

MAGIC WORDS

A Tale for Christmas Time

BY

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Day & Son, lith^{rs} to the Queen.

“Oh, many a shaft at random sent,
Finds mark the archer little meant;
And many a word at random spoken
May soothe or wound a heart that’s broken.”

Scott.

TO
MRS. AUSTIN

This Little Volume
IS AFFECTIONATELY INSCRIBED.

CHAPTER I.

IT was the evening of Christmas Day. The hymn of "Peace upon earth, good-will towards men," had been chanted by thousands of voices throughout the land, from the grand cathedral-choir to the simple singers of the village church. Charity had extended her munificent hand to the poor and needy, lighting up smiles on many a care-worn face. Hospitality welcomed the good, the beautiful, and the great to the lordly mansions of the rich. Love and Peace sat enthroned in many a happy home. Poverty, shivering at the present, was consoled by the glowing figure of Hope, pointing with radiant eyes to the future. Memory and Sorrow lingered around the grave of many a departed one; but of all mourners they were the saddest who were estranged from those they still loved. Yes, amid the pain, the sorrow, the suffering of life, *their* hearts were the heaviest; for (to use the oft-quoted words of the poet) "to be wroth with those we love, doth work like madness in the brain;" and this hallowed season speaks strongest to our kindest feelings, and to the tenderness of our better nature.

A train had stopped at a rough little village station about thirty miles from town, and a few country people, on their way home, leaned over the bridge above to admire the enormous red eyes of the monster as it moved slowly on through a deep cutting crowned with dark firs. They lingered yet a moment longer, to mark whom it had borne from the great city to their quiet village. A beautiful girl of fifteen, glowing with health and exercise, accompanied by two fine, rough-looking dogs, rushed down to meet her playfellows and friends. She was breathless with joy, and with her race over the

heath; but her merry laugh and warm greeting sounded pleasantly enough as the noise of the train died away in the distance.

A lady, wrapped in a warm plaid, who had been anxiously waiting for some time, took the arm of her husband, with a few low words of delighted welcome, and they walked briskly away. The dogs of the younger party barked with glee—were patted and caressed. One look at the dear heath and at the hills beyond, with a thrill of delight at the thoughts of a long ramble over them on the morrow, and the ponies were mounted, the dogs whistled to, and away flew the happy trio to the home-welcome, to the dear old hall, to all the joy of a Christmas meeting.

Only two other passengers appeared, winding up the pathway—a gentleman of tall and commanding aspect, and a buxom, brisk-footed countrywoman, wrapped in her scarlet cloak, who passed him with a low curtsy and cheerful good night. She was thinking of the bright fireside, of the dear little faces round it anxiously awaiting her return, and of the enormous amount of joy contained in that wicker basket. An event of great marvel and wonderment is a poor woman's visit to her friends in town, and she is ever in a tearful state of ecstasy and excitement on reaching home again; all of which becomes a matter of grave family history in the lowly household, and is recounted on many an occasion to eager and attentive hearers.

She quickly disappeared up a winding path cut through the furze and heather, evidently leading to a low-roofed cottage on the skirts of a fir-wood. Lights twinkled in the casement, and joyful voices were soon heard approaching to meet and welcome her. The road was now perfectly solitary. A few deep-red clouds still hung over the west, and here and there a large bright star shone silently

through the sharp, pure air. Dogs bayed in the distance; the sound came very pleasantly over the heather through the rough old pines.

The gentleman walked briskly on, and lights began to appear in the valley beneath. He stopped as the merry notes of a flageolet struck his ear, proceeding from a cottage by the road-side. The blaze of a wood fire within illumined the little rustic porch and neat garden. Bright branches of glistening holly shone in the tiny casement. The tune ceased, and was followed by a light-hearted laugh and the sound of young voices.

“How happy they seem!” said he. “It is such scenes as these which make the country so delightful, so cheering to sense and spirit!”

And yet he sighed heavily as he walked on; and passing through an avenue of fir and larch leading to one of the prettiest and most picturesque cottages in the world, he paused when he reached the garden-gate. It seemed, too, a dear, quiet, sweet-smelling home. Lights shone from more than one of the windows; and more than one bright young face might be seen, by the gleam of its golden hair, flitting about in the uncertain light. A sweet young voice singing as sweet a tune ceased, as all young voices do, suddenly, when the bell rang out its summons, and a brisk, rosy little maid appeared, lantern and key in hand, to admit the traveller, and guide him through the long shadow of the firs to the house. A favourite dog bounded to meet and gambol round him with unrepressed joy. The children clustered into the porch to say, timidly, “How do you do?” and hold out their little hands to shake; while their mother, advancing with a kindly greeting, expressed her pleasure at his return. Even the maid looked pleased and happy to see him. But yet it was not his home.

After a few minutes' conversation, the traveller was seated in his own room, his dog, his sole companion, looking at him with glistening eyes, as his master fondly stroked his magnificent head. He was a man of twenty-eight or thirty years of age, with a sad and thoughtful cast of countenance, yet one that all who looked upon it *must* instantly love and respect; it was at once so engaging and so noble. He looked round his little room at his sketches and his gun with evident pleasure, placed some books and papers which he had brought on a little table before him, and drawing his arm-chair close to the blazing pine-logs, sat watching the golden cones as they crumbled away, one by one, at the height of their brilliancy. But every reverie must have its end; and his was brought to a close by the appearance of coffee, borne by a bright-eyed country maid, smirking and smiling with pleasure, as country servants are wont to do at every fresh arrival.

It would seem that the reverie by the bright fireside was not an idle one, but that among many revolving thoughts, some, at least, were considered worthy of preservation; for the coffee was soon despatched, the table covered with books and papers, and the stranger intently occupied with his pen.

So absorbed did he become with it, that after one or two long, wistful glances, the fine hound lay down reproachfully on his comfortable rug, as if despairing of any further notice that night.

The wind moaned heavily in the pine-branches round the cottage. Presently the writer paused and listened to the sound, so like the rushing of distant waters. He walked slowly to the window, and gazed long and earnestly into the night. It was moonlight, yet stormy; and large, glittering stars, looked down through the dark branches, when the hurrying white clouds had drifted over them.

The distant clock of the old village church, slowly striking the hour, sounded mournfully over the river; and the lonely man at that little window thought of years that were gone, of the bright firesides in many a happy home that night, and turned and put away his papers with a sigh. He thought how differently he used to work years ago, when, with all the ardour of his nature and the energy of hope, and yet with intense fear and anxiety, he strove to render himself worthy of one idolized, one long-sighed-for object! He thought, too, of the bitterness, the agony of disappointment; and how long years of his young life would have been thrown away, had he not struggled hard to save himself from becoming a useless, melancholy being, given up to the indulgence of selfish regrets. He had succeeded,—there was some comfort in that reflection. He knew of what he was capable, and dared not throw away the power he had acquired, because it no longer availed the idol Self. So he still worked on. He had become distinguished for his literary labours, and for his contributions to the improvement and well-being of his fellow-creatures; but to fame and to the praises of the great he was now equally indifferent. His happiest hours were passed in his favourite village, where he was greatly beloved, although he dared not wholly give himself up to the quiet of a country life.

He had had the old Gothic church restored, with all possible observance of its antique ornaments and its fine clustering ivy; and took a kind of Sir Roger de Coverley delight in seeing the country people, bettered and improved in every way, flocking to it on Sundays to hear his good tutor's sermons, to which he used to listen with so much reverence in his boyish days. He had learned to believe that the word "happiness" signifies, the being reconciled to bear, still having courage to do, and gratitude to enjoy that which

remains. Thus, he was usually cheerful in his various occupations; *but this was Christmas time*: a time when the lonely heart feels most desolate—a time when many a tender word spoken by the absent is remembered with sorrow—when all anger is forgotten in the feeling of peace and love which steals over the heart. And his head lay buried in his hands, his whole soul given up to an overwhelming agony of regret.



Day & Son, lith^{rs} to the Queen.

“This day last year,” he muttered, “who could have believed the change? Oh, Edith!” he continued, taking up a miniature that lay beside him, “who could have thought then that we should now be as strangers to each other? Who could have thought that that bright face, those many noble qualities, could have wrought so much misery?” Again he looked at the lovely countenance, smiling on him a thousand of the tenderest remembrances, and a still gentler expression, a kindlier spirit, came over him. “Those eyes,” he said, “how softly they have looked on me! Perhaps even now a thought—but what folly! In the pride of beauty and prosperity, what is there to remind her of me?”

A low tap at the door interrupted his meditations. For an instant he could not say, “Come in!” his heart was so very full; but quickly recovering himself, he turned with a smile to welcome a little village child, who timidly advanced to place both her tiny hands in his.

She looked into his face with eyes beaming with love and gratitude; but the joyful, sparkling expression soon faded away, for she saw that he was sadder than usual; and with the quick sympathy and natural grace of childhood she sat down quietly on the rug, and taking the stately head of the hound on her lap, pensively stroked his long, shaggy coat. Presently she ventured to break the silence in her gentle way—“I am so glad you are come back, sir; I have missed you so!”

Her companion’s countenance brightened, and he said with animation—“Have you, though, my poor little Mary? I thought you had forgotten me, being so long away.” And he stroked her bright brown hair.

“You should not have thought that,” said the child, earnestly; “I always remember you, for you taught me all I know. I was longing to come yesterday, and all day to-day,” she continued, “to hear if you had arrived. To-day has been so happy that I could not stay away any longer, and so here I am,” she added, with her merry laugh, which sounded pleasantly in that usually silent room. These simple words, that mute caress, had restored the confidence of the two friends. Mary was herself again, full of fun and prattle. Seated on the extreme edge of a huge Gothic chair, she balanced her little feet on the back of her friend Troy, who, far from resenting the liberty, fixed his dark eyes lovingly on her sweet young face, while she talked on, full of the details of her simple life. How she had gathered pine-cones for several evenings, because she knew he loved their cheerful blaze and sweet smell. How poor Turpin, who was always in trouble, had hunted a rabbit, and been caught in a trap; of her mad race over the hills for help; how she nursed the poor, poor foot afterwards; and how the faithful patient cried because he could not accompany her that night; the relation of all which very much affected his kind little mistress. Presently she produced with great glee her “Christmas present,”—several little bundles of bark, peeled with great care, from the silver birch-trees, cut into slips, and tied with red worsted. “I burnt a little bit the other day,” said she, “and the smell was so nice I thought you would like it, so I got some to light your taper with—do try it;” and the little creature soon held a blazing piece in her hand.

“It is delicious, Mary; and how good of you to collect it for me!”

“I was very happy getting it,” said the child; “but I wish you had not thought I had forgotten you. I could not forget you!” she continued, after a pause; “you, who have been so good to me, and taught me so much! I never looked at a book before you came. Oh,

I was sadly wild! Mother said I made more noise than the boys!" And she laughed heartily.

The tutor laughed too, and told the often repeated story, which he knew she loved to hear, of how, in his walks, he had frequently listened to her little voice singing in a cornfield, while "minding" birds; how he had been surprised at her sudden disappearance on his nearer approach, and on making a voyage of discovery, had found her ensconced in the body of a broken-down post-chaise, that, singularly enough, lay between two old fir-trees at the foot of the wood! He did not describe to her how, in imagination, he had pictured the different and exciting scenes in which the once gay equipage might have borne its part; but went on to say how he had peeped in unobserved, and had seen her perched on one of the dilapidated seats, with a little piece of board on her lap, intently occupied in carving a morsel of meat into divers small pieces, which she divided, with impartial care, among three ragged starlings perched on the opposite beam, who watched her with glistening eyes! How merrily she talked to them, and how perfectly they seemed to love and understand each other! He reminded her of her surprise on being discovered, and her frank invitation to the intruder to "look in" on the wonders of the unique aviary, with its valuable illustrations of the "History of Red Riding Hood," its bright jay's feathers, and other childish treasures!

Heartily the little Mary laughed; and so the Christmas evening passed on.

"I must go now," she said; "I promised to read mother the pretty story you gave me, 'Simple Susan,' and they will all sit up for it! Good bye! You will promise not to be so sad when I am gone as you were when I came in. You have been thinking of that pretty

lady again!" she said, with a face of anxious love—pointing to the miniature—"that makes you so, I know! Why don't you go to her?"

"Because she does not love me, Mary," was the faltering reply; "and you know we are not happy with those who do not love us."

"Are you *sure* of that?" said the child, earnestly. "People often hide their kindest thoughts—and perhaps she hides hers from you; you must look for them, as I look for violets, in their thick leaves. Oh, I was so unhappy once!" she continued, tears starting into her eyes at the remembrance: "I quarrelled with my brother, and we did not speak all day—both were so proud: but do you know" (and the sweet little face sparkled) "that when I put my arms round his neck and kissed him, and said, 'Good night, Harry!' he kissed me, and cried too; and said how unhappy he had been *all* the time. I had thought he would *never, never* love me again! Oh! if my brother had died, as baby did, before we kissed each other that night!"

Poor little Mary paused, her heart quite full at the bare idea of such a thing; but she turned again, with admiring eyes, to the miniature. "She looks very kind and good, and *so* beautiful! Did you speak gently, and ask her to love you again: or were you proud?"

The child did not notice the agitation of her companion, and little did she imagine that, long after her head lay softly on her happy pillow, the simple eloquence of those Magic Words was working powerfully in his heart!

CHAPTER II.

OVER many a mile of hard, frosty road, by snow-clad fields and hills and woods, by many an ice-bound stream, must we lead the imagination of our reader on the evening of the same Christmas Day, and peep into another home, far from that we have just quitted.

Undrawing the warm crimson curtains of a charming little room—half drawing-room, half library—the light of a lamp falls brightly on the figure of a lady reading to her husband. It is manuscript, and he puts the pages by for her as she goes on.

She often pauses, to look up with a delighted smile at his praises, and he thinks that she never looked so beautiful before! She is very like Correggio's Magdalen, and has the same lovely countenance and waving hair.

Presently she came to the last page, and the praise was repeated.

"I had no idea I could translate so well," said she, "and am glad you like it, for that will give me spirits to go on: I may, in time, become quite useful to you."

"When are you not everything to me?" was the reply. "But, Marion, you must not work so hard; I cannot afford to see you look one bit less bright. Besides, it is a kind of reproach to me your working so much; indeed you must not!"

"Nonsense!" said Marion, laughing; "you can't think how happy I am when helping you, for I am sure you are often very weary! Poor Edward! what anxiety I have caused you! Now for a volley of

protestations!" said she, laughing again. "But to be serious: I was thinking, to-day, how much we have to be thankful for; and that with all its anxieties how happy this year has been—how *infinitely* happier, working and striving on together, than droning through an insipid life of ease, as some do. I don't know what would become of me if you were ever to be rich," she continued; "to be sure, one might always find some useful employment, some good to be done; but no one knows, except those who have experienced it, the delight of overcoming difficulties, and earning home comforts by one's own exertions."

"True, dear Marion! I never knew, until I knew you, how little is necessary for happiness!"

"I knew what life was—I had an anxious one at home, even from a little child," said Marion, "and adversity taught me to know what is best worth knowing; what flowers to gather in this great garden, that many neglect, or do not perceive. How sweet are the uses of adversity! I love to linger on those words; and if ever I venture to write an essay," said she, smiling, "it shall be on that subject. What does it not teach us?—the practice of almost every virtue."

"Nay, not quite so far, enthusiast," said her husband, smiling; "remember the effect of almost constant sun on flowers; how splendid they become—how fully their beauty is developed!"

"Yes; but they cannot bear the storm that *may*, that *must* come. The stout old thistle, reared in cold and sleet, is much better off—much more useful, and protects many a little plant under its vigorous leaves. Now, only think what adversity really does for us. To begin with *my* early life:—my father and mother treated me as their friend in all their troubles; I was accustomed to watch their anxious

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