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Nellie's Christmas Eve.

BY EMMA GARRISON JONES.

Christmas was near at hand, and they were very busy at Walnut Hill. The house was filled with company, and there was a great deal of work to do.

Nellie had been on her little feet ever since sunrise. She was very tired, and ill, too, with something worse than mere bodily ailment, hopeless, heart-broken sorrow.

Little Nellie was an orphan. Years before, when she was so young she could only dimly remember the sad event, her father had died. They lived in the heart of a great city at the time. But being left very poor, and in feeble health, the widow was led, by the hope of obtaining respectable employment, and the expectation of finding an old friend, to remove to the neighborhood of Walnut Hill.

The friend she hoped to find was in his grave, and as the place afforded no employment, having no alternative, but to support herself and her child by constant labor, she settled down, and went to work, doing plain sewing for the shops in the village.

Years drifted by, and the widow toiled patiently and uncomplainingly, and little Nellie grew up a happy, promising child.

She and her mother were all in all to each other. During the day they were inseparable, and at night they slept in each other's arms.

One night, a night that Nellie never in all her after life forgot, the child was aroused by her mother's voice. "Nellie, Nellie, get up and light the candle, my darling."

The child obeyed, something in her mother's voice thrilling her little heart with vague terror. She brought the light near to the bedside, and seeing her mother's face, cried out in wild anguish.

"Oh! mamma, what is the matter?"

"Come closer, my little girl, and don't be frightened; let me clasp you in my arms, darling! There now, I'll tell you what it is. Nellie, my last hour has come; I am dying, my child."

Nellie's cry filled the silent night with piteous echoes.

"Mush, my love," panted the dying mother, struggling hard for power to speak. "You will not be left to perish. The fatherless will have you in his tender care, my little Nellie. The loving father, who cares even for the young sparrows, will care for you."

When I am gone, Nellie, some one will be raised up to befriend you. You have heard me speak of my dear friend, Mrs. Goldthwaite; if you could only find her, Nellie! But there's a letter I wrote it when I was ill before; you will find it under the cover of my Bible, Nellie! It is addressed to my dear friend Alice Goldthwaite. If by any chance you ever hear of her, send that letter, and she will be your second mother. You won't forget, Nellie?"

"No, mamma, I won't forget."

Then there was silence. The laboring breath became slower, the white face more ghastly. Nellie shrieked aloud in her terror and agony.

"Mamma, mamma, tell me what to do?"

"You can do nothing, my darling! Only kiss me, Nellie. Oh! father in Heaven, into Thy tender hands I commit my fatherless child!"

And that was the end. The white lips spoke no more. Nellie's mother was dead.

Nellie was now wholly friendless. But Mrs. Hathaway, of Walnut Hill, being in need of a girl to look after her baby, offered her a home. Nellie's choice but to accept the offer.

For a long, weary year, she had lived there, until that wintery afternoon, which opens our story. A little maid of all work, doing any and everything that came to hand, and receiving small thanks and encouragement, and smaller pay.

"Take Robbie into the library, Nellie, while Jane tidies up the nursery," commanded Mrs. Hathaway; "and be sure you don't let him get into mischief."

Nellie obeyed. Robbie was a restless little fellow, and for some minutes he kept her close at his heels; but, at last, she got him quieted over a picture book; and then she drew a small scrap of paper from the pocket of her dress, and began to

examine it closely. "Charles Goldthwaite, Esq., Attorney-at-law, Grafton." were all the legible words the bit of newspaper contained. For weeks Nellie had carried it in her pocket.

"I wonder where Grafton is, and if Charles Goldthwaite knows anything of Mamma's friend?" she thought, looking wistfully out into the falling twilight.

Crash! and a loud scream from Master Robbie. Nellie turned round. The little fellow had climbed in a chair, and pulled down his mother's pet Dresden vase, and shivered it into fragments.

"Oh! My buttons! See what Robbie's done! Won't you catch it Nell?" cried Rosabel, putting her head in at the door. "I'm going straight to tell mamma."

In two minutes Mrs. Hathaway appeared.

"You wicked, idle, disobedient girl," she cried, pale with anger; "didn't I charge you to keep Robbie out of mischief? Take that, and that, and that; and I wish you'd take yourself out of my house; you're not worth your salt." She struck the child savagely, as she spoke, blow after blow. Then, gathering up the fragments of the vase, she flounced out of the room.

Nellie had not uttered one word, but her dark eyes were filled with tears, her lips quivered, her little heart throbbled, almost to bursting. Poor, motherless child. There was no one to take her part. She lifted Robbie in her arms, and carried him to the nursery; then, taking her shawl and hood from the rack, she put them on, and stole silently from the house.

"I will not stay another hour," she said. "I must try and find poor Mamma's friend."

Always she went across the yard, a little, homeless bird, seeking shelter from the storm. On and on, past the village church, past her mother's grave, white with the winter snow; over the fields, and down to the station, where the lights were twinkling in the darkness. The train was on the point of moving out.

"Please, sir, will this train take me to Grafton?" she inquired.

"Grafton? Not quite! That's some miles ahead from the next station. All aboard!"

The train was moving. Nellie went in with the rest. When the fare was collected, she took her little purse from her pocket, and poured its contents into the conductor's hand.

"I hope there's enough to pay, sir," she said, simply.

He gave her back some change, and smiled kindly at her, as he disappeared. And through the wintry darkness, the train flew on. With her little face close to the glass, Nellie watched the flying trees as the slow hours went by.

At last, the train stopped at a little way-side station.

"Passengers for Grafton?" somebody shouted.

Some half-a-dozen persons got out and Nellie followed them; but they soon disappeared, and she found herself standing, utterly alone, under the dim light of the winter stars.

A sudden sense of desolation possessed her, and she began to cry, and to regret the rash step she had taken. While she stood thus, an old man came along, with a lantern in his hand. He stepped short, at sight of the lonely, little figure.

"Hello! what's this?"

"Please sir, I want to go to Grafton. Can you tell me the way?" asked Nellie, plaintively.

"Grafton? Why that's full five miles off, you can't get there to-night."

"Then I don't know what I shall do."

"Are you alone?"

"Yes, sir."

The old man whistled.

"Such a midget as you, alone; and at this hour of the night! Come along with me. I've a good fire down here in the station house."

Nellie followed him gladly, and soon found herself in a small room, heated by a stove. Her new friend gave her some bread and sausages for her supper, and then made her a snug bed in a warm corner; and she lay down, and slept until broad daylight.

"Did you ever hear of Mr. Goldthwaite, in Grafton?" she asked after she had shared the old station master's breakfast, and was about to bid him adieu.

He shook his head.

"Dunno as I ever did. Can't remember names, and I don't go to Grafton often."

"But you can show me which way to go, sir?"

"Yes, yes! you take that road to the left, there, and keep straight on. Grafton's a bit beyond Cedar Creek. But you'll have snow about your ears before you get there if you don't hurry."

Nellie wrapt her shawl close, bade her friend a grateful farewell, and set forth on her journey. The cold was bitter, the sky overcast and lowering, and a wailing wind filled the desolate wood, through which the road ran, with mournful music.

Nellie's little heart ached, and so did her weary limbs; but she went bravely on. Noon passed, and the short-lived winter afternoon went

like a dream.

"Please, sir," she asked of a teamster, "will you tell me how far Grafton is?"

"Oh! not very far. Just beyond Cedar Creek."

Nellie struggled on. The snow had begun to fall rapidly, and it would soon be dark. She was so tired, so cold, so hungry; and it was Christmas Eve. Trudging on, she recalled Christmas Eves, when she had her mother; and blinding tears fell from her eyes.

At last, just as the night came down, she reached a turbid stream, spanned by a rustic bridge. It must be Cedar Creek, and Grafton was not far.

She took her hat again; but the cruel winds tore off her hood, and sent it whirling away through the snow. Panting, breathless, her dark locks tossing in the storm, she paused at the foot of the bridge, her limbs failing her, and unable to proceed.

Far off, faintly borne on the winds she heard a sweet chiming of Christmas bells. All the world was so happy. Yet she was out in the storm, she had no friend, her strength was gone, she felt she must lie down and die. Her mother's image came back to her, at this moment, to comfort her. "The loving father, who cares for the young sparrows, will care for you."

The words gave her temporary strength. She struggled on again, in the teeth of the storm, and crossed the bridge. In the ravine beyond, her strength failed utterly, and she sank down by the way-side. She tried to get up, but fell back. Her eyes closed. The fatal torpor, which is the messenger of death, clouded her brain; she murmured, "Mother, dear mother," and lost consciousness.

It was about this hour, that in a luxurious mansion, near Grafton, opened, and a young lad came in.

"Here's Fred, at last! Oh, Fred! you're going to Grafton for the girls?" cried several voices, those of his sisters.

Fred came in, stamping the snow from his feet.

"To be sure. I told Dick to put black Bess to the big sleigh. Let me get my overcoat, and I'm off."

Mrs. Goldthwaite looked up from her needlework.

"It is late, and so stormy. Maybe you'd better not go, Fred."

"Bless your heart, mamma, I don't mind the storm; and the girls can wrap up well."

"Oh, mamma! let him go," cried Floxy. "We shall have no Christmas without Lizzie and Belle."

"What do you say, Papa?" asked the mother. "Is it quite safe?"

Her husband looked up from his pipe.

"Oh, yes, I think so. Black Bess is sure-footed, and Fred's the prince of good drivers."

Flushing with pleasure, at his father's praise, Fred hurried out, addressing his wife, "to the heirs of James Colburn. I made inquiries about it, and there's a snug little fortune awaiting them, if they can only be found."

"I wish they could," replied his wife, earnestly; "poor, dear Ellen, I wonder if she is living! It seems so strange, I should have lost all trace of her, so entirely; and we were like dear sisters once. I wish you'd give the matter some attention, Charles."

"I will! I'll hunt them up yet. Never fear, my dear."

Mr. Goldthwaite returned to his paper, and his wife to her work. But in a little while, there came a shrill tinkling of sleighbells, and Floxy rushed in exclaiming,

"Oh, mamma! here's Fred back again. Something's the matter."

The sleigh was at the gate. Fred leaped out, and taking something in his arms, hastened through the driving snow.

"Why it's a child," screamed the girls.

"I found her right beyond the bridge," exclaimed Fred, quite out of breath. "Black Bess snubbed, and the reins broke, and I jumped out, and there she lay in the snow. Mother, I hope she's not dead!"

Mr. Goldthwaite took the little, snowy form, from his sitting room, and carried it into the warm parlor.

"Lay her on the lounge, Charles; and Floxy, ring for Jane, and order hot blankets. Poor, little wif, I wonder who she can be."

The Christmas merriment was all hushed, and for an hour, Mrs. Goldthwaite and Jane worked earnestly. At last, Nellie opened her eyes. The room was warm, and bright, and luxurious. In one corner stood a glittering Christmas tree. She looked from one object to another, and a sudden smile lit her white face.

"This is Heaven," she said, softly, "and, oh! where is mamma?"

Mrs. Goldthwaite bent down and kissed her, her tears falling.

"No, dear, it is not Heaven. But you are with kind friends, who will take the best care of you."

"I am so glad. The child looked troubled. Then she tried to rise.

"I must go on. I want to get to Grafton, and try to find Mr. Goldthwaite."

"Why, my dear, there is Mr. Goldthwaite, and I am his wife. Were you coming to see us?"

Nellie's eyes widened, and her little face brightened again.

"I am so glad. Are you Mrs. Goldthwaite?" Mrs. Alice Goldthwaite waited.

"Will you be my second mother?" she asked, her eyes filling. "Mamma said you would; and I'm so tired, and I want a mother so bad."

"Indeed, I will," cried Mrs. Goldthwaite. "You're loving mother. You shall never be tired, or sad again, my little Nell. Children come here, and kiss your new little sister."

"The girls came willingly, but Fred, flushing to the roots of his curly hair, hurried out of the room.

"Well, I can't go to Grafton for the Truder girls, to-night," he said. "But, hurrah for Christmas Eve! Hurrah for Christmas Eve!" chimed in papa, and the happy house fairly rang.

Years and years after, and it was Christmas Eve again. The hallowed day never grows old; no matter how often it returns to us, it always brings Peace and Good Will.

The Goldthwaite home was in a blaze of light. Papa sat in his armchair, silver threads on his brow. Mamma was busy with the Christmas cheer.

Fred, a tall bewickered young fellow, his father's junior partner, made his way into the drawing-room, where Nellie sat at the piano.

"I say, Nellie, haven't you a Christmas gift for me?"

She looked up, with a smile and a blush.

"I've ever so many pretty things, Fred; but you're so hard to please. Am I? Shall I tell you what I'd like to have, Nellie, above everything else in the world?"

"Yes, Fred," she said, softly, her eyes downcast.

"Well, I will. It is just seven years, since that Christmas Eve, when I found you down yonder in the snow. Nell, I was a boy then, but I fell in love with you that night, and I love you yet. I want you Nell, for my Christmas gift."

Nellie answered not a word, but she held forth her slender, little hand, and the happy fellow caught it, and carried it to his lips.

And this was Nellie's happiest Christmas Eve.—Peterson's Magazine.

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