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"HOW BEAUTIFUL ARE THE FEET OF THEM THAT BRING GLAD TIDINGS OF GOOD THINGS!"

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MORNING STAR AND CATHOLIC MESSENGER.

NEW ORLEANS, SUNDAY, DECEMBER 13, 1868.

TWO BLOCKS FROM THE CHRISTMAS FIRE.

BY CAVIARE.

Though the wind blew fierce, and the snow fell fast, and the soot-flakes tumbled down the chimney at Christmas time, the frosty dear old festival will bring its special delights, its gracious thoughts, that blossom, like its own rose, by stormy gales, and amid leafless gardens, diffusing its sweet breath around, when the violets are still under the earth, and the furze is blossomless on the uplands. The glory of the time lies in the contrasts which it evokes and multiplies. Abroad the stubble is stiff with ice; the fields, if not white, are covered with the yellow tint of decay; the brook is thick and immovable; our trees do not afford a solitary green bud to relieve the universal dreariness in which, from their melancholy looks and pinched bodies, even the dumb animals of the stall and paddock might be supposed to participate. Within doors the hearth is bright, for there the traditional log burns, sending out all sorts of extravagant sparks, squibs, and crackers. An unusual glow pervades the house, and every one seems determined to be happy. However poor the household, however numerous the little ones that gather round the knees of sorrowful maternity, a fowl is sure to find its way to the pot, and even a bit of sweet cake, or a morsel of plain dessert is eked out of the family resources. In many humble homes Christmas is the anniversary of a great household purification. Only to see how the ceilings glitter with fresh wash; how the dingy, moth-eaten floors become almost white; how the mildewed panes grow transparent; how the plates and dishes shine, each in its proper place—is a rare pleasure! It is fine to seek the dark boughs of holly, often gorgeously jeweled with bunches of blood-red berries, and the twinkling laurel-like branches of ivy with which the good woman decorates her candlesticks and polished tins, sticking a little "bit in every crevice and coign of vantage, where a glimpse of bright foliage and a spray of crimson fruit will catch the eye and show to advantage. And then the Christmas candle, which has been hanging by the wick a whole fortnight in the chandelier's window! How the children look at it, and wonder how much it weighs! With what pride the poor man lights it before midnight with an unsteady hand, and face averted from the light; whilst his wife stands in his shadow, and a tear gathers to her eyes, as she looks back at the long procession of Christmas candles which stream with a fading light into a fatter Past! With Christmas time, old faces catch up happy reflections of youth, and young faces flush with a divine excitement, like John Keats's grapes—"up to the surface full of happiness." I knew a venerable old friend, who, of all times in the year, would dance only at Christmas. In the chimney nooks you may hear the breezy gossip of gray-haired people; and from all corners of the house the merry chatter of the little folks as they speculate on sweetmeats and Christmas-boxes, and not last nor least, the ravishing prospect of slides and snow-balls. If you look abroad, putting your eye to the slit in the shutter, you may see across the street heaps of white abrupt gables and pendant chimney stacks, throwing broad bars of ash-hue athwart the spotless roofs, with the watchman standing contemplatively on the flags, his oiled hat glistening in the pure tranquil moonlight. Perchance some poor unfriended mother or sister, some homeless outcast, ragged and shivering, may catch your eye; and if so, holy and wholesome is the practice, which good people have not forgotten, of opening their doors and pockets to the poor at this touching season. Even the legalized cruelty of the Workhouse molifies its severity before the Christmas fire; and our poorer brethren who sit, day after day, between life and death, in its cold and blinding dungeons, get a morsel of joint and pudding on the day of our Lord's nativity, which the system that starves them officially recognises as merely the 25th day of the twelfth month. Our jails, also, throw open their terrible doors, and permit the worst criminal to receive little comforts from his friends outside. Blessings upon

the day which can wring compassion from the Workhouse, and mercy from the jail! Sometimes the wind will roar down the streets, drifting the snow, twisting the chimney-pots until they spin, and sending all the sign-boards swinging to-and-fro like dumb chimes; the glass will clash, the roof shake, and the soot dance down the chimney—ah! those are the pleasant accompaniments to the festival. It is the snow and the wind crying: "As you won't let us in, we will have a Christmas of our own on the leads, and gutters, and spouts, and house-tops—shan't we?" says the snow. And the wind roars out a mighty affirmative. The little children clap their hands, for their glee is boundless; and the old people look jolly, and exclaim: "God bless us, what a windy Christmas!"

I know how they manage to keep Christmas in great houses. There, indeed, it is a common-place affair enough, for with it come no contrasts—because puddings and joints, and Christmas-boxes are no novelties to the dweller therein. You will find them sitting, those great, cold polite people, in one vast, luxurious apartment, red-curtained, soft-carpeted, amid the richest furniture, and the dearest glass, and the finest plate. They sit on straight-backed chairs, those people do, with very grave faces and very low voices; very proper, very admirable conduct I admit; but I love to be pleasant as well as wise, and prefer naturalness to politeness. The little children rest their frilled elbows on the glittering tables, and criticise the pictures, and turn over the leaves of their Christmas books, for all the world like old people. Mamma is languid, and papa looks as if he wished the night was over, that he might look gloomy and discontented again without any breach of propriety. The apartment is beautiful; but not a bit of holly, not a bit of ivy, because, as my lady tells the children, who have brought up rapturous accounts of the style in which the servants' hall is done up with boughs and berries, they are vulgar, and only used by the poorer classes. When the tea equipage has been removed, papa generally calls on the youngest daughter to play her last piano exercise, or, as he particularizes it, "that thing about the flats." And when she has wearied her thin, little fingers over the keys, mamma says: "My dears, it is bedtime;" and the bell is rung, and the dears are kissed, and the maid takes them up to bed, where they lie awake for hours, listening to the poor man in the sad coat, and his poor wife in the limp dress, who are singing Christmas carols under the windows.

It is a fine thing, I know, to be rich and wear diamonds, and go to church in a load of furs and a fashionable carriage; but to enjoy Christmas as it ought to be enjoyed, one must have tasted poverty, and dined occasionally with that highborn and temperate noblewoman who was wife to Duke Humphrey. I know of only one man of rank who can be said to have rightly enjoyed Christmas, and that was Sir Roger de Coverly. Look at his letter to Mr. Spectator, in which he tells him that at Christmas he always keeps a good joint and a stout flagon on the sideboard, for the entertainment of the destitute. Bless that dear old heart. Christmas is the apotheosis of poverty. Therefore it is that good angels sit, in that holy season, by the firesides of the poor, and that the tenderly-disguised minister of God's bounty, whom men call Chance, drops unaccountable crowns into empty pockets, and replenishes the cruse of the indigent.

When I look back upon the Christmases of two certain years, and put their separate experiences together, I cannot help thinking that they present as many shades and contrasts of thought and situation as could be easily collected within so narrow a compass. Recalling the special incidents and surroundings which serve to distinguish one from the other, the misery and desolation which darkened one festival, the sudden happiness which lighted upon the other, I cannot help feeling thankful; and, mixing the bitter and the sweet in one foaming hippocrene, I find the draught taste delicious. I know a man, walking daily in the trafficked highways of trade, but gifted with keen perceptions and noble renunciations of great truths, which, to our common loss, lack a higher direction and a bolder flight, who asserts that at the day of judgment the economy of God's providence will be vindicated in our suddenly seeing, that how-

ever dissimilar was our lot in the bygone world, each and all enjoyed an equal measure of happiness. Applying to this doctrine the touchstone of my own fortunes, I am convinced it is sound and rational. The jewel-headed toad remained for many centuries the dominant type of good involved in evil; but physical science gave us a better illustration of the goodness which may be impacted in filth, when it extracted marvellously brilliant dyes, and refreshing perfumes from the dregs and sediment of the gas house. Dare I believe that my neighbor opposite, who reclines daily at a banquet, and picks his teeth with a diamond stiletto, is a whit happier than I, who must needs be content with a steak for dinner, and a turn in the park by way of dessert? On the contrary, I go so far as to fancy that the man in thick shoes and tattered coat, who pumps from morning until night at the square corner, is as happy as either. I am fully satisfied that pain and pleasure have their compensating balances—that if my neighbor dines sumptuously, I am not afflicted with his dyspepsia—that if my friend in the thick shoes works hard and lives frugally, his wants are below reproach, and he may smile at the taxman. In this way I develop the serenity with which I can afford to remember my two Christmases.

MY FIRST CHRISTMAS.

John and William, and Edward and I, Richard, were bound apprentices in a great house at the end of a great dingy street, about the centre of a great city. None of us had rich parents or wealthy friends to care for us. We were very poor, and what is worse, very hopeless. Three of us were orphans; and William, who, because he was habitually addicted to playing pantomimic tunes on the kitchen bellows, with the kitchen poker for a bow, we had affectionately named Fiddler, afterwards contracted to Fid, had a dying mother. He was very small, and some one, with whom he had a quarrel, nick-named him, "the Widow's Mite." Of his father, who had emigrated to Canada when Fid was a baby at breast, nothing was known, though a good deal was surmised. John was a quiet, large-headed boy, of whom, as our mistress, Mrs. Millet, used to say, "nobody knew nothing," but we did not love him the less on that account. He was a natural, tender-hearted fellow, very fond of sleep when he could get it, who looked on every kind-faced man as his father, and on every genteel woman as his mother. Thomas was a fair-haired, nervous little fellow, very consumptive in look, very playful, very affectionate. Our friend Edward—we always called him Ned—was a merry-hearted lad, who, although he never said a queer word, much less to venture on a joke, was a famous singer of comic songs. We four, by some process which is not satisfactorily explained even by the theory of Elective Affinities, somehow happened to come together as poor apprentices under that cold roof in the great house in that great city. We were hard-worked, ill-fed, sparsely-clothed. We received no wages; our status in the establishment being considerably below that of the house-keeper's cat and our master's pet cockatoo. From seven o'clock, daily, until ten o'clock at night, we worked in a vast, ill-ventilated, close-smelling shop, shouldering our way as best we could through bales of goods and swarms of customers under the cold, cruel eye of our master, Mr. Millet. It was a very harrowing occupation, you may be sure; for we were expected to please everybody, and to spare no lying, no cozening in foisting on our customers a store full of dozed goods, which had been years upon years on hands, and was rapidly losing all value. I remember Mr. Millet distinctly. He was a tall, well-built, broad-chested man; his face was a fat oblong, bordered with faint indications of whiskers, and lighted up by the most malignant and watchful of eyes. There was a terrible savageness in his thick compressed lips and massive chin, which none of us, for certain rational reasons, much liked. As I have said, he was very fat; and this was most perceptible in the region of the eyes, which presents thick sprays of multiplied wrinkles, which, starting from the corner of his lids, zigzagged back under his hair. It was his custom during business hours to walk hurriedly up and down the shop, jingling gold and silver pieces in his breeches pockets, and stopping, when the humour seized him,

to direct some brutal reproach or slightly qualified imprecation at us, poor apprentices. We lived in a state of constant fear and irritation, and he knew it. When ten o'clock at night came, one of us would steal out in the dark to put up the shutters, taking care not to speak to the policeman, a crime unpardonable in a poor apprentice. Then the shop would be closed, and Fid or I would take the keys upstairs, and having laid them down silently at Mr. Millet's elbow, follow the rest of the apprentices to the kitchen, where we sat until bedtime. We were given supper, but the bread was so bad that it was hard to eat; and the milk, which was kept in a tankard suspended to the water-but, was very thin, and made us feel very sick. When we had made a show of eating we drew a long form to one side of the fire, and, having drawn lots for places, would sit down. If we indulged in a chat we were obliged to select the topics with great prudence, for we were within earshot of the housekeeper, a lady who exhibited a marvellous taste for carrying stories to head-quarters, and embroidering us with the authorities. At eleven o'clock came the order for bed, accompanied by strict injunctions not to speak when we got there. No light of any description was allowed, lest, as it was charitably intimated, we should "try to set fire to the house." Mr. Millet's parlor door had to be passed on our way up; it was nothing uncommon to find that gentleman, candle in hand, on the lobby, waiting to review us. In so doing he was generally assisted by Mrs. Millet, a coarse-minded, good-looking woman, who dressed expensively and vulgarly at the same time.

"Stop," he would say to us, and then to his wife, "Mrs. Millet, bear witness, there is them boys. I'd like to know who clothes them, I'd like to know who feeds them, Mrs. Millet; who but their natural protector?"

"You puppies," Mrs. Millet would say, "why don't you say 'yes'?" Of course we all said "Yes."

"Haven't I treated them," he would continue, "as if they were born proper; as if their fathers and mothers could be had to the good? Don't I?" This question was invariably put with a good deal of vivacity, the speaker seizing one of us, poor apprentices, by the hair, and pressing his knuckles under our ears until we were glad to say "Yes, sir."

"And who sends them to bed, Mrs. Millet? who saves them from transportation, and from hanging, I'd like to know? Go to bed, you sneaking snivellers. Go!" Mr. Millet would say, and we were only too happy to follow his instructions.

Having crept into bed, we pulled the clothes over our heads and chatted in whispers until we fell asleep. These were dull times, you may be sure; but there was no help for it. We were friendless and penniless; and, bad as the great house in the great street was, there remained for us no other home in the wide world.

Christmas came. And who is it, however miserable, can refuse a peaceful heart and a holiday smile (clown's paint as it may be) when touched by the gentle inspirations of the blessed season? It was a cold, d. y Christmas eve; the black frost lay hard and slippery on the flagstones; the sky was of a light blue, with millions of lights sparkling on the windows of the dingy shop; puffy heaps of snow lay crammed in between the tops of the street railings, and on the corners of mouldings of the sign-boards, and on the tops of the gas-lamps, and in every nook and cranny where its pure presence could find a refuge. The streets were thick with people coming and going to market, and their pleasant voices penetrated to where we stood. It was miserable to be there when every one around us was so happy; but what could be done? When we heard the clock strike eight, John suggested that we, poor apprentices, should send Mr. Millet a petition, begging him, because it was Christmas eve, to permit the shop to be closed at nine o'clock. Fid was generally our literary man; but as he was despondent and sad in consequence of hearing that his mother was at the point of death, John drew up the petition, and it was taken up stairs by the housemaid. In a few minutes she returned, pained and sorrowful. "Master says," said the woman, "that as because you're blackguards, not to close the shop until eleven o'clock." We

looked at each other in blank, miserable amazement. "What do you say to that, Fid?" asked Ned. "God forgive him," replied Fid; and this was the only allusion we made to the ukase. The clock struck the quarters, and the two hours seemed quadrupled in length. Since seven in the evening a single customer had not crossed the threshold, except a poor man, who asked us, as if in sarcasm, to help the distressed. The night grew colder and colder; the frosty stars shone keener; the wind blew the snow off the streets into our faces, until we shivered and huddled ourselves together for warmth. The streets grew deserted; and at last eleven o'clock came, and with it came Mr. Millet. He was flushed from drink or excitement. He flung the shop door suddenly open, and glared at us, poor apprentices, with those horrible eyes of his from the top of the step. Fid gazed up into the flabby face with a fearful curiosity, and continued looking until I, who knew the consequence of such imprudence, touched him with my foot.

"Who wrote that?" asked Mr. Millet, producing the bit of paper on which we had written our petition. "Who wrote that?" There was a fearful silence for a few minutes. "You pack of squalid curs," said Mr. Millet, "am I to be answered? Who wrote—that?"

"I—I did, sir," said John. Mr. Millet descended and caught John by the head. "You lying scoundrel," he roared, "have you the face to tell me that you wrote that, up to my teeth?" Hitting the poor boy about the ears, dismissed him to bed without supper. John disappeared. "Close that door!" exclaimed Mr. Millet, pointing to the public entrance. And then with a disgusting shrivel of the wrinkles about his eyes, he added, "I'd have you take care of yourselves. You know me. Do you know me?" We said, "We did," very humbly. He then went up stairs, desiring us to follow him. Wondering what would happen next, and after a little fight on the lobby to know who would go first, I led the way to the parlor, and Fid and Edward followed. We stood outside the door until desired to come in. Mr. Millet was seated at the fire; Mrs. Millet lay on the sofa, with a very languid air, which I interiorly attributed to too much brandy. "Elen—Mrs. Millet," said the gentleman, "I have brought you four—no, there's one gone to bed—hopeless ruffians. Look at them as they stand before you. Such depravity is awful, Mrs. Millet."

Mrs. Millet looked at us, and only said, "Shocking."

"I have brought you four sneaks," he continued, "as would do credit to the condemned cell, and yet, as you know and as they know, I spare them. They'll know them when the judge says to them—Where's your character? 'Twill be no use—bear witness, Mrs. Millet—for them to be coming snivelling to me. No—I shall say," continued Mr. Millet, rising with a slight stagger and revolting draw up of the wrinkles, "let justice have its due—I grant no commutation."

"Very proper," observed Mrs. Millet. "Faugh! I'm a Dutchman if they doesn't smell of onions."

Considering that the lady herself had provided the obnoxious vegetable, the objection was scarcely reasonable. "How dare you smell of onions?" asked Mr. Millet. "Phew! the house is alive with them."

Ned ventured to say that he had onions for dinner, in return for which information Mr. Millet squeezed his knuckles under the boy's ear, and when he shrieked with pain, told him to hold his tongue in future until he was spoken to.

"This is Christmas," said Mr. Millet, with a very lofty air. "My dear, I wish you a happy Christmas. My dear, give those bad lads a bun a piece."

Mrs. Millet looked up in astonishment. Her face grew red and her frame shook with emotion. "Mr. Millet," she said, "I never encourage vice. Give them buns! Why the next thing they'll ask is clean shirts every Sunday. Buns indeed!"

Mr. Millet was humiliated. "Who spoke of buns?" he asked, turning to me. I said I believed nobody, and for capital good reasons he abstained from pressing the inquiry further. "What are you snivelling about?"

(Continued on Eighth Page.)