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CHRISTMAS IN NORWAY.



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Norway, Christmas is kept with true Christian charity that it would be well for other nations to adopt. There they bear in mind those angelic words, "On earth peace, good will toward men." One sees a bright fire in the most miserable hut, as in the

noble mansion, and the sound of joyful mirth escapes through the fissures of the thatched roof. Open house is the order of the day. The doors of all the houses are thrown open, and every passer-by has his place at the table and by the fireside. In many parts of Norway the traveller is not allowed to pay for his board and lodging on the day, even at the inns. Not only men, but even birds and animals, are

made to rejoice on Christmas Day. All the animals are feasted, and on the roofs of the barns are suspended poles, to which are attached fine ears of corn. The labourers engaged on the farms ask and receive from the farmers sheaves of corn, which they fasten on the roofs of their cabins, that the birds may come and sing and enjoy themselves there.



AVERIL.

By ROSA NOUCHETTE CAREY, Author of "Nellie's Memories," etc.

CHAPTER XI.

"A PLAIN, HOMELY LITTLE BODY."

AT their entrance into the dining-room Frank Harland found himself surrounded by a group of friends. As one of them addressed him, Annette, with much tact, slipped away with a softly-whispered excuse. She had caught sight of Averil at the other end of the room.

Averil beckoned her to a chair beside her. "What have you done with Frank?" she asked, smiling. "I thought I put you in his charge. Ah! there he is with the Courtlands, surrounded as usual. He is a general favourite."

"One need not wonder at that," returned Annette, sedately. "I have never talked to any young man before, but I found him very pleasant. He has been telling me about Monsieur and his mother. He seems to have a happy home, my cousin."

"Yes, Grey-Mount is a dear old house; and all the Harlands are nice. They are very dear friends of mine, Annette, and one day I must take you to see them. A day at Grey-Mount always does me good. And there is another place— Well, Frank"—as that individual made his way to them rather hastily.

"I have shaken off that young puppy, Fred Courtland. I hate fellows who scent themselves. Faugh! You have been talking for the last two hours, and I daresay no one has thought of getting you a cup of tea."

"No, never mind," returned Averil, smiling. "The signora is going to sing again, and I must not leave the room just now. No, indeed, Frank," as he seemed determined to argue the point. "Let me listen to her first, and then I will go with you."

"All right. But please understand that I am to have the monopoly of your conversation. No followers allowed at present." And to Annette's amusement he coolly took up his position so as to fence Averil completely from notice, and his monopoly of conversation consisted of an unbroken silence. Averil seemed perfectly satisfied with this arrangement. She leant back in her chair and listened to the song, and a more rested look came upon her face as the high, pure notes of the signora's voice floated through the room.

Some degree of attention was paid to the gifted young vocalist; but just at the last a group outside the window beside which Frank Harland was standing began talking rather too audibly.

"Miss Seymour," observed a languid, drawling voice, "I wish you would inform me where I can find my hostess. It is awkward, to say the least of it, when one has no conception of a person."

"I do not see her at present," returned Maud, coldly. "It will not be easy to find her in this crowd. A very small person in black. That is the only description I can give you, Captain Faucit. A plain, homely little body like Miss Willmot is not very easy to describe."

"No, indeed"—and here Mrs. Willmot's smooth voice chimed in. "My stepdaughter is a sad invalid, Captain Faucit. Dear Averil is quite a recluse. One cannot wonder at it"—dropping her voice, although every word was distinctly audible. "With her affliction, poor girl, her want of health, and her deformity, the world offers few attractions."

"Now for the tea, Averil!" exclaimed Mr. Frank, briskly. He had set his teeth hard for a moment, and his hand was clenched, as though it longed to do injury to some one; but the next moment he was leaning over Averil's chair with a gentle, brotherly sort of freedom. "Come," he said, touching her cold little hand. "A cup of strong tea—that is my mother's panacea for all ills."

Averil rose and took his arm without a word. There was a dark, pained flush on her face, a strained look in her eyes, as though the cruel words had gone home. Annette looked after her pitifully. She could see that kind Mr. Frank was still talking to her. He was very tall, and had to stoop a good deal. "A plain, homely body, indeed," groaned Annette. "And she looked so sweet just now. Deformity! Oh, what a wicked, wicked lie!" For once Annette did not measure her words. "What did it matter, such a little thing as that? What does it matter that she is not as tall and straight as Lottie, when everyone loves her!"

Annette's pleasure in the *fête* was over. She could hardly keep her tears back as she sat there. Where was

Lottie? She had not once come across her. But even as the *thought* passed through her mind Lottie waved to her gaily. She was sitting under the awning with a merry group of girls, and seemed happy and well amused. Annette felt far too miserable to join them. The room was thinning now. The professionals had gone. A little later on she saw Averil glide quietly to her stepmother's side, as the guests made their adieux. The next moment Mr. Frank came up to her corner. "I must be going too," he said rather gravely. "I hope everyone has had as pleasant an afternoon as I have"—but he spoke without his old gaiety.

"The afternoon is spoilt to me," returned Annette, with more vehemence than caution. "Mr. Frank Harland, why is it that people are so cruel? Why do they hurt my cousin, who has the goodness of an angel? This is all they give her in return for so much generosity."

Frank Harland's lips twitched a little under the brown moustache. "You must not ask me, Miss Ramsay," he said, hurriedly. "I can't help it if people will be such brutes. I beg your pardon—I believe it was a lady who spoke. I only know I had to pull myself up pretty tight. That fellow, Faucit, spoke to her just now. I longed to kick him."

"I do not like these Seymours," returned Annette, with the same frankness with which she would have talked to Lottie. "They take too much, and they give nothing back. Every day my cousin has much to bear—to suffer. If she were not a good Christian she would not be so patient."

"Ask my father what he thinks of Averil," was Frank's reply. "Oh, I know all about it. It pretty nearly sickens me to see the airs they all give themselves. If they would only treat her decently! Miss Jones knows my opinion—we have often talked about it. Good-bye Miss Ramsay. I daresay we shall meet again soon," and he shook hands with her heartily.

"She is not a bad sort, and she is fond of Averil already," he thought, for the Harlands, from the eldest to the youngest, were staunch to Averil, and Frank especially had a brotherly affection for the gentle little creature.