

## NAN HAGGARTY.

*(Continued.)*

"Oh! nothing! nothing!" she said, "But—Robert—would you mind drawing down that blind." One of the windows had been forgotten uncovered; and it was after a glance towards that window that the sudden change came over Mrs May's face, and silence fell on the noisy little revel. After some wonder and great efforts on Mrs May's part to hush up and forget the interruption, all went merrily as before. The Christmas candle was lighting, the "Mary" of the house, who was no other than its mistress, having lighted it, and there was no happier circle enjoying that night's festival.

"Come, now," said Robert May, "we shall go into the drawing room, and you shall lie on the sofa, Mary, while the children and I get up some Christmas carols."

So, reluctantly, the lights on the tree were put out, at last, one by one. Fairy-like curls of smoke and perfume of wax filled the room. The servants went off to their own dominions with much outpouring of thankfulness and many good wishes, and the family party went to the long, old-fashioned drawing-room. Mrs May rested, a little tired, perhaps, with her exertions for her poor friends of all the country round, and the father and children soon filled the room with a cheery version of "When good King Arthur ruled the land he was a goodly king," and all the subsequent history of that "bag-pudding" that was the type of the holy-crowned dish of later centuries. The Christmas log was presently brought in by Mike—it was only a stout, dry stump from the garden.

"If ye please, sir, he whispered to the master, as he passed him—and Mike looked very pale—"ould Nan Haggarty was sittin' in the kitchen, as sure as I'm here."

"What nonsense, Mike!" The children were busy with the rhyme about the bag-pudding made by the legendary queen, and took no notice of the conversation as Mike put the log on the fire.

"Well, ye may say so, sir, but she was sitting in the kitchen; I saw her. An' I ran out to the others again; they was comin' along the passage; and she disappeared; she only showed herself to me. The Lord be merciful to her! Will that log do now, sir?"

"All right, Mike. That's something like a blaze. Hold your tongue about the other matter. See you don't frighten the women with such folly."

So Mike was dismissed, and the yule log cracked bravely.

"Although you have had presents already, Santa Claus may come," said the father to the three children, as they were retiring for the night.

"Oh! yes, we shall hang our stockings on the rail of the beds. Good night, papa! Good night, mother dear!"

Then the husband and wife sat by the Christmas fire alone and talked of the past year, and of the mountain road, and man's work and cares—and how Murphy's men were discontented and ought to pay more, how Quain never kept his contracts, and how if the frost became very hard the work might have to stop altogether.

"Well," he said at last, "I think it is about time for Santa Claus;" and his wife took from their hiding place in a cabinet some of the trifles in which children delight—a necklace, a drawing-book rolled tightly, and a number of glass marbles for the boy. With these treasures for his children the master of the house went softly up the stairs to play the part of Santa Claus.

The light of the children's bedroom fire shone brightly as he noiselessly opened the door. He looked in. Some one was standing there—not a child or a servant. A shock of amazement struck him dumb and still. There, plainly visible in the light from the hearth, an old woman was seated, with a dark cloak on, and a little white cap.

As if conscious of his entrance, she stirred on her chair. She began to rise. He thought she would never stop rising—she was so tall, so lank, so straight. She faced half round and the light was on her face—a colourless face, drawn and old, with sunken mouth and hollow eyes. The man at the door saw that she held in her skeleton hand a white cloth and a large pair of scissors. He had heard of poor Nan Haggarty from Mike, and of the dusting and the mending. All his boasted disbelief in ghosts and goblins was gone in an instant. His mouth dried up. It was as if all at once his belief in the solid earth's roundness had been demolished, and the earth had been proved flat after all. He had been angry with Mike, who first spoke of this phantom in the house. But here it was, visible to himself when he least expected it. He would have advanced and spoken, but he dreaded to wake the sleeping girls. What if they saw it to? All this flashed in a few moments across his mind. The apparition passed through the open doorway near the fireplace. He followed. Georgie slept in the little room beyond, and another door led out from it to the landing. The master of the house followed briskly. No one was there. He crossed in three steps to the other door. The landing was all dark. The clock ticked underneath on the stairs.

He turned back into the children's rooms, lighted a candle and searched, and placed the little gifts in the expectant stockings

hanging on the rails. Then, not telling anyone, for he hesitated to acknowledge that he himself had seen the apparition and been convinced, he quietly searched the whole house from the top to the basement—every room, the back staircase, the front staircase and even the cellar. Then he went down to the drawing-room again. It was near twelve, and Mrs May was wrapped in fur, and ready for midnight Mass. Some of the servants joined the party, carrying lanterns. It was a regular Christmas night of the style most people like when they themselves have warm and happy homes; the moon was bright among the drifting clouds, and a thin scattering of snow sparkled on the ground.

"I hope the Lord will keep the children safe. We are out on a good errand, anyhow," Robert May said, with unwonted fervor and evident anxiety.

There was a silence. They went across the road. Crowds of people were gathering in groups and streams towards the churchyard, with its glittering mounds and stones and its dark trees.

"Do you know, Robert, I don't like that house?" said the lady in fur, holding closely to her husband's arm. "I was thinking if we could change after Christmas—"

He understood the unfinished suggestion.

"Something has frightened you, Mary."

Mrs May spoke only in a whisper, after a glance towards the churchyard. "I would not tell anyone but you—but I did see something. There was a face, a dead face, close against the window—nothing but the face, with a little white frill round it; one of the caps they bury people with. There was no figure below—nothing but the face, with the darkness all round it."

"You imagined it, Mary. You are making yourself ill."

"I am certain I did not. I saw it." They were in the churchyard now, and passing Nan Haggarty's grave, all whitened with snowflakes, and glistening under the moon.

"When things like that are imagined, the real solution is that the house is not healthy," said Robert May as stoutly as he could.

"The children's part of the house is—is not healthy I am sure; I made up my mind to that to-night. They must have other rooms."

"Couldn't we leave the house?" the wife persisted.

"I don't think I shall ever be happy in it now."

"I hardly think it is a healthy place," he assented. "Bad air may reduce people's strength, and play queer tricks with their minds."

"Then we ought to leave it at once."

"Perhaps so; and it is a pity, for I liked the place from the first."

"Oh, the house is perfectly charming," said Mrs May, "but you should hear the servants talk. That house is haunted."

"Rubbish, my dear! I beg your pardon, but I mean—I mean—well, if it's not a healthy house, the sooner we are out of it the better."

Meanwhile, quite unconscious of the anxiety of the grown-up folks, the happy children slept. Doubtless their sleep was guarded: they awoke to nothing fearful, nor even dreamed of phantoms of the night. And the fire burned lower and lower, and the stockings hung bulging with gifts on the rails of the three little beds.

When everyone had returned from church, and the house and all its doors and windows fastened for the night, the father looked into the nursery rooms to see that all was well; and he could hardly believe his memory that a gaunt old hag with duster and scissors had intruded and appeared in that most peaceful place. The fair heads all lay blissfully on the pillows, the eyes closed, the lips breathing softly. The father shaded the candle with his hand, and wondered if anything in the world is so beautiful and innocent as the face of a sleeping child. We older mortals reason for their exquisite tranquility, that they are dreaming unattainable visions, peaceful and pure as the rivers of Paradise; while—alas!—in reality the dreams may be of climbing the apple tree, or fighting for toffee.

Then the night wore on, and all in the house were fast asleep—except Blanche. That excitable child woke up, and thought it must be morning, though perhaps a very dark morning; and she wondered if Santa Claus had come. Gently she crept over the coverlet to the foot of her bed. There was something rolled tightly in her stocking. Perhaps it was a drawing-book; she was wishing for one. Oh! yes, Santa Claus had come! Of course she knew it was papa; but not in the world would she ever ask him. That would destroy the illusion, and the coming of Santa Claus down the chimney was one of the brightest romances of the whole year.

Pinkie was asleep; Pinkie was always asleep just when one wanted her. What was in Pinkie's stocking? It would not be fair; Blanche thought, to go and feel it, and find out; besides, she might bump against the bed-post in the dark.

What time was it? How could one know if it was morning? She went to the window, put her fair face inside the edge of the blind and peeped out. Oh! how cold the glass was against her cheek! Why, there was snow outside. It did not seem a bit like morning. The garden looked so still and white; the sky so like a night sky with the clouds drifting across a bright moon; and the silence of the house told that everyone was asleep.