



The Family Circle.

"Home Sweet Home."

A LITTLE MISTAKE.

BY THE AUTHOR OF "FRISSE'S BRIDAL," "WILFUL WINNIE,"
"AGAINST HIS WILL," "A TWISTED LINK," "CLASPED WITH
RUBIES," ETC.

(Concluded.)

While she was on her knees thus engaged, Fritz came towards her with something in his palm, asking:
"What do you call this?"
He knelt down beside her that she might look into his hand. It was the tiniest spray imaginable, and consisted of two or three pale green leaves, and a couple of white berries. A pretty spray, and an innocent-looking one; and the sight of it made Nelly redder than a rose.
"What is it?" asked Fritz again.
"It must have been amongst the holly? It came by mistake," she murmured.
"But what do you call it? Is it mistletoe, Nelly—is it?" Nelly dropped her broom, and started to her feet.
"Mr. Meryon, if you were to dare—" she panted.
"Dare what? Did you think I was going to kiss you?" he said, looking up in her glowing face as he knelt before her. "I should dearly like to, but not against your will, Nelly—not against your will. I may keep the spray though—mayn't I?"
"It's the first I ever saw," and he carefully transferred it to his pocket-book.
"I wish Tom would come," Nelly said, as she joined her sister in the kitchen, where Grace was knitting at the window.
"I suppose he'll not be long now," was the placid reply.
"But what's the matter, dear? How hot you look!"
Before she could receive any answer, Fritz put his head in at the door.
"If I were to go for a walk, would there be any danger of losing myself? And where can I find any shops or stores?—which do you call them?"
Grace answered his questions, and he set out on his expedition, leaving Mr. Graydon still busy with his letters. Presently this gentleman rang the bell, and the sisters looked at each other.
"It will seem so odd to send cook; besides, she might betray our secret sooner than we wish," said Nelly.
"But, dear Prue, I cannot go to him with this red face!" Nelly protested; so, half willing, half reluctant, Grace went herself.
Mr. Graydon merely wished to ask a question or two respecting the time the post went out; but as she was leaving the room, he recalled her.
"I see there is a photographic album here, but it only contains views. Is there not one in the house with cartes of the family?"
Grace murmured something about its having been put away by Mrs. Derville.
"I should have liked to see it so much!" he exclaimed, with an air of disappointment. "I used to know your young ladies some years ago. Are they much altered?"
"Very much," was her constrained reply. "Past all recognition."
"Is it possible? But of course it is. What am I thinking about? Miss Derville—Mrs. Anderson, I mean—was little more than a child when I knew her; now, I daresay, she has expanded into a lovely woman."
"Mrs. Anderson is considered very good-looking," stammered Grace, and abruptly retreated, her jealous heart aching with a new pang. It was of Belle, then, that he retained a tender recollection—the light-hearted Belle, whom he could not have seen more than twice or thrice, as her girlhood had been spent under the wing of the spinster aunt who had adopted her.
Presently Fritz came back from his excursion in search of shops, with his pockets filled with Christmas gifts for one and another. Cook did not know how to be grateful enough for the gay, warm shawl, that was to help to cure her rheumatism, while for Nelly and her sister he had bought a roll of crimson ribbons, to be worn in honor of the day. Grace would have civilly declined the gift; but Nelly accepted it for both, curtseying nearly to the ground with a quizzical look that evidently puzzled the donor.
Evening came, and still Tom had not put in an appearance. The dinner was delayed, but in vain; and as his friends evidently attributed his absence to the fascinations of the pretty widow, his sisters forbore to remark upon it; and Nelly, on whom the duties of parlor-maid devolved, donned a white apron and an air of importance, and would have attended on the guests. But Fritz prevented it.
"I cannot stand this," he said, bluntly, as he took a dish out of her hands.
"If two great he-fellows like you and I, Graydon, cannot wait upon ourselves, we deserve to go without. Many thanks to you, Miss Nelly, but anything we require we will fetch."
"My dear Fritz," said his friend, as, mentally thanking him for his consideration, Nelly was retreating, "you must not carry your knight-errantry to such lengths, or you will often find yourself in an awkward predicament, for in many English families young girls are preferred as waiters."
"And me! sit still and let them carry heavy trays and great joints of meat!" Disgraceful! muttered Fritz. "It will take me a precious long time to get used to the manners and customs of the mother country, I can see!"
Presently Mr. Graydon began to feel perplexed at Tom Derville's lengthened absence, and his companion to murmur at it loudly. Cook, too, in the kitchen was asking whether she ought not to make preparations for the morrow, as there were guests in the house, and the sisters were debating whether their parents would be uneasy when the day passed away without their children joining them.

"Let us telegraph before the office closes," suggested Nelly. "A few words will suffice:—*'Safe and well, but still waiting for Tom, whose friends have preceded him.'*"

The idea was acted upon; and when they returned, rosy with their brief walk, Mr. Graydon was standing on the hearth, and Fritz was questioning cook, whose cold rendered her so unintelligible that he glanced up in despair.

"Oh, here's Nelly, thank goodness! Come here, there's a dear little girl, and help me out, will you? Mister Tom promised us a true English Christmas, and I don't like the notion of being done out of it. Cook signifies that there's beef in the larder—the roast beef of Old England—but where's the pudding—the plum pudding, that cannot be concocted properly anywhere else? Not made! Then I vote that we make it instantaneously."

"Whom do you include in the word *we*?" asked Mr. Graydon, with a smile. "Not me, I hope."

"No song, no supper—no help, no pudding," said Fritz, turning up his cuffs in the decided manner of one who does not mean to be balked by any obstacles. "I put the question to all here: Am I, who have come so many thousands of miles to taste the great English dish, the crowning glory of a Christmas dinner, to submit to a disappointment because of Tom Derville? Perish the thought! If some one will lend me an apron, a wooden spoon, and a cookery book, I'll show them how a brave spirit surmounts difficulties."

"Without the flour, and the suet, and all the other little ingredients generally supposed to be necessary?" asked Nelly, mischievously. "Fetch the wooden spoon, cook. Mr. Meryon is going to exhibit his abilities as a conjurer, and make us a superlative pudding out of nothing."

"Gently," said the laughing Fritz. "I don't intend to run any risks on such a ticklish occasion. I propose that the making of our Christmas pudding shall be a joint concern. Cook shall be director of the chopping-board. Nelly and I will be the aides-de-camp, and the others shall be supernumeraries. Are you all agreed?"

Grace looked doubtfully at Nelly; but she was nodding a cordial assent to the proposal.

"I have no objection if Prue hasn't," she said, with a sly glance at her sister. "Let us have the pudding by all means. When Mr. Meryon goes back to Australia, I daresay he will often think of this evening's work, and the little mistakes he fell into over it."

"But there are not to be any!" cried Fritz, unconscious that her speech had a hidden meaning. "Mistakes might result in a failure, and that I protest against. I propose that our pudding shall be such a pudding that we shall marvel at our own success. I certainly haven't the least notion in the world how we are to set about it; but I'm willing to be taught; and so, my friends, let us commence."

There certainly never was a culinary operation seasoned with more mirth than the one at which the whole party now set to work. Cook, as an invalid, was permitted to issue her directions from her arm-chair by the fire, and magnanimously forgiven when she flattered at some of the small errors her assistants fell into, while Nelly took the active management of the undertaking. With her pretty arms bare, and repressed fun gleaming in her eyes, and betraying itself in the dimples that hovered about her little mouth, she domineered over Fritz most tyrannically.

However, he was a willing slave, going to and from pantry, and store-room and larder, as often as his capricious mistress chose to send him. It is true that he was not always able to find what he was sent for, and then it behoved Nelly to go and help him in the quest, and more than once she came back with heightened colour because their hands had met, and Fritz had audaciously clasped the fingers that came in contact with his own.

To Mr. Graydon, and the more sober Grace, the task was allotted of stoning the raisins; but whether it would ever have been accomplished if cook had not come to their aid, is doubtful, seeing that they fell into such earnest converse about Australia and those gold fields, which had drawn the restless Tom Derville from his English home, that they forgot their occupation.

"Are you very fond of pudding, Mr. Meryon, that you have beguiled us into this task?" Nelly inquired, as she beat up the eggs.

"No, not as a rule; but I have long had a wish to taste a real Christmas pudding. Our shepherd volunteered to make us one last year with such materials as we could beg and borrow from our neighbours. But he had heard somewhere that it would be better for being boiled a week previously, and he boiled it!"

"Not for the whole week surely?"
"For the whole week, night and day. Did you ever taste cooked india-rubber, Nelly? because we did when that pudding was taken out of the pot."

Nelly laughed, but she was giving him divided attention just then, for Mr. Graydon was relating to Grace an act of great bravery Tom had performed during a flood that had partially swept away a village through which he was passing.

His exertions quite exhausted him, he went on, "and it was while he was lying at the feet of the gallant fellow who had saved so many lives and knew that it must be my old friend Tom Derville."

"Then you had not seen him for some time?" Grace remarked.

"No; we had been in the habit of writing occasionally; but our correspondence dropped off after Grace—after Miss Derville's marriage."

"What are you saying, Mr. Graydon?" asked Nelly, whose quick ears had caught every word. "It was not Grace Derville who married Mr. Anderson, but her sister Belle!"

Mr. Graydon uttered an exclamation that made one of his listeners quiver from head to foot, and droop her head on her bosom lest her tell-tale face should betray her.

"Great heavens! is she—Grace unmarried?"
"She was when last I saw her," Nelly replied, demurely; and, in a state of agitation he could not conceal, Grace's faithful lover abruptly rose and went back to the darning-room; while Grace herself dropped a few tears among the raisins, that were not, however, wholly sorrowful ones.

Then he had been true to her image, and had grieved when he fancied her lost to him. Oh! for the coming of Tom, that all hateful disguise might be thrown off, and her anxious eyes tell her whether the change time had wrought would make him look coldly upon her.

"There," said Nelly when the pudding was fairly completed; "if this should prove a failure, Mr. Meryon, I shall lay all the blame on your shoulders. You know that it was by the merest chance that it wasn't sprinkled with Cayenne pepper instead of spice, and I'm certain you put the salt in twice over."

"That was because I was watching you chop up the candied peel. I was in a fright lest you should cut yourself."

"Do you faint at the sight of a cut finger, Mr. Meryon?" he was scornfully asked.

"Do I give you the impression of being very chicken-hearted?" he queried in return.

"I haven't thought about you sufficiently to be able to say; and having uttered this monstrous fib, Nelly ran away to wash her hands, and thought proper to avoid the young man for the rest of the evening."

But if she snubbed Fritz, and sent him to bed wondering why her manner changed so suddenly, she was the most sympathetic of listeners to all the hopes and fears Grace confided to her, when they had retired to their own room. How indignantly she scorned the idea that her sister's sweet, pensive face was faded, how kindly she admired and praised Mr. Graydon, though in reality—having seen him under a cloud—her private opinion was that he was grumpy; and what pleasant prognostications she uttered of happy days to come, that were to compensate for all the long years of suspense Grace had endured!

The lamp burned low, and still the sisters sat with their arms affectionately wound around each other, talking in pleasant whispers, till a distant clock chimed the hour of one, and they knew that any other day had dawned.

"A merry Christmas to you, dear Prue!" Nelly gaily cried. "Don't say that I have not wished it early enough; and now if we mean to go to bed at all, we had better begin to prepare for it."

"Hush!" said Grace, her cheek blanching. "What was that noise? I could have declared that I heard a door open."

"Fancy, dear—nothing else. Who should be up and walking about the house at this untimely hour? It is not like you to be so nervous."

"But, Nelly, I do not care to mention it in the morning, and afterwards it slipped my memory; cook says one of the keys of the side-door—you know there are two—is missing, and she avers that John must have taken it away with him. You know that she always suspected this man."

"Why should he do such a thing? There is a bolt to the door that secures it."

"But that bolt is defective, and cook says that any person who is acquainted with the premises could slip it back."

Nelly began to look as uneasy as her sister.

"Thank goodness we are not alone in the house! Let us listen at the top of the stairs, and if we have reason to believe that there is anyone trying to effect an entrance, we will arouse the gentlemen."

She snatched up a shawl, and was stepping cautiously towards the door, when the handle of it was turned by some one outside. With a gasping cry she fell back against her sister.

"Who's there?" asked Grace, tremulously.

"No reply was vouchsafed, but the door received a vigorous shake that elicited a shriek from both the frightened girls."

A muttered exclamation answered it, and they could no longer doubt that burglars were in the house—burglars, too, who must have been instructed where to seek for the most valuable articles left within it; for who else but the treacherous servants could know that Mrs. Derville had packed her jewellery and the best of her plate in a small box that was placed under the bed of her daughters?

Nelly remembered at this moment how Harriet, the too officious housemaid, had entered the room while her mother was thus engaged; and how the girl's eyes had glistened as she caught sight of some expensive trinkets then in Mrs. Derville's hand. At the time her evident interest in the ornaments had been set down to simple feminine admiration, but now it began to assume a different aspect.

"What shall we do?" whispered Grace, for the person or persons without were attempting to force an entrance. But Nelly only answered with a sob of terror. Mr. Graydon and Fritz would come to their aid if they could be aroused, but a passage and double doors lay between this chamber and the apartments the gentlemen occupied; and when Nelly raised her voice and screamed for help, two pairs of shoulders were set against the yielding panels, and the next moment the helpless girls were in the grasp of a couple of ruffians, who forced them to be silent with their menaces.

Grace fainted; and Nelly, borne down on her knees by the rough fellow who held her, closed her eyes, and feebly prayed for mercy. The guilty footman, who remained in the passage outside till they were silenced, then ventured to show himself, and whispered directions to his associates.

"Look for the box—a black one, bound with brass—and never mind the girls. This room is at the back of the house, so they cannot make anyone hear them, and there's not a soul in the place, as I told you before, except the deaf cook. There's gold watches in that case on the dressing-table. Hand 'em here—and the rings and brooches as well. I can stow 'em away in my pocket."

But his orders were brought to an abrupt close by a mighty blow from behind, that stretched him on the floor senseless; and the next moment the other two men were struggling with Fritz Meryon, who collared one and kept the other at bay with the powerful right arm which was his only weapon.

The fellows, however, were strong and desperate, and, quickly recovering themselves from the shock of his entrance, they attacked him with such violence that despite his bravery he must have been overpowered if Mr. Graydon, armed with a poker, had not hastened to his assistance.

When one of the ruffians had succumbed to a tap on the head, the other was soon captured, and ere long both of them were bound hand and foot, and dragged into the bath-room; Fritz guarding the locked door while Mr. Graydon went in search of the police.

The treacherous John, forgotten in the struggle, had crawled away, and made good his escape; and the sisters, left once more in possession of their apartment, felt as if it had been but a hideous dream—so sudden had been the coming of the burglar, so rapid the events that succeeded their first alarm. The broken lamp, the scattered articles lying in all directions, and the over-turned chairs and tables were, however, unpleasant proofs of reality of the attack; and Grace, still weak and faint with nervous agitation, slid down beside her bed, murmuring thankful prayers for the timely help their guests had given.

Leaving her to the care of cook, who had been aroused by the noise of the scuffle, Nelly stole into the passage, where Fritz was walking to and fro, keeping watch over his prisoners.

"How are we to thank you, Mr. Meryon?" she exclaimed.

"Not with tears, pray. I cannot bear to see them. And how you are trembling still! Why, you foolish little thing, you are safe now! You don't suppose I would let anyone hurt you, Nelly?"