

NEELY AND SANTA CLAUS.

BY ANNA CERES FRITSCHE.

"The Christmas eve and bed-time. Now at their mother's knee the children all are wondering what their Christmas gifts will be. See the line of stockings, hung where falls the merry, freight glow, that guides good Santa's footsteps, and his reindeer o'er the snow."

"I hope he'll bring a rocking-horse," says Willie, "for us boys." "And cradles, dolls and dishes and a lot of pretty toys," says Jenny, "but with thoughtful face our little, blue-eyed Nell asks: 'Mamma, where does Santa Claus get all his cash, please tell?'"

"In Santa's arctic, ice-bound home a fairy queen doth dwell. Replies mamma, "of kindly heart, who loves all children well. Old Santa is her god-son. At his cradle thus she speaks the words: 'Take this magic purse; to him my gift 'twill be.'"

"When this boy has grown to manhood's years and stands in need of gold, it will never fail to give him all his pockets both can hold. 'But, mamma, Tom and Bessie Brown, who live across the way, always find their stockings empty, on the morn of Christmas day.'"

"Since their papa died. Does Santa Claus forget them, mamma, tell. Why does he pass them by?" with puzzled look asks little Nell. "My child, perhaps good Santa Claus, who leaves within our door so many gifts, desires you to share them with the poor."

"Then, mamma, will you wake me when you hear his sleigh-bells ring? I will give him Tom's and Bessie's share of all that he may bring." "I will, my dear," says mamma, as she strokes the curls and tucks. And the children soon are tucked away and sound asleep in bed."

"And this the story told by Nell on the morn of Christmas day: 'Mamma, forgot to call me, and so Santa rode away. But I think his sleigh-bells woke me, and I hurried to the door. For I heard the sleigh scamp'ring o'er the crisp, snow so hoar.'"

"Ere I reached the door, 'twas opened just a little, and a hand thrust in a little ways-of course, you understand. It was the hand of Santa Claus, and he waited for me there. To lay within his big fur glove Tom's and Bessie's rightful share."

"And I gave him of the presents what I thought would do them good: Charlie's cap and overcoat and Jenny's fur-trimmed hood. My seal-skin coat and white silk mitts I sent them with the glove on Santa's hand looked just like papa's seal-skin glove!"

MABEL'S CHRISTMAS BATH.

By Bert Hendricks.

The "Ice Queen" was the rather fanciful title which ten-year-old Mabel Heath had been given by the boys and girls of the little Maine village near which she lived. She was passionately fond of skating, and her skill in that line was something wonderful. In fact, there were very few skaters of twice her age who could be compared to her. Mabel knew this, and she bore her queenly title with an air of superiority which was rather annoying to see.

But that one afternoon's skating! It was a Christmas ten years ago, and though Mabel is now a young lady, full grown, she has never forgotten, and probably never will forget, the events of that afternoon.

For weeks she had been preparing for the Christmas party. For was not her particular friend, Bessie Seymour, to give a grand party that night? The youthful society of the village and surrounding country had been anticipating the affair with not a little pleasure. Papa Seymour had engaged two musicians to furnish music for the dancing part of the fun, and mamma Seymour had provided a store of cakes and candies and fruits and everything else that ought to make up a Christmas night feast.

But that morning Mabel's big brother Jack fell sick. It was horrid, of course, to have such a thing happen on a Christmas day, and Mabel really felt very sorry for Jack. But she felt ten times more wretched when her mother said to her: "Mabel, I hardly see how you can go to that party to-night. Jack is sick. I don't see who is going to drive you over to Squire Seymour's this aft'noon."

"Oh, mamma!" half sobbed the child, tears welling to her eyes, "I can't give up that party. Isn't there some way?" "My darling," the mother said, "I know it will be a terrible disappointment. But you know we live so far out of town that it is almost three miles over to Seymour's. I couldn't think of letting you tramp clear over there in this snow."

"I can't give it up, I can't give it up," said the child, tearfully. "And, mamma," she continued, "I'm thinking up. I've thought of a plan of getting over there. I can skate over. You know the river runs almost past our house, and I can skate nearly to Bessie's house. Oh, mamma, please let me," she said, as she saw that her mother hesitated. "You know I can skate so fast."

"But are you sure the ice is firm?" asked her mother, anxiously. "Of course it is," said Mabel, nodding her head emphatically. "Wasn't I on it almost all day yesterday?" Her mother finally consented to the plan, and so, late that afternoon, well wrapped in her little fur cloak and muffler, and with her skates tightly strapped to her feet, she started out.

"I hope the dear child will enjoy herself," said Mrs. Heath, turning to her work with a sigh. She was thinking of that Christmas day five years before when her husband, in a drunken fit of anger, had left her and his two children and wandered away. He had never returned, and the neighbors said "Good riddance to the drunken wretch!" But the wife thought differently, and hoped that some day he might come back.

"Come, Bob," shouted the child to the small dog which had been her companion almost from her babyhood. "Now we're going to start! Ready?" And away she glided from the banks, followed by her shaggy four-footed friend.

Down the river they flew toward the village. For the first few moments all went well, and Mabel felt more than happy in the keen, cold air. "Well, soon be there, Bob," she said to her companion, who found him hard work to keep up with his young mistress.

"Hark! what's that?" she added, as a crackling noise struck her ears. Again she heard the crackling noise. Surely the ice could not be giving way! She skated faster and faster, hoping to reach a more secure stretch of ice. For she began to realize that the glassy surface of the river was bending and rolling under the motion of her skates like a huge piece of paper. Faster and faster she sped, fear making her forget the tired feeling that was creeping over her. She was afraid to go ashore, for she realized that if the ice were weak anywhere it would be near the edges. And the river was very deep, even close to the shore.



DOWN THE RIVER THEY FLEW TO THE VILLAGE.

Again that crackling sound! This time it was louder than before. It was growing dark, and Mabel could see the lights flashing out here and there in the village, which lay only a short distance away.

Suddenly she felt the ice give away. With a loud crash it broke, and Mabel was in the black, cold water. She floundered at the ice and tried to raise herself out of the water. The ice broke, and she fell back. Again she tried to save herself. Once more the ice gave way. She was becoming numb. Was this her last Christmas, she thought.

"Oh, Bob!" screamed the child, suddenly thinking of the dog and hoping that in some way he might save her. But no Bob came. She closed her eyes and sank.

"Just in the nick of time!" exclaimed a man, as he pulled the limp, unconscious form out of the air-hole. "Lucky thing that dog acted so suspiciously, tugging at my coat, that I knew something was wrong. Well, little girl," he continued, as Mabel opened her eyes, "you had a close call; no mistake about that."

He carried her quickly to the shore, and soon they were both safe on land, though how they escaped going through the ice, which had been weakened that morning by a thaw, neither ever knew.

"What's your name, little girl?" asked her new-found friend. He was odd-looking, very rough, and rather shabbily dressed. But the child took a liking to him from the first.

"Mabel Heath, sir," she replied. "Mabel Heath?" said the stranger, his voice trembling. "Tell me, child, where do you live? Is your mother alive?" And as she answered these questions the girl saw that his eyes were filled with tears. She wondered why it was.

Perhaps you think Mabel missed that party. You do? Well, you're such a mistake. Her strange companion took her to Squire Seymour's, carried her indoors, and suddenly disappeared, after a hasty goodbye. When the chorus of "Oh's! and ah's! from her juvenile friends was over, Mabel was snugly fitted out in one of Bessie's dresses, and thoroughly toasted before a roaring fire. In a wonderfully short time she was her own lively self again.

As for the party, Mabel enjoyed it just as much as though she had not taken that cold plunge bath. Games followed the dancing, and then came the supper. Mabel, of course, was the heroine of the evening. She didn't go home that night, but early the next morning she tramped home through the snow, on her arm a basket of good things, left over from the feast, for Jack and her mother. When she reached home she was surprised to find that both of them already knew of her strange escape from death.

"What, who told you about it, mamma?" asked the child, wondering. "It was your father, Mabel, the father whom your adventure was the means of sending back to us."

"And then the door opened, and Mabel saw her father—the stranger who had saved her."

ONE CHRISTMAS EVE.

By C. R. Crespi.

It had long been understood, although the arrangement was tacit, that when Basil Giles and his cousin Leslie Damer should attain the ages respectively of twenty-five and twenty their families should be still more closely allied by the marriage of the two—only son and only daughter of their houses. As a child Leslie had been at school, so that when she returned home after being thoroughly finished by a tour of the continent with her friends the Rossetts, she met young Giles for the first time since those early days in which life had been a mere thoughtless dream of happiness.

He had driven down from "The Towers" to meet her at the station, and as the train slowed up she from her window had a good view of him as he stood upon the platform, a pleasant-faced young man with keen blue eyes and a sunny smile. As she slowly descended from the coach, she found him ready with outstretched hands to greet her.

"Cousin Leslie," he said in his clear pleasant voice; "I knew you, at once, you see, although my last recollection of you was as a little girl in short white frocks and long flaxen curls." "And mine of you," looking up with soft dark eyes which were full of a sweet indefinable charm, "was not so—so picturesque. I remember you as a very little boy with a strong propensity for getting into mischief and issuing therefrom with the dirtiest of dirty faces."

mother; her whole heart has been set too long upon joining—" "Our two estates," put in the girl coolly. "Yes, I understand; but I will end all that if you will only aid me. You have merely to refuse to fulfill your part of the contract."

"I could not be so ungrateful, cousin." "And then the matter is at an end," went on the young lady without heeding his interruption. "I have a wretched temper; tell your mother you hate a virago, and I will treat you to a scene or two." "No need to go quite so far. Only may I ask you a question? Have you—are you—"

She smiled mischievously. "Yes; I have, and I am. I have met a—person to whom I have engaged myself. The matter is all out, Basil—only promise to keep my secret until I am my own mistress, and—"

"Or until I give you up," he said gravely, and a little regretfully; for the bright, mischievous smile and soft dark eyes had made their usual impression. He sighed, and turned his ponies into the avenue.

"You would like to lie down until dinner, I suppose," said Mrs. Giles, a little anxiously. "No, thanks; I would prefer a dance. Nothing rests me so thoroughly as a long, slow walk when I am tired."

"The blue room; oh, Aunt Margaret, how completely you must have forgotten my complexion! I am quite too pale—but never mind, I suppose I can bear it."

This was the beginning; by the end of the week poor Mrs. Giles would follow her son's movements with anxious eyes and a deep sense of relief if she saw him pass his cousin without lingering at her side. Still, the estates were contiguous, and the arrangements made between the two fathers must hold good. The girl could not marry without her aunt's consent before reaching the age of twenty-five; and she refused to become her cousin's wife; and Mrs. Giles fully intended that the affair should be consummated long before that time.

By the week before Christmas the Towers was overflowing with guests, and in their honor Mrs. Giles was compelled to waive her own prejudices and give over the house to her niece and her niece's young friends.

The Rossetts of Glen Dale had asked leave to bring with them their distant relative and friend—Colonel Bryan, an officer who had distinguished himself in the

of prudence and solemnize a real marriage. The dressing bell rang and as the party trooped out of the room Leslie turned with an almost imperceptible motion of the hand to Colonel Bryan. As the last one disappeared behind the silken portiere, he rose and with one movement knelt beside the girl.

"Have you the answer for me that I wish, Leslie? Time presses, and we gain nothing. Let it be as I ask you, dear; you will never repent."

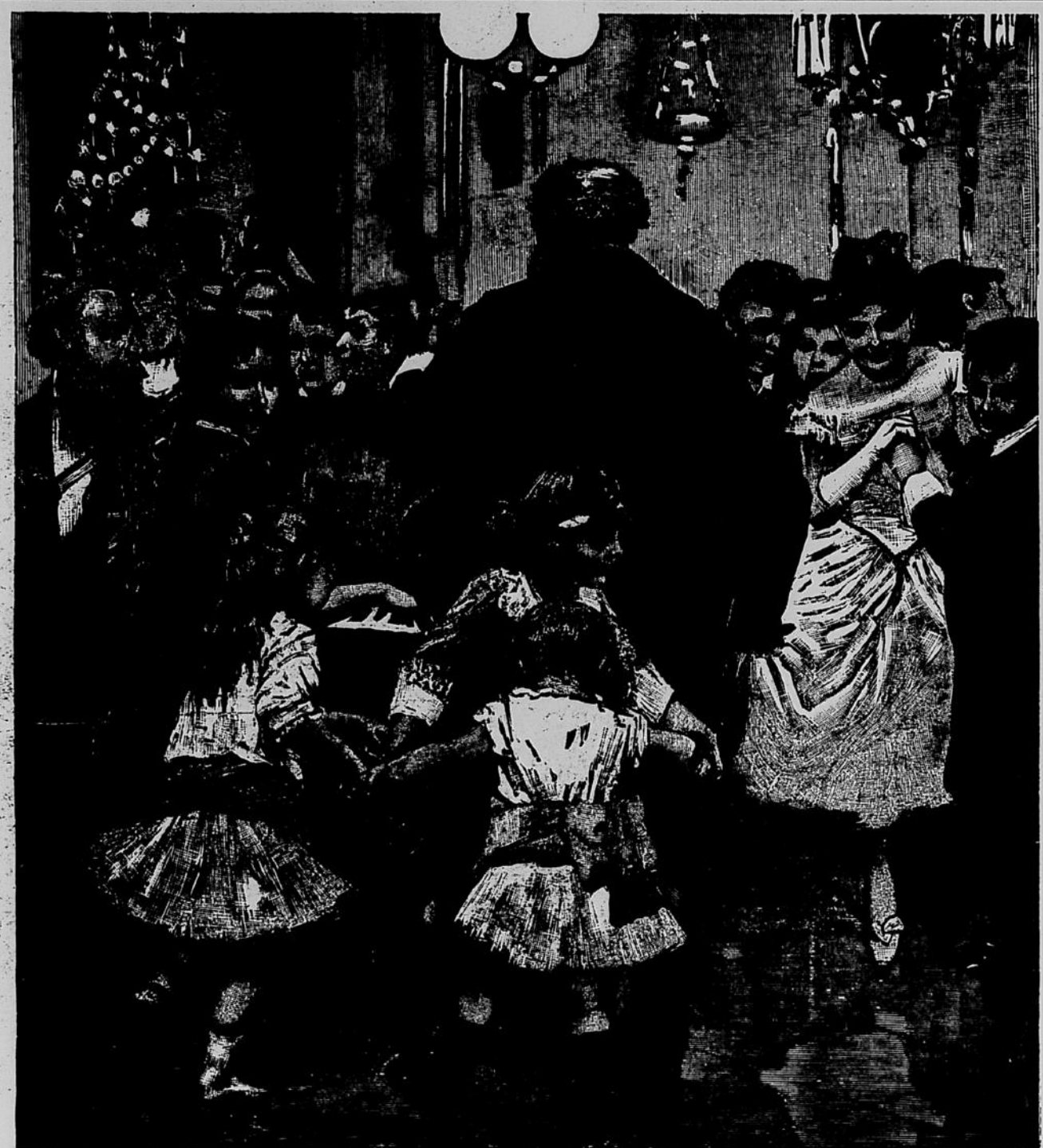
"But it was my father's desire, Victor, and I cannot decide to oppose him and my aunt; you understand, I am sure. I have told her that I cannot fulfill that absurd condition, but I could not tell her anything else. She does not know that—"

She broke down and laid her hot cheek upon his shoulder. Alas, for Mrs. Giles and her cherished hopes!

After a little while he lifted up her lovely face with his sweet quivering lips. "I have a plan, dear, if you will only consent to it. As far as I can see, the matter is simply that Mrs. Giles is your guardian until you are twenty-five in case you refuse to marry your cousin on your twentieth birthday. That day is just three months off, and I am ordered to leave at once for a warmer climate. I must go, and yet I cannot leave you. Will you come with me, Leslie?"

"You see that I cannot." "I would not ask you to leave your aunt's roof, dear, without her consent; but if that is secured, will you marry me and go with me to Spain at once?"

"You know that I would go," she answered, "but you cannot obtain her consent." The next morning some one brought out his collection of autographs for general admiration, and one after another wrote his name and tried his hand at copying some famous signature for the mere sake of killing time. Mrs. Giles wrote a rather peculiar hand and was somewhat proud of her unique manner of signing herself, so she willingly acceded to the many requests for her autograph. Colonel Bryan was the last one to ask for it, and he apologized for asking her to write immediately below his own name—but he had heard some one say that their style was something alike. This produced a chorus of laughter, in the midst of which he escaped from the room into the library, where, for an hour or more, he was engaged in earnest conversation with Basil and Leslie; later,



MABEL AT BESSIE'S PARTY.

beside her, and gathering up the reins, touched Topsy lightly with the whip. Now and then he glanced a little curiously at the fair, pale face so near him—a delicate face, with velvety brown eyes, fringed hair; she had a dainty mouth, with thin, flexible lips, a very lurking place for smiles. He thought that he stole those glances unobserved, and was therefore a little startled to hear, softly uttered, "Well, cousin, and how do you like me?"

"I am not the exception to prove the rule," he answered gaily. "I like you as you should be liked. Does not that say enough?"

"Thanks; I am glad you like me, because, I dare say, I am going to shock you horribly, but a beautiful candor is my leading charm. I like you so well already that I want you to join me in an alliance, offensive and defensive, against all those silly persons who would make us hate each other. It is possible that a little more modesty might be better here; but the truth is that I have no intention of allowing your mother to parade this poor orphan girl at every tea and dinner party in the county, with me in the party to her credit because—"

"I call attention to that absurd stipulation in our respective fathers' wills. Do you want to be my friend, Basil?" "Of course I do."

"Then, if you do, be good enough to tell your mother to-day that we neither of us want to be any more nonsense on that score. I—"

"I was bad enough at school to be called Rosa Bud by the girls; but now, as a young woman in society, I have no wish to be an object of sentimental interest to half the old gossips in this humdrum place."

"But, seriously, cousin Leslie, I am not such a bad fellow, after all. You might, to use the homely old saying, go farther and fare—"

Soudan; a man of most noble appearance and manner—a man whom the gay young people immediately resigned to Leslie, since from their first meeting the two appeared to find their greatest pleasure in each other's society.

Leslie's bosom friend, all the more devoted because, in secret, she had set her heart upon Leslie's supposed fiancé; but, of course, being such confidential friends, Miss Damer knew of this. At any rate, they were so inseparable that Mrs. Giles found it her duty to admonish her other guests in regard to her conduct toward her.

They were all in the library one afternoon discussing the manner in which the festive week should be observed.

One man, a young clergyman and the gayest and brightest of the number, suggested private theatricals, and then amused the entire party by his accounts of how he had once taken the part of a young and blushing maiden—"merely because of my fair hair and innocent face," he said to Leslie, at whose feet he was lounging in very unclerical attitude on the hearth rug; "though some one remarked that I played the part to perfection because—well, if you will have it—because I really am so beautiful. For my part, I prefer to enact the warrior; I feel so altogether a dashing militaire."

"You can't be more than a hunting parson," put in Gay Rosseter. "How I would love to see you in the pulpit in purple and gold! Don't be shocked, Mr. Giles. I really would enjoy myself immensely. But, talking about charades and tableaux, I must be permitted to arrange one scene entirely myself. I have a lovely white satin gown and we have a clergyman; why not combine the two and have a marriage scene for one tableau? What is the use of a clergyman if we can't make him more than ornamental? You agree with me, do you not, Mr. Roche?"

A chorus of laughing voices rose at once, some in favor of the plan, others in opposition. But the girl carried the day. "Only mind, Mr. Roche," said Leslie, lightly, "in your zeal you do not overstep the bounds

he left for a hurried trip to London, returning the next afternoon triumphant and light-hearted.

The day before Christmas eve, the night selected for the private theatricals, Leslie made one last effort. She appealed to her aunt, but in vain. Her protestations that Basil joined with her in objecting to the contract were received with contempt.

"I understand the matter thoroughly, girl," Mrs. Giles said, icily. "You have worked upon your cousin's kind heart to such a degree that he is willing to do anything for you. I cannot force you to marry him, of course, but I can and will prevent your marrying anyone else for five years."

"You may do as you please," the girl said, scornfully; "only I should have too

much pride to force my son upon any woman who did not care for him—simply for the sake of increasing the importance of the family by annexing a few more miserable acres of land to the estate."

It was Christmas eve, the great dining-room gayly decorated and for the time given up to the young people, who sang and danced to their hearts' content during the early part of the evening.

The stage that had been erected at the upper end of the room lacking nothing in the way of drop scene, footlights, and so on. All the county families whose names were on the visiting list of the Towers had been bidden to the theatricals and to the dance afterward, and already carriage after carriage had deposited its load of giddy middle-age and fair be-mused youth.

The last scene was to be the most beautiful of all the entertainment, and as a set piece it was, indeed, a success. It was Gay Rosseter's bridal tableau, and when the curtain rose Leslie, in flowing white veil, traditional orange-blossoms, and all stood with hand lightly held in Colonel Bryan's, Basil, as best man, looking with a comical mixture of amusement and dismay at the charming bridesmaid, in snowy silk, with white roses in her dark hair; and it was impossible not to observe the twinkle in the parson's Irish blue eyes, as he confronted the audience in all the dignity of freshly starched surplice.

Then the curtain fell, and the admiring friends applauded in the usual conventional manner; after which Mrs. Giles led the way into the drawing-rooms. Later came Basil and Gay, looking uncommonly happy, yet rather too guilty to escape notice. Still, they joined in the dances, and it was only after some allusion had been made to the absence of Leslie and Colonel Bryan, that Mrs. Giles, at a signal from her son, followed him into the library, where were seated the missing ones and the parson. Leslie had resumed her evening dress, but her delicate cheeks were so much flushed that her aunt at once commented upon her not having removed her stage rouge. But this deepened the color, and she almost unconsciously drew nearer to the clergyman. He smiled reassuringly, and led his hostess to a seat.

"My dear madam," he said, quietly, "I hope you will thank me for having aided you in making two of our friends happy. By virtue of my office, I finished the ceremony which you admired so much. Colonel, I am sure you can easily make your peace. You see, Mrs. Giles, you signed your name to your consent to this—this entanglement."

"All fair in love and war," put in Basil, gaily; "and, mother dear, Colonel Bryan is both a lover and a warrior."

Mrs. Giles was a wise woman in her generation, and she did what only a wise woman could have done—she held her tongue. "Colonel Bryan had been ordered away for his health, you know, and both he and dear Leslie were always so romantic. She was happy to announce the engagement of her son to Miss Rosseter. Such a delightful consummation of her dearest hopes! They had been attached to each other since they were mere children. Yes, dear Leslie was going away for the rest of the winter. Her husband's health left much to be desired. Active service in the Foudan, you know." And so on.

"For Leslie," since she is happy, can afford to smile, though she tells her husband that he is not so much a brave warrior as an unprincipled strategist.

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SHE TRUDGED HOME THROUGH THE SNOW.