

# The New Northwest.

CHRISTMAS NUMBER.

FREE SPEECH. FREE PRESS. FREE PEOPLE.

VOLUME XI.—NO. 15.

PORTLAND, OREGON, THURSDAY, DECEMBER 22, 1881.

PER YEAR—\$3 00.

## A CHRISTMAS LETTER, AND WHAT CAME OF IT.

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Ting-a-ling-ling!  
"Answer the door-bell, Eva," said Mrs. Marchmount, while a momentary silence fell upon the group of merry-makers in the spacious parlors, and the Reverend Silas Raymond paused in the midst of unloading and distributing the numerous packages from a bountifully furnished and beautifully illuminated Christmas tree.

"Let the bell-boy do it," was the petulant reply of the spoiled young lady.

Ting-a-ling-ling-ling-g-g!

"Obey me instantly!" said Mrs. Marchmount, "I let the bell-boy go an hour since. He, too, wanted a holiday."

"Some beggar probably!" petulantly exclaimed Miss Eva Marchmount, as she hastily unclasped the new diamond necklace—her Uncle Silas Raymond's gift—and handed it to her mother. "Or, worse yet, it may be a thief or a robber. Take care of my diamonds."

Ting-a-ling-ling-ling-ling-g-g!

The door opened and a stranger entered. The children paused in the midst of their merry-making and gazed in mute bewilderment at the tall form of a woman in tattered garments, sodden with the rain.

"She would persist in entering," said Eva, with an apologetic air. "I told her we were having a family party, and we didn't want intruders on Christmas Eve."

"My business is urgent," said the woman. "I knew it was Christmas Eve, and that is why I came. Don't let me disturb your festivities, pray. I only hope that you will not forget those who are worse off than yourselves, who are without a place to lay their heads to-night. Verily it is a bitter night."

She had removed her hood while speaking, displaying with her ungloved hands a mass of auburn hair, poorly kept and tinged with gray, but glossy and beautiful in spite of the ravages of time and poverty.

"Can I do anything to serve you?" asked Mrs. Marchmount, loftily.

"Not yet," warming and chafing her labor-stained hands before the glowing grate, and placing her ragged, soiled and damp shoes upon the fender.

"Then why this intrusion, pray?"

"I do not mean to intrude; at least, I cherish the hope that you will not deem me an intruder when you know the errand upon which I have come."

"Eva, take this person down to the kitchen and give her a seat by the range. And tell Helgar to give her a bountiful supper and a place to sleep in the attic chamber."

"I'm not hungry, ma'am; I'm not asking for a place to sleep. This seat by the fire is good enough. Do I look like a beggar?"

The woman straightened her form and tossed her head haughtily.

Mrs. Marchmount and Uncle Silas exchanged glances.

"I'm afraid she's an escaped lunatic," whispered Eva.

"Silas," said Mrs. Marchmount, "call Martin, the coachman, to put this person in the street."

Uncle Silas looked regretfully at the half-unloaded Christmas tree and hesitated, but obeyed the order.

"Yes, Silas," said the woman, rising to her feet, and addressing the clergyman as he reentered the room, "call your fatted and pampered coachman and put this person in the street. This is Christmas Eve, and every Christian must be charitable at such a time, you know. Yes, Silas, put this person in the street," mimicking Mrs. Marchmount's tone. "You'll enjoy these presents better—all of you—when you know there's a stray sheep from somebody's fold wandering away into the storm and darkness at your command, 'out through the mountains thunder-riven,' that the song tells of. And then, after your costly presents have all been bestowed; after Eva and Ruth and George and Johnny and Fairy Belle have all had their share—"

"How did she know all our names?" whispered Ruth and George in their mother's ear.

"After your sister's children, Mary and Susan and Bessie and Margaret, have gone to their scanty beds supperless," continued the stranger; "after they get up to-morrow morning and gaze hopelessly into their empty and ragged stockings for the gifts Santa Claus has forgotten to bestow—he never visits the poor, you know—then you, Uncle Silas, will enjoy standing up in your velvet-lined pulpit and preaching the gospel of charity, the

gospel of the Son of Man, who had not where to lay his head. Yes, Silas, put this person into the street."

"Poo' 'ady! 'Oo may have my Tismas' attle. Take it to baby Margie," said Fairy Belle, as she tripped fearlessly toward the excited woman and placed the toy in her horny hands.

"God bless you, child! You're one of the Savior's lambs!" exclaimed the woman, wiping a tear from her eye with her threadbare shawl. "I didn't tell you I had a baby Margie. I was speaking of your cousin—your mother's sister's baby. Her name is Margaret."

"Do you know my poor sister?" asked Mrs. Marchmount, tremulously.

"I can bring you tidings of her, if you are disposed to listen."

"She was a stray sheep," said Uncle Silas, in a sepulchral tone. "She married badly, and her husband, always a scapegrace, alienated himself entirely from us during the war. He lived in the South and took sides with the rebels, and his wife, our sister, forever estranged herself from us by her affiliation with his interests through all that fearful struggle. She was the youngest of our family, its pet and pride. But she would marry Diedrich Knickerbocker in spite of us, and so she went to the dogs with him. I don't care to be disturbed by memories of her. I have my widowed sister, Mrs. Marchmount, and her children to provide for, and that is all I feel able to do. Our father disinherited her. He had good reason for so doing. I never feel pleasant when anybody revives the thought of her. She made her bed; let her occupy it and be satisfied."

"Her husband is dead," said the woman, solemnly.

"Good riddance to bad rubbage!" exclaimed Uncle Silas. "Here, Martin, show this woman the door."

"No, Silas," pleaded Mrs. Marchmount; "let her stay. She may be an impostor—I frankly admit that she has the look of one—but she won't hurt us if we're vigilant. You remember our last Scripture lesson was about 'entertaining angels unawares.' Suppose we vary the usual routine of our Christmas services by bidding this hitherto uninvited guest to remain with us during the holidays."

"You're a strange mortal, Sarah; always full of whims and crochets. Do as you like, but don't bore me with any of your sentimentalism."

"Am I not to put the vagrant out, sir?" asked the coachman, with a disappointed air.

"No, Martin. It's Christmas Eve, and for once I'll yield to a woman's whim."

"An' prove yourself a fool for all o' yer yieldin'!" echoed the subordinate, *solito voce*, as he descended to the subterranean regions to resume the bountiful repast which he had already been enjoying for an hour with Helgar, the rubicund Norwegian cook.

"Ye'd better be after lockin' up the spoons an' other val'ables, me chieken, for the mistress has ta'en it into her head to harbor a thafe or a tramp o' some sort for the next fortnight. An' mind, me darlint," chucking the blushing damsel under the chin and speaking in a tone that carried with it the thought of a closer Hibernian caress, "mind that ye don't let no beggar's imp put on airs over the future Mistress Mulhooney."

"Drust me for geebin' up de dignity of Misdur Mulhooney. I understands my bis'sess," replied the happy servant, as she helped her lover to another huge slice of roast turkey.

"This is better than I expected," exclaimed the stranger, as the servant departed, resuming her seat before the glowing grate and replacing her feet on the fender. "Pray go on with your gift-making—and get it over. I have business with you, Mr. Raymond, and you too, Mrs. Marchmount, to-night, after the young folks are abed."

"Wouldn't you like some of our Christmas candy?" asked Master George, advancing toward her with his chubby hands full of bonbon papers.

"No, child; I don't care to eat your bonbons. I am not a beggar. Go on with your merry-making and leave me to my reflections. But remember, the stranger thanks you, all the same."

"Who are you, madam? and what is your business?" said Mrs. Marchmount, impatiently.

"I can't tell you till the children are abed."

"Let her alone, Sarah," said the reverend gentleman. "Who she is is none of our business."

The woman relapsed into silence, and the work of distributing presents went on.

Reverend Silas Raymond's brother-in-law, Colonel Phillip Marchmount, had been dead for three years, and he, the sole inheritor of his deceased father's Northern city home and handsome income, had cheerfully taken the widow and orphans to the paternal homestead and given them shelter and support in a style which the pension of a soldier's widow would not have sustained. Mrs.

Colonel Marchmount looked loftily from her superior station upon all who had been less fortunate than herself, and, like her brother, had long been self-deluded into the fancy that the memory of her sister, Mrs. Diedrich Knickerbocker, was uprooted from her affections. All knowledge of this wandering sheep had been studiously kept from her children's ears, and proud and pretty Eva Marchmount had listened in wonder while the stranger guest had given them the unwelcome tidings that proclaimed her the niece of a poverty-stricken and probably degraded aunt.

"Lieutenant Knickerbocker will propose when he sees that diamond necklace," said Mrs. Marchmount, in a playful whisper, intended for her daughter's ear alone. "I don't know the worth of it, but of course it's valuable. You must wear it and look your prettiest when he makes his New Year's call."

"Lieutenant Knickerbocker!" muttered the woman in rags. "Lieutenant Knickerbocker! Yes, yes, yes!"

Ting-a-ling-ling!

"Another ring at the door-bell!" exclaimed Mrs. Marchmount, petulantly. "Eva, answer it, child."

"What possesses people to call on Christmas Eve, when the bell-boy's away?" fretfully exclaimed the girl. "I should think everybody would be at home to-night."

"Everybody hasn't a home," said the stranger, still gazing into the fire.

"It was only the postman," said Eva, shivering as she entered the balmy apartment after her brief absence at the door. "The wind blows a hurricane, and the rain and sleet are just horrible! I wonder why the weather can't be pleasant on Christmas Eve."

"Storms come to teach us charity," said Uncle Silas, blandly.

"The letter is for you, mamma, and the postman said it was to be delivered to you only. He was quite emphatic about it. 'To be read before you sleep,' was his express direction. And now, by your leave, I will retire, for I'm tired and sleepy. Good-night."

A maid was summoned, and the younger members of the family were consigned to her keeping, leaving the brother and sister and the stranger guest alone.

"Let me see that letter, please," said the woman, eyeing it eagerly.

"That's an odd, and I may say an impudent request," replied Mrs. Marchmount, giving her the letter as though reluctantly impelled to obey.

"It comes through the dead letter office from Mobile, and has been a long time on the journey. Wonder why you didn't get it sooner?"

"We were absent from the State in the Autumn, and some post-office clerk who didn't understand his duty must have forwarded it to Washington under the head of 'uncalled for.' Give it back to me, please."

Mrs. Marchmount broke the seal and settled herself to read the contents. A shudder passed through her frame as the chirography of a well-known hand met her gaze, and tears dimmed her vision as she followed page after page to conclusion, while the wind howled around the gables of the great house, and the mingled rain and sleet played a mad tattoo upon the window panes.

"I must close the blinds," said Mr. Raymond, rising to his feet and crossing over to his sister's side, where he stopped for an instant and gazed at her inquiringly.

"It's from Haidee," she said, sadly.

"Botheration!" was the gentleman's abrupt rejoinder, as he turned away and slammed the shutters nervously.

"Let me read my letter aloud to you, brother," said Mrs. Marchmount. "Please do."

"I don't want to hear it."

"It's Christmas Eve, you know, Silas. You are to preach a Christmas sermon to-morrow. Would it not be well for you to get your own heart right first? Who knows but the Lord put this letter into my hands, on this night of all nights, on purpose to open the door of your heart to receive your houseless, homeless, wandering sister?"

"What have I for her to do if I should receive her? Of course she has a great houseful of young ones. Your bad matches are always prolific ones—more's the pity."

"If she has children, that is only so much the more reason why we should help her, Silas."

"How can you help her, Sarah?"

Mrs. Marchmount blushed, winced, and burst into tears.

"It is true, Silas, that I am a pensioner upon your bounty, and you keep me like a princess. But I would rather live on half my allowance and give the remainder to Haidee. I would, indeed!" she exclaimed, through her sobs.

"Remember, Silas," she continued, hesitatingly,

"that I might have been wealthy, like yourself, if our father hadn't disinherited me, just as he did Haidee."

"Sarah!" and the voice of the clergyman was stern and reproachful, "have I not in all things treated you as generously as though I had been your own father?"

"Yes, Silas."

"Then, what have you to complain of?"

"My inability to help my sister Haidee. Here is this strange woman, this tempest-tossed, unbidden guest at our fireside, Silas; whom I've been longing to see alone for the past two hours, because she told me she could bring me news of her. I feel that I cannot rest in peace till I have learned all that she can tell me. Oh, Silas! if father had only been just with me I need not have been left a dependent upon your generosity! It would have been so much more pleasant and righteous if he had left me a great deal more than was mine, for then I would have had need of a great deal less than that was yours."

"I will retire if you will show me where I am to sleep," said the stranger, rising to her feet and wearily stretching her stiffened limbs. "I don't wish to intrude upon your business and family matters."

"You are not intruding," replied Mrs. Marchmount. "Please remain with me for awhile. I must talk with you."

"Then," said the reverend Silas, "I will retire."

"Stay!" exclaimed Mrs. Marchmount. "I entreat you, Silas, to hear me read our sister's letter."

"I have no sister except yourself."

"Don't say such a cruel thing, brother. We three are children of the same mother. You have a warm heart, only you don't know it. You remember our sister as a young, inexperienced and willful girl, who ran away with a dashing, unprincipled cadet and joined his fortunes in a loyal way more than twenty-five years ago. You have not met her since, nor have I. But you did meet Diedrich Knickerbocker in Libby prison, where you were a captive and he a captor. Did you not tell me that he once risked his life to give you food when you were starving, on a never-to-be-forgotten Christmas Eve, when you were in his power?"

Reverend Silas Raymond grew red in the face and nervously stirred the glowing embers in the sea-coal fire.

"To-morrow," continued his sister, "you will preach a sermon on 'Gifts.' You will tell of the wise men of the East, who, when they saw the star that guided them to the birth-place of the young child, rejoiced with exceeding great joy. You will tell about the gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh that were brought by them and offered at the feet of the infant Saviour. You will extol the munificence of those oriental sages, and will urge your congregation to renounce every feeling of selfishness and obstinacy, and in the name of the lowly One of Nazareth, give good gifts directly to Haidee, for I know your masculine will too well to waste my breath in making such a request. But I do wish, dear brother, that you would bestow enough of my rightful portion of our father's estate upon me to enable me to make her and her children comfortable. Christmas Eve is a grand good time to turn over new leaves, you know."

The ejaculations of the reverend gentleman were sufficiently emphatic to border on the profane, if they had been uttered by a less exemplary person. For some minutes he paced the floor nervously, while neither of them spoke. Then, turning to her, he said, abruptly:

"Read the letter! *Hang the luck!*"

Mrs. Marchmount did not wait for a repetition of the command. The sister wrote:

I do not know how you will receive tidings of me, but my heart so warms to you to-day that I cannot longer forbear to chronicle the love I feel for you and the longing that sometimes possesses me when I wonder if I will ever be permitted to look upon your face again.

I will not trouble you about my own sad reverses. Situated as you are, in the lap of plenty, with no breath of heaven to blow upon you except in balmy breezes of welcome, you could not realize my lot if I should attempt to depict it; nor would I pain you for an instant by a picture the sight of which would give you sorrow and do me no earthly good. Since Diedrich's death, I have become a wanderer, like the dove from the ark, only there the similitude ceases; for the dove found an olive branch and returned with it to a place of shelter, while I find no olive branch, and should I ever succeed, I should have no ark to which to carry it.

While in the pursuit of a mercantile agency, upon which I rely for the precarious business that brings bread to my babies, I paid a visit recently to the old plantation where you and Silas and I were born.

Dear brother! I hear that he has grown to be a great and good and prosperous preacher—I wonder if he would look at me?

I had an opportunity to go to the old home to help the women folks through the cotton harvest. You know the slaves are free now, and many of their former mistresses, who never did any menial labor before the war, have be-