas, poor Albey's Church will be like chalk after cream-cheese. And yet," he added soberly, "his sermon this morning was a good thing."

"It was—it was—" repeated the young girl with emphasis; "but something is wrong—something is false. Either Mr. Albey is deceiving himself or—" she hesitated and blushed.

"Deceiving others?"

"Pet looked pained."

"They are horrid words to say and we have no right to judge."

The dance was over; and he led her back to her seat, where she was soon surrounded. Her grace, her *naivete*, her exquisite toilet were the theme of all tongues.

"Your sister is thoroughly *distinguee* and unaffected," said the ladies to Barbara.

"Your sister is thoroughly bewitching and original," said the gentlemen to Miriam; and the young *débütante* was as joyous as a humming-bird among flowers.

She danced—she chatted—she played with her French fan; while a vivid color burned in her cheek; and her grey eyes grew black and luminous. Madame Justine was bright. The world was a lovely place—a very mythical, magical, enchanting place; but would the trials and crosses (Madame had foretold as well) ever come to her?

"O Mary! conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to thee!" said Pet to herself, using unconsciously the aspiration the nun had taught her, holding her fan over her arms the night before they parted.

When Cyril came to lead her to supper, he smiled as he said: "You are enjoying yourself."

"Ah! yes, *mon ami*, it is the happiest birthday-night of my life."

"That is because you went to Church this morning," he said mischievously.

"No, no," she retorted eagerly; "but because I laid my flowers at Our Lady's feet this afternoon after Benediction."

He shook his head. "What will Miss Barbara think of all this?" he asked, and pretending not to hear her reproachful "*Et tu, brute!*"—he went to fetch her a cup of coffee.

Her bright face grew sober; and she looked pensive and wistful till he returned. There was a great deal of lively conversation going on around her; and every one was making merry; but suddenly there came a lull in the noisy room, and the old doctor who had been the friend and physician of the Trentons for several generations past, rose to speak.

It was a touching little speech of welcome to the darling of the house, come back a blooming maiden from foreign shores, to the friends she had quitted as a little child. It was an honest-hearted reverent toast to the birthday of the Infant Christ—none the less sweet to all, for being the birthday of beloved Pet. It was the congratulations by his mouth, (the doctor said) not only of the united company there assembled, but of the united Hamlet, elsewhere assembled, to the inmates of Trenton Terrace on the charming addition to that merry Christmas frolic. And in conclusion the bluff old gentleman bid his hearers rejoice in the Lord, and again and again rejoice, inasmuch as the dear young lady came out of the ordeal of foreign influences and the fascinating shadow of the Romanist cloisters, still, God bless her! a true staunch unswerving child of the Church of England.

Barbara looked triumphantly at Cyril as the old doctor sat down, and Cyril looked at Pet whose cheeks were very pale.

An hour later the guests were gone. "A delightful evening," said Barbara complacently. "There has not been such a ball at the Terrace since Mamma died. Every one is in ecstasies with our little French girl."

"Good night, darling," said Miriam kissing her young sister's brow, "may all your precious birthday nights be as gay as this."

Cyril followed into the hall the slender

figure in white, and lighted a candle for her:

"I said to the lily, 'There is but one With whom she has heart to be gay, When will the dancers leave her alone? She is weary of dance and play.'"

"Though I must confess," he added jestingly as he handed her the light, "you look more like *La Sonnambula*, just now, than *Maud*." A bright drop glittered on her cheek and fell upon his hand. "Hush!" she whispered warningly feeling he was about to speak. "I am either very weary or very sad. And I have a presentiment."

"Of what?" and his face was sober enough. "That my next birthday will be a graver, may be a sadder one than this. Who can tell what the future may bring forth? Good night." And she glided up the wide old stairs with her lighted taper, so spirituelle in her thin white trailing robes, that after she had vanished, Cyril rubbed his eyes like a man coming out of a dream; and going into his room smoked his meerschaum for an hour to bring himself round.

PART SECOND.

J.

Christmas Eve once more at Trenton Terrace. No white snows falling—but above, a frowning, sullen sky; and below, a still bitter cold which pierces to the inmost marrow of the bones. The very dogs drew closer to the hearthstones; roaring fires blazed in all the rooms of the Terrace; and the guests made merry within doors in an atmosphere like summer. For plenty of visitors had come to keep the Christmas and Pet's birthday with the Trentons.—There was certainly an odd fascination about that half-French, half-English girl—the gentility far and near agreed; and Pet, like a magnet growing daily more powerful, drew a large circle to the great old house; and Barbara under them welcome and Miriam pleased them with her beauty. The latter had not altered in the year; but every one says that Pet is marvellously changed.

There she sits near the fire, filling in an embroidered slipper for one of Cyril Murdoch's sisters; and as she turns her face this way (drawing her companion's attention to the sketch, you see how thin it is—but how sweet and tranquil; and with such a pure steady light in the once saucy eyes. It is like a face which has gone through some sublimating process and come out no longer of the earth, earthy. But she has not lost an atom of her gaiety; and the group of young people round her chair listened eagerly as she talked.

She is telling them the old convent-legend of Saint Dorothy, the Virgin; and she tells it so charmingly that Miriam forgets to read her book; and Barbara draws near with her embroidery; and Cyril Murdoch crosses the room and sits down at the other side of the little round table. Pet certainly makes a great deal out of the pretty legend. Such vivid pictures of the beautiful Dorothy before the heathen emperor; or in the palace of the apostate sisters; or in her prison, rejecting with scorn the splendor of the imperial temptations. When she gets to where the lovely saint is martyred by the heathen, and the jeering lawyer at his banquet receives the promised fruits and flowers in the celestial gardens—the girls pronounce it the perfection of poetry and Romance; and Pet meets Cyril's eyes bent meaningly on her face, and grows very sad, and tells no more legends.

Not even Mr. Albey (who has come in at the death, literally and figuratively) rises "Enose!" and begs her to go on. For she seldom refuses Mr. Albey anything; and even now looks up with a pleasant smile while she shakes her head. They are great friends—the little ex-vent-girl and the Anglican minister.—They have many interests in common; meeting constantly (not at the church, for Pet does not go there—often than she can help), but among the poor of the parish, at the bedsides of the sick and dying, and at the school for little orphans. Pet is a regular fairy god-mother, welcomed with smiles from chubby faces, made prisoner with joyful shouts, and only relinquished at a large ransom of toys and sweetmeats.

"The children are on the watch for Santa Klaus," were Mr. Albey's words to her that Christmas Eve; "they were hanging up their stockings when I came away."

"Bless their dear little hearts!" smiled Pet in a motherly way, "they must not be disappointed."

"You are spoiling those little rogues," said Miriam; and Mr. Albey went and stood behind her chair, and showed her a copy of the *Hymns of the Ages* which he had brought her. She looked up with a bright blush; and while he bent over her, talking and turning the leaves, Pet watched them with a sad pity in her grey eyes and sensitive mouth. Then she sighed; and Cyril Murdoch got up abruptly, and began to walk to and fro with his arms folded on his broad chest.

"Did you ever hear such a thing?" said one of the Murdoch girls sitting next to Miriam. "Mr. Albey says he is going to have a

day-break service and communion in his church to-morrow morning!"

A surprised but well-bred murmur went round.

"Does the Bishop approve?" said Barbara looking annoyed.

"He does not interfere," replied the young minister, reserving the fact that the episcopal approval was of so little account that he had not asked it.

"I must say, I don't care for these innovations," said little Barbara, briefly.

"It is a progressive age," suggested Miriam giving a shy glance at Mr. Albey; "and why should the church be conservative?"

"As to the Bishop," said one of the young girls, "they say he hears confessions himself; for his wife told me she was dying with curiosity to know what went on in the study when the penitents were there with his lordship."

There was a general laugh.

"Mr. Albey has an advantage in that point over the Bishop," said Cyril with a sarcastic smile; "for he has no wife to be tempted to eavesdropping in the discharge of his priestly functions."

The minister's pale cheek flushed, but he only said slowly:

"I think there is a mistake somewhere.—The Bishop does not take part in these matters, nor agree with Dr. Pusey; for a friend of mine (who is rector at St. Mark's), had a letter from him plainly discountenancing the ultra movement."

"Do you ever hear confessions, Mr. Albey?" said one of the Murdoch girls.

"For shame Lucy; how can you ask such questions?" protested an elderly lady, of a severe dyspeptic aspect.

"Why, where's the harm?" cried giddy Lucy.

"Where's the harm? My dear girl, you surprise me. Fancy how indelicate to tell one's sins to a *man* (good and trustworthy in himself, no doubt), but who had not the least earthly power to forgive them! Bah!" and the spinster shivered, "I should never be able to hold up my head after it."

"And yet there is a text somewhere," said Pet, musingly, "about Christ's breathing on his Apostles and saying: 'Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven; and whose sins you shall retain, they are retained'—isn't there, Mr. Albey?"

"Yes; and it must be very consoling," said Mr. Albey, as he came over and took Cyril Murdoch's vacant seat.

"The girls at school used to look as if it was," remarked Pet; "their faces were always brighter and their tempers sweeter on confession-day than any other time."

"After all," went on the minister, as if talking to himself; "repugnant as it is to our pride, there must be a singular comfort in it. When, by the grace of God, one begins to see more clearly all his own secret business and unworthiness, it would sometimes be a relief, even humbly speaking, to confess it."

"Aye, even from the house-top," added Pet, energetically.

Mr. Albey bent towards her over the little table. The rest of the company were discussing animatedly the engrossing topic; and Cyril Murdoch stood in the deep recess of a distant window looking out at the bare roads and the leaden sky.

"We are comparatively alone, Miss Petronilla," said the young minister, eagerly. "Will you tell me what you meant by your note of yesterday?"

"All that I said, *mon ami*, and more too— and more than I could ever say," returned Pet, going on with her needle-work.

"Then the crisis has come?"

"It has," with a smile of infinite peace and joy. "After these long clouded months of struggle (you know how bitter); after hours of prayer and humble petitions to know God's Holy Will!—the grey hairs were lifted reverentially—praise to His mercies! the light has come at last, and my resolution is taken."

The young minister looked at her fixedly with the nervous color ebbing and going in his cheek.

"I envy you," he said, mournfully; "but my hour has not yet come."

"Might it not come all the sooner if you were to meet it, and did not pass it by?" questioned his companion, with the look of a pleading angel.

"As God sees my heart," said the young man in a low impressive voice, "its strongest desire is to do His sovereign will. But, as yet the path is dark before me. Every step I take is enveloped in mist and fog."

Pet clasped her hands fervently on her knee:

"Only promise me that when the light does come (as it will—as it must), you will not shut your eyes to it? You will not postpone the Creator to the creature?"

He followed her eyes as they rested on Miriam in her *fauteuil*, her bright dress flowing around her in crimson waves, her lovely face brilliant with bloom as she talked and laughed with the rest.

"Though it cost me my heart's blood," he replied, slowly, and with a look of pain, "may

our dear Lord keep me from trifling with the least of His adorable inspirations!"

"Amen, my brother," said Pet, solemnly. There was a little pause between them.

"And what are you going to do? if I may be permitted to ask. Have you told your sisters about it?" asked the minister at last.

"Alas! no; I dare not speak till to-morrow. Barbara exacted a promise from me six months ago, and forbade me to mention the matter again till my eighteenth birthday. I need all the precious graces of to-morrow to go through the interview."

"She may not be unrelenting," said the young man, gently, seeing that there were tears on the long lashes.

"Ah! you do not know her. Hers is a quiet nature, but strongly prejudiced and unyielding as a rock. If I do not sacrifice my conscience—the alternative is a bitter one."

Her companion looked at her inquiringly.

"To quit the Terrace altogether and go live with my Aunt Trenton," said Pet, lower than she had yet spoken and with a blush. "My sister will neither witness nor countenance my apostasy—as she calls it."

"Is Aunt Trenton the widow of the Presbyterian elder whom (Miriam said) you used to dread so much?"

"The same. When, as a very little child," said Pet, smiling faintly, "I used to be naughty or willful, my nurse had only to threaten me with Aunt Trenton at such times and she was sure to bring me to terms."

"Isn't this beautiful?" said Miriam, reading aloud to the group about her chair, but so clearly that not a word was lost:

"O that thy faithless soul one hour only, Would comprehend the Christian's perfect life— Despoiled with Jesus, sorrowful and lonely, But calmly looking upward in its strife."

For poverty and self-renunciation. Their Father wouldeth lack a thousand fold, In the calm stillness of regeneration Cometh a joy they never knew of old."

II.

With that new strange "joy" shining out of her expressive eyes, Pet stood up and gathered her canvass and kerythms together.

"Have you any commissions *mes amis*?" she said gaily. "I am going down to the hamlet on a little matter of my own; and shall be happy to kill any number of birds with one stone."

"Wrap up warmly, darling," said Barbara, inexpressibly comforted to see Pet and the minister on such confidential terms; while Miriam added, "Shall I ring for the carriage?"

"N'importe," returned Pet, "I would rather walk. The exercise will warm my blood."

With a gay "*au revoir*,"—she was leaving the room when the tall figure quitted the window-recess, and followed her.

"I have something to say to you," said Cyril Murdoch in a low voice; "may I walk with you to the hamlet?"

Her face was half-averted, but he could see what a vivid blush died her cheek, and even her throat.

"Yes," was her brief, reserved answer; and they went into the outer hall where they met Angelique whom Pet despatched for her hat and shawl. While they waited, Pet leaned against a bronze Diana in silence. The monotony-color gone, her face was pale; and in the half-closed eyes the drooping arms, and every line of the willowy, girlish figure, there was apparent great weariness of body and mind.

"You are killing yourself," said Cyril vehemently. "Between prayer, and fasting, and going to church, and visiting sick paupers in all weathers, you are committing suicide as fast as you can."

"O my friend!" she returned with a gesture of inimitable grace. "How little you know about it. If it were not for these very things I could never have lived through the past six months. Ah! no, it is the reactions, the crosses of the earth, earthly, that wear upon me and make me weak and thin. See!" and she held up her wrist from which the bracelet hung loosely.

"As you please; but one thing is sure— you will slip away from us presently like your Saint Dorothy in the legend,

"Who from celestial gardens sent Flowers as her witnesses To him who scoffed and doubted,"

and I," he added trying to hide his really strong emotion under a sarcasm, "must be content, I suppose, with the lot of the jeering lawyer."

Pet's face underwent one of its quick changes, and she broke into a merry laugh. "Bravo!" she cried—"I like that." But seeing his sober look, she added softly: "Ah! if it could be that my poor sufferings, might win you the precious gift of faith!"

"Here is Angelique," he said abruptly, taking the shawl from the maid's hands and putting it around the slight figure; and in a few moments they were out alone on the frosty road with the grey sky frowning down upon them.

"Pet," said Cyril at length as they faced the keen wind. "I told Barbara this morning

(in the library of our recent talk, and of your refusal, she is bitterly disappointed."

Pet was silent.

"She had set her heart on our marriage,"—he said the last word a little timidly—"and is puzzled, wounded, not only at this change in you, but at many other odd reserves of late to which you refuse her the key."

Pet drew a deep breath, and looked straight ahead of her.

"Why will you make me miserable?" her companion broke out vehemently, "why will you reject me, point-blank, without any explanation when you know that I love you with all my heart? If you had nothing to give me in return—if I knew that you were utterly indifferent to me, I would go away without a word; I would go back to Germany and fight it out alone the best I could. But—(O Pet! why will you drive me to it?)—you cannot deny that all along until lately, in a hundred nameless ways you have shown me that my attentions were not displeasing to you. Was this fair? Good heavens! was it honorable?"

Pet was as pale as death; but answered in a low firm voice:

"Pardon, if I wound you—still more, if I misled you. I could never marry you unless you were a practical member of the Roman Catholic Church."

He started as if he had been stung:

"Are you really a Roman Catholic?" he said sharply.

"In heart and desire—yes," returned Pet. "I did not mean to tell my secret so soon, but you force me to it. To-morrow, by the grace of God, I am to be baptized conditionally, and make my first communion in the Catholic Church."

Cyril bit his lip until it bled.

"Diablo!" he muttered, "these are the fruits of Catholic numerics—a plague light on them! The next thing you will return to France and be a nun. Let them cut off your curls, and hide your sweet face under a veil and a filled cap! O my darling!" he broke off passionately. "renounce all this folly—and give me the right to make your life bright and beautiful, and worth the living. I can never give you up."

Silent a moment from actual inability to command his voice, he burst out again:

"But why should a paltry question of creed part us forever? Marry me—and I vow to you, you may worship God how and where you please. Do you think me so unmanly, so base, as to tyrannize over your conscience? Answer me, Pet."

How full of beautiful trust was the look she turned upon him!

"I have every confidence in your manliness—your generosity," she said gently; "but the case is not altered. Marriage in the Catholic Church is a holy sacrament—a union of souls as well as of hearts and hands. Religion, faith, is its essence, its purity, its perfection. My friend, although we loved each other with all our hearts, and were ever so tender of each other's prejudices,—failing to think, to hope, alike on this vital point, the future you promise, would be to me—a martyrdom."

Cyril chafed openly under her calm reasoning; little knowing, (man that he was) the brave delicacy with which a woman can hide her breaking heart.

"But does not St. Paul say something about the believing wife sanctifying the unbelieving husband?" he urged impatiently.

"Ah! *mon ami*, St. Paul must have spoken there to wives who had not been Christians at the time of their marriage; or, at the worst, to brave, generous women whose faith and foothold were so secure, they could afford to stoop over the bank and give their hand to the poor Pagan sinking in a sea of unbelief. Such grand risks are not for me—a little trembling need. God might withdraw his graces in punishment of my boldness; and the loss of both our souls be the bitter penalty."

Pet's eyes were full of tears; and she added as if talking to herself: "Unless a man renounce all, he cannot be My disciple."

"But these are words for an apostle—for a missionary," urged the tempter. "You are a young beautiful girl with a tender, sensitive, loving heart. How can you embrace, or if embraced, persevere in a life of constant struggle and daily self-denial?"

"Dear Lord! through thy holy cross and passion—strengthen me," prayed the pure, generous heart.

And the prayer was granted.

"I have given you my answer," she said with a heavenly calm in her large eyes; "and I rely on your honor to preserve my secret till to-morrow."

"If I were less honest," said Cyril not boastfully, but as if it had been wrung out of him; "I might do as many another man has done—turn Puseyite, Papist, aye, Mahometan for the one he loved;—but I cannot act a lie. I don't believe or accept the doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church, and what is more, I never shall. Mr. Albey, who seems to share your confidence and fair views more fully, may not prove so hard a subject."

In his bitter disappointment he for a moment—and was cruel as well as mean.