UNDER THE MISTLETOE.

By Harriet Prescott Spofford in the Cosmopolitan.

I.

Black hair, long enough and strong enough for the Carthaginian bow-strings, splendid black hair falling all about her like a veil of night!

I always did hate black hair, and I never knew such coarse, rank, luxurient hair of any color that did not belong to a coarse temperament.

This especial black hair, whenever in all my life since I have had any trouble, has swept before my eyes as if it were the very cloud in which the trouble shrouded itself. But always, to offset it, there rises also before my eyes a face, fine, strong, and beautiful, the look of whose dark, kind eyes is a benediction, my husband's face; and all my trouble vanishes as mist does when the sun shines on it.

I was only the housekeeper's daughter; but the housekeeper had been a lady. Had been a lady? My mother was a lady, high caste and thoroughbred. But when my father died he was launched in such enterprise that everything went with him, and old Mr. Ponsonby, my father's friend, gave her charge of his mansion and household affairs. Some years later old Mr. Ponsonby had died, and young Mr. Ponsonby, Mr. Pierrepoint Ponsonby, who had been with his uncle but occasionally in my remembrance, reigned in his stead, and I was still staying with my mother, recovering my health before taking the place engaged for me as governess, where I should have been now but for this illness, in whose long convalescence my mother felt I must be with her. Scrupulous to the last degree of nicety, she meant to retain me in this bachelor establishment, even while under her own care, no longer than was necessary.

Perhaps I had my own ideas on the matter: a girl usually knows when any one is in love with her. Yet I knew, too, that Mr. Pierrepoint Ponsonby's wishes and ambitions were wishes and ambitions that made it important to marry or make a fortune and thus increase her own. But could I fail to feel, also, what the sudden flush meant, the lingering glance, and again the avoiding eye? And I said to him in my thoughts, "You are really despicable," and if my thoughts had run otherwise, I would not have given him a suspicion of it, but have held my head high with the smiling indifference of a woman sufficient to herself.

And yet life had been very sweet to me in the September days of rich softness, when the year paused full of ripeness; in the red October days, wander under the illumination of the woods, through their scarlet and gold, and green glooms, and damp sunshine; in the chill November days, when the wood fire was beckoning us home with its fragrant blaze, where we could sit beside the hearth and let the time go by without speaking till startled by some sound outside our sphere of dreaming. pleasanter, I say, was life then (for all my knowledge that it was idle temptation to impossibility) than in these December days, when the Assyrian had come down on the fold with his cohorts all gleaming in purple and gold: that is to say, a score of the rich Ponsonby cousins and their friends to pass the holidays, and among them this Juliet, with her black hair and her million dollars. And from the day they came he scarcely seemed to see me and had hardly a word or a glance for me.

It was not so, I thought, that Mr. Nevers would have treated me. Somehow, pleasant as days were with Mr. Pierrepoint, it was to Mr. Nevers that my thoughts turned in my grievance. And among all these people of fortune and of smooth paths, the other should have seen to it that I was given honor: I who had been his uncle's care, who had closed his uncle's poor, tired eyes at last: I who was penniless and had laborious ways to tread, perhaps my life long.

Old Mr. Ponsonby had meant to provide some fixed income for my mother and myself: but he had died without a will, and if his nephew had knew of his intention, we could not accept anything from him: and now I was to leave what had been my home of luxurious ease and go out into the world and fight my way, and I found myself looking forward eagerly to the day of my going, for here and now I was fighting my way more literally than I should ever be when at my outside work. For while these ignored, and those patronized, and a few accorded friendly equality, this black-haired Juliet, choosing to single me out as a special foe, waged coarse and open war, and gave stinging insults that it sometimes made me cry in the night to remember.

I would not make my mother more unhappy by complaint. I felt forsaken and forlorn when I thought how impossible it was to turn to Mr. Pierrepoint: and then always the glance of Mr. Nevers brought peace, and it did not seem necessary even to tell him of these trivial troubles, since the very thought of him made them cease to be troubles. But more than once I realized now that in the sweet days of the last summer and early fall I had been drifting into something that was a mere pleasantness of the senses, and I thanked heaven that this interruption had not come too late! If Juliet could content Mr. Pierrepoint Ponsonby, after what he had known of better things, why, let him be contented!

I never before knew any young girl who so valued money, especially when already possessing it, as this Juliet did, and that so sordidly and distressingly knew the worth of it.

She came into my room one morning, on some excuse, with her hair down: she had a trick of letting it fall down when she wished a sensation: but she did not usually care enough about me to think a sensation in my behalf worth while. It was blowing about her now like a cloud as she hurried along.

"What would you think if you had to carry all this on your head?" she said.

I hesitated to tell her that I disliked her hair: but Olive Thayer, who was reading French with me that morning, said she should be delighted if she had to carry it.

"It's a great saving, anyway," said Juliet. "I don't have to spend a hundred dollars a year for new hair at the hair dresser's, I don't see how people without either hair or money get along. What do you do, Miss Featherstonhaugh?"

"I? Oh, I do without, you see," I said, laughing, for the fever had taken all the yellow locks and left me with a shock of short ringlets curling close to my head as a fleece.

"Perfect Greek, those short curls are," said Olive. "I would be glad to have your fever if it would leave me such a head!"

"Have you had a feaver, Miss Featherstonhaugh?" asked Juliet. "Here? I should think you would have gone to a hospital."

Of course, I colored and made no reply.

"Why should she go to a hospital?" asked Amy Bellew impetuously, "when this is her mother's home?"

"Oh, everybody has her own ideas of propriety," said Miss Juliet. "And some people might consider a hospital the best place if they had no home of their own. It must be very odd, having no home of your own. I wonder how it feels."

"Perhaps you may find out some day," I said, for I was having all I could endure.

"Money takes wings, you know," said Verena Ponsonby, laughing.

"Not when it's well taken care of," said Juliet; "and mine is so settled that I defy it to get away. If the wharf property gives out, there is the gas property, the warehouses, the blocks of buildings, the railroad stocks, the bank stocks, the government bonds, some savings bank hoards, some mortgages. The dividends come in so fast that sometimes I don't know what to do with them. But I keep them. Money is power. Money is more than brains or titles. If you have money, you can do anything. It's the only aristocracy now. And mine is always growing; for you know I never spend half my income, and every year there is the other half to re-invest."

"I should think it was wicked," I said, "almost before I thought, "if I had your income, not to spend the whole of it, with all the distress there is in the world."

"Dear me! How do you know what my income is?"

"I have heard you mention it often enough," said I, taking up my book, that she might be gone, "to be quite familiar with the figures."

She stared at me a moment with her great coal-black eyes. "I don't suppose you know enough to know what insolence is," she said slowly then. "How should you, the housekeeper's daughter?"

"Juliet!" cried Olive and Verena.

"For my part, I don't know why the housekeeper's daughter is associating with Mr. Pierrepoint Ponsonby's guests, anyway!" continued Juliet.

"There is one of his guests," I cried, "with whom she refuses to associate! And you will leave her room immediately!"

And as I started towards her—I'm sure I don't know why—she uttered a cry and shrank away, and ran off, slamming the door behind her.

II.

"I didn't know but the little vixen was really going to strike me," she was saying that evening to Mr. Ponsonby. "Why, I actually screamed!"

"As if you had seen a mouse," he laughed.

"Not when it's well taken care of," said Juliet; "and mine is so settled that I defy it to get away. If the wharf property gives out, there is the gas property, the warehouses, the blocks of buildings, the railroad stocks, the bank stocks, the government bonds, some savings bank hoards, some mortgages. The dividends come in so fast that sometimes I don't know what to do with them. But I keep them. Money is power. Money is more than brains or titles. If you have money, you can do anything. It's the only aristocracy now. And mine is always growing; for you know I never spend half my income, and every year there is the other half to re-invest."

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How hurt and indignant I was! He could walk, and talk, and sit and read with me all that idle time before the house filled with people; but now he could hardly see me; and all his old pleasant intimations had been so hollow that he could laugh about me with this creature and compare me to a vermin!

When he turned and saw me sitting there, with my head bent over the book of pictures, I never raised it, although I felt sure by those subtle senses that never betray you, that he was gazing at me and waiting for a responsive gaze. But when Mr. Nevers came wheeling his chair along, I glanced up and smiled and made room for him beside me, although it took all my reserves to summon a smile; for Mr. Nevers had shown me a kind consideration in these dark days, and many days before, that touched my heart.

If I haven't told you about Mr. Nevers, it is time I did. I had known him only a little while in comparison to the length of time I had known Mr. Pierrepoint, although I had, perhaps, known him better, and he was almost old enough to be my father, but we were the best of friends. He lived in one wing of his great house, and seldom visited anywhere but at Mr. Ponsonby's.

Now and then he had the Psyche put in commission and flitted away over seas to nobody knew what pleasures. Sometimes he was heard of off the lagoons of Venice; sometimes he was in a dahabeah floating up the Nile; sometimes he was rocking on a camel over the desert or exploring stone temples in Idumea: and then again he was unexpectedly seen calmly rolling down his lawns in his garden chair, as if he had never been away. He had a wonderful degree of strength, and perfect health. He was a collector of all sorts of curios, bronzes, armors, old chains, Rembrandt engravings four inches square, worth more than a patine of bright gold of that size, and such books as made book-making seem an art as fine as cameo setting.

With all that, he was one of the men who, unknown to the world, are factors in affairs; for, detesting publicity and politics for himself, he never entered their arena; but senators, and secretaries, and judges, and their kind constantly asked his advice, and hardly a question of importance arose that the actors on the great scene did not seek consultation with him wherever he was to be found. He had no near relatives, and seemed to stand alone in the world. He had never married. He had a face fine, and strong, and beautiful: but (and I feel as if it were a profanation and sacrilege to speak of him as though it mattered) he was a dwarf, not quite five feet tall, and with a crooked shoulder. Nobody was so delightful to look at when he sat, and few people, through the pitifulness of it, so painful to look at as he when he stood or walked, which, however, he seldom did, usually wheeling himself with swift skill and directness in his chair. And nobody was ever more delightful than he when he talked, with all his vast resources, his wisdom, and his wit, his gentleness and kind forbearance. When I listened to him I used to wonder that no woman had ever felt her heart moved enough by all that singular beauty and goodness and knowledge to become his wife: and tears filled my eyes so that I had to look away. And once I half wished I had never seen Pierrepoint Ponsonby, in order that, if Mr. Nevers liked it so, I might make him the happier. I had a singular assurance, for all his silence there, that he would like it so. And yet—and yet—oh, I was very sure I did not, I never could love Mr. Nevers!

"Why do you look at me so sadly?" he asked once.

"I didn't know I did," I answered, startled and ashamed.

"I suppose you are pitying me," he said. "You must not. I need no pity. Few men are happier than I."

"I—I—really—I—"

"Oh, pray don't," he interrupted, as I stammered on. "I have embarrassed you more than you have me. You are afraid, too, that you have hurt my feelings. I got over all that long ago. I regard my misfortune as of so little consequence beside my better reasons for content. You are thinking it a pity no woman will marry me. No, don't deny it! I can read your mind, you see.

'And all her thoughts as far within her eyes,
As bottom agates seen to wave and float
In crystal currents of clear morning seas,'"

he said. "Well, I thought it was a pity once, and it cost me some struggle to reconcile myself to the fact. But I have never asked one. I never shall. If such an impossible miracle should happen as that a good and lovely woman should wish, should be willing to marry me, and think she could find her happiness in it, I am not sure I should allow it."

"Not if she loved you?"

"I should need very deep assurance of that," he said smiling, with the light in his brown eyes.

"Oh, how could you?"

He looked at me a moment.

"It may seem strange to you," he said, "but I have never allowed myself to love a woman. If I have found her beautiful or charming, I have left her out of hand. Such things, I early understood, were not for me."

"But—but—I don't thing you are right," I stammered again. Suppose—it might be—a question of her happiness."

He laughed like a boy. "I am afraid that would be impossible," he said.

"But if it were not?" I persisted.

"What? I'm sure I don't know. Well, if I found it were so, if I were able to deceive myself into such a blessed hope, I—I should give her some sign: I should tell her for instance, that my pride was too great to ask any woman to take a deformed and shrunken husband—that—that—if she—oh, it's too absurd to talk about!"

"You are absurd!" I said. "You will tell her, if she loves you, what?"

"I'm sure I don't know. After the deluge what?"

"Tell her," said I, "that if she ever finds life impossible to live without you to give you the sign. Tell her to take your hard some day and slip from it that ring you wear, the odd stone—it isn't the thing for a gentleman to wear anyway—and to put it on her own."

"Very well," he said, laughing and turning his chair away. "That will do as well as anything. You tell her, if you ever come across her."

And still laughing, he wheeled his way from the room.

III.

As the days went by now, upon my word I wondered at Mr. Ponsonby. I knew him so well that I knew what was agreeable, necessary, invaluable to him: and Juliet had not one of these things in her possession. She had a bold, showy beauty of the sort that he didn't prize, and she had qualities, in her rudeness, her selfishness, her temper, her coarse want of sensitiveness, and her assurance, that were offensive to him.

But yet a million dollars! What that would do for the old Ponsonby place! What that would do for the old Ponsonby name; and if he had political ambition, as he had, that ambition whose qualification needs the expenditure yearly of small fortunes, how much that would do for the Ponsonby career! It seemed to me that poverty and obscurity were a thousand times better than such ignoble wealth and prominence, and again I said to him in my thoughts, "You are despicable!" But it hurt me to say it for all that.

I was playing some waltz music later in the evening, a little crazy tarantella, a quaint gavotte of Bach, and trying to forget myself in that wild, sweet joy of others. He came and leaned against the corner of the mantle gazing at me. I looked up half a second. Such a strange, long, sad and troubled gaze was his! I did not understand it. Suddenly the music forsook my fingers, and pushing back the chair, I fled out of the room before I should lose all self-control. My mother met me and drew me into her sitting-room, and held my head on her knee, stroking my hair, but saying nothing till the clock struck eleven.

"Now," she said at last, "it is time to go to bed, or you will see the Ponsonby ghost. It always walks, in some shape or other, the night before Christmas here."

"Then it isn't due till to-morrow night," said Mr. Pierrepoint, coming in, for the door stood ajar. "We will all sit up and see it, and you shall tell us the legend, Mrs. Featherstonhaugh."

"I will tell you the legend now, Pierrepoint, as your uncle told it me," said my mother. "It is only the ghost of an old family falling of the Ponsonbys that walks. It is an exacting ghost. When they have offered it the sacrifice of what they most value, it will be laid."

"They?" said Mr. Pierrepoint. "Who are they?"

"You," said my mother.

"What a terrible thing to be a plural—royal, editorial, and the gods on Caucasus, all shrunk to one Ponsonby man!"

"You will never seem a man to me," said my mother, "nor like the last of the Ponsonbys, and by no means like the head of the house. You always seem like the little boy whose jackets I mended, whose broken fingers I bound up, whose headaches I used to cure."

"And you are always just the same lovely Mother Featherstonhaugh to me that you were the first day that you came into this house and ordered me (I was making my annual visit then) a plate of bread and butter and an ocean of jelly. And when you took off the wraps and showed me your little rose leaf of a baby, I thought she was the sweetest miracle in nature. And—and—"

Suddenly he stood up and looked at me where I sat on the hassock at my mother's feet, putting my disheived hair in order.

"And I think so now!"

And then he strode out of the room.

"And he lets that Juliet girl talk so to a miracle of nature!" I cried indignantly. "And he is going to marry her million and let the miracle of nature go! Well, there is one thing about it: the miracle of nature has some self-respect!"

And my mother laughed.

"Why so excitable?" said she. "You do not love him. It is only a silly pride of yours that is suffering mortification."

And then off I went to bed myself, but not for any great amount of sleep.

IV.

The wind was blowing with a rising gale, bringing snow up the mountains; and as I looked from the window in my restlessness an hour or two later, my lamp being out, I saw it driving by in great gusts of whiteness across the gulf of gloom behind.

"Well, well," I said to myself. "A green Yule makes a fat churchyard; and this is a very white Yule. There won't be many more people here, but the mistletoe will hang in the hall all the same."

I threw open the window to breathe the freshness of the gale a moment; and at that moment I saw it. Light lay all around it on the driving snow, light like a slanting beam everywhere diffused upon the storm, and in the midst of all the light and whiteness a vast shadowy form, a man's form as plainly as I ever saw anything, a Ponsonby man's only to my excited fancy terrible. What made it more terrible was that I could see no face, only where a face should be, perhaps a deeper shadow more full of dark suggestion. Strange to say, that beyond this first chill creeping of the blood, it did not alarm me.

"It does not come as an enemy," I said. "There is something familiar about it. But if this is the Ponsonby ghost, why does it come to me?"

And I bent forward searchingly.

But what was this beside it? Another shape, dark upon the whiteness of the storm, a woman's shape, but again gigantic, and round it blowing out a cloud of shadowy hair, long, veiling, black as a Carthaginian's. And the woman bent as if bending towards me, and raised an arm—was it threateningly? And then, as if from a jewel on a long extended hand, came a flash of light through all that blindness, and the two shapes bent together, and all at once the truth rushed over me, and in spite of myself I laughed a loud, clear, ringing laugh, and the two started apart. There was confusion of moving light and darkness where they had been and then all light ceased and only the great white storm raved on.

So this was the end, then, of Pierrepoint's doubts. He had solved the question. Well, he had solved it for me too; it was the end of my doubts.

I lighted my lamp, and took out his photograph and placed it alongside the drawing I had made of Mr. Nevers. One was all dark, slender and sinuous grace; one was full of life, fire and power. One had proven weak and unworthy, if not treacherous; one was so strong that if he wished anyone's love, he would not ask for it. And yet until very lately I had thought I loved the one and did not love the other. Ah! what if those eyes that here gazed at me so kindly, so tenderly, had ever looked otherwise! What if they ever should! Always since my first remembrance of them they had held that gaze for me.

"If Pierrepoint Ponsonby is despicable," I said, "so is a woman that does not know her own heart. But I have found out mine, and that without any so bitter test as tests might be."

And and all at once, as I sat there with my elbows on the table, looking at that drawing, I was wondering at myself, wondering what I had done in the years that I had known Mr. Nevers during his long absences and the weeks and months when I had never heard of him, and feeling with a sudden fire and intensity that never could I endure such absence and silence again and live. And he? Oh, that perhaps made little odds. It was enough for me to love, bliss enough, contentment enough.

And yet I knew better. I knew now more fully what it needed no words from him to tell me. And I blew out my lamp and looked again at the vast, white storm sweeping as gladly as the blood swept in my veins, and went to sleep full of a deep and unspeakable joy, and only woke when day had long dawned, and found the white storm still raving on.

V.

I had plenty to do in my rooms that day; for I meant to be leaving the place presently and meant that my mother should go where I went, wherever that might be, and it was twilight of the early Christmas eve when I went down, and the servants were hanging up the holly and the mistletoe that had been brought in from the woods before the storm. I always had a sort of pleasant superstition about the mistletoe, and this quaint leaf and waxen berry of the Virginian woods might be as powerful as the genuine sprays brought in from over seas. I lingered now watching them hang it as if I assisted at some religious or incanting rite.

A group of the guests were sitting about the great hearth of the drawing-room, when I went in at last, their faces rosy in the blaze. Pierrepoint started to his feet and took a step towards me, and then suddenly re-seated himself by Juliet as before, and Mr. Nevers, with his warm, welcoming smile, wheeled his chair aside to make room for me near him.

"Did you know that Juliet heard it?" cried Amy to me.

"Heard what?"

"Why, the ghost you know, the Ponsonby ghost."

"You don't say so! When—where—what was it like?"

"I didn't say I saw it," said Juliet with loftiness. "I heard it."

"Heard a ghost!"

"Yes, heard a ghost!" she cried snappishly. "And that's all there is about it."

"Oh, indeed!" and I was turning away indifferently.

"Yes, indeed!" she cried then. "And I don't think you'd be so exceedingly calm if you had heard it. It was perfectly bloodcurdling! Oh! so sharp, so high, so shrill, so piercing, so cruel, and mocking, and vindictive. Positively, I never heard so fierce a shriek of laughter; more like a yell of hate."

"Strange no one else heard it. Did you hear anything of the sort, Mr. Ponsonby?"

"Who? I?" he said with a start. "No, nothing, nothing of the sort," with an odd hesitation. "Of that sort, at least."

"Then it wasn't the Ponsonby ghost, I suppose."

"Oh!" cried Olive, "Mr. Ponsonby promised that your mother should tell us the ghost story on Christmas eve."

"That story will be told on many a Christmas eve yet," said I. "It is a ghost, I fancy, that never will be laid."

"What do you mean?" said Mr. Pierrepoint, sharply.

"Why? Do you know about it?" said Juliet.

"Oh, yes. And so does Mr. Ponsonby."

"And why will it never be laid?" she asked, imperiously, as if she had a right to know.

"Oh, because, according to the legend of it, I suppose there never will be a Ponsonby willing to sacrifice the thing he loves best for the thing he loves second best."

"I'm sure I don't know what you are talking about!"

"It doesn't matter. But if he loves, for instance, a woman best, he will not sacrifice her for any money, and if he loves money best, he will not sacrifice that for any woman. By the way, I wonder if it was the ghost I saw that you heard."

"You? you saw a ghost?"

"I saw, looking from my window, at just about midnight, pausing on the storm, exactly as if treading a cloud of driving snow, a shadow, a regular Ponsonby shadow."

"You saw it? You really saw it?" cried one and another.

"And what did it do?" exclaimed Amy and Olive in a breath.

"Another shadow suddenly appeared beside it, the shadow of a woman whose hair had fallen about her—long hair, black as a cloud—and the shadows bent together; and I fancy—oh, I only fancy—I saw the first shadow make a motion as if it slipped a ring on the hand of the second shadow, this way."

And on the dark side of the firelight I had taken Mr. Never's hand, sliding the ring there from his finger, and lifting my left hand into the light, I slipped the ring on the betrothal finger, held it a moment in the glow of the blaze, and dropped my hand again over the side of the chair.

"Well, and what then," cried Amy and Olive again.

"Oh, nothing much." For Mr. Nevers had grasped that fallen hand of mine and held it in his own, tight as in a vise.

"But what happened?" persisted Verena.

"Oh, the light was blown out, maybe, or the ghosts remembered, if they were ghosts, that snow storms, and mist storms, and what not, are like quicksilver on the backs of mirrors, when they stand posturing with a light behind them."

"Oh!" said Amy, in a tone of half-delighted disappointment. "It wasn't a ghost at all! It was a pair of lovers! Who do you suppose it was?" "I'm sure it wasn't I."

"Nor I," said Olive.

"Nor [illegible] Mr. Nevers.

"Nor [illegible]," feebly stammered Juliet.

"It must have been some of the servants," said Verena.

"Servants to something, to others' caprices or their own," I said. "The woman's shadow had the build of a cook, I remember."

And then I was ashamed of my bit of spite.

"I am sure, though," I added, "that with all my heart I wish she may make a better wife than I think she will;" for, after all, spite would have the better of me.

And just then there was a commotion in the circle made by Jane's bringing in the tea.

"What do you mean by all this?" said Mr. Pierrepoint, rising as the others rose, and coming over and standing a moment beside me.

"What should I mean?" said I.

"Do you imagine—can you imagine—is a man pledged by the act of a midnight romp, the gift of a ring, an idle kiss?"

"You will forgive me, Mr. Pierrepoint," I began, half under my breath, "if I say that I neither know nor care."

"You do not care? It is nothing to you, then, whether—"

"The friend of so many years, Mr. Pierrepoint, your choice of a wife would be a great deal to me. But as you choose a person that would not let me remain your friend, with whom you can even make me the subject of a jest, I must of necessity resign myself to letting your marriage mean nothing to me."

"It should mean everything to you!" he exclaimed hotly in his suppressed undertone. "I may have cheated myself into the wild endeavor to do without you. But it is impossible! I cannot! And when I saw you with that ring of Nevers on your hand, I thought I should go mad."

"Mr. Pierrepoint," I said, "you are speaking to the woman that will be the wife of Mr. Nevers, or of no one."

"What!" he cried, forgetful of his ears, and then sinking his voice again. "Will you tell me," he said, "that you—you, who have so believed in the sanctity of love, that you love, would marry that man, that hunchback!"

"I love as I never [illegible] now dreamed I could love," said I, "a man so noble like [illegible] he has one defect, I fail to remember it, whose beautiful face is the reflex of his beautiful soul, and without whom life would be a desert that I could not cross!"

And I moved away hurriedly and closed the door behind me, afraid lest tears of excitement, anger and love should overflow my face.

VI.

I paused a moment at the foot of the stairs, to get my breath, perhaps, when the drawing room door opened again, and I heard the chair come wheeling swiftly down the hall.

"Stay a moment," said the voice that thrilled me. And Mr. Nevers caught the hand that still wore his ring. "You are playing with fire," he said hoarsely; "the fire of the eternities, the fire of heaven or hell. Do you—dare—let me dream—!"

I turned and looked at him as well as I could for the color streaming up my face and making my very eyelids heavy, and then I knelt down on the rug beside his chair.

"Do you want your ring back?" I whispered.

"And you," he said, as if in answer to me, "do you mean that you are going to be my wife?"

"You have never asked me," I whispered again.

"I never shall. Only—only—if you are—if I am not dreaming—if this is not some dear, mad, delusion, then wake me quickly!"

I put my arms up about his neck and kissed him.

"Is this real?" I said.

"My wife! My wife!" he murmured, clasping me.

And with that all the Christmas bells rang out, and I looked up and saw the mistletoe swinging over our heads, and hid my face on his breast.

"It is a bliss I have no right to that I never dared hope for, that to pray for I should have thought blasphemy, that I did not look forward to even in heaven."

"Oh, heaven is here!" I said.

And just then the drawing room opened, and the young party came dancing out for their frolic under the mistletoe.

"Oh, my good gracious!" cried Juliet, starting back. "She had better talk about the Ponsonbys marrying for money! I suppose that's what all her rigmarole meant! And here she sells herself to a hunchback!"

"For shame!" cried Amy, as they all gathered about us.

"Oh, Juliet, on a Christmas eve!" said Verena.

But I only clasped him the closer. And then Pierrepoint, very white and set, was speaking.

"Possibly the Ponsonbys marry for money; I wish some of them had before my time. But one of them has to-day had his hand rejected by the young lady of whom you speak, Miss Juliet. And there is nothing left for him but to pray heaven to bless his more fortunate friend whom she has already blessed."

And he wrung Mr. Nevers' hand, and the tears flowed from my eyes, and I am not sure that for just the one-half second I was not sorry I could not marry both of them, or that there were not two of me!

"I have known many Christmas eves," said Mr. Nevers, "since I was a child, but never one that brought any difference to my life till now. But I feel as if the world was made and life begun for me this Christmas eve!"

Taxation of Bachelors.

From the Philadelphia Record.

The proposition in the French chamber to put a progressive income tax on bachelors serves to indicate the financial resources that yet remain untouched for nations whose exchequers have been exhausted. But this is by no means a modern scheme for replenishing bankrupt treasuries. In England in the reign of William and Mary, Parliament assessed a graduated tax not only on bachelors and widowers, but upon marriages, births and burials. This was literally taxation from the cradle to the grave, and exceeded in brutality some of the worst features of the English protective system of the same period.

The social rather than the financial condition of France lies at the bottom of this scheme to put a tax on bachelors. It is shown by statistics of last year that in Paris there are 470,104 unmarried men and 381,754 single women. In these figures widows and widowers are not included. Estimating at 300,000 the persons of both sexes that are not of marriageable age, it appears that in Paris there are about as many persons who live contrary to the decree of nature as there are married men and women. In the rest of France the proportion does not differ very materially. There are about 2,000,000 marriageable Frenchmen who prefer what they regard as the convenience of celibacy.

The cause of this indifference to marriage lies in the fact that in Paris, as well as in other cities of France, young men find it more and more difficult to support a family according to their condition in life, while it is quite easy to establish relations outside of the marriage tie. In the French republic the pressure to fill places in the government is far greater than it is in this country, with all the cry about our national greed for office. A young Frenchman's first ambition is to obtain as high a position as possible in the civil service or in the army. In the crowded condition of the universities and military schools, whose graduates struggle for government posts, promotion is extremely slow; and by the time the average French official has attained the rank and salary which would enable him to support a wife his desire to found a family has been, as a rule, considerably lessened. When married he must live in accordance with his station, which costs much money, while official salaries are not by any means as high in France as they are on the other side of the English channel. But the unmarried Frenchman, whether official, clerk or artist, can live well on a small income, as he can occupy a cheap and narrow apartment and make modest expenditure for food without injuring his social position, to which he attaches much importance. It is not strange, under these circumstances, that so many Frenchmen should prefer single life to the married relation. Whether a tax on bachelors would arrest this tendency to celibacy, and promote social morality, may well be questioned. There would, of course, be much complaint among the bachelors over the partiality of such a tax. But it has long been the policy of the law in France to give encouragement to the fathers of large families. To tax bachelors at a higher rate than the heads of families would be in harmony with this policy.

HAIL THE NIGHT.

Hail the night, all hail the morn
When the Prince of Peace was born!
When, amid the wakeful fold,
Tidings good the angels told.
Now our solemn chant we raise
Duly to the Saviour's praise;
Now with carol hymns we bless
Christ the Lord, our Righteousness.

TWO CHRISTMAS POEMS.

A Happy Family.

For the INTELLIGENCER.

"Bring in the boughs of holly, and deck the pictured walls,
Let joyous Christmas carols ring through the spacious halls;
For at this festive season our joys are manifold,
And we may well be merry, who have both health and gold.
Run Jimmy, fetch the ladder—John cannot reach so high.
There, Carrie, that looks lovely—look out there Kate—oh, my!
You nearly knocked those vases down from the mantle there.
Oh, Frank that ball looks splendid suspended in mid air!
You, Mary, take the children, and pack them off to bed,
For Harry there is sleepy—see how he nods his head.
Say Jimmy, little honey, now don't forget to go
To-morrow morning early to Mrs. Mary Stowe,
And tell her to bring promptly my dress at half past eight—
She's had plenty time to make it—I can no longer wait
For Charlie Scott to-morrow will take me to the ball,
And I must be arrayed in the latest styles of all."
So spoke a happy maiden, the eldest of a flock
Of merry, gay young people of aristocratic stock,
As assembled in the parlor upon a Christmas eve
They decked the room with holly and garlands green did weave.
And well might they be happy, light-hearted, gave and free,
As mid joyous songs and laughter they trimmed their Christmas tree.
Their father was a banker of credit and renown,
The family was considered the wealthiest in the town.
And merry strains of music upon the night air rang
As, gathered round the organ, they Christmas anthems sang.
Bring in the boughs of holly, and deck your pictured walls,
Let joyous Christmas carols ring through your spacious halls—
[illegible] our joys are manifold,
For at this festive season you[illegible] and at [illegible]
And you may well be happy, who have both health and gold.

One of God's Poor.

They say that this is a season when *all* should be merry and glad—
But *I*, an orphan forsaken, am heart-sick, and tired and sad.
The crowds that jostle and push me, hear not my heart-broken sigh—
There's naught to cheer me, and no one cares whether I live or I die!
What right have I to be happy at this festive time of the year,
When people are wishing each other a Christmas of mirth and of cheer?
I who am doomed to a life-time of hardships and sorrow and pain,
Must ever be sad and dejected, must look for pleasures in vain!
Hark! the sweet anthems of Christmas are borne on the night's frosty air—
How happy and joyous they must be in that bright, happy home over there!
While I—oh! Father in heaven, thou knowest alone what I bear!—
A girl alone in the city with a world of sorrow and care.
All day in the factory I labor, where I never hear a kind spoken word,
And naught but the noise of machinery, and curses and rude jests are heard.
Two dollars a week they pay me—they say, 'tis more than enough
For a girl to live in the city, whose ways of living are rough.
I know that my clothes are ragged—I've nothing about me that's new,
But why should that be the reason that people should think me untrue
To all that is noble and virtuous, and brand me a "tough" and a "case,"
And eye me with loathing and horror, insulting me e'en to my face?
God knows I'm as pure as the angels that hover about his white throne,
If I am a poor girl forsaken and live in the city alone.
Alone!—oh, that word means so much to a homeless orphan like me!—
No father to love and protect me, no mother to teach me to be
Content and happy with all things—to bind up my poor aching head,
To kiss from my brow the frown-marks, and bid me be cheerful instead—
No brother to shield and protect me from insults of rude wicked men—
No sister to wind her arms round me, and tell me to never mind when
Things don't just happen to suit me—that all will be right in the end.
Alas! there is nothing to cheer me, not even a kind loving friend.
You say that this is a season when *all* should be cheerful and glad—
You now know what is the reason *I* am so gloomy and sad.
But one precious thought comes to me howe'er sad and lonely I be—
That Jesus Christ came to save e'en such poor, wretched outcasts like me.

—*Jerry Cruncher.*

"Blood Will Tell."

Yes, the old adage is right, but if the liver is disordered and the blood becomes thereby corrupted, the bad "blood will tell" in diseases of the skin and throat, in tumors and ulcers, and in tubercles in the lungs (first stages of consumption) even although the subject be descended in a straight line from Richard Cœur de Lion, or the noblest Roman of them all. For setting the liver in order no other medicine in the world equals Dr. Pierce's "Golden Medical Discovery." Try it, and your "blood will tell" the story of its wonderful efficacy. Tu,F&w

Personal Comeliness

Is greatly enhanced by a fine set of teeth. On the other hand, nothing so detracts from the effect of pleasing features, fine eyes and a graceful figure, as yellow teeth. That popular toilet article SOZODONT checks their decay, and renders them as white as snow.

Be On Your Guard.

Benson's Capcine Plasters are widely imitated. That is the fact. Now, why are they imitated? Because they are the only porous plaster in existence that is really trustworthy and valuable. Benson's Plasters are highly and scientifically medicated, and cure in a few hours ailments upon which no others have had any effect whatever. The public are therefore cautioned against plasters bearing the names of "Capsicin," "Capsicum," "Capsicine," or "Capucin," which are meant to pass for "Capcine" (please note the difference) and also against plasters bearing the names "Benton's," "Burton's," etc. When buying ask for Benson's Plaster and protect yourself by a personal examination. The genuine has the word "Capcine" cut or pressed in the body of the plaster and the "Three Seals" trademark on the face cloth. (3)

SPECIAL NOTICES.

Some Doubt the Bible

And the motives of its authors, but none who have used them doubt the efficacy of "Burdock Blood Bitters. This splendid blood tonic is without a peer. For sale by H. B. Cochran, druggist, 137 and 139 North Queen street, Lancaster.

Threw Away $350.

"Troubled with asthma for eight years. Not quite two bottles of *Thomas' Eclectric Oil* cured me completely, after spending over $350 without the slightest benefit." This is what August Trubner, of Tyrone, Pa., says. For sale by H. B. Cochran, druggist, 137 and 139 North Queen street, Lancaster.

How About the Doses.

Many people before purchasing a medicine naturally inquire, the size of the dose and the strength of it. In using *Burdock Blood Bitters* a teaspoonful for the little ones and two teaspoonfuls for grown folks are all that is necessary at one time. This magnificent medicine is not only economical but very pleasant to the taste. For sale by H. B. Cochran, druggist, 137 and 139 North Queen street, Lancaster.

Proved a Big Benefit.

"Has magical pain-killing and healing properties. Half of a fifty-cent bottle cured me of rheumatism and a cold that had settled in my back. Feel as well as I ever did in my life." Otto J. Doesbury, proprietor *Holland City News*, Holland, Mich., speaking for "Thomas' Eclectric Oil." For sale by H. B. Cochran, druggist, 137 and 139 North Queen street, Lancaster.

"My Mother

Has been using your *Burdock Blood Bitters* as a liver remedy, and finds them very efficacious." Chas. L. Alnsworth, 41 Vance Block, Indianapolis, Ind. For sale by H. B. Cochran, druggist, 137 and 139 North Queen street, Lancaster.

A Policeman Braced Up.

D. F. Collins, member of police, seventh ward, Reading Pa., talks this way: "I suffered severely from rheumatism; nothing did me any good till I tried *Thomas' Eclectric Oil*. It is a pleasure to recommend it." For sale by H. B. Cochran, druggist, 137 and 139 North Queen street, Lancaster.

ONE BOTTLE EFFECTS A CURE.—Mr. Oscar E. B. Koch, of Allentown, Pa., was bedfast with inflammatory rheumatism in the winter of 1883. Doctors could do nothing to relieve him. He commenced using Gross' Rheumatic Remedy. By the time he had used half a bottle he could leave his bed; when he had finished the bottle he was cured and has not had a return of the disease since. In his own words, "I feel better than ever before." Price $1, by all druggists. feb8-3md&W&F

MEDICAL.

CAPCINE PLASTERS.

BENSON'S POROUS PLASTERS.

WINTER EXPOSURE CAUSES COUGHS,

Colds, Pleurisy, Rheumatism, Pneumonia, Neuralgia, Sciatica, Lumbago, Backache and other ailments, for which Benson's Capcine Plasters are admitted to be the best remedy known. They relieve and cure in a few hours, when no other application is of the least benefit. Endorsed by 5,000 physicians and druggists. Beware of imitations under similar sounding names, such as "Capsicum," "Capsicin," or "Capsicine." ASK FOR BENSON'S AND TAKE NO OTHER. Examine carefully when you buy. All druggists.

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