

THE DAY BEFORE CHRISTMAS.



WAS the day before Christmas and on the street...



His appearance suggested a familiar saint: Though his garb and his manner were not quite as quaint...

Alas! that Disaster should plume her dark wing: Alack! that so certain is Trouble's sharp sting...



Rising up in a hurry, he made a quick grab for his scattered parcels, then summoned a cab: To the seat he soon clambered, gave the driver a word...

NAN AND SIM.

Story of an Enforced Christmas Present.



"AN, come here er min!" said old Bob Horner, addressing his daughter. The girl, who stood spreading the covers on an old-fashioned bed, preferred not to hear her father's d e m a n d...

"Walk, then, I'll say suthin. Ef I kitch Buck round here I'll hurt him, an' mo'n that of yer run off an' marry him I'll foller yer up. Wall, never mine, yer shaint marry him, that's all. I've er tellin' yer fur er long time that I wanted yer ter marry er preacher. Tain't never yer er preacher in our family, an' it's no time that was one. I've sot my min' on this, an' yer meenther think I ain't goin' ter have it thater way. Why jis look at Preacher Martin's wife. She gits er new caliker coat ever when she wants it. Er new one, min' yer. Er new caliker coat all spotted ez putty ez yer please. I've dun said eruff. Ef Buck comes on this here place ergin it won't be good fur him."

was wrong. He was tall and gaunt, with long, yellow hair and a sickly sprinkling of beard, like a thin growth of wire grass, growing where the land is poor. His wife had been educated into meekness, and thought that she should find her greatest pleasure in hovering over the sizzling bacon and watching the hoe-cake. Nan, the girl, was a beautiful blonde, full of life, but afraid of her father. Sim Buck, to whom Nan was secretly engaged to be married, was the neighbors' said, "a rip snortin' sort uv er feller that mount er mount ter suthin of he would try, but the chances wuz ergin him."

Mrs. Horner took up the supper, and, sighing wearily, said: "Come, pap, an' eat er snack." The old man drew up his chair, waited, with an air of impatience, until the other members of the family were seated and then asked a blessing, beginning with an eloquent "gracious Lord" and ending with an unintelligible sigh.

"Ain't yer goin' ter eat nothin', Nan?" "Ain't er hangry." "Buck's tuck yer appetite, I reckon." "Sis!" "Hear'd what I said. Wall, never min', I'll take his appetite the next time he comes on the place." "Pap," said Mrs. Horner, "don't torment the child."



"I've dun said eruff." "Hello, old man!" "Looking up with a start of joy, the old man beheld Sim Buck leisurely approaching. "Fur the Lawd's sake, Simmie, run here!" "Ain't in no purtickier hurry," the young man replied, tearing off a chew of tobacco. "Great heavens, don't yer see how I'm fixed?"

"Ah, hah!" Sim replied, as he came up and carelessly sat down on one end of the log. "Confound yer fool soul!" shouted the old man, "ain't yer got no sense?" "I'm all right; ain't nothin' the matter with me. Come ter think er bout it, thar do peer ter be er fool in the neighborhood, an' I sorter pees like he's dun jammed his foot into the crack uv er log." "Never mind, I'll fix er fur this." "Peers like you've already fixed yusef?" "Sim, for God's sake split open this log an' let me git outen here."

"Don't like ter split wood, but ef yer've got any plowin' yer want done I don't mind doin' it fur yer." "You air a brute," the old man raved. "Yes, that's what they said down in the holler, but the branch kep on er runnin'." "That's me." "Simmie." "Please turn me er loose." "I ain't got er holt uv yer." "You air the blametest fool I ever seen." "That's me, an' ter-morrer will be Christmas, too. 'Lowed that I'd come over an' take dinner with yer, but I hear that yer didn't want nobody but preachers ter come round yer."



"Turn me loose, Sim, an' yer may come." "Tell yer what I'll do. Turn er er loose of yer'll gin me er Christmas present." "I'll do it; I'll gin yer er calf." "Come er gin." "Two hogs." "No, gin me Nan." "I won't do it!" the old man indignantly shouted. "All right, then; good-bye." "Hol' on, Sim." "Wall." "This thing is er bout ter pinch my foot off." "Ah, hah, but I must go." "Say, Sim." "Wall." "I'll gin yer the gal. I can't stan' this no longer." "Shall we take it down in writin'?" "Oh, mussy, no; my word's ez good ez my bond."

stay out thar. Wy, look at the gal, a kissin' the fool feller. Martha, what do all this mean! Wy, dog my cats, what yer wanter kiss me fur? Wall, wall-er haw, haw-I never did see like."

"Old man," said Sim, "it won't be many hours now till Christmas, an' I tell yer what I lowed the best er time er soon ez the first rooster crows arter ther clock strikes twelve I'm goin' out, git a justice uv the piece an' git married."

"Yer ain't er goin' ter do no sich uv er thing!" the old man exclaimed. "No, sir, yer ain't er goin' ter budge, fur I'm goin' arter the justice uv the piece myself. Oh, ole man Horner, when he takes a notion, is er good one."

When the clock struck twelve Sim said: "Now lesson fur the rooster! Ding him, will he never crow; thar he is! Git yer naz, ole man!"

Old Horner soon returned, and the couple were married. At the breakfast table, while the neighbors' guns were firing salutes to the Saviour's birth-day, old Horner said: "I still don't understand why yer all giggled so risty er min'!" "Wy, pap," laughed the girl, "it wuz cause we had dun slipped up on yer so!" "How'd yer slip up on me?" "Wy, I've fessed 'ligion thater day, has jined the church an' the confunce has dun made er preacher outen him, an' he had gone to tell yer the good news when he found yer catch by er log."

"Wall, wall," said the old man, "Sim er preacher, wall, er haw! haw! the joke is on him."

"Why so?" Sim asked. "Cause yer has ter pay double price fur the gal."



emotion which has caused his weak eyes to shed a tear of joy, father and mother proudly survey the treasures of their hearts and home as they approach the hallowed tree-not hastily, not impatiently, but demurely and decorously-chanting in a low, sweet whisper the message of joy: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good-will toward' men." Grandfather whispers a solemn "Amen," and then rises to read a prayer from the old and well-worn family prayer-book, while the others, with folded hands, surround the tree and listen with wrapt attention to the words of thankfulness and supplication uttered by the noble old man. Then the children receive gifts brought by "Christkindchen," tokens of love whose pitiful intrinsic value would cause a wringing to mind, but which are dearer to those remembered than the most gaudy and expensive baubles can be to those "highly-civilized" unfortunates who know not the value of love.

While this touching distribution is taking place in the cottage, a sweet chant is heard on the street, and in a few moments a dozen voices, lowly singing "Glory to God in the Highest," seek and gain admission. The spokesman of the twelve young men and women repeats the story of the "Christ-kind's" (Christ-child's) birth, and asks in simple verse for a gift for the poor and sick and needy for whose sake the Son of God was born in a lowly manger, suffered and was crucified; and while the sturdy youths, clothed in leather knee-breeches and short jackets with huge brass or silver buttons,

and the pretty young women, whose picturesque attire adds to natural charms, sing another appropriate song, the peasant's wife fills a basket with fruit and cake and a jiz with apple cider, thus practically responding to the melodious petition of her visitors, who leave the house chanting once more the joyful message, "On earth peace."

From house to house they wander, filling a heavy cart with the contributions of the cheerful and charitable, ever repeating their songs and their stories and their legends, until every one able to do so has given his or her mite. And when the work of collecting is finished, the distribution begins. The hovels of the poor and sick are visited, and at each door a basket is left, together with a word of cheer and the never-fading "Good-will toward men."

The sleepy old night watchman of the village toots the hour of eleven on his melancholy horn as the cheerful band of young people reach the last cottage whose owners are to be made happy through the generosity of their neighbors. Their glad chant is, however, not answered by words of welcome. Instead of the care-worn face of the overworked widow whose lad they desire to lighten, they see the benevolent face of the village pastor. Quietly they file into a dingy room, dimly lighted by a single tallow candle. A distracted mother, wrapt in gloom and sorrow, stands at the head of a miserable bed watching every motion on the face of a little sufferer whose frail body is buried under the weight of heavy feather bedding. Slowly the child opens her glassy eyes and raises her weak body. A thought of the present seems to fit across the fevered brain.

"Mamma," she whispers, "has the 'Christ-child' come?" "Yes, my darling," sobs the heart-broken mother, "and it has brought you such a gay little frock."

"Oh, mamma," lispingly-"give it to neighbor's Barbele, they're poorer than we." "Knelling at the bedside, the worthy pastor wipes away a tear, the almost paralyzed mother suppresses a heart-rending sob, the subdued roysterers weep tears of sympathy. Silence, broken only by the slow tick of the old cuckoo clock on the wall and the heavy breathing of the dying child, is at last interrupted by the patient sufferer.

"Mamma," she whispers, hoarsely, even in death preaching charity, "I'm going. Give me a kiss. I'm going. Let me see the dress. Yes, yes; give it to Barbele. Give it to Barbele. Yes, mamma"-starting up-"see the Christ-child! It becoms me to come, to come. Yes, yes, I'm coming-I'm coming-Glory to God in the!"

One last gasp and the pure soul of the widowed mother's only treasure has joined the "Christ-child" in his home on high. The good pastor offers a fervent supplication for the bereaved woman, and as the young witnesses of this touching scene silently leave the house of death, the watchman toots the midnight hour, the church-bell rings the advent of Christ's natal day, and over hill and dale, from every neighboring village, sung by young voices, come the words of hope: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good-will toward men."

"What's 'Huntsman'?" "Didn't you ever play Huntsman? Why, it wouldn't be Christmas at all at grandpa's without Huntsman. Aunt Lizzie wanted to play girls' plays, like Come In, Come See, and Bumble-come, Bumble-come; but 'Life and Ben and Mammie and all us boys and girls' didn't want to play mean no to have Huntsman." "So when the girls had cleared the table, in the dining-room, Uncle Oliver says: "Go ahead, boys, and get the chairs ready."

"We all played but grandpa. He said 'twas a little too much for an old fellow like him, after a Christmas dinner, but he'd help do the laughing." "We put his great arm-chair in one corner and fixed the other chairs up and down t e middle of the room, back to back; chairs enough for everybody that was going to play, all except one."

around, too, at the end of the procession. When the huntsman said: "Bang! Tige didn't know what to make of it, and ran around after the folks were sitting down puffing and catching their breath. I tell you a fellow has to have pretty good wind to play Huntsman."

"We played lots of times more, and the next time Tige ran round just as he did at first, but after he'd got the play into his head, when the "Bang!" came he sat right down and pounded the floor with his tail. That's his way of laughing, I s'pose."



"I tell you, the jolliest part of playing Christmas is playing Huntsman, and the jolliest part of that was seeing Tige help play, and the next jolliest was seeing grand pa help laugh."

That is the way Bart Carver told the story to Archie Groceley a week after last Christmas. Do you wonder, reader mine, we all loved Tige, he was such a wise, fun-loving dog, or that all the grandchildren thought Christmas the best day of the year, grandpa so enjoyed seeing them happy?

OME one somewhere has written that houses, like men, have their seasons of life and death. One who had known the mansion of Obed Sproule as it was years ago, and who had chanced to see it shortly before a certain Christmas, not long since, must have been reminded of that sentiment.

Not that physical decay, or the tongue of fire, or the heavy hand of the tornado had visited it. No force of nature had devastated its fair proportions and comely looks; and as for the tooth of Time-such substantially-built houses as this, with the ordinary repairs such as its owner never failed to make, will defy the old scythe-bearer for centuries. The change of which I speak was in its general aspect, in the use that was made of it, in the face, so to speak, that it showed to the passer. For men who knew its history would tell you that time was when its many windows and shutters were thrown wide open to the light of day; when music, mirth and laughter were heard at night from its parlors; when fair and many faces looked out from it, and when little children romped up and down the broad stairs, and played on the lawn in front. But it had long been strictly closed to all the world save its morose, hermit-like occupant. The shutters were closed, the doors fast-locked, rank weeds had grown up about it, and its whole exterior was chill and forbidding. People who had watched said that sometimes its solitary dweller came out and in at a rear door, always bolting it upon his entrance; and that, saying this, no living persons were ever seen about the premises. Even the tramps, the beggars, the peddlers and the book-agents, who prevent life elsewhere from becoming monotonous, paused at the gate, looked doubtfully at the prospect within, and passed on.

Like house, like master. From a genial, hearty man, Obed Sproule had almost in a day become a sour misanthrope. He discontinued his business; he closed his dwelling; he shunned his old friends and associates. To them and to the world of trade and society he had become as dead as though his name and his former virtues were catalogued on the granite of the cemetery.

So long had this been his condition that it had ceased to excite remark. When he passed his former companions, often crossing the street to avoid them, they could only look at him in mournful silence. But at a social gathering about the time referred to, when this subject was brought up, and the opinion had been expressed that there would never be a change in Obed Sproule till the day of his death, a silent listener observed: "Has any one tried to break through this shell of pride and hardness, and reach the real man within?" "Real man?" was the incredulous answer. "There is none. The man has been given over for years to incurable bitterness and wrath. We have all seen his condition, and we all know how hopeless it is. Of what use to court rebuff and insult by trying to change it?" "We who knew him in his better days can not shirk our responsibility in this way," was the gentle but firm rejoinder. "The question may one day be asked of you and me, 'where is thy brother?' What shall we say if we have made no effort to rescue him from his worst enemies-the demons within him?" A brief silence followed, and the painful subject was not resumed; but one of the party went to his home that night resolved that the attempt for which he had pleaded should be made. It was made upon the very next night.

It was a bitter one, clear, starlighted and beautiful, but with an air as keen as invisible dagger points. The solitary figure of Obed Sproule, muffled almost from ears to heels in his cloak, was skulking with the step of a thief through the gateway of his desolate home when a hand was laid upon his shoulder.

"What the dickens do you want?" was his rude salutation. The man who had arrested his steps carried in his arms what looked like a large bundle.

"Here is a poor little child that I have picked up," he said. "She is homeless and destitute. Let me warm her by your fire."

"No-be off with your vagrants! Take her to the almshouse and warm her there. I don't keep open house for paupers."

"Do you remember me?" Sproule looked the other in the face, and replied, pettishly: "I used to know you, when I knew anybody. You are Silas West, I suppose."

"When you knew anybody, as you say, I was one of your best friends. I did you many valued favors, and was always welcome to your home. Now, when I ask shelter, not for myself, but for this forlorn waif, I defy you to refuse!-yes, Obed, in the name of our old friendship, I say you dare not!"

He was shivering with cold, but was more affected by this blunt appeal. His hard face, or what could be seen of it, did not soften, but he uttered a brief "Bring her in," and made for the back door, followed by the man with the burden.

Inside the house, the latter was introduced into a room where dust, litter and confusion prevailed, where costly furniture, rare books and ornaments were heaped about in utter neglect. A fire smoldered in the wide, old-fashioned fire-place. Sproule stirred it and threw on wood from a pile that lay on the carpet, and the ruddy blaze soon crackled and flamed up the chimney.

Mr. West removed the wrappings which enveloped the form of his charge, and revealed to the ungracious host a beautiful little girl of perhaps six years, golden-haired, blue-eyed and red-checked, dressed coarsely but very comfortably, as became the season. Sproule looked at her and demanded harshly: "What mummery is this! You said the child was picked up by you. This is no vagrant."

Susan D. Nickerson. BESSIE'S CONQUEST.

As of Old, "A Little Child Shall Lead Them."

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"Ma is dead, and so is pa," she prattled. "Pa died first. He made nice pictures, but people wouldn't buy 'em, and we had no fire, and nothing to eat; and after he died, ma got sick, and was thin and weak, and she used to take me to bed with her to keep me warm; and she would cry, and tell me all about the nice great house she used to live in. One night she got cold and wouldn't talk to me, and then some people came and took me away from her, to the big stone house where I live now with lots of other children. They're kind to us there, and this gentleman comes often to see us; but-but-" and the little voice quavered with the swelling thought, and the tears wet the long lashes-"I'd rather have my ma back again."

J. W. Whippert. PLAYING "HUNTSMAN."

The Jolliest Part of Bart Carver's Christmas. A True Story for the Children.

LD I go to grandpa's last Christmas? Of course I did. I always go there to Christmas.

"Did I have a good time? You never had a better time in your life, Arch. Groceley, I tell you. The jolliest of it all was playing 'Huntsman'."

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"Uncle Oliver said he'd be the first Huntsman. Then all the rest of us sat down, and Uncle Oliver gave us each a name. I was Bear, 'Life was Wolf, Mammie was Fox and Aunt Lizzie was Here, and so on." "When we were all named Uncle Oliver began to run round the chairs; pretty soon he called: 'Bear!' I jumped up and caught hold of his coat and ran after him, then he called 'Fox,' and Mammie grabbed my jacket and trotted after me as fast as she could trot. So, you see, Uncle Oliver called us, and then, till we were all running round the room, laughing and shouting and making such a racket that the hired man told the folks in the kitchen:

"WHAT THE DICKENS DO YOU WANT?" day became a sour misanthrope. He discontinued his business; he closed his dwelling; he shunned his old friends and associates. To them and to the world of trade and society he had become as dead as though his name and his former virtues were catalogued on the granite of the cemetery.

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James Franklin Felt.