

‘A Tale For Christmas’

It was on a bleak, cold, cheerless evening – of the 24th of December, 1835 – that a young man, of handsome features, but with a thoughtful expression of countenance, entered a small town in one of the Midland counties of England. He travelled on foot, and with a kind of knapsack, containing his little wardrobe, slung over his shoulder. His manners and bearing were evidently superior to his outward appearance, which was even worse than what is generally denominated ‘shabby genteel’; for his boots were broken, his garments (once of good material and fashionable cut) were patched in several places and exhibited unmended rents in others, and his attire was moreover so scanty that it afforded but a sorry protection against the icy blast. And on his high, open, but thoughtful brow there appeared to be traced some secret, which almost extinguished the light of hope that, in strange contrast, gleamed in the large black eyes.

The town was gay and bustling, in spite of the inclemency of the weather – for it was Christmas Eve ! The shops were decked out in their usual attractive manner at this season; and the thrifty housewife – the poor hard-working girl – the matron in easy circumstances – the busy servant-maid – the staid house-keeper – the good old grandmamma – and the kind mother, – and also the lazy, dissipated and improvident portion of the community, were all abroad making purchases for the morrow’s festivity. Yes – even the improvident seemed to have laid aside for once their usual habits, and to have secured the means of enjoying their Christmas Day in the good old English style. But the way-worn traveller whom we left entering the town – was he also certain of passing the next day amidst good cheer and pleasant companions ?

He passed through the principal street of the town – purposely walking in the middle of the road, so as to avoid the glare of light which streamed from the shop-windows and the private dwellings on either side. Perchance he was afraid of being recognized by those who had known him in happier days.

Arrived at the outskirts of the town, he relaxed his pace and approached with some degree of caution a handsome-looking house that stood by itself in the midst of a rather spacious garden. It is true that the fair faces of the flowers had departed from that spot – chased away by the rude breath of winter: it is true that the cold breeze made sullen music among the naked boughs; – but cheerfulness seemed to reign within the dwelling – at least, if one might judge by the store of good things that the various tradesmen have just delivered to the door, and by the reflection of the blazing fire on the warm red curtains drawn over the parlour-window.

‘Ah ! they can be happy, then – without me !’ murmured the wanderer to himself – not in bitterness, but in profound melancholy and heart-felt sorrow. Then he turned away, and directed his steps towards a cottage which stood at a little distance.

He knocked at the door, which was immediately opened by an old woman, – not one of those repulsive creatures whose appearance is immediately suggested to the imagination by the term ‘old woman’, but a grand-motherly, good-humoured, kind-hearted dame, whose smiling face compelled forgetfulness of the fact that she was no longer young and pretty. She was neatly dressed, and the open door revealed the interior of a comfortably furnished abode for a person in a humble sphere of life.

She held a candle in her hand; and the moment the light streamed upon the young man’s countenance, the good dame started with mingled surprise and joy, exclaiming ‘Good heavens ! Mr Gerald –is it indeed you ?’

‘Yes, nurse – it is I – the wanderer, the outcast !’ returned the young man, not attempting to subdue the sigh of anguish which rose slowly but painfully from his breast.

‘Oh ! don’t speak like that, Mr Gerald –pray, don’t now !’ exclaimed the old lady. ‘But walk in sir – walk in. I have so much – Oh ! so much to tell you; and I am sure you must have even more to tell me.’

Gerald followed the nurse (for such she had been to him in his infancy and youth, and by that almost endearing name he had ever been accustomed to call her) into her comfortable little parlour; and she instantly began, without a word of preface, to cover the little round table with a snow-white napkin, and place thereon a cold meat pie, a loaf of bread, and a jug of home-brewed ale – for she saw at a glance that her guest was not in condition to render it probable that he would refuse to partake of her cheer.

But ere he even sate down near the warm fire, which was roaring half-way up the chimney – a regular Christmas fire, even in that little cottage –he suddenly exclaimed ‘Nurse, my parents ? Are they both –’

‘Both well – and will be happy, now that you are come back, Mr Gerald’, was the hasty reply – for Mrs Brown (such was the venerable widow’s name) perceived that the young man was almost choking with painful suspense. ‘But shall I just run across and prepare them –’

‘No – not now – not this evening !’ cried Gerald. ‘It must be for to-morrow, nurse – because to-morrow is the anniversary of the birth of that Saviour who sacrificed himself to redeem mankind, and the hearts of those who believe in Him are ever disposed to forgive and forget on such a day !’

‘Oh ! Mr Gerald, your good father and your kind mother need not even that holy influence to induce them to receive you with open arms !’ urged the nurse.

‘But I am not prepared to meet them to-night,’ returned the young man: ‘no – I must commune with my heart on the eve of the memorable day which, I hope, is to prove one of pardon and

oblivion for the past – happiness for the present – and hope for the future ! In this at least, dear nurse, permit me to have my own way. And now –one more question: – is – is *she* –'

'Miss Lucy Adair is *still* Miss Lucy Adair,' exclaimed the nurse, with a sly and good-humoured laugh – for she was delighted in her inmost soul to be able to relieve the anxiety which she knew to be hanging like a weight of lead upon the young man's heart. 'Yes, Mr Gerald – Miss Lucy is not only Miss Lucy *still*, but, to my mind, she will never change her name unless it is for that of Franklin.'

'Oh, nurse – you have inspired me with hopes which – but I tremble lest they should never be realized !' he exclaimed, covering his face with his hands as if the visions of felicity just opened to his view were too bright – too dazzling to gaze upon.

'Come, dear Mr Gerald – don't give way to your feelings in this manner,' cried the good-natured nurse. 'Miss Lucy has had two or three good offers during the four years that you have been absent; but she has refused them all –'

'Adorable girl !' ejaculated Franklin, now yielding to all the enthusiasm of the most delicious aspirations.

'And it was only yesterday,' continued the nurse, ' – only yesterday, Mr Gerald,' she added impressively, 'that the dear young lady honoured me with a visit, and as she sate in that very arm-chair which I have stood out for you, she spoke of you with tears and blushes – and she assured me in confidence – in strict confidence, mind – but I don't care about telling *you* the secret –'

'What did she say, nurse ?' asked Gerald, with feverish impatience.

'That she had a kind of conviction that you would soon return – and that when you did come back –'

'You hesitate, nurse ! but did she not say that I should return a wiser and a better man – reformed – purged by four years of suffering, probation, and ineffectual toil in the great forests of North America –'

'She knew that you would become worthy of your parents' love – worthy of her hand,' said the nurse in an impressive tone.

'Yes – and I am thus worthy !' cried the young man, drawing himself proudly up to his full, commanding height. 'And, thank God ! I have never – even in my wildest days – done a deed which has left an indelible stigma upon my name. No: – I was a spendthrift – a gamester – a dissipated youth; but I have never perpetrated an act strictly deserving the harsh epithet of *dishonourable*. My follies have bene great – oh ! very great; but crime is unknown to me.'

‘And it is for this reason that Miss Lucy has never ceased to love you – never ceased to think well of you,’ said good Mrs Brown. ‘But sit down, and partake of my humble fare – ’

‘Humble, indeed !’ exclaimed Gerald: ‘it is a delicious banquet to one who has been so harshly knocked about the world as I ! But ere I suffer food to pass my lips, let me ask another question. Does Lucy – do my parents know of the sad reverses which I have experienced in America, in the strenuous but vain endeavour to regain that fortune which was left too early to my own control, and which I shamefully dissipated ? In a word, have my various letters been received *at home* ?’

‘They have,’ replied the nurse. ‘And now that your mind is more easy – or ought to be – sit down, and enjoy yourself.’

Gerald placed himself in the arm-chair in which his beloved had sate the day before; and he ate with a good appetite. While he was thus engaged, the nurse mulled a bottle of elderberry wine, judiciously adding a little spice to enhance the flavour. She then filled a large tumbler, and forced Gerald to drink the generous liquor. He obeyed her earnest solicitation, and even ventured upon a second glass – on condition that good Mrs Brown would keep him company. She agreed, and imbibed a small quantity – but it was merely to make her young guest feel more at his ease.

Now whether it were the effects of the hot spiced wine, or the overpowering effect of fatigue, – or both united, – that pressed with leaden weight upon Gerald’s eyelids, we cannot exactly say: – but this we know, that a drowsy sensation, which he vainly endeavoured to shake off, came over him; and finding that it was useless to wrestle with this somniferous feeling, he resigned himself to its advances. In a few minutes he slept soundly in that arm-chair.

Presently he began to fancy that he was the spectator of a strange phantasmagorian exhibition which was taking place before him; and his mental eyes were now immovably fixed upon the great Stage of Life. Over that stage a long procession was passing, marshalled, as it seemed, by a genius of repulsive aspect, and having a banner on which was inscribed the single but significant world – ‘EVIL’.

First appeared a king and a queen, wearing crowns upon their heads and carrying sceptres in their hands, and with numerous pages to bear the sweeping trains of their crimson and ermine robes. Smiles were upon their countenances, as they acknowledged the shouts and ceremonial cries of the people amidst whom they passed; but, by some unaccountable means, Gerald could read the secrets of these sovereigns’ hearts. Then, to his ineffable surprise – he found that they were far – very far – from happy. They were haunted by the conviction that they did not do their duty – that they compelled a starving people to supply them with countless treasures – that they were luxuriating in the enjoyment of all the pleasures which earth’s produce could yield or human ingenuity devise, while the millions around them were literally in want of the common necessities of life. They also trembled for the crowns which they wore, because they knew the

people to be stronger than even themselves and all their armies – and they kept continually muttering to themselves, ‘Perhaps another year, or even another week may see us reduced to an abyss as low as our elevation is now high !’

Next came a train of nobles – great dignitaries of the state, ministers, generals, admirals, and councillors, – all clad in magnificent robes or splendid uniforms, all wearing coronets or plumed hats, whereon glittered a reflection of the radiant halo which surrounded the king and queen who had preceded them. Again the people shouted and applauded: but Gerald could read the hearts of these great personages – and he saw with continued surprise, that they were unhappy. Jealousy of each other – a sense of insecurity in their high positions – an alarm lest some sudden convulsion in society should sweep away their wealth, their titles, and their honours – and a host of petty feelings, such as envies, ungratified desires, disappointed ambition in particular points, the consciousness of utter worthlessness unduly exalted, and such-like sentiments raged like burning coals heaped around their hearts.

Next came men of an inferior rank, but of vast riches, and whose presence seemed to make quite as powerful an impression upon the multitude as either royalty or aristocracy had previously done. But when Gerald scrutinized their hearts, he found that they were as unhappy as the rest. Disease tortured some – a consciousness of ignorance, of coarseness of manner, and physical repulsiveness oppressed others, they well knowing that they were tolerated in the fashionable world in consequence of their wealth – and others, again, were scared by the conviction that a prodigal heir would in a few months dissipate, when they themselves should be no more, the piles of gold which had occupied them half a century to accumulate.

Next came a crowd of merchants and tradesmen of the upper class – all individuals whose names rendered a bill as current as a bank-note. But in their hearts they were not happy ! Some recoiled from the thought of a particular speculation into which they had been led, and which threatened to prove a ruinous failure; others were a prey to the liveliest anxiety because no tidings had been received of their ships; a third portion apprehended the stoppage of some great firm, whose bankruptcy would redound with equal effect upon themselves; and a fourth section, being positively insolvent, dreaded the approach of a certain day, whereon must fall due acceptances which they could not possibly honour.

And afterwards came a huge mass of the various smaller trades or employments – represented by persons whose physical existence was deteriorated by the tainted breath of crowded cities: house-painters, afflicted by a particular cholera; tailors, pale and sickly, with contracted limbs; bakers, dying by inches through inhaling a noxious gas, living in an atmosphere of unnatural heat, and compelled by their avocation to turn night into day; clerks, who are wasting away on high stools and leaning over hard desks; workmen in cutlery, whose lungs are hopelessly affected by the inhalation of the impalpable dust of steel; milliners, pale-cheeked, with short hacking coughs, and who, in toiling with their needle, are actually hemming their own winding-sheet;

seamstresses, sewing shirts for the shop-sellers and drawing their own heart's blood with every stitch they make; journey-men tailors, working for the great clothing marts and resembling skeletons dressed up in garments through some hideous mockery at death; factory-boys and girls, pining away rapidly with the hectic of consumption on their cheeks; miners, affected with the black-spit, and craving for the pure fresh air of heaven; and various other descriptions of the sons and daughters of toil !

Lastly came the tribe of paupers, – half-famished men and women, compelled to walk apart from their children in this strange procession of Life's Stage; wearing the garb of poverty – the coarse grey, which is also worn by felons in the hulks and in the criminal prisons !

The entire procession had now passed by: and for a few minutes Gerald was gazing on vacancy. But at length the sounds of inspiring music burst upon his ears; and a genius of heavenly countenance appeared, waving a banner whereon was written in letters of gold the word – 'GOOD'.

This radiant being marshalled another procession, representing the different sections of society in the same order as before. But this time, all were happy. The king and queen wore the bay-leaves of peace instead of the golden and jewelled diadems; and their attendants were not employed in the menial office of sustaining their robes. The people shouted their applause with unfeigned sincerity; and the king and queen smiled joyously, because they knew they deserved this welcome. The aristocracy, which followed, were justly proud of the titles that they bore, because those honours had been well earned in the service of the country. Next came the wealthy merchants and substantial tradesmen – all happy in the conviction that success must await their commercial enterprises, illegitimate speculation having yielded to prudent and justifiable undertakings, and new laws having removed the restrictions formerly placed in the international exchange of the world's produce. The inferior grades of tradesmen and other industrious classes came next, rejoicing in good wages, invigorated by the wholesome air breathed in the parks and pleasure-grounds laid out for the people, happy in the abridgement of their toils to a legitimate length each day, and blessed by an influx of provisions which liberal trade-laws had admitted from all parts of the earth. Last of all came the aged, the invalid, and the poor – no longer smarting under the stigma of the workhouse-badge of pauperism, but decently dressed in garments suitable to their own tastes, and their hearts cheered with the comforts of the alms-houses in which they dwelt.

This second procession passed away; and during the pause which ensued, Gerald felt a serene and holy delight to think that the disagreeable impressions made upon his mind by the first Act in Life's Drama should have been so unexpectedly dissipated by the improved aspect of the second. But he had not much time to reflect; for again there was a sound as of myriad footsteps approaching the stage; and while the first procession emerged from one side, the second deployed from the other. Then they were arrayed as two armies preparing for battle; and the two

generals – the Genii of EVIL and GOOD – advanced to meet each other. It was not however in hostile encounter that they thus met; but to reason with each other. The Genius of Evil argued that his system was the better; and the Genius of Good ably justified his own particular administration of the world’s affairs. The Genius of Evil, lacking logic, grew insolent and overbearing; but the Genius of Good did not lose his temper for a moment. The former was nettled by the calm composure of the latter, and flew into a violent passion. At that moment a hoary-headed, but gay and laughing old man, riding upon a goat, and bearing in his hands a huge bowl whereon was inscribed the word ‘WASSAIL’, suddenly appeared upon the stage. He was attended by a jovial crew of choice spirits, bearing the luxuries of the season; – for this venerable man’s name was OLD CHRISTMAS, and he and his attendant genii were crowned with holly and mistletoe.

The moment he appeared, all argument ceased between the spirits of Good and Evil: the happy countenance of the former became still more radiant with smiles; and that of the latter expanded into an expression of kindred feelings.

Then Old Christmas raised his voice, and spoke thus: – ‘So long as the world exists, will there be differences of opinion between the advocates of social and political systems. But there is one day in each year when I alone am King; and that day is now at hand. Then let all animosities and dissensions cease; forget your antagonism for four-and twenty hours: and unite together in friendship and fraternal love at the banquets which I am about to spread for your enjoyment !’

These words were received with deafening plaudits from both sides; and the attendants on Old Christmas hastened to prepare the festal table. And a rare banquet it was to which the good old man had thus bade all sects and all conflicting parties in the Christian world ! But before the feast began, Old Christmas made a signal; and all his guests – the king, the queen, the noble, the rich man, the merchant, the tradesman, the operative, the journeyman, the milliner, and the pauper, on both sides of the world’s stage – sank upon their knees to mingle their voices in one general thanksgiving for human salvation ! All distinctions of rank were at the moment forgotten: and the king and the beggar breathed the same air, which wafted their common prayer to the throne of the Omnipotent !

Then commenced the joyous banquet; and it was astonishing to see how the presence of Old Christmas diffused around such feelings of contentment, benevolence, and love, that men who had long been mortal enemies spontaneously thrust out their hands to each other, and the highest peer was rejoiced to behold the felicity which now inspired the heart of the lowest pauper.

‘Oh !’ thought Gerald, as he contemplated the scene, ‘that this happy Christmas could last for ever ! – that thus good old man could always preside at a banquet at which should be gathered all the conflicting sects and the antagonistic parties of Christendom !’

At that moment the entire scene changed: – Gerald Franklin opened his eyes, and – behold ! he was seated in the arm-chair in the nurse’s cottage.

The light of day had displaced the artificial lustre of the candles; and the good old woman was bustling about to prepare the breakfast.

‘What !’ ejaculated Gerald, starting up, ‘is it indeed morning ?’

‘It is past eight o’clock, and the bells will soon ring for church,’ answered Mrs Brown. ‘I tried hard to wake you last night,’ she added, with a merry laugh; ‘for I had prepared a comfortable bed for you in the little back-room: but I could not rouse you, and indeed, it would have been a pity – for you slept so sound, and so peaceful, and so quiet – and every now and then you smiled so sweetly in your slumber – that it would have been a sin to disturb you.’

‘Oh ! glad am I indeed, dear nurse, that you suffered me to sleep on – and to sleep there,’ exclaimed Gerald: ‘for I have enjoyed a most ravishing dream, – a dream that has shown me what the world *ought to be*, as well as what *it is*, – a dream, too, that has exhibited to me, in the most beautiful colours, the humanizing influence of Christmas ! Ah ! now I am nerved – now I am prepared to fly to my parents – to cast myself at their feet – to say to them ‘*The Prodigal is returned, an altered being: pardon, dear parents – pardon !*’

The old lady did not attempt to check the young man’s enthusiasm: she did not rightly comprehend all he had just said to her; but she understood enough to feel convinced that his thoughts had fallen into a proper channel; and she was contented.

Immediately after breakfast, which he ate with a good appetite, Gerald Franklin repaired to the residence of his father. The domestic, who opened the door, and who had long been in the services of Mr Franklin, was overjoyed to behold his young master once more: but Gerald made him a sign to moderate his enthusiasm; and, when the faithful fellow was in a condition to speak collectedly, the prodigal son learnt that there visitors at the house – and those visitors were Sir Robert and Lady Adair, with their beautiful daughter Lucy.

He could have wished to meet his parents alone in the first instance: but, determined not to shrink from the ordeal before him, he desired to be shown to the apartment where his father and mother and their guests were assembled.

In a few moments he entered their presence: and now a most touching scene ensued. Lucy almost fainted with excess of joy at Gerald’s return; and Mrs Franklin without a moment’s hesitation clasped her son to her bosom. Sir Robert and Lady Adair cast appealing glances upon the father at whose feet the young man now hastened to throw himself. Another moment – and all was forgiven.

Oh ! what a happy Christmas was passed at Mr Franklin's house on this occasion ! It was not the excellence of the wines, – it was not the luxury of the good cheer, which diffused such heart-felt, unadulterated joy throughout the abode, – but it was that the parents were blest by the restoration of a son now in every way worthy of their affections – that Lucy was enabled to receive a suitor deserving of her love – and that Sir Robert and Lady Adair smiled upon him as the future husband of their darling daughter !

Years have elapsed since the events which we have just related; but often and often have Gerald Franklin and his lovely wife visited the cottage of worthy Mrs Brown, who still lives to witness their happiness and fondle their children; and never – never has he forgotten to point to the old arm-chair in which he slept through the entire night – observing, 'It was there, dearest Lucy, that I was visited by the best thoughts which ever were sent by heavens to purify the human soul !'

In conclusion, gentle reader, permit us to wish you a merry Christmas and a happy New Year !