

The Storyteller.

MY CHRISTMAS ANGEL.

It was Christmas Eve, and a small cold wind blew over the frozen snow.

Dickens would have dubbed it 'The Artful Dodger,' for it met you unexpectedly at street corners, and whistled a song of 'Home, sweet home,' if you paused a moment to rest.

'Seasonable very,' said comfortable Mr Bull, in broadcloth, as he bustled along on his way to buy the turkey.

'Cruel, cruel weather,' said shivering little John, as he scuttled along like a frightened rabbit, in looped and windowed raggedness.

The shops were very bright and tempting. Poulterers, butchers, confectioners had all thought of the holly, but not of the gas bills. The toy shops were each of them a childish fairyland. Up and down the snowy streets went The Waits and Carolers, and the chimneys of Sherborne played merrily.

I cannot say that I felt very happy, for it was Monday as well as Christmas Eve, and I was rent collecting, being at that time collector for a certain Mr Green Winson, an estate agent of an old Midland city.

You will wonder how I came to have such an ungracious part to play on the stage of life. Well, beggars cannot be choosers. I was without a trade or profession, and, unlike Othello, I had to open mine oyster with whatever instrument came handy; not with the warlike sword. So, like Mr Micawber, I collected rents, and waited for something to turn up.

Sherborne had two staple industries—watchmaking and weaving. When one was up the other was down. At the time of which I am writing the looms were clacking busily, and the watchmakers were walking about disconsolately with their hands in their pockets.

This being so the weavers paid up, and wished me a Merry Christmas cheerfully, and by the time I arrived at Black Prince's Buildings my spirits had risen.

But they speedily fell again. The Buildings, you must know, were down an ancient courtyard, all dark with age, which had once, so said tradition, been the approach to a palace, in which that mirror of chivalry, Edward the Black Prince, had once stayed.

An oil lamp suspended by an iron cresset shed a dim light around. Near this lamp, by an empty niche, in which a saint had once mutely spoken of holiness and Heaven, stood a cloaked figure, and when I came up to it I recognised it as that of Kathleen Wheeler, the eldest daughter of one Eli Wheeler, a watch finisher, who had for some weeks been on half-time.

A very curious family were the Wheelers. Wheeler *per se* was either up in the skies or down in the deeps. There was no *via media* for him. When he was in the former state he spent too lavishly, and when he was in the latter he ate rue because of that which he had done in the former.

There were four children—pert Prue, roguish Dick, baby Stella, and motherly Kathleen, who was both the light and stay of the household, though she was only 11. It was Kathie who made Irish stew out of almost nothing, even as the dead mother, who was a daughter of Erin, had done. It was Kathie who kept the children tidy, and took them to Mass on Sundays and feast days. It was Kathie who sang so sweetly of the Maiden Mother in the Church of St. Winifreda, which we both attended, and I was sure that it was she who gathered the rent together.

The light from the lamp showed me that the girl's sweet, oval face, which was framed in short, dark curls, was very pale, and that the dark blue eyes were full of tears.

'Mr. Branson,' she said, 'can I speak to you a minute? Will you listen to me, please?'

'With pleasure. What is it?'

'It isn't what it is, sir; it is rather what it is not. Father's been very short of work lately, and baby Stella's been ill, and we've had to sell Sanker (Sanker was a stumpy-tailed dog, who rejoiced in the name of Sancho Panza), and though Dick has run errands and I've done odd jobs for the better-off neighbors, the ends won't meet. If it hadn't been for Mother Margaret down at the Convent I don't know what I should have done. Even as it is I've been sorely, sorely tempted on this blessed Christmas Eve. Father said that I might pawn his best tool, the mandril, till Christmas was over, so I took it to a pawnbroker, who refused to take it in because it was so old. I felt broken-hearted. No pudding for to-morrow, Sanker gone, dad in what he called the dumps. I sat down on a doorstep and sobbed. And as I cried a well-dressed woman came up and spoke to me.

'What's the matter, child?' said she. 'Have you lost any money?'

'I've none to lose, madam,' said I. 'I only wish I had.'

'So that's it, is it? I guessed as much. Well, I'll tell you how to get some.' She opened her purse and took out a sovereign. 'Run into that butcher's shop,' said she, 'and buy a pound of suet, and bring the change to me. We'll go shares. But look you, if the master rings it and looks oddly at it, say you've got some coppers in your pocket, and give him the pence I'll give you. But be sure and get the coin back. Mind.'

'I remembered hearing that a lot of coiners were about, and guessed that the coin was bad. Still, I took it. Shelton, the butcher, was a rich, hard man, and Dick had said: "No pudding to-morrow, no nuts, no anything! My, it's hard lines, Sis!"'

'I was just stepping into the shop when all at once I seemed to hear mother singing 'Lover's song,' "The angels' whisper," to Stella.

'Why, it seemed to sound quite plain. I couldn't pass false coin after that. I turned back, and flung the money at the woman's feet on the snow.

"Oh, how could you?" I panted out. "I know it's bad, and I'm so poor. How could you tempt me on a Christmas night?"

'She stooped, took up the coin, said something about "A little fool," and turned away.

'Then I made my way to St. Winifreda's and knelt down near Our Lady's shrine.

'It was very lovely there. Cares seemed to slip away as I looked at Mary, with her little white baby in her arms. I told her all my troubles about the mandril, Sanker, Dick, and the pudden. I said: "Dear Heavenly Mother, my mother has gone to you; let me live, so that I can come to you both some day." Then I looked at the Sacred Heart, and it seemed to me as if Jesus said: "Little daughter, hide in My Heart, and trust." And I said, "I will," crossed myself, and came away.

'And as I came home to the Buildings I all at once remembered that Mrs. MacCutchin, in Princes Row, would trust a rabbit, onions, and potatoes, and that I could make a Christmas dinner. So I've settled that. It's the rent which troubles me. We're a week back, and this week added on makes 10 shillings; but unless the stars drop down as gold I can't pay you, sir.'

The sweet girlish voice ceased speaking; the flickering light showed that the girl's head was bent very low—half with sorrow, half with shame.

Green Winson would want the rent; he had already blamed me for being too lenient. What was to be done?

'Go without that new overcoat,' said an interior voice,—the voice of Charity. 'Better a shabby coat and a warm heart than a grand coat and a frozen heart.'

I listened to sweet Lady Charity. I remembered that I was simply a young man in lodgings, without 'the desirable "she" and the hostages to fortune.'

So I put down 10 shillings in Winson's green rent book, and then handed another 10 to Kathleen. 'Kathie,' said I, 'you're a dear, good girl. Take this and buy Dick the pudding and the nuts.' She turned as red as a damask rose, and held out the piece of gold.

'You are very good and kind, Mr. Branson; but, excuse me, can you spare this?'

'Of course! Don't think about that. A Merry Christmas—and better luck in the coming New Year.'

She timidly laid her hand on my arm.

'Mr. Branson, you've been our Christmas Angel. What can I do for you?'

'Pray for me, child.'

'That I will. I will pray that some day I may be your Christmas Angel.'

CHAPTER II.

Seven years had passed away since I stood with Winson's rent book in Prince's Buildings, and again it was Christmas Eve—a green Yuletide this time, as it chanced.

The everlasting hills and the golden stars looked down on me as I listlessly strolled through the fields which led to Hoar Cross Railway Station.

They looked on a rich, but lonely, wifeless and childless man, did these same golden stars. For Fortune's wheel had turned in my favor. First of all, a cycle manufacturer had employed me as clerk, then as manager, and ultimately into partnership.

When the business was turned into a limited company I became managing director, and the golden tide of prosperity still came my way.

The North had been my mother's country, and having a penchant for it, for her sake, I had rented a place called Malwood Tower, just outside the small township of Hoar Cross, and here I meant to pass Noctitude in the company of my chum and fellow-director, Rudders, whom I was on my way to meet at the Junction. Half-way through the field a telegraph messenger met me and handed me the usual orange-tinted envelope, with 'Message for you, sir. Nothin' to pay.'

I thanked him, took it mechanically, and thinking it of little purport deferred reading it until I put my feet on the platform of the station.

Then I went up to a lamp at the far end, tore it open, and read as under:

'Can't come, old man. S.S. gone wrong. Fear it's all up.'

The message was brief, but to my mind it spelt ruin, for it was from the director I had come to meet, and S.S. meant the Swift-Sure Cycle Company—my company.

Every man has a weak spot—has the heel of Achilles. My weak spot was the dread of becoming poor; of having to face the world again. To one who has driven in his carriage life's stony highway looks rough.

There were only two passengers waiting. One was a lady, in a chinchilla hat and royal blue costume; the other was Macfarlane, of Clewsbury, the cloth manufacturer, with whom I had no personal acquaintance, but with whose history I was acquainted. He had a bonnie wife, three winning children, a farm, and a large going concern. Why did the sun always shine on him; why had the sudden blow fallen on me alone?

I grew stunned and dazed, and determined to go straight home by a nearer and shorter road than that by which I had come.

To do this it was necessary to cross the line (for Hoar Cross was then without a bridge connecting the platforms).

I stumbled down the wooden steps and began to cross the line. My head was bent; I did not see the two green lights coming nearer, always nearer, neither I did hear the panting and the throbbing of the iron horse, on its way to the Land o' Cakes.

But another did.

A slender form stood by me. Suddenly a hand drew me quickly and firmly backwards; a tremulous voice said quickly, 'Mind; oh, mind! the down express is coming. I am only just in time to save you!' Then I roused from my stupor, and looked round.