

The Christmas Eve

PRIZE CHRISTMAS STORY.

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THE Persian roses had long since given their perfume to the air of the desert to refresh the weary camel-driver, and their petals to the scattering wind to heap the poet's tomb—for it was the twelfth month of the Mohammedan year in which is observed a divine institution, having for its authority the Koran:

"And proclaim to the people a pilgrimage; let them come to Thee on foot, and on every fleet camel, arriving by every deep defile."

"This do, and he that respecteth the sacred ordinance of God, this will be best for him with the Lord."

Night was passing. The stars were going out one by one, and the nightingale's song plaintive of sorrow was hushed. Murky darkness still flooded the pass guarding the approach of the desert. Dull tones from the heavy copper bells of the dromedaries quartered for the night in the far distance open, carried the signal to a rude hamlet among the hills that the caravan train would be starting ere daylight.

A rising from long and silent prayer in response to this call, two lone watchers, like those of old heeding the star of Bethlehem, stole down from an upper chamber and out into the melting gloom. Merwan, the rug-maker, was the first to break the solemn and consecrated watch.

"The night has fled and the hour is at hand, Kizami," said he to the young pilgrim, "and it is well. And thou wilt return ere the season of roses approacheth, when I must away. Aye, thou wilt return in time, for an angel voice whispered it while I yet prayed. Hasten ye Kizami, perform thy pilgrimage, and thy sins forgiven thee, ask pardon of God for mine, and it shall be granted. And oh, my young pilgrim, by the beautiful word of the holy Koran, I shall be as pure as the day I was born!" And Merwan, in ecstasy, lifted his eyes and hands to the sky now taking on the silvery hue of the dawn.

"Thy face is even as an angel's now, my sainted Merwan, but tell me, wherein lies thy sin?"

"Ah, I have sinned, Kizami! I have had longings to remain; I have bewailed my fate to my God, and pleaded with him to make me whole, and fill my cup of human bliss; to crown my manhood, and grant unto me mine earthly heritage."

"By the sins of the fathers, given in the book of the Nestorians, is not thine earthly heritage the blight in the rose?"

"Aye, the blight in the rose visited upon me. But that is not my worst sin."

"Thy sin, then, Merwan?"

"Pleading with God for that which is not in His Koran. But haste ye, Kizami, I would see thee through the pass and on thy way."

Darkness was beginning to vanish. The lark, ardent amid the dawning clouds, was calling to the morn. Streaks of gray were chasing the shadows of the desert, as the sandaled feet of a turbaned hermit and pilgrim pressed the sands of its border. Neither had spoken as they paced the trail through the high and narrow walls, to the gateway, shutting out the storm, the heat, the fear, and the dread of its immeasurable stretches.

In prayer stood Merwan with closed eyes and hands outstretched to the westward, where Kizami was about to depart on his pilgrimage. So long did the rug-maker remain motionless, that a rosy light began flooding the caravan of the hills, and Kizami, buoyant of spirit and with youth burning in his light and active body, plucked at the sleeve of the worshipper, at the same time craving his patience. Merwan gazed upon him with grave sweetness, bidding him speak.

"Merwan, I must away, yet, for mine own enlightenment, I would fain know thine earthly heritage. I will guard it as my soul."

Merwan smiled in sweet forgiveness of the other's earnestness, and about to speak, was turning his misty eyes across the sands, when he clutched the youth's arm and exclaimed:

"O, look ye!"

It was only the simple picture of a mother and child, with the dawn-shadowed plain for its background, and for its halo, the rosy blush of the morning. She was riding a sturdy ass, and with veil thrown back, nursing the babe at her breast, while her husband in the characteristic rusty brown gown and white turban, was holding the bride and glancing back with fondness upon his family. The desert waste was gray and chill in the dawn, yet warm and glowing with life and devotion and breathing of fruition. It was the divine story in human characters. The story is growing old, but every century hears its mystic calling and gains new life and power. It is still and must forever be the joy of the world. Let earth rise with it, then, and live.

The healing vision of the Holy maternity passed, Merwan drew a hand across his eyes as though he had but slept and dreamed.

"Man's holy heritage," he murmured, and then suddenly turning to the pilgrim he said:

"Kizami, I asked God for that!"

From the distant village literally founded upon the sands divers noises were being borne upward and outward upon the air, proclaiming all things animate and inanimate that go for the making of a pilgrimage, in the process of activity prior to the start.

Shouts, hoists, grunts, pulls, tugs, shoves, kicks and punches, gave signal that loads were being lifted to the backs of animals, adjusted and tied. As quickly passed the face of that young mother beneath her impenetrable veil at sight of the two strangers, as quickly fled the deep impressiveness of the moment at the infinite variety of sound and jargon, discordant and inarticulate.

"All that is mine is thine, Kizami," said Merwan at parting.

"All? You don't mean?"

"Yes, all; save that upon which my hands are busy. The Mullah will know, and have care of that in the holy hour; but—go! Nor tarry, nor forget ye the hour of roses. God and God be mindful of thee. Glory to Allah!"

A moment later and the young pilgrim was in the midst of the passing caravan—a motley assembly of camels, mules, and donkeys; muleteers, pilgrims, and camel-drivers—creeping away to the westward, while in the east and over all the sun was reigning.

Far away, yet ever near, high above rolling hills and surrounding plain, loomed Noah's mountain, Ararat; crowned with clouds and robed in rosy snow, soft-tinted by the sun; lonely, grand, and solitary; "a fitting place for the resting of the ark at the solemn death hour of an older race and the birth of a new generation."

It was a holy day. Priests were praying in the mosques, pilgrims wending their way to Mecca, shepherds like those of old calling to their flocks, each one by name, as they huddled together in the open places of the snow. The winter was present, and the spring far away, yet the sunshine while tempered by clouds, was imparting a touch of the soft season with its light and life and joy.

Merwan, the rug-maker, immovable as a bronze statue, gazed long to the westward till the creeping pilgrimage melted into the desert. Then back through the hills to his hamlet and loom he passed, with the bearing of a Persian prince.

"O, perfect day!" he murmured ecstatically, "wherein it is enough for me to know God's will is being done!"

The spirit of the spring was quickening in the land of the Magi. Soft gales were dissolving the mountain snows and the landscape glimmered in radiant new and radiant. In the lowlands, the peasants were turning the soil with their plows. The purring of a Persian water wheel carried the tidings of swollen rivers dispensing their blessings to valley and plain. The liquid notes of a bird floating high among the green and purple hills, thrilled the air with its joy of new-born wings, while the wild perfume of an early flower stirred the sense with its message of a second birth.

The winter had passed. All nature was throbbing with the unseen forces of immortal life.

It was the hour of midday devotion. Upon his prayer rug, with his pale forehead touching the floor, Merwan, the weaver, knelt in long and silent supplication. Within that sanctuary, where tapestries of unimaginable beauty covered the crude walls, the vast solitude of the desert seemed to abide, filled with soul and with heaven all about; populace of abundant life in light and color, cloud and mist, sun, moon, and stars, and thought companions. It was a shrine where angels might descend to watch over a soul left alone like a lamb on the plain.

A familiar step aroused the suppliant, and a Mullah, the faithful priest of the prophet, darkened the portal.

"By the heart and soul of the founder of the faith, may Allah chasten thee in pain," the holy one gave greeting and particular blessing.

"Glory to Allah! and His will be done," murmured Merwan, still prostrate.

From the Koran the Mullah chanted:

"Angels come among you by day and by night; when those of the night ascend to heaven, God asks them how they left his creatures! And what of thee, Merwan, thou lone one; what answer can they give of thee—we found him in prayer, in prayer we left him!"

"By the faith of Islam, yes."

"Two angels watch upon each mortal, one on the right, one on the left. At the close of each day they fly up to heaven with a written report. Every good action is recorded ten times by the angel at the right; and if the mortal commit a sin, the same angel says to the one on the left, 'Forbear ye for seven hours to record it; peradventure, he may repent and pray and obtain forgiveness.' And what of thee, son; dost thou repent ere the seventh hour and pray?"

"Thy servant prayeth always ere the seventh hour."

"By the scrupulous cleanliness of the prophet, doth thou perform ablution before each prayer?"

"For the cleanliness of my soul, do I perform ablution for the cleanliness of my body."

From the Holy Book the Mullah concluded with a prayer:

"God! There is no God but He the living, the ever living. He sleepeth not, neither doth He slumber. To Him belongeth the heavens and the earth and all that they contain. Who shall intercede with Him unless by His permission? He knoweth the past and the future, but no one can comprehend His knowledge but that which He revealeth. He is the High, the Mighty."

"Glory to Allah!"

"Arise, thou believer, and by the heart of Mahomet, may thou knowest God's mercy."

Though pure barbarian by birth, yet with the grace and peaceful majesty of a prince, did Merwan, the rug-maker, sit before his crude loom in the doorway, weaving a wondrous fabric. His delicate, high-bred face wore an expression of aloofness from the world; his eyes, dark and deep, unfathomably deep, bespoke a soul within a sacred portal; his hair was black and curled around the rim of his snowy turban.

Upon the ground opposite, the descendant of the prophet was squatting upon his heels, seeming to muse, yet watching with wary interest the busy fingers before him.

As precious as a Persian carpet, a beautiful cat upon a footstool, like Persia revealed on the map, blinked in the sunshine; perplexed and uncertain of balance, with furry back twitching uneasily; dozing, yet wide awake, in seeming mistrust of the Mullah, even as Persia of Russia.

The stillness that followed the prayer was broken by Merwan the weaver:

"While I yet prayed in the night hour, a filmy scarf veiled before me, dazzled my eyes with the brightness of its characters unto me written: 'In that hour when thy soul is gently drawn from thy pale lips as the silken veil from the face of one beloved, oh, the mystery and charm in the revelation!'"

The Mullah started as one falling out of a dark dream, into the searching light of day. The cat shifted. The sun was not more radiant than the face above the threads, the knots, and the nervous fingers.

"By the fascinating smile of the prophet, thine is even as a ray of the spirit, shining in purity and brightness. God hath given thee this resignation ere thine hour approacheth. Blessed art thou in thy consecration!" The cat was purring of pety, roguery, sanctity at once interchangeable.

Merwan continued the message set forth in gold letters:

"When the petals of the roses have hidden Omar's shrine, man shall envy thy quiet grave veiled beneath thine own roses woven in splendor and gold."

Merwan, the weaver, caressed his rare fabric now nearing completion.

"Aye, 'tis a thing of rare beauty," the Mullah responded, "and worthy the grave of a righteous believer."

"Thou shalt enter the golden gateway into thy heavenly Mecca, and thy soul shall be white as the wheaten flour, and fragrant with perfume. Sweeter than the spicy gales of Saba shall the air be cooled by sparkling fountains, and resounding with the melodious voice of that singing angel, Israfil!"

"Upon thee be peace in the name of Allah the Merciful."

Resplendent being shalt thou be, free from human defect and pain, and endowed with youth and thy beauty; and loving, aye, better after thy spiritual eyes have beheld the glories in heaven.

Thus was setting in gold and purple splendor ere the Mullah had finished his priestly calling of preparing the soul about to separate from the world and enter upon its future. Each mountain height was robed in the royal blue and crowned with fiery gold. A mantle of wonderful color enveloped the dingy hamlet while a shaft of shining light fell upon weaver and loom, and flashing beyond, transformed hangings and rugs into a garden of glory, all of which was not lost to the keen, sweeping glance of the prophet's trusty disciple. The cat arched his back and then huddled, holding his own on his feet, as the Mullah, studying the hug of the Big Polar Bear, to spring at the Mullah, should he attempt to make sacrilegious advance on the sacred possessions of Merwan, his master.

But he waddled away, the fat Mullah, his loose robe wrapping a bosom impenetrable, leaving his one sheep alone on the mountain, save for pussy, who purled in the lap of a maiden, a tiny sanctimonious, uncertain, fat, al; and pondered, no doubt, like a Persian, as to where his possessions began or where they would come to an end.

As for Merwan, he stroked his fond pet, and smiled a grave smile, which flickered a moment and then went out like a candle.

"O, Thou, who never sleepest, be with me this night in the shadow!"

Alone in the night, alone in his death-watch did Merwan, the rug maker, whisper:

"O, Thou, who never sleepest, be with me this night in the shadow!"

And a light went out in the land where the Star shall eclipse the Crescent.

Grandma's face was a study maternal, as she sat in the garret and pondered.

"It's the palfame tiny wee stocking I hung for my Elsie, and for wee baby, and now—my! how the past shadows gather—shadows? I guess I'll keep still as to shadows; the very word gives me the creeps. It's just like a rose petal, bless it! the tiny wee stocking. And to think that maybe—there! I'll not think it, I'll just hang it. Grandma searched in the secret drawer, and out came the tiny wee stocking, and the hood, just what I'm after. How I love them! with a sigh. I almost can feel the little warm body. By my eyes! that rug! all unrolled—it's been handled—who's dared? I thought I had hidden it safely away."

Grandma felt her knees. "Oh, the beautiful thing! Well I mind me the day it was given to me by my mother; 'twas my 18th Christmas and upon it I stood to be married—but there! I feel chilly and queer—I must not take cold. I'll hide you again when it is day-light, but now—Grandma hustled away downstairs, with pale face, nor paused till she had locked herself in her room.

"It's strange how that thing affects me. How one talks to it as if it could hear; but it just seems to breathe, move and speak. It's a mystery to me who has touched it. Can it be? But God save us! I'll not hold that thought either, but I'll just run downstairs and proceed with my task."

A little later as the fire burns brightly in the living room, Grandma

was suddenly checked in the act of hanging up a tiny stocking on a baby-rubber line drawn beneath the mantle. John the young husband, walked into the room.

"Not hanging stockings already, grandmother?"

"Aye, it wants but a week, lad," sharply.

"But we never hung up our stockings at home till the night before Christmas, and besides—why, grandmother! John's eyes fell upon a bit of silken footware, and a rosy color mantled to the roots of his hair.

"And 'why grandmother!' I should like to know. I want to be sure that I use foot that size will be kicking in our home by Christmas. In my village hanging the stocking the week before insures good luck."

"Have you doubts, grandmother?" said the young husband, apprehensively.

The nurse interrupted.

"Your wife is calling for you," she said.

John disappeared.

How is your patient by now?" Grandma asked of the nurse.

"Quite indeed! I can't make her out, but she's better. I don't say a word, and she starts me with: 'Don't be alarmed, dear Miss Brooke, I am quite sane,' and that rare, grave smile, and the soft tender light in those deep, dark eyes, reassures me."

Grandma smoothed out the little white robe on her lap that boasted her own hand embroidery; but she looked to and fro very fast, and then said:

"Give an instance, Miss Brooke, in what way does she strangely impress you?"

"Well, this morning she would wash her hair—she's wilful you know—as she came from the bath, in her loose flowing robe, with a white towel wrapped about her head like a turban, with the black curls clinging around the edges and crooning some incoherent stuff."

"Stuff! that's it exactly," Grandma broke in with her eyes all aglow like the nurse's.

"It resembled a chant in its one mellow tone, and the words—"

"Aye, the words?"

"They were foreign."

"And she looked like—" the nurse pondered.

"Yes, yes, like what?" Grandma moved to the edge of her chair.

"Like a thing oriental and not of this land."

Grandma gave a slight cry. "I knew it would come; the poor child's been marked. There! the cat's out of the bag. I'll have to confess, that my dearie may not be misjudged. Hish! here's John."

In the doorway, with wide staring eyes and pale face, the young husband looked quite distracted.

"She needs you, Miss Brooke," he suggested, "she's in great distress."

As the nurse went upstairs, John let go of his calm and desperately turned upon Grandma:

"The limit is reached; I think she's quite mad."

"And what now?" Grandma asked in alarm.

"She calls for a rug!"

Grandma threw up her hands and sank into her chair.

"And she says, 'Grandma Grey can produce it!'"

"Good Lord! all my fears are confirmed."

"What fears? You fill me with terror."

"Concerning that rug."

"Then there is such a thing in this house?"

"To be sure. A grave-rug."

"A grave-rug! What does it all mean?" and John gripped his hair.

"What does it all mean? John Calvin! That question has haunted me, aye fully two-thirds of my journey through life."

"Grandma! be quick," shrieked a voice from above.

The old lady jumped, and fled up the back stairs, while John followed close with the candle.

"Now, give me the light," Grandma gasped, from sheer loss of breath and queer nerves. "There's the thing over there in the corner—hurry up, else that sick child will follow!" John stooped to gather the roll in his arms while she wheeled for the door.

"Can you tell me why you've hid this rare thing away in the garret?" asked John.

But the dear old white head leaned half way down the stair ere John had uttered his question.

A half hour later the husband and nurse softly tiptoed into the old lady's presence. John had ordered a consultation, or rather, an explanation. To this Grandma had quickly responded:

"'Twill be a relief, since occasion demands, I've carried the thing into my back chamber. Bring Miss Brooke, 'tis her right as a nurse; already she senses the ghost in the closet."

Grandma rocked in her chair. She was pale and badly upset, but otherwise plucky and brave as a whole. Her granddaughter's keepers appeared.

"Well, what happened? I've been straining both ears, but never the breath of a sound have I heard."

"She spread the rug out on the bed," answered John, "nestled upon it like a tired child in its mother's arms and went sound asleep."

"The first rest she's taken in days," said the nurse.

"All I needed," she said, "was this bed of sweet roses to cool my hot head to lull me to sleep. I wonder why Grandma's withheld it so long? It's mine, you know, John."

"To be sure! but I never told her."

"Then how did she know?"

"The plot thickens," mused Grandma.

"And why in the world has so wondrous a thing been allowed to repose in the garret?"

"And is the thing haunted?" the nurse sharply asked.

"What on earth do you mean, Grandma Grey?"

"Just what I said. Mr. John, that rug has lain wrapped in the greatest of care and locked in my own chest all these years. Imagine the state of my nerves, if you will, when today I found it spread out on the attic floor."

"Then that's where my patient has been when I have missed her," exclaimed the shrewd nurse.

"Pray, how do you know—you've no proof," John spoke with excitement.

"Will you both hold your tongues and sit down, while I tell you the story," Grandma said curtly.

"And haste lest my darling awake."

"Never fear; she'll sleep like an infant till morning. I know all the tricks of that rug."

The facial expressions of husband and nurse were peculiar.

"Rugs are not only written pages," began the wise, not to say startling, old lady; "but they live and breathe and have their being. Not only has every color its significance, each design its hidden meaning, not only may you read wondrous things from Persian characters and wondrous verses from Persian poems, not only do the shadowy tracery of leaf forms, flowers and trees, there contained a symbol language, but pervading all, there hovers a peculiar spirit—a mental drift—some inherent and mysterious fitness bearing the subtle truth of our marvelous nearness to the world beyond. I gained my knowledge through reading and study while in possession of that wondrous creation upstairs; some there are, however, so sensitive as to hear and hear, and see, and learn, without the aid of books or teacher."

"That costly fabric was given to my great-grandmother as a Christmas gift, hanging over the door of her tall four-poster bed, for her to muse and dream upon as she lay with her first-born—my grandmother—clasped to her breast. From that time it has passed down the line, from first daughter to first daughter, the best that it be given at Christmas time, or at the advent of a daughter, whichever first followed the marriage. And strange to relate, each first birth has been a girl babe, and always opening about Christmas time with never one break."

"Were any of these mother strange before birth?" the nurse broke in.

John gasped. "Now, don't tell me my dear, 'tis a victim of some terrible heredity!"

"Will you please hold your tongues till I finish? Then you can form your own conclusions by yourselves. When my Elsie, the sweet mother of this child upstairs, was married, the sunshiny of her mature soon met with its eclipse. I can see her now as then looking like a crushed violet, and with all her wifely joy snuffed out like a candle."

"Is this nature's own child, in joy with life, longing for its joys, yet feeling the deep fires of faith, an ever incensed shrine in her heart?"

"On all these instincts the man, her husband, tried and cruel. Even her hope of motherhood fell under the blight of his contempt."

"Religion, duty—the names were witticisms he played upon in blasphemous skepticism till my girl's heart shrank in its fear."

"Oh, 'twas cruel!" Grandma choked, the grandson's eyes flashed fire, and the nurse looked out through tears.

"We little thought," went on the halting voice, "how strange should be her solace. According to the will of that old, eccentric granddame, the rug was to be Elsie's within the coming week. 'Twas the very first Christmas she had seen her mother since her birth. No little stocking hung before the fire; no sweet faced wife sensed the joy of motherhood. But Elsie was so changed in the delight of her husband, that she had no time to feel her own mother heart torn."

"In March, the cold and heartless Stanton receiving a business call, several months' absence, journeyed away to Alaska fields, little dreaming of a joy he had unconsciously implanted in the heart of an obedient Elsie—the joy of promise and fruition. One evening in April, she stood before me

bearing a wedded thought that was to be brought to golden fruit in the midst of December's snow and frost. Her joy seemed not of earth, but of heaven—a spirit floating out from her."

"'Tis New Year's in the Persian land, my mother dear," she digressed, as she called the precious secret that had sent a fairy mad, and said, "I falls not in January as does ours, but in the advent of the spring. The Persians celebrate this festival in the same way as we observe our Christmas, only it continues for two whole happy weeks, when the earth is all a-bloom with flowers. City, town, village, and hamlet rejoice in holiday attire, and with interchange of gifts, and good wishes, and the welcoming of callers with large trays of sweetmeats."

"You'll not have time for Persian history, by and by, I chafed her."

"The voice of my Christmas guest—as she called the rug—was never silent, mother dear, I don't have to hunt in books for information."

"The force of this speech did not dawn upon me at the time. Again, one evening in the soft April dusk, Elsie said dreamily, 'this is the hour when the Persian greets you with 'Peace be unto thee.'"

"And did your Christmas guest tell you that, my dear?"

"Yes! He frequently greets me at this sweet hour."

"He!" I exclaimed in amusement, "And has the old rug assumed the form of sex?"

"Not only sex, but soul!" she answered solemnly. "It is a presence that is not to be put by," she quoted, and for some unaccountable reason at the time, I felt troubled.

"The roses are blooming in that far land of Iran," she mused, and soon with the fields be a waving mass of white poppies."

"In October, when my Elsie was a pretty girl, a beautiful, and, in her completeness, came the shocking tidings of Stanton's sudden death. We had been looking for him every day; it seems, he had but started homeward when pneumonia claimed him for a fatal victim. Naturally, I trembled at the dire effect of such a blow to my delicate Elsie. But mine was the pain when I found that it fell as lightly upon her as the leaves of the autumn, for I not only sensed the sad truth that Stanton had killed all her love for him in hours of his brutal torment, but I was also possessed of a cruel fear that a shadow lurked in the brightness of my darling's mentality."

"At this revelation John, the young husband, moaned and began to pace the floor."

"Stanton, John, will you?" said Grandma, "and remember I am living it over again; it is harder on me than on you."

John obeyed.

"Stanton was never my soul companion, mother dear," Elsie reasoned in her sweet effort to calm me, nor was she deceived in the real cause of my alarm. 'Don't tremble so,' she soothed, 'and remember, I am your own and loving old mother Christmas, while I am here, and felt that my Elsie was not only strong and brave, but mentally above me.'

"Come, mother dear," she said one evening as we sat in the gloaming awaiting the coming of Christmas, and the holy hour of her consecration. 'I want to tell you a sad though beautiful story.' Upon the rug she seated herself, and with her head bowed, she began to tell me the Christmas story."