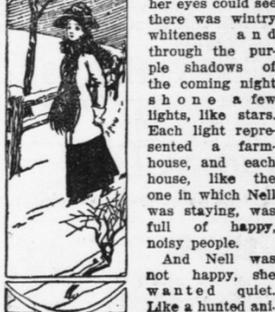


Nell's New Year's Eve

By Temple Bailey

Was there any place where she could be really quiet?



The Snow began to fall.

where she might be alone. On the crest of a hill, far up the road, stood the schoolhouse where she taught. It was closed now and dark.

"I will go there," Nell said to herself, and just then a voice behind her called: "Supper is ready."

"I don't want any," Nell said wearily. "I'm going out for a little while, Mrs. McGregor. I'll be back by ten."

The snow began to fall softly as she left the house, and by the time she reached the school it was beginning to drift against the fences. There was no fire within, but Nell lit a lamp, and when the warmth began to steal into the room, she drew the one big chair close to the hearth and in the peaceful loneliness gave herself up to her thoughts.

But she was not to remain in peace long. There was a sound of sleigh bells without, heavy steps on the threshold, and she looked up to see the burly form of a young farmer in the doorway.

"Well, well," he said, "I saw the light and came in. Who would have dreamed that you would be here alone?"

Nell smiled wearily. "I came to be quiet."

"Then you don't want me,"

"Oh, sit down," she said, somewhat ungraciously.

But he stood by the fireplace and looked down at her.

"What's the matter?" he asked abruptly.

"Nothing," faintly.

"Don't tell me that; I know better."

"If I tell you," she asked, "you mustn't give me any advice. I have had so much advice I hate it."

He sat down beside her. "Tell ahead," he said, "and I'll promise to listen like the Sphinx."

"You see, it is this way," she said; "my uncle in town is rich. He is a miserly old man, and he made me miserable when I lived with him. I'm not going to tell you about my childhood, how little love there was in it, and how I was starved spiritually and mentally, as well as physically. When I grew old enough to understand that he could give me things, and had not because he wanted to save and save, I left him and came here to teach; and now he has written to me to come back, and I don't want to go, yet he is sick and old and alone. I told Mrs. McGregor and she tells me to stay here. Then all the family talked about it and every body advised. They meant well—but I couldn't stand it, I—I don't want to go, but I must."

He started to say something, then checked himself.

"I'd like to break that promise," he said.

"No, you mustn't," she said firmly. "You've all been so good to me here and if you," she caught her breath "join the others in asking me to stay it will make it so hard for me to go."

"He doesn't deserve much at your hands," the man stated.

"I know," she said wearily, "but to-morrow I begin a new year, and I don't want to begin it wrong, yet I don't know the right."

"I don't believe much in saying things," the young farmer remarked; "my policy is to do them. And now, are you going to stay here in this lonely place much longer? It is snowing and it is late."

"I suppose I ought to go," she said doubtfully, "but it is so lovely here in the silence."

"Look here," he said suddenly, "don't you keep your tea things in that little cupboard? I have got to go to town, and when I come back

I'll bring something for a little supper, and we can watch the old year out. Then I'll take you home in the sleigh."

"How good of you." She held out her hand to him. "You haven't bothered me with advice, and you are doing something to make me comfortable. That is just like you, Jack Norton."

He blushed a little, this big kindly man, who looked upon the little woman from the city as a being from another sphere; she was so dainty, so different from the girls in his own village.

Nell knew what she was doing when she told him not to ask her to stay; she had known for a long time of the question that trembled on his lips. She knew he wanted to marry her, as a woman knows who is wise in the ways of men.

She thought of the life she might lead if she married him, a life in the big farmhouse, with the wind blowing in winter. Then she thought of her life with her uncle in a dark apartment in the streets of the city. She knew that, in a way, it was a false idea of duty that would take her back. Yet she had to go, some force that was in her seemed impelling her.

The wind blew in great blasts against the little house, the snow had drifted up to the window sills, and white lines of it pointed across the window pane like ghostly fingers. Dragging footsteps came up the path. Nell listened. It was not Jack Norton; these were the steps of an old man. From the door a voice quavered: "Are you there, Nell?"

"Uncle," she said, fearfully, "how did you come here?"

"I met a young man down the road," he said. "I wanted him to guide me to the McGregors. He told me you were here."

"You didn't answer my letter," the old man went on, when she had made him sit down.

"Are you going back with me?"

Now that she was faced to face with his meanness, it seemed to Nell that she could never go with him.

"I don't know," she faltered.

"Here's a grateful girl," the old man stormed, and just then the sleigh bells jingled and, in another moment Jack Norton was in the room, his arms full of bundles, his eyes beaming.

"So this is your uncle," he said. "I thought so when I directed him here. You'll stay and have supper with us, won't you, sir? We are going to see the old year out and the new year in."

"Who are you?" the old man growled.

"I?" Jack's eyes flashed from Nell's cowering figure to the grimness of the uncle. Then suddenly he took things in his own hands.

"I'm the man your niece is going to marry," he said.

"What?" the old man shouted.

"I'm the man your niece is going to marry," he said securely. He had seen the joy in Nell's face.

"But she is going home with me."

Jack shook his head. "No, she is going home with me. You can come whenever you wish, sir. The old house is big enough for twenty uncles, or if you like it better, there is a cottage at the edge of the farm where you could stay if you wished."

The old man flashed a crafty glance at him.

"Would it cost me anything?" he asked.

"Nothing," said Jack.

"Then marry her," said the old uncle, "and I'll come and live in the cottage alone."

Nell's face was in her hands, and, as Jack bent over her, she whispered, "I'm the Man She Is Going to Marry."

"It is the only way that you can make my New Year happy," he told her, and as she looked up into his face she knew that what he said was true. (Copyright.)

The Chinese New Year.

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Writings on September 26th, 1911, by Miss Lela Thomas, of Peabody, St. Mary's county, Md.
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