

The Story Page.

Frances Donovan's Christmas Vigil.

BY HOPE DARING.

Outside the rain was falling steadily, with no breath of wind. The shadows of evening were gathering over the sodden fields, and curiously mingling with the gray mist that was rising from the river, seemed to blot out all form and substance of material things.

Within the little weather-beaten house Frances Donovan was sitting alone. She had lighted no lamp, and the fire had burned down to a mass of coals. She sat upright, her head leaning against the back of the old-fashioned rocking chair, her hands firmly clasped in her lap, listening to the monotonous dripping of the rain and seeing the pictures that naturally rise before the eyes of a woman who sits alone on Christmas eve.

She saw herself as a merry, laughing school girl, gathering buttercups and daisies in the fields that stretched back of the old gray stone house that was her home. A few years and she was a blushing maiden listening to the tender words of a tall Saxon-faced lover. Then came her marriage night, and she remembered the thrill of rapture with which she had lifted her eyes to that same face and promised, before God's altar, to be Mark Donovan's true wife. Again the scene changed, and she held in her arms her first-born, her only child, little Harold.

How reverently she had knelt by his cradle and given him into God's keeping! Ah, those happy, happy days! The next picture was not so bright. It was leaving the old home for the far West. She had opposed it, but Mark's enthusiasm had carried all before it.

Ten years ago they had come here. She had been unhappy, and blaming Mark for all the privations she must endure, coldness had sprung up between them. Five years passed. Then came that awful night when Harold had breathed his life away. She had stood above her dead boy and accused his father of murdering him. "Had he been where a good doctor could have reached him he might have been saved." At those words the youth had died out of Mark's face, and it had never come again.

The years since were so dark, so empty, containing only the little grave upon which the rain was dripping. And Mark's pain, the pain that began to try to drown itself in strong drink, had been as naught to her.

This morning he had told her that he had done the thing they used to build so many hopes on, viz., sold one-half the huge farm to a wealthy Eastern speculator for five thousand dollars.

"You can have a new house, Frances, you can go East, or do anything you like," he said, with something like a smile in the blue eyes from which disappointment and sorrow had long ago blotted out the sunshine.

And she had never looked up from the bread she was mixing. "I don't want anything," that was all she had said.

He had turned, gone to the barn, saddled his horse, and rode away to the town six miles distant.

Suddenly she sprang to her feet, lighted a kerosene lamp, replenished the dying fire and stood looking irresolutely around her. The sitting room, kitchen and bed-room that constituted the entire house save the loft were comfortable and clean. But there were no attempts at ornamentation, no effort to make the little house a home. Christmas eve. It was not to the joyous Christmas eves of her girlhood that her mind turned, but to the natal night of Christ when "a multitude of the heavenly host" had announced his birth. Did it mean aught to her, that coming of the Prince of Peace? Since earliest childhood she had professed allegiance to him, and did she not look forward longingly to the time when, saved by the blood of Christ, she should enter into the fair beyond and once more clasp her child to her breast? Yes, but now, what did it mean now? Was he, the Saviour of men, her daily companion, was her life blessed by his presence, and did she, because of his presence, bring happiness to all about her? A moan broke from her lips. She crossed to the little sleeping room, and holding the lamp close to the mirror, looked long and intently at the reflection of her own face. She noted the lines crossing the low brow, the dark eyes in whose depth burned a fire of unrest, the hard lines about the lips, the haggard, worn expression; then she turned away, sick at heart.

"I look like a happy woman!" she cried. "God pity me;" and at the words, the barriers of coldness gave way. She fell upon her knees, and a torrent of sobbings shook her slender form.

Two hours had gone by when Frances Donovan rose. These hours when we come face to face with self and view our inner hearts by the revelation of God's spirit are epochs in our lives. Mrs. Donovan mechanically replenished the fire and glanced at the clock.

"Half-past ten," she exclaimed, in a tone of genuine alarm. "Why has Mark not come? Something must have happened."

It seemed as if an icy hand was laid upon her heart. If something had happened, if her husband came to her with unsteady step and clouded vision, would she be guiltless? Again the memory of the past swept over her, and Frances Donovan saw that the love of long ago was not dead, that it was real love and therefore eternal.

"I love Mark, and I will save him," she thought. "Dear Father, help thy child to atone for the past."

She glanced again around the dreary room. Then she said to herself, "When Mark comes, no matter how he comes, he shall find Christmas cheer waiting him."

A fire was soon burning in the kitchen stove. She remembered that Mark had killed a couple of fat chickens for to-morrow's dinner, and she prepared them for cooking. She made mince pies and doughnuts, she swept and dusted the little rooms, bringing forth a few bits of cherished china and some photographs, to give the place a festive air. As she worked, she thought of many things, thought how, in the past, she had done nothing for the Master or the needy ones about her. A half-mile away was the home of the widow Salls and her little ones. "To-morrow shall see a big basket of food carried to her," she thought. Then she sighed. How many mornings had come and gone without her once thinking of the neighbor who was one of those whom "ye have always with you." Then there was the little church a few miles away. For months she had not crossed its threshold. A few months before a boy had been in Mark's employ, a bright lad who was fast learning to walk in the downward way. Her hand had never been raised to stay his going. How much she might have done to help the poor Swedish women around her. Many of them were ignorant of life in the West, but she had been indifferent to their wants.

"God forgive me," she cried, her lips white with pain.

All night she worked and planned with feverish haste. Mark did not come. As the hours wore away, a terrible fear came to her. Had she awakened to late? When all was done, she sat down for a moment, waiting for the dawn. Sleep overpowered her, and she was only aroused by the opening of the outer door. She sprang up. The gray light of the glad Christmas morning was peering in at the windows. Afar in the east a faint glow of rosy light told that the storm had passed with the darkness.

At her side stood her husband, carefully holding in his arms something wrapped in a blanket.

"It was too bad to leave you all night, Frances," he said, gravely, "but I was called in to Jim Lane's on the way home. He died an hour ago. There were only men there, and I brought little Willie home with me, just to stay until some arrangements can be made to send him to the poor-house."

She did not notice the apologetic tone in his voice, but threw back the covering from the sleeping child. He was a beautiful boy, notwithstanding the dirt and rags. His dimpled face was hushed with the glow of perfect health, he had close-curling dark hair, and a lovely scarlet mouth.

"Let me take him."

Without a word, Mark Donovan laid Willie in her extended arms. She stooped and pressed her lips to the clustering curls.

"My Christmas gift," she whispered, "sent me by God as a token of his love and forgiveness. Mark, husband, will you forgive the past and begin life again? I will be a better wife to you than I have been."

She sat down; the child still in her arms, and motioned him to a chair. Then she told him the story of the night and her plans for the future.

"Is it too late, Mark?" she asked, piteously. "Have I forfeited your love?"

"This is a time of great joy," he whispered. "Frances I thought you had ceased to love me. I will turn my back on the past and together we will care for this child. Christ has indeed come to our home this Christmas morning."—New York Observer.

The Story of a Wish-Ring.

BY MARY FERGUSON.

In "the days of long ago" the writer heard a simple little German legend. It runs in this wise:

Once upon a time there was a young farmer who, in spite of his earnest efforts, had been unfortunate, and he felt quite despondent and discouraged. One day he had been ploughing until very weary, and had seated himself upon his plough for a few moments' rest, when he noticed an old woman passing by. As she crept slowly along she called out to the disheartened man:

"Why is it that you will continue to work there day after day, getting no reward in return? Leave your ploughing, walk straight ahead for two days and you will have arrived at the foot of a great fir tree which stands in the midst of a forest. It is so tall that it towers high above all the other trees round about it; and there is no

other tree of its own kind near it. If you can succeed in cutting it down your fortune will be made."

The old woman passed on, and ere long was quite out of sight; but her words remained behind in the mind of the tired and discouraged farmer. Presently he arose with the air of one who had made up his mind, left his plough, shouldered his axe and walked steadily forward for two days. Then, as the old woman had foretold, he found himself standing at the foot of a great fir tree, which was so tall that it towered high above all the other trees round about it, and near which stood no other tree of its own kind.

He at once began to ply his axe, and soon, beneath his sturdy blows, the chips flew far and wide. At last the mighty form began to tremble and to sway. As it tottered he heard the sound of something crashing through the branches, and in a moment there lay at his feet an immense nest. Two eggs rolled out of the nest, breaking as they touched the ground. An eagle flew out of one, and from the other rolled a golden ring. The eagle grew larger and larger, until it was as large as a man. Then it slowly flapped its wings and soared aloft, circling three times above the head of the wondering man.

As it circled slowly above the farmer's head it spoke: "You have saved me. You will find your reward in the golden ring. It is a wish-ring. Turn it twice upon your finger wishing as you turn, and whatever may be your desire it will come to pass. But it can bestow but one wish, therefore consider carefully and well before you wish, that you may have no reason to regret your choice."

Then the eagle flew swiftly toward the east and was soon lost to sight. But the memory of its words was impressed upon the farmer's mind as he stooped, picked up the ring and slipped it on his finger. Then he took up his axe, again shouldered it, and this time started on his homeward way.

As night approached on the first day of his returning walk, he found himself near a jeweler's and he thought he would ask the value of his ring. He entered the shop and showed it to the jeweler, who assured him that it was worth nothing; whereupon the farmer told the man how he obtained it and that it was a wish-ring.

This information inspired the jeweler with an immediate and intense desire to get possession of the ring for himself, and he made great professions of friendliness and hospitality, urging insistently that the farmer remain with him over night. The unsuspicious man readily consented, and when the hour for retiring arrived, went to bed with those feelings of trust and security which induce the deepest and calmest sleep. While he was thus peacefully resting, the crafty jeweler stole softly to his bedside and slipped from his finger the coveted ring, replacing it with one that looked the same but which had no magic power.

When morning came the jeweler was very desirous for the speedy departure of his guest. As soon as he had seen him safely off and out of the way, he closed his shop as if for the night, placed himself in the middle of the room, turned the ring twice upon his finger and wished without any hesitation—for well he knew what was his desire—for gold, gold, gold—a million pieces of gold.

No sooner had he made the wish than a golden shower began to fall. The shining pieces fell all about him, and they fell upon him, beating and bruising him sorely. He could not escape them. He cried for a cessation, for mercy, but still they kept coming, until at last the weight of the metal broke the floor beneath, and the jeweler, beneath his gold, was precipitated into the cellar and there crushed to death.

The farmer, meanwhile, was quietly and steadily walking toward his home. When he arrived at the house he told his wife all about his adventure, showed her the ring and told her of its being a wish-ring. She would have liked to try its power at once. There was a piece of land, she said, which lay between their two fields which it would be wise to obtain.

But the farmer said that it would not be worth while to use the one wish for that, for if they worked hard and were saving, they could soon earn and save enough to buy it for themselves. "It has but one wish," he added, "and we must consider well and carefully before we make that one, lest we should have reason to regret our choice."

So they made no wish, but worked hard and were very saving, and all they tried to do seemed to prosper; never had their crops been so plentiful, nor their sales so ready and so satisfactory. In another year they were able to buy the bit of land which lay between their fields and to pay for it themselves.

Then the wife said she thought they would do well to wish for a horse and a cow. But the husband replied that if they continued to be industrious and saving, after but a little while they would be able to buy these too, and would still have the wish to use, for they did not know what need they might have of it in the future. And in a short time they were indeed able to purchase the horse

and cow, and the wish saved the wish.

Years passed by, but very prosperous saving, and although times spoke of the thing for which they were convinced that

"We are," he said, "no need of anything to procure for ourselves in the years less strong. The consider well and we should have

The years passed rich in this world abundance, the power or position own position, and procure for not rank. Although his industrious with his men, content. After that on his porch, greetings with a

The years passed weight the farm and old and feel in its wretched time," he would the best thought

One night—of passed gently an earthly waking gathered about them noticed that would have been

"Nay," said ring greatly. The connected with great some tender, as buried with the

So the ring, which, indeed, the hand which strengthened and faithful work contented life.

Leo was in b he had asked h

Leo was a ve not so brave w right within h conscience—the

Mother knew the light turned Leo's hand and "Tell mother Leo lay very in a boy's way

"P'raps you as I'd believe i eyes—I did. mother? I cou down in the k

Mother said spoke gently. "What was an' all the fell an' 'S'p'ard caught at the boys yell fired on his fr an' 'drove' him that time at L

"Then it w alone. An' al 'tis, I saw it dark, in the dark 'was full beggin' like I

"Did you l home?" ask "I didn't r snowballed s fence, an' m brought her l now!"

The little h he went on d mother: "I co an' we've on mother's lif

"We will t Leo was ve suddenly ask "But the h how came the eyes I see? Mother kis she replied— "P'raps right!"—Litt