

The Birds' Christmas Carol.

Continued.

"CLEMENT RUGGLES, do you mean to tell me that you'd say that to a dinner party? I'll give ye one more chance. Mr. Clement, will you take some of the cramb'ry?"

"Yes, marm, thank ye kindly, if you happen ter have any handy."

"Very good, indeed! Mr. Peter, do you speak for white or dark meat?"

"I ain't partier as ter color—anything that nobody else wants will suit me," answered Peter with his best air.

"First-rate! nobody could speak more genteel than that. Miss Kitty, will you have hard or soft sars? with your pudden?"

"A little of both, if you please, an' I'm much obliged," said Kitty, with decided ease and grace, at which all the other Ruggleses pointed the finger of shame at her and Peter *grunted* expressively, that their meaning might not be mistaken.

"You just stop your gruntin', Peter Ruggles; that was all right. I wish I could git it inter your heads that it ain't so much what yer say as the way yer say it. Eily, you an' Larry's too little to train, so you just look at the rest, an' do 's they do; an' the Lord have mercy on ye, an' help ye to act decent! Now, is there anything more ye'd like to practise?"

"If yer tell me one more thing I can't set up an' eat," said Peter, gloomily; "I'm so cram full o' manners now I'm ready ter bust 'thout no dinner at all."

"Me too," chimed in Cornelius.

"Well, I'm sorry for yer both," rejoined Mrs. Ruggles, sarcastically; "if the 'mount o' manners yer've got on hand now troubles ye, you're dreadful easy hurt! Now, Sarah Maud, after dinner, about once in so often, you must say, 'I guess we'd better be goin';' an' if they say, 'Oh, no; set a while longer,' yer can say; but if they don't say nothin' you've got ter get up an' go. Can you remember?"

"*About once in so often!*" Could any words in the language be fraught with more terrible and wearing uncertainty?

"Well," answered Sarah Maud, mournfully, "seems as if this whole dinner party set right square on top o' me! Maybe I could manage my own manners, but ter manage nine mannerses is worse 'n staying to home!"

"Oh, don't fret," said her mother, good-naturedly; "I guess you'll git along. I wouldn't mind if folks would only say, 'Oh, children will be children;' but they

won't. They'll say, 'Land o' Goodness, who fetched them children up?' Now, it's quarter past five; you can go, an', whatever yer do, don't forget your mother was a McGrill!"

VI.—"WHEN THE PIE WAS OPENED, THE BIRDS BEGAN TO SING!"

The children went out the back door quietly, and were presently lost to sight, Sarah Maud slipping and stumbling along absent-mindedly as she recited, under her breath, "It was—such-a-pleasant—evenin'—an-sech-a-short-walk-we-thought-we'd-leave-our-hats-to-home."

Peter rang the door bell, and presently a servant admitted them, and, whispering something in Sarah's ear, drew her downstairs into the kitchen. The other Ruggleses stood in horror-stricken groups as the door closed behind their commanding officer; but there was no time for reflection, for a voice from above was heard, saying, "Come right up stairs, please!"

"Theirs not to make reply,
Theirs not to reason why,
Theirs but to do or die."

Accordingly, they walked upstairs, and and Elfrida, the nurse, ushered them into a room more splendid than anything they had ever seen. But, oh, woe! where was Sarah Maud? and was it Fate that Mrs. Bird should say, at once, "Did you lay your hats in the hall?" Peter felt himself elected by circumstance the head of the family, and, casting one imploring look at tongue-tied Susan, standing next him, said huskily, "It was so very pleasant—that—that—" "That we hadn't good hats enough to go round," put in little Susan, bravely, to help him out, and then froze with horror that the ill-fated words had slipped off her tongue.

However, Mrs. Bird said, pleasantly, "Of course you wouldn't wear hats such a short distance—I forgot when I asked. Now, will you come right in to Miss Carol's room; she is so anxious to see you?"

Just then Sarah Maud came up the back stairs, so radiant with joy from her secret interview with the cook that Peter could have pinched her with a clear conscience, and Carol gave them a joyful welcome. "But where is Baby Larry?" she cried, looking over the group with searching eye. "Didn't he come?"

"Larry! Larry! Good gracious, where was Larry? They were all sure that he had come in with them, for Susan remembered scolding him for tripping over the door mat. Uncle Jack went into con-

vulsions of laughter. "Are you sure there were nine of you?" he asked, merrily.

"I think so, sir," said Peoria, timidly; "but, anyhow, there was Larry;" and she showed signs of weeping.

"Oh, well, cheer up!" cried Uncle Jack. "I guess he's not lost—only mislaid. I'll go and find him before you can say Jack Robinson!"

"I'll go, too, if you please, sir," said Sarah Maud, "for it was my place to mind him, an' if he's lost I can't relish my vittles!"

The other Ruggleses stood rooted to the floor. Was this a dinner party, forsooth; and if so, why were such things ever spoken of as festive occasions?

Sarah Maud went out through the hall, calling, "Larry! Larry!" and without any interval of suspense a thin voice piped up from below, "Here I be!" The truth was that Larry, being deserted by his natural guardian, dropped behind the rest, and wriggled into the hat-tree to wait for her, having no notion of walking unprotected into the jaws of a dinner party. Finding that she did not come, he tried to crawl from his refuge and call somebody, when—dark and dreadful ending to a tragic day—he found that he was too much intertwined with umbrellas and canes to move a single step. He was afraid to yell! When I have said this of Larry Ruggles, I have pictured a state of helpless terror that ought to wring tears from every eye; and the sound of Sarah Maud's beloved voice, some seconds later, was like a strain of angel music in his ears. Uncle Jack dried his tears, carried him upstairs, and soon had him in breathless fits of laughter, while Carol so made the other Ruggleses forget themselves that they were soon talking like accomplished diners-out.

Carol's bed had been moved into the farthest corner of the room, and she was lying on the outside, dressed in a wonderful soft white wrapper. Her golden hair fell in soft fluffy curls over her white forehead and neck, her cheeks flushed delicately, her eyes beamed with joy, and the children told their mother, afterwards, that she looked as beautiful as the pictures of the Blessed Virgin. There was great bustle behind a huge screen in another part of the room, and at half-past five this was taken away, and the Christmas dinner table stood revealed. What a wonderful sight it was to the poor little Ruggles children, who ate their sometimes scanty meals on the kitchen table! It blazed with tall colored candles, it gleamed with