

and sisters, with their families, will be there. But it is of no use now for him to try to join them. The feast will be ended, and the circle will be broken, before he can reach Cincinnati. So he strolls out of the station and up the streets. No, he will not take a hack nor a horse car; happy people may consent to be carried; those whose minds are troubled would better go afoot. He will walk off his disappointment.

He trudges along the narrow streets, the drays and the express waggons, laden with all sorts of boxes and parcels, are clattering to and fro; porters, large and small, are running with bundles, big and little; the shops are crowded with eager customers. Mr. Haliburton Todd is too good a man to be dismal long in a scene like this. "What hosts of people," he says to himself, "are thinking and working with all their might to-day to make other people happy to-morrow! And how happy they all are themselves, to-day! We always say that Christmas is the happiest day in the year; but is it! Isn't it the day before Christmas?"

So thinking, he pauses at the window of a small paint-shop, when his attention is caught by the voices of two children, standing in the hall at the foot of the stairs leading to the stories above. On the sign besides the door-way he reads, "Jackman & Company, Manufacturers of Ladies' Underwear."

The children are a girl of twelve and a boy of ten, neatly but plainly dressed; a troubled look is on their bright faces.

"How much, Ruby?" asks the boy.

"Only seven dollars," answers the girl, choking back a sob. "There were four dozen of the night dresses, you know, and the price was two dollars a dozen; but the man said that some of them were not well made, so he kept back a dollar."

"The man lied," says Ben, "and I'll go up and tell him so."

"Oh, no," answers Ruby; "that wouldn't do any good. He wouldn't mind you, and he might not give us any more work. But the work was well done, if we did help; for you run the machine beautifully, and mamma says that my button-holes are every bit as good as hers. Just think of it! Only seven dollars for two weeks' hard work of all three of us!"

"We can't have the turkey," says Ben, sadly.

"Oh, no. I found a nice young one down at the corner store that we could get for a dollar and a half, but we must lay by two dollars for the rent, you know; and there'll be coal to buy next week. I'm sure mamma will think we can't afford it."

"Come on, then," says Ben, bestowing a farewell kick upon the iron sign of Jackman & Company.

Mr. Haliburton Todd has forgotten all about his own disappointment in listening to the more serious trouble of these children. As they walk up the street, he follows them closely, trying to imagine the story of their lives. They stop now and then for a moment to look into the windows of the toy-stores, and to admire the sweet wonders of the confectioners, but they do not tarry long. Presently, the eyes of Mr. Todd are caught by a large theatre bill, announcing the

Oratorio of the Messiah, at Music Hall, Tuesday evening, December 24th, by the Handel and Haydn Society. Mr. Lang is to play the great organ. Theodoro Thomas' orchestra is to assist, and the soloists are Miss Thursby and Miss Cary, and Mr. Whitney and Mr. Sims Reeves.

"Correct!" says Mr. Haliburton Todd, aloud. He knows now what he will do with the coming evening. It is long since his passion for music has been promised such a gratification.

While he pauses, he notes that Ruby and Ben are scanning with eager eyes the same bill board. "Rather remarkable children, he says to himself, "to care for an oratorio. If it were a minstrel show, I shouldn't wonder."

"Wouldn't I like to go?" says Ruby.

"Wouldn't I?" echoes Ben, with a low whistle.

"Don't you remember," says the girl, "the night papa and mamma took us to hear Nilsson? Miss Cary was there, you know, and she sang this:

"Birds of the night that softly call,
Winds in the night that strangely sigh."

It is a sweet and sympathetic voice that croons the first strain of Sullivan's lullaby.

"I remember it," says Ben. "Mamma used to sing it afterwards, pretty near as well as she did. And don't you remember that French chap that played the violin? Blue Tom, they called him, or some such name."

"Vieuxtemps," laughs Ruby, who knows a little French.

"Yes, that's it. But couldn't he make the old fiddle dance, though! And the boy tilts his basket against his shoulder, and ex-cutes upon it an imaginary roudale with an imaginary bow. "We used to have good times at home, didn't we—when papa played the violin and mamma the piano?" Ben goes on.

"Don't!" pleads Ruby, turning with a great sob, from the bright promise of the bill-board.

The two children walk on in silence for a few moments,—Mr. Haliburton Todd still close behind them. Ruby has resolutely dried her tears, but her thoughts are still with the great singers, and the voice of the wonderful Swede is ringing through her memory, for presently Mr. Todd hears her singing low:

"Angels ever bright and fair,
Take, oh, take me to your care."

"Well, my child," he says in a low tone, "I don't think that angels are apt to have gray hairs in their whiskers, nor to wear ulsters; but there's an old fellow about my size who would like to be an angel just now for your sake."

While he is talking thus to himself, the children turn into the hall of a tenement house. Mr. Haliburton Todd glances after them, and sees them enter a room on the first landing. He walks on a few steps slowly, hesitates, then quickly turns back. In a moment he is knocking at the door, which had been opened for the children. The knock is answered by the boy.

"I beg your pardon, my little man," says Mr. Todd. "I am a stranger to you; but I should like to see your mother if she is not engaged."

"Come in, sir," says a voice within.

It is the voice of a lady. Her face is pale and anxious, but her manner is quiet and self-possessed.

"It is a curious errand that brings me here, madam," says Mr. Haliburton Todd; "but I trust you will pardon my boldness and grant my request. These children of yours chanced to be standing with me in front of the same placard, announcing the oratorio to-night; and I heard enough of what they said to know that they have a rare appreciation of good music. I have come in to see if you will let me take them to the Music Hall this evening."

"Oh, mamma!" cried Ben.

Ruby's eyes plead, but the mother's face is grave. "Your offer is extremely kind, sir," she says at length, slowly; "and the thing you propose would give my children great pleasure; but—"

"You do not know me," Mr. Todd supplies. "That is true; and of course a wise mother would not commit her children to the care of an entire stranger. Here's my card,—Todd & Templeton, Mattawamkeag Maine,—but that proves nothing. However, I'm not going to give it up so. Let me see; I wonder if I know anybody you know in this big city. Who is your minister?"

"We attend, at present, St. Matthew's church, of which Mr. Brown is rector."

"What is his first name?" "John, I think."

"John Robinson Brown?"

"Yes; that is the name."

"Cor-rect!" ejaculated Mr. Todd, triumphantly, with a distinct hyphen between the two syllables of his favourite interjection; "that fixes it. What luck this is! I know your minister perfectly. He has been up in our woods fishing every summer for five years, and we are the best of friends. Can you tell me his residence?"

"I know," cries Ben. "He lives next door to the church, on Chaucer street."

"All right. Let the boy run up to his house after dinner, and see whether Mr. Brown indorses me. I'll drop in on him this morning. If he says so, you'll let the children go with me to-night?"

"I know no reason," answered the mother, "why they may not go. You are very kind."

"Kind to myself, that's all. But I shall be obliged to ask your name, madam."

"Johnson."

"Thank you, Mrs. Johnson. I will call for the children at half-past seven. Good morning?"

Mr. Haliburton Todd bows himself out with a beaming face, and leaves sunshine behind him. He pauses a moment on the landing. The door of the room adjoining the Johnsons' stands open, and he observes that the room is vacant. He steps in and finds a glazier setting a pane of glass. It is a pleasant room, with an open fireplace; the rear parlor-chamber of an old-fashioned house, and it has been newly papered and painted. It communicates with the sitting-room where the children and their mother live.

"Is this room rented?" he asks the glazier.

"Guess not."

"Where is the agent?"

"Number seven, Court street."

"Thank you!" Mr. Haliburton Todd glances around the room again, nods decisively, and hurries down the stairs. What becomes of him for the next hour we will not inquire. A man is entitled to have a little time to himself, and it is not polite, even in stories, to be prying into all the doings of our neighbors.

The next glimpse we get of him, he is sitting in the study of the rector of St. Matthew's, explaining to that gentleman what he wishes to do for these two little parishioners of his.

"Just like you," cries the minister. "But who are the children?"

"Their name is Johnson, and they live in a tenement house on Denison street, number forty-five."

"Ah, yes. Their father was the master of a bark in the African trade, and he was lost on the west coast a year and a half ago. Nothing was ever known of his fate, excepting that a portion of the vessel bearing its name, 'Ruby,' was washed ashore, somewhere in Angolia, I think. They had a home of their own, bought in flush times, and mortgaged for half its value, but in the shrinkage everything was swept away. They have lived in this tenement now for nearly a year, supporting themselves by sewing. I suspect they are poor enough, but they are thoroughly independent; it is hard to get a chance to do anything for them. You seem to have outflanked them."

"Oh, no; I'm not much of a strategist; I moved on their works and captured them. It's my selfishness; I want to hear Thursby and Cary with those children's ears to-night, that's all. And if you will kindly write a little note, assuring the mother that I will not eat her children, the boy will call for it. And now, good-morning. I shall see you next summer in the woods."

The minister presses his friend to tarry, but he pleads business, and hurries away.

Now he mysteriously disappears again. After a few hours we find him seated before the grate, in his cozy room at the Parker House; the telegram has gone to Cincinnati with the bad news that he is not coming; the oratorio tickets have been purchased; dinner has been eaten; there is time for rest, and he is writing a few letters to those nephews and nieces who know, by this time, to their great grief, that they will not see Uncle Hal to-morrow.

Meantime, the hours have passed cheerily at the little rooms of the Johnsons, on Denison street; for, though the kindness of their unknown friend could not heal the hurt caused by the hardness of their greedy employer, it has helped them to bear it. Ben has brought from the rector an enthusiastic note about Mr. Todd, and the children have waited in delighted anticipation of the evening. Presently, at half-past seven the step of their friend is on the stair, and his knock at the door.

"Come in, sir," says Ben. It is a very different voice from that of the boy who was talking at Jackman & Company's entrance a few hours ago. "This has been a day of great expectations here," says Ben's mother. "I do not know what could have been promised the children that would have pleased them more. Of music they had a passionate love from infancy, and they haven't heard much lately."