

TWO CHRISTMASSES;

OR, THE MYSTERY OF THE HAUNTED GARRET.

CHAPTER V.—CONTINUED.

We pass the very spot where I threw myself face downwards on that terrible day six months ago, when I had lost all I had in the world. I remember it—I never pass the place without remembering it—but I do not know whether my cousin thinks of it or not as he walks beside me with his head bent and his hands in the pockets of his old shooting-coat. I thought then that there was nothing left for me but to die, but I found that there was work for me to do, and I have done it, and found peace and contentment in the doing of it, if not absolute happiness—and, after all, how few are happy in this world! I was not perfectly happy even when I was mistress of Grayacre and my boy alive.

I had a hard fight with him about giving up Grayacre; if his mother had not fallen ill immediately after our falling out, he would have gone back to Canada in spite of me. But I had told Winder & Curtis everything, made over to him as far as I could, when he utterly refused to take any steps to establish his rights. So things remain to this day, my cousin leaving the entire management of the farm to Michael Foote, making no changes, buying and selling nothing, not being empowered to do either, since he has not administered to the will. It is an unnecessary state of things—I feel it now when I am becoming resigned to my own loss. I am too fond of Grayacre for its own sake not to wish to see it properly managed and, of course, as affairs are now, everything is at a stand-still at the farm. Whatever resolution my cousin has come to, he seems determined to abide by it; but I am at least equally obstinate. However he came by it, Grayacre belongs to him. I have no more right to it now than the man in the moon.

Aunt Wills has never left her room since she died with us in the oak parlour on Christmas Day. But it was only in the beginning of March that she became seriously ill and took to her bed. Ever since then she has been so weak and poorly that Hugh could not bring himself to leave her, even if she had not begged and prayed him to remain. But I am sure he will go back to Canada as soon as she is out of danger—at least, I am sure that is his intention. That she will ever be well enough to allow of his leaving her I am beginning to doubt. For the last week we have been sitting up with her day and night, and last night I did not like her symptoms at all. But Hugh will not believe that she is in any danger; even last night when I called him up to look at her—he generally sits up with her part of the night that Leslie and I may rest a little, or else by the fire in the oak parlour to be ready when we call—he had not observed anything unusual in her voice or look. But I do not think she will ever be up and about the house again.

Leslie Creed came to her when I left Grayacre. Aunt Wills had never made any effort to keep me. I think she was sorry for me and missed me until Leslie came. But then she had all she wanted. She loved Leslie, who never went out of her way to please her, a thousand times more than she had ever loved me, who would have done anything for her for Laurie's sake. I believe Leslie even cares more for me than she does for Aunt Wills. But Leslie worships her cousin Hugh.

"I will go on to the doctor's," Hugh says, as we part at the door of my house; "and if I can I will bring him back with me."

I think it would be just as well. He walks on up the road, and I let myself in with my latch-key and steal up the narrow stairs to my own little room. It is not half-past six yet; none of the patients are stirring, but one of the nurses is moving about softly in the wards, and the little maid is lighting the a-lor fire. I shall have time to lie down for an hour at all events, and I am so thoroughly worn out that I hope I may even get a little sleep.

It is a vain hope; something or other, some dim presentiment of coming evil perhaps, will not allow me to close my eyes. At seven I am up and about my duties in the wards—before eleven the hardest part of the day's duties are over, and I am anxiously looking out for my cousin Hugh.

Hugh has never betrayed himself by word or look, never even alluded to the scene in the firwood, from that day to this. He neither avoids me nor seeks me out; sometimes I think he changes colour when I meet him or address him suddenly, and very often I find him watching me in his grave intent way, very much as he used to watch me at Grayacre; but neither a momentary paleness when he meets her nor an occasional look at her across a crowd proves that a man is in love with a woman, whatever romantic people say.

He is certain to come—I know him well enough to be sure of that. I am standing in the window when he comes up the road on Meerschaum; I am at the door before he has flung himself out of the saddle.

"Well?" I ask, reading my answer in his eyes.

"She is going on very well."

"I am so glad! Did you find Doctor Murray at home? I suppose you did at that hour in the morning?"

"Doctor Murray never came home at all. But I sent for Nesbitt as soon as I got back to Grayacre—he never calls it 'home'—and he came over at ten."

"Nesbitt?" I repeat, my countenance falling. "Was it only Nesbitt?"

"Murray won't be home till to-morrow. But I believe Nesbitt quite understands the case. He says we are not to force her to take more nourishment than she feels inclined to—her pulse is quite strong and she has no dangerous symptoms."

"I wish Doctor Murray would come back! If they let her strength run down, she is lost."

"There seems to be no danger of that."

"How is Leslie?"

"Oh, Leslie is very well!"

"I shall be over at nine, tell her, to take the first part of the night."

"Do you sleep at all, Joan?"

"No—I could not sleep."

"And you will get no rest all day?"

"I shall sleep to-night, or rather to-morrow morning."

"You look like a ghost," he says, sighing. "Well, I will come over for you at half-past eight?"

"But it is quite light till nine o'clock, Hugh. It is great nonsense your coming all that way merely to walk back with me!"

"I shall come nevertheless."

Which he does, just as the old church clock strikes the half-hour. The thrushes and blackbirds are singing in the brakes and hedges, and the dusk is falling with the falling of the dew as we set out, my cousin in his rough homespun clothes, I in the close black bonnet and nun-like cloak which are such an eyesore to him.

"Nesbitt dined with us," he tells me, as he stops to light his pipe outside the door.

"I left Leslie to entertain him while I came for you."

We scarcely speak again till we reach Grayacre—we who used to have so much to say to each other. Sometimes of late Hugh has fallen into sulky fits. I think he is tired of the inactive life he is forced to lead. He may be anxious, too, about La Hougue Blo, left entirely to the care of servants, for the old grandmother died before Leslie came to England. I wonder what would become of Leslie if anything happened to Aunt Wills? She has not a relative in the world that she knows of except Aunt Wills and Hugh, and an aunt married to an indigo-planter in Burmah. But I suppose she will marry soon, with her sixty thousand pounds—that is, if she can bring herself to care for any man except her cousin Hugh. As for Hugh, I am beginning to think he dislikes her; but then I may be mistaken, as I have so often been before.

We find Leslie in the blue room, a pretty little sitting-room, which we always use in summer, with a deep bay-window overlooking the home meadow and the wood. The window is open, and, though there are no candles lighted, there is still sufficient daylight to show us the dainty figure in the low basket-chair, and Doctor Nesbitt's handsome head and shoulders, as he leans at a little distance against the sash.

"You must have owl's eyes," Hugh says crossly, as we come blinking in from the lamp-lit hall. "Why don't you have candles? I for one can't see in the dark."

"Don't scold," Leslie laughs. "It is only that the room seems dark to you, coming in from the light. We were quite enjoying the gloaming."

"So it seems."

"Has he been as agreeable as this all the way from St. Perpetua's, Joan?"

I shake my head, wondering whether he brought his crossness into the room with him, or whether it is jealousy of Doctor Nesbitt which has put him out of temper.

"I wanted tea for you. Hugh, will you ring the bell?"

Susan brings in tea, and lights the candles. Leslie puts me into a comfortable chair, and then pours out tea, assisted by Dr. Nesbitt. Hugh has thrown himself into a corner of the sofa, where he sits sulkily watching his cousin.

Leslie looks so pretty in her rich black-silk gown, with its heavy jet embroidery and ruffles of black lace round the throat and half-short sleeves. She wears her blonde hair out short and falling in a cloud of fleecy gold about her forehead, her eyes are of the colour of the gray wood violets we find among the primroses in spring. Her face is charming in colour and outline, every movement of her prettily-rounded figure worth watching, every modulation of her clear young voice worth listening to, they betray so much careful training, so much instinctive coquetry, such a wonderful knowledge, how acquired I know not, of the effect they are likely to produce. The French blood in her veins makes a thousand airy graces seem quite natural to her which would have been utterly foreign to my nature; and then she is so young, such a mere child, she may be permitted the pretty impertinences which would have been not only unbecoming but ill-bred in a woman of my age. And yet I think sometimes Hugh is angry because she is not so composed and grave as I am—I, who have suffered more in six months than Leslie Creed ever suffered in the whole course of her beautiful spoilt existence.

It makes me feel lonely to see a stranger play the hostess here, in the house where I had held the reins of government since I was a child of ten years, and used to drop the keys among the hay, or into the river, or lose them in tool-house and barn as often as not. But I cannot deny that she plays the mistress very prettily, and I wonder how Hugh can refuse to smile at her when she carries him his cup of tea. I suppose he is jealous of Doctor Nesbitt's devotion, and yet he ought to know at least as well as I do that Leslie cares more for one look from him than for all the other's attentions.

"You look like a ghost, Joan," Leslie says, standing before me in her softly-glimmering black silk with its shimmering embroidery, her round pink cheeks, her golden head, her pretty white bare arms, such a contrast to my pale tired face and eyes dull and heavy for want of sleep. It is really too bad to ask you to sit up again to-night."

"I should have been more anxious if I had remained at home—I could not have slept in any case."

"But auntie is so much better—I don't think we need be anxious about her any more."

"Not if she goes on improving like this for a day or two longer."

"Doctor Nesbitt says she has turned the corner. We'll have her up and about in no time. Are you going up-stairs? We'll, I'll look in when I'm going to bed. And I'll relieve you at four o'clock, and then you must have a good sleep before you go back to St. Perpetua's."

I take my place in the sick-room, making my arrangements for the night so quietly that aunt Wills never wakes out of her doze to inquire who is in charge. She lies in the same way, half asleep, half, I think, in a kind of stupor, for the greater part of the night—I am not sure that she recognizes me when I rouse her to give the necessary nourishment and medicine. At two o'clock Hugh comes in, and wants me to rest on the sofa; but I do not feel sleepy. He remains sitting with me at the fire, not talking much, but leaning his elbow on the arm

of the chair farthest from me and watching me gravely with the old intent look in his eyes. Hugh has changed greatly during the last few weeks, I think. He never goes about now in the old careless happy way which had made his presence such a boon to us at Grayacre in the beginning of the year.

At four o'clock I go to call Leslie. It is broad daylight; the early morning sunshine streams into the pretty old-fashioned room when I open the shutters, falling full on the child's white forehead and long eyelashes. I cannot help thinking how fair she looks in her white nest, with one hand under her dimpled cheek and all her bright hair spread out on the pillow. It seems a pity to wake her, her sleep is so sweet and so profound, and I could not sleep even if she took my place with Aunt Wills. So I leave her to her dreams a little longer, smiling to see how she has hung Hugh's photograph where she can see it last thing at night and the first in the morning, on the blue wainscot at the foot of her bed.

I have just finished my solitary tea. My little maid has cleared away the tea-things and gone out to spend an hour with her mother, who lives in the village. I am sitting in a little low basket-chair in the window, resting myself and thinking, my hands clasped idly in the lap of my white apron. Up-stairs in the women's ward I can hear the nurse moving about; but most of the children are asleep, and the house is very quiet. The long evening is before me, to do with as I like, for I do not sit up with Aunt Wills to-night. I can read, or sew, or write letters, or lean my head back on my cushions and think, as I am doing now.

"A life of independence is a fine thing; but it is very lonely." It must have been a woman who wrote the pathetic words. I am independent—I am able to earn my bread as a man might earn it, with hard honest work. But I feel lonely to-night. Other women are in their fathers' or their husbands' houses, surrounded by sisters or children, dependent perhaps, but hedged round and encompassed by all the sweet ties and companionships of home. I am alone, and likely to be alone for the remainder of my life, unless—But, as once before, my thoughts refused to go farther than that "unless."

My book lies on the table at my elbow, but I do not care to read. I feel sad, and yet I ought to feel nothing but gladness at the good turn Aunt Wills's illness has taken. Hugh rode over to tell me of it in the afternoon, and I can picture how he and Leslie are rejoicing over her; he had seemed in such good spirits, talking to me from his horse's back as I stood in the garden—he was riding one of the young horses, and could not tie him, like Meerschaum, to the gate.

"I suppose he will be off to Canada now," I said to myself as I watched him ride away up the sunny, dusty road. But I know his gladness is for his mother's sake—Hugh was always strongly attached to his mother, and I ought to be glad too. I am glad. If I envy Leslie Creed, it is not with any bitter envy—it is only that I wonder why I was destined to live and die alone. I suppose it was not my fate to be the centre of any sweet home-circle; and, after all, I have my sick folk to attend to, and their love and gratitude to keep my heart warm. And the world was made for the young. Some words I read in the book on the table come back to me like a refrain. "A woman may be an angel, but she can never be a girl again;" and, though it is surely best to be an angel, the thought fills me with a half pathetic pain. Will the angel be as glad as the girl has been sorry? Will the angel's bliss make up for the pain of the mortal? Will it even remember its identity with the poor passionate body which, much as it may have erred and suffered, is all that we know of ourselves? Never a girl again! Never a girl like Leslie, with her bright head and her sweet eyes and her fresh glad voice! Never a girl for whom lovers will pine—never a girl to take delight in robing myself in the silks and satins and jewels which suit so well the smooth peach-like skin, the glad eyes, the dimpled shoulders! I am not so very old—only four-and-twenty. But I have never felt young since Laurie died. And I have always had so much responsibility. I think it is that which makes me feel so old.

The summer gloaming falls softly while I sit here, thinking, in my serge gown and linen collar and trim white cap and apron. They hate the nurse's dress at Grayacre, but I think it is becoming to me, and I am picturing the happy party in my aunt's room—Leslie in some pretty dress or other, sitting on the foot of the bed probably, chattering in her sweet girlish voice, Hugh in the great old chair beside her, grave and glad, aunt Wills propped up on her pillows looking at her "children" with loving, languid eyes—when Hugh himself pushes open the little gate and comes walking up the garden between the low box border and the sweetbriar hedge.

The instant I see him I feel a misgiving; but then I reassure myself with the thought that if there were any danger he would never have come away.

"Hugh," I exclaim, as he walks into the room, sitting still from very eagerness, "how is aunt Wills?"

"She is gone!" he answers hoarsely, and, throwing himself upon the floor beside me, buries his face in my lap and bursts into a passion of choking sobs.

It is terrible to see a strong man cry. My own heart is wrung, but I am so sorry for him that I can shed no tears for myself. I can only hope that the very violence of his grief will wear it out, for, if not, it will kill him; it seems to me as if the agony is as much greater than any agony a weaker person could endure as his strength is greater than theirs. But he conquers it at last.

"Hugh," I say tenderly touching the crisp close locks which cover but do not hide the shapely outline of the prone dark head, "dear Hugh, try to remember that all her suffering is over—that nothing that could be done was left undone—that you were with her, caring for her, to the last."

He raises his head, and even in the dim twilight I can see how his face is discoloured; the few burning tears a man sheds have seared his cheeks.

"She was all I had in the world."

"You were a good son, Hugh."

"I! I was a selfish brute—I thought of nothing but my own troubles!"

"You have no need to reproach yourself. You were the joy of her life."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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