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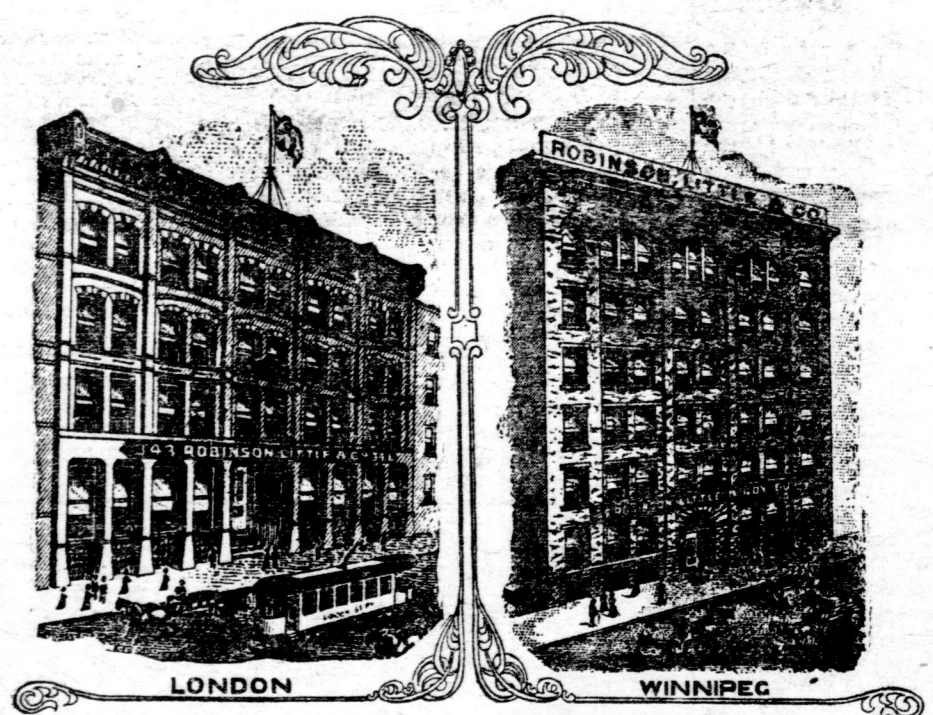
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LONDON and WINNIPEG

CHILD OF CHRISTMAS

Continued From Page Twenty-five.

Randolph knows what it means," he replied, "and you couldn't a-whaled a chap that deserved it more."

"Whale? Oh, I don't know what you mean!"

Zepherine was forced to fall back on Sarah Clifton for an explanation. When the explanation was given it took Zepherine's breath away.

"Oh, I was rude to him," she said, weeping a little, and blushing a great deal. "But how could I do? He was also rude. He would drive me away when I go to take care of his own child."

"Why, my dear, he didn't want you to catch the disease," Sarah Clifton explained.

"But if I catch it, what is that to him?" cried Zepherine with some show of indignation. "If he have it I won't take care of him—unless—"

she paused and gave Sarah Clifton a swift glance.

"Unless what?"

"Unless you or Nan want me to go there." The older woman regarded Zepherine with a curious smile, and she continued to smile after the girl had gone for her embroidery frame.

Whatever the smile may have meant, it had no effect on Zepherine, for whenever Dorrington came to Shady Dale, which was often, the young woman promptly disappeared, and was seen no more until after his departure.

More than once he made inquiries about her, and on one occasion he said he wanted to see her for the purpose of apologizing for his rudeness.

"Why, I hope they have been rude to the child," Randolph, remarked Sarah Clifton when he mentioned the matter. "She thinks that she was rude to you."

"Well, only properly so. I was irritated when she came into that house, but not for long. I soon found that she knows more about the treatment of the small-pox than I do. She threw my medicine out of the window and refused positively to follow my directions, and yet Nan tells me she is the kindest, gentlest little thing in the world. I'm sure I don't understand her at all." Later when Sarah Clifton had informed Zepherine that the doctor had made inquiries for her, she raised her eyebrows in astonishment.

"For me?" she cried.

"Yes; he said he wanted to apologize," replied the older woman dryly. "Apologize to me!" exclaimed Zepherine.

"Well, poor man! If he knew nothing of the small-pox, and know not who should apologize, he must have a deep cough somewhere. I am quite sorrowful for him." When she had said this, Zepherine renewed the dry smile with which she had regarded Zepherine on a former occasion. This time, however, Zepherine saw it, and seemed to divine its import. "Oh, now you are laughing at me!" she cried, blushing violently. "I am very foolish; I cannot tell why poor Doctor Randolph came to be out of temper all the time, day and night."

"Absolutely not nearly so important at that," replied Sarah Clifton; "he's nothing but a great, big, blundering, good-natured man."

Zepherine tossed her head and her eyes flashed. "Well, I wish I could see some of that great good-nature," she said scornfully.

"Well, my dear, I'm thinking you'll have plenty of opportunities," the older woman suggested. "After a while you'll come to the conclusion that Randolph is not important enough for you to jump up and run away every time you hear his footsteps on the gravel outside. He's been coming here regularly many years, but I've never taken the trouble to distinguish his footsteps from that of other people."

"Oh, but if you were in my place," said Zepherine, blushing; "if you heard him walking as I did, all through the long night, while Nan was ill—well, I think you would know his step when you heard it. I know yours, and I know Nan's. I don't think it so hard to know the step of those you—oh, I mean those you like or dislike; do you think so?"

"No, I suppose not," replied Sarah Clifton.

Zepherine was only too glad of an excuse to get away from this friend, who had suddenly become a despot to tease, so she ran off to meet Nan.

As soon as she saw Zepherine, she threw up her hands with a shrill scream of delight, and she just knew it would turn out to be a real and truly romantic Christmas to her.

Mr. Valcombe's shop to find out why he didn't come to Shady Dale any more, and one of the men there—he had two now—told her that Mr. Valcombe was not in town, and that he had gone to New Orleans, and that he didn't propose to return until—at this point she placed both hands over her mouth and gave Zepherine a wild look.

"What then, is the matter with you? Why do you begin to tell something, and then pause in that way?" inquired the thoroughly puzzled Miss Johns.

"Oh, I want to tell you, but I mustn't. Oh, Mr. Sanders will never forgive me. Indeed he wouldn't; he told me so. It is the most perfectly lovely idea I ever heard of."

"But what can it be? Is it about me?" As she spoke Miss Johns began to blush even as she blushed before Sarah Clifton.

Nan paid no attention to the blushes. She simply placed her hand over her mouth and shook her head. When she did speak she pretended to be angry. "You know I am just dying to tell you. Oh, if you knew how wild I am you wouldn't dare to ask me!"

"Dare? It is something terrible, then," said Miss Johns, her face becoming pale. "Oh, if you care for me, please tell me."

Nan seized her in a furious embrace. "Oh, you sweet goose! Oh, you dear-est! Don't drive me crazy! I would tell you but for Mr. Sanders. When he saw me coming from the shoe-maker's he called me, and asked me how much I knew about somebody, and I pretended to know a great deal, and I kept on hinting and asking him how much he knew. And oh! it's the most wonderful thing! Up went the hand to the mouth again, and nothing Miss Johns could say or do had

the effect of inducing Nan to tell what she knew.

The fall drifted into winter without producing any change in the season. The roses bloomed, the birds sang, and the apple trees, mistaking the portents, began to clothe themselves with blossoms. The sun shone with the warmth of spring, and the delicately crisp breezes were laden with the odors of the season of flowers.

Well, it was upon the balmy wings of this perfect season that the days drifted toward Christmas, and when that day was near, the word went around that Mr. Valcombe, the shoe-maker, had returned to the village. He had not come upon the stage-coach. No, he had not been a passenger on the stage-coach. In Malvern he had hired a conveyance, and had timed his start from that city so as to arrive at Harmony Grove after nightfall; and the driver who had his supper at the tavern, declared that Mr. Valcombe had brought a companion with him. This driver further said that the two passengers talked outlandish; they talked all the way, and he couldn't understand a word they said.

The day after his return Mr. Valcombe appeared to be in very high spirits. He saw Mr. Sanders on the street, and called to him, and after the two had talked together for a few moments, they went to Mr. Valcombe's shop, and here they had another consultation, which lasted an hour or two.

After that they went to the tavern, where Mr. Sanders made a very peculiar inquiry. He asked if anybody had seen Nan Dorrington. Well, of course, somebody had seen her, but nobody knew where she was at that particular moment. Home was the last place to look for Nan, but she happened to be there when the three went on by their way to Shady Dale. They called for her, and then the three went on their way.

Mrs. Abraham Goodlett, Dorrington's housekeeper, watched from her window, saw the three visitors stop in the middle of the road and stand there talking. Then all of a sudden she saw Nan jump at the shoe-maker and throw her arms around him. This she saw, and tried to swing him round in a wild dance. Owing to circumstances, Mr. Sanders was not swinging. He simply turned on his heels and allowed Nan to whirl around him, and when she had finished this series of gyrations, she threw her arms in a good squeezing.

And certainly Nan seemed to be very pleased this time, for when she and her companions reached Shady Dale she rushed at Miss Johns and came near smothering her with hugs and kisses, and she repeated the same performance with Sarah Clifton.

"Nan, Nan! you are smothering me!" cried Sarah Clifton, struggling and laughing. "What does it mean?"

"Oh, don't you know?" exclaimed Nan; "it's only two days to Christmas. Nanny—her pet name for Mrs. Sanders—was saying 'other day' that if this spell of weather keeps up we'll have ripe peaches on April Fool's Day and figs in May."

This being a matter beyond dispute, Nan's small audience could only laugh at her enthusiasm. However, when no one else was looking, Mr. Sanders winked, and Mr. Valcombe shrugged his shoulders after the manner of his people. And then—how it was done no one seemed to know—Nan inveigled Miss Johns into taking a walk, whereupon Mr. Sanders reinforced and supported by Mr. Valcombe's eloquent shoulders and hands, gave Sarah Clifton to understand that it was the desire of certain influential individuals to set out a Christmas tree for the especial pleasure of Miss Johns.

"Are you deserting Nan?" the lady asked.

"By no manner of means," replied Mr. Sanders. "Nan is to be the ring-master, and Mr. Peter will be the trick clown, as you may say. Anyhow Sarah, you're likely to learn something from this tree. The rult'll be a surprise to you."

"Well, what kind of present will you give the child?" Sarah Clifton inquired. "I have a number of things to give her, and I've been trying to think of some way to surprise her pleasantly. I confess I like the old way the best. I'm a great believer in Santa Claus, old as I am, and I once took it for granted that all girls are alike in that respect. But it is not so. Zepherine tells me that among her people Christmas is a serious celebration, and the giving of presents is reserved for New Year's, when the young people come from far and near to kneel before their parents and ask their blessing."

"Yes, yes; that is so," said Mr. Valcombe. "It is the old, the very old habitude."

"Well, it's mighty different here," remarked Mr. Sanders. "In this State an' section even the half-grown children give their parents a blessing out any day in the year, and they are so superior to them that raised 'em that they seem to get along mighty well without a blessing of any kind. But that's a gray horse of another color. This is a case where we can't hang up stock in an even bag; it's barred. One of the presents we'll have, the honor to give the young lady has got so many sharp ends and corners that it can't be shoved into anything less than a bug-head. Havin' no hoghead, we'll have to stand it up by the tree."

And so the matter was arranged. That afternoon a tree, a lusty young holly, with a rank growth of foliage, was brought in from the woods and concealed in the carriage-house. The next day there were various mysterious consultations going on. Miss Johns was with Nan, and if she observed anything out of the ordinary she gave no sign.

But the day before Christmas she could hardly fail to note that something extraordinary was on foot. Nan was not visible, and when Miss Johns would play on the piano she found the parlor door locked, and, pausing a moment she heard muffled and mysterious sounds within. For a second—oh, it was the briefest moment—she saw a flash of lightning, and it was how much he knew. And oh! it's the most wonderful thing! Up went the hand to the mouth again, and nothing Miss Johns could say or do had

her happy.

There were other things she remembered, too—things that brought a heightened color to her face, and caused her sensitive lips to quiver. She told herself that though she ought to be happy, she was not happy at all. She wanted to go away, but durst not. Oh, there were times when a wild and frightened heart was fluttering in that innocent bosom—especially when Randolph Dorrington's step was heard on the gravelled walk.

She turned away from the parlor door. If there was nothing else she could do she could finish a piece of lace she was making; so she took her work and sat out of doors in the pleasant sunshine. Nan, who had been set to watch all Zepherine's movements, gave a sigh of relief. "Thank goodness!" she cried. "Now I can go into the parlor without climbing in at the window."

Christmas morning dawned bright and beautiful.

There was not a cloud in the sky or a hint of frost in the air. The mocking-birds were singing in the orchard, and the blue-jays were vigorously chiding a gray squirrel in one of the big oaks. An early breakfast was the rule at Shady Dale, and Christmas morning was no exception. The negroes were crowding around the back door, ready to cry out "Christmas gift!" to all who came in sight. Then Sarah Clifton made her appearance, and the negroes were soon in possession of the presents intended for them; and not one was forgotten.

Following this came the justly famous Christmas tree. Mr. Sanders threw open the door of the parlor. The room presented a very beautiful appearance. The heavy red curtains had been drawn together to expel the light of day. The illumination came from the six big candlesticks that had done duty in the Clifton family for many generations. The Christmas tree, also, bore a burden of small candles attached to its boughs, and was furthermore loaded with packages of various shapes and sizes. It made a very brave show, indeed. It was placed at one end of the large room, being flanked on either side by curtains, which completely concealed the corners.

From behind one of these curtains came Peter Valcombe, who said that everything was ready. Then, turning to Miss Johns, he said in French: "Mademoiselle, will you please play for us one of the songs you heard when a child, one that your good father taught you?"

Zepherine hesitated, her hands clasped together. "But, why?" she asked; and then, without waiting for an answer, she went to the piano, drew a deep breath, and began a little melody that her father had composed for his violin. It was very beautiful;

it is honey."

"I meant I want nothing but my father," replied Zepherine.

"Well, he's a good chunk of a present," said Mr. Sanders, and then he bent on distributing the presents.

Suddenly Sarah Clifton asked where Randolph Dorrington had gone.

"He's outside," said Zepherine. "I heard him walking."

Sarah Clifton observed that the young woman had opened all her presents save one—the first she had received. But when Peter Valcombe came and sat by her father she excused herself. She ran to her room and tore the envelope open. It contained a brief note from Randolph Dorrington. He said he had long sought for an opportunity to apologize for his rudeness on the occasion of Nan's illness, and would she kindly permit him to speak with her a few moments? She placed the note in her trunk, and then stood swinging her hands, uncertain what to do. She looked at herself in the mirror, and made a mouth at the reflection she saw there. Then she went out upon the veranda, and saw Dorrington sitting on one of the low double seats scattered about the lawn. She hesitated, but finally gulped down her shyness or fear, or whatever the feeling was, and ran down the steps and went toward him. Dorrington rose to meet her, hat in hand, and wanted her to be seated, but she shook her head, and immediately opened the attack.

"When you make fun of me as you do you are too cruel," she declared indignantly. "You are too cruel when you speak to me of apology. You do that because you know how hurt I am because of the way I spoke to you when Nan was ill. Yes, I think it is cruel." Tears were in her eyes, and her lips quivered.

"But, Zepherine," he said, a little sadly, "I remember nothing but my own rough speech and manner. If you were rude you had a right to be. But isn't there some excuse for me? Will you forgive me?"

"It is I who should say that," Zepherine declared; but Dorrington noticed that she was very particular to leave it unsaid.

"You haven't answered my question," he insisted.

"Because it has no need of answer," she replied.

"Well, I will ask you another that you will be compelled to answer," he said.

"Oh, compelled?" She smiled at him, but there was trouble in the smile. "Will be compelled? Well, that it different."

"Will you marry me?" he asked.

"Will I —" All the color left her face.

"Will you be my wife?"

"Why, you must be in great trouble, if you come to me. Have you no others to go to?" She had suddenly recovered her composure, and was

now, to use one of Mr. Sanders' comparisons, as cool as a cucumber.

"I want no other," he answered.

"Do you think I would come between you and Nan? She would break my heart by hating me."

"Then, let us leave the matter to Nan," he suggested.

"Why, I never heard of such a thing!" protested Zepherine. "You must be —"

"I certainly am," he answered. At that moment Nan came to the door of the house, and when she saw Zepherine and her father she ran to them.

"Nan, I have just asked this young lady here to leave her home here and live with us."

Nan gave a shrill scream of delight. "Oh, won't that be fun?"

"But you don't understand," said Zepherine.

"Oh, don't! Why, goodness, you must think I'm a baby—and I'm not one when you come. You'll be my itsey-bitsy mamma."

"Oh, for shame!" cried Zepherine, getting very red in the face. Whereupon, Nan seized her dear friend and squeezed her as only Nan could squeeze. "You'll break every bone in my body," protested Zepherine.

"You haven't answered my question," said the doctor.

"Say it, goodness, and be done with it," insisted Nan.

"Oh, Nan, I love you; you know it well. I will do anything to please you."

"Popsy, there's your answer," said Nan, and then she ran away to the house, a very thoughtful and considerate performance.

"Oh! I thought all the time that I hated you," said Zepherine after they had talked a while. "But when I saw you holding my dear father's hand I knew the feeling was something else." She paused a moment, and then exclaimed, "What a Christmas this is for me!"

"And for me!" said Dorrington.

Steel bands are now used in Germany in place of leather belting. On account of their solidity, these bands are much narrower than leather belts used for the same loads, being about one-sixth of the usual leather belt. The steel band is not so heavy as leather, and it can be very tightly adjusted, the distance between the engine and the machine being a matter of little importance. Careful and repeated experiments have revealed the fact that the entire loss of power does not exceed 1 per cent. Owing to the lightness of the belt, the influence of centrifugal force is small and allows of a much increased velocity.



Leaned over Nan who was in a raging fever.