

(Written for the Canadian Illustrated News.)

"WEE WIFIE'S" CHRISTMAS-BOX.

A CHRISTMAS STORY.

Such a tiny fairy of a woman as it was! Seated on a low footstool before the open coal stove, gazing with intent yet dreamy eyes into its glowing depths. And such a snug little room! and such a queer little doll's-house of a place altogether! Evidently not intended as the residence of people of unlimited means, or of very large family, for it consisted of but three rooms: parlor, bedroom, and kitchen, all of the smallest dimensions and most exquisite neatness. To be sure there was the attic, but even Tom Thumb could not consider it lofty.

Not a very grandly furnished house either, I am afraid, but with an air of taste not always discerned in the mansions of the wealthy, which caused the little woman's husband to say fondly that his wee wifie's skill and ingenuity would have been quite thrown away had they possessed a fortune.

I am sure the crimson carpet of that little room was drugged, but ah! how warm and cozy it looked in the snowy twilight, with the glow of the bright coal fire upon it! I have a suspicion that that comfortable lounge in the corner would have looked guilty if charged with having been a packing-box in its day; but willing little fingers, aided by fresh straw and more of that invaluable drugged, had transformed it, and when the finishing touch was added by stronger fingers bordering it with bright brass-headed nails, it would take very acute eyes to discover its origin. So thought wee wifie and her husband. And the arm-chair one side the little open stove had certainly belonged at one time to the large family of flour barrels; but who would have recognized it in its neat chintz dress? after having been cut into proper shape by "dear old Fred," (who, by the way, was the aforesaid husband).

Three cane-seat chairs, a small round table, now laid with snowy cloth for dinner; a crimson-covered corner stand, on which were placed a few richly-bound books, a silver-mounted flute, and a small work basket, completed the furniture of the room—if we except a cabinet-sized painting, hanging frameless against the wall, the portrait of a beautiful lady of middle age, with soft brown wavy hair, crowned with costly lace, and having a rich brunette complexion, and tender brown eyes. About this picture hung an evergreen wreath, and clusters of evergreens decorated the room. For this was Christmas Eve, and wee wifie sat in state to receive her husband,—or tried to, I should say. And she might have succeeded had it not been for the irrepressible state of delight into which she was flung by every fresh trip to the little kitchen, and peep into the oven, where, comfortably skewered down, and looking as if he were hugging himself with delight at the situation, a plump, well-stuffed chicken was doing to a charm.

"Dear old Fred," she murmured, as she flitted about the table rearranging the plain white ware and letting the fire-light glimmer on the few silver teaspoons which were her own, and looked strangely out of place, with their crest and stately name among their commoner associates. "Dear old Fred! how I wish I could give him a Christmas-box! How late he has to work, poor boy, even on Christmas Eve! And oh! how hungry he will be!" And she laughed with delighted pride as she thought of his astonishment at the chicken and her wonderful bargain. For he had given her money for the express purpose of buying a turkey for their Christmas dinner, and she had actually got the two for a smaller sum. And with the money left she should have a plum pudding. Such a housekeeper as she was growing to be, and so good at a bargain.

Little she thought how her sweet eager face and scanty little purse had touched the old farmer's heart, making him think of his girl at home about her age, and all the plenty that surrounded her. "I've had a beautiful harvest," he thought, "and I will help her to a merry Christmas. I'd give them to her if I dare, but she is a proud little lady, spite of the thin purse," and he named a sum that would not buy the chicken, and actually brought them to her door.

"A queer little nest," he told them at home, "built right against the old stone church, and the organist practising for Christmas, made the little house tremble with the noise."

But now the little woman sinks down upon her ottoman before the fire, with a murmured wonder "why Judy does not come," and before following her thoughts, which are wondering afar off, let me describe her to you.

Small and delicate in figure to an unusual degree, with a bright brunette complexion, and the same tender brown eyes which look out from the picture over her head; wavy brown hair, which will curl spite of her attempts at a matronly back comb, and sweet coral lips, which gave her a child-like look, though she is twenty-five!

She is thinking of that, and her thoughts go wandering backward, backward to many a Christmas Eve long past.

She sees—peering into the coals with dreamy eyes—a stately mansion on the bank of a broad river, a long avenue of giant live oaks, heavily bearded with lengths of silvery-grey moss, leads from the gate-way up to its vine-shaded veranda. She sees the group of whitewashed cabins off to the right—among the pines and magnolia trees. She can almost hear the shout and laugh of negro voices and the merry tones of the violin.

She sees her father, stately, courteous, hospitable, his heavy white hair thrown carelessly back from his broad brow, his gray moustache giving him the air of an old-time cavalier, chatting on the veranda with a group of city friends, who are spending Christmas in the country. She sees her delicate lady mother (and her eyes linger lovingly on the frameless portrait on the wall.) How all eyes follow her as she glides about dispensing kind words and bounteous hospitality. And her brother Rolf and herself, children then, chasing each other on the lawn, with a dozen dusky little followers joining in the sport. Ah! she remembers well the beautiful picture of the sun-set sky, the broad, glowing river, with its green island in the centre, towards which, propelled by the lazy strokes of singing negroes, a huge flat boat was gliding, with a patient crowd of sleek cattle, whose nightly pasture ground was there.

And she glances with an involuntary shiver through the window at the lead-coloured sky, which gives promise of a snow-storm ere the morning. Again she sees her father's city home, all of luxury that wealth and taste could supply, within its walls. It is Christmas Eve, and all the wealth and

fashion of the city is gathered there to honour her first appearance in society. How well she remembers her last look in the cheval glass that night, fresh from the hands of her maid, while her old nurse Judy stood beaming with delight. Rose-coloured silk, white lace, and diamonds; the family diamonds. How like a dream it is now!

And her conquests, and her gaiety in Washington that winter! How far away it seems. What an intoxicating time it was! and how she enjoyed the next two years in Europe, with Rolf—who had completed his education there—as guide. He came home with them, and then she began to notice the cloud no bigger than a man's hand, which ended in such a storm! Father and brother were both deeply interested in politics. Christmas Eve was strangely quiet that year, for both were away; and, ere another, the storm had burst in all its fury. Ports blockaded; Sumpter taken; Bull Run fought; her father, by virtue of his West Point education, in command of a regiment; her brother second in command. What a year that was! spent in prayerful hope for the cause and the dear ones, spent in learning patience and faith in God from the dear mother.

Early next year her father was brought home with an arm shot off, and other wounds requiring long nursing; but they heard of her brother's bravery and promotion to cheer them on another Christmas Eve. Next year they were all in the country—their city home despoiled of all its carpets and curtains to make blankets for their brave soldiers, and the most of their silver melted up in the good cause. And then, while her father was failing in strength, word came of her brother's death at the head of a wild charge on a western battlefield. Oh! the dumb, hopeless agony of that Christmas Eve!

And the mother, whose heart was bound up in her boy, began to fail. And the negroes were all gone, except faithful old Mamm Judy, who loved her nursing more than freedom; and old Uncle Simon, who was her father's foster brother and servant, true to his massa to the end. And the weary days dragged on full of disaster to the cause, for which a devoted people had sacrificed so much. Her father was almost hopeless; her mother grown prophetic in the near approach of death, saying mournfully, "It is a lost cause, Dora, and the end is not yet!"

Then came news of Sherman's march toward the sea. She remembered the helpless horror that possessed them. Oh! if Rolf had been spared to them escape might have been possible.

Escape was possible for one of them, and all other fears were swallowed up in the near approach of that silent messenger who was to bear her precious mother to the peaceful land.

And the child-like face grows pale and hard as she thinks of that night of horror, when they watched beside the dying bed, and she heard the tramp of many feet up the long avenue. Her father in helpless grief, knelt beside the pillow. Old Mamma, with covered head, was rocking back and forth with passionate ejaculations of sorrow; and in a corner, with the moonlight on his bowed white head, old Simon was praying with the tearless earnestness of the old. "Oh Lord, give de poor lamb strength for de trial," she heard him say, and then came a summons at the door, which rolled through the great empty house like the voice of thunder.

She sprung up; at any cost the dying must not be disturbed; and with no thought but this she flitted through the broad hall and flung open the door. She saw a crowd of upturned faces, and flashing bayonets in the moonlight. The dark, stern face of the commanding officer met her defiant, tearless eye. Involuntarily, as it were, she recoiled and removed his cap.

"I beg pardon, madame, we have orders to search this house for the notorious rebel, Col. Arlingford. Men, guard the doors!"

For one second all things whirled about her; then, with desperate calmness, she said: "We are watching by my mother's death-bed; do not intrude upon us to-night; take all the house afire, but leave us to our dying." His stern face softened, perhaps he remembered a mother's grave among the snow-covered hills of the North. "I can give you till morning," he said, "though the house will be carefully guarded. Warn your father to make no attempt to escape."

Escaped he did not even know his danger, as he knelt watching the light die out of the eyes he loved.

At the first gleam of morning light she stared upon them all and fell asleep. But not alone! Oh! not alone did she go forth upon that voyage whose port is peace. For when a husband comprehended his loss, he lifted up his face to heaven, (that face grown so old and baggard in a single night that his daughter scarcely knew it) and crying with a pitiful voice, "All lost! wife, son, and cause!" his heart was broken, and he fell dead beside the bed.

Even in her terrible sorrow, she felt a thrill of defiant gladness. Safe! safe! she thought: they cannot take him now. Like a dream she remembered all that followed—the graves under the magnolias, the old home as it was left by the lawless soldiers; windows broken, valuable articles "confiscated," furniture broken up for firewood, her father's portrait thrust through by some insolent hand, her mother's deprived of its frame, and the lawn dug up in various directions in the search for hidden treasures. And then taking a last look, she went forth into the desolate world with only old Mamma to care for her.

By the aid of a Federal officer, who had been her father's college friend, she was enabled, after many trials, to reach Canada, and in her City of Refuge found acquaintances who had fled from the South long before. By their assistance she obtained a situation as nursery governess and music teacher in a wealthy family; while Mamm Judy, quite content to be near her nursing, supported herself by taking in washings at her humble lodgings. And now "wee wifie's" face loses its hard expression, and the eyes grow soft and dreamy as she thinks of the quiet year, so grateful after her troubles. Her duties were light, her pupils loved her, and she loved music as flowers do the sunshine. And then—then she met dear old Fred. And he, just home from a German University at Christmas time last year, introduced the German custom of the Christmas-tree for his little sisters' amusement. With snowy hair and beard, and fantastic garb, dispensing gifts and bonbons to the assembled guests, not forgetting the quiet little governess, surrounded by shrieking, laughing, children.

Poor Fred! he was nearly through his law studies, but not independent of his father. Why did he haunt the sad-eyed girl in nursery and school-room? Why join her at piano and

organ, with that splendid voice, till she heard it in her very dreams? Why? because it was fate he told her one night in the dim twilight of the music room, and while he was pleading passionately that she would be his promised wife! Even while he was kissing the little hands which strove to free themselves, a stately step was heard, and a wrathful form stood before them. How the little wifie's face glowed as she remembered the withering, blighting words that woman—and mother—showered upon an orphan head.

A lady by virtue of wealth alone, she scorned poverty as crime; and "her son was to elevate, not lower the family."

A few hours after, as she was sobbing out her grief on her faithful nurse's bosom, there came the step which she knew so well at the humble door. And a glad voice said—"I have left them all, little Dora, henceforth there is no one in the world for me but my 'wee wifie!'"

What could she do? He had quarrelled past reconciliation with his family—and her own heart pleaded for him, she was so lonely! So the end of much entreaty was that she became his wife and mistress of this tiny mansion, and Fred, through a friend's influence, got a situation in a wholesale house with a chance of promotion. And, oh! how happy she had been these short six months! the glad tears came to her eyes at thought of such perfect peace, after so much sorrow.

But a tramping of snowy feet at the kitchen door, made her start and exclaim how "late" it was! as a shining black face thrust itself into the room, followed by a warmly muffled figure, bearing unmistakable witness of the snow-storm outside, and a cheery voice exclaimed, "Yah! yah! Heh! heh! I declare to goodness the chile's a settin' here in the dark! thinking of her husband, I'll be bound, an' lettin' de fire go clean out! Lucky ole mamma's live to see to ye, Honey!"

"Why, Judy! where have you been? I thought you was going to spend the day with me as well as to-morrow," exclaimed she. "You were gone when I came from market."

"Laws, yes! chile," said the old woman—hiding a very beaming face in the oven, on pretence of seeing how the chicken was "doing." "De markets com'd home, an' I got de house tidy and de chicken ready, an' den a strange gentleman as wanted a lot of things done 'fore Christmas Day—he offered me sich big wage I was 'bleeged to go, Honey! But I's well paid, I low dat! I done got a nice Christmas-box for you an' Massa Fred, an' plenty left, heh! heh!"

"But, Judy, how often have I told you never to spend your earnings on us?"

"Laws, chile! who else I got to care fer, hay? but it's mos 8 o'clock! Massa Fred's late to-night."

Just then the little house trembled, as if about to take wings for an upward flight. And the organ and choir of the old church burst forth in glad unison—practising that joyful Hymn—

"While Angels watched their flocks by night!"

And the little wifie, listening in the window with a heart full of unspeakable gratitude for her present happiness, saw that the storm-clouds had vanished, and the moon was shining on the white-robed earth, clad for its festival. And dear old Fred was certainly coming in the distance, but not alone! there was a tall heavily wrapped figure with him. Some friend he was bringing to dinner with him! How fortunate about the chicken! And with a last sigh, "Oh! if I could give Fred a Christmas-box!" She turned from the window to see Judy, with a hysterical chuckle, rush wildly to the door, and fling it open, to be caught in her husband's arms and kissed and cooed over to the figure in many wraps, who smoothed her in kisses and a heavy black beard! But she took it very quietly, for she saw at a glance that the brother she had mourned as dead was alive again! the lost was found! and too much joy was near to breaking a heart which had borne many sorrows bravely. She dropped her head on the dear shoulder and fainted quite away. While Judy stood wiping her flowing tears with her check apron and shouting "Glory! glory! tank de Lord I lib to see dis day!" Her energetic efforts soon brought her mistress back to her senses, and soothed the fright of husband and brother. And then clasped close in that recovered brother's arms, she listened and questioned, and wept and rejoiced, while Fred—sat with glowing, sympathetic face beside her, and Judy dashed in and out in a state of frantic ecstasy, doing the most absurd and uncalculated things, and bursting into a chuckle now and then, and a grateful exclamation such as "Tank de Lord! dey Arlingfords hold up dere heads agin now! No Arlingford never yit born to be poor white trash! abused so!" When a sudden memory of the oven made her utter a subdued—"Laws me! I recorn dat chicken done burn up!" and set her in serious earnest to serve the dinner. But it might have been burned for all that was eaten that night. The little wifie's heart was too full of her brother's story, and he too busy recounting it. And though Fred made absent attempts at appearing hungry, they usually ended in putting bits of chicken in his tea instead of sugar, and pouring the contents of the milk jar on his plate for gravy.

It was a weary story of suffering and sorrow that old Arlingford told them in his deep, sad voice. Wounded and taken prisoner on the battle-field. Long sickness and little care in a Federal hospital. And then the horrors of prison life on Johnson's Island till the close of the war. "At last," he said, "when released, ragged and nearly penniless, to find my parents dead, my estates confiscated, and my sister gone, with no clue to her whereabouts! It made me desperate, reckless! I joined some Southern officers, going to offer their services to Maximilian. But having the good fortune to rescue a wealthy Spanish gentleman and his lovely daughter from the murderous hands of a party of brigands, and thereby winning her love, and his undying gratitude, I resigned war for peace, and strove in the love of Inez—and the care of her father (slowly dying of a wound received in the struggle)—to forget the bitter past. Her father died, leaving us his immense fortune, and weary of that land of strife and commotion, and longing to discover my lost sister—in which wish my wife earnestly joined—we prepared to come North. But on that fatal coast—my Inez, never strong, was attacked with the deadly vomit, and died in my arms." He was quiet for a while, with a look in his face which made Fred clasp his wife's hand closer, with a sudden dread he had never felt before! Then he resumed in a low tone, "I was very ill after that, I believe, but death was not ready for me—there was work for me to do. And when strong enough I sailed for Europe, and then took steamer for Canada, and on board fell in with our old friend Dick Telfair, who had seen you in this city, knew the facts of your marriage, and gave me your husband's address. The rest is soon told. I resolved to give you a