

A NEW YEAR'S STORY.

THE CHIVALROUS DEFENSE OF A RED HAIRED GIRL, AND WHAT CAME OF IT.

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COME, uncle, spin us a yarn. "What kind of a yarn?" "A New Year's yarn, of course. You can't expect us to be satisfied with anything else on New Year's eve."

"Shall I spin 'em a New Year's yarn, auntie?" asked the old gentleman of a white haired lady who was knitting by the light on the center table, at the same time giving her a knowing look.

"Of course not," she replied, half frowning and half smiling. "There's only one thing ever happened to me on New Year's eve, and I've remembered that always."

"Is it a love story?" asked one of the girls. "Well, a kind of one. Bring out some nuts and apples, and give us another stick of wood for the fire, and I'll see what I can make of what happened to me on New Year's eve, 1831."

The old gentleman's requirements having been attended to, the boys and girls ranged themselves round the fire and the story was begun. He looked straight at "Auntie" while he told it, evidently enjoying its effect upon her more than on the younger listeners.

She was the homeliest girl in the school; there can be no doubt about that. She was freckled, her hair was red, not a dark shade of red, but fiery. She had struggled with whooping cough, and measles, and scarlet fever, and every other disease that childhood is heir to until she was little more than skin and bones.

We were all very young children—at least most of us were. I was 14. There was one boy who was still older—Dick McLean. Dick was a natural tormentor. He would abuse the girls as well as the boys. He respected dolls no more than hoops and kites.

I limped away from Dick and the circle, inwardly planning revenge on Dick McLean before the end of the term. Indeed, I at once told my father I desired to take boxing lessons, and receiving his assent, after three months' secret practice, went up behind my enemy with a lighted match and burned his back hair off up to the crown of his hat.

As I had expected, after my defeat on my first encounter, I was set down as

champion of the ugliest girl in the school. I did not recover from the beating I had received for a week. One day as I limped across the playground Reddie came up to me and poked something at me folded in a piece of brown paper. The sight of her was alone enough to ruffle me; but to see her standing by me, shyly, with her hand stretched towards me and something in it, in sight of half a dozen pupils, was too much.



"IT'S ONLY THIS." "Go 'way," I said. She didn't say anything, but continued to look up at me shyly, as though she knew it was a great presumption for her to offer me a gift.

"What is it?" I asked in no kindly tone. "Something I made for you." "I don't want it," I said, turning away. "Please, Tom," she said, "won't you take it?"

I cast a glance at her; she was evidently full of some deep feeling. "What have you got?" I queried. "It's only this." And she took the paper cover from about it and held it up, casting an anxious look at me to see if I admired the gift. It was a book mark such as children make, and on it, in letters in which many of the stitches were put in wrong, was "Tom Erven."

"That's not my name, you little goose." "Isn't it spelled right?" "No. It's T-o-m-E-r-v-e-n." She looked so stupefied and woe-begone at her blunder that I pitied her. If we hadn't been in view of the other children, I think I could have spoken a kind word to her.

"Won't you take it, anyway?" she asked ruefully. The quickest way to get rid of her was to accept it. "Yes, I'll keep it. Now run along." Her face brightened up and I was surprised at so much expression. If she had not so many freckles and such red hair, and had more flesh on her bones she wouldn't be so ill looking after all, I thought. As she skipped away she turned and gave me a grateful look; such a look as a peasant might give a prince.

"YOU SEEM SURPRISED." That was the last I saw of Reddie at school. The next day she was taken with symptoms which developed into typhoid fever, and was kept at home. Her absence was a great relief to me, and I wished when she recovered, if she ever should, that she would go to some other school.

Between 14 and 24 years of age there comes a great change. When at 24 I looked back on my childhood and thought how careless I was of the feelings of others, I was surprised. Yet it must be confessed that what I had gained in one way I had lost in another. I had acquired polish and prevarication; I had learned to say pleasant things to young ladies, and was considered quite an adept in this respect. Besides, I did not scorn to practice petty impositions, to flatter them to gain their favor.

I soon became tired of society, which was unfortunate for my mother and sisters, for whom I was the only available escort. Still, I was occasionally dragged by them into the gay whirl. One night I had been unwillingly appropriated to escort my sisters to a dancing party. It was Christmas night, 1831. I had given up dancing, and stood looking on with my arms folded.

"Tom," said my sister Mary, coming up to me with her cheeks all aglow—she had just finished a dance—"you look too blue for anything. I want to introduce you to a young lady."

my old name," she said. "Try me and see." "Reddie." "Upon my word!" I looked at the beautiful creature before me with ill concealed astonishment.

"You seem surprised." "Yes—at—at the singular fate that brings this meeting." "At nothing else?" she asked, archly. "I found no words to reply, so I remained silent." "You don't remember my singed doll, I suppose?"

"I have reason to especially remember that doll. It makes me quite sore to think of it." "You behaved very chivalrously. And the book mark I gave you. You have treasured it, of course?" "Of course." She looked at me searchingly. It was evident that she knew I was prevaricating.

"In that whole school there was but one who was kind to me," she said, impulsively. "Perhaps some of them would be glad to show you some attention now." "Only one was kind. And that one—whom do you think?" "I can't tell." "You."

"For heaven's sake, Red"—I stopped short. "You fought for me." I blushed. I had never considered that I had fought for her, but that I was obliged to fight. "I got thrashed." "The kindness was all the more acceptable." "I was not especially appreciative when you offered me your gift."

"You fought for me." There was no one near. We were standing close together. I felt for her hand and gave it a quick pressure, then dropped it. In another moment she was whirled away in a waltz by a handsome fellow with a tawny mustache and blue eyes.

After the last dance and as we were going home, I saw her again in her wraps in the hall. "May I go to see you?" I asked. "Yes." Then, with her eyes snapping, she added: "Come and bring the book mark. Let me see; I'm engaged every night for a week. Come New Year's eve."

"And not without the book mark?" She had just time before the door closed behind her to give me a mischievous look, and say, "No." My position was embarrassing. I had permission to call with a book mark and no book mark to call with.

I had no intention whatever of foregoing my call for want of a souvenir. Nothing would be more easy than to duplicate the book mark, and as to practicing the deception of offering it as the original, I had no qualms of conscience whatever, having perpetrated many such sins of far greater enormity. I asked my sister to make a book mark for me, and warned her not to do the work too carefully, imitating the stitches of a child.

Armed with what I considered a fair imitation, I called and sent it in with my card. When she entered the drawing room I scrutinized her face to see if there were any signs of her having discovered that the token was spurious. She held my card and the book mark in her hand, and as we seated ourselves she tossed them on to the table. So far as I could discover, she believed the book mark to be genuine.

"It is very good of you to have kept that souvenir so long," she remarked, fixing her beautiful eyes on mine. "Don't mention it," I observed, inclining my head deferentially. "How carefully you must have kept it. It's not the least dingy."

agree," she said. "Isn't it odd?" "Very odd." "I must have made a mistake." She concentrated her gaze upon me in what seemed to me one glance of withering contempt.

"You are very much mistaken if you think to impose that brand new book-mark on me for the one I gave you." Oh for an earthquake, a cyclone, anything to change the situation! "How ridiculous!" I muttered, trying to force a laugh and put a humorous view on it all.

She declined to see anything ludicrous in the act. She became more grave, if possible, than ever. I picked up the bookmark and bent my hot face down over it to hide my confusion. I had lost all presence of mind. My ideas were in a state of chaos. What to say I didn't know, and didn't know what I said.

"I see," I stammered, "the one you gave me was w-w-worked in red hair." A peal of laughter brought me to my senses. My discomfiture was complete. I fell back in my chair and covered my face with my hands.

"You do that just like a girl," I heard her cry delightedly. "It's exactly what I did when you left me that day in the school yard, and I thought about my blunder in spelling. Only I covered my face with my apron." Presently I mustered courage to look at her.

"Who made that book mark?" she asked, resuming a serious expression. "My sister." "What made you do such a thing?" "My admiration for you." "Nonsense!" "There is a tide in the affairs of men," I muttered, "which, taken at the flood"—

"I have admired you," I said, humbly, "ever since"—I hesitated. "I was a red headed little imp." "No," I went on, profiting by the lesson I had learned and speaking frankly. "Then, to thoughtless, unreasoning children you were not attractive." "Now you are speaking manfully. Please don't ever attempt to impose on me again."

"Indeed, I never will, if you will forgive me for this." "You are forgiven," she said, kindly. "But you haven't told me when this admiration for me bloomed." "When I met you on Christmas night at the dancing party." "In other words, you have admired me for a whole week."

I looked at her, frankly, honestly, and meant every word I spoke when I replied: "In those three days have been crowded enough admiration to offset ten years of indifference." She blushed and lowered her eyes. "It has not been only admiration," I went on. "For three whole days I have been madly in love with you."

She leaned back in her chair and drew a long, long sigh. "You know that I speak the truth." "By your past record?" "No, by my sincerity. You can see it in every feature; my voice, my eyes, my whole being."

She sat with her eyes fixed on a spot in the carpet, occasionally raising them to mine as though wondering whether I was worthy of credence. "I don't believe a word you say." But I saw that the tide had turned; that she was wavering. My want of reputation with her for truthfulness was certainly a great barrier in the way of my convincing her of my sincerity, but I did not despair, for I knew that what I said was only too true. For half an hour I continued the attack, she parrying every thrust, and continually reminding me of my recent deception; but the quickest way to convince is to be really in earnest, and this gave me the victory.

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A REFLECTION IN THE MIRROR. I glanced again at the book mark. Something in her manner caused me to scent danger. Suddenly it broke in upon me like a flash. The original had been misapprehended. "The n-n-name is written a great many ways," I stammered. "I spelled it E-r-v-e-n." "You couldn't have done that." "O, yes, I did: I remember it perfectly. Little girls are sensitive. At least I was, and I felt your rebuke at my blunder very keenly." I was wiping the perspiration from my brow. It seemed to me I had never seen so stern, so contemptuous an expression on any woman's face. "That's a g-g-good way to spell it," I remarked wilyly. She took the book mark and the visiting card from the table. "You see they