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A CHRISTMAS STORY.

(From the Lamp.)

Christmas is come again, with its light, its music, and genial loving spirit. The snow falls, the stars glimmer, the chimes ring out their joyous Christmas peals; the waits chant their glorious Christmas carols; ivy and mistletoe do their best towards making the earth fair and green; old faces, long loved, crowd around us; dear familiar voices ring again in our ear; the world has laid aside, for a time, its hardness and selfishness to be genial, kind, and sympathizing. The hardest heart cannot withstand Christmas; it leads them where and how it will; it brings the prodigal home, the wanderer to the fire side, the long-estranged back to the long-vacant place.— There is but one it can never restore to us; that is, the dear one dead,—ah! dead years ago. Christmas does much, but, alas, it will never give him back, it can never fill the vacant chair, or bring the loved face or the kind voice among us again. No; but if those we have loved and lost are nearer to us at one time than another, it must be this holy Christmas tide. Bless God for this great gift of Christmas, this glorious anniversary of His birth who so loved us.

It was three o'clock in the afternoon of Christmas eve, and I stood at the drawing-room window, watching a Christmas scene that filled my whole heart with joy. Our house was some little distance from London, and I gazed over the river that lay beyond the gardens belonging to the grand mansions opposite to us. It was not yet dark, but the sun that had been for some time glittering on the snow, was sinking; it was that mysterious, dreamy twilight that possesses so strange and soothing an influence over men and men's hearts. The scene I saw was very fair. Christmas snow covered the earth; it lay white and hard upon the ground; it roofed the houses, it fringed the trees, and nestled in the dark green holly bushes. The air was frosty and biting cold, yet clear and pure; and over all was that beautiful purple, hazy light painters delight in; no mist or fog, but changing, fantastic shadows as the twilight deepened, tall fir trees stood erect, knowing Christmas could never do without them; dark holly-bushes bore their load of scarlet berries and white snow, and very proud they were of their pretty burden; and the graceful ivy twined and wreathed itself round wherever it could possibly get: the coquettish mistletoe, with its green leaves and white berries, looked—well, we know how it looks: may we live to see it for many happy years yet to come.

The houses opposite were a grand study to me who love Christmas landscapes. Early as it was, some of them were already blazing with light; in some the blinds were drawn, and shadows of Christmas ever-greens played upon them; sometimes one could see the outline of a child's curly head, or of taller figures, which passed and repassed. I could never count the number of times some of those area gates were opened. I thought butchers and bakers would never cease coming. I saw more turkeys than I could count. Of course, it was all fancy, but it really seemed to me that the very houses smiled. Once I saw, and it gladdened my heart, a cab drive up with three rosy-cheeked children just come home from school; the whole household were in the hall to meet them; the way in which those boxes were taken from the cab and brought into the house, the way in which the mother kissed the children and the children kissed the mother,—I saw it all, even down to the baby who was in such a hurry to be noticed that it fell headlong down two of the stairs, and plunged into a thick mat lying at the foot of the staircase. I almost hurrahed with the children when it was found to be uninjured. I felt inclined to burrah again when I saw a stout footman bringing a foaming glass to the cabman. I knew why. He had heard the baby fall, and was polite enough to run as though to help, saying 'Bless it; not hurt, I hope.' I am not quite sure that his number was not taken in order that he might always be employed. Then the doors were closed, and I saw no more of that little Christmas drama. There was another house that interested me strongly, it looked so dull and dreary; Christmas even had not brightened it. Ah, I remembered three months since I had seen a mournful procession leave its doors; I knew a kind father and tender husband had gone and left we and sorrow behind him; I could see nothing but I could picture the gloomy rooms once bright with Christmas lights and evergreens; the empty chair, once filled. Ah me; even four months since he sat there; the poor wife, last year so blithe, so happy, with a face of sunshine; and now, alas, sunshine and light were gone; a widow's cap makes the pale face paler, and she shrinks from the glad sights and sounds. Last year bright young faces were round her, and fresh, gay voices had made music in her ear; now all were gone; of that dear group some were now in other climes. Sad, ah, sad and dreary was Christmas Eve for them. God help

them, and be, as Thou hast promised, a friend to the widow and father to the orphan. The purple light deepened and mingled with the shades of a winter's evening; the sky grew darker and its deep blue was somewhat shadowed by fleecy silvery clouds that heralded the approach of the lady moon. A voice roused me from my dream. 'Kate, Kate, is it not time you went to dress. It is after four, and our train leaves at six.'

'After four, and our train leaves at six; do you think my toilette will require two hours' consideration?' I replied, turning from my post at the window, and facing my brother, to whom, dear reader, allow me to introduce you. There he stands, Captain Lionel Eyre, six feet high, and as handsome and manly-looking as you could wish. He had the family face, which had been transmitted from generation to generation, clearly-cut fine features, with dark flashing eyes, and lips that, though at times could smile as sweetly as any woman's, were yet oftener seen with a slight sarcastic turn which I knew quite well. I am proud of my brother, and with reason, for a nobler, truer-hearted man does not exist; he is clever, too; not merely well educated, but intellectual, and, better than all, dear Mother Church has no more devoted son. If he has one quality that I admire more than any other it is that chivalrous and heart-whole love that he has for his faith. True, our ancestors had it; among them there have been brave men and true men; men great on the battle field and of high honor in the state; but there never yet was one who proved recreant to his church, never one but that gloried in it as his greatest honor, and prized it above earthly fame and possessions. He was noble-minded and generous even to excess; if he had a fault, this dear brother of mine, it was that he was given to sarcasm. Still, I must say, it was directed chiefly against myself: perhaps he thought I was his sister and that it was his duty to put me down sometimes. I never heard him sarcastic to others as he was to me: it was good-humoured but still it told against me. I always knew by a gleam of the eye and one curve of the lip that it was coming.

When Lionel was seventeen our father died. Lionel was at college, and I a little child of seven, was still in my nursery. My mother only lived three years after him: so that at the early age of twenty, Lionel became heir to my father's estate (which was a large one) and uncontrolled master of the fortune my father left him. I inherited from my mother a fortune sufficiently large to enable me to live in the greatest ease and comfort. So when Lionel was twenty and I only ten we went together to take possession of the old house, vacant since my father's death for my mother could never to live in it.— It was called Deepdale Manor, and a more picturesque or beautiful mansion I never saw.— There for some years we lived in the greatest tranquility. My brother had governesses and masters for me; of the result I am naturally too modest to speak. At sixteen I was pronounced finished, and declared by a council of governesses to be ready to make my *entree* into society: they said my education was finished. I persist in thinking that it began then: the rest had been a mere preparation for it. At the same time my brother wished, for many reasons, to join the army. He was perhaps somewhat tired of the quiet life he had led at Deepdale. Without much delay he obtained his wish, and was metamorphosed from a squire into a captain. The change suited him; but then we could no longer live always at Deepdale. He took a pretty house some little distance from London; there we lived together. My father's sister lived with us, Aunt Alice, a kind, warm hearted old lady, who was a mother to us both. Lionel was often absent from home during the day, and then Aunt Alice and I did our best to amuse each other: but evening always brought him back, and then time passed quickly enough. He was very indulgent to me, and gratified my every wish.— He always seemed to remember that I was fatherless and motherless, and so had a double claim to his love. I never remember one angry or unkind word from his lips. I was proud, petulant, and haughty: yet he cured me of these faults by the gentlest admonitions mixed with the finest sarcasm: when one did not touch me the other did, so that between the two I was cured, and grew up more amiable than one might have expected. Dear brother, may God bless and repay you a hundred-fold for your untiring love and kindness to me. We were very happy. I do not think there was a brighter or more cheerful home than ours in all England. My brother filled it with sunshine and happiness, my aunt with kindness and comfort, and I with music and flowers. You will ask me why we were leaving this warm little nest on a cold frosty Christmas Eve, to travel through freezing winds miles away. Ah! that is a secret of my brother's; he thinks, perhaps, I know little about it, and I laugh at him quietly, and pretend to be quite unconscious.

I was ill once, and went to the sea-side with my aunt for the summer. Lionel could not leave his duties; but he came sometimes to see us.— During our stay we became acquainted with Sir John and Lady Howard. They were Catholics, so were we. We met constantly, and became inseparable friends. I was almost sixteen, and they had one daughter, May, who was but a few months older than myself. I never saw a more beautiful girl; she had quite a Spanish-looking face, clear, and yet so richly coloured; such masses of black silky hair, that waved and rippled just as I have seen it in old pictures by great Spanish masters; large dark eyes, full of liquid light, lathomless, dreamy, and sometimes flashing with a fire that would have been too brilliant had not long silken lashes shaded them. Ah, yes, I have seen faces just like hers in pictures; just such eyes, such glorious coloring; just such rich crimson lips and beautiful clearly-cut features.— Her parents were very proud of May. She was not what people call accomplished; she had a full rich contralto voice; but she never trained it. I never saw her touch a piano; she could not draw; never touched what is called 'ladies' work'; but she had both intellect and genius of the highest caste, and they had been well cultivated. She had the soul of an artist and a poet too. I never found another imagination like hers—so glowing, so fervent, and so original. She was a strange girl; a strange mixture of brightness and humility, of simplicity and tact of candour and reserve. You know her, and at first she puzzled you trying to read her; she bewitched you, and you ended by loving her faults, virtues, and all together. The first thing I loved her for was her utter freedom from all nonsense or affectation, and her truthful, open, candid manner. You felt that she was genuine and true. It is true that at first sight she seemed haughty, but that quiet reserve hid higher and nobler qualities than those which generally belong to one who can be read at first sight.

She was the only friend I had, Lady Howard was ill. She interested me, too. She had a sweet, kind face; but it always looked clouded. I have seen her when all the light and brightness that ought to have been there seemed dimmed with tears. She had no disease; but was drooping and delicate. I felt sure there was some mystery; that sad sweet face must once have been bright and smiling. She was rich, devotedly loved by her husband and child; to all outward appearance she had no care; but I knew something had happened that had robbed her life of its sweetness, and her frame of its strength. Sir John was a thorough Englishman kind, genial, full of sound common sense, impatient of all that was false or mean, upright, just, and God-fearing, beloved by rich and poor, and proud, perhaps, to a faulty degree, of his beautiful May. The cloud that hung over his wife seemed to influence him, for in spite of all his wealth, and the many causes he had for happiness, I sometimes saw him dull and depressed, without any seeming cause. The more I saw of them the more I wondered what ailed the pale, delicate mother, and the strong, hearty squire. We became very intimate, and visited continually. We often went to Ferndale, and they as often visited us in town. There I learnt that they had another child, a son, who was abroad. He was some years older than May. Where he was, I did not know. They seldom mentioned him, and when by chance I asked about him, a pained look came over Lady Howard's face, and her husband turned the conversation. I questioned May, but she knew little about where he was, or what he was doing.

'Papa says he will come home when his studies are finished.'

'Oh, is he studying, then?'

'I suppose so, Kate. But why do you ask?'

'It seems to me so very strange that your brother, the heir of Ferndale, should be from home so long, and that you should none of you think or speak more of him.'

May's face flushed, and she remained silent for some moments.

'Kate,' she said, earnestly, 'do not speak to me on this subject again. There is something; but even I do not know what it is. I see it pains mamma, so I never mention it. Do not speak to Lionel about your doubts and surmises. He thinks my brother is abroad and studying; he does not know us so well as you do. Promise me, Kate.'

'I promised; and whatever I thought for the future I said nothing. Lady Howard's health slowly improved, and the name of the heir of Ferndale was seldom mentioned amongst us.

Lionel knew May: he was cautious, this brother of mine, and weighed his words carefully in a general way; but I knew by his eloquence the first time he saw her what had happened. He was afterwards more shy in speaking of her, but by a thousand different signs and tokens I knew my brother loved her with the whole force of his noble heart. While things were at this juncture Christmas came, and with it an invitation for us

to pass some time at Ferndale. This is where we were going through the cold and snow this bright Christmas Eve.

Lionel said little; but I knew him so well that I read his delight in the exuberance of spirits and the more than usual sunshine in his face. The presents, too, that he made me, I thought they would never end; he evidently wished me to make a sensation amongst the Christmas guests, and I good-naturedly determined to second his wish, and do my best to follow it out. He was anxious all the morning, counting the hours, I knew; and now at four came to rouse me from my reveries.

'You forget,' said Lionel, 'what a distance it is from London to Ferndale.'

'No, I do not. I only wish to avoid waiting half an hour at Euston square.' 'Now, Kate, do not be tiresome; run and get dressed; the fly will be here soon. I know your boxes are all packed; there is nothing to delay you; mind you wrap up well; it is bitterly cold.'

'Cold, indeed, it is. I begin to fancy we are very foolish to leave our warm, bright home, to search for adventures at Ferndale.'

No reply. Lionel only put on one of his dignified looks, as though he considered me too young to be talked to. I was determined he should speak.

'I cannot think why people go out at Christmas; it is the very time for home.'

'You seem to forget you are going to see the best and dearest friends you have, Kate.'

'Ah, truly; well, I must make the sacrifice.'

'If there is any,' interrupted Lionel, 'in going to be petted and fêted, as you will be.'

I could not tease him any more, he looked so good and kind. I went off, and another half-hour saw us driving to the station. We arrived, as I had prophesied, just half an hour too soon. I went into the waiting-room, where Lionel brought me a book, and hurried away, half afraid, I know, of what I could have said had I chosen to do so. We started at last, and after a cold and rather dreary hour's ride we stopped at Ferndale. The station was one mile from the Hall; but the carriage was there to meet us.— On the ride along those frosty roads I never saw Christmas Eve more beautiful; the sky was dark blue, and studded with glimmering, golden stars; the moonbeams silvered the white snow, and covered the ground with fantastic shadows. The dark trees were fringed with snow; the hedges and fields were one mass of pure, beautiful white. We drove through the park gates, and then the scene was like fairyland. Ferndale Manor House was a large rambling building, belonging to no particular style of architecture; in fact, it embraced them all: each inhabitant had added to it as suited his fancy; the result was a large mansion, with turrets and towers; a magnificent entrance-hall and porch in the Tudor style; large lofty rooms, wide, spacious corridors and staircases; all kinds of snug little rooms, pretty boudoirs, and a noble picture gallery. The house was situated in the midst of a large park; and half a mile distant from the Hall stood the pretty little church, built by Sir Phillip Howard, the great grandfather of the present baronet.

The first sight of the Hall nearly sent me springing out of the carriage. It was one blaze of light. From every window there streamed a flood of warm, rich, ruddy light, out upon the white ground. As we drew near, we heard distinctly a sound of laughter and music. What a glorious scene it was, that shadowy park behind us, with its dark trees silvered by moonbeams, the white earth, the picturesque and brilliantly lit and illuminated Hall, and, above us, the dark sky, with its golden stars. Another minute, and we were in the hall, surrounded by such a group. Out came Lady Howard, her pale face lit with the kindest smiles. I thought of my own dead mother as she folded me in her arms. Then came Sir John, with hearty Christmas greetings; and last, my beautiful May, brighter than ever, radiant with the sunniest smiles and eloquent with the sweetest words. When I could take my eyes from her face, I had enough to do in admiring the Christmas decorations. Two grand old hall was one mass of bright green, and in the midst was hung a mistletoe bough. Ten minutes more, and we were in the great drawing-room, and anything more beautiful or fairylike I never saw. It was a large and splendidly-furnished room, with rich carpets and luxurious chairs and sofas of every description. The rarest pictures adorned its walls, statues the most graceful and costly occupied the niches. Now, Lionel was twined round the picture-frames, and the beautifully-carved pedestals; masses of green holly, with its bright scarlet berries, dark branches of fir, clusters of twining ivy, were most gracefully arranged. A large chandelier poured a flood of golden light, that played on the rare pictures, the white statues, and the evergreens. In the middle of the room, occupying the post of honor, was the Christmas tree. Ah! I shall never see one so beautiful again. It was a tall tapering tree,

and its dark branches were loaded, as though by fairy hands, the oranges, rosy apples, and purple grapes, hung from it in bewildering profusion.— And oh? such presents! Splendidly bound books lying in snug little nests, their red covers and gilt edges looking prettier than ever; beautiful rosaries, sparkling little silver crosses, tiny pretty holy-water stoups from France, the bracelets, chains, fairy-like looking dolls, gaily embroidered purses. I never could mention one-half the beautiful and costly things that glittered on that glorious Christmas-tree. There were little wax tapers of all colors glimmering like little stars. I wished all the children in all the world had been there to see it. But I had much more to do than gaze at the beautiful tree,—old friends to recognize, new ones to learn to know. The room was half filled with a gay and happy group. Besides the inmates of the hall, there was Lady Ducie and her son Guy, whom I pass over quickly, because—well, you will know the reason why later on. I loved Lady Ducie very much. She was a widow, and Guy her only son. There was pretty Lila Hope, May's cousin,—a sweet, fair girl, as gentle and retiring as she was good and clever; and then came Charley Leigh, without whom no Christmas party was ever complete at Ferndale, he being Lord of Misrule, and doing general duty as chief wit and fun-maker. There were others whom you, dear reader, will scarcely wish to know, as they do not relate to my story. In all that group May was the loveliest. She passed from one to another, with her brilliant face and gay words, making sunshine wherever she went. My brother's eyes followed her. He did not speak to her much, but one such look as he gave May was enough. Sometimes he would go near her, with a few words; then her face would flush, and she would look up at him with such exquisite shyness, veiling the gladness of her heart. Ah! May, if no words ever had been spoken, that sweet flushed face of yours, and those eloquent eyes, would have told all.

At nine o'clock, in came the yule log. Sir John would not have missed that ancient and time-honored Christmas rite,—no not for anything you might have offered him. It was soon soon burning and crackling on the large hearth, sending out a warm ruddy blaze that did one's heart good. I never saw a happier scene than that,—Lady Howard sitting near the fire, her kind face lit with pleasure at the sight of our happiness; Sir John going from one group to another; May holding a little court near the Christmas tree, at which Captain Lionel Eyre was prime minister, and Charley Leigh king's jester. Lila stood apart preparing some music, and I, Kate Eyre, was comfortably seated on the large sofa, and Guy Ducie was near me.

'Kate,' he said, 'did you ever see anything happier than this?'

'No, never. But can perfect happiness last?'

'Are you quite sure it is perfect? Does it never strike you, Kate, that there is a shadow resting on Ferndale? Look now at Lady Howard: she seems pleased and happy. Wait a few minutes, and you will hear her sigh most bitterly, and clasp her hands together, while a look of pained recollection comes over her kind face. Have you noticed this?'

'Yes; but I am used to seeing Lady Howard unhappy.'

'Look, too, at Sir John: though that genial, hearty manner, do you not discern some trace of a bitter heart-ache?'

'I do, but that I have seen before without ever knowing the cause. Still it is only such a cute observer as you and I who would notice it; mere lookers-on see nothing, and I do think, Mr. Guy, you and I too might do better than discuss our friends while we are under their roof, at least.'

'Very true, Miss Eyre, I submit; I merely wished you to moralize a little: never trust mere appearances in a room full of smiling people; you little know what is going on,—the dramas that are enacted, the parts that are played.'

'Nay, stay; I do not know, nor have the least desire to do so. I am contented with the surface of society; I do not wish to sound the depths. I am sure you clever people who are always thinking about the inner and hidden life are not so happy, after all, as we who are contented to study only the outward and visible part.'

'Let us return to the 'outward and visible.' Then here is May going to sing. What is it? Ah, the 'Wanderer's Return.'

It was a beautiful and plaintive melody, and May's rich, full voice did it full justice; it affected me strongly. I looked at Lady Howard, and saw her eyes were filled with tears. Sir John had shaded his face with his hands, and stood near his wife. The melody seemed to float round the room, sometimes, waiving in the most plaintive harmony, and then so soft, so sad, so sweet, no one could hear it unmoved. We were silent for some minutes; words would have seemed misplaced after that beautiful melody.