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THREE BIRTHDAYS.

A CHRISTMAS CAROL.

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(From the Philadelphia Catholic Standard.)

PART FIRST.

I.

Christmas Eve (no matter about the year); and the snow falling thick and fast. Not a dreary, leaden-browed storm, but white with the promise of a merry Christmas—a Christmas full of joy and frolic in which the very snow-flakes joined and danced; a Christmas full of glory to God and peace to men as every Christmas would be, if pure hearts and clean consciences would only make and keep it so.—And such a wind abroad. Such a racing, roaring, rollicking Boreas—which whistled up the roads and down the chimneys, and blew the snow from the evergreens as fast as it fell, till the grounds at Trenton Terrace seemed full of empty Christmas trees waiting for Santa Klaus to come.

More than the evergreens, forsooth, were waiting at Trenton Terrace. Every article of furniture in the wide old sitting-room seemed to its inmates full of pleasant expectation. The antique chairs, the equally antique tables and mirrors, the bright and-irons on each side the glowing grate, even the Parian shepherd and shepherdess on the mantel-shelf seemed to join mutely the question of the ticking clock:—“Why-don't-she-come? Why-don't-she-come? Why-don't-she-come?”

Over in the deep bay-window, catching the fading light through the parted crimson curtains, Miss Barbara Trenton was asking herself the same question, as she divided her time between the white road without and her white embroidery within. Dark, slender and small, with a gentle refinement pervaded her from head to foot: dressed in soft grave colors and with a pair of soft grave eyes shining through her glasses, Miss Barbara was thoroughly in keeping with the old-time richness of her surroundings: and bore her thirty years with quite grace. Not so serene, but infinitely more beautiful was the face on the other side of the room. That of a girl of twenty seated in a low fauteuil near the fire. Whittier's *Snow-Bound* lay open upon her knees; but her eyes were reading the bright coals instead of her book—and the coals might have been flattered at the preference. Such clear violet eyes and such golden blonde hair; skin like a bisque doll's and a fair stateliness in face and form—Miriam Trenton and her sister Barbara were as strong contrasts as could well be imagined.

“What a long time it has been!” said the latter, breaking the silence and her embroidering thread both at once. “Only four by the clock and a good hour yet to wait. How provokingly calm and sleepy you look, Mirrie.”

“Then we must have changed roles,” returned the beauty at the fire, rousing with a laugh from her reverie; “Barbara, the stable, rebuking Miriam, the capricious, for looking calm and happy—oh! fie!”

“Foolish girl,” said her sister, with a happy smile, “if you will idle your time and be naughty, Mr. Albery must scold you for it, for I can't, this day of all the days of the year.—Can you realize, love, that in an hour's time we shall see dear Pet again?”

“Darling Pet!” mused Miriam, dwelling tenderly on the words, “Five long years ago, and to-morrow her birthday.”

“Yes, seventeen to-morrow—Christmas Day, and the sweetest Christmas gift coming to us that God could send. How I long to see the dear child!”

“She must have grown much taller,” pursued her sister still musingly; “the air of France agreed with her charmingly; and in her last letter she warned us to be prepared for many changes. Any change, so it be not the one we dreaded that year.”

“Ha!” cried Barbara, with a flash of the soft eyes: “that could not be. It was imprudent, perhaps, to place her there (Mr. Albery told me as much); but you know what the doctor said.”

“That the south of France would give her new life; and the nuns of the *Sacre Cœur* would make her a lovely cultivated woman without tampering with her faith.”

“Yes,” said Barbara, clasping her hands with unusual vehemence, “for that, and only that we made the sacrifice of our hearts, and gave up our darling. Reconcoiled ourselves to missing her all the empty days, and dreaming of her all the yearning nights. The strong, brave child! Five years in a French nunnery, and she comes back to us (God bless her!) as the Three Children of old came out from the fiery furnace—without even the smell of fire upon her clothes.”

In the silence following the words, the clock ticked louder than ever “Why-don't-she-come? Why-don't-she-come? Why-don't-she-come?” and the antique chairs, and the still more antique tables and mirrors, the bright and-irons and the marble shepherd and shepherdess again joined mutely in the question.

“To live and die,” said Barbara, impressively, folding up her work as she folded up her unexpressed doubt: “as her dear father and mother did, a consistent member and communicant of the Established Church of England.”

“God grant it,” said her sister; adding, “Barbara, dear, the clock is striking the quarter.”

“Touch the bell, if you please, Mirrie.—Susan must take a last look at the darling's room, and see that nothing is wanting.”

As the servant brought in lights and received her instructions, Miriam walked to the window and looked out. Twilight falling fast with the snow: and the wind unabated.

“What a wild night! I fear they will have a rough ride from the station.”

“I have no fears. The carriage is close: the coachman safe, and her maid and Cyril are both with her.”

“True enough—Cyril. I had forgotten Cyril. How odd that in the thought of Pet I should have quite lost sight of Cyril.”

“Quite natural,” said Barbara, with a tranquil smile.

“Dear me! he must be quite the German *savant* by this time with a highly cultivated taste for Limberger and Rhine wine.”

Barbara laughed.

“But it was kind of him after all,” pursued Miriam, “to sacrifice his pipe and his books and his chair in that German university and cross over to France, solely to bring home this little sister of ours. Cyril is fully as old as you, is he not, Barbara?”

“No, dear, not by five years. I well remember when Cyril Murdoch first came here as dear papa's ward, he was a little boy of ten, whilst I was a very mature young lady of fifteen. Hark! is not that the bell?”

“The Reverend Mr. Albery,” announced a staid footman.

“Why, Mr. Albery, how kind,” said Barbara, cordially advancing to meet the visitor. “I am delighted to see you.”

He took her outstretched hand in silence and bowed gravely over it to Miriam. The beautiful head was bent with equal reserve: and she sat down near the table and began to turn the leaves of a book.

The young minister was a man of refined appearance, with a pale ascetical face. He was tall and slender, had a gentle mouth and a troubled melancholy in his large dark eyes.—But his principal characteristic was a nervous hesitancy, plainly visible in his manner, even when silent, but which increased painfully when he talked.

“Petronilla has not come yet?” he said as he seated himself near Miss Barbara.

“We are expecting her every moment.—How thoughtful of you to remember the day. I take it as a very great kindness, Mr. Albery, to come over this stormy evening and welcome our darling home. Have you dined yet?”

“No; being a fast-day—” he began when his eye fell on Miriam's face. It was still bent over her book, but a queer smile rested upon her lips. He broke off with a color in his pale cheek and added hurriedly: “I was down at the lunnet visiting some sick and walked home this way.”

“Speaking of sick calls,” said Barbara, whose perceptions were not very keen, “how is the cobbler's wife? Still sinking rapidly? What an obstinate woman she is! Yesterday when Miriam and I called with some wine and jelly she would insist that you should give her absolution, and bring her Christ's Body and Blood,” as she called the Sacrament. I assure you it sounded quiet blasphemous.”

“She said it was in the prayer-book,” said Miriam, in a clear quiet voice.

The young minister did not speak, but gazed at the fire with a wistful, yearning look.

“I, for one, think there should be a special visitor to inquire into such cases and instruct the poor ignorant souls,” said Barbara.

“And I, for one, do not believe in shams and subterfuges,” added Miriam, and she looked straight at Mr. Albery.

He did not seem to hear either remark—but still gazed at the fire with his far-off wistful look. Then he said in a low voice:

“I gave her absolution this afternoon. She seemed to crave it so much. It was very consoling.”

Both the ladies were too well-bred to exclaim; but Barbara looked grieved and bewildered: and the queer smile returned to Miriam's lips.

“You are going with the tide, I see,” she said, after the silence, with a sparkle in her violet eyes. He answered in the same low voice as before—but making little pauses between his sentences:

“A Hand is leading me—I can but trust myself to its guidance—I only seek to do my Master's will.”

There was such a noble light in his eyes: such an earnest simplicity in his tone that Miriam looked down gravely at her book; and Barbara who did not understand it at all asked a little sharply:—

“How are the improvements going on at the church, Mr. Albery?”

He looked quite animated.

“Admirably, Miss Barbara. The baptismal font and the new chancel-railing are really fine works of art; and the cross over the altar—I should say the communion-table—will be finished by to-morrow. You would not believe how the holly brightens up the dark little church.”

“How consoling to have all completed for the Christmas services. I was just finishing your new surplice when you—Miriam! Mr. Albery!—the carriage! Our darling has come!”

The crunching of wheels on the snowy drive outside and the shrill neigh of the horses: the subdued hum and excitement of the servants gathered in the hall, forgetting in their joy the decorum of a well-ordered household—all confirmed the delightful suspicion; and the faithful old retainers fell back respectfully as Barbara and Miriam pressed eagerly to the door.

II.

She stood between her dark little sister and her tall fair sister with their fond arms encircling her—a bewitching cross between the two. Not so small as Barbara nor so tall as Miriam, she was slim and undeveloped, but with a lithe grace in her girlish figure; and a sparkle, and a buoyancy and a variety in her odd face which were as French as France could make it. Her travelling-dress of dark green cloth, while it fitted closely to her pretty form, was wholly devoid of ornament; but from her shoulders fell the graceful folds of a large white bournous which Barbara had sent to wrap her in the carriage. There was no other name for her but Pet. The servants saw it in the gay young head with its masses of brown hair rippling and waving to the shoulders. Mr. Albery saw it in the sweet childish face which smiled up at him so frankly and cordially: and the sisters saw it in the slender figure and the wonderful gray eyes which were black in the blaze of the chandelier.

What the tall athletic gentleman thought who stood in the doorway—his surtout still on, his brown curly beard flowing down upon his broad chest, and his bright eyes going from face to face—it would be hard to say. But Pet suddenly remembered him.

“And this is our friend, Monsieur Murdoch,” catching his hand with a pleasant girlish grace. “*Mille pardons, mon ami*, but I quite forgot you.”

And renewals of the old friendship went round; while Miriam looked at “*mon ami*” curiously, and “*mon ami*” returned the gaze with interest; and Pet threw off her wraps and nestled on a stool at Barbara's feet, chatted gaily. So much to ask—so much to answer; so many charming stories of France, of the school—of the homeward voyage. But presently she broke out with a reproachful wail:

“Oh! my poor Angelique!—my maid—she understands no English. *Ecrivez moi*, only one instant—” and away she flew. And leaving the gentlemen to themselves, the sisters followed. It would take too long to tell how Pet sprang up the old staircase (as familiarly as if she had only been gone a week and a day) to find her tall strong French girl in the house-keeper's room, very low and dispirited before the fire. Or how she consoled her to the mild dismay of Barbara and the amusement of Miriam by flying at her, flinging her arms about her neck, kissing her smartly on both cheeks and pouring out a perfect torrent of French, to which Angelique answered “*Oui*” and “*Heureux*” at first, with many tears; but ended by blossoming into the gayest of smiles and nodding like a mandarin.

Then Pet sent her to see the trunks: and the sisters went up to dress for dinner. Very little time there was to spare, after this confusion; but Barbara could no more keep away from Pet than a bee could keep away from a flower full of honey. So when Angelique was brushing out her young mistress's lovely hair, Barbara must needs run in to take a peep at her darling's toilette. And then Pet must fly out of her chair and insist with a charming wilfulness on Angelique's opening her trunk (just brought up) on the spot: and proceed to litter the floor with laces, gloves, fans, scarfs, and so many other wonderful Parisian trifles, that staid Barbara was beguiled into sitting down in the midst of *debris*; and was there found a contented prisoner with the happiest young keeper in the world when Miriam appeared in her jewels and her violet silk a half hour later.

“O *Belle Etoile!* but you are brilliant!” cried Pet, springing up to embrace her blonde sister. “*Le bon Dieu* has made you so fair that you ought to be very, very good. Are you?”

“I am afraid not,” smiled Miriam.

“Ah! it is very hard, *n'est ce pas?*” and Pet made a *piquette* and stood on one foot like a bird. “It is so easy to be wicked, *ma chère*, and so difficult to be even a little bit good.—Madame Justine used to say make a good resolution, Petronilla, make a good resolution—but it was make and break so often that my guardian angel must have been out of patience.”

This was a little English and a great deal of French as all her talk was.

“*Venez, ma melle,*” pleaded Angelique: and she took the wilful child in hands. In loosening the combing-saque, something bright attached to a chain fell out and glittered on Pet's bosom.

“What is this, darling?”

Pet put the bright something to her lips; and then put her lips to Barbara's cheek:

“A medal one of the nun's gave me. Don't look frightened, *petite*; I am still a bad little Protestant—but I love *ma Mère*.”

Barbara and Miriam both looked grave, but Pet slipped into her simple dinner-dress, fastened a bunch of violets in her corsage, drew a ribbon through her beautiful hair, and led them away in charming spirits.

It was a delightful dinner. Cyril, between Pet and Miriam, was the prince of talkers; and was so genial and so fluent, and so full of foreign anecdote that even quiet Mr. Albery capitulated. Seated next to happy Barbara the weary troubled look went out of his large eyes, he forgot his nervous hesitating for once, and basked contentedly in the family sunshine.

“You must take excellent care of her,” he said, at the dessert, looking at Pet and talking aside to Barbara. She has made a great change of climate at a very inclement season, and will need looking after.”

“She is not so fragile as she appears: but we shall be models of prudence. (Try these English walnuts, Mr. Albery: they are very nice.) As your remark she must feel it very cold—and such an old-fashioned storm to welcome her. Did you suffer much, darling, in coming over?”

“Oh! we had a charming voyage. The captain said he never saw as mild or open a winter so close to Christmas—didn't he, Monsieur?” to Cyril.

“Yes,” laughed her companion, mischievously; “and Miss Petronilla knows the reason why.”

“Ah! how you tease!” said she looking down at her nuts with a pretty blush. “You see” (explaining to the others), the dear nuns began a novena to Mary, Star of the Sea, just before I left, and the whole school joined in it. *Bon voyage* was what they asked for; so, of course—with delightful civility—“of course, it was all fair sailing after that.”

Barbara was plainly vexed: Miriam bit her lip, and Mr. Albery looked at the young speaker with a pleased, puzzled smile.

Cyril seemed to enjoy it all; and put another match to the magazine. “Faith without works is dead,” said he: “I suppose you will be stealing out with Angelique after a while to get wax-babies and evergreens, and go to building a *creche* in your boudoir.”

“Ah! how charming that would be!” sighed Pet, unconsciously. “To have the dear little infant in the straw—and His Blessed Mother and St. Joseph—and the good beasts and the Three Kings among the lights and flowers; and then to kneel together and sing ‘*Adeste fideles*.’ Mon Dieu! how sweet!” Her expressive eyes were dim with tears.

“One realizes it so much better when one sees it. You would not believe, addressing Barbara, what lovely *creches* the girls used to make. We gave all our pocket money last year.”

Something in her sister's grave face was a damper on her enthusiasm. She checked herself suddenly with another little sigh, and said to Miriam: “Tell me about the ball; when is it to be?”

“To-morrow evening,” returned her blonde sister, a trifle constrainedly; “and you are to be the queen of it. Being your birth-night the hamlet will turn out and the Terrace be illuminated in your honor.”

“Charming!” cried Pet clapping her hands. “Don't you wish it was to-night?” said Cyril.

“No, no, to-morrow: for that gives me a little time to rest. I am too tired now to dance; and,” (with a pretty childish gesture) “I do so love to dance!”

They all laughed at her droll earnestness.

“And I,” said Cyril, rising with the rest, “bespeak your hand, Miss Petronilla, for the first set; and hope to share with you the honor of opening the ball.”

“If it were only Epiphany,” laughed Pet, bowing gaily with her hand upon her heart, “we might have a dish full of beans and draw lots; and you might be the King, while I was sure to be the Queen.”

And so chatting merrily they all went away to the drawing-room. The winds still roared outside and the snows fell thick and fast; but the wild night, with its cold and storm, its pitchy darkness and its bleak benumbing hardships, was safely shut out from the closely-curtained, richly furnished saloon. The fires glowed cheerily: and the bronze astrals shed a softened glow on all around.

“One song, Pet, for Mr. Albery before he goes,” and obedient to Barbara, Cyril opened the piano and Pet ran her little fingers over the keys. Looking up at the bearded face and bright brown eyes which bent over her, Pet whispered:

“If I cannot have the *creche* I must at least

have the hymn,” and while he smiled quietly, she sang in rich full tones the “*Adeste fideles*.”

So much pathos—so much soul, were in the grand old anthem as it swelled through the quiet room, that Cyril, watching through his half-closed eye-lids, saw the listening trio, all deeply, though differently, moved. Miriam's color brightened and her breath came quicker. Barbara took off her glasses and drew them through a fold of her cambric handkerchief; while Mr. Albery got up deliberately and walked over to lay his hand upon the singer's head, and say, “God bless her!” in quite a broken voice.

But Pet? Charming, inexplicable, mysterious girl! She put her face down upon the rose-wood rack with the last lingering note and—burst into tears.

“She is bewitched,” said Miriam.

“She is bewitching,” said Cyril, as he walked to the nearest window.

“She is worn out with her journey and had better go to bed,” suggested Mr. Albery, and Barbara who was too full to speak took her darling round the waist, and led her away, smiling through her tears, and murmuring “*Bon soir*,” like a tired child.

III.

Pet in her morning-dress, at the Christmas breakfast, was no longer the Niobe of the night before. Gay and smiling and full of airy talk—if she had been a summer flower, and her tears had been the dew, she could not have looked more refreshed.

“Merry Christmas, darling,” whispered Barbara, with a kiss, “and here is your birthday gift.”

Pet turned over the elegant copy of the *Book of Common Prayer*, and looked a little curiously at the gilding and illuminations, saying slowly: “Thank you, thank you, dear Barbara.”

Then she opened the fly-leaf and read: “*To my darling Pet with the hope that it may be to her as it was to our dear Mother, an enduring comfort and companion.*”

Barbara watched her anxiously as she read; but the large gray eyes came up at last and looked openly but a little sadly into her own. Then the gay young head nodded briefly; and the elder sister went round to her place behind the urn.

Barbara's thoughts were of eternity—mine are of time,” said Miriam's pleasant voice; and a superb little watch and chaine were laid on Pet's plate.

“Angel! you are as good as you are beautiful cried Pet in her old French way, as she kissed her. A thousand, thousand thanks.—Ha! Monsieur, do you know what time it is?” and Cyril entering the breakfast-room, with his hand full of flowers, had to laugh heartily at her pretty affectation, as she held her head on one side, and eyed her new treasure, like a bright-eyed bird.

“You are going to read prayers, I see,” he said glancing at the book, and are punctual to the minute. Proceed, fair parson, and let *this* be your text.

Pet took the fragrant bouquet from his hands with a pleased blush and thanked him with the words:

“I could preach on these all day. They are worth twenty books—” and before Barbara had time to feel hurt, Cyril addressed her with a grave bow, and said:

“This was the only gift I dared to give our little convent-girl. She is full of caprices, I assure you; and one of them is—”

“A dislike to being canvassed by her enemies,” interrupted Pet, merrily: “Personalities in this circle, Monsieur, are strictly forbidden. But I must bring *my* little treasures,” she added. “Angelique has surely forgotten them.”

Ignoring the bell, she ran out of the room, and came back in a few moments with her hands full.

“They are but trifles,” she said with a pretty humility, “but my money melted like snow last year.”

“She gave the half of it to a beggar at St. Genevieve,” said Cyril curtly.

“Peace,” and Pet frowned at the speaker and his interruption, and shook her curls warningly. “This little *imitation* is for you, dear Barbara; I thought you would be pleased with the gracious wisdom of A' Kempis, sweeter, (as Madame Justine used to say), than honey at a feast or music at a banquet of wine. To you, dear Miriam, I trust Our Lady. Take good care of her and she will take good care of you,” and she laid an exquisite statuette of the Madonna and the Holy Child in Miriam's lap.

“And what is this?” asked the latter with a smile, touching a string of pearls on a silver chain.

A chaplet for Angelique, fresh from the tomb of St. Peter. While here, showing a bronze *bas-relievo*, “is a medal blessed by the Pope for the Dominican monks who keep the *Santa Scala*. Whom shall I give it to?”

“*Voilà!* fair queen,” and Cyril went into mock heroics and dropped on one knee before her.

She threw the ribbon on his broad shoulders: “Arise, Sir Cyril Murdoch, and prove your-

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