

THE NEW-YEAR'S GIFT.

The sparkling ice and snow covered hill and valley--tree and bush were glittering with diamonds--the broad, coarse rails of the fence shone like bars of solid silver, while little fringes of icicles glittered between each bar.

In the yard of yonder dwelling the scarlet berries of the mountain ash shine through a transparent casing of crystal, and the sable spruces and white pines, powdered and glittering with the frost, have assumed an icy brilliancy. The eaves of the house, the door knocker, the pickets of the fence, the honeysuckles and seringas, once the boast of summer, are all alike polished, varnished, and resplendent with their winter trappings, now gleaming in the last rays of the early sunset.

Within that large, old-fashioned dwelling might you see an ample parlor, all whose adjustments and arrangements speak of security, warmth, and home enjoyment; of money spent not for show, but for comfort. Thick crimson curtains descend in heavy folds over the embrasures of the windows, and the ample hearth and wide fireplace speak of the customs of the good old times, ere that gloomy, unpoetic, unsocial gnome--the air-tight--had monopolized the place of the blazing fireside.

No dark air-tight, however, filled our ancient chimney; but there was a genuine old-fashioned fire of the most approved architecture, with a

gallant backlog and forestick, supporting and keeping in order a crackling pile of dry wood, that was whirring and blazing warm welcome for all whom it might concern, occasionally bursting forth into most portentous and earnest snaps, which rung through the room with a genuine, hospitable emphasis, as if the fire was enjoying himself, and having a good time, and wanted all hands to draw up and make themselves at home with him.

So looked that parlor to me, when, tired with a long day's ride, I found my way into it, just at evening, and was greeted with a hearty welcome from my old friend, Colonel Winthrop.

In addition to all that I have already described, let the reader add, if he pleases, the vision of a wide and ample tea table, covered with a snowy cloth, on which the servants are depositing the evening meal.

I had not seen Winthrop for years; but we were old college friends, and I had gladly accepted an invitation to renew our ancient intimacy by passing the New Year's season in his family. I found him still the same hale, kindly, cheery fellow as in days of old, though time had taken the same liberty with his handsome head that Jack Frost had with the cedars and spruces out of doors, in giving to it a graceful and becoming sprinkle of silver.

"Here you are, my dear fellow," said he, shaking me by both hands--"just in season for the ham and chickens--coffee all smoking. My dear," he

added to a motherly-looking woman who now entered, "here's John! I beg pardon, Mr. Stuart." As he spoke, two bold, handsome boys broke into the room, accompanied by a huge Newfoundland dog--all as full of hilarity and abundant animation as an afternoon of glorious skating could have generated.

"Ha, Tom and Ned!--you rogues--you don't want any supper to-night, I suppose," said the father, gayly; "come up here and be introduced to my old friend. Here they come!" said he, as one by one the opening doors admitted the various children to the summons of the evening meal.

"Here," presenting a tall young girl, "is our eldest, beginning to think herself a young lady, on the strength of being fifteen years old, and wearing her hair tucked up. And here is Eliza," said he, giving a pull to a blooming, roguish girl of ten, with large, saucy black eyes. "And here is Willie!" a bashful, blushing little fellow in a checked apron.

"And now, where's the little queen?--where's her majesty?--where's Ally?"

A golden head of curls was, at this instant, thrust timidly in at the door, and I caught a passing glimpse of a pair of great blue eyes; but the head, curls, eyes, and all, instantly vanished, though a little fat dimpled hand was seen holding on to the door, and swinging it back and forward. "Ally, dear, come in!" said the mother, in a tone of encouragement. "Come in, Ally! come in," was repeated in various tones, by each child; but brother Tom pushed open the door, and taking the little recusant in his arms, brought her fairly in, and deposited her on

her father's knee. She took firm hold of his coat, and then turned and gazed shyly upon me--her large splendid blue eyes gleaming through her golden curls. It was evident that this was the pet lamb of the fold, and she was just at that age when babyhood is verging into childhood--an age often indefinitely prolonged in a large family, where the universal admiration that waits on every look, and motion, and word of the baby, and the multiplied monopolies and privileges of the baby estate, seem, by universal consent, to extend as long and as far as possible. And why not thus delay the little bark of the child among the flowery shores of its first Eden?--defer them as we may, the hard, the real, the cold commonplace of life comes on all too soon!

"This is our New Year's gift," said Winthrop, fondly caressing the curly head. "Ally, tell the gentleman how old you are."

"I s'all be four next New 'Ear's," said the little one, while all the circle looked applause.

"Ally, tell the gentleman what you are," said brother Ned.

Ally looked coquettishly at me, as if she did not know whether she should favor me to that extent, and the young princess was further solicited.

"Tell him what Ally is," said the oldest sister, with a patronizing air.

"Papa's New 'Ear's pesent," said my little lady, at last.

"And mamma's, too!" said the mother gently, amid the applauses of the admiring circle.

Winthrop looked apologetically at me, and said, "We all spoil her--that's a fact--every one of us down to Rover, there, who lets her tie tippets round his neck, and put bonnets on his head, and hug and kiss him, to a degree that would disconcert any other dog in the world."

If ever beauty and poetic grace was an apology for spoiling, it was in this case. Every turn of the bright head, every change of the dimpled face and round and chubby limbs, was a picture; and within the little form was shrined a heart full of love, and running over with compassion and good will for every breathing thing; with feelings so sensitive, that it was papa's delight to make her laugh and cry with stories, and to watch in the blue, earnest mirror of her eye every change and turn of his narration, as he took her through long fairy tales, and old-fashioned giant and ghost legends, purely for his own amusement, and much reprimanded all the way by mamma, for filling the child's head with nonsense.

It was now, however, time to turn from the beauty to the substantial realities of the supper table. I observed that Ally's high chair was stationed close by her father's side; and ever and anon, while gayly talking, he would slip into her rosy little mouth some choice bit from

his plate, these notices and attentions seeming so instinctive and habitual, that they did not for a moment interrupt the thread of the conversation. Once or twice I caught a glimpse of Rover's great rough nose, turned anxiously up to the little chair; whereat the small white hand forthwith slid something into his mouth, though by what dexterity it ever came out from the great black jaws undevoured was a mystery. When the supply of meat on the small lady's plate was exhausted, I observed the little hand slyly slipping into her father's provision grounds, and with infinite address abstracting small morsels, whereat there was much mysterious winking between the father and the other children, and considerable tittering among the younger ones, though all in marvellous silence, as it was deemed best policy not to appear to notice Ally's tricks, lest they should become too obstreperous.

In the course of the next day I found myself, to all intents and purposes, as much part and parcel of the family as if I had been born and bred among them. I found that I had come in a critical time, when secrets were plenty as blackberries. It being New Year's week, all the little hoarded resources of the children, both of money and of ingenuity, were in brisk requisition, getting up New Year's presents for each other, and for father and mother. The boys had their little tin savings banks, where all the stray pennies of the year had been carefully hoarded--all that had been got by blacking papa's boots, or by piling wood, or weeding in the garden--mingled with some fortunate additions which had come as windfalls from some liberal guest or friend. All now were poured out daily, on tables, on chairs, on stools, and

counted over with wonderful earnestness.

My friend, though in easy circumstances, was somewhat old-fashioned in his notions. He never allowed his children spending money, except such as they fairly earned by some exertions of their own. "Let them do something," he would say, "to make it fairly theirs, and their generosity will then have some significance--it is very easy for children to be generous on their parents' money." Great were the comparing of resources and estimates of property at this time. Tom and Ned, who were big enough to saw wood, and hoe in the garden, had accumulated the vast sum of three dollars each, and walked about with their hands in their pockets, and talked largely of purchases, like gentlemen of substance. They thought of getting mamma a new muff, and papa a writing desk, besides trinkets innumerable for sisters, and a big doll for Ally; but after they had made one expedition to a neighboring town to inquire prices, I observed that their expectations were greatly moderated. As to little Willie, him of the checked apron, his whole earthly substance amounted to thirty-seven cents; yet there was not a member of the whole family circle, including the servants, that he could find it in his heart to leave out of his remembrance. I ingratiated myself with him immediately; and twenty times a day did I count over his money to him, and did sums innumerable to show how much would be left if he got this, that, or the other article, which he was longing to buy for father or mother. I proved to him most invaluable, by helping him to think of certain small sixpenny and fourpenny articles that would be pretty to give to sisters, making out with marbles for Tom and Ned, and

a very valiant-looking sugar horse for Ally. Miss Emma had the usual resource of young ladies, flosses, worsted, and knitting, and crochet needles, and busy fingers, and she was giving private lessons daily to Eliza, to enable her to get up some napkin rings, and book marks for the all-important occasion. A gentle air of bustle and mystery pervaded the whole circle. I was intrusted with so many secrets that I could scarcely make an observation, or take a turn about the room, without being implored to "remember"--"not to tell"--not to let papa know this, or mamma that. I was not to let papa know how the boys were going to buy him a new inkstand, with a pen rack upon it, which was entirely to outshine all previous inkstands; nor tell mamma about the crochet bag that Emma was knitting for her. On all sides were mysterious whisperings, and showing of things wrapped in brown paper, glimpses of which, through some inadvertence, were always appearing to the public eye. There were close counsels held behind doors and in corners, and suddenly broken off when some particular member of the family appeared. There were flutters of vanishing book marks, which were always whisked away when a door opened; and incessant ejaculations of admiration and astonishment from one privileged looker or another on things which might not be mentioned to or beheld by others.

Papa and mamma behaved with the utmost circumspection and discretion, and though surrounded on all sides by such pitfalls and labyrinths of mystery, moved about with an air of the most unconscious simplicity possible.

But little Ally, from her privileged character, became a very spoil-sport in the proceedings. Her small fingers were always pulling open parcels prematurely, or lifting pocket handkerchiefs ingeniously thrown down over mysterious articles, and thus disconcerting the very profoundest surprises that ever were planned; and were it not that she was still within the bounds of the kingly state of babyhood, and therefore could be held to do no wrong, she would certainly have fallen into general disgrace; but then it was "Ally," and that was apology for all things, and the exploit was related in half whispers as so funny, so cunning, that Miss Curlypate was in nowise disconcerted at the head shakes and "naughty Allys" that visited her offences.

"What dis?" said she, one morning, as she was rummaging over some packages indiscreetly left on the sofa.

"O Emma! see Ally!" exclaimed Eliza, darting forward; but too late, for the flaxen curls and blue eyes of a wax doll had already appeared.

"Now she'll know all about it," said Eliza, despairingly.

Ally looked in astonishment, as dolly's visage promptly disappeared from her view, and then turned to pursue her business in another quarter of the room, where, spying something glittering under the sofa, she forthwith pulled out and held up to public view a crochet bag sparkling with innumerable steel fringes.

"O, what be dis!" she exclaimed again.

Miss Emma sprang to the rescue, while all the other children, with a burst of exclamations, turned their eyes on mamma. Mamma very prudently did not turn her head, and appeared to be lost in reflection, though she must have been quite deaf not to have heard the loud whispers--"It's mamma's bag! only think! Don't you think, Tom, Ally pulled out mamma's bag, and held it right up before her! Don't you think she'll find out?"

Master Tom valued himself greatly on the original and profound ways he had of adapting his presents to the tastes of the receiver without exciting suspicion: for example, he would come up into his mother's room, all booted and coated for a ride to town, jingling his purse gleefully, and begin,--

"Mother, mother, which do you like best, pink or blue?"

"That might depend on circumstances, my son."

"Well, but, mother, for a neck ribbon, for example; suppose somebody was going to buy you a neck ribbon."

"Why, blue would be the most suitable for me, I think."

"Well, but mother, which should you think was the best, a neck ribbon or a book?"

"What book? It would depend something on that."

"Why, as good a book as a fellow could get for thirty-seven cents," says Tom.

"Well, on the whole, I think I should prefer the ribbon."

"There, Ned," says Tom, coming down the stairs, "I've found out just what mother wants, without telling her a word about it."

But the crowning mystery of all the great family arcana, the thing that was going to astonish papa and mamma past all recovery, was certain projected book marks, that little Ally was going to be made to work for them. This bold scheme was projected by Miss Emma, and she had armed herself with a whole paper of sugar plums, to be used as adjuvants to moral influence, in case the discouragements of the undertaking should prove too much for Ally's patience.

As to Ally, she felt all the dignity of the enterprise--her whole little soul was absorbed in it. Seated on Emma's knee, with the needle between her little fat fingers, and holding the board very tight, as if she was afraid it would run away from her, she very gravely and carefully stuck the needle in every place but the right--pricked her pretty fingers--ate sugar plums--stopping now to pat Rover, and now to stroke pussy--letting fall her thimble, and bustling down to pick it up--occasionally taking

an episodic race round the room with Rover, during which time Sister Emma added a stitch or two to the work.

I would not wish to have been required, on oath, to give in my undisguised opinion as to the number of stitches the little one really put into her present, but she had a most genuine and firm conviction that she worked every stitch of it herself; and when, on returning from a scamper with pussy, she found one or two letters finished, she never doubted that the whole was of her own execution, and, of course, thought that working book marks was one of the most delightful occupations in the world. It was all that her little heart could do to keep from papa and mamma the wonderful secret. Every evening she would bustle about her father with an air of such great mystery, and seek to pique his curiosity by most skilful hints, such as,--

"I know somefing! but I s'ant tell you."

"Not tell me! O Ally! Why not?"

"O, it's about--a New 'Ear's pes----"

"Ally, Ally," resounds from several voices, "don't you tell."

"No, I s'ant--but you are going to have a New 'Ear's peasant, and so is mamma, and you can't dess what it is."

"Can't I?"

"No, and I s'ant tell you."

"Now, Ally," said papa, pretending to look aggrieved.

"Well, it's going to be--somefin worked."

"Ally, be careful," said Emma.

"Yes, I'll be very tareful; it's somefin--weall pretty--somefin to put in a book. You'll find out about it by and by."

"I think I'm in a fair way to," said the father.

The conversation now digressed to other subjects, and the nurse came in to take Ally to bed; who, as she kissed her father, in the fulness of her heart, added a fresh burst of information. "Papa," said she, in an earnest whisper, "that fin is about so long"--measuring on her fat little arm.

"A fin, Ally? Why, you are not going to give me a fish, are you?"

"I mean that thing," said Ally, speaking the word with great effort, and getting quite red in the face.

"O, that thing; I beg pardon, my lady; that puts another face on the communication," said the father, stroking her head fondly, as he bade her good night.

"The child can talk plainer than she does," said the father, "but we are all so delighted with her little Hottentot dialect, that I don't know but she will keep it up till she is twenty."

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It now wanted only three days of the New Year, when a sudden and deadly shadow fell on the dwelling, late so busy and joyous--a shadow from the grave; and it fell on the flower of the garden--the star--the singing bird--the loved and loving Ally.

She was stricken down at once, in the flush of her innocent enjoyment, by a fever, which from the first was ushered in with symptoms the most fearful.

All the bustle of preparation ceased--the presents were forgotten or lay about unfinished, as if no one now had a heart to put their hand to any thing; while up in her little crib lay the beloved one, tossing and burning with restless fever, and without power to recognize any of the loved faces that bent over her.

The doctor came twice a day, with a heavy step, and a face in which

anxious care was too plainly written; and while he was there each member of the circle hung with anxious, imploring faces about him, as if to entreat him to save their darling; but still the deadly disease held on its relentless course, in spite of all that could be done.

"I thought myself prepared to meet God's will in any form it might come," said Winthrop to me; "but this one thing I had forgotten. It never entered into my head that my little Ally could die."

The evening before New Year's, the deadly disease seemed to be progressing more rapidly than ever; and when the doctor came for his evening call, he found all the family gathered in mournful stillness around the little crib.

"I suppose," said the father, with an effort to speak calmly, "that this may be her last night with us."

The doctor made no answer, and the whole circle of brothers and sisters broke out into bitter weeping.

"It is just possible that she may live till to-morrow," said the doctor.

"To-morrow--her birthday!" said the mother. "O Ally, Ally!"

Wearily passed the watches of that night. Each brother and sister had kissed the pale little cheek, to bid farewell, and gone to their rooms,

to sob themselves to sleep; and the father and mother and doctor alone watched around the bed. O, what a watch is that which despairing love keeps, waiting for death! Poor Rover, the companion of Ally's gayer hours, resolutely refused to be excluded from the sick chamber. Stretched under the little crib, he watched with unsleeping eyes every motion of the attendants, and as often as they rose to administer medicine, or change the pillow, or bathe the head, he would rise also, and look anxiously over the side of the crib, as if he understood all that was passing.

About an hour past midnight, the child began to change; her moans became fainter and fainter, her restless movements ceased, and a deep and heavy sleep settled upon her.

The parents looked wistfully on the doctor. "It is the last change," he said; "she will probably pass away before the daybreak."

Heavier and deeper grew that sleep, and to the eye of the anxious watchers the little face grew paler and paler; yet by degrees the breathing became regular and easy, and a gentle moisture began to diffuse itself over the whole surface. A new hope began to dawn on the minds of the parents, as they pointed out these symptoms to the doctor.

"All things are possible with God," said he, in answer to the inquiring looks he met, "and it may be that she will yet live."

An hour more passed, and the rosy glow of the New Year's morning began to blush over the snowy whiteness of the landscape. Far off from the window could be seen the kindling glow of a glorious sunrise, looking all the brighter for the dark pines that half veiled it from view; and now a straight and glittering beam shot from the east into the still chamber. It fell on the golden hair and pale brow of the child, lighting it up as if an angel had smiled on it; and slowly the large blue eyes unclosed, and gazed dreamily around.

"Ally, Ally," said the father, bending over her, trembling with excitement.

"You are going to have a New Year's present," whispered the little one, faintly smiling.

"I believe from my heart that you are, sir!" said the doctor, who stood with his fingers on her pulse; "she has passed through the crisis of the disease, and we may hope."

A few hours turned this hope to glad certainty; for with the elastic rapidity of infant life, the signs of returning vigor began to multiply, and ere evening the little one was lying in her father's arms, answering with languid smiles to the overflowing proofs of tenderness which every member of the family was showering upon her.

"See, my children," said the father gently, "this dear one is our

New Year's present. What can we render to God in return?"