

THE MESSAGE OF THE BELLS.

CHILDREN'S CHRISTMAS SONG.

(Mother.)

Children, Christmas Bells are ringing,
Pealing forth with merry glee,
Come, with busy little fingers,
Come, and dress our Christmas Tree.

See, what a handsome Tree it is now,
Tall and straight, with pointed top,
Think of it when filled with presents!
(Now, children, don't let any drop.)

Merrily the Bells keep ringing,
Cheering as we work away,
What happy news they seem to tell us!
I fancy I can hear them say:—

(The Bells.)

We—the Christmas Bells—are bringing
God's own message, good and true,
Children, these sweet words remember,
Christ, this day, was born for you.

(Children.)

Look! our Tree, at last, is finished;
Oh! mother, what a lovely thing!
And hark! those dear old Bells keep ringing,
That message which you say they bring.

Sweet Bells! that tell of peace and gladness,
We have enjoyed this Christmas morn;
Our work is done, our hearts are singing,
"Christ, for us, this day was born!"

FRANCES J. MOORE

THE ROBBERY AT THE HALL.

Mrs. Rawson was a brisk, busy lady, who would manage everything and everybody in the country if she could. She had a formidable array of domestic virtues; had the reputation of being very strong-minded, but withal was a most nervous woman, hiding it well, however, under a loud sort of bluster.

Another peculiarity was her absurd jealousy of her husband. Poor Rawson himself was one of the meekest and mildest of men. He was known at school as Pink Rawson, and now he was married and the father of a large young family, he was pinker and milder than ever. His life was a burden to him from this ridiculous jealousy. Even his periodic visits to his mother who lived in London were looked upon with distrust. She always accompanied him if she could, and frequently, to my knowledge, made herself excessively disagreeable. I never shall forget a walk we had together. I don't think it is quite the correct thing to walk through the London streets, but there was no help for it on this occasion, our horses having met with some accident in Regent street, and walk we must to a cabstand. But that walk! Gracious me, we couldn't look across the road! It was, "Rawson, who are you looking at?" "Pay don't stare so!" "Can we not go into a shop?" "Ms. Stonnor, be kind enough to call a cab!"—and call a cab I did at last, with great satisfaction.

A remarkable occurrence took place at the Hall shortly after they arrived. We had all met in the drawing-room after dinner, my brother was dozing in an arm-chair, Mrs. Rawson was reading a novel, my niece was at the piano, and Rawson would have been turning over the leaves had his wife's eye not been upon him.

Suddenly the door opened, and my butler, Thomas (a most exemplary person), came up to my chair with a startled sort of look and desired to speak to me. When we got outside, he told me that one of the housemaids was in hysterics, having seen a ghost on the lawn. It was bright moonlight, and while the girl was closing some shutters her attention was attracted by a moaning. On looking out she saw the figure of a young lady gazing up at one of the windows and wringing her hands. Thomas, who ran to her assistance when she screamed, said also that he distinctly saw the figure disappearing in the shrubs. "Where is this girl?" whispered a voice close to us, and there was Mrs. Rawson, looking very white. She had followed us out of feminine curiosity.

"Take me to this girl," she said loudly. "I'll soon take the nonsense out of her!" However, notwithstanding cold water, salvolat, and abundant scolding, the girl stuck to her statement. She gave the most circumstantial account of it.

The figure was dressed in white, had black hair, looked very sad, would stare up at a particular window, then wring her hands and moan.

The window she described was that which belonged to the haunted chamber. My brother scoured the shrubberies without avail.

Then we talked away about poor Lettice's sad story, till the two ladies went to bed in considerable perturbation.

Nothing occurred the following night, but on the next Thomas knocked at my dressing-room door as I was going to bed. "For Heaven's sake come here, sir," he cried. I hurried after him. "Look there!" he said, pointing out of the corridor window. There, sure enough, on the lawn, in the bright moonlight, was the figure the girl had described. I could see it with painful distinctness. It was like in face, figure and dress to Scheffer's picture of "Mignon regrettant sa patrie," that hung in my nephew's room. It would look up at the haunted room, then clasp its hands and moan. When I turned to speak to Thomas, I was confronted by another

white figure. It was that of Mr. Randall Rawson, who having heard the disturbance, had followed us in dishabille. "What is all this about?" she said in sepulchral tones. For answer I pointed to the figure. "Ah!" she cried, clutching me violently. "I am not frightened! no; this is some trick. I'll have the creature punished. I tell you both, these things do not frighten me!"

Here she clasped me so violently that I nearly fell. "Open the window, Thomas," she continued loudly. "I'll speak to the creature."

At the sound of the opening casement the figure turned slowly toward us, and with a despairing cry disappeared amid the trees. Mrs. Rawson fell back in hysterics, and being rather stout, it was as much as Thomas and I could do to support her. "Ah, ah!" she laughed; "I tell you I am not frightened! I tell you——"

Here the noise she made was so great that Rawson himself appeared on the landing in a hurried toilet.

"What on earth is the matter?" he cried. His voice recovered her at once.

"Come here, Mr. Rawson, and give me your arm to my room."

They made rather an undignified exit, but just then my mind was too much engrossed by the extraordinary apparition to notice anything else. Through that long night I lay thinking it over. What could it mean? I remembered the psychological discussions with Hansen, in which I was invariably right; and before morning was quite certain that I had grasped the meaning of this. It was a portent that affected the family.

When my brother, who had slept soundly all night, began deriding it, and saying it was a dodge of the servants, I pulled him up at once. "Perhaps," I said, "I know more about it than you think."

"What are you driving at?"

"I mean that it may portend something more serious than you hint at."

"Ah! Peter," he said, "how often have I told you not to keep all the jewels and plate at the Hall. Why don't you send them to your banker's?"

"You mistake me," I said; "the trinkets and plate are safe enough; but did it never occur to you that spirits may actually visit the earth?"

"If I did not know you better, Peter, I should think you had adopted whisky in Scotland, or had softening of the brain coming on. Where did you pick up this nonsense?"

I laid my hand upon his shoulder. "Robert," I said seriously, "I'll tell you about Scotland. My mind was opened there, and I am now convinced that it is possible for spirits, both seen and unseen, to visit this earth. Moreover, we may converse with them."

He looked at me dumbfounded. At last he said, "Poor Peter! you are worse than I expected."

"And," I continued, not heeding him, "the question to be answered is, what should we do, or how should we act, when they do appear?"

"In this case," he said brutally, "I should look after the spoons."

It was no use talking to a man of this sort.

In fact, the more serious and intent we were in watching for, or trying to find out about this spiritual manifestation, the more frivolous and absurd he became. He dressed himself in white and stalked about the front of the house, saying, "One ghost was as good as another."

Just before he started for Scotland he played a very stupid and reprehensible practical joke on Randall Rawson. Rawson happened to leave an envelope addressed to his mother on the library table. This was taken by my brother, who, imitating the handwriting, wrote, "Dear mother, I shall send you fifteen blue goats to-morrow. Can't get any more, but will telegraph to New York." Poor Rawson came up to me in great excitement the next day with a telegram in his hand. "Good heavens! Stonnor," he said, "here's a calamity: my mother's gone mad. Read this."

"From Mrs. Rawson, Queen's Gate, to Randall Rawson, Stonnor Hall.—Don't want any blue goats—don't telegraph to New York."

"Poor mother!—I must be off at once. My wife is out driving. Could you manage to come with me?"

"Certainly," I said. "Write a line to your wife, and let us be off. We shall just catch the London train."

So Rawson wrote on the back of the telegram, "Dear Wife,—This will explain itself. Hope to be back to-morrow. Poor mother!"

Of course, when we went to Queen's Gate and saw the spurious letter, the hoax began to dawn upon us. We vowed vengeance against Robert, but by the time we got back he had started for Scotland. What a miserable time we had of it with Rawson's wife! Nothing would persuade her that it was not a planned thing between us.

"The next time you take my husband to dissipate in London, Mr. Stonnor," she said with cutting irony, "pray find some more sensible excuse than blue goats."

"Really, Mrs. Rawson," I protested, "it was nothing more than a practical joke of my brother's."

"How fortunate to have an absent brother!" she replied sarcastically.

Luckily our attention was now distracted by Mr. Hansen's arrival. His presence acted like oil on the troubled waters. In a couple of days he had settled down, a favourite with all, and a special comfort to me. Even Mrs. Rawson pronounced him to be a most superior person, and

it was interesting to notice that, after pooling the very name of Spiritualism and abusing its converts, she insensibly became converted herself.

"We ought to write to Dr. Pascal," she said, "and insist on a searching inquiry being made. It is a crying shame that the savants do not recognize it!"

"The inquiry would come to nothing," said Hansen. "They would investigate, and probe, and test; and, then, if they could account for the phenomena as being the sequence of some so-called law, their intellects would be satisfied; if not, they would call it humbug."

"But, Hansen," I said, "there must be laws, you know; everything must be governed by laws."

"Exactly," he answered; "but what these so-called philosophers call laws are nothing more than assumptions on which they conveniently base their facts."

"There may certainly be," said Mr. Rawson, "some occult power which they know nothing whatever about."

"There is! There is! Believe me, there is, Mrs. Rawson!" cried Hansen. "And then how sweet and comforting to think we can hold converse with departed friends!"

"Indeed it is!" said Mrs. Rawson; "it satisfies our loftiest aspirations!"

"By-and-by history will be read by its help," I said.

"A noble idea—one worthy of you!" said Hansen, pressing my hand.

After this we had many interesting conversations. We of course told him of the spectre. He was intensely interested. He made us narrate the circumstances again and again. He examined the lawn, shrubberies, and windows, and finally put the girl Jane under severe cross-examination. One day, in company with Mrs. Rawson, we explored the old house, and were looking at the family jewels and plate, in the strong fire-proof box.

"We must not wonder at your brother telling you to look after these valuable heirlooms," said Hansen, "any more than wonder at the girl Jane's fright. The idea of burglary is just what would occur to an unenlightened mind."

"I think this box would resist any attempt at burglary," I said, smiling. "See how this key turns two strong bars right across the inside of the lid."

"Most beautiful mechanism!" he said, "and how ingeniously contrived!"

He tried the key several times, then returned it to me, continued, "But I am more interested in the haunted room. Let us go there! Let us go quickly!"

Something in the change of his voice as he spoke the last words made us look at him. His eyes were fixed in vacancy, and both his hands were extended towards us. We each took one, and without any direction on our part, his eyes still fixed, he led us straight to the haunted room! While the door was being opened we heard some knocks and a sort of moaning noise. Nothing daunted, however, we entered—Hansen still in his trance and Mrs. Rawson pale yet determined. For some time there was silence, then he heaved a great sigh, drew his hand across his brow and said, "This is Lettice's chamber! Where is the inscription?"

Before we could answer there were four distinct knocks from the fireplace. Again his eyes assumed the vacant stare, his jaw fell, and he looked about him in a dazed sort of manner.

"Would you learn more of the apparition?" he asked dreamily.

"I would," I answered boldly; "was it a portent?"

"It was."

"A portent of what?" I asked breathlessly.

There was no answer.

"Could you bring us into communication with this spirit?" said Mrs. Rawson.

Still no answer; but with a sigh he sank back in a chair apparently asleep. Presently he awoke, quite unconscious of what had happened, examined the room and inscription with great interest, and then went down with us to the drawing-room.

We told my niece and Rawson what had happened, and that evening we all tried to persuade him to conduct a seance with the view of eliciting information from the departed Lettice. At first he refused. "Remember," he said, "how my health suffered in Germany from these investigations. Since that I have been unable to follow my calling. Oh, let me retain my health!"

It was at my solicitation that he at last yielded; and that he should not be a sufferer, I induced him to accept a donceur that would relieve his anxiety about working for a year or so.

He thought the manifestations would be stronger if some of his time were spent in the old chamber; so we had his bed moved to a room opening from it, that he might go in and out as he pleased.

I must own we were all morbidly excited on the morning of the pre-arranged seance. For myself I was determined to solve the portent. I was proud that the philosophical investigation should have fallen on my shoulders, and was quite conscious of the power of elucidating the phenomena. I determined also to take copious notes and submit them to the Royal Society. F.R.S. is not by any means an ungentlemanly adjunct to one's name, and one of my first subsequent actions should be certainly to show my unbounded gratitude to Hansen for having opened to me these vistas of philosophical research.

Mrs. Randall Rawson talked and laughed loudly to hide her excitement. Her husband walked about the house on tip-toe all day, and my niece had a pale, pinched look and was occasionally in tears. Dinner seemed an impertinence, and the servants must have noted how little we ate. Their presence was irksome. We were impatient till they retired for the night, and then, more like a row of conspirators than ordinary inmates, we silently went up to the haunted room.

Hansen was already there. The night was very dark and warm, and he stood by the open window calm and collected.

"You all know," he began, "how trying it is for me to conduct these investigations, and I only do so now out of deference to the mental attainments of our host. We cannot tell—no one can tell—whether there will be any manifestations, but we will try. The night is favourable."

We seated ourselves round the table, placed our hands upon it, and made a contact with our fingers. Presently it moved; then was violently agitated, almost falling on our feet, while occasional loud raps were heard on the inscription.

"Strong manifestations on the oak carving," he said in a lone tone; "let me go to it."

He got up, and as he moved to the fireplace his chair ran after him.

We all saw it, and made some involuntary exclamation as we rose from our seats.

"Ah!" he said, "don't destroy the contact; the spirits are busy to-night."

We re-seated ourselves. My niece, rather faint, next to Rawson, then myself, Mrs. Rawson, and Hansen. Presently my niece cried, "Something touched my leg!"

"Be calm," said Hansen. "Be calm."

"Oh!" she exclaimed, "I cannot bear it; something is on my lap!"

"Rawson, move your place this instant, sir," cried his wife. "Move your place this instant, or I leave the room."

"My dear——" he began.

"Move your place, sir," she insisted.

So poor Randall had to move. "I think I'll go to bed," he said, and slipped out of the room.

"What was it?" I whispered to my niece.

"It was as if my child was climbing on to my knee," she whispered back.

Hansen rose and drank some water. "I think," he said, "it would be advisable to conduct the rest of the seance in darkness."

"Your late researches, Mr. Stonnor, must have shown you the wonderful properties of light as an occult motive power. No doubt it interferes somewhat with spiritualistic phenomena. In the light we get indirect information by rappings, but in the darkness we may obtain more direct communications."

So saying he put out the candles, and we assumed our seats.

The rapping increased. They were very loud. Then small flickers of light darted all about the room. Then a moaning, such as we heard on the lawn, could be detected in the air close to us.

"Are you the spirit of Lettice Stonnor?" asked Hansen.

There were three raps and a moan.

"Is your visit a portent of evil?"

Two raps.

"Is your visit to the Hall a friendly one?"

Three raps.

"Where do you come from?"

Here a shower of stars shot all about the room.

"Will you show yourself to us?"

Three raps.

Our excitement was now positively awful. We could hear our hearts beating. Presently out of the darkness a luminous figure was seen moving towards the window. Arriving there, it turned, and we saw, illumined by a soft light, the features of the departed Lettice Stonnor. Her black hair hung about her shoulders, and she moaned and gesticulated as she did on the lawn.

"Speak!" said Hansen.

"I return no more," she said in unearthly tones, and slowly disappeared out of the window.

There was a crash in the room. Hansen lit the candles, and there on the floor were my niece and Mrs. Rawson in hysterical faintings. To this day I don't know how we got to bed. I remember calling Rawson, and somehow between us we saw the two ladies to their rooms. When I got back Hansen had thrown himself on his bed.

"Let me sleep, let me sleep," he said, shaking me by the hand—"the expenditure of psychic force has been too much for me; but what a glorious success!"

The reaction from the excitement gave me a heavy sleep, but I was rudely awakened before eight the next morning by Thomas. He had shaken me out of my stupor, and was standing over me in his shirt sleeves.

"O lor, sir!" he cried. "Oh lor, Mr. Stonnor!"

"What is the matter, Thomas?" I exclaimed, starting up and rubbing my eyes.

"Oh lor, sir! the family plate, sir, and the jewels! all gone!"

"Gone!" I shrieked, jumping out of bed.

"Call Mr. Hansen!"

"He's gone too, sir!"

I kept my room for a week. Owing to something he had heard in Scotland, my brother had suddenly returned to the Hall the day after the