

Christmas Reading.

WHAT CHRISTMAS BROUGHT.

From the Quiver.

BY CHRISTIAN REDFORD.

CHAPTER I.—WITHOUT A PURPOSE.

It was a cold January evening; the curtains were closely drawn, the hearth neat, and the fire burning cheerily; and in a large arm-chair—her father's usual resting-place—sat Miss Maud Ford, with her feet up on the gaily worked fender-stool.

"Do you think Mr. Sanger will come this evening, Ella?" she asked.

"He may," rejoined the gentle elder sister, quickly, not to say coldly.

"I hope he will," Miss Maud continued. "I like to hear him talk; there is always so much point in what he says."

Ella did not reply. Tea had stood long on the table, and she had now risen to clear it away, for Mary, their one servant, had asked leave to go out for the evening; and their young step-mother had gone with their father to an entertainment at the village school-room.

Mr. Ford was in business in the nearest town; but of late years he had not been particularly prosperous. However, his young wife had brought him a little money, and since the marriage, some six or eight months before, Ella and Maud had felt more hopeful than for some time.

Maud now took her feet from the fender-stool, and leaned forward with her chin on her hands, gazing into the fire.

"And it is not only what Mr. Sanger says," she went on; "but what he does, that I admire. It is easy to talk, but it is wonderful, when one comes to think of it, how little people really do, in the twenty-four hours of each day! And then—looking at the things that are done—it is still more wonderful to see how little real point they have, as a rule. From beginning to end they mean nothing in particular: they are not part of the building up of any great purpose, as they should be; in short, they are, nine-tenths of them, simply, as Mr. Sanger would say, 'pointless exertions,' and might just as well have been left alone."

"Mr. Sanger has an apt pupil in you, dear," said Ella, rather coldly still; "but may I ask for the point of what you have just now said?"

Maud half smiled.

"I am ambitious," she returned slowly, as she still gazed meditatively, but with brightly sparkling eyes, into the fire. "And I have not the slightest intention, whatever anybody may think, of burying myself in a village like this all my life. Look at Winifred Bowman, see how she improved after spending six months away from home last year. She made a point then; but if she doesn't follow it up by another, and another, and another—all pointing towards some great crowning point—of what use will be that one alone? And it is just the same with me. I have made perhaps a little point in this direction, another in that, as scores of people do, and then I have left and forgotten them, and so—of what real use have they been? But now I am going to begin afresh upon an entirely new plan; and first—I must leave home for a time, at any rate."

But Ella only gave a quiet smile, and went on busily drying the tea-cups. Sue was used to her young sister's flights of fancy.

"Home-keeping youths," quoted Miss Maud, looking up now with merry eyes, "have ever homely wits; and so have home-keeping young ladies also; and I am determined that I will even go out as governess or companion, if I cannot get a change in any other way."

"I do not quite see your point yet, dear, I think," returned her sister, "but if you only want a change, perhaps you may be able to get a very pleasant one without leaving home altogether. Winnie Bowman's cousin, Mr. Goodwin, is coming to stay at the vicarage, you know, and I daresay we shall be quite lively for a month or two."

But Miss Maud gave a little dissatisfied frown.

"Yes, but do you not see, Ella? I want a great deal more than just to be lively! We are poor, and my aim is to rise above our present position altogether. I do not exactly see how I am to contrive it yet, of course; but my great point is to be music. I am fond of it, and if I follow out my plans, why should I not succeed as well as any one else?"

"Will you explain to me exactly the kind of success you mean, Maudie dear?" asked Ella in grave sweet tones.

"Oh, not your kind!" laughed Maud carelessly.

"You are too contented, Ella. I believe you would be quite happy—under certain circumstances"—with a twinkle of mischief in her eyes now—"if you knew that you would have to go glodding on through the remainder of your days on a crust! But, as for me, I want just a little more than that, and I think, too, that it will be my own fault if I don't get it!"

"It is success in money that you wish for then, Maudie?"

"Yes, for the simple reason, that one can do next to nothing without money in these days."

After a pause, Ella said thoughtfully, as she was packing the cups and plates together preparatory to carrying them into the kitchen:—

"Our final aim is the same—that is, we both wish to attain satisfaction, I suppose; but the means we daily take to arrive at this desirable end, are as different—as we are different!"

"Yes," rejoined Maud. "And we are so different, that what would be happiness and satisfaction for one, would be by no means the right thing for the other. And another thing I may as well say while I have it in my mind. You are not like yourself lately, Ella. What is the matter with you? And why do you treat poor Mr. Sanger's opinions with so little respect? He is perhaps thirty years older than yourself; he is so clever and energetic; also he is rich, and kind and good-natured and wishing to do good; do you not think him, then, from various points of view, worthy of some small consideration?"

But Ella looked grave and stood for a moment in the doorway.

"I will answer you when I come in again, Maudie."

She was absent but a few moments, and then, returning, chose a low seat by the fire, and laid her head on Maud's knee. And Maud bent and kissed her.

"Maudie dear!"

"Yes."

"You were speaking of Mr. Sanger. You will wonder, I daresay, to hear that I consider his exertions also pointless?"

Maud gave a little start as of surprised indignation, but said nothing.

"Do they give him any lasting satisfaction?" continued Ella. "He does not appear as though they did. And towards what end is he working? I do not believe he knows—"

She had got so far, when they were both startled by a loud and abrupt knocking at the street door.

As Ella left the room to answer the knock, Maud arose from her chair, and listened, and waited, half fearfully, half impatiently. There was a short colloquy in the tiny hall; a stranger's quick tones, and Ella's soft ones in reply; and Maud caught the words:—

"Here are my credentials." And then, "Son of an old friend of Mr. Ford's." And again, "I am quite sure that I may claim a welcome."

At length Ella ushered in the untimely visitor, announcing him as:—

"Mr. Donald Ferguson."

CHAPTER II.—CHANGE AND PROGRESS.

It was a bright cold afternoon in the end of March. Ella knelt before the white kitchen hearth toasting.

More than two months had passed away, and they had been happy months for Ella; and kneeling there, she had been thinking over all the happiness, and how it had come about.

Ella was going out to tea, and Maud also. The latter had not yet finished dressing, but Ella was quite ready, in her neat brown dress, with its soft frills of lace, and the silver brooch, that had been her mother's; and she would only have, in twenty minutes' time, to put on her warm furred cloak, and little brown velvet bonnet.

As she busied herself with the muffins, she heard at intervals a firm quick tread in the room overhead, and a soft flush rose in her cheeks, and presently a tiny bright smile parted her lips.

She would have missed, and sorely now, Donald Ferguson's step about the house. And yet—how strange it seemed to remember it!—a little more than two months before, and she had never even seen him! And how distinctly she could recall the evening of his late arrival! How dubious she had felt about admitting him, yet how perseveringly he had begged to be received. And, finally, she had given way to his importunity, and also to her own sure instincts, which had told her that here was one of Nature's true men. Also she recalled with pleasure how unaffectedly glad her father had been to see him; and how happily and contentedly he had remained with them ever since, having insisted from the first upon paying a liberal sum weekly for board and lodging: though, judging from various small circumstances, he could not be by no means a rich man.

He had said that he had a particular wish to remain in the neighbourhood for a short time; but he had kept his own counsel as to the reason why; and this, and much beside, had offended Maud.

"And why is he so shabby in his dress?" she had more than once said to Ella. "He must be miserably poor—though certainly he is never behind in his payments!"

And then, when he goes out morn-
the whole morning, or the whole afternoon, as he so often does where, does he go? Nobody knows, of course, and it is very mysterious and unsatisfactory altogether, I think, Ella; and I cannot imagine how

you can make such a friend of him! I can only hope that you may never be sorry for it."

To all of which, and much more of the same kind, repeated at different times, Ella's only reply was a gentle secure smile. She, and she alone, in that house, as yet, knew of the blessing that Donald Ferguson had brought with him—a blessing which she could now call her own. And how it had been imparted to her? Mr. Ferguson had put to her the plain question, "Are you a Christian?" And in the daily and often hourly consideration of this inquiry Ella had found her joy.

Mr. Sanger had gone abroad for some time, and Maud, occupied and happy, had ceased to talk of "making points." But Ella had not ceased to think of all that had been said on the subject. But what could she do? How could she make points—and make them for the Master? She did not know; she could not see her way in the least; and she had put her earnest wish and her difficulty before Mr. Ferguson. And he had answered:—

"The less must come before the greater. Let us go on; and each of us will, by the blessing of God, become conqueror in time. You must not expect to be able to compress the whole of the Christian's beautiful and instructive journey into a few steps. Souls grow, and expand, and gain beauty and colouring little by little, like the flowers, and advancing slowly towards their fruitage and reward, like the trees. 'He that believeth shall not make haste.' Let us be content to go on from day to day, and from hour to hour, with patience, and in ever-increasing faith."

"I can at least," murmured Ella, as she thought over all this, while still kneeling by the kitchen hearth, "do as well as I know, all the little things that come to me to be done. And from these I may go on to more and greater things—and who can tell how soon?"

But was there no lightest cloud, then, over Ella's peaceful happiness this afternoon? Yes; a very small cloud, but an unmistakable one, nevertheless, or at least so Ella considered; and it in part concerned her old schoolfellow and friend Winifred Bowman.

It was with Winifred that they—that is, Ella and Maud—were going to tea. Ella had finished the muffins now, and her face was rather grave as she covered them, and put away the toasting fork. She would far rather have spent the evening at home; but she had not been able to contrive it without seeming ungracious. Also Mr. Ferguson had appeared greatly to wish that the invitation (in which he had been included) should be accepted.

But now Ella heard Maud run lightly down the stairs. Then, after a moment's delay, Donald Ferguson's quick step followed Maud's. And he had not gone into the sitting-room, but instead had made his way directly into the kitchen.

"Put on your bonnet," he had said to Ella, in his usual abrupt tones. "It is time we started."

And Ella had obeyed him, simply and naturally as she might have done a brother. During the past weeks she had, quite unconsciously, grown accustomed to doing so.

And when, a little later, she made her appearance in the sitting-room, she found Mr. Ferguson conversing quietly with her step-mother, while Horace Goodwin, Miss Bowman's cousin, was chatting merrily with Maud.

Mr. Goodwin's visit at the vicarage would soon be ended now, and then he would return to London, and to "business," for which, however, as it was easy to discover, he had no great love. He also had been invited to spend the evening at the Bowmans', and he had called in order to accompany Ella, Maud and Donald.

Judging from Maud's face, he was not unwelcome. Her eyes were bright, her cheeks flushed, and her manner animated and pleasing. And Ella glanced at her, noting the soft brown hair falling in tiny waves and curls all over her brow, and the little bonnet above them crowned with snowdrops, and thought that she had never seen Maud looking so really pretty before.

Soon the four young people were on their way to Highfield Farm, which was about a mile distant, and was the home of Mrs. Bowman, a widow, and her daughter and only child, Winifred.

Donald and Ella took the lead, and Horace and Maud lingered behind.

Donald appeared unusually serious this evening. Was he thinking of Winifred Bowman? Ella wondered. For that he very often did think of her she knew. But why, was the puzzle. He did not seem to have any special affection for her; his manner perhaps was a little graver towards her than towards other girls, but that was the only difference that Ella had ever been able to remark.

Afternoon had given place to evening now. It was very still and peaceful; no rough March wind fluttered Maud's pretty dress, or her ribbons, or threatened sometimes to take away her breath. And she and Horace lagged farther and farther behind, chatting and laughing, and thoroughly enjoying their walk. But as for Donald and Ella, they had been so far all