

CHAPTER III.—NELLIE'S CHRISTMAS-BOX.

Next day shone clear and bright throughout merry England. The younger portion of the inhabitants of London, going into ecstasies over the keen frost of the night before, that enabled over-worked clerks and apprentices to enjoy, for once in a season, the luxury of skating on the smooth surface of the Serpentine. At an early hour many parties could be seen emerging from the vicinity of Hyde Park and Kensington, all ardour and enthusiasm, in expectation of the coming sport. In the morning Nellie and her guardian attended divine service, after which they returned home in time for luncheon, and to await the arrival of their guests, for Mr. Studly, Arthur's partner, a gentleman nearly as old as Mr. Burton, had also been invited. Miss Ashleigh had just completed the neat dinner toilet she usually wore, a plain black silk dress with linen collar and cuffs, when her maid handed her a small casket, of exquisite workmanship, with a note in her guardian's hand-writing. She hastily broke the seal, and took out of the envelope a small golden key, and slip of paper, the writing on the paper ran as follows: "Inclosed is the key of the casket, which contains a portion of your mother's jewels, her wedding present. Your father desired they should be given to you on your nineteenth birthday, and as you attain that age to-day, oblige me by wearing them." Her next act was to open the jewel case, eager—not to possess the gems it contained—but to touch those which once had been worn by her mother; the mother whom she had never known save by the sweet memory that ever clings round lost-loved ones.

Reverently she took out, one by one, the magnificent set of diamonds and laid them on the toilet table, then dismissing her maid, she kneeled down in front of them and kissed each little stone passionately, weeping bitterly all the while, from her loneliness on this Christmas day, when so many girls of her own age would be surrounded by a pleasant home circle of kind parents and loving brothers and sisters, and she had only this *silent* remembrance of a parent's love.

Presently she grew calmer, thinking it might be wrong to indulge in a grief that seemed to murmur against God's holy will, that had called her parents to himself. Then she thought of Arthur, how very dearly he loved her, and remembering this, grew calmer still, till at last she bowed her head and prayed that God would comfort and guard those that were even more lonely than she, —who had to toil in poverty for the bread they would eat to-day. Rising, she fastened a diamond of uncommon size and lustre, to which was attached a fine gold chain, in her short curly hair; then, loosening the brooch that pinned her collar, she replaced it by the one that had been her mother's, and putting the necklace, bracelet, &c., back into the casket, turned the key and slowly left the room. She was descending the broad oak staircase, when a gentleman in the hall, busily divesting himself of his overcoat and gloves, caught her attention.

"A merry Christmas Mr. Knightbridge," she called out gaily, for before Arthur she must try and be cheerful, "a merry Christmas. Has your Uncle come?"

"The same to you Nellie," replied the young man, taking her hand, "You look charming to-day, *petite*," he murmured, looking into the eyes which his presence had caused to shine more brightly, and entirely ignoring the question concerning his Uncle.

"O you naughty boy, you know that compliments are——."

"Just in season, and very pleasant when they speak the truth."