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THE CHRISTMAS ANGEL

MUSAICUM CHRISTMAS SPECIALS

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CHAPTER I THE PLAY BOX

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At the sound of footsteps along the hall Miss Terry looked up from the letter which she was reading for the sixth time. "Of course I would not see him," she said, pursing her lips into a hard line. "Certainly not!"

A bump on the library door, as from an opposing knee, did duty for a knock.

"Bring the box in here, Norah," said Miss Terry, holding open the door for her servant, who was gasping under the weight of a packing-case. "Set it down on the rug by the fire-place. I am going to look it over and burn up the rubbish this evening."

She glanced once more at the letter in her hand, then with a sniff tossed it upon the fire.

"Yes'm," said Norah, as she set down the box with a thump. She stooped once more to pick up something which had fallen out when the cover was jarred open. It was a pink papier-mâché angel, such as are often hung from the top of Christmas trees as a crowning symbol. Norah stood holding it between thumb and finger, staring amazedly. Who would think to find such a bit of frivolity in the house of Miss Terry!

Her mistress looked up from the fire, where the bit of writing was writhing painfully, and caught the expression of Norah's face.

"What have you there?" she asked, frowning, as she took the object into her own hands. "The Christmas Angel!" she exclaimed under her breath. "I had quite forgotten it." Then as if it burned her fingers she thrust the little image back into the box and turned to Norah brusquely. "There, that's all. You can go now, Norah," she said.

"Yes'm," answered the maid. She hesitated. "If you please'm, it's Christmas Eve."

"Well, I believe so," snapped Miss Terry, who seemed to be in a particularly bad humor this evening. "What do you want?"

Norah flushed; but she was hardened to her mistress's manner. "Only to ask if I may go out for a little while to see the decorations and hear the singing."

"Decorations? Singing? Fiddlestick!" retorted Miss Terry, poker in hand. "What decorations? What singing?"

"Why, all the windows along the street are full of candles," answered Norah; "rows of candles in every house, to light the Christ Child on his way when he comes through the city to-night."

"Fiddlestick!" again snarled her mistress.

"And choir-boys are going about the streets, they say, singing carols in front of the lighted houses," continued Norah enthusiastically. "It must sound so pretty!"

"They had much better be at home in bed. I believe people are losing their minds!"

"Please'm, may I go?" asked Norah again.

Norah had no puritanic traditions to her account. Moreover she was young and warm and enthusiastic. Sometimes the spell of Miss Terry's sombre house threatened her to the point of desperation. It was so this Christmas Eve; but she made her request with apparent calmness.

"Yes, go along," assented her mistress ungraciously.

"Thank you, 'm," said the servant demurely, but with a brightening of her blue eyes. And presently the area door banged behind her quick-retreating footsteps.

"H'm! Didn't take her long to get ready!" muttered Miss Terry, giving the fire a vicious poke. She was alone in the house, on Christmas Eve, and not a man, woman, or child in the world cared. Well, it was what she wanted. It was of her own doing. If she had wished—

She sat back in her chair, with thin, long hands lying along the arms of it, gazing into the fire. A bit of paper there was crumbling into ashes. Alone on Christmas Eve! Even Norah had some relation with the world outside. Was there not a stalwart officer waiting for her on the nearest corner? Even Norah could feel a simple childish pleasure in candles and carols and merriment, and the old, old superstition.

"Stuff and nonsense!" mused Miss Terry scornfully. "What is our Christmas, anyway? A time for shopkeepers to sell and for foolish folks to kill themselves in buying. Christmas spirit? No! It is all humbug,—all selfishness, and worry; an unwholesome season of unnatural activities. I am glad I am out of it. I am glad no one expects anything of me,—nor I of any one. I am quite independent; blessedly independent of the whole foolish business. It is a good time to begin clearing up for the new year. I'm glad I thought of it. I've long threatened to get rid of the stuff that has been accumulating in that corner of the attic. Now I will begin."