

* * The Story Page. * *

Angels Unawares.

BY MARION KELLISTON.

It was after midnight! And after midnight, even on Christmas Eve, most men sleep. There were still a few of the Christmas holiday late trains to shriek their way into the railway stations and discharge their wondrous miscellany of overcoats and portmanteaus; a few railway porters were yet on duty, reaping a rich harvest of "tips" from the home-comers, or the friends waiting to welcome them; a few cabbies were still waiting, hoping to pick up some late "fare"; a few houses, here and there, were still brilliantly lighted, where gay dancers yet danced in reckless forgetfulness that the Christmas season in the "Go-and-do-thou-like-wise" festival, in memory of the Unselfish One who "went about doing good"; a few drunken brawlers, here and there, straggled home, untouched as yet by the love and the purity and the sorrow of the Holy Child; while here and there a group of carollers carolled sweet echoes of the first Peace anthem into the stillness of the night and into the hush of the human hearts that woke to listen. Yet, for all this, those that woke were few compared with those that slept.

Most of the Christmas preparations were made, most of the Christmas surprises were ready. The brown-paper parcels were tied up and labelled, the mince pies and the turkeys were ready, the Christmas trees were dressed. The Daddies and the Muvvers who, a few hours ago, had stood together outside the toy shops, consulting to the full as to whether Baby would love a white furry monkey or a black nigger dolly the most—whether Jack would best enjoy a box of bricks or a ship—had gone home and emptied the bulged-out pockets into the proper number of little socks and stockings, and were sleeping now to allow Santa Claus undisturbed use of the chimney or the key-hole! Most of the tears over the purses that wouldn't run to dollies and monkeys, to warm petticoats and mittens, to mince pies and apples—most of the tears over the empty places where it was no use to lay the warm shawl, over the little socks it was no use to fill, were hushed, for a while at least, by the God who "giveth His beloved sleep" in their heartache and sorrow. And the moon gleamed, and the stars shone, over a world, a busy world, hushed from its busyness into sleep.

Yes, most of the Christmas preparations were complete. Most of the Christmas preparation angels had already gone home. They had carried all their Christmas messages; they had stirred their love into the full number of Christmas puddings that had been sent to those for whom nothing was prepared. They had suggested all their "good plans," and whispered all their "kind thoughts." They had assisted at every stocking-filling, tree-dressing and parcel-tying. Some of them (too many!) had gone home sad and disappointed, and God grew sad and disappointed too, as they told of the many refusals they had had from those whom they had asked to help God send round His Christmas love and gifts. But He whispered to them, "Forgive them, for they know not what they do. They knew not that you were angels, and that the messages were Mine. My children are so slow to recognize."

And then, through the starshine, He sent down the last of His Christmas-heralding angels,—that chosen one by whom He always sends those special messages to be whispered to men in their sleep on Christmas Eve. They stir in their sleep as the angel whispers, and their dream becomes all peace; but when they wake in the morning they rarely guess that it was the holy angel giving them God's Christmas kiss, that gave the peace they woke with; like the little child in its cot, that smiles and stretches out its little arms in its sleep, as it feels its mother's kiss, and yet is all unknowing of her nearness. The messages he had to carry were many; some of them were God's own compensations to some of His children whom one and another of His more happily circumstanced children had refused to minister to,—many remain uncompensated, and the wail of their uncomfited sorrow, their unministered-to need, rising to the heart of God, is laid to the charge of His elect, who withheld the message they were charged with. Many of them, however, were the special love-messages God chose to send direct to His children Himself instead of through His other children!

The angel paused first beside a sleeping woman—toll-worn and weary. There were no Christmas stockings hanging near the three little sleepers that made those two little rooms—home. It had been such a bad week for work; every one had been out buying Christmas presents when she took her sewing home and she had had to come away without the money; and so—and so—there was not even a sprig of holly to make the room look like Christmas to the children. And she had cried herself to sleep, sore-hearted and hungry for the love and help and comfort of the breadwinner that used to manage so much better! And the holy one smoothed out the pillows, and signed the cross of patient endurance upon her brow. He whispered his message softly to her and passed on. What

he whispered no one ever knew, but in the morning—somehow things were different. The little ones were good; they didn't all cry to be dressed at the same time; and they didn't all make their pinafores dirty as soon as they were put on clean; and they didn't upset their bread and milk on the best table-cloth, that had come out as the only celebration of Christmas Day, nor quarrel for the same toy! Nothing went crooked, and nothing fretted her; but she didn't know it was the angel that had left the peace, when he smoothed her pillow—she didn't even know he had been there.

Then he came where a little child was sleeping. He brushed back the thick, clustering hair, and signed the cross of daily suffering in kisses on the blue-veined forehead, and the boy smiled and dreamed! Next day, as he lay on his sofa, the hours didn't seem so long and weary, and he was able to forget the pain in his back while he lost himself for awhile in his new book, and the lump didn't come into his throat once, all the time his brothers were out skating. The cross shone there upon his brow beneath those clustering curls all the rest of his short life, and the angels knew it was the sign of the Cross-bearing One's followers; but he never told any one, not even his mother, the message from God that the gentle angel had whispered into his dream.

Then he passed into a prison and stood beside the narrow bed where a well-built, regular-featured man was lying. The visiting regulations do not exclude God and His angels—God chooses to be there always, and the angels know every nook and corner of prisons, with their every temptation and sorrow, as well as of churches with their unwritten records of prayer and sacrifice. They often make notes in the chaplain's memorandum book, but never refer to the authorities' records for information, much of which is never sanctioned by their signature. He stood watching the man for awhile, and sighed sorrowfully. Rising, he leaned over him, and tenderly gave him his Father's kiss of forgiveness, and, signing the cross of penitence on his brow, turned away. The man dreamed on, and saw his mother in his dream. He saw himself as a tiny child, kneeling in her arms to lip out the "Our Father," and "Gentle Jesus, meek and mild," and "Pray God, take care of me all through the dark night." When the morning dawned he had learned how dark the night had been, and that God had taken safe care of him all through it. When he went in to prayers the chaplain saw something in his face he had never noticed there before. He reproached himself for judging "No. 74" harshly, and for his faithless despair of the Good Shepherd's leading back His wandering flock to the home-pastures, for he knew that God had met him and given him a new heart—the heart of a little child. He thanked God and took courage!

Next he paused at a rich merchant's bedside. The cares of this world had choked the rich, generous pulses of his nature, and the stifling atmosphere of his counting-house and his ledgers had dulled and blunted him. Even in his sleep he looked cold and hard. But the Father of Love will not have it so,—least of all at Christmas time, and the Love-angel stood beside him and gently grasped the wrist that lay outside the coverlet. Very patiently he held it, till his own love-pulses throbbed through the sleeping man and his face grew less set. Then, smiling, he stooped and whispered God's message into his dream, and stole softly away. In his dream the merchant saw again the little child selling violets, that he had turned from without helping as he came out of his office that afternoon,—the "poor relation" whose letter he had voted a bore, and unhesitatingly replied to with a curt refusal,—the minister's appeal for funds for the Christmas gifts for the poor, and his polite evasion of it. He saw it all; but with God's love pulsing again in his soul things looked different,—and in the early morning he woke with a new resolve. He dressed early and stood ready to go with his wife to the Christmas church service. After the Benediction, as she was still kneeling beside him, she saw him take a bank-note from his pocket-book—his love offering to God; and she was glad! As they came down the aisle together he slipped it quietly into her hand and whispered softly, "Put it into the poor-box at the door, dear."

On the way home she put her arm in his and said, "This makes it such a happy Christmas. We have only been there together twice: once on the first Sunday after we were married, and once again soon after baby came."

He smiled and said, "Well, it shall never be so long again, precious one."

And she was a woman wise enough not to tease him with questions.

At the parsonage that morning the minister said, "And do you know, dear, that ——— was at church with his wife this morning. He hasn't been to church for years!"

But the angel had passed on to where another man was sleeping. There were lines of care upon his brow, and his face looked worn and haggard. There were streaks of gray in his hair, and his hand was white and thin,

though he looked scarcely as if Nature had long put away his boyhood. But life goes hard with some men. They strain and strive, but circumstances are dead against them. An employer's death, a winter of pleurisy and bronchitis, an investment of the little "all" of capital that fails,—these things set a man fighting life at terrible odds, when there is a delicate wife and hungry little ones at home. The man turned uneasily in his sleep, and murmured, "Give us this day our daily bread," and the angel dropped a tear for the pity of it. He knew the man was hungry—hungry for actual bread, undreaming of such vain luxuries as butter or meat (they were little but "memories" now)—and hungrier still for the daily work that would honorably earn it. The angel laid his hand upon that brow, smoothed out its furrows, and whispered the message the Father-love of God had sent. The man slept on, but when he woke he was brave enough to trust God again, and fight on.

Then he came where a little street arab was curled up under an archway, cuddling close all his earthly belongings, which consisted mainly of a little brother to be provided for, a mangy but faithful terrier, and a basket of hearthstone, match-boxes and boot-laces. Clenched tight in his rather grubby little fist was a penny and two half-pennies his provision for Christmas-day fare! In the only pocket of his ragged coat was an orange a fruit-shop woman had given him (and the kindness was accounted to her for righteousness), and he was treasuring it up for the little one's Santa Claus surprise in the morning. The angel smiled over the protecting brother-love that kept him warm, despite all lack of blanket to screen off the night air. He wrapped the torn coat closer round him, and sent him dreams of noble, unselfish manhood, and blessed him with the children's blessing as he said, "For of such is the kingdom of heaven."

Then he came where a father and mother were sleeping, and an empty cot stood beside the bed. There was no tiny sock to fill, no baby prattle to listen for, no baby toys to put ready. Away in the cemetery there was a tiny grave, with a few Christmas roses freshly placed there, but here there was nothing save hush and stillness and heartache. The tears were still wet upon the mother's cheek, for she had cried herself to sleep, crying for the little one that the Good Shepherd had taken out of her arms into His own. And the comforting angel saw the photograph of the little face, with its nimbus of clustering curls, and the little vase of violets beside it, and said, softly, "Their angels do always behold the face of our Father." Then he whispered God's comfort, and God's cure for loneliness and heartache, into her dream, and turned away. And in her dream she felt the little arms of not one, but of crowds of little angel-babies twining round her neck, and their soft cheeks gently rubbing against hers in loving caress. And when she woke she had learned that she would find her own little angelled baby and the holy Christ-child in every little child she met, and blessed them—and forgave God for taking away her only one.

He came again to another one, to whom God had given every earthly joy; but in her joys she had forgotten His other children—the joyless ones outside. And the reminding angel touched her forehead lightly with his wing to brush away the earth-mist of selfishness that was enveloping her, and breathed God's message of reminding and recalling into her dream. In her dream she saw herself wandering wearily up and down the earth, trying to find one soul whom she had blessed or cheered or helped, to witness that she had at least once done a noble or useful or kind deed, and she sought all in vain. She saw herself looking through a great pile of past actions, trying to find even one labelled "Unselfish" but she found them all, one after another, labelled "Society claim," "Conventional religiosity," "Ostentatious parade," and she buried her head in shame and despair. When she awoke she sent joys to the sorrowful, food to the hungry, help to the unhelped; and a new joy stole into her heart, and God's smile shone on her life.

Yet one more he sought. He came where a tired woman was sleeping. The fire had flickered itself out, as the joys had done out of her life. Her hair was quite white her frame frail and feeble, but she was quite alone. The grown up children had all gone, one by one, to their own homes; some abroad, too far to reach her with their comforting care; some nearer home, but more forgetful! She had missed them all, and all the loving little cares over her so much; but now—well, by this time she had grown used to always having the pain of loneliness and of being forgotten. But even yet the Christmas bells always brought it back overwhelmingly—all the contrast of it with the old Christmases, when Christmas included husband, children, holly, home. Now, in her sleep, the angel heard her moan out "Benjamin, Benjamin." He stooped over her lovingly, comfortingly. But again she called piteously, "Benjamin, Benjamin!" and stretched out two thin, wrinkled hands to the Benjamin that had forgotten the mother-love that had never forgotten him. "I had better take her home for God Himself to comfort," the angel said—"home to the Father-love that never forgets." And he carried her home to God.

And God had watched His chosen one blessing the sleepers; and as He saw the holier look grow in their faces while the angel stood beside them, He said, "There is joy in the presence of angels."—*Pail Mail Magazine.*