

THE CHRISTMAS FROLIC.

By HARRIET PRESCOTT SPOFFORD.

(Copyright, by Harriet Prescott Spofford.) "You'll not be going a great way, this Christmas weather, the dark so early," said his wife, anxiously, looking out on the gray river, where the whitecaps were running against the tide.

ter behave reel pretty," with a fond look at the flower-faced little girl. "And the saxon's ast Jimmy—" "Saxon," said the mother instructively. "Saxon," then ast Jimmy ter ring the bell for him tonight. Wish 'twas me."

"I wish 'twas I ast me," said Dave, tugging at his boots. "There's more bells than one in town," said Jimmy. "By gum, that's so!"

"Well, they ast, your bells," said their mother. "An' you'd better keep away from 'em. Come, here's the beans all baked to a crisp. My! don't they smell good? Come, I want ter git the rest back ter keep 'em for your father."

"I wonder what they ring the bells for Christmas eve, anyway," said Dave, with his mouth full. "Ter scare off the bad spirits, to be sure," answered Jimmy.

"Where ast any bad spirits," said Sis. "Lesh'n ourselves," said the mother. "I guess they ring the bells because they're glad Christ was born. I'm sure I be. An' so's your father."

"Say, ma, is pa a good man?" "John Markham! If you're ever half as good as—"

"An' a bunch o' white grapes apiece," threading her needle to sew on a loose button for him. "They'll have this to the Sunday school tree. But I'd like 'em ter have good times ter hum ter remember bimbeby."

"An' so," looking up with a gleam of mischief in the blue eyes, "you've been a-vastin' money on Sis—" "I did jes' git her a little fur collar," said the wife, hesitatingly.

"She's now! You don't suppose I be gratch anything to Sis? Didn't you git nothing for the boys?" "Yes," she said again, doubtfully. "I know we hadn't order. But Christmas on'y comes once a year an' they did so want Robinson Crusoe an' Pilgrim's Progress."

"An' it keeps 'em to hum things. An' I'll make my ole bunnit an' shawl du—" "You're a good mother, Mary."

"You can't be children but once, you know," biting her thread off. "There!" "I know. An' I don't want her. When I remember the licks I had all over the place I don't want ter be a child again. My nittings dry? I'd rather be a grown man 'th you for my wife than all the children in Christendom."

"You're ma's great boy, ain't you, Jimmy?" said the little woman, leaning her cheek down on the rough hand. "She do no where she'd be 'bout you."

"An' 'bout me!" said Dave, his rosy face peering over the other shoulder. "An' me, ma," cried Johnny, springing into her lap, while Sis ran to get there first.

"Without any one o' ye!" she said, half laughing and half crying. "You're the best mother I got!" cried Johnny. "I declare!" she said then. "You ain't half so good as your mother. An' it's time the lamp was lighted. The dark shuts down like a diab-cover these days. If you're going ter see Sis up ter St. Paul's you'd better be off, though. An' you wait an' come home with her, Jimmy. You put on your comforter, now. You got your arfics, sis? Yes, I do wish your father was in. There's the light to the point blazin' up. My land! how its come on ter blow! You all be home early, now, or I'll be real worried."

"An' me, ma," said Jimmy. "We'll take care of Sis." "Bring her back for a Christmas present," echoed Johnny. "I'll be home in time for the stockin's," called Dave. But their gay voices came back to her but the eddy of the wind that puffed over her light as she held the door open.

"You go right in, ma. You'll ketch cold," Jimmy shouted back. "An' I guess that's all 'pall ketch," Johnny called, walking backward. "She watched them a moment in the twilight, trudging on with the wind behind them, scuffling the snow, pushing one another, tumbling down and rolling over and up again and filling the air with their happy and light voices, and she shut the door and felt her lamp and went about her tasks."

But the polly presently grew faint. "Oh, certainly 'd order be in stiller," she said, going again and again to the window, where she had her shining hat and the flakes whirled and soared and fell and slanted by like sparks of fire. "I do no," I declare! I'm main frightened. I never felt jes' so shaky an' limp in my life," she said. "Oh, Joe, Joe, if you don't come back—"

"She went into the bedroom presently to find the stockings and as she darned a small hole she thought of Sis up at St. Paul's, among the green boughs, and felt a little awe as she saw her helping at the little wreath about the mantel, with the old aisles like the aisles of some dim, sweet world, all green and dark and spiky. "I guess I know how mothers feel when their sons are prents," she said. And then under the bell rang out, the old cracked bell, giving a glad, rolling peal on the lull of the gale. "That's my Jimmy!" she thought. "He's jes' makin' that bell praise God! My! it jes' takes me right inter church, 'th the hemlock boughs and all the woody, cool green thins' there!"

And then another bell, one much more close at hand, rang out like a roaring echo. "I've a bell, rang out," she exclaimed. "I'm sure, I believe, then boys have climb' the Old South belfry in spite o' me! My! That's the North church—no, it's the Old-tower—my soul to gracious, it's both of them! That's my Johnny then. And that's Dave. I suppose the sexton's let 'em, an' they've got some of the other boys along."

Precisely that had happened. For when the sexton of St. Paul's began to tell Jimmy what he and the other boys crowded around, shouting and pushing, and Jimmy gave Johnny a kick, and Johnny transferred it to Dave, and Dave hit out all around, and a scuffle and sarambo followed that would have ended in open disgrace if the sexton had not ordered them all out and away without benefit of clergy.

And at this Jimmy, remembering that there were other bells in town, had instantly organized several bell-ringing parties, and they started at full run, to get into the meeting houses the best way they could, and make the belfries rock and drown out St. Paul's all the superior metal of the bigger bells; and when one of the lads heard the peal of the other sound out like the boom of fire bells and answered it with the peal from his own steeple tossing out upon the dark, their hearts were almost bursting with the delight in the clash and clang and roar beating out the air about them.

"I wish their father was hearin' of 'em," the mother said again, pressing her face against the glass, while the snow drove by something less furiously. "I would reely tickle him. It'm mighty pretty music. Jes' hear the echoes! Oh, Joe, where be ye!" And as the bells pealed on she was waking up and down the little house, stopping at every turn to look through the pane, to open the door and feel the blast, more than once to cry out with a voice that the wind pressed back soundless, making her feel her helplessness before the great forces of nature which hum and destroy, shutting the door and walking up and down again as she wrung her hands, and pausing at every shutter of sash and door to listen. "Oh, what sort of a Christmas eve is this?" she cried. "Oh, Joe, Joe, Joe!"

But even while the bells were ringing it seemed as if the wind were falling. "Jimmy said it was just a spit," she murmured. "I traps her right. One o' them quick squalls o' snow, nature which he found a shly taken unawares. And, oh, it must have took him unexpected or he'd be home!"

What a long, interminable hour it was before the great, glad uproar of the bells was over! And then presently she was sure it was time the boys and Sis were at home, and without staying to imagine they were plunging and slipping and snow-balling together on the way, the wind having abated as suddenly as it had arisen, she felt that everything had come to an end, and husband and children alike were lost to her, and full of a wild, unreasoning panic she was crying like one possessed, when the door burst open and a chorus of glad voices smote her—sweet, oh, sweeter, clearer than the peal of all the bells. Meanwhile, out in the bay, Joe had found his trawls much richer than he had expected, and as he was so busy in stripping them and in being and setting them again that he gave little heed to the ringing and the storm till his fury was all about him. "T'won't last long like this. Them audent ones go as they come. Jes' keep her head to the wind," he said to himself. "She'll ride it out." And then the snow was wrapping him, blind and thick, and all at once the dark had fallen. "Wal," he muttered, "if one o' them concerned big coal steamers don't come rippin' along I'll be down in it's a smole. But we're good for it—of the stick hold—'Pleasant' and me."

It was a tussle. It took all his will and all his strength to keep the boat trimmed to meet the equal and riding on the top of the great sea that came roaring and hissing on and only just left short of washing over and filling the little Pleasant. And when the furious hour was past he would have given all his share of fish to lie down in the bottom of the boat and get his breath.

The sea was still rolling, in long swell succeeding swell, and the snow was falling in a thick sheet, through which not a glimmer of light penetrated—only a wide, faint dimness seemed to swim up grayly from the great tops and hollows about him. He felt that the boat was drifting, but he could not tell in what direction; he thought perhaps the tide was running in, but as he looked about him there was nothing by which he could make sure. The Ipswich light, he said, ought to be just over his head; the revolving ruby and gold of the light at the shoals ought to be on the other hand. Plum Island light ought to be over his shoulder. If he could be sure a spark of one of them he would know how to shape his course. But

there was not a ray over all the wide welter of the water, through all the dim veil of the snow. He felt as if he had gone blind. He listened for the dull hum of the whistling buoy, but the snow muffled every sound and one wave tumbled him still to another. It had grown cold. The snow stung now like sleet. Hope and sail were stiff with ice. "By George! It'd be my winding-sheet!" he exclaimed. And he fell back in the boat and the thought of his wife's terror and grief struck him to the heart like a knife. It was Christmas eve; and the children would be capering and carrying on, opening oysters on top of the stove, roasting chestnuts and apples and looking over their shoulders for him to be coming in the door. And he would never be coming in the door again. What would become of them? O face against the glass, while the snow drove by something less furiously. He gave a great sob, a sob of pity for them and for himself—and in the next moment he caught his breath in an irrepressible alarm. For here was music. Certainly, then, he had not been so dazed by the cold and storm. They heard music when they died. Here it came again—bells! Ah, what a great surge of sound, one moment resonant on the black air, then repeating itself in a whisper, a sigh. Again it came, a shower of tones skimming over the water like a flight of gray and silver gulls; and now one crash and ring and roll rose above them all—the Old South bell. And with that came the steady flash of the North church bell, the hum of the old town bell, the quaver of St. Paul's! And then the wind sung in, blowing the sweet alarm all back to shore and closing the lanes of the mist and snow through which they had sifted. And only a faint exquisite echo sighed and died away.

But what matter? Now he knew where he was—Salisbury Sands to the left of him, old Newbury to the right. About ship, and up sail, up sail for the channel around; here was old Newbury now on the left; here was the North Breaker singing like a nest of eagles, off Plum Island; yonder, on the right, rose the screams of the great South Breaker, sucking down the Salisbury shore; here was the roar of the waves tumbling on the bar. A stark gleam on the water, hazy halo through the snow. Plum Island light! Another—the Bug light, the harbor light! He knows every inch of the way now. The channel grows clearer—the Pleasant is good for it. He steers through foam and fury, he surfs the hums and Black rocks into stiller water, he rushes straight to the moorings.

The children were just knocking the snow off their feet at the door, as he ran up on the wharf. Good was the touch of solid earth, and sweeter than any strain of music in his ears was his wife's shriek of joy. "Didn't I say I allus come home?" he cried joyously, catching her in his arms.

"O, Joe!" she sobbed. "If we live a hundred years, we shan't ever have such a Christmas eve as this again! Come children, come right in out of the snow. I guess you've been frolic enough tonight. I s'pose it was you rung the bells."

"You bet it was!" said Jimmy, unwinding his comforter. "Wal," said Joe, slamming the door behind them, "I ain't over work an' play does the same thing. But your frolic did a lot of work tonight. Per if I hadn't heard them bells, there'd a be no father an' no Christmas in this house! Got a bowl of coffee, wife? George! I could eat the hull bean-put!"

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