

### The Christmas Gift.

By M. D. BRIDGE.

Around the Christmas tree stood,  
And watched the children's faces,  
As they their little gifts received.  
With childish awe and glee,  
We group folks had our share of fun  
In making one another merry,  
And laughed to see the juveniles  
Kiss the "holy berries."  
Beside me sat the "holly berries,"  
A lovely dark-eyed maiden,  
While near her stood our little Eve,  
Her arms with love-gifts laden,  
Until around the room she went,  
The blue-eyed baby, shyly,  
And, blushing red, into each lap  
Her offerings dropping shyly.  
But when to me the darling came  
All empty-handed she stood,  
And when I asked, "Why slight me thus?"  
She answered, "Oh, because we  
We dinna know you tumbling here!"  
And then, with blue eyes shining,  
To sister's side she went, her arms  
Her sister's neck entwining.  
"But something has happened," said I,  
"My Christmas heart to gladden."  
A shade of thought the lady face  
Seemed presently to sadden.  
Till all at once, with gleeful laugh—  
"Oh! I know what I'll do, Sir!  
I've only sister Bessie to send,  
But I'll do my best, Sir!"  
And the laugh that came from all  
I drew my new gift to me,  
While with flushed cheeks her eyes met mine,  
And sent a thrill all through me.  
"Oh! blessed little Eve!" cried I,  
"You gift I welcome gladly!"  
The little one looked up at me,  
Half wondering, half shy,  
Then to her father straight I turned,  
And humbly asked his blessing  
Upon my Christmas gift, the while  
My long-stored hopes confessing.  
And as his aged hands were raised  
Above our heads in benediction,  
The blessed-time of Christmas  
Had seemed to me so holy.

### THE SAILOR'S RETURN.

A Christmas Story.

It was Christmas eve. For an hour or more I had been seated before the chimney-place gazing into the fire, indulging in a retrospection. I am a bachelor, but Christmas is not the only day I devote to dreaming; for I am one of those individuals who live much in the past, and often, as twilight deepens into darkness, I sit peering back into the hazy past, in fancy watching again scenes which bring to my vision a sweet childish face, framed in a profusion of yellow ringlets, a face that made an impression on my boyish heart, which time can never efface. That awake within me the first wild thrills of love—true, incalculable love. A face too heavenly for this world, so God called it away early. When I looked upon it for the last time—before the coffin lid shut it forever from my view—my young heart chilled within me, and I fervently prayed that I, too, might die. From the moment that I heard the harsh earth thud upon the coffin that contained the form of my child love, I became something of a recluse. I had no friends, and for many a few days previous to the opening of my story, intending to return on the following day; but before I had been in town two hours an old acquaintance of mine—the one who had been my first tutor to pay me a visit; I was obliged to forego all business and remain in my room in the Cliffville Hotel. Christmas eve found me much improved. But the prospect of spending the day at a village tavern, where I was a stranger, did not present to me an unpleasant aspect, although a sense of extreme loneliness stole over me, and the silence and gloom of the room (for I was not quite dark oppressed) made me put some wood upon the fast expiring coals and lighted up my lamp. I paced up and down the narrow room to keep warm. By degrees my thoughts drifted into a strange channel, and suddenly, and for the first time in my existence, I realized what a useless, selfish being I was—that I had been looking at life through a defective glass. I was simply Isaac Newton, a moody old bachelor, with an intellect far superior to the average, but possessing a goodly stock of this world's goods, which I had managed and used for the gratification of my own selfish whims and fancies, never for a moment thinking of the want and suffering around me. I would turn over a new leaf and date it Christmas eve, 1855.

A few moments later found me carefully picking my way over the slippery pavement of the main street of the town. In the store-windows, which were illuminated as brightly as a plentiful array of oil-lamps and metal reflectors would permit, articles of every description were displayed in the most enticing manner. Groups of men, women, and children were collected before the most attractive windows, gazing admiringly at the wondrous things that were hurried hither and thither laden with numerous packages, containing articles destined to make both young and old hearts bound with pleasure on the morrow. The jingle of bells, the merry laughing of children, the rustle of snow, the peals of laughter that reached my ear, and the happy smiling faces that met my gaze at every turn, combined to make a scene that I had never before witnessed. At last, when I had been walking quite briskly for some moments, humming half aloud old lines from a forgotten book, I forgot my mission, when the distance between store-windows, and the infrequency of street lamps, notified me that I was approaching the suburbs of the town.

Going back away, I had stopped opposite the show-window of a little confection and toy-store. Before this window, looking with longing eyes at the wondrous things, stood a little girl, thin and poorly clad, and holding a hand in his, an old man with a sorrowful, careworn face.

"Oh! grandpa, art thou beautiful!" exclaimed the child. "See that doll with light hair, isn't she lovely? I wish she were mine; but you can't buy her for me, can you?"

"Not to-night," replied the old man, with a half-suppressed sigh. "But some day, when I can afford to buy you a finer one—when grandpa gets rich."

He smiled faintly, then turned his eyes from the window and gazed away into the darkness. The light fell upon his face, where I could easily discern the deep traces of care, disappointment, and age.

"Oh! how I wish I had some of those candies, and the doll, and that wagon with red wheels, and—but I forget. It is wrong to make such wishes. And Maria has told me that I must not covet

anything—that to do so is very wicked. Come, Grandpa." And she turned away sadly. "Let us go home. I don't want to be wicked, but I can't help it. I see so many pretty things. The old man permitted himself to be led from the window by the child, and hand in hand they walked slowly away. For a moment I stood looking after them, then, acting upon the impulse, I went in pursuit. After proceeding a short distance along the main thoroughfare, they turned off to a narrow street, and following I saw them enter a small and rather dilapidated house, which stood some distance back from the street, with a courtyard before it. I noted its appearance carefully. It was built of wood, two stories high, and looked to be considerably older than a century. A picket fence, minus many of the pickets, with a rusty gate, which swung backward and forward in the strong wind, discouraging the most exuberant imagination, divided the plot of ground upon which it stood from the street. Satisfied that I could find the house again without difficulty, I retraced my steps, and was soon standing before the counter of the little store, into whose window the old man had just passed. I saw so wistfully but a few minutes previous. When I stepped out into the street again it was with a large brown paper bundle in my arm, the contents of which consisted of the coveted doll, a miniature cradle, the wagon with red wheels, a white woolly dog, with protruding glass eyes and a red paper collar, a cat that meowed when spoken to, and numerous other sweets.

Though the package was a cumbersome one, and on several occasions came near being knocked out of my hands, I carried it with me, and the tongue of the wagon would persist in getting into complications with my legs, I must say I never felt lighter of heart, or better able to contend with the ordinary annoyances of mankind, than on this little occasion.

Back to the old-fashioned house I returned, but I was not destined to reach it without two complete "trips." From the corner, who following the example of the child, had gone to sleep. I was the first to break the silence.

"Where was the Starlight bound?" I ventured, hoping to draw forth the story.

"To the northern seas," replied the old man. "She was a whaler, and as pretty a craft as ever sailed. Why, sir, it was considered an honor to be one of her crew. For a while I was the first mate of the Dolphin, a staunch, large-sailing brig, that could stow away a larger cargo than any craft that sailed from California, yet he had often expressed a wish to go to sea with the Dolphin, and on a Sunday about sundown. We were seated around the table in this very room, that evening, a happy party, listening to William's description of the strange and wonderful things he had seen and done in the Arctic seas, when there came a knock on the door. Maria, there—and he pointed to the slumbering little woman—"opened the door, and the next instant a man stepped in, the captain of the Starlight. He drew up a chair and joined the party, and entered into conversation and told us many strange and interesting stories. At last, as he arose to go, he turned to me and said, 'I have asked whether it was true that he had made his last voyage on the Dolphin.' 'Yes,' replied our boy. 'Three voyages on a slow tub like her are quite enough for me. I don't want to go to sea with you like the Starlight,' inquired the captain. 'There's not a craft that would suit me better,' he answered. 'I want a mate,' the captain went on to explain. 'I don't want a mate with a fever, and as I know you to be a good sailor, I dropped in to-night to know whether you will ship with me?' William's face lighted up as he answered, 'With no man sooner than yourself, and on no craft with more pleasure than the Starlight.'

"The next day everything was arranged, and William was the first mate of the handsome little brig, which sailed two days after upon a six months' voyage. The day after the departure, when she left, composed of fathers, mothers, sisters, brothers, wives, and sweethearts, collected there to say 'Good-bye! God speed, and a safe voyage.' Days rolled into weeks, and weeks into months, and the time began to speak of the return of the Starlight, and to look toward the horizon, expecting each day to sight her sail, but no sail appeared except that of some fishing smack or other small vessel in the distance. So six, seven, eight, nine, and ten months rolled away, and yet no news of the overdue vessel reached us, and the people began to display anxiety and to scan the horizon for the ship. At last, one day, a steamer, but the trim little vessel never showed her peaks above the horizon. It was not until two years had sped by, that all hope died. Oh, sir! I can assure you that hearts were numerous then! Our home was no longer the same; a heavy cloud hung over it, casting a gloom where everything had been bright and happy before. We saw the face that had been the lightest of all, growing each day paler and paler. It was a long time before I fairly realized that our boy had gone from us forever. I have often found myself gazing on the ocean, with a nervous feeling at my heart, thinking, 'Perhaps he'll leave in sight to-day,' but the remembrance of those two years of vain waiting and hope would flash upon my mind, and then my heart would sink, with a dull sinking pain, and I would say, 'his wife, sir—died, the clouds seemed to fall thicker about us. I should have lost all heart, had it not been that the child was left us. Each day some new trouble overtook us, and each day we were obliged to mortgage our little home here."

The fire was dying down—only a few coals smoldered among the ashes. The wind sang dolefully, and the old house till doors creaked, and the beat in chorus a loud tattoo. I was much affected by the old man's story. His face, so deeply furrowed by age and care, his sunken eyes now moist with tears, were a picture of grief by the light of the oil-lamps on the mantle, making a sad and almost weird picture. He had fallen into one of his fits of morbidness again, his eyes fixed upon the fire, and his hands were set rocking backward and forward, in low chair, nervously picking at the thread in the hem of her apron, while the mysterious female and the child slumbered about him. Suddenly a gust, stronger than any which had preceded it, shook the house from foundation to roof, so that even the dishes in the pantry added to the general clatter of doors and windows and blinds. All at once, the door swung open, and I entered the apartment dashed open, and the freezing wind, bearing with it a quantity of drifting snow, rushed madly in. The sudden change of temperature awoke the sleeper, and he started up with a start. Pushing the child from her lap, she sprang up and rushed toward the door. For a moment she stared fixedly out into the darkness, with a look of terror upon her face, and

then uttering a terrific shriek, she sank to the floor.

Hastening forward, I was confronted by a tall man, with a shaggy beard, dressed in a half-civilian, half-sailor costume. He stepped by me, and crossing, with extended arms, toward the old couple, exclaimed—"Father! mother! don't you know me?" The old man's face was pale as death, and he fell upon his knees. His wife answered in his stead, "Yes."

"And her mother?" I resumed.

"Died," answered she, "three years ago. She never was very strong, and when she realized that all hope was vain, she seemed to lose interest in everything. We did all we could for her, but as the doctor said, there was no medicine in this world that could save her. One night she called us to her, and told us that she was going to leave us, and wished to bid us all farewell; and when she saw the tears rise to our eyes—for we looked up as if she had been our own—she locked up, and smilingly said, 'Father, mother, don't mourn for me; I shall be happy, very happy, soon—for I am going to meet him, my husband, in a land where nothing can ever part us.' She kissed her tenderly, and with his father's name unfinished on her lips passed quietly away."

I was much moved by this recital, and as I was far away from the ocean, I overcame the choking sensation I felt in my throat, and expressed the moisture that came to my eyes. The old man having risen from his reverie, was surprised to find me weeping, and he felt a desire to know more of William Hemphill than the sad entry upon the family register told. I listened to the story of the young man's life, and the way he had made his fortune, and the manner in which he had made his application to the Virginia navy, and how he had secured a commission as an English seaman, he at once went in quest of a vessel about sailing for some American port. The Virginia was an American ship. The captain, a few good seamen to complete her crew, the captain informed him where he made his application. He was not until he had discovered she was a slaver, bound for the coast of Africa. After a tedious, stormy voyage the ship put in at Quitta, a little town on the Atlantic coast of Africa. 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