

Stephen Skarridge's Christmas.

THE COTTAGE.

'Twas Christmas Eve. An adamant sky hung dark and heavy over the white earth. The forests were canescent with frost, and the great trees bent as if they were not able to sustain the weight of snow and ice with which the young winter had loaded them.

In a by-path of the solemn woods there stood a cottage that would not, perhaps, have been noticed in the decreasing twilight had it not been for a little wisp of smoke that feebly curled from the chimney, apparently intending, every minute, to draw up its attenuated tail and disappear. Within, around the hearth whereon the dying embers sent up that feeble smoke, there gathered the family of Arthur Tyrrell—himself, his wife, a boy and a girl.

'Twas Christmas Eve. A damp air rushed from the recesses of the forest and came, an unbidden guest, into the cottage of the Tyrrells, and it sat on every chair and lay upon every bed, and held in its chilly embrace every member of the family. All sighed.

"Father," said the boy, "is there no more wood, that I may replenish the fire?"

"No, my son," bitterly replied the father, his face hidden in his hands; "I brought, at noon, the last stick from the wood-pile."

The mother, at these words, wiped a silent tear from her eyes, and drew her children yet nearer the smouldering coals. The father rose and moodily stood by the window, gazing out upon the night. A wind had now arisen, and the dead branches strewed the path that he soon must take to the neighboring town. But he cared not for the danger; his fate and heart were alike hard.

"Mother!" said the little girl, "shall I hang up my stockings to-night? 'Tis Christmas Eve."

A Damascus blade could not have cut the mother's heart more keenly than this question.

"No, dear," she faltered. "You must wear your stockings—there is no fire—and your feet, uncovered, will freeze."

The little girl sighed, and gazed sadly upon the blackening coals. But she raised her head again, and said—

"But, mother, dear, if I should sleep with my legs outside the clothes, old Santa Claus might slip in some little things between the wooden and my skin; could he not, dear mother?"

"Mother is weeping, sister," said the boy, "press her no further."

The father now drew around him his threadbare coat, put upon his head his well-brushed straw hat, and approached the door.

"Where are you going, this bitter night, dear father?" cried his little son.

"He goes," then said the weeping mother, "to the town. Disturb him not, my son, for he will buy a mackerel for our Christmas dinner."

"A mackerel!" cried both the children, and their eyes sparkled with joy. The boy sprang to his feet.

"You must not go alone, dear father," he cried. "I will accompany you."

And together they left the cottage.

THE TOWN.

The streets were crowded with merry faces and well wrapped-up forms. Snow and ice, it is true, lay thick upon the pavements and roofs, but what of that? Bright lights glistened in every window, bright fires warmed and softened the air within the house, while bright hearts made rosy and happy the countenances of the merry crowd without. In some of the shops great turkeys hung in placid obesity from the bending beams, and enormous bowls of mince-meat sent up delightful fumes, which mingled harmoniously with the scents of the oranges, the apples, and the barrels of sugar and bags of spices. In others, the light from the chandeliers struck upon the polished surface of many a new wheelbarrow, sled, or hobby-horse, or lighted up the placid features of recumbent dolls and the demoniacal countenances of wildly jumping-jacks. The crop of marbles and tops was almost more than could be garnered; boxes and barrels of soldiers stood on every side; tin horns hung from every prominence, and boxes of wonders filled the counters; while all the floor was packed with joyous children carrying their little purses. Beyond, there stood the candy-stores—those earthly paradises of the young, where golden gum-drops, rare cream-chocolate, variegated mint-stick, and enrapturing mixtures spread their sweetened wealth over all available space.

To these and many other shops and stores and stalls and stands thronged the townspeople, rich and poor. Even the humblest had some money to spend upon this merry Christmas Eve. A damsel of the

lower orders might here be seen hurrying home with a cheap chicken; here another with a duck; and here the saving father of a family bent under the load of a turkey and a huge basket of auxiliary good things. Everywhere cheerful lights and warm hearthstones, bright and gay mansions, cosy and comfortable little tenements, happy hearts, rosy cheeks, and bright eyes. Nobody cared for the snow and ice, while they had so much that was warm and cheering. It was all the better for the holiday—what would Christmas be without snow?

AN INEVITABLE ENTRANCE.

Through these joyous crowds—down the hilarious streets, where the happy boys were shouting, and the merry girls were hurrying in and out of the shops—came a man who was neither joyous, hilarious, merry, nor happy. It was Stephen Skarridge, the landlord of so many houses in that town. He wore an overcoat, which, though old, was warm and comfortable, and he had fur around his wrists and neck. His hat was pushed down tight upon his little head, as though he would shut out all the sounds of merriment which filled the town. Wife and child he had none, and this season of joy to all the Christian world was an annoying and irritating season to his unsympathetic, selfish heart.

"Oh, ho!" he said to himself, as one after another of his tenants, loaded down with baskets and bundles, hurried by, each wishing him a merry Christmas; "oh, ho! there seems to be a great ease in the



THE CHRISTMAS MACKEREL SEIZED FOR RENT.

money market just now. Oh, ho, ho! They all seem as flush as millionaires. There's nothing like the influence of holiday times to make one open his pockets—ha, ha! It's not yet the first of the month, 'tis true; but it matters not. I'll go and collect my rents to-night, while all this money is afloat—oh, ho! ha, ha!"

And so old Skarridge went from house to house, and threatened with expulsion all who did not pay their rents that night. Some resisted bravely, for the settlement day had not yet arrived, and these were served with notices to leave at the earliest legal moment; while some, poor souls, had no money ready for this unforeseen demand, and Stephen Skarridge seized whatever he could find that would satisfy his claim. Thus many a poor weeping family saw the turkey or the fat goose which was to have graced the Christmas table carried away by the relentless landlord. The children shed tears to see their drums and toys depart, and many a little memento of affection, intended for a gift upon the morrow, became the property of the hard-hearted Stephen. 'Twas nearly nine o'clock when Skarridge finished his nefarious labor. He had converted his seizures into money, and was returning to his inhospitable home with more joyous light in his eye than had shone there for many a day, when he saw Arthur Tyrrell and his son enter the bright main street of the town.

"Oh, ho!" said Stephen; "has he, too, come to

spend his Christmas money? He, the poor, miserable, penniless one! I'll follow him."

So behind the unhappy father and his son went the skulking Skarridge. Past the grocery-store and the markets, with their rich treasures of eatables; past the toy-shops, where the boy's eyes sparkled with the delight which disappointment soon washed out with a tear; past the candy-shops, where the windows were so entrancing that the little fellow could scarcely look upon them—on, past all these, to a small shop at the bottom of the street, where a crowd of the very poorest people were making their little purchases, went the father and his son, followed by the evil-minded Skarridge. When the Tyrrells went into the shop, the old man concealed himself outside, behind a friendly pillar, lest any of these poor people should happen to be his tenants, and return him the damage he had just done to them. But he very plainly saw Arthur Tyrrell go up to the counter and ask for a mackerel. When one was brought, costing ten cents, he declined it, but eventually purchased a smaller one, the price of which was eight cents. The two cents which he received as change were expended for a modicum of lard, and father and son then left the store, and went their way homeward. The way was long, but the knowledge that they brought that which would make the next day something more like Christmas than an ordinary day, made their steps lighter and the path less wearisome.

They reached the cottage and opened the door. There, by a rushlight on a table, sat the mother and the little girl, arranging greens wherewith to decorate their humble home. To the mute interrogation of the mother's eyes the father said, with something of the old fervor in his voice:—

"Yes, my dear, I have got it," and he laid the mackerel on the table. The little girl sprang up to look at it, and the boy stepped back to shut the door; but before he could do so, it was pushed wide open, and Skarridge, who had followed them all the way, entered the cottage. The inmates gazed at him with astonishment; but they did not long remain in ignorance of the meaning of this untimely visit.

"Mr. Tyrrell," said Skarridge, taking out of his pocket a huge memorandum-book, and turning over the pages with a swift and practised hand, "I believe you owe me two months' rent. Let me see—yes, here it is—eighty-seven and a half cents—two months, at forty-three and three-quarter cents per month. I should like to have it now, if you please, and he stood with his head on one side, his little eyes gleaming with a yellow maliciousness.

Arthur Tyrrell arose. His wife crept to his side, and the two children ran behind their parents.

"Sir," said Tyrrell, "I have no money—do your worst."

"No money!" cried the hard-hearted Stephen. "That story will not do for me. Everybody seems to have money to-night; and, if they have none, it is because they have wilfully spent it. But if you really have none"—and here a ray of hope shot through the hearts of the Tyrrell family—"you must have something that will bring money, and that I shall seize upon. Ah, ha! I will take this!"

And he picked up the Christmas mackerel from the table where Arthur had laid it.

"'Tis very little," said Skarridge, "but it will at least pay me my interest." Wrapping it in the brown paper which lay under it, he thrust it into his capacious pocket, and without another word went out into the night.

Arthur Tyrrell sank into a chair, and covered his face with his hands. His children, dumb with horror and dismay, clung to the rounds of his chair, while his wife, ever faithful in the day of sorrow as in that of joy, put her arm around his neck and whispered in his ear, "Cheer up, dear Arthur, all may yet be well; have courage! He did not take the lard!"

WHAT ALWAYS HAPPENS.

Swiftly homeward, through the forest, walked the triumphant Skarridge, and he reached his home an hour before midnight. He lived alone, in a handsome house (which he had seized for a debt), an old woman coming every day to prepare his meals and do the little housework that he required. Opening his door with his latch-key, he hurried upstairs, lighted a candle, and seating himself at a large table in a spacious room in the front of the house, he counted over the money he had collected that evening, entered the amounts in one of the great folios which lay upon the table, and locked up the cash in a huge safe. Then he took from his