

CHAPTER VI.

And now, patient reader, this is my seventh Christmas eve. The great hall at Marsdon, which runs along the whole of the main building behind, has Christmas logs burning brightly on the old iron dogs in the chimney; the walls are bright with shining, green holly laden with its scarlet berries hung round the old knights of Marsdon, from Sir Humphrey in his armour down to my grandfather in his General's uniform, and my own dear father in his hunting suit of Lincoln green. Of the ladies, some wear saques, others the stiff head-dress and ruff of Mary de Guise; my mother, fresh and lovely in her young beauty, with her bridal dress of white satin, and pearls. The oak ceiling and floor shining like polished marble, bright with plate as old as the house. Our guests with one exception to be Denholms and Mortons.

The vestibule where mamma and Archie—as Sir Archibald Denholm Morton—are seated in state, to receive the guests, has its own great Christmas log and decorations of holly, which there, are reflected from pier glasses reaching from floor to ceiling, doubling every picture and statue in the room. Vases, filled with natural flowers, give a beauty and perfume to the whole house. The light of wax tapers reflected back a hundred times by the crystal pendants of the chandeliers; the gay dresses of the children, all combining to form a scene of enchantment and beauty.

Mamma has given her life interest in Morton Castle to Archie, reserving Marsdon as her own and her children's home; the fifty thousand pounds, inherited by her as heiress of Morton, she has given to me as a marriage portion, with a trousseau fit for a duchess. My marriage dress—the only one chosen by myself—is to be white satin with blue forget-me-nots!

Dear reader, I am to be married on Christmas day, to-morrow. This should be the happiest day I ever knew, yet my heart is full of apprehension and unrest. He telegraphed to us from Liverpool, of his arrival in Britain, yesterday; he ought to have been here by ten in the morning; the timepiece in my boudoir points to nearly six o'clock, and yet he comes not. The bell, in the old tower of Marsdon, is ringing in the Christmas with deafening tones, and the bells in Marsdon village have begun to ring in reply, a merry Christmas—a merry Christmas,—and he comes not.

"Hope deferred maketh the heart sick." How the suspense takes away my breath and makes my heart stand still, surrounded by the din of joy, amid which I alone sit quiet and silent. I try to think of the chorus of angels singing peace and good-will to man—of the star-guided wanderers, on the lonely moor, the streak of light which streamed from under a cottage door in the land of Bethlehem, in the solemn midnight, centuries ago—but it will not do; the terrible words "he cometh not" are before me as I write.

The bells ring on a merry Christmas—a merry Christmas—bang after bang is given to the knocker at the great door, as the guests pour in, and one after another, amid mirth and laughter, bid my mother and brothers "a merry Christmas," while hands are pressed and the hearty response is given—"a merry Christmas."

Ah, woe for me, he cometh not. A strain of holy music on the air, now loud and deep—now low and sweet,—again a great burst of triumphant melody, "Christ is born in Bethlehem."

Woe is me; my heart stands still; why doth my bridegroom delay his coming? A voice which seems low and sepulchral, as it were that of the spirit of death, whispers in my ear and tells me, "There are dangers on the land unknown, on the sea," and my heart responds to the fearful truth, as it lies like a weight of lead in my breast, and over and over I ask myself the terrible question "Will I ever see him more?"

Oh, that I could escape the din of their happy voices, the almost wild merriment.

Another knock at the door, not a loud bang like the others, but a low, nervous knock, like the harbinger of evil tidings. My mother and Archie go to the door; out on the portico. What can take them out there?

Hark! that voice, with its familiar sound. Be merciful, oh, God! It is old Mr. Edmonston's voice, low and subdued. I cannot hear his words. But I know their import well. Walter, my bridegroom, is dead, dead!—be pitiful, oh, God!

Again the loud burst of melody, the triumphant chorus, "Christ is born in Bethlehem." Would to God that burst of music could kill!

Oh, woe—oh woe, hark!—what voice is that ringing out so loud and clear—"A merry Christmas, a merry Christmas, where is Isabel?"

It is Walter Edmonston. I praise Thee, O God; his foot is on the stair, coming up three steps at a bound.

Dear reader, a merry Christmas, a merry Christmas to you.

THE last survivor of Napoleon's expedition to Egypt has just died at the Invalides. This veteran, Darrey by name, who had almost attained his one hundredth year, was fond of relating how he was on duty in Egypt on the day the murderer of Kleber was executed. Kleber was assassinated in Cairo in June, 1800, by a fanatic named Soleyman, who after having been condemned to death had his right hand burned off and was then impaled. Tortured by thirst, he called for something to drink, and Darrey, touched with compassion, gave him a glass of water. Darrey had been for more than half a century at the Invalides, which now contains very few old soldiers.

BOGEY.

(FROM THE FRENCH.)

The hour is late, the mother from home;
Why tarrieth he in the waning light?
Down on the lawn where the laurels bloom.
He promised to come and sing to-night.
Hark to that rogue of a sister's cry!
Will the child keep ever a wakeful eye?
Sleep, tiny, sleep; Bogey will take
All little girls that he finds awake. (Bis.)

This naughty old Bogey, whenever he comes,
Kills, as he rideth his terrible round.
In the dead of night through the children's rooms,
And eats all the babies who won't sleep sound.
His big black eyes are aflame with light,
And all who behold him they shriek with fright.
Sleep, tiny, sleep; Bogey will take
All little girls that he finds awake. (Bis.)

"Nay," says the little one, "Lucy, nay;
For I've seen the Bogey from over the blind.
He looks not a bit like what you say;
He has big black eyes, which are, O, so kind!
I peep when his sweet, sad voice I hear;
For he sings of love, so I need not fear."
Sleep, tiny, sleep; Bogey will take
All little girls that he finds awake. (Bis.)

The sister reddens, then softens her voice:
"Sleep, my darling, 'tis time for rest;
Sleep, and to-morrow I'll give you choice
Out of all my ribbons you love the best."
Down in its pillows the roguish head
Nestled, and softly the tiny said,
"I'm asleep, I'm asleep; so now, dear Lu,
Your black-eyed Bogey can come to you." (Bis.)

W. E. M.

DICK ALLEN'S MERRY CHRISTMAS.

It was about ten o'clock on the night of Christmas-eve—a good many years ago now—that Dick Allen gave his name at the gate of 'Old Trinity' College, Dublin, and passed in. As he looked in at the lodge-door, he felt a strong temptation to sit for a while with the two burly good-natured-looking night-porters by their roaring fire; for the night was bitterly cold, and he felt more thoroughly alone than he ever had before in the two-and-twenty years of his life. However, there were other feelings in Dick's mind at the time that counter-balanced his sense of loneliness; so he merely replied to the porters' kindly 'Good-night, sir,' and passed on to his rooms in 'Botany Bay.' Once within his rooms he lost no time in striking a light, and then set to work to rekindle his smouldering fire. The prospect that the candle revealed was far from cheerful. The room was carpetless, and, except for a table, one armchair, and two or three dilapidated cane-chairs, almost naked of furniture. And yet they had not the look of the apartments of a hard-reading sizar, who had neither means nor desire for any decoration beyond what was absolutely necessary: the nails were there in the walls, but the pictures were gone; that handsome armchair and massive table had never been put in by themselves. Where was the rest of the furniture? Everything betokened a recent and rapid fall in the fortunes of the tenant. He, however, had now at last succeeded in rousing into a show of animation the dying embers; and after warming his hands for a few minutes over the blaze, he got up, and, producing a bottle of whisky from his pantry, mixed a glass of 'grog,' and then, throwing himself into the armchair, fell a-thinking.

A perfect stranger to Dick and his story would easily have guessed that the thoughts which were bringing such a weary look of almost hopeless wretchedness upon that handsome young face were not over-pleasant ones. Sad enough in all conscience they were, and not without reason. It was now some six months since Dick had fallen out with his father, between whom and himself there had always existed the strongest affection. What was the original cause of quarrel is immaterial. Some trifle, occurring at an inopportune moment, had set at variance two proud and wilful, though loving, hearts. Hot and bitter words had been spoken on both sides. The very closeness of the bond which had united them before seemed to make the breach more irremediable; and Dick Allen had left his home one night in the summer vacation, refusing all offers of assistance from his father, and determined for the future to hold no communication with him. He had never known what it was to want money, and consequently thought that nothing was easier than to get it; so while the remainder of his last quarter's allowance lasted, he lived pleasantly enough at his rooms in college, always on the look-out for some means of making money, but not yet considering the search as very pressing or necessary. In fact, he was quite satisfied in his own mind that to a clever fellow—as he undoubtedly was—anything like an approach to want was an impossibility. When his money, however, began to disappear, it occurred to him that his manner of looking for work had perhaps been scarcely energetic enough, and so he determined to set about making a livelihood without further delay.

It would be going over again a thrice-told tale to relate the rebuffs and disappointments that he met at every step; how he gradually almost lost faith in himself from repeated failure; how he tried to obtain employment in one way after another, and at last began to think that there was no way whatever open to him. The fact was that poor Dick, though clever enough, had yet never had the training in the school of poverty which would have enabled him to turn his talents to immediate account. He tried to get a position as under-master in a school; but found that his having obtained no collegiate distinctions (which Dick, indeed, had always considered rather as the exclusive privilege of

poor men) was an insuperable barrier. He tried journalism; but found the market already overstocked, and numbers of men with as much brains as himself, and ten times as much technical skill, applying for every vacancy. He had had, it is true, one or two transient gleams of success; but they had done him almost more harm than good, as they diverted him from the now all-important search for some occupation comparatively permanent.

One result of his ill-success in this struggle for a livelihood was that he was gradually compelled to drop the society of his former companions; for Dick was far too proud to accept the assistance many of them would have been glad to give him, and he could not bear to live amongst them in his present altered circumstances. Hence it was that for some months he had lived almost alone. But about a month before the Christmas-eve on which we have seen him, he had fallen in with a set of men whom he had formerly avoided almost with contempt, but to whom he was now attracted by a kind of sympathy. They were almost all clever men and all dissipated men—a wild, reckless set, nearly every one of them knowing that he had by his own deeds blighted the prospects of a promising life—utterly careless of the future if only they had to-day the means of drowning remembrance of yesterday. Once amongst them, Dick had soon given up all effort, as he had before almost given up all hope, to obtain anything like a respectable and permanent position. They lived a strange, disreputable, hand-to-mouth life getting 'tick' wherever there was a chance; 'backing' one another's bills when any one would accept them; sometimes, though not often, making a few pounds in some honourable way. Poor Allen soon lost any delicacy he had had before regarding a resort to the pawnshop; and his furniture and most of his wardrobe had gone very rapidly to supply means for the constant round of dissipation in which he lived, and which had left its mark on his pale, though still handsome and well-bred, face.

Yet through all the stages of poor Dick's downward career, he had always one restraining influence upon him which, though at times almost unheeded, never quite left him. This was the affection he had for his younger sister—as he called her, 'little Kate.' Squire Allen had been twice married. By his first wife he had three children—a son and heir, now abroad with his regiment in India, and two daughters, both of them married for some years before the period of my story. By his second wife he had our hero Dick and one daughter, four years younger than Dick. On these, his youngest children, the Squire's whole affection had been concentrated. Their mother had died a couple of years after Kate's birth; and hence it happened that she and Dick had clung to one another from childhood as children early deprived of a mother's care often do. After the quarrel with his father, Dick had regularly corresponded with her, and, knowing her anxiety about him, he had sent her glowing accounts of success and prosperity, which, I fear, must often have seemed to himself a dismal mockery as he contrasted them with the actual disappointment that was wearing him down. Kate believed enthusiastically in her brother's talents, and so was the more easily imposed upon; and it was a great comfort to the good-hearted old Squire to know from her that the son whom he was as fond of as ever was at least not in any difficulty. As to an ultimate reconciliation, the older and wiser man deemed it merely a question of time.

The day before this Christmas-eve, however, Dick had seen the last of his late companions leave Dublin for the Christmas, and had returned to his solitary rooms perfectly desolate; he had felt very ill for some days, and utterly dispirited. It had suddenly occurred to him that Christmas-eve would be Kate's eighteenth birthday, and knowing she would wish to hear from him on that day, he had sat down to write. After a vain effort to control himself and tell the usual tale of success and happiness, the poor fellow had utterly broken down, and in a few almost incoherent sentences told how ill he felt and how hopeless his condition was, and implored Kate to write to him at once, as he did not know how soon it might all end; but it could not last much longer. This he had hurriedly posted, almost careless as to the effect it might have; but now, as he sat gloomily thinking in his armchair, he could not help feeling bitter disappointment that he had had no reply. He got up, and paced up and down the room.

'She might have telegraphed,' he said aloud; 'she might even have come up to see me. Though how could she, as he said, a moment after, 'while she,' entertaining a lot of people at home? But she might at least have telegraphed. Good God, if she'd written to me like that, nothing would have kept me from her!'

These reflections added to the bitterness of poor Dick's feelings; for a few minutes more he walked up and down with irresolute steps, then suddenly stopped for a moment, as it were to collect himself, took a bottle from his breast-pocket, and setting it down on the table, brought a wine-glass from the pantry. 'As well do it now as at another time,' thought poor Allen, as he held the glass up to the light and began pouring the laudanum into it drop by drop. He had counted about thirty drops, when suddenly he heard the first clang of the bells commencing the Christmas chimes. Somehow the sound compelled him to stop and listen, and he laid down the bottle and glass. Then, as he listened, he could not help going over in memory the many times when, on this night of the year, he had stood in his father's house, with his sister by

him, and wished her many a happy birthday; and he thought of what that sister's feelings would be were she to hear next morning that he had died a suicide. Thus he stood thinking until the chimes had ceased; and then, softened and more calm, he turned to the table, and said to himself, 'Not on this night, at any rate. To-morrow I may be able to do it, so that no one may know how I died.' Then it struck him that the laudanum he had already poured out would at least procure him what he seldom enjoyed now—sound sleep; so, filling up the wine-glass with water, he sat down again by the fire, and in a few minutes was fast asleep.

Now while poor wayworn Dick was heavily sleeping under the influence of that gentle poison, laudanum, events were transpiring far away that strangely influenced his fate. In the great old drawing room of Allentown was assembled a large and merry party. The house was always at that season full of visitors, and as many relations and friends were gathered together as could find room. The centre of attraction on this her birthday was of course Kate, who was, indeed, at all times the favourite with everybody, from the warm-hearted but hasty old Squire, down to the raggedest 'gossion' that hung about Allentown. Yet somehow this night she was not in her usual spirits; she could not help thinking often and anxiously of the brother whose place was vacant, and who seemed almost cut off from her for ever. An accident too had happened in the morning, which, although treated as a jest by most of the guests, had rendered Kate more than usually anxious. The boy who had gone in the morning for the post had taken an early opportunity of drinking Miss Kate's health; and it was only after a strict search that he was found in the middle of the day, at his old grandmother's cottage with a broken head, and, as the old cook said to Kate, 'spacheless wid the drink.' Speechless or not, he had been utterly unable to indicate the whereabouts of the postbag, and the only course was to wait patiently till he slept his drunkenness off, and might be able to remember. Kate had been much disappointed, for she was sure Dick would have written for her birthday, and in spite of his jovial letters her woman's wit had begun of late to suspect something wrong. Just as they were 'drinking in' the Christmas morning, word had been brought that the truant postboy had at length recovered consciousness, and was leading a party in search of the missing bag, so that the letters might be expected any moment. They waited, however, a good while longer, laughing and talking round the fire; but at last, sure enough, in came the old butler with the letters. Kate had a whole bundle of them, amongst which she saw in a moment one with Dick's well-known handwriting. After reading for a few moments she suddenly turned deadly pale, and almost fainted. Restraining herself, however, like a brave girl as she was, she made some excuse for leaving the room, and rushed to the Squire's sanctum, where she knew he had just gone. She shut the door and said:

'O Squire, read that!' putting into his hands poor Dick's broken-hearted scrawl.

The Squire read and gasped out, "Good God! My poor boy, my poor boy! What is to be done? If I had only known!"

The father and daughter stood for a few moments, as it were, overcome with a great feeling of powerlessness to avert the calamity that was evidently foreshadowed in the letter. Suddenly the same thought struck both, and they looked at the clock.

'O father,' cried Kate, 'couldn't we stop the night mail at Knockrath. They'll do it for you.'

'God help us,' said the Squire: 'the mail passes at two, and it's more than half-past one already. Stay, though,' he added, after a moment; 'there's just a chance.'

He opened the door, and went at once into the kitchen followed by Kate.

'Quick,' said the Squire, to the servants, who were in high-jinks, 'some of you fetch Jim Cassidy!'

In a minute came Jim, a fine specimen of a young Irishman, the rough-rider and trainer of the establishment, who had carried the Squire's colours to victory on more than one steeplechase course.

'Jim,' said the Squire, 'I want you to ride for your life to Knockrath, and tell the station-master from me to stop the up-mail and keep it a few minutes; we'll be after you. Look alive, man; you've seven miles to go, and scarcely twenty minutes to do it in! Take Saucy Kate; she's about the fastest.'

'O Jim, it's for me; and do ride fast!'

'For you, miss!' cried Jim. 'Then, bedad, if the gray mare doesn't put her best leg foremost, you may say I'm no horseman.'

'In a minute or two the grey mare was at the back door, and Jim Cassidy booted and spurred, and in the saddle; then, with good wishes from all, he was off, taking the mare down the back avenue at a steady canter. A few seconds more and he had passed the gate, and the listeners could tell by the rapid thud of the hoofs that Jim was sending Saucy Kate along towards Knockrath at a rate few men would have cared to ride on that dark road in the wild night. In an almost incredible short space of time (though it seemed long enough to Kate) the mail phaeton was brought round, and Kate, muffled up to her eyes in furs and with a driving-cloak of her father's outside of all, was seated in it, and in a moment more the Squire was driving as if he meant to overtake Jim on the grey steeplechaser. Suffice it to say Jim did his work like a man; got up just in time to