

THE
CHRISTMAS
PEACEMAKER

Virna Sheard

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THE CHRISTMAS PEACEMAKER.

By Virna Sheard.

LIFE was a series of abbreviations to Lucinda Ellen, even to her name, which in the beginning had been cut down to Cinders.

The only things she appeared to have been given ungrudgingly were eyes and hair. The eyes made one think of that dog in the old fairy tale who had optics like saucers, they were so big, yellow brown, and pathetic. The hair matched in color and was unsubduably curly.

Time for Lucinda Ellen was a succession of weeks, filled in by blue Mondays—with no holidays, jolly Saturday afternoons or peaceful Sundays to leaven the lump. The world's population she insensibly divided into two classes, with one crowned head: boarders who paid, boarders who didn't, and Mrs. Stogers.

Her dream of luxury was the front parlor, and her ideas of art were bounded on the right by a portrait in oils of the deceased Stogers, and on the left by some vegetables and feather flowers, under glass shades in the same room. The antimacassars which strewed the unyielding parlor furniture were mysteries of exquisite handicraft to Cinders, and created in her a wild desire to duplicate their knotty stitches. Her surreptitious attempts to copy these unlovely things resulted in a few puckered, begrimed specimens of crocheting and many tears, but they proved beyond question that the feminine instinct to make something useless, under the impression that it is ornamental, was strong within her.

Six years before, Mrs. Stogers had taken the child from one of those homes for orphans where all the little children wear clothes made of the same material, cut by one pattern; and six years—when a person is but thirteen—to look back upon is practically always.

During that time Cinders had washed dishes, battled with dust, and run endless messages on small, weary feet, till “the trivial round and common task” had done their best to sandpaper away the intense feelings and vivid imagination which live in almost every child and are its birthright. That they had not succeeded was a sort of miracle.

Love had never come her way. Yet it did not follow that because nobody loved Lucinda Ellen, she did not know what love was. Far from it. She had always loved something, if it had been only a rag doll, and upon this object,

whatever it happened to be, showered a positively abject devotion. It was the way she was made. At present her heart's delight was a diminutive one-eyed cat, whose size was no indication of youth, for he was popularly supposed to be enjoying his ninth life, there being those who testified to having seen him at least eight times ready for burial. In color this animal rivalled the ace of spades. In voice and temper he commanded respect from both man and beast. To Cinders alone was shown the soft side of his nature, and he would follow her about tirelessly, making a sound in his throat like a small steam piano.

When night came, and the last dish had been shelved, the kitchen swept, and the stove garnished till it satisfied the soul of Hannah—Mrs. Stogers's prime minister and, incidentally, cook—the child would go wearily up the many stairs to her own room under the roof with its one tiny, slanting window looking upward at the stars. The cat always followed warily, eluding with a vigilance born of knowledge the all-powerful Mrs. Stogers; and when Cinders curled herself up on the chair that stood beneath the window, he would spring to the back of it and say, in his own fashion, all the nice things he could think of to the forlorn little maid. He would even tap her face with his soft black paws and tousle the bronze tangles of her hair. Cinders would rest there, her wondering eyes watching the stars, twinkling so far off in the mysterious sky, her mind possessed by many strange thoughts; and the weird black cat would keep her company.

One evening early in November she had come to her room very tired. It had been a Monday of deepest indigo, and the spirit of the child rebelled against fate. A fierce hatred of Mrs. Stogers and Hannah possessed her, and filled her eyes with hot tears. The heavy drops splashed down upon the cat in her arms and disturbed him. He did not like or understand tears,—they were wet and uncomfortable; but looking up into the troubled face he knew that she was unhappy, so gazed at her sympathetically with his one blazing eye and purred his loudest.

Cinders stroked him with her hard little hand, and gradually the tears stopped. She was not given to weeping or self-pity, but was of a sunny nature that sought, like a flower in a dark place, for the light. It was very quiet in the attic. The deep, muffled purring accentuated the stillness. Now and then some giddy young mice behind the wall squeaked and scuttled away to their homes.

“The moon was afloat, like a golden boat,
On the sea-blue depths o' the sky.”

The child gazed at it entranced. It was so rarely beautiful, that golden moon, and it shone just as much for her as for the rest, she thought. Not the rich people, or the Queen, or Mrs. Stogers had more right to it. It was God's moon, and He just lent it to the world. And so it was with the sunshine, and the wild flowers, the waving trees, the blue of the sky and the sea and the air,—all these best things in the world were made for her, Cinders, as much as for anybody. There was comfort in the thought, and balm for her bitter little heart.

Suddenly there floated through the room a sound so sweet, so thrilling sweet, she sprang to her feet, clasping the cat tight as a protection, for she was half afraid. Some one was playing on a violin, but that the child did not know, and a fancy floated over her that an angel had slipped down into Mrs. Stogers's attic on a bar of moonlight, and had brought his harp with him. Her breath came fast, for she did so love music. The street pianos were her chiefest joy, and a German band, no matter how broken-winded, had hitherto filled her with ecstasy; but this was different,—Mrs. Stogers's walls had never echoed to such sounds before. The music went on, a tender, simple melody with a minor undertone through it, and it was played by a master hand.

Cinders stole out into the hall and listened. The door of the next room whence the sound came was ajar, so she pushed it open quickly. A man stood there, his violin tucked under his chin. A lamp, fastened against the wall, shone down on him. He was young and very good to look at. He stopped playing after a few moments, and as the child moved to go, saw her.

"Hello!" he said, smiling, "who are you?"

"Cinders," she answered, drawing a long breath. "Oh! you do play lovely, sir."

He laughed a little. "Come in," he said, tuning the violin. "Come in if you'd like to. I'll play again. It's refreshing to be appreciated, it's charming;—a new sensation in fact. It's what we all want, don't you know, to be appreciated." Then, as she sidled into the room half shyly, "Are you appreciated, little one?"

"No, sir," she said, her mouth drooping. "Oh, no, sir, I ain't."

He raised his eyes and saw the small figure standing in the full light.

"Great Cæsar!" he cried, with a soft whistle. "What a regular little witch! Is that your familiar spirit? Where did they ever get you?"

"From a home," said Cinders, "an'—he ain't a spirit—he's a cat."

"I see he's a cat," returned the young fellow. "Oh, yes, decidedly a cat, and a bad-tempered one, to judge by the waving of his tail. Do you

remember what George Eliot calls a cat's tail,—or it may have been a dog's tail?"

"No," she answered, her great eyes alight.

"Well, it's rather good. She calls it 'the appendage whereby he expresses his emotions.' What's your friend's name?"

"'Phisto," she said, soberly.

"Mephistopheles, possibly?"

"Yes, sir; that's what Hannah named him 'cause she says he's a perfect divil, an' that's the name of a divil she saw in a play."

"Hannah has a sense of the fitness of things. But you, you were never christened Cinders in a Christian land?"

"Oh, no, sir; my name's Lucinda Ellen, only Mrs. Stogers says life's too short to call me that."

"I retract the compliment I paid Hannah. Any one possessing an idea would have turned Lucinda Ellen into Cinderella. Don't see how they could have missed it."

He touched the violin string softly, then dropped the bow.

"What do you do with the cat when you ride out on your broomstick?"

"When I do what, sir?"

"When you take your midnight airing in your peaked cap and red cloak, that kind of thing. Where do you leave the brute, Mrs. Witch? Or do you take him along as a mascot?"

"I ain't a witch," said the child, gravely.

"Come, come," answered the young fellow, smiling; "you're not Cinderella, so you must be the witch. Besides, they always have eyes like yours and just such hair, and there's the black cat. He's convincing. The *tout ensemble* is perfect."

"Well, I ain't a witch," she replied again. "I wish't I was; then I'd change Mrs. Stogers into a cow, an' Hannah into a monkey, an' I'd turn things to gold, an' live in a castle. An' I'd never do anything but listen to music, like you played, an' I'd have fairies bring me ice-cream on little trays every hour, an' I'd buy a real diamond collar for 'Phisto, an' I'd marry a prince."

"Like me," he said, looking amused; then, as she did not answer, began to play.

Cinders listened as one under a charm. Her heart ached with the sweetness of the sounds, for the violin spake a language she understood. It told her the same things as the rain that pattered on the roof and the wind

that blew about the house on wild nights. When the passionate notes ceased, her curled lashes were wet and her face white and eager.

“You have a soul, you queer little thing,” said the man.

“Everybody has a soul,” she replied softly, “even cats.”

“Do they? Well perhaps, but not the same kind. No. If people felt my music as you do, I would have my pockets full of gold, little Cinders, instead.” He stopped abruptly, then went on. “Where’s your mother?”

“I haven’t any—nor a father—nor nobody.”

“We’re in the same boat then,” he answered. “But you have friends?”

“Only him,” she said, stroking the cat. “I sort of belong to Mrs. Stogers. I should think you had friends, sir, lots of them—you’re so big—an’ beautiful looking.”

He gave a short laugh. “I have an aunt, an aunt who thinks she owns me body and soul.”

“Like Mrs. Stogers does me?”

“Yes, probably. But this aunt of mine has a mortgage on me, unfortunately. I have lived with her. I owe her everything. She is still liberal. She says I may be rich going her way, with the alternative of being poor going my own. It can be seen,” with a shrug, “which I have chosen. It was the one possible way; a man can’t be browbeaten.”

“Like Mrs. Stogers browbeats me?” she broke in sympathetically. “No, of course not—but—but—what if your aunt loves you? Wouldn’t that make it different, sir?”

The boyish face, looking down at her, darkened. “There is love,” he said, “and love. Yes, there are those who might think she loves me, little one. If so, it’s a parody on love. I say, a blind, selfish, domineering thing is not worth the name.” He was talking to himself now.

“I must go,” said the child, drawing a long breath. “Mrs. Stogers wouldn’t let me be bothering you.”

“Oh, you haven’t bothered, you have flattered me. I find I can move an audience to tears.”

“Do you play—for—for—money, sir?” she asked diffidently.

“I am glad to say I do. To-morrow night I take my position, second violin in an orchestra. It has been no money and semi-starvation; now it will be second fiddle and the affluence of Mrs. Stogers’s attic. But there’s the future.”

“Will you play some other time?” she asked wistfully.

“I will.”

“Thank you, an’ good night, sir,” said Cinders, closing the door.

When he was alone the man stood thinking. “I feel better,” he said, half aloud, “much better; not so light-headed and shaky. Knocking around so long alone took the courage out of me. It’s a good thing to talk to somebody when one’s down on one’s luck, if it’s only to a child.”

As for Cinders, the melody she had heard sung itself to her till it put her to sleep. Every evening before Dan Thorald went to the theatre, he played on the small brown instrument, and Cinders and the cat listened. When he returned late, the child lying awake on her little bed close under the roof, would sometimes hear the music that charmed her again. Through the days, after rehearsals, Thorald stayed in his room writing, as though life depended upon it. If Cinders had a spare moment she would look in at him quickly, to make sure he was there. When the man chanced to see her, he called her in, but she invariably refused the invitation, though the black cat, who was her shadow, always accepted with alacrity. Thorald was strangely attracted by the odd child, and would talk to her on such occasions in his half-earnest, half-whimsical fashion.

“I forgot to dust when you were out, sir,” Cinders remarked one day, standing at the door.

“Don’t trouble,” he replied, smiling. “Somebody, very æsthetic, once said, ‘Remove not dust, it is the bloom of the ages.’”

The child looked puzzled. “It couldn’t have been Mrs. Stogers,” she replied; then, her tone changing, “Oh, you do write a lot; isn’t it pretty cold to be writing in there so long?”

“You forget the stovepipe,” he answered.

“The stovepipe!” she said, scornfully. “Ye don’t think that gets ye warm?”

“Assuredly; else what’s its mission?”

“There ain’t any fire in the stove it’s caught on to. I asked Mrs. Stogers to have a fire into it, but she won’t.”

“Thanks, but don’t bother,” he replied.

“I s’pose you think I’ve troubles o’ my own,” she said, quaintly. “Well, I forget ’em when I hear your music, Mr. Thorald, and if I’m angry, the wickedness jest goes right out o’ my mind. Truly it does.”

“There was a king once, named Saul,” said Thorald, “and one played to him upon the harp; but I don’t suppose you know the story.”

“No,” she answered wistfully, shaking her head.

“I’ll tell it to you some time, not now. I must work. When this opera is finished my troubles will be ended, Cinders.”

“What’s a opera?” she questioned.

“Music,” said Thorald,—“music and more music, set to words. This is going to New York—to make my fortune—or—”

“Or what?”

He shrugged his shoulders.

“It is going—for all the world to hear, that’s all.”

“I’m glad,” she answered, radiantly. “All the people will clap their hands and call fer you, like Hannah says they do at the theatre.”

“They may,” he answered.

“Oh! they will,” said the child, wisely. “An’ I am glad—for you—but,” passionately, “when you get rich—I won’t never hear you play again.”

“Yes, you will, I won’t forget you, Cinders, if that time comes.”

“Won’t you?” she cried. “Oh! won’t you, Mr. Thorald?”

“Not I; you’re such an uncommon, odd little piece. I couldn’t if I tried.”

“Maybe you’ll go back to your aunt,” she suggested.

“Certainly I will—when I get rich. It’s only when a fellow’s poor he don’t go back, you see.”

“Yes, I see,” she said, nodding. “Come on, ’Phisto, we must go.”

Thorald heard her slipping down the hall in shoes that had probably served Mrs. Stogers faithfully. On the stairs one fell off and bumped to the bottom.

The man smiled, then grew grave. “By and by,” he said, “I’ll look after that child a bit.”

He finished his work and sent it away, then tried to put in the time practising, but the weather was frosty, and his fingers could not handle the bow.

Cinders fretted at the thought of him in the cold room, where he sat reading, his overcoat buttoned to his throat.

December came in with heavy snow and a biting wind from the north.

Then the child grew desperate. “Please, Mrs. Stogers, won’t you give Mr. Thorald the little room where the stove is?” she said timidly.

“Won’t I what?” cried the landlady.

“Won’t you let him have the empty room an’ a fire in the stove?”

“Well, I never! That I won’t! He don’t pay enough for what he does get. I’ve no use fer proud ones like him—poor as poverty, an’ holdin’ their heads above them that has seen better days.”

“It’s awfully cold,” said Cinders; “awfully, awfully cold, Mrs. Stogers.”

“One’d think this was the North Pole, ’stead of Vermont, to hear you. Goodness me! it’s only seasonable and pleasant. You complain of yer own room, child.”

“No,” cried Cinders, her eyes flashing. “Oh, no, I’m used to it, but he isn’t. He’s a gentleman.”

“Or thinks so!” retorted the woman. “a-carryin’ round a dress suit in that swell leather case o’ his. A dress suit, my gracious! I don’t care whether he goes or stays. I’m tired to death of the noise he makes on his fiddle.”

Cinder’s red mouth set itself firmly. There was no use in talking to Mrs. Stogers, she thought. A person who called music a “noise”—no—no use.

When the landlady was busy elsewhere, she fled to the wood shed, gathered her skirts full of wood and toiled up the back stairs noiselessly. She fastened the door of the empty room, and started to light the fire.

A few minutes later Thorald, on his way to the attic, heard sharp screams as of a child in terror. He thought of some little children who lived in the house, and often played about the halls, and sprang up the stairs towards the sound. As he reached the landing Cinders rushed towards him, her short tindery dress ablaze. To catch her and rub the flames out with his hands, against his coat—any way—was the work of a moment, and soon she lay in his arms, a rumped, frightened little heap, but safe.

“You’ve burnt your hands,” she sobbed. “Oh! I know you have, I know you have.”

“Are you hurt much?” Thorald asked, his voice rather shaky. “I think you must be hurt, Cinders.”

“No,” she said, “I don’t b’lieve I am. My clothes are all woollen but that dress. I jest got caught on top like, like Hannah’s pies does sometimes,” with a queer little laugh. “I guess I’ll be kind of brown like them, but”—pushing back her curls—“but you’ve burnt your hands, Mr. Thorald.”

“Yes, rather, not very badly. I’ll send Mrs. Stogers up and then see to them. Cinders,” he said, “it’s a good name for you after all. You tried to make it fit this time.”

“I was lighting the fire in the room under yours,” she said in a half whisper. “Jest wait till Mrs. Stogers knows, that’s all.”

A heavy step sounded on the stairs, and the landlady's voice greeted them.

"Who's been settin' the house afire an' yellin' so?" she cried, coming into view, but stopped short, her eyes falling on the still trembling child and her unsmiling lodger.

"It wasn't the house," Cinders explained rather faintly; "it was me. I lit the fire, and caught my dress. Mr. Thorald put me out, the flames you know, and he burned his hands."

There was never a heathen who raged as Mrs. Stogers did then. No thought of sympathy entered her mind, and as nothing could stop the avalanche of words, Thorald went out. When he returned his hands were bound up, and his spirit was rebellious, for he knew it would be two weeks before he could touch his violin. Yet he was not without hope, so long as his manuscript did not fail him.

If the opera was received, he would go home for Christmas victorious, and show the woman who thought she ruled his destiny that he was able to do his own work in the world, in his own way. Yes, if he succeeded he would go home, but—

Oh! these awful "buts" that turn us off at right angles from our heart's desires. What Thorald did not count upon was illness—that thief in the night.

One morning, two weeks before Christmas, he did not come down to breakfast, and Mrs. Stogers mounted the steep stairs to ascertain the reason. No answer was given to her knocking, so, the door being unlocked, she went in. Her lodger was tossing his head to and fro on the pillow. He called Mrs. Stogers "Aunt Emily," and she said afterwards the way his eyes stared gave her chills, so she sent him to the hospital.

Cinders watched the ambulance take him away, then she rushed to her room and flung herself down on the floor. She did not cry, for it had got past crying with Cinders. "If I knew where that old aunt lived, I'd find her," she said, sitting up and gazing with melancholy eyes at Mephistopheles. The cat rubbed a ribby side against her dress for answer.

"There might be a letter or something in the leather case," she went on thoughtfully. "I don't like lookin', but I guess I must."

She stole into the deserted room softly; the emptiness, the stillness, was unbearable, and in a fever of hope and fear she searched quickly. In a pocket of the dress suit, despised of Mrs. Stogers, was a letter directed to "Miss Emily Thorald." Then followed the name of a town Cinders had heard

mentioned often, for it was not far away. She smiled as she spelled it slowly over.

“I’ll write,” she said, rejoicing in the accomplishment, which had been acquired with infinite pains in the odd moments Mrs. Stogers had given for conscience’ sake to what was called her “education.”

“Yes,” she said again, “I’ll write, an’ get the money from my bank for the paper and stamps.”

This bank was a tin building kept by Mrs. Stogers in her own room. Any coin of the realm that Cinders chanced to receive she was condemned to deposit therein. Now, she abstracted this building from the site it had so long occupied, and shook out enough coppers to make her purchases, then wrote as follows:

MISS EMILY THORALD:

Your nefu is took ill with a fitt of sickness. If you dont come to him he will dye. There aint nobody cares if he does or not, but me. He is at the Hospittle, and is out of his head. Hana says the Hospittle is orful.

With Resspec,
LUCINDA ELLEN.

This Cinders posted, then waited. More than a week went by. She escaped once and went to the hospital. The porter told her Thorald was very ill, that no one had come to see him. The child made up her mind on the way home that she would go for Thorald’s aunt herself. There was a desperate pain at her heart that made inaction impossible.

About dusk she slipped out of the house, dressed in what Mrs. Stogers called her best clothes. The tin bank was clasped to her breast. The cat followed, scenting adventure in the air. The city looked gay and bright at this dusky hour. The great buildings were trimmed with the snow’s ermine and the frost’s lace, as in honor of the approaching feast-day. Lights winked at the lonely little girl from friendly-looking houses. There was cedar before the shops, and bunches of glistening holly behind the windows.

She passed butcher shops where rows and rows of turkeys, all butchered to make a Christmas holiday, hung stiff in death, and where pigs of cheerful countenance, adorned with paper roses, and holding lemons in their mouths, appeared to rejoice in their fate. On and on sped her light footsteps, for she knew the way. Her starry eyes saw the beautiful city, and it seemed as a city in a dream. Silver sleigh bells rang on the frosty air, but she did not know she heard them.

The man in the ticket office at the station stared as she asked for her ticket and handed him the tin bank.

“Break it open,” said Cinders, “an’ take out the money, please. I think there’s enough. I tried to get it open, but I couldn’t.”

So far her faith in humanity had not been corroded. The official wrenched the box open, took the needed amount and handed back the rest with the ticket. He looked amused, but kindly. People were all kind, she thought—the brakeman who helped her aboard the train, the conductor, all of them.

Perhaps it was because the Christmas spirit was abroad in the land, or else that the serious little face, framed in its bronze brown hair, the eager, appealing eyes, and tremulous red mouth were hard to resist.

The train sped on through the white country and Cinders waited, the cat, who had escaped all pursuit, purring calmly beside her.

At the right station she got out, carrying Mephistopheles, and stood alone on the empty platform. An ancient cab was awaiting possible passengers. Cinders went to the driver and asked him if he could take her to Miss Thorald’s house.

“I want to get there very quickly,” she said, “and here’s the money,” handing him the balance on hand.

“All right, lady,” he answered; “get right in; ye’ll be there in a jiffy.”

If it had been daylight he wouldn’t have called me that, thought the child.

As to how she should return home she did not trouble. No thought of Mrs. Stogers disturbed her. No fear, though the hour was late and the place strange. One idea alone held her mind.

After a little while the cab drew up before such a house as Cinders had seen in pictures. She stepped out and, going up the steps, pulled the great brass bell-knob. A man answered the door, a stiff, wooden-looking man.

“I want Miss Thorald,” Cinders said eagerly, “an’ I want her at once, if you please.”

The butler led her in and went for his mistress. The child waited in the great hall calmly, as one who had come on a mission.

A woman came towards her presently—a stately woman, very beautiful, who did not look either old or young, but something of both. Cinders sprang to her with outstretched hands.

“Why didn’t you come?” she cried, reproachfully. “I told you how ill he was. Are you so angry you will let him die all alone?”

The woman grew white and caught her breath strangely; with one hand she unfastened the lace at her throat.

“I don’t understand. Who are you, child. What have you come for?”

“The letter,” Cinders said incoherently,—“the letter, you know. I waited for you to come.”

“I know nothing of any letter!” answered the other. “Sit down and tell me what you mean.”

Little by little Cinders told her story—of the man in his attic room; of the music she loved, and the opera that had been sent away; of the cold, cold days, and the unfortunate fire she had started. It was a childish tale, much mixed in the telling, but the listener understood at last.

“If they took his opera in New York he was coming home for Christmas. When people are successful they come home. When they ain’t, why they don’t,” Cinders ended gravely.

“My proud boy,” said the woman, her lips quivering; “my proud boy!”

Then she kissed Cinders softly, passionately. “That might have made me harder still,” she said. “I had other desires for him—but now—oh! you good little thing—you poor little thing, you shall take me to him at once, at once.”

“It was very queer to be kissed,” Cinders thought, as she fell asleep that night in a little white bed in one of the big beautiful rooms. “Very, very queer, indeed.”

It had not been possible to reach the city till next morning. At noon Miss Thorald entered the white hospital ward and found the one she sought. But it was not that day that he knew her, nor the next. She listened to him talking—of the hours spent in the cold, lonely room—of his work—of Cinders—the only one who had seemed to care.

“You are a little witch,” he repeated often; “you see into the future with those solemn eyes. Yes. And the black cat. He knows too. I charm you both, though—with the music. There was a king named Saul and one played to him upon the harp. But you don’t know that story. Some day I will charm the whole world, so—”

The woman prayed as she listened.

As for Cinders, Miss Thorald kept the child with her. Never, never was she to go back to Mrs. Stogers. For there are ways of settling things when one has a friend rich and determined; and Cinders had found such a friend.

It was Christmas day that they went together into the ward where Dan Thorald lay. He would know them, the nurse said. They might stay for a little while.

“Why, it’s Cinders and Aunt Emily,” he cried weakly, as they came near. Cinders dropped down by the bed and hid her face against it.

Presently she looked up with tear-filled eyes.

“I guess you don’t know it’s Christmas,” she said.

“Christmas! No, but I might have, I’ve got such a lot of presents—Aunt Emily, and you, little one, and this victorious letter from New York. Mrs. Stogers brought it. At first the nurse wouldn’t read it, for fear excitement would kill me. I told her I’d die if she didn’t. That ended it,” he said, pausing between the words, but smiling happily.

“Oh! I’m glad—so glad,” cried Cinders, clasping her hands.

“I knew I could count on you; but, Aunt Emily, you won’t mind if I go my own way—now? It will be a successful one.”

“Go your own way, dear heart,” she answered softly. “I will follow. It is what women always do—in the end. I mind nothing—for I have you again—my Christmas gift—from God.”

“And you, Lucinda Ellen,” Thorald said, after a few moments, and with a low, shaky laugh, “don’t you want a Christmas box too?”

“I jest want to stay here,” she answered, eagerly.

“You shall stay—not here exactly, but with Dan and me, for always,” said Miss Thorald.

“So I may be sure of an admirer and applause,” put in Thorald, who would talk. “You’re a luxury I’m to be treated to. We’re lucky to have been the first to discover you, Lucinda Ellen, for you’re a sort of curio, an original, and Aunt Emily, being a collector, realizes that probably there’s only one of the kind on the market, don’t you know.”

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Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *The Christmas Peacemaker* by Virna Sheard]