The TWELVE DAYS *of* CHRISTMAS

Written by

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STAVE I.

Of Fruits & Follies

A Partridge in a Pear Tree

It is typically considered that a tale such as this should end with a wedding rather than begin with one, but at this moment the residents of Merrywake were installed within the garlanded pews of Wakely Church, quiet witnesses to the marriage between the darling of the county of ——shire (and, indeed, of her honourable parents), the eldest Pépin daughter, to one Nicolas Toussaint.

Such a marriage had instilled somewhat mixed feelings in the congregation. That the gentleman was rich could not be disputed, nor the fact the couple appeared to be matched rather admirably in disposition, for Juliette was kind and Nicolas more than passing amiable; so too was the lady considered

a veritable beauty and her smiling suitor extremely handsome. To many, these facts alone were enough to soothe any niggling doubts that might have lingered. Who, after all, could deny the happiness present on the young couple's faces as they stood before one another at the candlelit altar? Yet it could also not be denied that Seigneur Nicolas Toussaint was a Frenchman, a matter which roused much mistrust.

Of course, it was widely known the Pépins were of French extraction themselves, but that family had long been settled in Merrywake, where four out of the five daughters were brought into the world, all of them educated in the manner of English customs and so very well too that one scarce remembered to hold their lineage against them. Viscount Pépin himself stated publicly he had no sympathy for 'Little Boney' and his now-thwarted ambitions, and if it had not been for an old childhood injury in his left shoulder the viscount would have willingly fought under Wellington's helm. With no sons to call to military order, the Pépins were far removed from the conflicts which had so long reigned overseas.

Yet not all the residents of Merrywake could boast of such a remove. The twilight days of 1816 saw Wakely Church's pews possessed of vacant seats once belonging to sons and husbands, cousins and nephews, so too fathers and brothers, and though it was Christmas Day and a wedding at that (which should have occasioned utmost joy in the hearts of everyone in attendance), the sight of Toussaint sliding a gold ring onto his pretty wife's finger still felt rather raw to some.

For Miss Frances Partridge – sitting as far back in the

church as propriety would allow considering her position as lady's maid – she gave not one fig her mistress had fallen in love with a Frenchman, beyond what such a circumstance would mean for her future. Frances teased the skirts of her finest wool gown between cold-tipped fingers and kept her head assiduously bent, making sure as she always did not to raise her eyes in the event she might catch a certain someone's gaze. *That* was a hurt long buried, but as the happy couple proceeded down the aisle and Juliette (who understandably only had eyes for her new husband) did not look her way, Frances felt an overwhelming sense of loss.

How different matters would be if she had married. If fate had not so unhappily turned against her all those years before, then she would never have been forced into the position of abigail at all, and now, for her prospects to be once again in question, and so late in life, too . . . She pressed the old locket which rested beneath her dress, felt the coolness of silver against the thin skin of her chest. Unbidden, the memory of a stolen kiss impinged upon her mind, and in a moment of uncharacteristic weakness Frances *did* raise her eyes to look to the man who had only moments ago performed the ceremony, but he had already departed the altar. Frustrated with herself for letting the memory thus affect her, Frances stood and followed the congregation outside just in time to see Juliette throw her bouquet of pink spray roses into the air, which fell into the waiting hands of Miss Prudence Brown, causing gasps of unladylike outrage from three of the four remaining Pépin daughters.

The girls pouted at the now giddy housemaid before sliding their eyes balefully to their eldest sister, who simply shook her head at them with affection. Smiling, happy, kind-hearted Juliette – how like her to treat her sisters' foibles in such a manner! It was this generous mark of character Frances would greatly miss. The week before, Juliette had asked if she might be prevailed upon to quit Merrywake and continue on with her as a companion, whereupon Frances might accustom herself to a more 'peaceful' way of living, but the idea of leaving the village in which she had spent her whole life was a most distressing thought, and Frances had declined the offer. Sixty-eight was far too great an age to be gallivanting across Europe. No, she would be better off staying where she was. To stay meant continuing her service to the other girls, and since none of them were yet in possession of marriage prospects of their own, Frances' position was secure for at least some years hence. But oh, what a disagreeable fate!

In truth, Juliette and Charlotte were the only daughters with whom Frances had no trouble – Juliette, due to her gentle nature and Charlotte, because she had no interest in being 'fussed over', much to the distress of the viscountess who had long bemoaned her third child's disregard for ladylike behaviour. But Maria, Louisa and Rosalie . . . Frances disguised her sigh with an over-bright smile as Toussaint helped his bride into the chaise, and raised her hand to wave. Well, those other Pépin girls were most wearisome.

She would not lose Juliette *quite* yet, at least, Frances reminded herself as the vehicle's wheels made their first rumbling turn, set in motion by Toussaint's own prize stallion. The chaise was only

to take the couple back to Wakely Hall, for the viscount and viscountess had quite insisted upon their daughter staying with the family until Twelfth Day, whereafter the seigneur and new seigneuresse would finally begin their journey on to Paris.

Paris. A place so very far from dear quiet Merrywake. But the alternative, Frances thought, as Rosalie – crying in a most aggravating fashion for a girl approaching eighteen – was led away by her mother to their waiting carriage, the other Pépins following closely behind . . . perhaps she could yet change her mind.

'Miss Partridge?'

'Oh, Mrs Denby,' Frances said, turning to look into the red-cheeked face of Wakely's cook. 'Such a lovely service, did you not think?'

'Quite charming,' Bess Denby agreed, 'and how like Miss Juliette to think to invite the servants. We were all so happy to be asked.'

The pair looked after the departing chaise, its white ribbons fluttering in the breeze, and Frances forced a smile.

'Indeed, she has no airs or graces. But then, her parents are much the same – they treat us all with just as much civility and kindness as they do everyone.'

At that moment the Pépin carriage trundled by, led by the Wakely coachman and a pair of handsome dappled greys. Though the windows were shut against the creeping cold, the sound of Rosalie's crying could be clearly heard through the glass and Frances and Mrs Denby shared a knowing look.

'Such a singular girl, dear Juliette. So unlike her sisters. You shall miss her dreadfully.'

'And I will worry for her dreadfully, too. To go to Paris, so soon after . . .' Frances shook her head. 'But Seigneur Toussaint tells me the city has been occupied by our English soldiers. No harm will come to her, he rests assured.'

Not one second after the words left her mouth did Mrs Denby's eyes fill, and Frances bit her tongue.

'Forgive me,' she said, softening her voice. 'I had not meant to remind you of . . .'

The cook gave a smile that did not quite hide her pain, but patted her hand.

'I hoped I might beg a small favour of you,' said she as two of the servants' traps departed after the Pépin carriage. Mrs Denby's gaze drifted to another being boarded by some of the lower servants, all of whom were in fervent high spirits, especially Miss Brown who looked pleased as punch with her new rose bouquet.

'Of course,' replied Frances. 'How might I assist?'

The other woman hesitated. 'Well, we have so much to do already back up at the hall. I should ask one of *them* by rights –' and here she gestured to the lowers on the newly boarded trap – 'but being of local stock they've been allowed the afternoon to spend with their families on Christmas Day, and I did not want—'

'Mrs Denby,' Frances interrupted. 'Pray, take breath and try again.'

The cook glanced away to a point beyond Frances' shoulder and back once more.

''Tis just the viscount wishes for some pears to adorn the

garlands for the ball, and it's no secret that Reverend Soppe's orchard boasts the best ones this time of year.'

Something much like a sharp sliver of cold pierced her chest as she understood to where the cook's glance had gone: the small copse of trees behind the church.

'Oh no,' Frances found herself whispering. 'Surely there is *somebody* else you can ask?'

A look of regret crossed Mrs Denby's round face. 'To be sure, there is no one. Mrs Wilson refuses to spare the uppers on such a menial task, and *I* cannot for I've so much to do myself. Venison to prepare, syllabubs to make . . . It would delay me even further. Since you have been given the whole day,' Mrs Denby finished, 'I thought you might be willing to assist.'

The sliver slid from the confines of Frances' chest right down into her stomach where it stuck like an icicle.

It would be churlish to refuse Mrs Denby. Frances had, after all, no plans. She had intended to return home by way of a pretty walk along the boundary wall of Wakely Hall (for the countryside was most affecting this time of year when the frost was newly settled on the foliage and glittering like tiny white crystals), then thought to spend the rest of the day reading at leisure within the small apartment set out for her use, blessedly some rooms removed from her tiresome charges. The Pépin girls would have no need of her today, she had been promised so by their mother, who fully understood Frances' preference for solitude this time of year. But of all the days for Mrs Denby to ask of Frances such a deplorable favour!

That woman was waiting patiently for her answer.

'I . . .' Frances took a shuddering breath and quenched her pride. 'I shall ask the vicar directly.'

A look of relief crossed Mrs Denby's face.

'You have my gratitude, Miss Partridge, truly you do,' and though Frances had never confided in the cook of her past troubles, servant gossip at the time had undoubtedly acquainted her with at least *some* of the particulars, so it must be assumed her gratitude was genuine. As if to clarify the fact, the cook patted Frances' hand again and smiling said, 'Twill be fine, just you see.'

Frances wanted to counter such a reassuring comment with a doubtful one of her own but the fourth and final servants' trap had descended upon them, and with Mrs Wilson clearly impatient to be gone Frances chose to hold her tongue. Instead, she watched with an acute feeling of foreboding as the housekeeper made room for Mrs Denby on the bench, the trap sprang forwards on its wheels, and the echoing clop of horses' hooves transported the small party down Merrywake's frosted road towards the comforting familiarity of Wakely Hall.

For Witherington Soppe, the Christmas period was a time he considered to be a thoroughly miserable affair. He had not always found it so – as a youth (when he would gallivant about his ancestral home of Heysten Park without a care in the world), he rather enjoyed the pleasantries of the season and looked forward to it with keen optimism – but age and experience had garnered in him a sense of acute melancholy

and aggravation that seemed to worsen year upon year, a most inconvenient state of mind for a vicar.

Was it not his *duty* to always keep his spirits cheerful, especially at this holiest of holy times? Did the Bible not say that a merry heart maketh a cheerful countenance? But alas, Witherington's heart was not merry, and had not been so these past fifty years.

Christmas Day was especially difficult. It was an unpleasant reminder of all he had lost, and to perform a wedding on that day as well was a particularly heavy blow. Still, Witherington thought, as he removed his vestments, the worst was over, and it relieved him greatly to escape as quickly as his old legs would carry him through the orchard and push the heavy door of the parsonage tightly closed, shutting out the crisp December chill.

His home was everything Witherington purported to be – dignified, neat, tidy – and though a trifle larger than he found entirely comfortable for a widowed gentleman of two-and-seventy, well, there was not much help for it. The parsonage had once belonged to a vicar who had, unlike himself and Eliza, been blessed with a family and made great use of its many rooms, rooms which Witherington decided some years ago to shut off. What need had he for a dining room when he barely received guests? What use for three bedrooms and two sitting rooms, when one of each would serve perfectly well? And with Mrs Jenkins to administer to the kitchen and other chambers necessary to domestic habituality, he had no need to venture forth into any one of them. The library was the only room in the parsonage that he put to good use, and it was there Witherington

found himself heading, with every intention of seating himself by the fire with a treatise on how to cultivate winter roses until that lady brought him his supper tray.

It was a sizeable library, each shelf carefully organised by subject – *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections* and *Olney Hymns* were nestled amongst other texts such as *The Parables of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ*, Baskerville's *Book of Common Prayer*, and the *King James Bible* (from which he composed his sermons), where further shelves kept a far wider collection of titles pertaining to horticulture. Of course, one might become thoroughly sick of reading after a while, and when such an occasion occurred Witherington could be found putting his knowledge to the test by tending his garden and orchard, tasks to which he lost many an hour. It was often said that gardening was good for the soul, a perfect remedy for disappointment and loneliness; certainly, the task of pruning rose bushes and eradicating weeds from his turnip patch afforded him a feeling as near to pleasure as it were possible for him to muster. And when *that* feeling had dissipated, he would take himself off for a long walk with his sketchbook and endeavour to document the local flora and fauna of Merrywake, though always in the opposite direction to Wakely Hall.

Today, however, was not one of those days. Today, he would read. Mrs Jenkins had already lit the fire, setting the library most charmingly in warming shades to make up for the lack of morning sun streaming through the west-facing windows, and the sight of it gave him cause to endeavour a rare smile. Crossing the worn Persian rug, Witherington came to stand before one

of the bookshelves; his prized copy of James Clarke's *A Catalogue* was pushed aside in favour of a set of papers resting next to it and then, with something like a contented sigh, Witherington donned his spectacles and settled down in the armchair with *A Treatise on the Venereal Rose,* keen to spend the next few hours absorbed within its fascinating pages. Thus, too, he would have done, were it not for the jangle of the front doorbell which sounded that very instant.

Witherington lowered the treatise. Mrs Jenkins was not a live-in housekeeper – she came twice a day to ensure the typical domestic duties were carried out and that the vicar was well fed. Beyond this, he was very much left to his own devices and therefore required to answer his own front door.

How aggravating! Who would think to call on him on Christmas Day, when it was supposed the people of Merrywake would be happily ensconced in their own residences? Why bother the Reverend Soppe just at the point at which he was to distract himself from his unwanted memories? And it must be said that the last person Witherington expected to find on the other side of the door was the very subject of those memories herself.

'Good morning, vicar,' said the lady standing stoutly on the other side of the door, and it took Witherington one breathless moment to respond.

'Miss Partridge. How do you do.'

Neither spoke further, but each watched the other warily. Frances, who had taken such great pains these past years to never look at the man beyond a fleeting moment when