

A CHRISTMAS HYMN.

BY T. BUCHANAN READ.

The air was still o'er Bethlehem's plain,
As if the great Night held its breath.
When Life Eternal came to reign
Over a World of Death.

The pagan at his midnight board
Let fall his brimming cup of gold:
He felt the presence of his Lord
Before His birth was told.

The temples trembled to their base,
The idols shuddered as in pain;
A priesthood in its power of place
Kneelt to its gods in vain.

All Nature felt a thrill divine
When burst that meteor on the night,
Which, pointing to the Saviour's shrine,
Proclaimed the new-born Light—

Light to the shepherds! and the star
Gilded their silent midnight fold—
Light to the Wise Men from afar,
Bearing their gifts of gold—

Light to a realm of Sin and Grief—
Light to a world in all its needs—
The Light of life—a new belief
Rising o'er fallen creeds—

Light on a tangled path of thorns,
Though leading to a martyr's throne—
A Light to guide till Christ returns
In glory to His own.

There still it shines, while far abroad
The Christmas choir sings now, as then,
"Glory, glory unto God!
Peace and goodwill to men!"

Rome, Christmas, 1871.

Lippincott's for January.

OVER THE SNOW.

A CHRISTMAS STORY.

Before a cheerful fire, in the best kitchen of a snug west-country cottage, sat two persons, a man and a woman, both advanced in years. All around wore an air of homely comfort. Of mere ornament there was little; but the furniture, though plain as could be, and bearing the marks of long service, was good and solid; and its trim arrangement and spotless cleanliness spoke highly for the good housekeeping of its owners. A square of Dutch carpet, bound with crimson braid, was spread upon the stone floor; and a glazed oak bookcase displayed upon its shelves a goodly store of delf and ancient china. On the chimney-piece a cuckoo-clock ticked merrily, and in one corner of the room stood an old-fashioned square piano, on which were piled a considerable number of well-bound books. Two or three old line engravings, mostly of scriptural subjects, decorated the walls, and the lattice window was half hidden by a crimson curtain. The whole aspect of the cottage betokened competence and modest independence. Nor were the inmates belied by appearances, for few among the inhabitants of the village were more universally respected than David and Mary Holt. In the same cottage they had lived for thirty years, paying their way, and asking no favour of any man; and for five-and-twenty of those years David had been parish clerk and schoolmaster, and in the estimation of the younger parishioners, little, if at all, inferior in dignity to the parson himself. His wife, with no less respect, won more affection; for David Holt was a stern and hard man, always just, but seldom generous; while Mary was ever tender-hearted, with a kind word and smile for everybody. To her the school-children came in all their troubles, whether arising from blow of cricket-ball or the perplexities of the rule of three, and rarely failed to receive some measure of consolation.

Such were the couple who sat, one Christmas Eve not very long ago, by the cosy cottage fire-side. A long clay pipe, a real old-fashioned churchwarden, just put aside, lay upon the snow-white deal table, and David Holt was reading aloud from a ponderous Family Bible, while his good wife, her hands crossed upon her knees, sat reverently listening. As befitted their solemn occupation, the faces of both were grave and quiet, but that quiet gravity seemed only to throw into stronger relief the characteristic expression of each;—David, square-headed and and square-chested, with massive jaw and chin, heavy over-hanging eyebrows, and deep-set keen grey eyes, hard, proud, and unforgiving, the embodiment of stern self-will and rugged pride; the old woman, gentle and quiet, with downcast eyes, soft grey hair, and pleasant smiling lips, that told of nothing but love and charity. And, yet, though the two faces were so unlike, a keen observer might have detected an element of likeness. There are some events (happy those who have known none such) which, coming into a human life, leave behind them a shadow for ever. It needed no second glance at these two persons to know that some such event (some great sin, or shame, or sorrow) had passed over their lives. But as natures differ, so the scars left by the fiery trial differ too. In David Holt's face the shadow bore the impress of humbled pride; in Mary's, that of wounded affection. The smile on the old woman's lips, the kindly smile that had rested there from youth, and that old age could not wear away, though still sweet, was sad as well; and the kind voice, that had so often spoken courage and cheer to others, had now a tone of weariness and ever-present pain. The rugged nature of David, on the other hand, seemed to have hardened under the rod. The hard features had become harder, the cold grey eye colder and sterner than ever. Even now, while reading the sweet Christmas idyll, the sweet story whose burden is the song of the angels, "Peace on earth, good will to men," his harsh voice lost none of its accustomed harshness, but uttered the sacred words defiantly, in tones suited rather

to some tale of battle and violence, than to the glad tidings of everlasting peace.

Slowly and steadily, never raising his eyes from the sacred page, David Holt read on; but even above his loud harsh tones could be heard the unmistakable sounds of a storm raging without. The wind howled and roared over the wild west-country moor, straining against the cottage eaves, wrestling with door and casement, and piling heaps of snow high against the lattice-windows. It was a night in which no one, with a home to go to, would willingly have been out of doors; any shelter, even the poorest and roughest, would have been preferable to exposure to that pitiless storm. And yet, out in the cottage garden, under the full fury of the bitter wind and driving snow, a woman stood, bare-headed and motionless, gazing through the lattice with wild, longing, hungry eyes at the homely scene within. After a little while she crept into the porch, but not to ask for shelter. One knock at the door, as though dealt with a feeble or timid hand was heard; and then, waiting not the result she came forth again and fled swiftly, her long hair streaming in the wild wind, towards the open moor.

After a moment or two the door opened, the light from within casting a broad bright beam into the outer darkness; and Mary Holt, shading her eyes with her hand, peered forth into the storm. She caught sight of the flying figure and calling to her husband, the two gazed after it till it disappeared altogether in the darkness. David was the first to re-enter the cottage, saying, as he did so, "Come in, Missus, come in, will 'ee?" It's some foolish prank o' one o' the village wenches. She thought to fright us, I reckon." His wife turned to follow him, but as she did so, stumbled against a bundle lying at her feet. "She's left some at behind her, then," said the old woman, stooping to examine it, when a faint wailing cry was heard, and she started back an instant, then hastily snatching up the bundle, rushed into the cottage. "Oh Davy, did 'ee ever? it's a child!" As she spoke, she laid her burden on the table, and letting fall the thick woolen cloak in which it was wrapped, disclosed a baby of three or four months old, whose wide open eyes seemed to testify the utmost astonishment as to how he got there. With motherly instinct, the good soul took the child in her arms, pressing it to her bosom with murmurs of endearment. But David's brow was black as night. "A pretty thing, the shameless jade, to saddle honest folk wi' her love-brat; but I'll find her out, I warrant—ay, that I will, if it costs me twenty pound!"

"Nay, Davy, don't 'ee be too hard on the poor soul. There's never a sin without sorrow; and she must have had a weary sight o' pain and misery before she'd be willing to part with her child."

"And serve her right, a baggage!" replied her husband. "If there's law or justice in the parish, I'll have her in the stocks before another week's out."

"Davy, Davy!" pleaded the good wife. "Sure you've forgotten that it's Christmas Eve, and the good words you were reading but now. Oh! maister, don't be angry over much to-night."

David was about to make a stern rejoinder, when his wife caught sight of a small locket of gold and blue enamel, which was hung about the child's neck by a ribbon. With a cry as if she had received a blow, she gasped, "Oh, David, look at this! It's hers, it's Ally's own child's!"

A flash of indescribable emotion passed over David Holt's face, and lip and eyelid quivered. But it was only for a moment, and the stern face hardened again, a shade paler, perhaps, but dark and stern as ever. When he spoke it was slowly and distinctly.

"I don't know of whom you speak; I had a child o' that name once, but she brought shame upon us. Take her who will, she's none of mine."

"She is our own flesh and blood, David," pleaded the old woman, in an agony of tears. "The Lord made her that, and bitter words won't alter it. Oh! to think that she should have been here, close by our door, and out in the storm! Davy, won't you—won't you fetch her back?"

David sat silent, silently gazing into the fire. "Davy, you call yourself a Christian man, you wouldn't turn a dog to door on such a night as this, and yet you'll suffer your own child to be wandering on the moor, without a place to lay her head."

"She can ask for shelter."

"Shelter! Likely that she who dared not face her own father and mother, 'nd seek shelter o' strangers!"

As she spoke she opened the cottage door, which the moment the latch was raised, was flung back heavily by the wind, and a torrent of snow poured in. Like the timid bird, valiant in defence of her fledglings, the mother's gentle nature rose to arms, and battled on behalf of her child.

"Oh David, shame on you! Have you the heart of a man, to sit there like a stone image, when your own flesh and blood may be perishing o' cold and wet? Lord help me, I'm but a feeble old woman, but my only child shan't die outside my door, an' me sitting by the fire within."

With eager haste the old woman fetched a pillow, and placing it upon the hearthrug, laid the child upon it. Then, her fingers trembling with excitement, she lighted the candle in an old horn lantern, and throwing a thick shawl over her head, snatched up the cloak in which the baby had been wrapped, and rushed to the door.

As she reached it, David rose slowly. "Well; missus, if you're bound to go, I reckon I'll have to go too. But mind ye this; I'll give the light o' love food and shelter this one night, but never more—never more, remember."

"I'm her mother, David; I remember that," said the old woman, her affection for her child overcoming even her wonted awe of her husband. "And I remember nought else to-night."

David made no reply. Closing the cottage-door, the old couple started on their quest. David was the first to speak.

"We're on a wild-goose chase, missus, I reckon. How are we to tell which way the wilful wench has gone?"

"The Lord guide us!" said the old woman, despairingly.

The two stood still on the wild moor, uncertain which way to turn; all around them, far as the eye could see, a broad wide sheet of snow. Their own cottage was the only dwelling near them, and the remaining houses of the village lay beyond it, quite in the opposite direction to that which the object of their pursuit had taken. They gazed around them in all directions, but the driving snow obscured their vision. Not a trace was to be seen of the object of their search, and there seemed to be no alternative but to give up the quest. But the quick woman's wit, outstripping the man's slower sense, leapt to a solution of the difficulty. With the eagerness of renewed hope, the old woman exclaimed—

"We'll find her yet, Davy; wi' God's help we'll find her yet. Back to the cot, maister, will 'ee; and gi' me the light."

Hurriedly the pair retraced their steps. As they neared the porch, the old woman held the lantern close to the ground, carefully examining the snow. After a few minutes search, she exclaimed—

"Here 'tis, sure 'nough, the print of Ally's little feet; I'd know them in a hundred. Now, maister, we're in the right track, thanks be to the good Lord that send the snow."

Holding the lantern low, and guided by its uncertain light, they followed the track of the small footprints, already becoming blurred and undistinct under the still falling snow. Fearful of losing the trace before they could overtake the wanderer, they pressed on, weary and panting, but never halting, never wavering in their onward course. They had reached a considerable distance from the cottage, but still no sign, save the still advancing footmarks of her they sought.

Still pressing onward, David spoke, with a strange tremor in his voice. "Tell 'ee what, missus, there's some at wisht about this—where can the maid be going o' this side o' the moor? There's never a house for miles."

His wife made no reply. Still they pressed onward, onward. Each could hear the other's breath, as they panted through the driving wind which blew in their faces, and buffeted them back, as though opposed to their errand of mercy. Suddenly a cry came from the old woman's lips, a shriek so shrill, so agonized, that, for the moment it alone was heard, and the moaning wind seemed, by contrast, hushed into stillness. She clutched into her husband's arm.

"Oh, Davy, hurry on! You're the swiftest, hurry on for dear life. Oh, God in heaven! she's making for the Black Pool!"

With a hoarse cry, like that of a wounded animal, a cry hardly less fearful, in its subdued anguish, than his wife's agonized shriek, David seized the light, and bounded forward, the old woman following as best she might, her hand pressed to her side, and her grey locks fluttering in the night wind. The feeble glimmer of the lantern became dimmer and dimmer in the distance, and Mary Holt felt her strength fast leaving her, when a shout was heard from David, and the light came to a stop. With renewed energy she pressed forward, and in a few moments was kneeling with her husband on the snow, supporting the insensible form of her lost daughter in her arms. With passionate tenderness the mother chafed the cold hands and kissed the death-white face, striving by close embraces to bring back the spark of life. But all in vain. The unhappy girl lay, as David had found her, a black heap on the snow; so still, so motionless, it seemed as though God had saved the wanderer from the last great sin—that awful sin which, shuts out mercy too—by taking to Himself the life she would have cast away.

Still the father and mother, clinging to the shadow of hope, relaxed not their loving efforts. Wrapping the warm woolen cloak about their child's lifeless form, they half dragged, half carried her along till they reached the cottage. Then, while David hastened for the village doctor, the mother essayed such simple means as her homely experience suggested, to recall the spark of life, if perchance it might not yet have aded into other darkness. After a little while, her loving pains were rewarded by perceiving the beat of a feeble pulse, and the appearance of a faint flush of colour on the white cheek; and, a little later, her ears were gladdened by the sound of the well-known voice, though uttered in the ravings of delirium.

But her happiness was of short duration. Soon the good doctor came, and, with tears standing in his eyes, spoke words of doom. The frail form had suffered more than it could bear, and the little life left was but the fire of fever, which might or might not burn through the night. For a little while the light of reason might come back; but if it should so come, it would be but to flicker for a moment, and then be quenched for ever.

And meanwhile, all unconscious of its mother's life ebbing so fast away,—of the wind and snow without, and the rain of tears within,—of life or

death,—of sin or sorrow,—the little babe lay sleeping before the fire; a dimpled arm supporting a dimpled cheek, on which the flickering firelight cast a rosy glory. And the cuckoo-clock on the mantelpiece still ticked on "Life, death—life, death." Each click, each drop of time, as it fell into the ocean of eternity, bringing a stronger throb to the life that was just begun, and stealing one more pulse from the life that was passing away.

With quivering lips and streaming eyes, the father and mother sat by their daughter's pillow, listening in silent anguish to her delirious moanings. Her dying fancy seemed to hover hither and thither about her life; straying far back in the past and recalling incidents of her childish days—incidents long forgotten, but returning now with strange vividness under the influence of her broken sentences. And then a sadder page was turned, and the parents knew (too late!) how their darling had been drawn aside from duty; and the father learnt, with bitter self-reproach, now his own sternness had repelled the loving confidence that had often risen to his child's lips; and which might, under heaven, have hindered that bitter ending. At one moment she fancied herself with her betrayer, and pleading, as though she had just left her home, for his permission to write to her parents. And here the listeners noticed, with a strange feeling of surprise, that no thought of shame seemed to mingle with her pleadings; she begged as though for leave to communicate joyful tidings, rather than to confess her sin, and sue for pardon.

"Oh, Robert darling, if you would let me tell father and mother, they would be so glad and proud. They will be a little vexed at first, of course, at our having kept it from them, but they will soon forgive that. And if it must be kept secret at present, on account of your uncle, why, I don't think they would mind, at least, not very, very much. And if the people did say hard things of me in the village, I could bear that, for your sake darling, you know and perhaps it would only be for a little while. And when you get your uncle's consent (and I'm sure you will, because you make everybody do just as you like, darling) why then it needn't be a secret any longer, need it? And I should be so proud of my darling soldier Robert. You will let me write, won't you, dear? to please your little pet Ally. I don't mind about anybody else, but I can't feel quite happy till father and mother know that I am your wife."

The listeners started, and bent forward with longing eyes, to hear more. But the feeble, fluttering spirit, exhausted by even so short a flight, had sunk down again; and the sufferers eyelids drooped, and for a while she seemed to slumber. Presently, however, she started again, with a wild cry, and sat up in the bed, gazing with fixed, dilated pupils, and pressing her thin white hands upon her forehead—"Oh, Robert! don't say that. You don't know how my heart is beating, even now, when I know it's a joke. Just put your hand against it, dear, and feel. Why don't you look at me, darling; why do you turn away? Robert, it isn't, it can't be true. A false marriage! Oh, Robert, how could you do it, when I trusted you so?"

The loud passionate sobs of the dying girl, as she sat wringing her hands and rocking to and fro in her delirious grief, disturbed the sleeping child, which awoke with a cry. The sound seemed to touch another chord. She ceased her sobs, and listened, smoothing her hair back from her forehead as though trying to recollect something. Her mother, with womanly instinct, put the baby in her arms. A look of sweet content came over the faded face, and she sunk back upon her pillow, nestling the little one to her bosom, and caressing the baby head with her wasted fingers. Then the wandering mind roved into another track.

"Baby dear! baby dear! Baby will never, never go away from his poor mamma, will he? Poor mamma! left all alone with baby in the whole wide world. Hush, dear, mustn't cry; poor mamma Alice may cry, but baby dear must not cry. Baby must be a happy baby boy, and grow up strong and handsome, like papa. Oh, baby darling, pray God you may never break anybody's heart! Hush-a-bye, dear, go to sleep on mother's bosom. Mammy will sing to him—sing him to sleep."

At last, when the sun was high in the heavens, shedding its morning glory far and wide over the crisp white snow, the sleeper awoke. The fire of delirium had given place to the calm light of reason in her eyes, and she gazed around with an inquiring look. "Have I been ill, mother dear? she said faintly.

"Yes, darling; very ill."

"I don't remember falling ill," said the dying girl; "everything seems gone from me."

A tiny cry from baby lips supplied the missing link. The white forehead crimsoned, and the blue eyes filled with tears of grief and shame. "I remember now. Oh, mother; can you ever forgive me?"

A loving kiss was the mother's only answer. But it said enough.

"And father, does he know? Will he forgive me too?"

David Holt rose, and stood by his daughter's bedside, looking down upon her with ineffable love and tenderness. The old love for his only child, repressed so long, not swept away all barriers; pride, self-will, resentment, all were forgotten in the deep emotion of that bitter hour.

"My darling, may God forgive me as freely as I have forgiven you all that I have to forgive!"

"I have you and mother forgive me, I can feel almost happy again. Oh, how nice it is to be at