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OUR STRANGE GUEST.

BY WILLIAM McDONELL.

(Author of "Ester Hall," etc.)

(Continued from last week.)

What a task it is to appear happy when your heart is sad.

What a task it is to appear joyful when your heart is sad.

What a task it is to appear cheerful when your heart is sad.

What a task it is to appear content when your heart is sad.

What a task it is to appear calm when your heart is sad.

What a task it is to appear kind when your heart is sad.

What a task it is to appear patient when your heart is sad.

What a task it is to appear forgiving when your heart is sad.

What a task it is to appear merciful when your heart is sad.

What a task it is to appear gentle when your heart is sad.

What a task it is to appear meek when your heart is sad.

What a task it is to appear mild when your heart is sad.

What a task it is to appear sweet when your heart is sad.

What a task it is to appear pleasant when your heart is sad.

What a task it is to appear agreeable when your heart is sad.

What a task it is to appear amiable when your heart is sad.

What a task it is to appear lovely when your heart is sad.

What a task it is to appear charming when your heart is sad.

What a task it is to appear graceful when your heart is sad.

What a task it is to appear elegant when your heart is sad.

What a task it is to appear noble when your heart is sad.

What a task it is to appear brave when your heart is sad.

What a task it is to appear courageous when your heart is sad.

What a task it is to appear strong when your heart is sad.

What a task it is to appear confident when your heart is sad.

What a task it is to appear determined when your heart is sad.

What a task it is to appear resolute when your heart is sad.

What a task it is to appear firm when your heart is sad.

What a task it is to appear steadfast when your heart is sad.

What a task it is to appear immovable when your heart is sad.

What a task it is to appear unshakable when your heart is sad.

What a task it is to appear unyielding when your heart is sad.

What a task it is to appear unbending when your heart is sad.

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those we cared for so much appeared at the moment to be so indifferent.

They had almost left the apartment. We could not

say a word to the man who had just come in to take them away in the darkness—for

it was yet far from dawn. There he stood on the bright hearth like some dreadful apparition—how unlike Santa Claus!

—now holding his great hands over the fire, as if to hide its light from us; now stamping again and again, knocking off flakes of snow and pieces of ice on the burning logs,

as if to extinguish them, and leave us to cold and discomfort, and to the unfeeling wintry blast.

Our foreboding thoughts had not time to form themselves into a definite shape before

John and William came in, just ready to start. They evidently had things so arranged

that they could get away without a long leave-taking. My father was already

seated in the sleigh. There were but few words spoken. There was a hurried embrace—oh, how my poor mother would have

clung to her son!—and out they went into the wintry gloom on that Christmas morning.

The driver cracked his whip. The bells gave an ominous ring again. The sleigh started off quickly, and just then a

glint laden with snow particles blew out the lamp which I held at the door, and, before

it was lighted again the sound of the bells could be but faintly heard, and those upon

whom our hearts were fixed had left us, perhaps forever.

CHAPTER II.

Gone!—I never felt the terrible intense

meaning of that word until then. Gone, but when to return? Gone, but not on a

holiday excursion at Christmas time, not on an errand of peace and good will towards

fellow creatures, for it then shocked me to think of it, they had almost thoughtlessly

left us to engage, if required, in actual hostilities against men towards whom they

could not have had any personal grudge, any cause for spite, much less any possible

reason for such a feeling as hatred. When, if ever, would they be likely to return? If

sent on to meet their so-called enemies what might be the result? Off they went, I feel, alas, how thoughtlessly, to enter

the dread arena of deadly strife just as much indifference as if they had

but started out to play a game of cricket. From what I had already heard and read

of this dreadful war, I could imagine a thousand fearful things which might happen

to them, as had happened to so many others, to many who had never anticipated

disaster.

The grey dawn at last appeared. We sat

silently around the fire, each engaged with thoughts which completely banished

sleep. There was now a wild storm outside, and though we could not yet see the

drifting snow-clouds we could hear their dash against the windows as they swept

along. And then the almost ceaseless waving of the forest trees caused a

monotonous sound like the suppressed roar of ocean waves at a distance. The

lingering gloom, the rough blasts, the rushing gale, and the moaning of the woods,

were the precursors of the most melancholy Christmas I ever knew.

The daylight came at last. I think we

scarcely welcomed it. The deep snowdrifts on the ground, and the dull leaden

sky overhead, seemed to be as cheerless as our own hearts. My poor mother was

greatly downcast, and after a little time I prevailed on her to go to her room and try

to rest for a few hours. Anna had been dozing for the last few minutes on the sofa.

I gently laid a shawl over her, and then, after having added a little fuel to the fire,

I stole away to my own apartment, and in the solitude of that dreful morning,

and while the wind was still turbulent outside, I could control my feelings no

longer, I could not think, I could not pray, but with throbbing heart, with trembling

lips, and with grasped hands, I sat on the side of my bed and wept.

I must have slept. The house was yet

quite still, as still as the poor sorrowful souls within it were taking their last long

sleep, rich at last of life's sad troubles and misfortunes. But I must be up and doing.

I heard the sound of the distant church-bell, and the jingling bells of sleigh after

sleigh, as they passed along the road, reminded me of the day, a happy season so

many. But how different to us! no sound of those familiar voices, and there

staring at me, as it were, was my brother's vacant seat by the fire-place.

On coming down stairs, I found Anna as I had left her. How glad I was that sleep

had brought her a few hours of forgetfulness. My mother was still in her room,

and I went about as quietly as I could to put things in order, and feeling that I ought

to get something for mother and Anna, I laid the table for breakfast—or rather

dinner, as it was now approaching noon. It was nearly two hours after this before

our plain and cheerless Christmas dinner was over. We had very little appetite for

anything, and merely went through the form of partaking of food for the sake, as it

were, of the festive season. We had no visitors that day; everybody seemed to be

away. There were family reunions, and meetings of old friends; no one came to see us, not even a sunbeam made its appearance

the whole day, and then when the

melancholy music.

We danced for some hours, then we had

supper; after that there were songs and duets, and then a general chorus; and John

and William—the two who were about to leave—told us humorous anecdotes and

stories to make us laugh. What hollow laughter that was! and then at the height

of our seeming hilarity, long before the dawn, we heard the storm outside, then

the sound of sleigh bells, a sound that reached my heart like a knell—no knell

could ever be more depressing—and I felt, as if it were, the color steal away from

my cheek when, with this, I saw Anna Strong standing, motionless as a statue, listening

to the same sound with frightened look and quivering lip again, like one suddenly

awakened from a pleasant dream to realize some terrible calamity.

Why was it that the jingle of the sleigh

bells at that particular time caused Anna and me to look at each other with such

deep meaning? I felt her hand tremble as she suddenly caught my arm. The sound

of the bells on other occasions had brought pleasing excitement, and there used to be

such a glad rush for fur caps, and mittens, and muffs; for shawls and cloaks, and

overcoats. Now, how different! no one stirred, but for a few moments there was a

solemn stillness, as if listening to the wind and to the bells like doleful voices

calling on us to prepare for a long, long separation.

The bells again gave a hasty ring as if to

tell those who were to leave us to get ready and hurry up. We heard the crunch of

the sleigh runners on the dry snow; the door opened and in came the teamster-

wrapped and muffled, stamping on the floor as if to make all aware of his arrival. He

looked around to see if his passengers were ready. Had he been the driver of a hearse

come to remove some beloved form forever from our sight, we could not have felt a

greater sinking of the heart. Had we seen such a vehicle at the door, with its great

black plumes, we could scarcely have had a touch of keener sorrow. How was it that

we were so much affected by the

melancholy music.

We danced for some hours, then we had

supper; after that there were songs and duets, and then a general chorus; and John

and William—the two who were about to leave—told us humorous anecdotes and

dismal shades of evening came again, and the night followed dark and stormy, we sat

around the fire as before, thinking: think-

ing of what might be in the future, and

communing with our melancholy thoughts.

Four days had now passed since the sad

parting on Christmas morning, and no message had come from those who had left

us. I called at the post office two or three

times, but no letter was received. On the

evening of the next day I almost clutched

with beating heart two letters which were handed me. One was from John to my

mother; the other was from William Brightman to myself. My mother was so

nervous that I had to read the letter for her. John wrote as if in the best of

spirits. He had been readily accepted as a sub-

stitute for Thomas. He and Will Brightman were, he said, fortunate enough to get into

the same regiment, even into the same

company, and a few days. He wrote on

like one who was about to start on a pleasant

trip through a peaceful country, instead of

being one to be borne off to "the front,"

hurried off to the battle-field, to the place

of slaughter and death, to shoot down a

so-called enemy, or to be shot or wounded

himself. My father, he said, had taken a

cold and would not return for a few days; he would of course stay to see them off.

William, too, was in the best of spirits. They were going to have a fine time. My

mother nor I must not be discouraged. He

would write often, and so would John, and

they would be back, safe and sound, much

sooner than we expected. This was the

tenor of their letters just as they were on

the eve of being sent with hundreds of

others to "the front."

"To the front!" I never fully under-

stood the dreadful import of those three

words until then. To the front, that is to

be crowded into the "front ranks, in the

midst of fire, smoke and thunder, and

brought face to face with men arrayed

against you, and then there, in the horrid

arena of carnage and confusion, be

obliged to kill or mutilate fellow-beings

placed before you, in order to prevent them

from doing so to yourself. Terrible alter-

native of so-called civilization! We are

told with the greatest complacency, even

by moralists and philanthropists, that war

has been a dire necessity all along from

the beginning; the only decisive way of

settling disputes among nations. In old

times a personal encounter was often the

usual method in which individual quarrels

were settled, but common sense and the

voice of public opinion have now forbidden

a resort so barbarous. By means of

brutal force and overwhelming numbers,

triumphant. Oh, what a fearful curse war

has brought on the world!

I waited until I had retired to my room

that night before I had courage to look at

William's letter. I held it unopened in my

hand for some time, guessing at its probable

contents, and agitated to some degree by

conflicting hopes and fears. There was, however, little in it to excite or depress. It

was much in the same strain as John's letter to my mother. He had succeeded in

being enrolled with him in the same regi-

ment; they would have together in a few

days; there being but little expectation of

any further hostilities; they were in good

spirits and full of hope, and did not expect

to be kept very long in the army, as peace

would probably be restored in a few weeks

or months at furthest.

Oh, how my heart palpitated when I read

his tender, delicate words to myself about

our marriage, and of our future hopes and

happiness; how his tenderest thoughts were

fixed on me, and how true and faithful he

should be forever. Poor fellow! I had

little reason to doubt his constant affection,

but his renewed protestations were insuffi-

cient at the time to lift from my heart the

weight that then oppressed it.

Anxious to know whether Anna Strong

had received a letter, I called on her the

next day. She, too, had heard from John,

a communication no doubt similar to my

own. I had a pretty good idea of what he

would say to her. She seemed cheerful and

more hopeful than I could be, yet I kept

my thoughts to myself, and said nothing to

discourage her.

In about a week after this my father

returned. He said he had seen the boys