In Glorious Sunlight - A Christmas Interlude

by emn1936

Summary

And he knew on this Christmastide, he was a man well-blessed.

Notes

An expansion of my previous story "In Glorious Sunlight" though a working knowledge of "North and South" is all you really need

In Glorious Sunlight – A Christmas Interlude

Brushing snow from his top hat and coat, John Thornton pushed open the door to his home. Stepping inside, he was immediately greeted by the scent of the evening meal being prepared in the kitchen and the cheerful murmur of sound drifting through the parlor door. Shrugging out of his coat, he hung it on the rack just inside the door and set his hat down on a small table nearby.

Pushing the parlor door open, he folded his arms across his chest and leaned against the door frame, basking in the sights and sounds before him. His gaze swept over the room to find his mother seated on the sofa, his one-year old son, Edward, cuddled on her lap. At the piano,
Margaret was carefully picking her way through a song, four-year old Lily seated on the bench at her side.

Flames danced in the hearth and candles flickered from points scattered about, bathing the room in a golden glow. The air was scented with the fragrance of pine and other fresh greens draped over the mantel and hanging in swags across the tops of the doors, and the spicy smell of ginger and nutmeg wafted in from the kitchen. And in the fashion adopted by the royal family, a small tree perched atop a table in one corner, its boughs draped in colorful paper garlands, miniature gingerbread men, paper cones stuffed with candies and nuts and gilt ribbons.

John bit back a smile at his mother’s barely concealed wince as Margaret stumbled through a difficult passage and Lily’s sweetly lisping voice piped out the words of the carol with great enthusiasm – though little talent. He pressed his fist against his lips to muffle the laugh that threatened to burst loose when little Edward’s face screwed up in a fierce scowl in response to his older sister’s cheerfully tone deaf warbling.

Edward’s wandering gaze locked onto his father and he squirmed in his grandmother’s arms until she released him. Gaining his feet, he toddled across the room, a wide grin showing off a row of tiny, white teeth.

“Papa!” Catching sight of her brother’s movements, Lily jumped down from the piano bench and joined him in hurrying toward their father. John sank onto his haunches and caught both children in his arms, squeezing tightly and eliciting giggling squeals from both.

Hitching Edward onto one hip, John rose to his feet to greet his wife who had hastened over to join her children at his side.

“Oh!” she exclaimed as she embraced him. “You’re cold!”

“It has begun to snow.” He pressed his chilled cheek against the soft warmth of hers, then brushed his lips across her brow in greeting.

“We were afraid you might miss dinner.” Hannah Thornton rose to join her family.

“The meeting ran longer than I anticipated,” he acknowledged.
He laid a reassuring hand on his mother’s arm. The mill was doing well, turning a tidy profit, but he knew that after having twice lost everything, his mother would never truly feel secure again.

“The deal is done,” he assured them. “The buyer agreed to nearly all our terms, and those to which he objected, I can easily live with.”

“There, you see?” Margaret swept Lily into her arms and swung her about. “Your papa is brilliant and we shall have a happy Christmas and speak no more of business.”

“Indeed.” John tapped a finger on the tip of his son’s nose. “We shall make merry and enjoy the holiday.”

Fanny, Watson and their young son would join them the next day for a traditional Christmas dinner of roast beef, Yorkshire pudding and all the trimmings, but tonight the family dined rather simply on chicken, roasted potatoes, peas and honey-glazed carrots. Lily clapped her hands to see warm gingerbread and lemon curd for dessert and Edward gleefully mimicked his sister, clumsily tapping his pudgy hands together.

“I think it is time for little ones to seek their beds –”

Lily’s mouth opened to protest and Margaret held up one finger in warning.

“Otherwise, Father Christmas will never arrive,” she said cajoling and smiled to see her little girl quickly acquiesce.

“I thought perhaps the children could open one gift each tonight.” John peered at his daughter over the rim of his wineglass and chuckled to see her head bob up and down in eager agreement.

“There are two small packages on the front table near my hat,” he told her. “Would you run and fetch them for me?”

Lily jumped down from her chair and Edward let out a little whine, pushing against the constraints of the tray trapping him in his chair. Margaret grasped his hand in her own and distracted him until
the pounding of Lily’s feet could be heard.

“Here, Papa.” The little girl was fairly vibrating with anticipation as she shoved the packages into her father’s waiting hands.

“John?” Margaret curiously eyed the packages coarsely wrapped in brown paper and bits of twine.

“Tokens from the women at the mill,” he told her as he helped Lily tug away the wrappings covering her gift.

“Mama, look!” Lily held up three miniature dresses. “Dresses for Miss Emmaline!” Miss Emmaline was a well-loved and somewhat bedraggled baby doll who accompanied Lily everywhere she went. The little girl and her doll were well-known figures at the mill as they often accompanied Margaret on visits to John’s office or to the dining hall where she played with the youngest children of the mill workers. Indeed, she had joined Margaret and John earlier that morning in giving out oranges and candied nuts to the children at the mill and baskets of food to their parents to grace their holiday tables.

Margaret fingered the tiny dresses, recognizing the material as scraps of fabric which had been rejected as unsellable due to various, sometimes tiny, imperfections in the weave. She raised her head and admired the small, stuffed dog similarly made of a patchwork of fabrics and smiled, moved to tears by the generosity of their workers who had taken the time to make gifts for her children.

The adults allowed the children a few moments to admire their new playthings. At last Hannah rose and declared herself ready to seek her own room as she brushed her lips over the children’s heads and wished them sweet dreams.

John scooped up a sleepily protesting Lily and Margaret carried the baby. They settled both children into their beds in the nursery, Miss Emmaline tucked alongside Lily and the new stuffed dog clutched in Edward’s hands as he curled up in his crib.

Easing the door to the nursery closed behind them, John and Margaret moved down the hall. They had converted Margaret’s former bedroom into a small sitting room for them and their children. While Margaret had not changed much of the décor on the lower level, she had put her own mark on their bedroom, the nursery and this little parlor. Bright and airy, with sheer curtains over the windows to allow the rooms to be bathed in sunlight during the day, it was decorated in the pale yellows and greens which reminded her of her beloved Helstone. A small collection of toys were corralled in one corner of the room, plump pillows and cozy knit blankets were tossed on the
furniture and books were scattered on every tabletop. Unlike the dour and formal living space of the downstairs parlor, this was a warm, inviting and comfortable room for the small family to gather in and relax.

They filled the children’s stockings with nuts, oranges and little candies. A small wooden bed, perfect for Miss Emmaline, was set out near the hearth, complete with tiny feather mattress, pillow and bedclothes carefully stitched by Margaret and Hannah and a little wooden locomotive painted bright red with oversized wheels was placed beside it.

At last they settled on the small sofa. John curled an arm around his wife, and she tucked her feet beneath her, resting her head on his shoulder. A fire crackled cheerfully in the hearth and he felt Margaret’s head grow heavy against him as she slipped into sleep. He fingered a tendril of her hair which had fallen loose, brushing it away from the rounded curve of her cheek. Staring into the flames, he reflected on his life now and compared it the loneliness of his existence before Margaret had come into his world. His gaze fell onto the copy of Dickens *A Christmas Carol* lying nearby on a table and he realized how close he had come to living as miserable a life as poor old Ebenezer were it not for Margaret.

Thanks to her financial investment and her unwavering and staunch belief in him, the mill was doing well; both they and their workers were profiting from its success. Their future was secure. Down the hall, their offspring slumbered peacefully in their beds and in his arms, his wife rested trustingly.

And he knew on this Christmastide, he was a man well-blessed.

End

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