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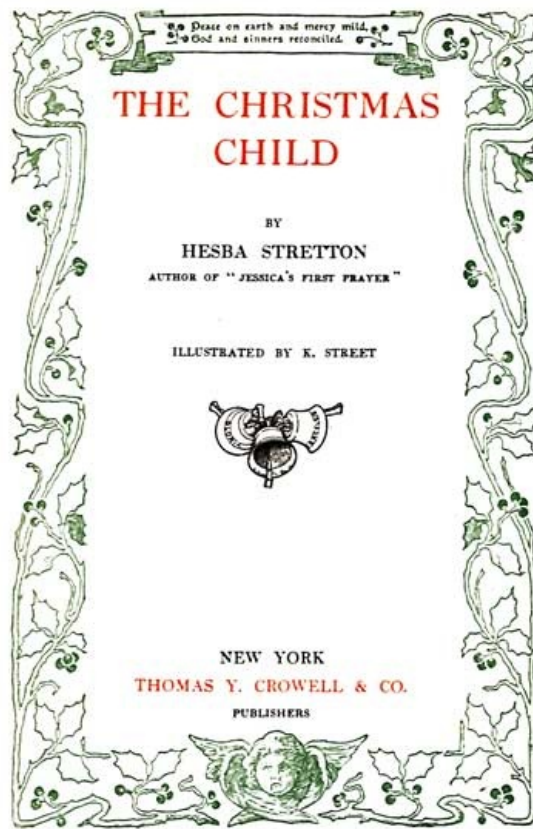
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THE CHRISTMAS CHILD

BY

HESBA STRETTON

AUTHOR OF "JESSICA'S FIRST PRAYER"

ILLUSTRATED BY K. STREET

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NATHAN LIGHTED HER STEPS

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CHAPTER I

THE COMING OF JOAN



Along some parts of the coast in South Wales the mountains rise abruptly from the shore, with only a narrow shingle between them and the sea.

High above the coast, however, there are warm, sunny little valleys and dells among the hills, where sheep can find pasture and a fold; and here there are many small farmsteads, surrounded by wild rocks and bleak uplands, where the farmer and his family live with their servants, if they happen to have any, as they used to do in old times, sitting in the same kitchen, and taking their meals together as one household.

Miss Priscilla Parry was the last of three leaseholders of one of these little farms. Her grandfather had enclosed the meadows and the corn-fields from the open mountain, on condition that he should have a lease for three lives from the owner of the land. His own and his son's had been two of the lives, and Priscilla's was the third.

The farm was poor, for the land was hard to cultivate. In every field there were places where the rocks pierced through the scanty soil, and stood out, grey and sharp, amid the grass and the ripening corn. The salt-laden winds and the fogs from the sea swept over them. Miss Priscilla spent no money in draining or manuring them; for was not the lease to pass away when she died, and she was nearly sixty years of age already?

But the sheep and the cows thrived wonderfully on the short, sweet herbage they browsed on the mountains; and her butter and cheese, and the mutton she sold to the butchers, were known through all the country. Nobody could produce finer. Every one knew she was saving money up in her little mountain farmstead, and the money was being carefully laid by for Rhoda Parry, the niece she had adopted in her infancy and brought up as her own child.

Miss Priscilla was a spare, hard-featured woman, with a weather-stained face, and hands as horny as a man's with farm-work. Twice a week she wore a bonnet and shawl, when she went to market or church. All other times her head was covered by a cotton hood, which could not be damaged by rain, snow, or wind; and in bad weather she often went about her farm with an old sack over her shoulders. Her shoes were as thick and as heavily nailed as old Nathan's, her head servant, and she strode in and out of her sheds and stables and pigsties as if she had been a man. It was said she could get more work done for smaller wages than any farmer in the country.

There was not a prettier girl in all the parish, which was ten miles across, than Rhoda Parry, and she was always prettily and daintily dressed. She had her share of the work to do, but it was the easiest and most pleasant. If the weather was fine and clear, she might go to call the cattle home from their cool and breezy pasturage on the mountain side. The cows she had to milk were the gentle ones, that never kicked.

Aunt Priscilla did the churning of the cream, but Rhoda made the butter up into pretty golden pats, and wrapped them in cool, dark-green leaves. Rhoda tended the little flower patches in the garden, whilst her aunt saw to the vegetables. The light home-work, too, was Rhoda's; but the rough, laborious scrubbing and washing were done by her aunt and the only little maid they kept.

When Rhoda was about eighteen, another niece of Priscilla Parry's died in London, leaving one little girl quite unprovided for. All the other relatives decided that, as Priscilla was a single woman doing well in the world, it was clearly her duty to adopt the child, and without waiting for her consent, or her refusal, which was the more likely, they packed off little Joan to her great-aunt's farm.

The child was under six years of age, puny and pale and sickly, having lived most of her time in a close back room, up three pairs of stairs, in a London house of business, where her mother had been housekeeper. Her only playfellow had been a cat, and the prospect from her window had been the walls of the houses on the opposite side of a narrow court, and a mere streak of sky above them.

Miss Priscilla did not at all like to have another child thrown upon her. Her plans had been laid long ago, and to adopt Joan would quite upset them. She intended to make Rhoda independent, that she might have no temptation to marry for a home when her aunt died. Getting married, to Aunt Priscilla, usually meant the greatest misfortune that could befall a woman; and to guard Rhoda from it was the fixed purpose of her life.

Like Queen Elizabeth, she could not forgive anyone belonging to her, man or woman, who was foolish enough to marry. Her old man-servant, Nathan, had escaped this error, like





herself; and both of them had lived free and single and wise, as Miss Priscilla Parry often said, even to their old age. Her cherished day-dream was that Rhoda would follow their example, and dwell with her in tranquillity and peace, until she herself closed her eyes, and fell asleep, in the course of twenty years or more, leaving Rhoda a staid, discreet, and unmarried woman of middle age.

Here was another child come, a girl too; and if she grew fond of Joan she would have the same misfortune to dread for her, and feel the same desire to save her from it. But she was a proud woman, proud of her character and name, and she could not turn the desolate child away. She was in some measure religious too, and if it was God's will, she felt she must take to Joan. But Aunt Priscilla took to Joan as a cross.

To Rhoda, however, Joan was altogether welcome. She had never had a playfellow, and Joan was so small and light and delicate that she seemed almost like a plaything, a living doll. The two were never apart. They rambled together about the breezy mountains, catching glimpses of the blue sea here and there; and they ran down the rough, rocky lane to the village on the shore, two miles away; and they kept house on market-days, as if it had been a merry sort of game, when Aunt Priscilla was away. It was a wonderful change to Joan from her close, dark little room in London.

The farm-house had been built at different times, and though it contained no more than four bedrooms, there were three staircases in it, two of them leading up to single rooms. One of these was set apart for Joan and Rhoda, where the window looked out upon the small garden and the green mountain slopes, with the sea and the sky around and above them.



THE TWO WERE NEVER APART

The farm kitchen, where they chiefly lived, opened into the fold, round which were built the stables and the cow-sheds, with the barn filling up one side of it, between them and the house. In the middle lay a heap of rotting straw, where the pigs burrowed and the fowls scratched diligently for hidden food; and all round it ran a causeway of large round stones, on which the hoofs of the horses rang, and even the soft, slow tread of the cows could be heard. There was a small blacksmith's forge at the end of the fold, for old Parry had been something of a smith himself, and Miss Priscilla could quite well overlook the shoeing of her horses and the mending of her cart-wheels.

The house-door was always open, and as there was not a morsel of carpet in the place, not even in the parlour, no one was afraid of dirty footsteps. There seemed to be something of busy and cheerful work going on every day, though the place was so far removed from any town or village.



CHAPTER II

JOAN'S SEARCH



Miss Priscilla Parry's head servant, old Nathan, took to Joan from the first. He was a white-headed, strong old man, nearly seventy years of age, but still able to do a fair day's work, or to take the whole management of affairs, if Miss Priscilla were laid up, which she never had been in all her life. He had lived as a boy with her grandfather, and as a man with her father, and the farm seemed to belong as much to him as to her. Like most of the people about, he was no Churchman; and being very ready of speech he was a favourite preacher to the little congregations meeting in some of the farm-houses scattered about the mountains.

Every Sunday evening there was a service held in Priscilla's kitchen, when twenty or thirty of the neighbours would come in to listen to Nathan's sermons. Of late years a number of young men, some of whom came long distances, had been in the habit of attending these Sunday evening meetings.

Old Nathan liked this very much; but Aunt Priscilla's heart was devoured by anxiety. Some of the new hearers were neighbours' sons, steady, dull young farmers, too awkward and shame-faced to push themselves forward; but there were others, bold young sailors, used to voyaging hither and thither and to making their own way in strange places, who did not hesitate to put themselves in the very front, close by the settle where she sat, and to sing bass to Rhoda's treble, and even to find the text for her in the Bible. One of them, a notorious young scamp, Evan Price, was Aunt Priscilla's greatest plague and aversion; but she never caught a single word or glance from Rhoda which could show that the girl encouraged him, or any one among the others; and as long as that was the case she was willing enough for them to look at her treasure, or long for it, but she could not bear the idea of losing it.

To little Joan everything was delightful. There had been the hay harvest, and the corn harvest, and the cutting of fern on the mountains for winter fodder, and the threshing of the corn on the barn-floor, and the piling up of great heaps of straw in the wide bays on each side of the barn.

And now Christmas was coming. Joan had never kept Christmas, and knew nothing about it. But at Aunt Priscilla's farm it was a great day, as it always had been since she could remember. Every relative who could come to the farm was invited weeks beforehand; and nothing else was talked of but Christmas Day. The Sunday evening before it came old Nathan's sermon was all about the shepherds in the field, and how they found the little babe lying in the manger; and he told the story so well that Joan did not go to sleep at all, but sat listening to him with her dark eyes wide open.

"Is it our manger, Rhoda?" she asked, when they went upstairs to their own little room to bed. "Will the babe be lying in our manger to-morrow morning?"

"Perhaps," answered Rhoda; "nobody knows whose manger He will come to."

"Oh! I wish it could be ours!" cried Joan eagerly. "I wish Mary and Joseph 'ud bring the little baby here, and the shepherds 'ud come to seek for Him. Would n't you love it, Rhoda?"

"Shall we two get up early, very early in the morning, like the shepherds did, and go and look in our manger if He 's there?" asked Rhoda.

"Oh, yes, yes!" answered Joan, almost wild with delight. "Oh! Rhoda, only suppose the baby should be there!"

Long before old Nathan was stirring, or anyone else in the house was awake, Rhoda and Joan crept quietly down their own little staircase, and after lighting the candle in Nathan's great horn lantern, they let down the bar of the house-door and stepped out into the fold. It was very dark, but the dim light from the lantern sparkled upon a fine hoar-frost, which lay like silver on the causeway and glittered on every straw scattered about the yard. Not a sound was to be heard, except a very soft, low moan from the sea, and that they listened for as they stood still on the doorstep. Joan's heart was beating fast, and her small fingers clasped Rhoda's hand tightly as they stole along the causeway to the cow-shed just beyond the barn.

The cow-shed was divided into two, and they passed through the outer one, where the cows were lying in their stalls, and turned their large, sleepy eyes upon the two girls, as if to





inquire why they were disturbed so early. In the little shed beyond the fodder and the hay were kept, and the stalls were empty. The barn opened into it, and the deep black space under the high roof of the barn served to deepen the delicious awe in Joan's little heart. Rhoda herself trembled a little with a strange feeling of seeking something which possibly might be found. She had never realised so vividly that the Lord Jesus Christ was indeed born in a stable and cradled in a manger; and she trod softly, with her heart beating, like Joan's, faster than usual.

They stood still for a minute on the low door-sill, their lantern casting its dim rays into the silent shed. Behind them was the deep breathing of the cows, and the slow sound of their munching, and all about them was the sweet, familiar scent of the hay. But this silent, empty spot, half lit up by the lantern, seemed a strange, unfamiliar place they hardly dared to enter. Rhoda lingered with a vague awe in her heart, whilst little Joan grasped her hand as if in terror.

"Let us sing 'Hark! the herald angels!'" whispered Rhoda.

Very softly, with a timid and tremulous voice, Rhoda began the hymn, and little Joan took it up in an undertone. They sang the verses through, gathering courage as they did so. Then with solemn steps they approached the manger and raised the lantern to look into its cradle lined with hay. It was empty.

"I suppose Mary is gone somewhere else," said little Joan, half grieved; "it was n't in her way to come here, p'rhaps, or you and me we'd have been so glad, Rhoda!"

"Perhaps she 'll come next Christmas," answered Rhoda. "We 'll come and look every Christmas morning, and sing our hymn, and perhaps we shall find them some time—Mary, and Joseph, and the babe, wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in the manger. Now we'll go back, and wake up aunty, and tell her all about it."

Aunt Priscilla hardly knew what to think of it. Rhoda had always been given to "making believe." She had often played at being David killing Goliath with a smooth pebble from the brook, or Ruth gleaning in the fields, or the Queen of Sheba, with a crown of cowslips, visiting King Solomon. For the last few years these fancies had left her, but they were all coming back again with little Joan. And going to look for the child Jesus in the manger; was it right or wrong? She spoke privately to Nathan, and the old man smiled, though he shook his white head.

"They 'll grow older and wiser in time," he said; "and sure the Lord 'ud never be angered wi' two young creatures seeking after Him in any way!"

But when the next Christmas came all was changed at the farm-house on the mountain. There had been no preparations made for keeping it as a holiday, and no gathering of kinsfolk was invited by Priscilla Parry. Nathan unbarred the kitchen-door, and lighted little Joan across the fold; but she went into the stable alone, and stood on the threshold singing the Christmas hymn with a sad, pale face that wore a lonely and frightened expression. The manger was empty, as it had been the year before; but the home seemed empty too.

All Joan knew of the beginning of this mournful change was, that she awoke one pleasant sunny morning and found Rhoda gone.

That day Aunt Priscilla roamed about the farmstead and the scattered fields her grandfather had enclosed upon the mountain, like one distracted, calling everywhere for Rhoda. The farm-labourers loitered about the fold and the little blacksmith's shop, whispering mysteriously whenever Joan had been within hearing. There had been nobody to keep them to their work, for Nathan was away all day, and did not return till the late sunset was past and even the loftiest peak of the highest mountain stood grey and dark against the sky.

Nobody had bade Joan to go to bed, and she was afraid of her little, lonely, separate room, if Rhoda was not coming back to sleep with her. Not a single word had Aunt Priscilla spoken to her all the day, and if the young servant-girl had not given her some bread and a bowl of milk she would have been left without food, for Aunt Priscilla had not eaten a morsel, or sat down in the kitchen, since the early morning.

Joan had curled herself up in a corner of the oak settle, which stood as a screen on one side of the corner fireplace, and had fallen fast asleep there, when she was aroused by Nathan's voice. He spoke so quietly and sadly that it did not quite awake her, and her drowsy ears took in the sound as if he had been talking to some one a long way off. But suddenly Aunt Priscilla spoke, in a voice so terrible and loud that she woke up in a fright. Her aunt was standing in the middle of the floor, and the light from a candle fell upon her face, weary and grey, and drawn into a frown of stern and passionate anger.

"She shall never enter my doors again!" she exclaimed; "neither she nor her husband, Evan Price—the worst scamp in the country! I 'll never forgive her. Deceiving me all these months! Let nobody ever name her name to me again; she's dead to me for evermore."

"No, no," said old Nathan, sorrowfully; "don't thee harden thy heart against her, Miss Priscilla. She 's been deceived as well as us, poor, young, ignorant lass! She does n't know what Evan is yet: a handsome young raskill, as all the girls make much of. If she repents—and she will repent, poor creature—thou must pardon her."



"Never!" cried Aunt Priscilla, "not on my death-bed!"

"Forgive us our sins as we forgive them as sin against us," he answered, in a very mournful and solemn voice.



"I'll never pray that prayer again!" she said fiercely. "I haven't sinned against the Lord as she's sinned against me. I've never brought shame and disgrace on Him. The Lord may pardon her, but I can't!"

"Hush!" exclaimed Nathan, "hush! God Himself is hearkening to us. Our sins against Him are as if we owed Him ten thousand talents; and the sins of our fellow-creatures against us are no more than a hundred pence. It is our crucified Lord that says it. Ah! thou knowest it well. 'O thou wicked servant, said the lord in the parable, 'I forgave thee all that debt because thou desiredst me; shouldst not thou also have had compassion on thy fellow-servant, even as I had pity on thee? And his lord was wroth, and delivered him to the tormentors, till he should pay all that was due unto him. So likewise shall My Heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother his trespasses.' It's an awful thing when the Heavenly Father delivers a soul to the tormentors! May God in His infinite mercy deliver thee; only take heed that thou drive not away His Holy Spirit from thee!"

Aunt Priscilla said no more, but went away upstairs, leaving the kitchen in utter darkness. Joan trembled from head to foot as she listened to her heavy tread in the room above. When old Nathan struck a light, her white, scared little face was the first thing he saw. He sat down on the settle beside her, and took her tenderly into his arms.

"It's a sad day for thee, too, my little lamb," he said; "thou 's lost thy playfellow, and there's hard times before thee."

"Where's Rhoda?" asked Joan, trembling.

"She's been tempted away from us," he said sorrowfully, "by one as pretends he loves her more than us. But thou must go to bed, my little lass. See! I'll carry thee upstairs. I'm a poor, rough nurse for thee, but my room's next to thine, on the other side o' the wall, and thee can cry to me i' th' night if thou 's frightened. And to-morrow I'll knock a hole through the wall, so as thou can hear me speak to thee. But there's no wall between thee and the Lord; He's close beside thee, and thou need never be affrighted."

But little Joan was frightened, both that night and many another dark hour, when she felt herself alone in the solitary little room. The child's life became very hard and desolate. Aunt Priscilla took no notice of her beyond providing her with food to eat and clothes to wear. She did not talk to her, and she never took her on her lap or kissed her. Sometimes Joan would creep timidly to her side and look up into her face, but Aunt Priscilla never seemed to see her.

There was nothing for the little girl to do but to wander solitarily about the fields or sit up in her lonely room with no one to speak to her for hours together. She was more desolate than she had been in London; for there her mother had sometimes come up to the attic to play with her, or to nurse her in her arms for a few minutes. There was no one to love her now, except old Nathan.

There was a still greater change in Miss Priscilla Parry. The neighbours said she was gone out of her mind; and it was true that all her nature seemed turned to hardness and sternness. She was never seen to smile, nor did she speak a word that was not absolutely necessary. She gave up going to church and market, and she refused to see any visitor who came up to the farm.

On Sunday evening, when the usual meeting was held in her kitchen, and the curious neighbours came in larger numbers than usual, they no longer saw her in her old place on the settle, where Rhoda's pretty face had made so strong a contrast with her aunt's. Miss Priscilla, after Rhoda's foolish flight, always retreated to her bedroom overhead, in which there was a small trap-door, made when her mother was bedridden, that she might hear the prayers and the sermon and the singing in the kitchen below. It was some weeks before old Nathan, who looked every Sunday if the trap-door was open, saw that it had been lifted up, and knew his mistress was listening.

When Miss Priscilla was downstairs about her work it was a sad sight to see her. Her grey hair had gone quite white, and her eyes were worn out with weeping. Her shoulders were bent as if she was always stooping under a heavy burden, and she seldom lifted her head or looked up from the ground. Joan often saw her lips moving, though no sound came through them. Everybody except old Nathan thought she was mad.



CHAPTER III

THE CHILD IN THE MANGER



The long winter evenings were very dreary when the sun set early and the rain and the fogs overspread the mountains, and enshrouded the home with blackness.

Aunt Priscilla used to retire upstairs, where Joan could hear her sobbing often in the darkness; and the two young servants, the maid and the ploughboy, as soon as she was safely out of the way, would slink off out of the kitchen, where their mistress could overhear them.

It was not worth while to light a candle for a little girl like Joan, and many a long hour she sat alone in the dark chimney-corner with no light save the dull red glimmer of the embers in the grate, and hearing strange, mysterious noises all about her, sounds so low and quiet that they could only be heard when everything else was perfectly still. And going to bed was always a terror to her. The little creature could not put her terror into words; but all day long it was as if some powerful and pitiless enemy was lying in wait to seize her; and as the hour came when all the household went to bed, and she was forced to creep up her separate staircase to her lonely room, the terror reached its utmost height, and she often sprang into bed dressed, and drew the coverings up above her head, lest she should see or hear something more horrible than what she could image to herself.

What Joan would have done without Nathan no one can tell. During the long winter nights, whenever he was sitting with her by the fireside, he taught her to read, or read aloud to her out of his Bible, which was yellow and worn with much turning over of its leaves. He could sing a little still, though now his teeth were gone his voice was weak and quavering; but he made Joan sing with him, and took care to choose such hymns as his mistress had been taught when she was a child, knowing well she could not help hearing them through the unceiled rafters overhead. The newer hymns which Rhoda had often sung with her young, sweet voice, old Nathan never sung; and Aunt Priscilla, in her dark, desolate room, would sit still and listen, and think of the days when she was herself a child, and go to sleep and dream that she was a child again.

The third Christmas Eve came; the second since Rhoda ran away from her tranquil home and all who loved her truly. Joan had grown into a very silent, pale, and sad child, seldom laughing, and with no companion save old Nathan and a doll he had bought for her in the market-town, where he went every week instead of Miss Priscilla. She and Nathan could not sing, "Hark! the herald angels!" because that was one of Rhoda's favourite hymns; but as they sat together on the settle very quiet, for both of them were full of sorrowful thoughts, Joan laid her small fingers timidly on the old man's hard and horny hand.

"Nathan," she said very softly, lest Aunt Priscilla overhead should hear her, "can I go to-morrow, like Rhoda and me said we would, and look into the manger for the child Jesus? I know He can't be there, because I'm a big girl now. But me and Rhoda said we'd go every Christmas morning very early; and she 'll be thinking of it to-morrow. I'm sure Rhoda 'ill remember, and think I'm going to look for Him."

"Ay, ay, Joan," answered the old man; "I'd never say nay to anything as is done out o' love. Maybe Rhoda 'ill be thinking of it, and please God it 'ill do her good. I'll be up early i' th' morning and light the lantern, and see thee safe across the fold and hearken to thee singing the 'Heral' angels.'"

There was neither frost nor snow this Christmas. The weather had been as soft and mild as autumn, and there were still some pale monthly roses blooming against the southern walls of the farm-house. Old Nathan lighted Joan across the causeway and put the lantern into her hand when they reached the door of the outer cow-shed. As she stood alone on the low threshold of the farther shed, and looked up to the black space above her, where the bay of the barn opened into it on her left hand, she felt a little terrified. The light from her dim lantern could not reach the roof, but she could see the piled-up straw rising high above her, and the utter blackness beyond it.

Her own white, melancholy-looking face was lit up by the rays from the perforated top of the lantern, which swung from her hand as she lingered on the door-sill gazing forward into the dark shed. The thought of old Nathan not far away gave her some courage, and, after a timorous pause of a minute or two, her young, clear, yet tremulous voice began to sing the Christmas Hymn:—

Hark! the herald angels sing,
Glory to the new-born King;
Peace on earth and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled.

All the other verses seemed to slip suddenly out of Joan's memory. She heard something stirring in the stall before her, the straw rustled softly, and there was a faint, slight sound of a gentle breathing. With her heart beating fast she stole forward on tiptoe to the manger, well lined with



hay, and lifted up the lantern. It was no longer empty: there lay a child asleep, a little babe, wrapped in swaddling clothes and cradled in the manger!



No doubt was there in Joan's little heart, no question as to who the sleeping child could be. All the little learning she had gained died away when she saw the child. She had come to seek the babe whose birth the angels had sung over, and she had found him. Without speech or motion, scarcely breathing for very joy, she stood gazing at it. The little head and small face, the tiny hands, filled her soul with awe and tenderness. Very timidly she touched the soft cheek with the tip of her finger—the warm, soft cheek—and the baby stirred a little. Then Joan, hanging the lantern to the rack above the manger, knelt down by its side to watch the quiet slumber of the welcome child.

Were the angels there, asked Joan of herself, unseen and unheard by her, singing glory? And oh! where was Mary, His mother? and where could Joseph be? She must take care of the sleeping baby till they came back; and surely Aunt Priscilla would consent to have such guests as these in her house.

But before very long she heard Nathan's voice calling her anxiously. He wanted his lantern; and his mind was not quite easy as to whether it was well for Joan to keep up a fancy like this. At the sound the baby stirred, and its tiny features grew puckered up, as if it was about to cry. Joan sprang up quickly yet quietly, and appeared in the doorway, beckoning to old Nathan to keep still.

"Hush! hush!" she cried; "he is here sleeping, and you mustn't wake him. But I don't know where Mary is or Joseph. There is nobody but the baby. Oh, I am so happy! I am so happy!"

"What does Joan mean?" thought Nathan, stepping heavily yet gently on into the inner shed, which he had filled with provender the day before. Joan led him to the farther stall, and there, in a warm, soft nest of hay, well wrapped up and sleeping soundly again, lay the baby. The old man stood silently gazing at it till the slow tears trickled down his grey and withered cheeks.

"God help us!" he sobbed at last; "poor little lost babe! Come on Christmas mornin'! And where's thy poor, sorrowful mother? What can we do for thee, Joan and me? Nobody to give thee a welcome but an old man and a little child. But we'll love thee for the dear Lord's sake as sent thee to us on Christmas mornin'. Ay, and, old as I am, I'll fight thy battles for thee, poor lamb!"

Very gently he lifted up the tender little creature, and laid it in Joan's outstretched arms, which tingled with delight, mingled with fear lest she should loose her hold of it. A flush of colour had come to her pale face, and all the sadness had fled from it, and her eyes were shining with joy. Nathan lighted her steps along the stony causeway, which she trod with a thrill of anxious care, lest she might slip and fall with her precious burden. But the house was reached in safety, and the sleeping child had uttered no cry.

"Lay it warm in thy own bed," said Nathan, "and wrap the blankets about it, and I'll run and fetch Nurse Williams, that knows how to manage little babes; and keep it still, Joan, while I'm away, whatever you do. Don't let thy aunt hear it till I come back."

How long Nathan was away Joan could not tell. She knew nothing of time as she knelt by the bedside watching the child sleeping so softly and soundly, its tiny face growing rosy with warmth. But at last her long day-dream was broken by the sound of her own name, uttered in so loud and terrible a voice that she felt as if she could not stir hand or foot. It was Aunt Priscilla's voice, not far away, nay, at the very foot of the steep and narrow staircase leading up to her room. Joan's heart seemed to stand still with terror.

"Joan, bring that child down at once!" were the words that rang in her ears; "I'll not have it one moment under my roof."

Joan did not answer or move, except to throw her little arms over the sleeping baby.

"No, no!" she heard old Nathan say; "I've lived here in this place all my life, with thy grandfather and father and thee, and I've been true and faithful in my service, and I've grieved over the poor unhappy mother of the little babe as if she'd been my own child. And now, if the baby goes away from out of the house I'll go with it. I'll stay no longer, not another hour. Thou'rt a hard woman, Priscilla Parry, and God 'll show Himself hard to thee. With the unmerciful He'll show Himself unmerciful, and with the froward He'll show Himself froward. And oh! it's a fearful thing to think of an unmerciful and hard God!"

Joan listened in terror to Nathan's strange words, but she did not hear her aunt's voice making any answer. There was utter silence for a long minute or two, followed by the sound of slow and dragging footsteps, which grew fainter and fainter till she could hear them no more. Then old Nathan came upstairs, and Nurse Williams, whom he had been to fetch.



CHAPTER IV

LOST AND FOUND



It was a very happy Christmas Day for Joan, though she never left her little bedroom. Her delight was in watching the wonderful Christmas child all day, and in helping to nurse him. Never had she seen anything so perfectly lovely as his tiny hands and feet, and the little head that nestled down so peacefully on her arm. A good part of the day she was left alone with the baby, for Nurse Williams was busy about the house, where there was a good deal of stir and excitement. The neighbours were coming in to inquire about the rumours that had reached them, and Nathan was away, and Miss Priscilla had shut herself up in her room, taking no notice whatever of any appeals to her to open the door or to speak.

Happy as it was to Joan, to old Nathan it was the saddest Christmas Day of his life. He was seeking some trace or tidings of the baby's mother; and his weary feet, made heavy by his heavy heart, trod many a mile that short wintry day in quest of her. It could be no one else but Rhoda who had laid the child in the manger. She had never been heard of since Aunt Priscilla had answered her first and only letter, asking forgiveness, by a bitter, stern, and terrible command that she must never show her face again at home, or dare to ask for any help, whatever misery befell her.

But Nathan's search was all in vain. No one had seen her down in the village, or in the scattered dwellings far and wide upon the mountains. But more than one had hinted to him that there were places, not far away, where the cliffs overhung the sea; and as he returned sorrowfully homewards he could hear the sad moaning and sobbing of the sea following him through the stillness of the night air.

But sad as the day was to Nathan, it was most miserable of all for Aunt Priscilla. She had shut out the grey light of the wintry sky from her room, and sat in gloom and cold, doing nothing. But she could not shut out her thoughts and memories; she could not make her heart be still. When she heard through the thin walls the faint little cry of the baby, she fancied it was Rhoda's cry when she lay a helpless little creature on her lap. Again and again Joan's young voice reached her ears, lulling the baby to sleep with the old, familiar words of the Christmas Hymn—

Peace on earth and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled.

But there was no peace for her. She paced restlessly up and down her darkened room, repeating to herself hundreds of times, "God and sinners reconciled!"

But she could never be reconciled to God, for she had vowed never to be reconciled to Rhoda, who had sinned against her. She had sworn that Rhoda should never enter her doors or see her face again. Would God let her enter into His house, or behold His face? A silent, secret voice kept whispering in her heart, "So likewise shall My Heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your heart forgive not every one his brother their trespasses."

Late at night Nathan knocked at her door; but she neither spoke nor opened it.

"Miss Priscilla," he said, "I can find no sign of her anywhere. She's gone, poor creature! There's some as fancy she's cast herself away into the sea; and maybe that's true. It's borne in on my heart as that's true; but God knows!"

Aunt Priscilla shuddered. She seemed to see in the darkness a slender, girlish figure standing on the edge of one of the cliffs, and casting herself down into the restless tide below. But she did not answer old Nathan, and he went away with a very troubled heart.

But in a few days a rumour ran all through the country-side that Miss Priscilla Parry's farmstead was haunted. And what spirit could haunt it except Rhoda's? The washerwoman, coming to wash at three o'clock in the morning, had seen a dim shape moving slowly in the black shadow of the wall, made visible by a faint light from the setting moon. The ploughboy and Nathan, going out early to work, had heard low, rustling footsteps in the cow-shed as they opened the door.

Nurse Williams, who came every night to sleep with the baby, fancied she was awakened by tappings on the lattice panes of the casement. Even little Joan could hear Rhoda's sobs and moans, as she lay awake shivering and trembling in bed, with her arm stretched across the baby to save it from all harm. Everybody was certain now that Rhoda had thrown herself from the cliffs into the sea; and though her body had been drifted away by the currents, her ghost had come back to haunt the place where she had once been so happy, and where her little baby was living.

Aunt Priscilla had not left her locked and darkened room since she had entered it on Christmas morning. No one dared to tell her directly of Rhoda's spirit having come back to trouble and haunt the quiet homestead. But she could hear all that went on in the kitchen below; and in the daytime the neighbours were glad of any excuse to come to the haunted house, though after





nightfall no one would venture out into the fold except old Nathan. The rough servant-girl and the ploughboy had both been to her door, and given her notice that they were going to leave; but she had not asked them for any reason. The last injury Rhoda could do to her was to make the house a terror and a talk in the country.

And now, as she sat alone, brooding over the past, with no work filling the hard hands which were used to be so busy, she no longer thought of Rhoda with the bitterness of wrath. She remembered what a young girl she was, and how full of fancies, which made it easy for people to deceive her. How terrible must have been the girl's misery before she could drown herself in the sea! And there was no rest for her troubled spirit, even in death! She was not sleeping peacefully in the little churchyard down by the shore, where all their kinsfolk lay within sound of the sea by night and day. There was something awful to Aunt Priscilla in the thought of Rhoda's homeless and restless spirit wandering about the places where she had been an innocent and a happy child.

Late on New Year's Eve Aunt Priscilla drew aside the curtain which had hung across her window since Christmas Day, and sat in the darkness gazing out into the field. In the house all was as silent as the grave, and out of doors there was the hush of night. A hoar-frost had fallen, and gave a glimmer of light, even where the shadows fell, when otherwise it would have been utter blackness. The waning moon hung in the dark sky, above a bank of thick and gloomy clouds. She could hear the distant undertone of the sea, and the murmuring of the many brooks running down the mountain slopes in the winter, for the cold was not yet sharp enough to freeze them.

And she could hear a far-off house-dog barking, and the nearer clanking of the chains by which the cows were fastened to their mangers, and the loud ticking of the old clock in the kitchen below. It would very soon be midnight. She felt the chill of the keen air, and she shivered as she huddled her shawl closer about her; but it was not the cold that made her lips tremble and her heart throb painfully.

She could fancy—oh, how easily!—that she saw Rhoda, as she had often seen her, tripping along the causeway, with her bonny, merry face, and her dancing feet. But she knew well it was only a trick her memory was playing. The fold lay all silent and deserted beneath her watchful eyes, with every door safely closed, and the gate at the far end locked. Everything was precisely the same as usual.

She was almost dozing in her chair, when all at once she felt her flesh creep, and her heart throb more violently than ever. A black form was stirring, creeping slowly under the walls of the barn, and seemed to be holding itself up by the empty spaces where the bricks had been left out in the building of it. It moved so gradually that it hardly seemed to come closer to the house; and yet it stole on nearer and nearer, a tall, thin, creeping shadow in the midnight gloom. To Aunt Priscilla it appeared to be hours, though it could only have been some minutes, before the shape reached the house-door, and sunk down out of sight on the threshold, under the shadow of the little pent-roof over the doorway. She could no longer see it without opening her window and stretching out her head. It was there, just out of sight; and it seemed more terrifying to her than while she could watch its languid and ghostlike progress.

She sat motionless, with no power to move. Poor Rhoda! poor little child, whom she had loved so fondly! Not escaped from her misery, even though she was dead; but wandering, a lost and restless spirit, about her old home! A rush of troubled tenderness flooded Aunt Priscilla's heart.

"God help me!" she breathed half aloud. "I never wished her harm like this; I'll speak to her; I'll call to her. Perhaps she's something to say, and can't rest till she's said it. Oh! my poor, poor girl!"

Trembling all over, she unlatched her casement and swung it back on its rusty hinges, which creaked loudly in the utter stillness. The dark heap on the threshold stirred a little; and Aunt Priscilla called to it in a very low, quivering, and sorrowful voice—

"Rhoda!"

"Yes, aunty," came the answer, in a tone so hollow and faint that she could hardly be sure whether it had been spoken, or that she had fancied it.

"Why do you come to trouble us like this?" asked Aunt Priscilla.

"Baby's here, and you, and Joan," moaned the faint voice again, "and there's nowhere else in all the world for me."

"Is there anything I can do to give you rest?" asked Aunt Priscilla, shivering.

"If you'd only forgive me before I die!" answered Rhoda, lifting up a white, thin face, which could be seen dimly in the gloom.

Aunt Priscilla sunk down on her knees before the open window. Rhoda was not dead, then! It was she herself, not her ghost, that was wandering about the old places, and haunting the home that had once been hers, and which now sheltered her baby. Where she had been all the week Aunt Priscilla did not know. But what was she to do with her



now? Must she let her die outside her door on this winter's night?

As she knelt there in silence she heard the clock strike twelve, and the bells from the little grey belfry of the church on the shore ring cheerily out into the night. Two years ago she and her neighbours had watched the Old Year out in the kitchen below; and she could see, as it were, Rhoda's pretty face again, and Joan's sleepy eyes, as they stood beside her singing the New Year hymn, as soon as the clock had finished striking. The familiar verses of the hymn ran through her mind till she came to the last but one—

Oh! that each in the day of His coming may say,
"I have fought my way through,
I have finished the work Thou didst give me to do."

But Aunt Priscilla felt that she had not finished the work the Lord had given her to do for Rhoda; she had not even begun what He had given her to do for little Joan. If Rhoda had sinned against her, surely she had sinned against Christ.

With a heavy sob she rose from her knees and went downstairs. The house was empty, except that Joan and the baby were sleeping in Rhoda's old bedroom; for all the rest had gone to keep the watch-night in a chapel two miles or more away. The house-door was not fastened, and she had only to lift the latch in order to open it. There was not the slightest sound from the threshold outside where Rhoda was crouching; no moaning or sobbing, no movement of any kind. Aunt Priscilla opened the door very gently and noiselessly.

"Rhoda!" she said, very pitifully.

But the girl did not answer her. She stooped down and raised her up against her shoulder. Oh! what a small, light burden she seemed, no heavier than when she was a young child like Joan. Aunt Priscilla lifted her quite easily in her arms, and carried her upstairs and laid her on the bed. Then she struck a light, and, shading it with her hand, looked down on Rhoda's face, as she had done many a time when she had been a sleeping child. The face was sharp and thin and death-like; she looked like one who had perished from hunger and want. Was she really dead?



JOAN SAW HER AUNT STANDING BY HER BEDSIDE

Little Joan was awakened suddenly from a sound sleep, and saw her aunt standing by her bedside, looking to her dazzled eyes a very image of terror. The child uttered a shrill scream, and threw both her arms round the baby, who was lying on a pillow beside her. She thought Aunt Priscilla had come, knowing that everybody was gone out, to take away the Christmas child. She must defend him with all her might.

"Get up, Joan," said Aunt Priscilla. "Rhoda is come home, and you must bring the little baby to her."

She had not seen the child before; and now she stood looking down on the small sleeping face with tears streaming from her eyes. She bent over him and Joan, and kissed them both with a strange solemnity, as if she was making a vow to God. Then she lighted a candle, and bidding



Joan come as quickly as she could, she went away again; and in a few minutes Joan followed her, carefully carrying the baby in her arms.

There was a pale, sunken face resting on Aunt Priscilla's pillow, and thin, wasted hands lying on the counterpane. The eyelids were fast closed, and the lips clenched. And yet it was Rhoda's face that Joan saw, and she called to her loudly and joyfully.

"See, Rhoda," she cried, "I found the little baby in the manger on Christmas morning!"

But Rhoda neither saw nor heard. Aunt Priscilla took the baby from Joan and laid it on Rhoda's bosom, and placed her hand tenderly on Rhoda's head. Then it seemed to her that a flicker of life moved over her set and death-like face.

"Sing, Joan, sing," said Aunt Priscilla, earnestly; and Joan, with her hands clasped, and her eyes fastened upon Rhoda's dear face, sang in a loud, clear voice—

Hark! the herald angels sing!

As she came to the last line, "God and sinners reconciled," Rhoda's lips moved, as if she was repeating the words to herself, and her white eyelids slowly opened.

"Not to me!" she murmured.

"Oh! yes, yes, my darling!" cried Aunt Priscilla, falling on her knees—"you and me are reconciled, and God 'ill be reconciled to us both. We are both sinners; but He'll forgive both you and me."

"And my baby," whispered Rhoda again, slowly moving one of her wasted arms to put it round him, and gazing mournfully into her aunt's face.

"I'll take care of him," she answered; "God has sent him and Joan to me, and I'll take care of them for His sake. I took care of you for my own sake, Rhoda."

There was a faint smile on Rhoda's face; and her eyelids closed again, as if she was too weak to keep them open longer. By-and-by there came into the quiet room the sound of distant voices, and Aunt Priscilla crept noiselessly downstairs and across the fold to the gate, to tell Nathan what had happened and to bring them all into the house quietly.

That New Year's Day was as strangely happy a day to Joan as the Christmas Day before it had been. She never left the room where Rhoda was lying; for Rhoda could not bear her to go out of sight, and only seemed content while she could watch her nursing the baby, in her old-fashioned, motherly manner. As Joan sat on a low rocking-chair, lulling him to sleep with snatches of hymns, and soothing him tenderly if he began to cry, Rhoda's eyes shone with a tender light, though the tears dimmed them at times. It was a peaceful, tranquil day, with few words spoken by anyone. Aunt Priscilla's step had never been so quiet, or her voice so gentle; and she seemed to Joan to be quite a different person.

When the short afternoon was over, and Nathan's work was done, he came upstairs to visit Rhoda. She had been as dear to him as his own child; and as he took her small, withered hand in his, his dim old eyes grew dark with tears.

"I saw you every day twice," she said, pausing often for breath; "I was hiding in the barn. I hid myself on Christmas Eve among the straw—like Joan and me used to do for fun—and I laid the baby asleep in the manger—for Joan to find; and I saw her come, and heard her sing—I was watching her and you. And after that I couldn't go away; there was nowhere and nobody to go to; and I stayed hiding in the barn. But I was very cold and miserable; I was frightened of dying there in the barn. And in the night I came close to the house—to look for food—and hearken if I could hear the baby. I'm not frightened or miserable now."

"Never mind the trouble now, Rhoda," said old Nathan. "Your aunt's forgiven you, and taken you home again; and God, He'll forgive us all, and take us home again some day. Think o' getting well and strong again, my poor lass."

"Not me," murmured Rhoda, faintly; "it's best for me to die, I know. Baby 'll be happier without me. I couldn't play with him and make him merry. Joan 'ill be as a little mother to him, won't you, Joan? I'm going to give him to you for your very own."

"For my very own!" repeated Joan, with wondering, wide-open eyes.





NATHAN CAME UPSTAIRS TO VISIT RHODA

"Ay! if aunty will let me," answered Rhoda, smiling; "she 'll love the baby, I know, now she's reconciled to me. Nathan, she forgives me, and God forgives me. I'm not unhappy any more."

"Rhoda, my lass," said old Nathan, "thy aunt 'ill never be happy no more, if thou dies. She's pardoned thee with all her heart; and thou must try to live, and pay her back. Tell me where thou 's been all this long while."

For a few minutes Rhoda lay silent, with a look of pain on her young, pale face.

"I dare n't ever have spoke to aunty," she murmured at last, "she's so bitter against marrying. And so I ran away, and we were married at Bristol; and then we went to London; and Evan deserted me before baby was born. I couldn't find him again anywhere in London; and it was a dreadful place to stay in without money, and no home. He hadn't been good to me for a long while before he left me. I've been a very wicked girl, but I've been sorely punished for it, Nathan; and I'd rather die now, I think, than get well again."

"My poor lass!" answered old Nathan, pitifully, "say, 'Let it be as God pleases.'"

"Let it be as God pleases!" repeated Rhoda, in her faint, hollow voice.

Never could anyone be better nursed than Rhoda was nursed. Aunt Priscilla watched over her day and night, hardly taking rest, and sleeping only a few minutes at a time. No noise was permitted about the farm that could disturb her; only the old, familiar sounds of cattle lowing, and sheep bleating, and the cackling of barn-door fowls, which were as soothing as pleasant music to her ears. Joan and the baby were always in sight; except when they were sleeping in a little bed on the floor, near at hand, that she might never feel any fear concerning them. Every morsel of food she ate was prepared by Aunt Priscilla herself, who would not trust even Nurse Williams to do anything for Rhoda.

For a few days it was very doubtful whether she could recover from the cold and hunger and weariness she had endured; but by-and-by there came a slight change, and by the time the spring began there was no longer any fear of her dying.

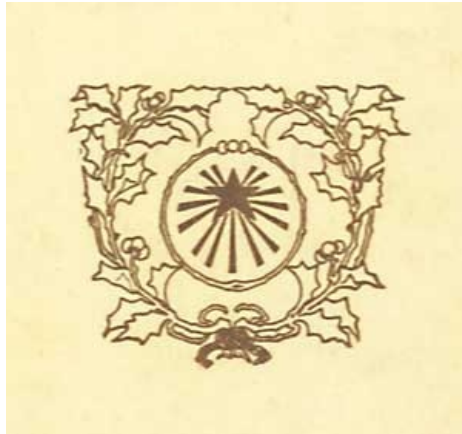
But Rhoda was never the same again. Her pretty looks were gone, and so were her merry ways. She was a quiet and grave woman now; often sad. Year after year went by, and she heard nothing of the husband who had deserted her. Her aunt found her more of a companion than she had ever been before; and they two, with old Nathan, gleaned all the brightness of their lives from Joan and the baby.

The old farmstead was a happier home for Joan than it had ever been for Rhoda. She had few indulgences, but she had the baby, the wonderful child whom she had found lying in the manger on Christmas Day. By-and-by, as she grew older, she understood Rhoda's sorrowful story, and how it was he had been laid there in order that she might find him. But every Christmas morning she stole early across the fold, and into the silent and empty shed, as if to seek the Christmas child; and when the baby was old enough she took him with her, and told him how she had found



him there, and knew he was come to bring

Peace on earth and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled.



*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE CHRISTMAS CHILD ***

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