

## Family Circle.

## A TERRIBLE CHRISTMAS-EVE.

BY THE AUTHOR OF "NO DEFENCE," "HALF A TRUTH," ETC.

We were as cross as we well could be—that is three of us were; and I think we had some reason. To be detained for two hours at a stupid junction, on Christmas eve of all days in the year, is provoking enough without the added circumstances of the said junction being an out-of-the-way place in—shire (which is almost as far north as it can be not to be over the border), and a keen north-east wind blowing through the chinks of the blindless waiting-room window, and driving the snow against the panes in clouds. Certainly, there was a jolly fire in the grate, and the porter (I believe there was only one) tossed on a liberal supply of coals and a splendid log to boot; and as we all had fur cloaks, we had not much reason to complain of the cold; still, it was frightfully annoying to be moped up here, on Christmas eve, too! with nothing to do but wait, wait for the southern train, which might come goodness knows when, if the snow kept on at this rate. So we three sisters grumbled vigorously, while we warmed our hands over the blaze, and wondered anybody could put up with existence in such an odious county as—shire.

We had been staying for some time past with friends over the border; but the people at home wanted us to return for Christmas, as grandmamma was to spend it with us, and she was anxious to see us all around her, for the last time, it might be; and here we were stuck for at least two hours, probably more, and a hundred miles to travel before we reached our home in—shire.

I have intimated that there was a fourth person present who did not grumble, and her quiet resignation to the inevitable ought to have shamed us into silence; especially as she had already travelled a greater distance than we had, and was going to London. She was a slight, delicate-looking woman, somewhere between thirty and forty, I should judge, with a face that one would call charming, and never think whether it was pretty or not. I had studied her covertly a good deal when we got into her carriage at Prestwick, and it struck me that she could be very fascinating if she chose; she had a remarkably firm mouth and chin, too; and when she spoke and smiled her face lighted up wonderfully; for in repose there was something in its expression that made me feel sure she had suffered very much.

We had entered into conversation on the journey, and then she told us she had been nursing a friend in Dundee, and was going home now to London. I remarked upon the severity of the weather in these parts, and she answered, "Yes, it was very severe—she did not like the snow." She said this with a curious shudder, which made me think that perhaps she had lost some one in the snow, and so I spoke of another subject.

She sat now in the chimney-corner, with her back to the window—I don't know if she did this on purpose—and her face in the shadow, and she was so uncomplaining and quiet, that at last I grew ashamed of growling, and exclaimed:

"I say, it's too bad; I'm sure this lady thinks us the most ill-tempered young women in the world. Don't you?"

"Not at all," she said, with her sweet smile and soft voice. "You are young, and I don't suppose have suffered much. One needs to know real suffering to be philosophical over trifles."

"But such a nasty hole as this!" said my youngest sister. "I'm sure this is the horriest county in England."

"I have no cause to love it," said our travelling companion.

"Why," said I, in surprise, "have you ever lived north?"

"For nearly nine months—not very far from here—there was no railway then."

Again that shudder, and half backward glance over her shoulder.

"A ghost?" whispered Bessie, the youngest, to me; but the lady overheard, and smiled.

"A good deal worse than a ghost," she said. "It was the snow I was looking at."

Bessie coloured.

"I beg your pardon," she said, "I didn't mean you to hear."

"It is of no consequence, my dear; but a very terrible experience happened to me on Christmas eve in this county, and it was just such weather as this, so it naturally comes back to me very vividly to-night."

Three pairs of eager, wistful eyes were turned to the sweet, grave face in the chimney-corner; involuntarily we drew our chairs nearer the fire, and glanced out at the gathering darkness and driving snow.

"You want to hear about it?" said the lady, answering our looks.

We did not like to ask for the story.

"Not if you would rather tell us," said I.

"No," she said, "I can talk of it now; for some years I could not. It may be the time of waiting; and if you don't find my story very interesting, it is, at any rate, true. Every act—every look—every word is stamped upon my memory as the type is printed off on the paper."

After a moment's pause, she commenced:

"After a moment's pause, she commenced: I may as well begin by telling you my name—it is Carlton. My husband is Dr. Carlton. It is possible your parents might remember the name, for the affair was in the papers of the day; but of course

you would know nothing about it. My husband has a good practice in London now; but seven or ten years ago he was a struggling man, as most young doctors are. We were Surrey people, and I had never been north in our life, so I confess I was not best pleased when my husband came home one night, after we had been married about three months, and told me he was in treaty to buy a practice at East Malden, in this county. We were told it was a very wild and semi-barbarous place, and that a south-countryman would find himself much opposed by a dead wall of prejudice; but warnings were all in vain; my husband was determined to try his luck, and the practice was bought, and off we went to our northern home.

East Malden is about seven miles from here, and at that time the nearest point by rail was to Snayton, twelve miles distant. West Malden, a small market-town, is about three miles from the village, but might have been a dozen for all the intercourse there was between the two places in those days. I daresay there isn't much now. My husband's practice extended over a wide district, embracing several scattered hamlets; but East Malden, a tolerably large village, was its centre. Our new home was in the very wildest part of the—shire fells, and as the house stood quite by itself, three quarters of a mile from East Malden, and three times as far from any other habitation, you may imagine how lonely it was.

We had taken with us a little servant-girl of about fourteen, who was devoted to us, but I often feared our solitary home might prove too much for her devotion. Brave, faithful Nellie! She is with us still.

Our lines had not fallen upon pleasant places. To begin with, the people were rough, deplorably ignorant, determinedly set against the new doctor—greatly on account of his coming from the south, but principally because he was, as they considered, new-fangled, and, as some said, used evil arts.

His predecessors had not been very much more enlightened than the people themselves; hence a surgeon who ran counter to almost every accepted tradition of the healing art, as understood in East Malden, was certain to meet with pronounced opposition.

The people could not go to another doctor, for there was none nearer than West Malden, and he, besides, had enough to do to attend to his own practice; but they regarded my husband with suspicion and hatred, and often flouted his directions, and then, when mischief ensued, blamed him.

Such miserable ignorance may surprise you, but it is to be found in other parts of England than this remote county—even in this day.

Things grew worse instead of mending as time passed on, though my husband strove bravely to conquer the prejudice against him; but nothing is so invincible as ignorance. If a sick man recovered under my husband's treatment, it was witchcraft; if the man died, it was the doctor's new-fangled ways that killed him. I ceased to go into the village, I feared to go, and heard many uncomplimentary remarks at first which I did not understand; but I was always quick at dialects, and I soon learned to understand what was said by the people when they came for my husband, to see him or fetch him. I almost always, however, pretended not to make out what they wanted Dr. Carlton, for they would frequently add some abuse of him, and I deemed it more politic not to appear as if I comprehended what was said, for then I must have taken notice of it, and that would make matters worse. How I blessed Heaven afterwards for this prudence!

I grew more and more nervous as the winter drew near;—the winter which begins so early in these parts; and when my husband was away, especially if he was detained late, I used to feel terribly anxious, fearing he had been attacked, or some trap had been laid for him. If I expressed any such fears to him, he laughed, and rallied me on my "fancies," as he called them, not unkindly; he loved me too truly to do that; but he wanted to reassure me, and he really was perfectly fearless. The people, he said, were a rough, and, on the whole, rather a bad lot; but not quite as bad as I imagined. I tried to keep my thoughts to myself, not to worry him; for of course he had enough to bear, but all the same, I lived in daily, hourly dread.

The winter of that year—(Mrs. Carlton went on, glancing back again towards the driving snow)—set in like this winter—bitterly cold, with heavy snow-falls even early in October—and I was day after day a prisoner in the house, with only my faithful Nellie as a companion. My husband was often absent, for hours at a time; but though, when we met, he tried to be cheerful, and to make the best of things, I could read between the lines, and I knew the prejudice against him was as strong as ever.

Near the end of November, my husband was called to attend the child of a labourer named Smith; the child was suffering from typhus, a very bad case; but if my husband's directions had been observed, it would have lived, he said. The parents, however, insisted they knew best, and chose to supplement or omit orders at their own discretion. The end of it was that poor little Polly Smith died in three weeks from the first seizure. My husband was so angry with the parents that he told them openly (not very prudently) that he had killed the child with his "new-fangled" ways; and the neighbors made common cause with them. The funeral of the girl was made the occasion of a demonstration against Dr. Lunnion doctor, and the animosity became quite menacing. The clergyman warned my husband against going into the village, and I implored him to keep away. He promised me he would, saying that, in time, the matter would blow over. But I knew better; these—shire people don't easily forget, and never forgive.

Under such circumstances, the prospects of Christmas were gloomy enough. To add to our trials, the

weather was, to our southern temperaments, mine especially, Siberian. And the eternal snow seemed to daze the senses.

So Christmas eve came just a week after Polly Smith's funeral. The snow on the fells was as hard as iron. None had fallen for four or five days, but there was a saffron tint in the leaden sky that promised more to-day.

Another snowstorm! "I said, with a sigh, as we sat at breakfast. "Oh, dear!"

How little I knew I should bless the snow for fall-

ing! About three in the afternoon a farming-man rode up from a farm some five miles off to fetch my husband; the master was "taken mighty bad." There could be no trap here. Farmer Nash was an honest fellow, and my husband knew the messenger well. There was nothing for it but to go; though my heart sank like lead as I bade my husband good-bye. I induced him to take a life-preserver with him (there were no firearms more than a fowling-piece in the house), and entreated him to keep a good look-out on the road home. He saddled his horse, and rode off with the messenger, and I was left alone to watch with deadly anxiety for his return.

He did not come back until past nine o'clock, and then on foot. The farmer had been dangerously ill, but was now on a fair way of recovery. The horse had gone lame, and my husband was obliged to leave the beast in charge of a smith about half-a-mile from the farm until to-morrow—Christmas day. But I was too glad to have my husband home again safe to trouble much about the horse. Again, now little I could foresee!

While we sat at supper it began to snow, but not heavily; but I did not mind that so much now. My husband was very tired with the anxiety of the case he had attended, the cold, and the walk over the moors; he said too, laughing, that the farm-people had given him some elderberry wine to warm him, and it had made him sleepy. So he went up to bed directly after supper, but I remained up to finish some work I was doing.

I should explain that our bedroom was in the rear of the house, not immediately above the sitting-room; and that, besides the front-door, there was a surgery-door at the side.

I had not heard any sound, when suddenly—this was a little past ten—Nellie came into the parlour with a somewhat scared face, the sight of which made my heart leap into my throat.

"What's the matter, Nellie?" I exclaimed.

"Please, m'm," said she, "there's two men in the surgery—Tom Smith and another—asking for the master, as I take it. They said, 'Doctor, don't be frightened; but look here, my dear—your master's out! Do you understand?'"

The girl looked at me, and went as white as a sheet; but she was a sharp London girl, and she understood.

"Now," I added, "go to the kitchen; I may want you by-and-by. You have nothing to fear. I'll speak to the men myself. Hush!"

Nellie went out without another word, but she gave me a look I shall never forget. It was so brave and loyal. I felt the girl comprehended at least something of the truth, and was ready to stand by me, happen what might.

I cannot tell what made me so calm, knowing what I knew the instant Nellie told me the men were in the surgery; but I was as calm and self-possessed as if they had really come on what was, I suppose, their ostensible errand—to fetch the doctor. I had the whole position against me clearly. The men should believe my husband was still out. The falling snow—ah! how I blessed Heaven for the snow now!—had long ago obliterated his footsteps. The horse was not in the stable. I could, perhaps, persuade them to go away—even induce them to watch for him on the road from Farmer Nash's. They would not, I reflected, kill me, unless it was absolutely necessary; but I had no thought or fear for myself at all.

I lighted a candle—my hand was as steady as my husband's own—and went out to the surgery.

There stood Tom Smith, a huge, bulky,—shire man, who would make two of my husband—a man with a coarse, heavy face, and a black mat of hair. With him was a smaller man, whom I recognized as an idle loafer, who sometimes did a turn of work, but oftener lounged about the village ale-house. This I knew was his character, and he looked it.

They were pleasant-looking men for a woman to find herself alone with in a solitary house among the fells!

"Did you come," I asked at once, courteously—neither of the men moved his cap, or saluted me in any way—"for Dr. Carlton?"

"Yes," returned Tom Smith. "This chap's sister's took mighty ill, and he's afraid to come alone for doctor, so I came along with him. Doctor must come at once."

Of course this was all false, but I must pretend to believe it. Also, I resolved to affect a very imperfect comprehension of what was said—it was in the broadest—shire; this might induce the men to speak to each other more freely in my hearing.

"I am so sorry!" I said, looking concerned (they could understand me fast enough). "I can't make out all you say, only that some one is ill. I will send the doctor the instant he comes home. He is out now."

The men glanced at each other, and Smith shook his head.

"That won't do," he said; "we want t'doctor now!"