

Bachelor Brindle's Christmas.

BY HARRY WHEAT.

"The merry now, be merry now, with joy bring in the holy bough; With song and feast and merriment."

Bachelor Brindle gave the half-burnt log in the fire-place a kick that sends the red sparks flying, and wonders

crustly where that bit of rhyme strung on a half forgotten fragment of melody,

comes from, and how it happens to chant itself to him so persistently to-night. It is a dismal night. Outside

a high east wind shrieks and squeals, shrieks around corners and echoes away drolly in every stray cavernous

recess and nook. Within, bursts of tawny and scarlet flame light up bachel-

or Brindle's favorite apartment, but

the air of careless drollery peculiar to a bachelor's parlors.

And bachelors Brindle, listening to the wind's boisterous whistlings and plaintive minor chords, comes cross-grained, and even misanthropic.

"Song and feast," he mutters grumbly, "holly, etc! Humph! Gammon!

"Where's my holly, and who'd go dragging round in this slush and sleet to bring it in! What's set me to thinking—"

"Christmas eve," chants the tea-kettle springing briskly over the blaze.

"Odeley!" is bachelors Brindle's reprehensible exclamation, "so it is. I like to have forgot it."

As if sprinkled with some subtle, magic powder, the freight, flickering, quivering, dancing, suddenly lights a path across the floor, through the cottage walls, beyond the mist and mist, far into the past, where a cheery Christmas fire is burning; there are busy hands and hurrying feet and merry voices; there is an intoxicating flavor of holiday cheer; there is song and gladness; there are bright eyes, contented troops of relatives and friends, and radiant among all, a rosy, black-eyed girl with a turned up nose, who wears a scarlet jacket—

"And had a temper enough for two," grants bachelors Brindle; there is a dim spot in the path of light. "Half your fault," sings the tea-kettle cheerfully. "More than half," snorts the wind belligerently, coming in a puff down the chimney to back the tea-kettle.

"Twas, was 'twas!" A momentary lulling of the aggressive wind, and a soft spitting in the red coals brings bachelors Brindle's mind back to his present lot.

"Saw," he mutters with a shudder. "Time was when the idea had abounded only foolishly bright visions of sleigh rides with her, of frolic and fun and—oh, what's the use! They're all gone, she among the rest, and I'm a forlorn old soul with no one to so much as cook a Christmas dinner for me—unless I could coax Aunt Nancy over."

Christmas eve! What an old wretch I was to forget it!

Bachelor Brindle gives the fore stick a discontented poke, and turns to light the tall lamp on the shelf, and then brings forth his old-fashioned brown Bible, and once more follows the sweet story of the beautiful Babe and the first Christmas morning, while without the wind tosses and whirrs its fleecy white burden about at its own erratic will.

"Light that!—depressingly smothered Christmas eve!"

Mab Lacy caught her breath, and clutched at her veil with both hands, as the rampant gale charged with millions of sleazy needles swooped around a corner and nearly blew her off the steps of the grim, tall, narrow-chested home, with its grey-green shutters, the bits of white paper tacked against the door bearing the faded notice: "Furnished Rooms for Rent," revealing its nature and character.

"Shall I shudder, such a night as this, if it is the waste and desert gloom of Malone's establishment with its mackerel-scented halls and roachey corners," she continued, plunging into the shadows of the long, dim hall, and feeling in the dark for her door-knob; "with all its family it is a haven of refuge from—Merry, Peggy! What are you tumbling my furniture about and slopping up my oil-cloth for? And whose is this big barn of a trunk!"

The stout maid-of-all-work, on her knees by the desolate little box-stove, arose with a red flannel floorcloth in one hand, and a bar of yellow soap in the other, eyed Mab drollingly, tried to scratch her eye with her elbow, and failing, gave her brown-like head a random rub with the soap, and answered:

"New fuller comin' to-morrow; and Miss Malone says as how you hadn't paid your rent this week, an' her gentlemen preferred—cause they don't mess things up snoopin' in their rooms, an' not wantin' to lose a shavin' roomer, an'—"

"But, Peggy, to-morrow's Christmas!" Mab sat down on the strange trunk, clasping her damp, gloved hands in helpless bewilderment.

"That's what I know," said Peggy, rubbing her ear with the soap, "but Miss Malone she says how the rent ain't paid an'—"

"But I was going to pay it next week, and would have last week if I hadn't been sick and not able to work, as I told her."

"That's so. But I reckon the ain't no use in raisin' a fuss," said Peggy, philosophically, "he's done paid her a month's rent, and she's took it. She says anyhow, she reckoned you was more of a lady'n to want to say you weren't wanted. But to her you weren't mornin', you can stay to-night."

"But what am I going to do then?" "Room-rentin' agency down yander," said Peggy, indicating the direction by a flirt of the floor-cloth.

Mab opened her flat little pocket-book and shook its contents into her lap. "Peggy," said she, "how many rooms could I rent for a dollar and a half?"

"Dunno," answered Peggy, with easy vagueness as she picked up her buckets of suds and departed.

"Nor care," added Mab to herself, leaning her head against the cold, white wall of her little room; "neither does any one else in the world. How different from the old Christmas-eves in the country, when every body was in to every body else, and everybody so

of them died, or left the dear, peaceful, stupid old hollow—and I among them. And now there is scarcely one left who would know me—only Aunt Nancy Dawson, who would have been my aunt really now, if Ben and I could have kept our tempers till the wedding-day. Ah, well, he has forgotten me, but Aunt Nancy might be glad to see me, and—yes, a dollar and a half will take me to the hollow. I'll go. The room is mine to-night, and sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof. I will trust in the Father of the fatherless, who leads us on by paths we know not of."

"Aunt Nancy—Aunt Nancy—"

"Dear sakes! don't shriek a body all in pieces, you Ben Brindle; what are you a-sayin'?"

The door of the little deep-eared kitchen flew open, letting out a scent of boiling coffee into the clear December air; a blue linsay skirt cleared open the passage-way, and Aunt Nancy Dawson popped into the sitting-room, armed with a broom which she at once proceeded to devote to the obliteration of the string of devils tracks left by her nephew across the striped rag carpet.

"Knowed there'd be tracks wherever there was a man," observed the little woman, whisking away briskly, "what 't' out so early for?"

"Weel!" said the old bachelors Brindle dolefully, "you see the long and short of it, I'm lonesome, Aunt Nancy—awful lonesome."

"Just what you ought to be," returned Aunt Nancy, with blunt candor, "your own fault. I've told you to get married forty times, ain't I?"

"But—there ain't any one left to marry round here as I know of."

"Fiddle! ain't there the wider Barley?"

"—Yes, there's the wider Barley," said Mr. Brindle doubtfully, "but you know she does weigh most three hundred, and is kind of curious and cross-grained like."

"There's Millsey Hicks; a lovely house-keeper—couldn't get a better."

"—No; she's too good. A feller could never get a bit of rest 'long as she could find a straw or a raveling to fuss about. Wants everything in straight rows and no crooks or where. She'd put strings to all the young ones she could find and run 'em up on poles like butter beans if she could. Anyhow, Aunt Nancy, I don't reckon I could get married right off to-day, and I would kind of like some one to cook a Christmas dinner for me. Not that a feller can't patch the spirit of Christmas round in his heart without any dinner, but it would make it seem like old Christmas, and I want you to jump right into my life with me, and stay all day. Hey?"

"I'll shan't," said Aunt Nancy, with no waste of empty apology; "I'm going to Jim Dawson's folks, across the Branch—promised 'em a month ago, an' it's saved me cookin' a lot of truck. Old Pepper's hitched now, 'n I'm goin' to start in just the time I takes me to get my share'n green woaded an' bonnet on. You kin go along too if you like."

"No—I don't like," returned bachelors Brindle. "They'll fish out all their knifkols from six counties and have 'em here, and I don't know half 'em, and don't seem to want 'em any crowd to-day—only just them I know. I'll go home and roast a sweet potato in the ashes and cook a spare-rib before the fire-place; that'll be good enough, only the gravy'll be full of cinders."

Bachelor Brindle drove slowly homeward, his spirits rather depressed in spite of the beauty of the day, bright with a glad glow of sunshine pouring down goldenly over the flawless white fleece of the night's bestowing, yet already beginning to grow damp and heavy under the warm glow, when turning the corner of a fence, where the drifts had blown up like blocks of marble, his horse gave a startled spring and stopped at sight of a small, dark figure trudging along on foot, a picture unusual enough to scare any horse in the country where not a farmer's daughter, in however moderate circumstances, will undertake a mile journey at any season of the year unless provided with some shape or form of a "nag." Mr. Brindle gazed down with a wonder that grew intense at sight of the little figure with its dark eyes and slightly upturned nose raised toward him.

"Mab Lacy," he cried. "Mab Lacy, or a Christmas vision?"

"It is Mab Lacy," she answered, with a little, fastidious laugh, "I've come back to see Aunt Nancy."

"Then you've come on as much of a wild goose-chase as I have," he returned, merrily. "She's gone—gone plumb to the Branch. Her old Pepper beats my Flows woefully, and I saw the gable end of her sleigh shy round the corner before I got to the end of the lane."

"Oh, then what's what all I do?" cried Mab, overcome with the sudden deserted appearance of her position, and sitting restlessly down upon the way-side stump, whose white cap of snow was gradually shrinking away and cooling in drops down its sides.

"Don't do that!" cried Mr. Brindle, with alarmed stupor; "you must sit on that wet stump and catch a cold just because Aunt Nancy took a notion to go bunnin' around for a Christmas lark, and you jump in here back of this robe. Now we'll have a talk. So you're alone, Mab?"

"All alone, Ben," sighed Mab.

"Well, look here. I'm the same old Ben you always know—and hated."

"I didn't," said Mab. "I—I—you know, Ben."

"You're the same Mab Lacy I always knew?"

"Yes I'm tempted to wish I was someone else just now."

"Well I ain't. If you're alone were both alone, Mab, for I am; and it's rather rough, in my opinion. Now, why couldn't we drop overboard this big slice of time that's departed so long, and go back to where we left off before we flew out at each other?"

"How could we?" asked Mab.

"Look through yonder," said Ben, pointing to a little yellow cottage at the end of a lane branching off the road. "Our new minister lives there, Mab."

"Does he?" Mab's tone expressed

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